

HELENA TAN

FULL OF IT

Opening: December 8, 2023, 7-10 PM

On view: December 9-21, 2023

full (adjective)

- 1: containing as much or as many as possible; filled to capacity or near capacity
a *full* tray
She is carnal and delicate, hot and cold, corporeal and abstract, a full and empty signifier.
- 2: possessing or containing a great number or amount—used with *of*
a room *full* of Chinoiserie in one of the favourite retreats of seven generations of Hohenzollern rulers, who repeatedly redesigned individual rooms with luxurious interior décor while also having sections of the gardens transformed into royal grandeur
- 3: lacking restraint, check, or qualification
the *full* support of policymakers in designing and implementing policies regarding undocumented migration
- 4: rounded in outline
a *full* figure
- 5: being a full moon, completely illuminated
the moon is half-*full* tonight
- 6: possessing a rich or pronounced quality
no longer much an explanation ('to flatten') but a *full* understanding, a piece of wisdom propounding a certain art of life
- 7: having volume or depth of sound
breaking up continuous development, it creates a space that enables the sounds to transcend themselves and accede to a kind of *full* resonance beyond the resonances
- 8: rich in experience
a *full* life

full (antonyms)

- a: empty/emptiness
an *empty* signifier

Passengers are requested to facilitate seamless passage through security, by preparing for screening. Please *empty* all pockets, take off any upper body over garments and place all belongings and garments in the plastic trays. Belts and shoes may also have to be taken off, upon request.

Emptiness introduces discontinuity and reversibility into a given system and thus permits the elements composing the system to transcend rigid opposition and one-sided development.

Without going into details, we can say that in musical interpretations, *emptiness* is rendered not only by certain syncopated rhythms but above all by silence. This silence is not a mechanically calculated quantity.

- b: absent/absence
she remains mute and *absent*

this *absence*—this 'undocumentedness'—is a critical and constitutive part of diasporic lived experiences

the invocation of ostentatious female ornamentation—that most visible and objective of categories—pivots on an elaborate negotiation between imagined presence and projected *absence*

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full (phrases)

i : *someone is full of it* (idiom)

slang someone is wrong or not telling the truth

X thinks he's so clever. He's *full of it*.

They've told you a bunch of lies. They're *full of it*.

ii : *Full of It* (disambiguation)

You enter into a scene just as familiar as it is strange. Segments from airport security conveyor belts lie at your feet. Instead of hovering at hip-height, the trays of standard size and shape sit on top of rollers placed directly on the floor. They could be idly waiting to be filled. *Please empty all pockets, take off any overgarments and place all belongings and garments in the plastic trays*. Yet their capacity to hold meaning rests on the condition that they remain empty. 'In the Chinese perspective,' writes Francois Cheng on the language of Chinese painting, 'emptiness is not, as one might suppose vague or nonexistent. It is dynamic and active.'

As you approach the trays, you notice that some of the rods are in fact turned from wood. The empty space between each rod evokes the image of logs turning to carry boats and ships into water. Then, glancing up at the wall, the rods with their peculiar shapes come into focus as imitations of an abacus. This computing device translates to "suanpan" (算盘), literally to 'calculating tray', then laterally to 'airport security tray'. The counting of beads and the screening of people converge to form a fungible surface. Bending over, you catch sight of a reflection: go figure, the earliest forms of physical calculation are still in use to current configurations of global migration. With this sleight of hand, human beings are rendered into objects no different than beads. Whether they come to seek work, education, family reunification or protection is of interest; their desires, stories, observations are not. How easy it is to strip away flesh from life and abstract it into sterile containers of 'stocks and flows'. Airport security trays are coated with antimicrobial spray and chipped with RFID trackers. Lives count only to the extent of controlling which bodies are let through and which bodies are kept out. This is how elements of nature are transformed into signs, signifiers that are emptied out but labelled as full.

Moving either up against the wall to your left or towards the nook behind you, you take a closer look at the abaci. Stripped of their function, their transformation is a conversion from instrument to ornament. Arrested in motion, they enframe images of the porcelain cabinet at Schloss Charlottenburg. Behind the rods of the abacus the extravagant decadence of Chinoiserie congeals a fantasy of China as artifice. Captured with a cybershot camera, they allow you to take up an embodied view, a gaze that gazes back at the orientalisising gaze from above, in defiance of an Ornamentalism that serves but the needs of Western society. Here, you are offered pause to think through and against the conflation between the 'oriental' and the 'ornamental'. You are reminded of Anne Anlin Cheng's poignant words: 'Ornamentalism—the forging of the sense of personness through artificial and prosthetic extensions—articulates an allegory for the crisis of personhood that the modern ideal of an integrated, organic, individual person was meant to alleviate.'

As you follow the motion of the conveyor belt to the right, three water-jet cut rubber wall sculptures replicate the slats of baggage carousels at airports. They puncture the wall, stencilling out three crescent-like shapes. Just as they remain ambiguous when asked if they are half empty or half full, they leave the question unanswered as to whether the white wall around them or they themselves perform the absence of negative space.

Ever shifting between abstract and concrete modes of representation, *Full of It* sustains the tension between the lived experiences of diasporic subjects and the calculatory forms employed by society and state authority to document them. By defamiliarising objects not normally deemed worth attention, this body of work materialises not *in spite of* but *because of* the lack of a proper border between embroidery and body. Reorienting the peripheral and supplemental as the pivot, she/it is a powerful prosthetic, a materiality of being that assembles personhood through synthetic rather than organic means. Both aesthetic congealment and full-bodied edifice, she/it brings into view an alternative form of life, not as the fantasy of an autonomous modern subject, but as the fully sensorial, vibrant presence of the ornamented body. Her/its emptiness is not synonymous with vagueness or arbitrariness. She/it is carnal and delicate, hot and cold, corporeal and abstract, a full and empty signifier.

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iii: *Full of It* (abstract)

In the exhibition *Full of It*, Helena Tan presents a body of new work that addresses contemporary ideas of socio-diasporic identity. Departing from the writing of Anne Anlin Cheng, diasporic subjecthood is thought through and against the conflation between the 'oriental' and the 'ornamental'. Through an engagement with specific materials, objects, and infrastructural systems, Helena's work addresses crucial material and cultural economies, using a unique synthesis of everyday forms to locate these sometimes vast, difficult to grasp structures within an individual's embodied, everyday experience. By layering narratives in material assemblages that parallel her diasporic experience, her work is invested in meaningful understanding and averting the reduction of an identity.

Helena Tan is an artist from the UK, Malaysia and Hong Kong. Her work is informed by contemporary socio-cultural symbols and signifiers, with an interest in how systems become constructed, exoticised and appropriated over time. She is currently an MFA candidate at Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts at Bard College, New York, USA.

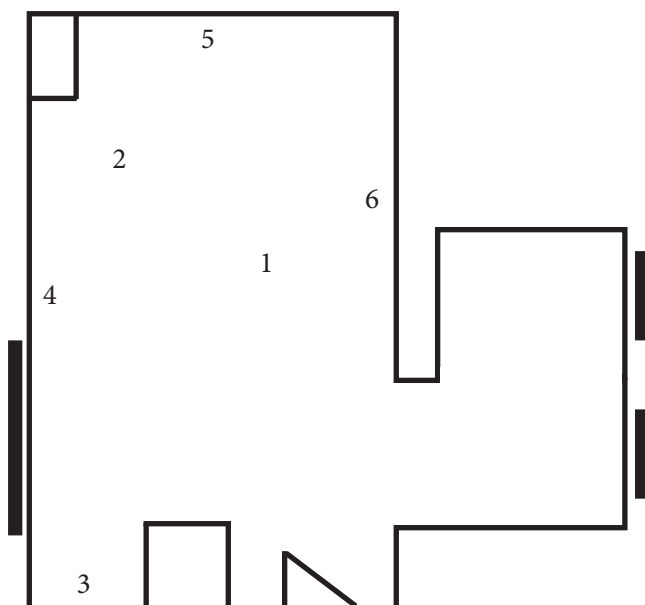
Thank you

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Text and curation by Steph Holl-Trieu

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1.
Sleepers, Like Logs
2023
Cherry wood, stainless steel, PLA, lacquer, RFID chipped airport security trays

2.
Hyperbole
2023
Wood, stainless steel, PLA, lacquer, RFID chipped airport security trays

3.
Brimming
2023
UV print on aluminium, frame

4.
Reel Fantasy
2023
UV print on aluminium, frame

5.
Crescendo Waning
2023
Rubber, stainless steel

6.
Crescendo Waxing
2023
Rubber, stainless steel