



Centre for
Contemporary
Asian Art

Acute Actions: Responses to I Am Not a Virus

Part 1: 15 April – 15 May 2021

Acute Actions: Responses to I Am Not A Virus is an artist-led exhibition series that seeks to unpack the hidden injuries of racism through the lived experience of Asian Australian artists and Asian artists living in Australia. By utilising experimental material and physical practices, the artists in *Acute Actions* illustrate poetically how the diverse futures for Australia might look. Through performative actions, material assemblage and sharing cultural food, their practices act as both archives of past traumas and sites of collective diasporic consciousness.

Almost 85% of the Asian population in Australia have endured at least one racial discrimination incident between January and October, 2020, according to an Australian National University study. Quantifiably representative of the intense stress and anxiety felt through the Asian Australian population, the unfortunate reality is that this vilification was prevalent even outside of this ten-month period. *Acute Actions: Responses to I Am Not a Virus* demonstrates, with piercing clarity, the effects of racism on the Anglo-Australian psyche and the experience of trauma as a lived reality for People of Colour (POC) living in Western contexts battling against Eurocentric ideals.

Adorned with the hazard-warning patterns of canary yellow, Sophia Cai's *Safety Yellow Woman* is a symbol of isolation and social distancing. Informed by the artist's hand-knitted practice, Cai's sweater has impractical sleeves measuring 1.5 metres, the physical distance we became accustomed to over the past year. As distancing measures and masks became second nature to us, the full-body PPE donned by Andrea Srisurapon serves as a stark reminder of the hardships faced behind closed doors in hospitals and clinics around the world. *Covid Clean* is a work underpinned by violence and resistance: Srisurapon's wai greeting pose and composed demeanour stand in opposition to being "slapped" with yellow paint. Transforming from anonymity in the PPE to individuality, *Covid Clean* asks us to challenge established stereotypes and reconsider the narrative representation of Asians in Australian and international media and society.

Similarly rooted in racial violence, *Eat Your Words* reflects on the abandonment of Asian eating establishments and the proliferation of racial slurs that occurred after the emergence of the Coronavirus. Sai-Wai Foo's machine-stitched dumplings are delicately crafted and enticingly plump, yet adorned with aggressive slurs, hand-embroidered in cursive-script. Foo's objects are simultaneously passive and aggressive, containing an internal dichotomy celebrating one facet of Asian culture while rejecting another. Food frequently acts as a gateway to engagement with cultures not of your own, and Jayanto Tan's *No Friends But The Ghosts (Ceng Bang)* presents an autobiographical exploration of racial identity, family and cultural displacement. This meditative installation is composed of delicate earthenware still life sculptures which encourage us to consider the embedded knowledge and importance of each piece of fruit, savory snack and sweet dessert of Tan's smorgasbord.

The works 气 (*qi*) by Amy Zhang & MaggZ and *Laksa* by Joe Paradise Lui & Deborah Ong explore cross-country collaboration and dialogue through the disparate physical actions of movement and cooking, respectively. Considering culturally significant objects, Zhang and MaggZ embody the 气 (*qi*) of each item in an energetic exercise of movement informed by contemporary dance. Giving equal credence to each object, the artists create a world without hierarchy, seeking equality between all. Reconnecting in Australia after being childhood friends in Singapore, *Laksa* plays directly into the unequal cooking abilities of Lui and Ong. Professional chef Ong instructs Lui on how to cook the complex and revered dish of laksa. Their ensuing meal is shared over video chat, a situation all too familiar between friends across the world.

Acute Actions: Responses to I Am Not A Virus presents the work of twelve artists commissioned through Diversity Arts Australia's *I Am Not A Virus* initiative. This selection represents a range of artistic practices and conceptual reflections; these include acts of processing and healing from the trauma of racial prejudice experienced by Asian people. Through ceramics, photography, performance, music, craft and storytelling, these artists have wrestled with racial prejudice and reframed multiculturalism to reflect this new lived experience.

List of Works:

1. Sophia Cai, *Safety Yellow Woman*, 2020–21, handknitted wool garment, adult size. Photography by Malcolm King. Yarn support provided by Fancy Tiger Crafts.
2. Andrea Srisurapon, *Covid Clean*, 2021, C-type print.
3. Sai-Wai Foo, *Eat Your Words*, 2021, Polyester, cotton poplin, polyester/cotton thread, cotton embroidery thread, recycled plastic pellets, machine stitching, hand finishing and hand embroidery.
4. Joe Lui & Deborah Ong, *Laksa*, 2021, single channel HD video, 21min 2sec.
5. Jayanto Tan, *No Friends But The Ghosts (Ceng Beng)*, 2020 - ongoing, ceramics, embroidery on found fabrics.
6. Amy Zhang x MaggZ, , 气 (*qi*), 2021, single channel HD video, stereo sound, 3min 34 sec.

Curators: Con Gerakaris and Reina Takeuchi

Artist Biographies:

Sophia Cai is a curator and arts writer based in Narm/Melbourne, Australia. She currently teaches as a sessional lecturer in the department of Critical and Theoretical Studies, Victorian College of Arts at the University of Melbourne, while also maintaining an independent curating and writing practice. Sophia is particularly interested in Asian art history, the intersection between contemporary art and craft, as well as feminist methodologies and community-based practices.

Using photography to capture her personal and cultural everyday experiences, **Andrea Srisurapon** explores concepts surrounding cross-culture, identity and Australia's social and cultural landscape. Reflecting on her cultural experiences of East and West and celebrating her family's heritage, Srisurapon challenges the stereotypes of racism, bigotry and cultural misconception and attempts to discover what it means to be a Thai Australian. Andrea graduated from Sydney College of the Arts and now works and resides in the city of Sydney.

Sai-Wai Foo is a Malaysian-born Chinese, Naarm/Melbourne-based emerging/early-career artist. Her training in fashion design influences and informs her practice through technique, finish and materials. Foo is a bricoleur who collects discarded and redundant items and gives them a new life through her sculptural practice. Working primarily in paper and textiles, Foo's materiality prompts viewers to consider discarded materials and to reconsider how things are used in our over-curated and insatiable consumer society. Her pieces invite a more intimate engagement, due to their scale and delicacy.

Joe Paradise Lui is a founding member of Renegade Productions. Within its aegis he creates, writes, directs, designs and composes theatre and performance works. His most recent work was *Cephalopod*, presented at the Blue Room Theatre in 2019. Joe Paradise Lui is the Spirit of the Fringe World. He is also a part of the professional and independent theatre industry in Perth as a director, writer, and a sound and lighting designer. He has worked with most Perth based companies including BSSTC, Perth Theatre Company, Yirra Yaakin theatre company and the vast majority of independent companies.

Originally from Singapore, **Deborah Ong** is proudly of Hainanese and Peranakan Chinese heritage. She came to Australia in 2004 to pursue a Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology, fell in love with the city of Melbourne, and officially made it her home in 2013. She's spent the past 10 years working as a qualified chef, and more recently has also been involved in teaching in local community centres, and pursuing postgraduate studies in Nutrition and Public Health. Deborah is passionate about food and its role in cultural identity. She finds joy in tearing down the walls of difference and bringing people together around the table with dinner and stories.

Jayanto Tan is a visual artist who was born and raised in a small village in North Sumatra to a Sumatran Christian mother and Guandong Taoist father. As an immigrant artist living in Sydney, who fled poverty and political repression in search of a better life, his practice blends Eastern and Western mythologies with the reality of current events. His works have been selected for the 66th Blake Prize and a solo show at the Verge Gallery. He won the 11th Greenway Art Prize in a small sculpture category. Jayanto holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts and Masters of Fine Arts from National Art School.

Amy Zhang is a movement artist that specialises in performance and movement direction. Using dance as her storytelling vehicle, she combines her unique eye for aesthetics to bring a new life to movement in all forms of media and live performance. Amy has most recently shared her work in this year's Vitalstatistix Adhocracy and Brisbane Festival.

MaggZ is a Melbourne-based movement and multidisciplinary artist, specialised in waacking – a dance style originated in 1970s LA from the LGBTQ community, predominantly involving arm movements. Traversing amongst dance battles, live performances, installations and interdisciplinary collaborations with other artists, MaggZ aspires to explore the possibilities of art and creativity whilst to honour the unique being of self and others.

Image caption: Andrea Srisurapon, *Covid Clean*, photographic print, 2021; photo: courtesy the artist.

