Shape-shifting: A Vulnerable Reading
by Donnalyn Xu

Entering a gallery is much like leaving the world behind. The confined walls are a neat frame for us to step into, and an engulfing silence offers a temporary relief from the noise of the streets outside. This is, of course, an easily criticised trope, and many have argued against the institutional tendency to place art on a separate sphere from reality. Yet, in the artist-run space of Pari, housed in what was previously a cafe (enshrined by the remnants of kitchen counters, and menu still visible on the wall like its own mural piece), transformation—of the world, of art, and of ourselves—is not only welcomed, but necessary.

In what way does an artwork become a point of entry, one that invites us to transform alongside it? In other words, I am wondering what it means to be a vulnerable reader of art. Vulnerable readings, according to Julietta Singh, "resist disciplinary enclosure, refusing to restrict in advance how and where one might wander through textual engagement".[1] I want to shed my own skin that I've been wearing for the past few weeks of a long and trying semester teaching art theory; that academic desire to dissect and scrutinise. *Shape-shifting* presents an opportunity to engage with multitudinous avenues of looking and listening, through works that propose adaptation as a method of survival.

The layout of the exhibition is archipelagic, offering islands of refuge as one wanders through the open space. Each work asks you to move around it in different ways—to contort your body to be gentle, distant, intrusive. To walk around, or stand close. In the centre of the room, a literal place of rest takes the form of a single brick-and-mortar stool by Jenn Tran. *Khảm Thơ (Pearl Poem)* is comforting in its straight-edged stability, painted a stark black with a reflective vinyl, inspired by the traditional Vietnamese craft khảm xà cừ (mother-of-pearl inlay). Tran's makeshift use of construction materials negotiates connection and disconnection through cultural objects, insisting that substitution is not lesser than, but a continuation of upholding lineage.

There are veering paths one might take to shape-shift. In Leo Bagus Purnomo's series of fabric works, photographic-like images are reconfigured into obscured, magical, and blurred realities, all dyed a gentle ocean blue. Each image is replicated three times, with shifting patterns of organic flowing lines reminiscent of traditional Batik—reminding us that mimicry still generates movement and change. Similarly manipulating traditional materials, Samer Almansour's copper and silver works turn scarcity into abundance. Twisting electricity wire to form cages around empty space and a delicate ceramic egg—Almansour's intricate craft reveals the quiet intimacy of an object, as well as the necessity of changing shape and taking on new forms. What is

[1] Julietta Singh, *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 22.

striking in this work is the presence of absence—as a lacelike, necessary gap through which the wires can unfurl.

The gaps and silences of history are reimagined through personal and lived experiences in Australian-Filipino artist Justin Cueno's *Skin*. Yet, it's important to remember that the body is not the antithesis of objecthood, but perhaps an extension. In a series of self-portraits presented through a two-channel video performance, Cueno presents two versions of himself, painted, in performance—his face sometimes obscured by banana leaves, his body drenched in white paint. Here, the diasporic self is not a fixed or stable identity that can be contained to a single image, but an ongoing process of mediating what it means to inherit loss and imagine otherwise. The body reappears in Zuraisa's ceramic tiles, which juxtaposes a woman's form with traditional geometric patterns of Islamic ornamentation—creating a dialogue between conformity and liberation, the imprint and the surface. By inserting the body as a central figure, both Zuraisa and Cueno reinterpret subjecthood, where the body is not confined to the site of the *real*, but another medium ripe for speculation.

The two other long-form video works in the exhibition require a slower viewing, expanding from the individual to consider cultural community. Inzitor Otaniyozova's short film *druzhba narodov (friendship of peoples)* documents the gathering of a group of Uyghur women in the midst of preparing traditional dishes. In recording this simple act, Otaniyozova reminds us that everything—even unadorned joy and brief laughter—must be preserved and thus, remembered. This sentiment takes multiple forms in Georgia Mulholland's sound and moving image installation *It's Your Head That Bleeds,* also presented as an accompanying printed book. Archiving a series of intimate interviews with her Palestinian friends in the West Bank, Mulholland's multi-sensorial work invites us to listen—to voices of resilience, and to the white noise of a cassette player that seems to pierce through stretches of silence. With minimalist black and white footage, the central focus is the expansive and experiential possibilities of bearing witness.

A recurring thread in *Shape-shifting* is an invitation for the audience to participate in this act remembering. The distinction between historical and personal histories collapses, and even the most private recollections have a shared resonance. Lige Qiao's 我,父亲,白桦林*: Why are we still sitting here when it's winter outside?* materialises an early childhood memory of a long train ride to visit their father in Northwestern China, and the birch trees they began to associate with this experience. Positioned in a corner beside the entryway of Pari, the artwork portrays a window scene on MDF boards, yet is itself a barrier shielding the view outside the gallery. One must walk around the life-sized panels to fully see the work, as if changing scenes in a theatre play. The activation of this strange and distant memory is only possible through our willingness to place ourselves in the artists' world. This sense of movement is carried in Amy Hill's vibrant paintings, featuring the pigface flower as it unfurls in full bloom, paired with a sister painting

that depicts footsteps marking the terrain of walking on Dharawal Country. A burst of colour in an otherwise muted room, Hill's paintings anchor us firmly to the heartbeat of *Shape-shifting*—which is to consider how cultural preservation is embodied, experiential, and continuous.

Shape-shifting does not follow a linear path towards a final form, and there is no singular process that each artist undertakes. Instead, the audience becomes interlocutors in their varying worlds and personas. We may enter through one portal and leave through another. We may pick up tools along the way: mimicry, repetition, manipulation. Sometimes it is painful, at other times, playful and brimming with possibility. In practising vulnerable reading, one must follow these impressions and moments of impact. They are, after all, our currency in this exercise of being open to a work that is opening itself to you.