

# HISTORY IS A SOFT CLAY MEDIUM: EUGENIA LIM AND SALOTETAWALE

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A postcard by the artist Salote Tawale hangs on the wall above my desk; entitled *The Bust* 2014, the photograph presents a classical sculpture of the artist's head and neck, set against a grey background. Every morning, after walking through the grand columned entrance of Tate Britain, I enter my office and sit down face-to-face with Tawale's image. Her expression is calm and stoic, yet the eyes stare accusingly into mine. Tawale's eyes ask me what sorts of faces are engraved into the historical sculptures that line the gallery walls in which I work, and whose hands have been given the honour of inscribing them. Simultaneously, they ask me what it means to display a body that is 'Other' – that is, not white, male and heterosexual – within the imperial framing inherent to all museums.

The postcard originated in a performance-based installation entitled *Colonising West Space* in which Tawale negotiated the architecture of a contemporary gallery in Melbourne through her placement of sculptural objects, photographic imagery and what the artist calls 'colour branding'. In essence a self-mythologising project, *Colonising West Space* traced the artist's bodily presence to create an alternative history of the space. Tawale has since disseminated the postcards widely, giving them to friends and strangers whom she invites to 'colonise' further spaces by placing an image of her body in new contexts. The postcard's circulation speaks to the condition of 'diasporic indigeneity' that informs Tawale's practice. As she asserts: 'Foregrounding the experience of a translated Indigeneity, the condition of my practice is one that is removed from land and separated from traditional practices, and consequently repositioned within immigrant histories'.<sup>1</sup>

History, for Tawale, is not set in stone: it is a soft clay medium, malleable, to be reshaped according to her whims. A similarly

playful approach towards narratives of the past is evident in the practice of Melbourne-based artist Eugenia Lim, whose work I will consider in dialogue with Tawale's. In recent years Lim has performed under the guise of The Ambassador, a feminist adaptation of Tseng Kwong Chi's *East Meets West* series, a persona who first appeared in a gold Mao suit wandering through the 'living history' museum of Sovereign Hill in Ballarat. Entitled *Yellow Peril* 2015, this performative video re-appropriates the racist nickname given to the infamously unpopular public sculpture *Vault* 1980 by Ron Robertson-Swann that was eventually re-housed outside the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art.<sup>2</sup> Lim's *Yellow Peril* was exhibited alongside two digital images printed on to unfolded gold emergency blankets. The first depicts a tourist photograph of the 'Ambassador' holding the largest gold nugget ever found, known as the 'Welcome Stranger'. As the 'Welcome Stranger' was found by Cornish miner John Deason in 1869, Lim's citation parodies white anxieties evident in the 'Yellow Peril' construct by suggesting that the time-travelling Ambassador has magically intercepted great wealth otherwise due to a member of the colonial ruling class. The second digital image reproduces a 1980 photograph taken of Lim's young parents standing in front of *Vault* soon after their arrival in Melbourne in that year. The juxtaposition of Chinese-Singaporean bodies set against a now-iconic sculpture that is forever linked in nickname to the xenophobic fear of Chinese and Asian presence in Australia creates a powerful image: at once painful, defiant and ironic.

Lim and Tawale are united in their privileging of personal narrative and family histories to displace Western art historical mythologies. More specifically, their work re-addresses the dominance of white artists in mainstream accounts of second wave feminist video and performance art. In her first live work, *Dressing Up (Ode to Mogul)* 2013, Tawale reimagined the reverse striptease in Susan Mogul's 1973 performative video by inserting a racialised narrative. Beginning naked, Tawale slowly dressed into what she describes as a 'totemic version of herself': white and pink face-paint, a head-dress of spooled VHS tape, and a spray-painted handmade version of a Fijian

'sulu'. At the same time she narrated – with impeccable comedic timing – the story of her painful first bra-shopping trip with her mother and sister in suburban Melbourne. During the performance Tawale ignored the audience and addressed only a video camera setup onstage, thus theatricalising the conditions of creating performative video practice alone in a bedroom or studio.

Tawale's homage to Mogul was at the invitation of Lim and myself when we commissioned artists to make a new live work in response to a video work of their choice from the 1970s.<sup>3</sup> This strategy is one that Lim has undertaken in her own artistic practice: Lim's 2014 video *Maternal semiotics* saw the heavily pregnant artist re-imagine Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* 1975, while in 2012 Lim performed *Narissus*, a durational response to her own live-faed video image that sought to 'perfect' freeze-frames of Marina Abramovic's *Art must be beautiful, artist must be beautiful* 1975. I have argued elsewhere that a defining characteristic of contemporary feminist art is the citational tendency to homage or parody the aesthetic and conceptual strategies of earlier feminisms.<sup>4</sup> Lim's and Tawale's re-performances of selected second-wave feminist artworks certainly display this tendency. However, as artists whose work explores the diasporic condition, Lim and Tawale's temporal registers are also necessarily geographical. Their work traces family histories of migration backwards through time and, as seen by both artists' recent undertaking of residencies in their ancestral 'motherlands', along a physical journey to a place of cultural origins. Yet, as theorist Stuart Hall argues, while cultural identities have histories, they also 'undergo constant transformation'.<sup>5</sup> He elaborates: 'Far from being grounded in mere "recovery" of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past'.<sup>6</sup> Tawale and Lim's practices do not aim to unearth a fixed notion of cultural identity – a true 'Fijian-ness' or 'Chinese-ness' – and insert it like a bookmark into existing accounts of art history. Rather, their practices play with different kinds of histories – family, feminist,

and canonical art history – to time-travel backwards and forwards in multiple directions. This productive interrogation of history creates new artistic subjects that, again to borrow Hall's words, 'belong to the future as much as to the past'.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Salote Tawale, in the introduction to her self-published book, *Salote Tawale*, 2017, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> See Geoffrey J. Wallis, *Peril in the Square: The sculpture that challenged a city*, Indra Publishing, Melbourne, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> *Memory Screens* was held at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Melbourne, as part of CHAWNELS: The Australian Video Art Festival, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> 'Performing Feminism: Body', Hobham Street Ladies and Brown Council, *Narissus*, vol. 36, 2015, pp. 23–31. Republished in *OnCuration*, no.29, 2016, <http://www.on-curation.org/issue-29-reader/performing-feminism-body-hobham-street-ladies-and-brown-council.html#WJ-UORCA7c>.

<sup>5</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1990, p. 225.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*