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A Chemical Love Story

Arma Yari

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Arma Yari's exhibition *A Chemical Love Story* interrogates a dual fascination: our longstanding relationship with the alchemy of mind-altering compounds, and the way in which desire is encoded within our very being. The discourse around both subjects *can* often tend toward the tyranny of absolutes – cynicism and dependency on the one hand, utopic idealization and autonomy on the other. However, not unlike the experience of zoning in and out of lucid perception there is always a blind spot within that oscillation. From fantasies of oblivion to transcendence, there more often stirs the truth of living in between, contradictions in tow, which is precisely where Yari stakes the practice of her optic sculptures.

While its theoretical, counter-cultural, and neuro-scientific implications are vast, one need not be a psychonaut to navigate the works in *A Chemical Love Story*. Her wavey corpus of neon-emblazoned retinas collide and kaleidoscope across an infinity arcade, but they beckon with an almost eerie familiarity. Works such as *Delyside* or *Absorbance* are almost a composite of the pulsing fluorescent signs that amass in the marketplace, offering a dutiful understanding of how trippy imagery invades all corners of our cultural psyche. We live in an age where, more than ever, psychedelic cues have been normalized and maintain a certain ubiquity. When we curtain our screens with swirling screensavers, tune into Adult Swim programming to find quantum imagery, when rhythm and drugs overtakes traditional R&B on radio airwaves, and as we extend ourselves into virtual worlds such as the Oculus Rift, electric dreams are no longer reserved for the dusky

reverie of the cult underground. Instead, extending the limits of neurotechnology becomes a lived reality, and an ostensible event horizon for the future.

Even more compelling are the intertexts of the esoteric, iconic, or niche variety. For example, the title of the exhibit itself is cribbed from Alexander Shulgin's cookbook for psychoactive substances of the same name. Elsewhere, the mystical icons featured in works such as *Synaesthesia* and *Cross-talk* recall the cryptic geometric shapes in the loopy, dream-based comix of American cartoonist Jim Woodring; in film, the hard opacity of HAL's dim cybernetic eyeball in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the *neu* romancing of the *Blade Runner* neon cityscape, or Gaspar Noé's attempt to escape corporeal subjectivity in *Enter the Void*; in the art world, the immersive light installations of James Turrell, the infinity mirror rooms of Yayoi Kusama, or Damien Hirst's *Pharmaceutical Paintings* series; in architecture, the vibrant stained glass and hyper-detailed, geometric tiles of the Nasir ol Molk Mosque in Shiraz, Iran; in philosophy, Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception*, and Swiss chemist and inventor of LSD, Albert Hofmann's writings about the consciousness-expanding possibility of "entheogens." From these pattern recognitions and art-induced surreal hallucinations, a confluence emerges. However unexpectedly, a psychedelic encounter can launch a whole mesh of associations old and new.

This odd mix of nostalgia and futurity stages a repetition with a difference, in this case, the way an organism retains sameness while essentially changing. Yari's series of sculptures, composed of mirror, glass, LED strips and neon lights, literalize this conceptual process by narrating the biological processes at work during an LSD trip down the rabbit hole. A window onto an incremental phase from ingestion to activation is affixed to the centre of each piece. Encrusted in neon, these snapshots magnify the chemical reaction in an inner frame, while the enclosing mirror stretches the static images into seeming infinity. Starting with a sculpture that represents LSD being absorbed from the gastrointestinal tract, the sequence proceeds to cerebral stimulation of the sympathetic nervous system, responsible for pupillary dilation, heightened body temperature, and a rise in blood sugar. Based on MRI scans and images of neurotransmitters, other works such as *Absorbance*, *Serotonin*, and *5-HT2A* follow the propagation of nerve impulses toward sensorial flux that can lead to strange, synaesthetic visions.

Yari's fixation on mystic imaginings is greatly indebted to Swiss scientist Albert Hofmann, notably his ideology about the catalyst function of LSD. Hofmann casts the drug's accidental synthesis in transcendental terms: "I did not look for it, it came to me. This means to me that a higher authority thought it was necessary now to provide mankind with an additional pharmacological aid for spiritual growth."¹ Similarly, a source of inspiration is Francis Crick, the father of modern genetics, who discovered DNA while under the influence of acid.² Although the nexus of drugs and sensation can indeed be a creative stimulant and empower social or political change, Yari remains cautious in her rationale and practice. Too often, proponents of a narco-aesthetic champion the artistic gains of drug culture without being sensitive to the dangers of intoxication and unproductive repetition. Especially in our context when idle distraction runs rampant, as Steve Goodman, another thinker about sensorial manipulation notes, if mood swings were induced to synchronize an entire populace, or conversely form a chaotic note of paranoid discord, affective modulation could also be a tool of mass control.³

If Yari is cognizant of the utopic-dystopic coin flip of psychedelic drug culture, she nonetheless embraces the opportunity to drive dialogue about its complicated history without resorting to an inflexible cure/poison dualism. The work is more than just cosmic reflections and perceptual distortions; operating within the troubled constraints of psychedelia is a way to negotiate boundaries and taboos, not just of its own complex history, but in the way one more deeply considers the relationship between self and surroundings. As a sequence, then, *A Chemical Love Story* is a dazzling dance, a transformation of forms about the dissolution of form. When the sublime and the uncanny enfold, infinity meets repetition to the effect that the ego can no longer compute.

How desirable is this outcome? We usually think of our identities as separate from the machinery, substances, elements, and processes that allow us to motor forth. We also often delude ourselves about the control we exert over the predictable serendipity of what

¹ Hofman, Albert, "LSD as a Spiritual Aid." *Spiritual Growth with Entheogens: Psychoactive Sacramentals and Human Transformation*. South Paris: Park Street Press, 2012.

² Doyle, Richard M. *Darwin's Pharmacy: Sex, Plants, and the Evolution of the Noosphere*. Washington: U of Washington Press, 2011.

³ Goodman Steve. *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and The Ecology of Fear*. London: MIT Press, 2010.

sparks intrigue, arousal, even love. It can take a powerful stimulant – drugs, art, romance – to access any kind of mystic, oceanic feeling, and to dislodge our position as a stationary observer. If Yari's work were merely homage or fetish, it would be a closed loop. Rather than pave over paradox, however, and by isolating each psychedelic part from the whole, we must confront whether we choose our own magic eye portals or vice versa. To escape is to enter; to enter is to escape – and in this vertigo, chances are enlightenment or objectivity may be a fantasy, but nonetheless we cannot seem to look away.

-Joshua Chong