

Mousse Magazine



WangShui, *Gardens of Perfect Exposure*, 2017-2018 installation view at Julia Stoschek Collection, Berlin, 2019
Photo: Alwin Lay

CONVERSATIONS

Ulterior Space: WangShui at Julia Stoschek Collection, Berlin

WangShui and Giovanna Manzotti in conversation

The experience of the exhibition invokes Sergei Eisenstein's descriptions of pre-cinematic montage, where the viewers' gaze is choreographed by movement, architecture, and light. Here, screens—as live entities through which to explore panoramas and mirages—are objects and sculptures as well as spaces for the intersection of live bodies and oscillating images. In this immersive, hallucinatory space of desire and myth and transformation, viewers are pressured to “see” haptically with their bodies and movements. WangShui's first solo show in Europe, presented at the Julia Stoschek Collection in Berlin, is a sequence of framed sites that speak to gender, delusions of identity, paradoxes of visibility, and the in-between spaces that haunt our lived experience.

GM: The totality of the exhibited works—and the spaces they activate between images and objects, bodies and screens, even before one sees them all the way through—seems already an intimate yet hallucinatory experience of renewal. The first moving-image installation we encounter, titled *Gardens of Perfect Exposure*, has many different layers. Could you talk about how you approached this project begun in 2016? Here, architecture, live subjects, everyday materials, and detritus (including chrome bath fixtures, silkworms, roof repair fabric, laminated hair, glass globes, and more) converge in a sort of carefully designed habitat where the lines between architecture, design, and filmmaking dissolve. How would you describe the shift between the material presence of the work and its mediated image? What do silkworms represent in the work from a natural, cultural, and economic perspective?

W: The work is titled after the Gardens of Perfect Brightness, the Qing dynasty imperial palace and grounds that inspired the term *sharawadgi*. It's a word with unknown etymology that Europeans made up to describe the asymmetry found in East Asian garden design during early encounters. The term and characterization eventually contributed to the unofficial design movement called chinoiserie, in which Europeans began designing "Chinese-esque" objects, gardens, and architecture. Experientially the work plays with scale shifts between the silkworms, bath fixtures, and projected live feeds, but it also pulls out further to consider this history of Asian imaginaries, which are in essence based on a series of mediated images.

The silkworms, of course, are tied to a long history of trade routes, but for the installation they are also interesting in terms of opacity. The cameras and live feeds overly scrutinize their every move in the molting process, but they eventually construct translucent cocoons or "screens" behind which their bodies undergo an intense resurfacing. So the work stages a contemporary paradox of visibility where exposure is compulsory and sanctuary is a myth.

GM: In the text accompanying the show, written by you and curator Lisa Long, I read that this interest in chinoiserie, Asian imaginaries, and myth making is cast in the shape-shifting Shen dragon. Can you explain how this "subconscious techno-sensual entity" operates throughout the exhibition?

W: The Shen, and myth making in general, represent inherently fluid approaches to logic and form. In the exhibition, the Shen—which is traditionally known to shift between humans, animals (including silkworms), and inanimate objects—also shifts between cameras, drones, and screens. There is a delicate space of manipulation between truth and fantasy, where the work lingers and operates. Much of the work in the exhibition grounds moving-image technologies in the first-person perspective to that effect—but also presents the self as a void.

GM: At a certain point, as the viewer, you walk into an empty white box and discover a sculpture mounted above a door. *12534* (2016) is a hydro dipped snakeskin that presents itself as a crown molding. As one approaches it, a material perversion emerges between the organic scales of the skin, the slick silvery sheen of the hydrographic print, and the transducers that turn the whole skin into a resonator/speaker. Could you talk about your approach to material and craft?

W: The value of material lies so much in its surface, so altering it is not only satisfying in terms of affecting its agency but also for haptic pleasure. Hydro dipping is interesting because it has become a hypermasculine DIY craft used mainly to wrap guns and car parts underwater, abstracting the original materials and forms to unknown ends. So much of its appeal is seeing the photographic print dissolve in water before entirely wrapping an object. In *12534* the hydrographic film was applied as a second skin to the snakeskin, using the flexibility of water tension to map out the subtle forms of the scales. The two skins are then further joined through sound vibrations, and together they moan.

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In terms of content and approach to this body of work, Joseph Holtzman (founder, editor, and publisher of *Nest* magazine) and Felix Burrichter (editor and creative director of *PIN-UP Magazine*) have been deeply influential. They both expanded the psychological spaces of architecture in such a pleasurable, sprawling way. Similarly, the research for the works in the show draws from wide-ranging references—urban theory, feng shui, zoology, the “fashion bath” aisle at Lowe’s.

GM: You mentioned haptic experience related to the movement of viewers’ bodies. Could you discuss this in relation to the new work commissioned by the Julia Stoschek Collection? *Weak Pearl* (2019) is a video sculpture weaving together fragments of the translucent LED screens used for skyline advertisements. The on-screen images oscillate between legibility and irresolution, light phenomena and abstraction. As the viewer approaches, both image and object begin to dematerialize, and surface is like an active membrane. What did you want to subvert or emphasize with this piece?

W: *Weak Pearl* is about the tension between distance and desire. From the back wall of the twenty-five-meter-long room, you are at the minimum viewing distance where you can just make out the imagery on the screen. But the majority of viewers are immediately drawn to the light when they enter the room and walk right up to it. They will never fully see the video.

There is of course a greedy trans impulse embedded in the work. The video sculpture constantly shifts between image, object, and light with the movement of the viewers body. Since it also consists of three LED mesh screens that have been woven together, the gaps between pixels on each screen are filled with pixels from the other screens, allowing for a simultaneity of moving images.

The physical form of the work, as well as the footage playing on it, are inspired by the radula, the toothed tongue unique to the mollusk family. In the video, an animated radula scrapes and combs through candid iPhone footage of gaping mouths.

In the deep sea, many organisms can be so moved by the light display of bioluminescent squid that they commit sacrificial automutilation, offering up their lives to the predator. *Weak Pearl* attempts to spatially simulate this romance that drives so much of image culture today

GM: In the single-channel video installation *From Its Mouth Came a River of High-End Residential Appliances* (2017–18), a traveling drone slowly approaches gaping holes in skyscrapers along the South China Sea. Called “dragon gates,” these holes are said to be designed as passages for dragons on their flight path from the mountains to the sea. In shifting between increasing proximity to the building and the viewers watching the video in the exhibition space, the camera and voice-over seem to somehow scrutinize levels of void and resistance at the same time. What do these holes reveal to you?

W: In that work as well as in *Weak Pearl*, the voids represent an ulterior space of resistance where surface meets depth, interior meets exterior, and entrance is exit.