

Andrea Srisruapon
Covid Clean
2021
C-type print
Courtesy the artist

Racialised representations of Asians as ‘unhygienic’, ‘dirty’ and the virus itself were heavily circulated by Australian media during the COVID-19 pandemic. They highlighted the perversion of xenophobia in our society and “yellow peril” rhetorics.

Counteracting these damaging narratives, *Covid Clean* presents an alternative story of empowerment. In the photographic series, Srisurapon dons full-body COVID gear and sits in front of the camera.

Joining her palms in a traditional Thai greeting pose, Srisurapon stares at the audience to demand their attention. Moments later, she is doused – or rather slapped – with yellow paint.

Hands still clasped, Srisurapon strips her stained gear to reveal a body and face which is not “yellow.” It is a clean olive tone.

As the subject of the series, Srisurapon harnesses her vulnerability and weaponises her body to spotlight disjunctions between stereotypes and reality. She is not an object that can be labelled; she is a Thai-Australian woman reclaiming her identity.

Amy Zhang & MaggZ

气 (qi)

2021

Single channel DH video, stereo sound, 2min 37sec

Courtesy the artist

In Chinese culture, 气 (qi) is a vital life force which permeates and links all things in the universe.

Working in this tradition, Chinese-Australian movement artists Amy Zhang and MaggZ explore physical relationships between their bodies and culturally significant objects in their video work 气 (qi).

By embodying the 气 of these objects, the artists attempt to re-imagine themselves as individual beings in a world without hierarchy. No one being is above, and no one being is below.

In today's milieu, 气 (qi) is an exercise of re-humanising ourselves and our community - in a time of growing hostility, violence and dehumanisation.

Jayanto Tan
No Friends But The Ghosts (Ceng Beng)
2020 - ongoing
Ceramics, embroidery on found fabrics
Courtesy the artist

No Friends But The Ghosts (Ceng Beng) responds to conversations between the artist and his friends/family during COVID-19 lockdown. Navigating personal attacks, racial identity, migration and familial narratives, these charged conversations are rendered into ceramics resembling cultural foods.

From the Deli River to Granville and Ashfield, Tan's work references his journey as a North Sumatran immigrant with mixed ethnicities who is now living and working in Sydney's multicultural communities.

His soft still life features multi-coloured earthenware treats flanked by embroidered fabric. The installation's stillness invites audiences to consider the embedded cultural knowledge and significance of each treat amongst communities encountered by Tan.

But as he meditates on the haphazard array of treats, Tan cannot help but comment, "In there and here. I was different because I look Chinese."

Otherness is different, yet the same.

Joe Paradise Lui & Deborah Ong

Laksa

2020

Single channel video, stereo sound, 21min 02sec

Courtesy the artist

Laksa is a work about reunion, reconnection, and food. It is the brainchild of Deborah Ong, a chef in Melbourne, and Joe Paradise Lui, a theatre artist from Perth.

Childhood friends who grew up in Singapore, Deborah and Joe found themselves living on opposite sides of Australia in 2020. In the intervening years, Deborah, missing the flavors of Singapore, became a chef in what was a lifelong journey to re-create home via the stovetop. Joe, on the other hand, never learned to cook.

Seeking to reconnect to culture and the migrant experience in the middle of the COVID crisis, Deborah taught Joe how to make Laksa, a notoriously complicated and beloved dish. They documented their process, as well as a dinner they shared afterwards.

They reminisced, and talked about history, the transmission of culture through food, COVID, and the migrant experience in an environment of increasing anti-asian racism. Within this seemingly simple work lies an introspective complexity around the immigrant experience, code switching, and adapting to a sometimes hostile new home.

Sai-Wai Foo
Eat Your Words
2020

Polyester, cotton poplin, polyester/cotton thread, cotton embroidery thread, recycled plastic pellets, machine stitching, hand finishing and hand embroidery

Courtesy the artist

Eat Your Words grapples with conditional belonging for Asian migrants in Australia – a theme applicable to the Chinese diaspora in the West.

In her work, Foo reflects on the plight of abandoned Asian restaurants during the pandemic (and the simultaneous idolisation of dumplings in Chinese culture).

Her textile dumplings entice us with their oversized plumpness and delicate folds. Before violently repulsing us with a flurry of racial slurs, embroidered with a subversive cursive script.

In one breath, our presence can be celebrated for diversity checkboxes but ostracised. Touted as cash cows for the Australian economy, international students may be neglected by the same institutions they support.

Foo summarises, “There is an acceptance of Asian culture but rejection of others, often in a prejudiced and xenophobic manner.”

Sophia Cai
Safety Yellow Woman
2020-21
Handknitted wool garment, adult size
Courtesy the artist.
Yarn provided by Fancy Tiger Crafts.

Safety Yellow Woman was a project that began following Melbourne's extended lockdown in 2020. The handknitted garment is a response to the social anxiety and isolation experienced during the year, and visibly gives form to the practice of social distancing through the lengthened sweater sleeves that measure 1.5 metres each – making this a wearable if impractical garment.

Beyond the humorous visual metaphor of a socially-distant sweater, the garment also reflects on the experience of anti-Asian racism experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic by conflating the idea of 'yellow' with both hazard tape as well as the racially charged profiling of people of East-Asian descent ('yellow peril/yellow invasion').