



## Main Space

Xpace Cultural Centre  
2-303 Lansdowne Ave  
Toronto ON M6K 2W5  
416 849 2864  
Tuesday-Saturday 12-6  
[www.xpace.info](http://www.xpace.info)

***The Bald Eagle's Claw* curated by Philip Leonard Ocampo**

Yan Wen Chang, Brandon Fujimagari, Andrew Harding and Josi Smit

July 5 – August 3, 2019

Performances by Madelyne Beckles, Dorica Manuel and Marissa Sean Cruz

Text work by Philippe Pamela Dungao and Ana Morningstar

On July 20th, 1969, Apollo 11 commander Neil Armstrong and pilot Buzz Aldrin became the first two humans to ever walk upon the surface of the Moon.<sup>1</sup> Claimed in the name of the United States of America, human-kind's first contact with the celestial was televised to an estimated 650 million people<sup>2</sup>, demonstrating America's superiority over other nations as the winner of a decade long "Space Race".<sup>3</sup> Such a triumph helped to catalyze a national ethos, which became known as the "American Dream". Despite its promise that hard work results in the upward mobility of all citizens, we continually witness the harmful ways in which the "American Dream" marginalizes people within its borders and around the globe. Its prominence in collective conscious is rooted in colonial power, both in the past and in the present. The nation's romantic fascination with space exploration can be seen as an escapist tactic which neglects the realities of its own destructive influence.

---

<sup>1</sup> Loff, Sarah. "Apollo 11 Mission Overview." NASA. April 17, 2015. Accessed June 17, 2019. [https://www.nasa.gov/mission\\_pages/apollo/missions/apollo11.html](https://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/apollo/missions/apollo11.html).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> A competition between the Soviet Union (USSR) and the United States (US) from 1955 to 1969 in which the two countries competed for innovation in the realm of space exploration.

*The Bald Eagle's Claw* calls attention to ideas of false-superiority in the United States of America by way of artworks that present as indulgent, disillusioned representations of American patriotism. By repurposing iconography associated with “Americana” culture, the artists involved in this exhibition use painting, sculpture, text and performance to question the U.S.A as a dominating force while demonstrating a concern for how its ideals have flooded beyond its borders and into global consciousness. Similar to the “American Dream”, the works feign this same sense of romantic optimism, gazing forward into the hopeful future, seemingly distracted from the bleak reality of the present.

The futuristic, space-inspired aesthetic of the 1960s was an era of American visual culture that hypothesized a vision of what progress in the U.S.A would look like.<sup>4</sup> Josi Smit employs materials reminiscent of aspirational possessions relating to the “American Dream” in *It was almost like you were there...*<sup>5</sup> Her tulle blinds reference prom dresses; vinyl invoking the image of Cadillac upholstery is used to sew a rug. Through her fabricated objects and fusing two replica Barcelona chairs and a 1970s Italian chrome etagere<sup>6</sup>, the space can only suggest multiple interpretations of what it could be. It draws upon the interior design of a living room but it is non-functional and hyper condensed. It could be a public landmark if it looked less like a domestic, private space. Each component is separated from their original function, creating an aggregate, alien form. They cannot fulfill the promise of their respective references and original functionality, and instead, exist together as many things but nothing at the same time. Akin to the unrealized utopian future of the U.S.A, both reside within an in-between state.

Sadie Hawkins, L-280, Prom Night (1980), The Final Girl, Pontiac Fiero, The Texas Chainsaw Massacre. The collection of paintings and objects included in this

---

<sup>4</sup> McCall, Bruce. “What is retro-futurism”. Filmed May 2008. TED video, 10:20.

<sup>5</sup> The full title of Josi’s artwork is *it was almost like you were there. I could hear you, I could see you, smell you. I could hear your voice. Sometimes your voice would wake me up. It would wake me up in the middle of the night, just like you were in the room with me*, a quote from *Paris, Texas* (1984) directed by Wim Wenders.

<sup>6</sup> A piece of furniture with a number of open shelves for displaying ornaments.

exhibition by Brandon Fujimagari are each imbued with nightmarish terror, inspired by visuals from slasher films combined with the passionate spirit of the American West and the commodified circuit in which these spectacular images become produced. There is a nearly mass-produced craftsmanship in the way that Brandon utilizes contemporary garment processes in fabricating works that suggest a lingering tension in the idealistic American air; a clandestine horror that lurks within a luxurious patriotic atmosphere. Brandon partners with collaborator D.J Stewart to recreate the killer's butcher table (*Canyon Table*), and hangs the victim's cheerleading pom pom on a nearby meat hook (*American Beauty in Silver Foil and Distressed Pig Skin Leather, 2019*). He reimagines Joan Parker's Dodge Fever ad campaign and rests it on the table, further pulling you into danger through her persuasive gaze.

It's the Golden Hour along a California Highway. The road, the trees, the neighboring cars: All bathed in glorious sunlight. In *New Horrors*, Brandon interprets this sublime sky, as seen through the dashboard of a car that soars towards it, as apocalyptic. He uses bleach and dye in paintings that depict the sunset as an atomic mushroom cloud and an uncontrollable wildfire. But wryly so, Brandon welcomes the impending doom, and considers it a fine way to die.<sup>7</sup>

In *Safe Travels*, Andrew Harding cruises towards this same sunset, but trades serene indifference for nostalgic optimism. Harding ties together disparate yet familiar imagery of travel that, together, are more able to cope with the bleakness of reality mediated through American influence. His works include a packaged image, lock and key set on top of an acrylic engraving of similar imagery (save for a spine fragment) that rests on top of a wooden platform. The inclusion of cedar in this work is both culturally and personally significant to Harding's Métis background. With its medicinal qualities, he seeks to imbue the other objects of his work with its healing properties; steeping a Car Freshener in it as well as dispersing it throughout the assemblage.

---

<sup>7</sup> Fujimagari, Brandon, in conversation with the author, January 9th, 2019.

On the pillar behind it hangs kitsch memorabilia (including an Indigenous headdress shirt, a popular object in Americana culture that has been somewhat reclaimed by Indigenous people but also plays into stereotypes of Indigeneity at the same time) vacuum sealed with a folded image the highway sunset. Finally, a piece of acrylic laser-cut into the shape of a car hood suspends another image of a sunset as a gold chain dangles from it. Andrew Harding incorporates found objects, images and fabricated items in makeshift sculptures that acknowledge assemblage as an act of making that is futile yet hopeful. *Safe Travels* packs your bags affectionately for the uncertainty that lies in the journey ahead.

The sun sets. Stars emerge as darkness engulfs the night sky, shining distances beyond comprehension. Its symbolism tethered to our sense of wonder and awe, fame and success; the extraordinary amongst the ordinary. Due to their prominence within Americana iconography, the star has grown synonymous with American patriotism and nationalism, boosting the narrative of the nation's purported ability to succeed, accomplish, thrive, and achieve.

Yan Wen Chang's works appropriate optimistic phrases and powerful statements, yet obscures them within the compositions of her meticulously crafted paintings. In contrast to the dynamic energy and bold imagery of her paintings - flora indigenous to her home country of Malaysia, Travis Scott lyrics, and majestic animals (among more) -, Chang illustrates a nostalgic loss of picturesque memory through channeling her father's struggles throughout his lifetime of moving between Asia and North America. Chang's works demonstrate the complicated relationship between bleak reality and escapist fantasy, channeling diasporic hardship as it ripples through generations.

*Malaysian Moon Moth 1 and Malaysian Moon Moth 2* are two works painted on bleached denim - a fabric considered to be working class - assuming the form of a four-point sparkle and a five-point star. *do you remember?* a large, vibrantly coloured painting, depicts a blazing horse accompanied by Hibiscus flowers. Chang's visual and

material choices present a confident aesthetic in order to combat adversity, encouraging viewers to reflect on an aspect of the “American Dream” that served as solace for the many marginalized people enamoured with it - that one could dream beyond actual circumstances, no matter how difficult they may be.

A large rectangular piece of black velvet hangs in the back of the space. *resident of uncey-le-franc* is reminiscent of a monolith, a geological feature popularized by its feature in Stanley Kubrick’s, *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Subject to countless interpretations, the monolith exists as an enigma that encompasses space and time.<sup>8</sup> Its subjective nature ignores our scientific efforts to understand outer space and instead embraces itself as a mystic anomaly. Resembling a starscape, over 200 enamel pins of objects relating to Americana iconography (fast food brands, liquor bottles, and cigarette packs) that Josi Smit has acquired are hand pinned to the textile. Previously belonging to a single, anonymous person, the scattered ephemera embodies a lived experience, focusing on a personal subjectivity instead of the consumerist influence its pictorial symbols usually represent. Their capitalist power is rendered inconsequential as they float throughout a universe.

Housing the remnants of performances from Madelyne Beckles, Dorica Manuel and Marissa Sean Cruz, their traces remain as a sculptural installation once their performances on July 13th, 2019 end. While questioning the realities that surround maintaining appearances of lifestyles that are prominent in American popular culture, each performer accesses performance’s subversive potentials in order to illustrate misunderstandings of labour and idealized living; a form of stardom in itself.

The performance evening begins with Madelyne Beckles. *One Light* is a monologue that is made up of half Kanye West lyrics, half Kim Kardashian quotes. Beckles recites it all in a digitally distorted, high pitched tone, akin to the sounds of a child speaking. She performs as North West, the couple’s six year old daughter: *I’ve*

---

<sup>8</sup> Kubrick, Stanley, and Arthur C. Clarke. 1968. *2001: A Space Odyssey*. United States: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Corp.

*made mistakes in my life for sure / When I gain a pound it's in the headlines / Aspire to inspire before you expire / Can we get much higher? / So high / Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh / Life is a marathon / I'ma shift the paradigm / I'ma turn up everytime.*<sup>9</sup> In this performative reading, Beckles explores stardom, success, cultural capitalist production in the United States of America as built upon the expense of black women through a character that is also commodifiable because of her blackness. She weaves her way through the audience, wearing a pair of pink high heels that are way too big for her feet. As North West, she represents a hyperbolic amalgamation of her parents superstardom, but also embodies the repercussions of cultural exploitation at a young age: Her shrill reading becomes an uncanny, romanticized look at becoming in its most unsettling form.

As the first note of Christina Aguilera's *Dirty* begins, Marissa Sean Cruz *awakens*. Dressed in both a hot pink and neon yellow latex dress, two matching sets of dish washing gloves, and several sponges glued to the bottom of her homemade slippers, she is prepared to clean up and work out at the *same time*. *SO Flesh, SO Clean* is a three part performance in which Cruz repeatedly cycles through a rigorous workout circuit. Misusing fitness equipment more and more nonsensically each time the song loops, she chugs yellow Gatorade as she cleans and exercises. Mirroring the healthy, active lifestyles of America's brightest stars, Cruz exaggerates the labour behind maintaining the proactive appearances marketed to us by American popular culture in humorous desperation.

In contrast to the boisterousness of Cruz's performance, the evening concludes with Dorica Manuel's *A Recipe for Flies*. The performance conflates two idioms, "Land of milk and honey", and "You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar" two sayings that share honey in its metaphor through associating it with opportunism in the United States of America, and then describing it as a necessity for success. Vinegar's

---

<sup>9</sup> Beckles, Madelyne, "One Light", 2019.

significance in Filipino culture<sup>10</sup> is met with shame in the context of the latter idiom, and the former champions the United States as its favorable opposite. Surrounded by various containers of milk, honey and vinegar, Manuel patiently transfers the liquids between containers, obscuring the divide that unfairly elevates the U.S.A above other nations.

On February 1st, 2003, Space Shuttle Columbia disintegrated upon re-entry into earth's atmosphere, killing all seven crew members onboard.<sup>11</sup> Distinct in its sociocultural prominence, the iconic footage documenting the crash is horrifying in its aesthetic appeal. The fragments of metal as it broke apart caught fire, making each piece twinkle; cameras interpreted the flashing light as technicolour, resembling a multi-coloured shooting star as it fell from the sky. Thirty-four years after the Moon landing, this tragic moment in American history was speculated to be a result of oversights and overconfidence of prior successes in the field of American space exploration.<sup>12</sup> The disaster demonstrated a fault in the country's own self assigned idea of excellence.

The painting, sculpture, text and performance work of *The Bald Eagle's Claw* are brought together through a collective search for belonging amidst being disillusioned by the "American Dream". Just as the nation itself looked to the stars in their quest for global dominance, the artists of this exhibition deliberately set their hopeful gazes outward, but are conscious of the complicated realities that inform such desire. If walking upon the surface of the Moon was our collective understanding of America at its finest, then let outer space take these ideas of excellence and send them crashing down, alongside the dying spacecraft.

- Philip Leonard Ocampo

---

<sup>10</sup> I'm Gonna Git You Suka (Filipino Vinegar). May 17, 2009. Accessed June 19, 2019. <https://burntlumpiablog.com/2009/05/suka-filipino-vinegar.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Howell, Elizabeth. "Columbia: First Shuttle in Space." Space.com. November 30, 2017. Accessed June 19, 2019. <https://www.space.com/18008-space-shuttle-columbia.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Berger, Brian. "Columbia Report Faults NASA Culture, Government Oversight." Space.com. January 29, 2013. Accessed June 19, 2019. <https://www.space.com/19476-space-shuttle-columbia-disaster-oversight.html>.