

Naer het levin
CFGNY

Hot Wheels London
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Long before “Made in China” became shorthand for mass production, China occupied a different place in the Western imagination. In the 1600s, it was not a factory but a fantasy—a symbol of refinement, luxury, and distant sophistication. Porcelain, silk, and tea were more than commodities; they were coordinates of desire. China, often standing in for Asia as a whole, represented what the West lacked and longed to possess. The appetite was for the exotic, the rare, the exquisite.

Today, that structure persists, though the terms have changed. China is no longer a symbol of rare luxury but of scale and speed. What was once tea and porcelain is now lithium and cloud computing. Desire remains, but it is now driven by efficiency, abundance, and extraction. China—and by extension, Asia—remains both essential and suspect: foundational to American identity, yet consistently cast as the foreign other, to be consumed and resisted in equal measure. At the time of writing, this fraught dynamic has reached a new fever pitch, with the U.S. imposing a 125% tariff on Chinese imports and China retaliating first with an 84% tariff, then matching the 125% rate on American goods.

CFGNY works within this entangled history. Their practice examines how culture, commerce, and foreignness collapse into one another, and how the figure of the “vaguely Asian”—their term—has become a container for both fetishization and disavowal. The term does not assert a fixed identity, but points instead to its fragmentation: plurality on one side, distortion on the other. CFGNY engages this condition not as critique, but as potential.

Much of their work operates within what might be called a bootleg identity. In this exhibition, nearly every object functions as a bootleg, fragment, or proxy—an echo of something else. But the bootleg here is not defined by lack. It does not aim to replicate a lost original. CFGNY approaches bootlegging as a method of reconfiguration—a collective, unstable, and additive process that resists control—something that might sit outside a tariff. In their hands, the bootleg becomes a site of possibility: referential, improvised, deliberately off. Not less than the original, but beyond it. Not a copy, but a deviation. A form of mimicry that hijacks value, misuses authenticity, and builds something else in its place.

This ethos extends to the drawings in the exhibition. Their origin is a set of constructed still lifes: dollar store trinkets from Chinatown, ceramic vessels cobbled together from castoff molds, restitched stuffed toys—often materials from previous works. These sets are rendered by hand, passed among members of the collective and drawn over several weeks. Each drawing carries the mark of multiple hands. Meaning is not stabilized—it is multiplied.

Their collective authorship resists the mythologies that sustain dominant systems of value—mythologies built on singular vision, official provenance, and the belief that origin must be traceable to a single name. In a system that privileges origin as the basis for authority—whether in art, identity, or trade—anything with a blurred or multiple point of origin is rendered suspect. Their work proposes an authorship that is collaborative, recombinant, and resistant to containment.

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These drawings sit in dialogue with the Dutch still life tradition, a genre that gained prominence during the rise of the VOC (Dutch East India Company). What appeared as domestic abundance was, in fact, a visual ledger of empire. Imported goods were staged as markers of taste, their cultural origins abstracted, their distance transformed into value.

CFGNY extends this lineage by layering printed facsimiles from a 17th-century VOC travelogue into their drawings. The original images, made by a European traveler confined to coastal ports, were later supplemented by his publisher who had never set foot in China—adding over a hundred new illustrations to the final edition. The result was a speculative archive: a crunchy reproduction, constructed through projection. Still, it circulated widely and became a visual standard—informing Western decorative templates and cementing a fictionalized East as an aesthetic fact in both Europe and the U.S.

The drawings are framed by cardboard shelving, clocks, and ornamental fragments. CFGNY uses cardboard—a ubiquitous material in global shipping—to reconstruct the domestic and museological spaces that stage imported goods as emblems of success. Mantels, mouldings, and false walls appear throughout the installation, casting cardboard not just as infrastructure, but as a language of trade: cheap, mobile, provisional.

At the center, a pitched-roof frame—referencing a structure in the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum—anchors the installation. Within the gallery, itself a former Victorian home, the structure takes on the feel of an attic: a space of cultural residue and psychic overflow, where toys are stored, junk is tucked away, and memory folds into repression. A space for what can't be neatly displayed or resolved. Each element—the still lifes, the drawings, the cardboard structures, the wooden frame—is intentionally incomplete, requiring a kind of filling-in that only imagination, or fiction, can provide. It is a space not to be read as complete—not museologically sealed off or rendered artifact—but as unfinished, refracted, and insistently in circulation.

CFGNY is an artist collective whose research based practice takes the form of image making, installation, sculpture, performance and fashion to expand ideas of racialization and subjectivity. Founded in 2016, the collective continually returns to the term “vaguely Asian”: an understanding of racial identity as a specific cultural experience combined with the experience of being perceived as other. The collective does not wish to represent what it means to be “Asian” in the singular; instead, it encourages the visualization of the countless ways one is able to be in the plural. CFGNY is composed of Daniel Chew, Ten Izu, Kirsten Kilponen, and Tin Nguyen.

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