

## Herald St | Museum St

A recent work by Cary Kwok – *Sir, For the 100th Time, You Are Not a Replicant* (2019) – is set in the cinematic universe of *Blade Runner* (1982). Kwok reimagines the test which the authorities use to weed out replicants posing as humans – in the film, an intense psycho-moral interrogation – instead as an automated, strap-on masturbation device. The protagonist in Kwok's work, he explains to me, has become a little too fixated on undergoing the test, merrily climaxing time and again, beyond all doubt of his human status.

For all its ribald comedy, this work underscores Kwok's core conviction: that to cum is human. The range of men whose ejaculations he insistently imagines - holy men, historic men, archetypal men - is an affirmation, underneath their disparate modes and appearances, of shared humanity. The multiplication of the settings and subcultures his subjects inhabit - Hong Kong Noir, Mughal miniatures, Steampunk cityscapes and, most recently, the landscapes of pulp cartoons, besides countless more - is a way for the artist to more broadly and deeply demonstrate semen as seminal, as essence, as essential. Whatever the colours of their skin, they all cum in the same colour. They're playful, yes, and titillating, perhaps, but Kwok's works are in some fundamental sense, he tells me, an earnest response by a non-white immigrant living in a country whose racism is ever more explicit - a plea for the recognition of underlying sameness. When in person we look over the fantastical, gang bang *One Day My Prince Will Cum* (2019) – which resembles the imaginings of Tom of Finland taking industrial strength poppers with the Kuchar brothers on a tour of Disneyland led by Paul McCarthy - Kwok points out how deliberately he included ethnically coded protagonists like Aladdin and Li Shang among the princely throng.

Of course, the bounteous variety of the spaces Kwok creates for his horde of wankers is also an exercise in style. Just as Raymond Queneau in his 1947 work limited himself to one story, told 99 different ways, to better revel in the manifold armatures of storytelling, Kwok focuses on an obsessive, repetitive subject to further flex his ability to construct different worlds around it. From suffocating Victoriana (*Smoking Fags After Dinner*, 2019) to Jane Austen elegance (*Man feels parts in Mansfield Park*, 2020), to the '*Wish You Were Here*' series – which revels in the stereotypes of stops on the tourist trail - the artist delights in distilling a place, a moment, or a style. Kwok recalls the sheer joy of identifying a period style as a constant since childhood, when he watched a period Hong Kong film as a child, and recognizing it as a production of the 1960s. As well as watching *Blade Runner*, Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) and the works of Studio Ghibli repeatedly for pleasure, Kwok tells me he often plays a film set in the same period as the piece he's working on, in the background.

Did Kwok immerse himself in Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra* (1963) when working on an Egyptian scene, like *Wish You Were Here (Take It Sphinx)* (2020)? It would be hard to know what *Cleopatra*'s star, Liz Taylor, would say when faced with Kwok's image of a tourist, whose mid-selfie ribbon of spunk blesses the Sphinx with a substitute nose. Kwok is open with eros, so honest about his fixations, so open with his joy that even if 'virtue' is hard to come by in his works, 'vice' hardly feels relevant either. Even when we discuss watching pornography, Kwok quickly gets back to the pleasures of style – how the cut of an actors' hair, or the orchestration of their pubes, can indicate a film's period – and, accordingly, can either generate a thrill (seventies, hairy chests) or kill the mood (eighties, oiled muscles) – as much as the actors' costume, or the furniture on set. Which is not to say that setting isn't a turn on: indeed, Kwok's works, for all their profuse sexual activity, are in a sense most truly alive to the paraphiliac thrill of props. Witness the title work of this exhibition, *Am I Turning You On* (2020), in which a finger gently flips a 1920s, Bakelite style light switch in the form of a penis, or *Three's a Party* (2020), which reconfigures a mid-century Danish-style bentwood couch into a chic, multi-person orgasm machine. Kwok conveys with missionary fervour the ways that furnishings can be as powerful a vessel for sexual charge as fetish gear: that anything, once invested, can set the scene for pleasure and erotic exploration.

'We all of us sleep with strangers in our heads', writes the cineaste David Thompson. There is an interestingly estranged community that has emerged in greater numbers in Kwok's recent output: women. Not the powerful glamourpusses of his earlier portrait works, women now appear alongside but excluded from the action – trying to peek through a keyhole in *Smoking Fags*, or strolling blithely unaware of the discrete, just-seen facial in *Man Feels*; or, like poor Olive Oil, staring through a porthole in shock in *Ahoy Seeman, Blow Me Down!* (2019). My first feeling, seeing all these women together, was pity: they seem "cucked", in modern slang, while their male companions furtively have their fun behind their backs. But the key to understanding their presence, banished far from the fun, reveals itself in Kwok's description of Snow White - who has stumbled into *One Day My Prince*, equipped with a strap on and a look of horror – as 'disappointed'. Disappointment is inextricable from desire: fantasies work that way. When we talk about what it is about wanking per se that makes it so different to sex, so appealing, Kwok intimates its reliability: none of the awkward, sometimes deflating negotiation that comes when we try to make our desires real with another person. The incursion of disappointment into Kwok's works only intensifies, for me, their excitement: makes more urgent their call to grasp pleasures in our hands, whenever we can. After all, if sex teaches us anything, it's that the chasm between joy and its messy aftermath is a matter of just a moment.

Text by Matthew McLean

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Cary Kwok

Am I Turning You On

22nd February - 28th March 2020

Front Space  
(Anti-clockwise)

Am I Turning You On  
2020  
Acrylic and ink on paper, artist's frame  
19.7 x 19.7 x 3.8 cm / 7.8 x 7.8 x 1.5 in  
HS15-CK7272D

Ahoy Seeman, Blow Me Down!  
2019  
Ink and acrylic on paper, artist's frame  
23.2 x 34 x 3.8 cm / 9.1 x 13.4 x 1.5 in  
HS15-CK7155D

The Stroker  
2019  
Ink and acrylic on paper, artist's frame  
32.5 x 36 x 4.3 cm / 12.8 x 14.2 x 1.7 in  
HS15-CK7154D

Back Space  
(Anti-clockwise)

The Prince and the Peanis  
2020  
Acrylic and ink on paper, artist's frame  
39.8 x 30.8 x 3.8 cm / 15.7 x 12.1 x 1.5 in  
HS15-CK7205D

Man feels parts in Mansfield park  
2020  
Acrylic, ink on paper, artist's frame  
33 x 24.5 x 4.5 cm / 13 x 9.6 x 1.8 in  
HS15-CK7233D

Pimp My Ride  
2020  
Acrylic and ink on paper, artist's frame  
19.7 x 19.7 x 3.8 cm / 7.8 x 7.8 x 1.5 in  
HS15-CK7271D

Stairway to Kevin (One Step Closer)  
2018  
Acrylic, ink and palladium leaf on paper, artist's frame  
44.2 x 34.2 x 3.8 cm / 17.4 x 13.5 x 1.5 in  
HS14-CK6811D

Someday My Prince Will Cum  
2019  
Ink and acrylic on paper, artist's frame  
32 x 41.2 x 3.9 cm / 12.6 x 16.2 x 1.5 in  
HS15-CK7028D

Sir, For the 100th Time, You Are Not a Replicant  
2019  
Acrylic and ink on paper, artist's frame  
36.5 x 28 cm / 14.3 x 11 in  
HS15-CK7096D

CYBERSPUNK  
2020  
Ink and acrylic on paper, artist's frame  
39.8 x 30.8 x 3.8 cm / 15.7 x 12.1 x 1.5 in  
HS15-CK7294D

Three's a party  
2020  
Acrylic and ink on paper, artist's frame  
39.8 x 30.8 x 3.8 cm / 15.7 x 12.1 x 1.5 in  
HS15-CK7243D

Wish You Were Here (Take It Sphinx)  
2020  
Acrylic, ink and gold leaf on paper, artist's frame  
28.5 x 32.4 x 4.5 cm / 11.2 x 12.8 x 1.8 in  
HS15-CK7248D

Smoking Fags After Dinner  
2019  
Ink and acrylic on paper, artist's frame  
35.7 x 50.9 x 3.8 cm / 14.1 x 20.1 x 1.5 in  
HS15-CK7188D

Cary Kwok (b. 1975, Hong Kong, HK) lives and works in London, UK. Exhibitions include: Drawn Together Again, The FLAG Art Foundation, New York (2019); Takashi Murakami's Superflat Collection-From Shohaku and Rosanjin to Anselm Kiefer, Yokohama Museum of Art, Yokohama (2016); Nirvana. Strange forms of pleasure, Gewerbermuseum, Winterthur, and Musée de design et d'arts appliqués contemporains, Lausanne (2015); Keep Your Timber Limber (Works on Paper), Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (2013); Obsession, The FLAG Art Foundation, New York (2010); British Comic Art, Tate Britain, London (2010); Attention to Detail, curated by Chuck Close, The FLAG Art Foundation, New York (2007).