

TODD LIM – RE: UBU ROI

April 18th – May 26th, 2024

Reception: April 18th, 2024, 6-9 pm

No Gallery – 105 Henry St. #4 NYC NY 10002



Todd Lim – “Untitled (hot water bottle)”, 2024 – wax and human hair – 13 x 7 x 4 in.

What exists within each of us are vast, private waters, which go entirely undetected in waking life. For years of my adult life, I went searching for those waters, this verboten ocean—venal, teeming, frivolous, and crude. I’d snort an entire gram of ketamine on a Tuesday night, just to visit that other place. To watch silent fire dance on the surface of the ocean, black horses vanishing at midnight. Of course, these images only approximate what is essentially alienated from all epiphany, sensation, or memory, which was precisely the reason for my return. I went to the other place so that I could rehearse my own death.

In Todd Lim’s diptych, *Poppies, (Such a Perfect Day)* (2018), takes its title after the Lou Reed song, which plays in the movie *Trainspotting* when Ewan McGregor shoots up and sinks into the merlot carpet. The painting’s top panel shows a field of a thousand poppies surrounding a black absence, like the orifice of a tissue box. The bottom panel is a plain, black void, mixing terror with serenity, memory with desire. Lim, who is a recovering heroin addict, doesn’t moralize beauty, which is the problem of addiction. When I look at these poppies, I see the heads of ten thousand saints, and I am no longer sure if I am among the living or the dead. I think, Yes, that is how it is.

All of Lim’s new show, “Re: Ubu Roi,” speaks to our age of permanent emergency, collective trauma, and everyday violence, producing a state of mass catatonia. Sign paintings like *For Sale* (2024) speak to the violence of neoliberalism, which has evaporated social welfare and

exacerbated wealth disparity. Posted (2024), staking a boundary of private property, is also a joke on posts on social media, the total commodification of the self. These are exploitative times. Not only do we identify with the abject object, we envy it. To be stripped of humanity, and our ability to feel—to become a thing, to empathize with death.

Wax and rubber sculptures, in the shape of water bottles, are trussed in twine, like Japanese rope bondage. They lay flat on the table, wincing at the viewer's gaze. They know it is "not right" to tie up a water bottle and stick a thermometer in its gut. They radiate shame. Somewhere between human and animal, the sculptures become a metonymy for the traumatized object (for there is no such thing as a traumatized subject), whose selfhood is constituted by a reality whose fabric has been torn. Some sprout human hair, which is the artist's own.

Lim's absurdist sensibility, as dark as it is comic, recalls Alfred Jerry's 1896 play *Ubu Roi*, which is credited as helping spark the Surrealist movement. It's a parody of *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and, *King Lear* all at once: a mad king reigns, ghosts wander the palace halls, and a treasonous queen is taken for an archangel of the Lord. Sometimes, the title is translated as "King Turd," although "Ubu" is closer to nonsense a baby might babble. This childish preoccupation with shit, adopted by artists such as Piero Manzoni and John Miller, and Mike Kelley, suggests an alignment with Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject, or Georges Bataille's concept of the *l'informe*—an anti-human state "stripped to bare life," when life and death reach such proximity that they appear to be fused.

As early as 1996, Hal Foster wrote that conceptions of the real in contemporary art were shifting "from the real understood as an effect of representation to the real understood as an event of trauma." Able to distort the mind, trauma becomes a lens through which one perceives reality. At once, trauma is both piercingly personal, but it is also common, not a cliché but even greater—the contemporary condition. Today in America, PTSD is the fourth most diagnosed psychiatric disorder.

We know from BDSM that real violence can be restaged, made safe because it's artificial, and mutable because of its aesthetic. Masochism becomes a way of embracing inalienable suffering. Sadism serves as the root of a compassion that can empathize with pain. Lim's work, too, extends and symbolizes the violated body, yet it also speaks back to trauma, turning back some of its effects.

One notorious symptom of PTSD is the blocking out of memory. Yet Lim's works seek to restore memory. *Chinese Take Out* (2019 – 2024), a large-scale painting in the shape of a Chinese take-out box, is intended to work on the memory of noodles slicked in hoisin sauce, or steamed broccoli with beef. Decidedly, this isn't the food of the commemorative—banquets, weddings, or Lunar New Year celebrations—but the kind belonging to blurry weekday nights, after work or with one's family, that get blotted out by dailiness and routine. By enlarging the common, *Chinese Take Out* (2019-2024) restores the ordinary, a salve in times of crisis and emergency. In the same way, Lim's *Untitled* series of water bottle sculptures evoke healing objects. When I see them, I see the hot water bottle that my Chinese grandmother used, not for

drinking, but to warm her body. She would carry it with her as a comfort item, in bed, or on the sofa, as she knitted blankets with elaborate patterns, and whenever I stayed at her house, I would wrap myself in them, not because I was cold, but because I wanted to be dressed like a prince. Recently, when the heat got cut off at my apartment in New York, I saw my Chinese roommate use one of those bottles to warm herself, I was shocked, and then homesick, because I had not seen one ever since my grandmother died, and we cleaned the house, and I asked, “What are we doing with the blankets?”

My grandmother died before COVID-19 when Asians were stomped to death in front of hotels and pushed in front of oncoming subways. It wouldn't have made sense to her, as racism is ridiculous. But in the face of violence, Lim reclaims absurdity as, if not bravado, then a sense of humor. In *Chink Rimbaud* (2013-2016), a photo of Rimbaud “wears” a pair of costume glasses with slanted eyes, yellow skin, and operatic eyebrows. A Chinese dandy. Too silly or stylish to be offensive. Watch the young poet hold your gaze. He isn't ashamed to be here. He isn't afraid of you. His suffering will not disqualify him from the presence of glory. Eternity is the sea mingled with the sun, and all of the summer belongs to him.

~ Exhibition text by Geoffrey Mak

Todd Lim (b.1964, Chester, NY) is an Asian American artist living and working in Lake Worth, Florida, and has received his BFA from the School of Visual Arts in New York City. Lim has exhibited in commercial art galleries and institutions both nationally and internationally. His works are included in the public collections of the Smithsonian Museum, Arkansas State Univ. Museum, Brown Univ. Museum, Detroit Institute of Art, MIT Museum, Newark Public Library, New York Public Library, Portland Museum of Art, Print Consortium of Kansas City, Univ. of Oklahoma Museum, and Ashforth Art Collection.

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