

Chewing Tongue**Billie Clarken**

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studio

Exhibition Text by Janelle Zara, 2026

Since the halcyon days of Tumblr, ca. 2015, the term “cursed image” has been used to describe an uncanny genre of low-resolution found photography. With no specifications for content, its defining feature is its disturbing detachment from any original context; the cursed image might be described as Lynchian, in which an element of inexplicability will transform the visually mundane into something sinister. Predating the cursed image is also Hito Steyerl’s poor image, a circulating reproduction whose substance and clarity deteriorates as it travels. In her 2009 essay, Steyerl called this “the debris of audiovisual production, the trash that washes up on the digital economies’ shores.” One artist’s trash, however, may be another’s fascination or nostalgia, or simply another point in a learning machine’s dataset.

The color pink summons childhood memories from inside the artist’s mouth, in which the rolling back of the tongue accompanied the liminal phase between waking and sleeping. This is the dissociative sensation of the conscious brain gradually relinquishing control, which in adulthood can be triggered by such external stimuli as chronic stress, burnout or ketamine. In approaching sleep, there is a shift exchange between the imagination and its cursed alter ego, the dream. The mind flashes with unpredictable distortions of imagery pulled from waking life, the most primordial form of appropriation art; so much of Richard Prince’s practice is indebted to the brain.

The image of a child’s birthday presided over by an animatronic mouse taps into a beloved collective memory of those born to a specific place and time, somewhere in the suburban center of the United States, as part of the upper tiers of the lower middle class, raised on Disney visions of super-idolized plastic humans, anthropomorphized vermin, and annual rituals of paying for one’s child to be photographed in the lap of an adult man in the costume of an

animal. For those lucky enough to grow up in single family homes, our unfinished basements were stuffed with pink fiberglass insulation that resembled cotton candy.

Compared to a human's, the hallucinations of an artificially intelligent machine who has never lived a life nor feared the agony of death are quite mild; recently, one was allowed to swallow the contents of MoMA's archives, which it regurgitated as a pulsing, slushy, colorful slop.

"Is our collective humanity just somebody else's screensaver?"

— Billie Clarken

The cursed image can only be found; it can never intentionally be created. It's a relic from when the photograph was once considered an extraordinary technology, in which a discrete moment in time could be preserved as a discrete object in space. The image served an indexical function with a one-to-one correspondence to real-life events. Today, the automated, instantaneous image now lives in a crisis of over-proliferation, a continuous stream of low-nutrient, disposable content. But imagine reverse-engineering a smoothie so that its constituent parts could be eaten whole. That is retrieving the specificity of waking life out from the slush, dusting it off and preserving according to some organizing principle—say, a clear acrylic DVD case, another indexical relic of the past, whose function was holding the moving image in a fixed point in space. In mining the immense trove of what already exists on earth, we may find no need to ever make a new image again.

Long live the poor image.