



## External 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)

Maddie Lychek

**please take separate bite and chew before swallowing**

March 10 - April 22, 2023

### ***Belly Full of Jelly***

Chew, swallow, repeat. Chew, swallow, repeat. Chew, swallow, repeat.

As *‘please take separate bite and chew before swallowing’* begins, we’re presented with a closely cropped image featuring the bottom half of Lychek’s face. She’s positioned against a yellow backdrop, making the setting nondescript. The ambiguity of person, and place, and context, is broken with the appearance of the lychee jellies. The jelly cups themselves offer fragmented bits of information about brand, flavour, and origin; only fully revealing themselves to those already familiar with this snack

Maddie lifts a single jelly cup to her mouth, sucking it in with one swoop, sometimes more, chewing, chewing, and swallowing. As this pattern continues and the video progresses, losing count of the number of jellies the artist has consumed we see her begin to slow down, a visible reduction in the speed of her chewing as she either begins to feel full, and or sick.

The exhibition title is derived from a warning on the plastic seal on the candy packaging themselves “please take a bite and chew before swallowing”. A phrase many of us were likely

all too familiar with, a phrase imbued with care and caution as eager mouths sucked down jelly candies.

Maddie Lychek is an interdisciplinary artist of mixed Filipino and white ancestry. Her practice revolves around performance, video, and curatorial projects. Her video *please take separate bite and chew before swallowing*, centering on jin jin lychee coconut candy jellies, is part of a video series that explores the continuity and nuances present in her multicultural upbringing and reflections on the Filipino diaspora in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).

When chatting with Maddie about the inspiration behind the work I was curious about her history with said candy and asked if she grew up eating them. She confirmed she's eaten them ever since she was little and that her family would get them whenever they went to a Chinese or Asian grocery store in Richmond Hill or Markham. She recalled the way her mother would cut them up for her younger siblings and gave them each only a few to avoid a sugar rush. "These restrictions inspired me to eat as many as I could, it felt very foreign to buy multiple jars just for myself and for my consumption alone. I guess you always hear your moms voice at the back of your head even through adulthood."<sup>1</sup>

Lychee coconut jelly candies here don't just represent a defiant childhood act but a living and ongoing understanding of community and cross-cultural diasporas that take place in so called Canada, and more specifically southwestern Ontario. When you live in southern Ontario depending on where you are, these types of jelly candies can be found in many places, corner stores, Asian diasporic grocery stores and often in the ethnic or international aisle at big box stores like Walmart.

As Maddie talked more about her relationship to diasporic cuisines and practices during our conversation, I realized geography played a significant role. "Up until I was 10, I lived in a predominantly Chinese neighborhood and community. The places that we frequented when I was growing up were always Chinese, and I felt very at home within Chinese establishments because of this. When I was 10 or so we moved to a different part of Richmond Hill that was predominantly white. We would have to drive fifteen minutes south to where we used to live to access the cuisines we were used to."<sup>2</sup>

Maddie evokes a sense of excitement and discomfort for the viewer. Much of her practice is often inspired by queer identities, the abject, and subverting dominant gazes. This work challenges the boundaries we use to categorize the world around us such as, inside/outside

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Maddie Lychek, *please take separate bite and chew before swallowing*, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Maddie Lychek, *please take separate bite and chew before swallowing*, 2023.

and the body/separate from the body as the jellies evoke both entities within and outside of ourselves.

In *Queer Phenomenology* Sara Ahmed reckons with orientation, and moments of disorientation, in relation to queer existence. Part of the experience of disorientation is the “giddiness and nausea” that fills our bodies. Ahmed suggests that if we stay with such moments, that we might achieve a different orientation toward them; that such moments may be the “source of vitality as well as giddiness.”<sup>3</sup>

I consider Maddie both a friend and a collaborator and it’s always a privilege to watch her perform. During production of this series, I watched as Maddie set up for the performance, lights, camera backdrop, ready to go. She began to pre-emptively open the lychee jellies so she could start eating them throughout the performance with no delays. Dressed casually she sat down, mic’d up and looking forward to perhaps fulfilling a childhood wish. The sweet smell of the jellies filled the air as she began to consume them. Behind the scenes you could see how ambitious she was with the amount she intended to eat. “I was excited to challenge my body and the process was definitely demanding.”<sup>4</sup>

When asked how the artist felt after the performance for the video, words of ill came to mention, and not being able to consume anymore of the jellies she had once loved for the foreseeable future.

(She had some a day or two later)

- Racquel Rowe

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<sup>3</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. (Duke University Press: London) 2006 pg.4

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Maddie Lychee, *please take separate bite and chew before swallowing*, 2023.