

## 4A Panel X Performance //

Let's unpack acute acts as part of *Acute Actions: Responses to I Am Not A Virus*

Saturday 15 May 2021 @ Firstdraft

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## TRANSCRIPT



**REINA TAKEUCHI** Hi everyone. Thank you for joining us today. We appreciate you taking the time to be here. I'm Reina Takeuchi - one of the co-curators of *Acute Actions* - and I'm joined today with Andrea Srisurapon and Jayanto Tan - artists from the exhibition project. Firstly, I'd like to thank Firstdraft for being so kind as to host us for this afternoon. I would like to thank: Diversity Arts; executive director Lena Nahlous; social media producer Glaiza Perez; project producer Kevin Bathman; Chair Debbie Lee for everything they've contributed to the *I Am Not A Virus* project; Amanda Browne - manager of strategic projects at Creative Victoria who funded this project; and our supporters at 4A. Thank you to the artists that have joined us today from the initiative. And thank you to both of you [gestures to Andrea Srisurapon and Jayanto Tan] for coming. Before we dive into this talk, I would like to acknowledge that we are gathered today on the unceded lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. I would like to pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging as the traditional custodians of the land on which we live, work and create. To start by discussing the project, Diversity Arts created the initiative *I Am Not A Virus* in 2020. The themes were quite strong in reimagining what a more diverse and inclusive future for Australia might look like and what it means to be Asian-Australian. As well as the micro-aggressions and acute racism that has emerged post COVID-19, the thematics that have preceded the pandemic, and how to look at racism in this post-pandemic era. The project originally didn't have exhibition outcomes but in 2021, 4A chose a selection of 12 artists out of the 80 that had applied and created work for the project. This initiative was

imagined by myself and Con Gerakaris - the co-curator of the exhibition. And yeah, we've been appreciative of looking at these works and sharing time with artists involved. To start, what motivated you to create work for *I Am Not A Virus* and why was the initiative's callout so important to you?

**ANDREA SRISURAPON** When I was reading the artist callout and saw those themes about standing against racism, standing up for yourself, claiming your identity and empowering your identity (cultural identity in particular), those things really resonated with me. For my practice, those are very strong links as well. So I think that's why I wanted to participate and make work that was still like that, but also commented on the pandemic. I knew too that other people were going to get involved and I wanted to connect with like-minded people who have the same values and morals that I do when it comes to racism and cultural identity. So, yeah, that's why I applied for it.

**JAYANTO TAN** Just like Andrea said, I just want to add a little bit about how I tried to connect with diverse people. When I saw their callout, it made me think deeply: this could be something I might want to do to explore my feeling as a migrant in Australia. I didn't find my way to it by myself. If anyone wants to ask me who I am, I'm still looking for it - I'm still searching for my identity. Am I Asian-Australian? I don't know because I was not born in Australia. So this callout really knocked my heart perhaps? Something I would like to do and talk about it. And then from there on, maybe I can find my own way, and then I can sit or walk on the ground. Currently, I feel like I'm floating in the sky. [laughter] A bit dramatic. But I'm very happy they accepted my proposal for *I Am Not A Virus*. Hopefully this project is ongoing and makes me comfortable in my own skin and I can discuss further about: 'Did I call myself Asian-Australian? Or not yet?'

**REINA TAKEUCHI** Yeah, I think that's something a lot of Asian-Australian diaspora are grappling with. I know personally as well, I wasn't born in Australia. I was born in Japan. And it's this whole thing of reframing what it means to be connected to land and connected to culture and then finding voice. And position. And perspective within place. It's very loaded and I think something that we use humour or art to grapple with.

**ANDREA SRISURAPON** This cross-cultural identity is a really funny thing because you obviously want (for me anyway) to engage in Australian culture and the Australian way. But I don't want to forget my Thai past and my Thai heritage. And it's this push and pull to try and maintain this balance. Because moving forward, I want to keep both. I want to be greedy and have both.

**REINA TAKEUCHI** I think that leads beautifully to the next question I have. Has this project prompted an examination for you of your personal histories or familial histories?

**ANDREA SRISURAPON** Well, my practice is about my personal experiences and my past so I find myself reflecting and examining that a lot. But you never want to go too deep and too heavy on it. Because I find that once I do, you get a little lost in it and I don't really know how to articulate and then I'm like "Oh no." So yes and no. Definitely you have to find a balance in that. I do have to reflect and examine. Why were things like this? And why was it so negative? But then you need to move forward and get your head out of the gutter and be like: "Alright. How do I turn this into a positive and how do I make this into a good message where everyone can understand and make it better?"

**JAYANTO TAN** Once again like Andrea said, it's really important for me - this project - because it's like I'm telling my story, and how Andrea was talking about negative and

positive. So far what I feel like (being a migrant from the Asian diaspora), people identify you like a negative thing. For example I can say from my experience, people always ask me where I come from.

I say, "I'm from Indonesia."

They look at you. "You don't look Indonesian at all." What is this all about?

Do people understand what Indonesia is? Do people understand culture of Indonesians? I have so much trouble to explain to people. Then I have to carry away all the story about where I come from, where my mother came from. And then I'll carry on and on: "My mother was like that. My father was like that." Because they're like, "Okay! But you're not Indonesian. You're more like Chinese." In some cases, it's okay but I don't accept that. I don't take that because I was born in Indonesia from a mixed race culture. I'm strongly attached to Indonesian and Sumatran culture. So I know more about Indonesian culture than Chinese culture. I realised art is the only place I can understand and deeply rely on to express my feelings. Not to fight, but to give people education to tell them this is what I am. And have a voice to tell the story of who I am without being attacked. Even today, people still don't agree with me when I say I'm Indonesian. They always think, "You are not. You are Chinese." This is a big question for me and something like, "What can I do for the next one?" Diversity Arts and showing at 4A encourages me to go forward to the next level and tell my true story. And showing my work is about diversity, my ancestors, my own place, and Australian culture.

**REINA TAKEUCHI** I think there was something really wondrous about your still life sculptures because they reference traditional food. But there are these nuances of Australian experiences (e.g. with the fairy bread). And then you see kids pass the gallery space and they're like [Reina's face in awe]. It's so beautiful to see, and then the parents are like, "Okay...I'll take you in to see it." And I think all of those aspects of sharing food, sharing cultural dance, sharing performativity - that's all reading into...



**JAYANTO TAN** One place.

**REINA TAKEUCHI** Yeah, Being in the one place. And also understanding the narratives as well. Do you want to speak about the works you created and your thoughts during its conception? It probably feels a while ago now.

**ANDREA SRISURAPON** Yeah, definitely. Six months ago? So I wanted to make a work that fought against the stereotypes and labels of Asian appearances particularly, and those remarks towards Asian appearances during the pandemic. So certain comments about Asians being dirty, unhygienic, bringing COVID over, and the yellow peril. You know, those comments were heavily circulated in Australian media but also now in other countries (particularly in America). Long story short, I just wanted to share how those labels don't reflect my reality and who I am as a person. And I really wanted to take that into a literal sense. So the yellow paint was a symbol to signify this attack on me and my body. So I'm covered in COVID gear from head to toe and standing in front of the camera. And a few of my lucky friends with buckets of paint decided to splash and force this paint onto my body. And as I take the COVID gear off, I'm not yellow; I'm not dirty. I'm just a girl with olive-toned skin. And yeah, I wanted to say they didn't mimic my reality. It's not true. It's not who I am. And at the end of the day, I should be able to use my body to empower myself to say who I am and I can identify myself as a Thai-Australian.

Concepts behind it? It's strange because that day was actually quite fun and I was with a few of my friends who did it. And it was a lovely day; it was outside. We had snacks and then all of a sudden - this splash of yellow paint. And I kind of relate it to when you get racial slurs at you in public because you don't see it coming. And then, yeah, when it does happen to you, it happens so instantly. You need to come up for air and then you need to carry on - especially when you're in public. You need to move forward. So that was the side note I took for it as well. And other concepts about head coverings and face coverings, that was another thing that I definitely want to explore moving forward. And the female body and using myself to communicate certain concepts.



**JAYANTO TAN** My work was during COVID-19 when we locked down. So during that time, I was thinking, "What kind of work I want to make? When someone passes on, you try to remember them." Because during that period, people were dying you know? People were like, "What happens now?" And also thinking about my family and what happened in Indonesia with the economic and social issues happening there. So I had to clear my mind and think about what kind of work I can make. And this memory came back to me about the funeral. Thinking about mum pass on, dad pass on, sister pass on, friends pass on. But I don't want to go too deep. I want to make something colourful to show my identity. I don't want to make something mellow or grey. So kind of the idea, "Let's make something about the funeral." In my father's ancestry, we have something called 'Ceng Beng'. Translated into English, 'Ceng' is bright and 'Beng' is light - so bright light. During the making of the works, my thoughts go to my mum because my mum loves to spend time in the kitchen making sweets for my father. So everyday life as a kid, I can see my mother making multiple offerings to please my father. So during lockdown in the studio - seven days - I was afraid to go outside because from the news, hearing cases of attacking Asian people. I'll just stay in my studio making art.

So the artwork showing at 4A combines soft and hard. I want to say how in the past, all the cakes are soft, colourful and nice. You can't eat them without your family. But today, they are not around. That's why I call them soft still life; they are beautiful but they are dead today. The fabrics with the embroidery with double happiness. With the work, I wanted to say that when you go to the cemetery, there are the stone graves. In the past, the stone graves were hard. But now it's soft because during COVID-19, everyone dies. So get the softness and to accept what happens because you can't control it. It's nature. So combining hard and soft tells this story of balancing our lives and accepting. As an artist, I

have to accept it. Otherwise we drown and it's too hard to get out. For me, the new work is personal but it took me a long time to create something I want to say. Because I was afraid. People judging and stereotyping you. It's very close to my heart. I want to tell my family's story and my experiences.



**REINA TAKEUCHI** It's really lovely to hear about. I mean, I think that was something that I always wanted, looking at this work as well. Because it has signs of the double happiness but then in actuality, it's very melancholic when you look at the title, "No Friends But the Ghosts".

**JAYANTO TAN** The double happiness isn't really double happiness. I borrowed the Chinese calligraphy and then changed how they got the stroke. The bottom is like a mask because during COVID-19 we are all wearing masks. I like to read my work with multiple meanings. Because I love making cake and the bottom is like the mixture of cakes. It's about the duality of life, death and dislocation. Because I'm a migrant in Australia, moving around all the time from Indonesia to here and telling that kind of story. It's about dark and light, and pain and glory. Positive and negative. Duality is important in my work and I want the audience to accept that.

**REINA TAKEUCHI** Yeah, there's a really nice duality and that's also reflective of your process because you ask your friends to be complicit in something, It's like friendly conflict.

**ANDREA SRISURAPON** Yeah, yeah. Yeah. They're a bit too friendly for that. But I think in that process - working with something that's so heavy and emotional - it is nice to have

friends to support you in those instances. And I've noticed in my past works, (for) everyone who's ever helped me, I've made sure there's some level of fun or lightness to it. I want the work to be finished and I want people there supporting me through the process. It was my friends this time and I had my mom and my sister in my past series. So yeah, I think it's very important for my practice that I have family and friends who collaborate with me. It brings me down to earth too. It makes things very simple for me. Because I know as an artist, I think I can get too into my thoughts and too complicated like: "What colours go with yellow? Everything! You need to calm down. Maybe you need some chocolate." These sort of things set me back and for my practice anyways, I always like to have some sort of link to my family or friends.

**REINA TAKEUCHI** I would definitely say the same, I think family and friends are the ones who work as editors behind the scenes.

**ANDREA SRISURAPON** I find too that they just do things that like, "This is awesome. You don't know how talented you are." Because they're not overthinking it. Like when I'm doing a shoot, I'm thinking, "You need to sit at this angle and it needs to be this and blah, blah, blah..."

But when my friends do it, they just act so nonchalant. I was like, "This is perfect! Keep chucking that paint the way you are." They have no clue! And I think that's the beauty of it too.

**REINA TAKEUCHI** Yeah. I think that when you're in the art making process, you can almost be standing too close to the work or you're so immersed in it that perhaps there's something really simple that could take place that you can't even see until someone is like, "Oh! Maybe angle it this way?" The project commenced in 2020 and has been realised with the exhibition component this year. I was wondering if the journey of that has changed the way you related to the work. Or the way that you perceived what the work was speaking to and where it could be going in the future.

**ANDREA SRISURAPON** I think I ran over this question a few days ago and I realised that when I made the work in 2020 and looking at my self-portraits, I still stand by the themes and the concepts. I still think they are very relevant to then and now in the future and stuff. But I didn't realise how isolated I was and I didn't realise how alone I was in this exploration of self identity. So that's one big change that I noticed. And I'm sure everyone can relate in 2020. Being cooped up and locked up in your room. I look at those portraits and I think, "Yeah. That's exactly where I was then." And now we're in 2021 and we're at this discussion panel. We can go out and we can talk to friends and all that kind of stuff. So that's the one thing I've realised that other people just like me, we were connecting in that sense. So I'm kind of relieved of that change.

**JAYANTO TAN** My one is completely opposite from Andrea. In 2020, I felt alive because I was in the studio and making my works. Because I have this connection with my family and funny conversations during the period. And then when I finish the work, "Oh. I want to make again!" Because the work is ongoing, so sometimes I make multiply works. You know with ceramics, sometimes you don't know what happens in the kiln. Some will break. Some will be gone. So the work for me depends on the space. I can bring all my work and fill up the gallery. I can do that too. So not much change. The concept - I'm looking forward to. And it depends on how I like to say it. Celebration? The light side of a person? The dark side of a person? I want to make more installations. Different cakes or something beyond my thoughts.

**REINA TAKEUCHI** Yeah, it's really nice to hear. I feel like everyone has different responses and things they want to hold onto from that time. And also the idea that people are going through these motions of seeing and imagining, "Okay. What have I got to do with this?" It's like this thing that's coming out of COVID in terms of like 'how does that make me look at my identity' in a renewed way. I think something really beautiful from the project has been ways of imagining more diverse and inclusive futures when we look forward. And maybe that doesn't have to be melancholic - it's something that's beautiful and enlivening. And I guess, yeah, that's the roundabout way of me asking if you were to imagine a more inclusive and diverse future for Australia where we are right now, what would it feel and look like?

**ANDREA SRISURAPON** Far out. Are you going to ask me the meaning of life while you're at it? [laughter] it's just such a foreign concept to me. I know that sounds so bad and I'd love to have it. I'd love to feel it and embrace it. But it's just such a foreign idea because I thought about where I was the last time where I didn't know that racism existed. And that's probably when I was 6/7 years old. So I've kind of been dealing with it for the majority of my life. So it's very hard to unpick that. Don't get me wrong, I would love that and I want that. I'm doing this because I'm striving for that. I'm definitely optimistic about that whole outcome. But it's hard to answer. I'm not too sure. But I definitely want it and I'm striving for it. Otherwise, what the hell am I doing here?

**JAYANTO TAN** I think it's very important - diversity - in Australia. Through my experience as a migrant coming to Australia, I grew so much stronger when the majority of people try to identify you. Try to tell you that because you are a migrant, you have to be like the majority of people to survive. I think diversity is a good idea so we can celebrate our culture and be together through differences. Otherwise, if I can say about myself, I lost everything to come to Australia.

First, I lost my name in my hometown because as a mixed race with a Chinese identity, you're not allowed to have your Chinese name to go to school. Because you have to adapt; you don't question. Your mother language is not allowed to be spoken in school.

Second step, I come to Australia and do the same thing because I carry just one name and when I get through to making the papers (e.g. Medicare), everything says, "Sir. What is your last name?"

I say, "I've got no last name."

"Well, can you change your name?"

"I can't change my name. I'm not Australian yet. How can I change my name? I'm only a migrant." I always worry about these things. And then finally to adopt this question and to adopt whatever the state government wants me to be like Australian, I created my own name. Now my name is Jayanto Tan. I thought that name would be good for me. However, it's still not good enough because how can you call your name? This is again about this 'real type'. People are like, "Oh you're wonderful...coming to Australia." This has got a lot of trouble, a lot of story behind it. You have to sacrifice everything. You have to sacrifice your hometown. You have to sacrifice the language. And you have to learn new things to adapt to Australia. Sometimes the majority of people like to box you in, "Hey! Get in line!" I'm not going to accept that because I'm not born here. I love you, but I'm not going to say that because it's not my culture. But I can't say it. But now I can say it because of diversity. Diversity is very important to me. I think I'm still foreign because I haven't taken to Australian culture yet. Hopefully one day because I was not born here. Am I Asian-Australian? Maybe I'm a migrant Asian-Australian. I can stay true to myself like that. And then coming back to diversity, it's very important so I can say more. So I have courage. So I'm comfortable in my life. This is my home town. I can't go back to Indonesia because my passport is Australian. So every time I go back to Indonesia, I feel like a tourist.

Indonesians don't like me anymore: "Oh you are Australian." So what can I say? And then Australians say, "You're not Australian. You're Indonesian or Chinese." OK, I'm not going to argue with you. So through my work, I can tell this story and encourage the other majority Australians to see that my work is not Chinese. My work is more like Asian-Australian with Buddhism. It's just how it is. You can see that this is not Chinese work. It's more like Asian-Australian work.

**ANDREA SRISURAPON** I think hearing your story, travels and journey, it makes me want it more, I want diversity. I want everyone to feel included. It's a good reminder. I don't know if we're ever going to get to that (and I don't want to sound like a beauty pageant) but sometimes it's about the journey and not the destination. It's the things you learn along the way. And I'm not saying that my artworks are going to answer all the questions about racism and my cultural identity. But if I learn a thing or two, the next problematic situation or encounter that I have to work with, I'll know what to do.

**REINA TAKEUCHI** Part of building an artistic practice is that it gives you a foundation to hold your identity in these spaces. It's like, "Well...my work is actually grappling with these themes and carving out spaces which other artists can relate back to." Organisations like 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art have been working for twenty years or so now to create those frameworks as well. It was originally an artist-run-initiative that was run from the perspective of artists who were like, "Ok. You can't find a space for us? We're going to carve one out."

**ANDREA SRISURAPON** And it really is a breath of fresh air. I'm from the Central Coast. I was the only Asian girl in my year and making certain artworks on the Central Coast. I love the Central Coast; I love the beaches and stuff. But I never really found it from a cultural perspective of relating to that. So being around people who have the same kind of cultural identity issues, it's really refreshing. And I talked before about feeling isolated. It's really nice to be around like-minded people and to know you're not alone. It encourages me to make more work knowing that it's going to reach out to other people and that they want to do the same.

**REINA TAKEUCHI** Thank you. Lastly, I was wondering where you see your practice going from here. Do you have any projects on the horizon you'd like to share?

**ANDREA SRISURAPON** I'm going to take a long nap. [everyone laughs]. No, it's definitely given me a lot of things to work with now and meeting other artists and creatives, it spurs me on to make more and get my hands dirty. I definitely want to work with more people in the Thai community and explore that area more. But I talked before about having a balance, and I think this is a prime example of me reflecting about racial stuff and my experiences and dealing with the heavy kind of stuff. Sometimes you just need to take a break and take a step back. I definitely will be doing creative things, whether that's in ceramics or drawing. But when I make a series that's so heavy and so personal, I tend to take a break for a bit. I'm still doing other creative outlets and then go back to it when I'm ready. So that's what I plan to do. I definitely want to keep exploring going the path that I want to, if anything, being a part of this whole show and meeting new people spurred me on.

**JAYANTO TAN** So I'd like to have a break. After this 4A show, I'll be very busy with all the projects. So just making work. This is the only thing I can do. Maybe next year, I really want to have a break.



conversation about it. Who knows? Maybe we can create a new work for Diversity Arts and 4A. [laughter]



**REINA TAKEUCHI** I think that's so nice about these projects. The collaboration...

**ANDREA SRISURAPON** The different interpretations...

**JAYANTO TAN** And also the yellow jacket.

**REINA TAKEUCHI** Definitely. Everyone's responding to these themes differently but there are some continuities. So I think from here, please welcome Amy Zhang and MaggZ who were part of the initiative as well for a performance of qi. Thank you so much.

**ANDREA SRISURAPON & JAYANTO TAN** Thank you.

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**Images (top to bottom):**

1. Andrea Srisurapon, *Covid Clean*, photographic print, 2021; photo: courtesy the artist.
2. *Acute Actions: Responses to I Am Not a Virus* (detail), 2021, 4A @ Darlinghurst, 101-111 William Street, Sydney. Jayanto Tan, *No Friends But The Ghosts (Ceng Beng)*, 2020 - ongoing, ceramics, embroidery on found fabrics. Courtesy the artist.

3. Andrea Srisurapon, *Covid Clean*, photographic print, 2021; photo: courtesy the artist.
4. *Acute Actions: Responses to I Am Not a Virus* (installation view), 2021, 4A @4A @ Darlinghurst, 101-111 Sydney. Jayanto Tan, *No Friends But The Ghosts (Ceng Beng)*, 2020 - ongoing, ceramics, embroidery on found fabrics. Courtesy the artist.
5. *Acute Actions: Responses to I Am Not a Virus* (installation view), 2021, 4A @ Darlinghurst, 101-111 William Street, Sydney. Right: Sai-Wai Foo, *Eat Your Words*, 2020, textile installation, 12 individual textile dumplings, hand embroidered racial slur. Courtesy the artist.
6. *Acute Actions: Responses to I Am Not a Virus* (installation view), 2021, 4A @ 101-111 William Street, Sydney. Joe Paradise Lui & Deborah Ong, *Laksa*, video, 21:02, 2021; documentation still: courtesy the artist