



OPACITY SHIFT

SKYE WAGNER

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UNSW GALLERIES

PARTIAL VIEWS:

On Skye Wagner's Opacity Shift

Looking at the centre of one of Skye Wagner's photographs is like looking inside the Facebook algorithm. It's as if all of those cat videos we liked, all of those curated ads we were sent, all of those gifs & memes & threads we shared, have been hustled into the studio, interrogated, mashed together, torn, and then reassembled in an exploded view. In placing two fragmented images together, say a picture of the ocean and blue duct tape, these two things become *like* or the *same* as each other. Our relationship to each individual object (whether it is a handbag, carrot, strawberry, tooth, varnished nail, or piece of bread) becomes muddled. We become hypnotised, entranced by the drip melting down the side of a pink ice cream scoop.

For *Opacity Shift*, Wagner has sought out images we may find trivial or banal or kitsch, and then used these to construct a series of multi-layer collages. These collages exude tactility and feeling. But it's a particular feeling, one I can only describe as a combination of wanting to touch the fabric of a stuffed toy, eating too much caramel slice, and listening to the same song on repeat—all at the same time. In linking banal images with affect, Wagner is drawing on the work of Sianne Ngai: a writer who has spent much of her career investigating the kind of aesthetics we tend to think of as trivial but are, in actuality, central to popular culture. Ngai is interested in aesthetic categories 'grounded in ambivalent or even explicitly contradictory feelings.'¹ These kinds of aesthetics are most often found online and in advertising—they make their way into cooking videos, makeup tutorials, Tumblr, dog & pastry memes, how-to YouTube channels, Disney cats, and the 'play the next episode' button.



Some examples of such 'contradictory feelings': cute but irritating, fun but unfunny, boring but in an interesting way.² These are not *extreme* feelings per se. We are not filled with rage or hunger or desire, but rather a type of emotion that sits closer to the surface. It's the kind of feeling we get when we are on public transport, earphones plugged in, swiping through a never-ending non-chronological feed, or when we spend thirty minutes in a digital malaise, scrolling through Netflix titles without ever arriving at a decision about what to watch.



But Wagner's images are not artificial in the way we expect them to be. For all they appear to be photoshopped or digitally manipulated, Wagner is only *mimicking* or *aping* this aesthetic. That is, these works are made out of intricate assemblages constructed inside of the studio, *not* via the screen. Wagner sources and curates each assemblage (with a combination of real objects and printed photographs) and then documents these with a digital camera. On occasion, she will print an assemblage, use it as a fragment in another assemblage, and then re-photograph it again. (This process explains the disorientating depth of field in Wagner's work, and how we can lose ourselves trying to find the endpoint of each surface.) Look for clues and you will find them: a lens cap, the studio floor, the stitching on the softball, or a 'real' carrot next to the image of a 'fake' carrot.

In 2009, Hito Steyerl wrote the much-cited essay 'In Defence of the Poor Image.'³ Writing at a time that was pre-social media takeover, Steyerl posited that the poor, low-res image offered an alternative to the commodity—the low quality, pirated, and pixelated version could move and circulate freely online (both for good and ill). 'It is no longer anchored within a classical public sphere, mediated and supported by the frame of the nation state or corporation,' wrote Steyerl, 'but floats on the surface of temporary and dubious data pools.'⁴

A decade later, the shareable image is now a lucrative commodity that can be traced, mined for data, and monetised. Wagner is pointing to this kind of contemporary image circulation—now in hi-def, and with less pixelation. But in collating and curating these images and overlaying them, Wagner is doing something else. She is creating a networked image bank with its own lexicon and set of interrelations—a network that is both analogue *and* digital, tactile *and* virtual, fake *and* hyperreal.

—Naomi Riddle

¹ Adam Jasper and Sianne Ngai, 'Our Aesthetic Categories: An Interview with Sianne Ngai', *Cabinet*, 43, (2011), accessible: <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/43/jasper_ngai.php>

² *ibid.*

³ Hito Steyerl, 'In Defence of the Poor Image', *e-flux Journal*, 10, (November 2009), accessible: <<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>>

⁴ *ibid.*

The works in this exhibition were created on the land of the Bidjigal and Gadigal peoples of the Eora Nation. I pay my respects to the traditional custodians of the land and extend this respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Sovereignty never ceded.

With special thanks to: Grant Stevens, Debra Phillips, José Da Silva, Karen Hall, Tim Silver, Vasili Vasileiadis, Alia Parker, Charu Maithani and Naomi Riddle.

Images captions (left to right): *black grid, dusty tape*, 2019, pigment print mounted on alupanel, 46 x 55 cm; *guinea pig, sticky notes*, 2019, pigment print mounted on alupanel, 41 x 31 cm

Cover: *golden chalice, egg yolk, seashells (detail)*, 2019, framed pigment print on Ilford Fibre paper, 80 x 59 cm