Three artworks in relation to feminie body

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Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne, Southbank campus

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This script is edited by Alison Chan

In today's presentation, I would like to show three artworks that I produced last year 2017. Each work contains a component that depicts a human body. In the first two works, female bodies are intentionally implicated, and in the last work, the sexuality of the body appears ambiguous. These works were created during my MFA, in response to the gender questions and issues. The issues that emerged around gender became entangled within in a so-called, the cultural liminal space. By talking about these works in the context of the feminine body, I hope to come to terms with fundamental questions that map the body of the female immigrant.

Image: An installation view of the work in the group exhibition *Free Love Hurts* at Mailbox Artspace. Curator: Andrée Ruggeri and Rachel Pearce. Photography by Mailbox Artspace staff.

Artwork One – *No Chairman Mao's Haircut for Women*. A triptych inside three mailbox spaces. 2017. Inkjet prints, a bread loaf, jam, a found cigratte butt.

Before Dad left for China to visit my grandma, I asked him to bring back my old photographs from the apartment that we used to live. When he returned, there was half a suitcase with pictures of me: the me whom I had long forgotten and now encountered only in the dreams, a version of me who would never doubt about my cultural or gender identity.

Among these, I found photographs taken during my first military training period. I was around 16 or 17 years old. In one photo, I am standing among other girls, wearing a green military uniform, and holding an old-fashioned gun. I still recall the blunt pain on my shoulder after firing a shot. In the photo, two male soldiers are standing by the side. They were in charge of our squad and gave us orders.

Image: a group shot of a squad in a high school military training program. 1996.

The green uniform assimilated individuals into a whole, and our gender became irrelevant. There are no smiles on our faces. We look tough, acted tough. With the gun and the uniform, we felt empowered, and we were equal contenders with the boys. In the training, we swore to prove that we were as good, as strong as the boys and to make our squad leader and commander proud. We cracked our voices when shouting Mao's slogans so that the boys who were trained in the next field, a distance away, would hear us and feel threatened.

The purpose of the training was to discipline and train us to listen to orders from the authorities instead of challenging them. We were reminded of our generational duty, as young women, to protect communist regime and carry on the communist ideology.

"Communist society is an egalitarian society."

This is what I was taught and what I also came to learn. Once, Mao said that "women hold up half the sky", and in the communist China, women would work in any jobs, with the same freedom that men did. Boys and girls received the same education. There was no mother's day in China. Instead, on the 8th of March, International Women Day, children gave their mothers gifts and the whole nation dedicated itself to the celebration to the female citizens.

Image: A found image. It was taken in circa 1960's.

Everything pointed to a truly equal society. Surely, we had disassembled thousands of years of structural inequality. In fact, He-yin Zhen, the first Chinese advocate of feminism, writing around the time of the Women's Suffrage movement, said, "Women can be liberated only when common property is established"[1]. This was a radical proposition in 1907. It framed the issue of women's liberation as a possibility in Mao's Communist regime where egalitarianism has already been implemented and practised.

Images: Two archive photographs of the first female air force of P.R.China. They were taken in circa 1964. Scourced from www.military.china.com

But, growing up in China, why could I hardly remember women's voices in the pursuit of knowledge and truth? Why was I not taught about He-yin Zhen, the first Chinese feminist? It was her, who first introduced and distributed the Communist Manifesto to China. It was only recently, after my departure from China, that I encountered her essays and ideas, in English. Surely, she was an essential revolutionary figure who deserved to be a part of a young comrade's education?

Why, despite all this Communist revolutionary thinking, is it still a social norm to have male leader and female assistant? Why is it that I hardly see a woman on the delegate panel of the CCP's National Congress? Instead, all I see is another male dominated arena: same age, same hair and same black suits. Why am I constantly told to hold myself to the standards of men? Am I not a standard of excellence in myself?

All these questions, all these doubts about gender equality were always rendered unreasonable because they were contradictory to the communist theory and ideology. They became 'unreal, unimportant and temporary', a hindrance in the greater goal of achieving a socialist country under a communist regime. The thinking was that in pursuit of 'egalitarianism' and a political regime, the gender problem would be resolved. As naturally as that. And problematizing gender was seen as a threat to the regime. It was the act of questioning and challenging the authority that became a greater threat to social stability. So, despite the quest for common equality and common property, a certain status quo still remained.

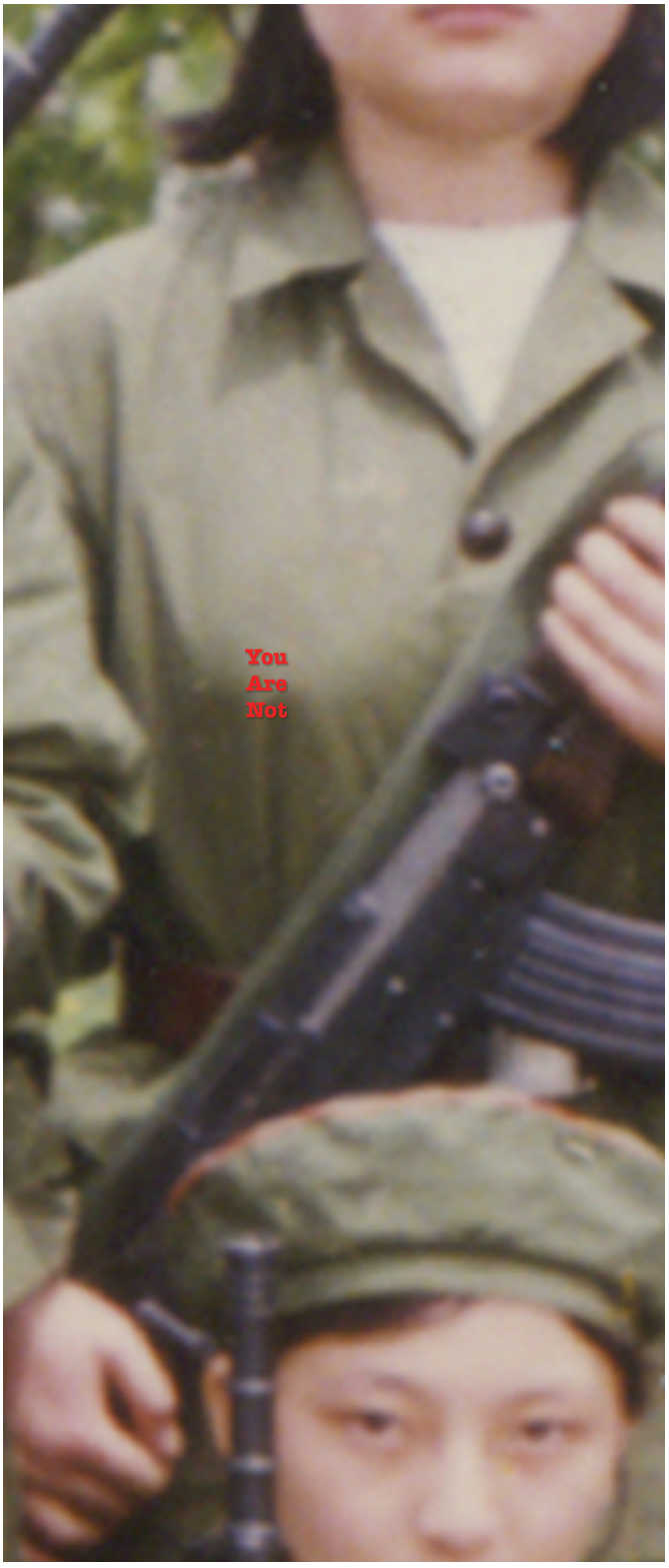

Image: An inkjet print of a digital image. 2017.

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In my military training, I often thought of my grandma, my Dad's mother. She was a child soldier and spent her entire youth fighting for the communist party. At the age of 13, an undercover communist member asked her to lead local children and organise grass–root resistance against Japanese invasion and genocide. At 15, she became the member of the communist party and was given the position as the Party Secretary in the central region of Jiangsu province to direct armed fights. As a member of the party, my grandma was given opportunities to receive education and training. She grew into a strong female soldier, leader and socialist believer. She developed a strong character: direct, brave, tough and strict.

During the special war time when fighters were needed and female supporters were called in the young communist party, my grandma's opinions and decisions were respected. At that time, she was an equal.

Image: Two portrait photographs of Gu Bin (grandma).

However, after the wars, it was arranged for her to work on a managerial level in various government institutions and businesses, but always as a subsidiary assistant to her male directors and managers. Her character of openly challenging authority and criticism, inherited from the war time, often made her the target of anti-Communist accusations. In the new China that she fought for, she struggled as female communist and worker. She was stuck in a hypocritical reality.

To me, grandma was always a distant and unapproachable person. She was more like an official at home instead of a grandma figure. She was a chain smoker. She spent a big portion of a day in the study, with my grandpa. They would sit opposite to each other, studying and taking notes on the important documents sent from the communist central government. Their heads were barely visible in the thick smoke cloud that they had exhaled for hours.

The only time I felt she was like normal grandma was when she was in the kitchen cooking for my family, more for my grandpa than anybody else. She was the only person who knew my grandpa's favourite food. She was the only person who could cook these complicated dishes. When grandpa passed away, she stopped cooking completely.

Image: A portrait photograph of An-jia Wu (Aunt), (circa 1960s)

My mum has a photo of her in the military uniform too. She told me that the green uniform was the most fashionable and desirable dress in the 60s and 70s. I wondered who lead such fashion trend, whether this trend signified an empowerment for the Chinese women, or if it indicated a kind of ongoing enslavement.

Looking at a photo of my Mum in the green hat, and the photo of me in the green uniform, I recognised a cultural tradition that meant a world that I used to belong to. And the question remains.

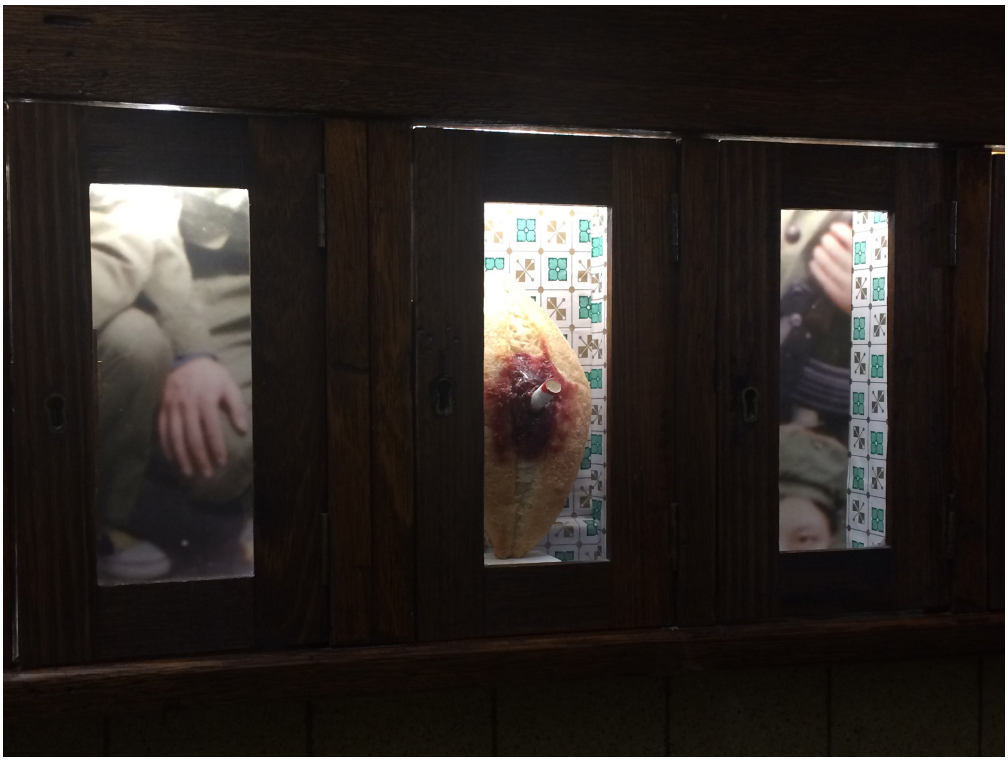

Image: An installation view of the work in the group exhibition *Free Love Hurts* at Mailbox Artspace. Curator: Andrée Ruggeri and Rachel Pearce. Photography by Mailbox Artspace staff.

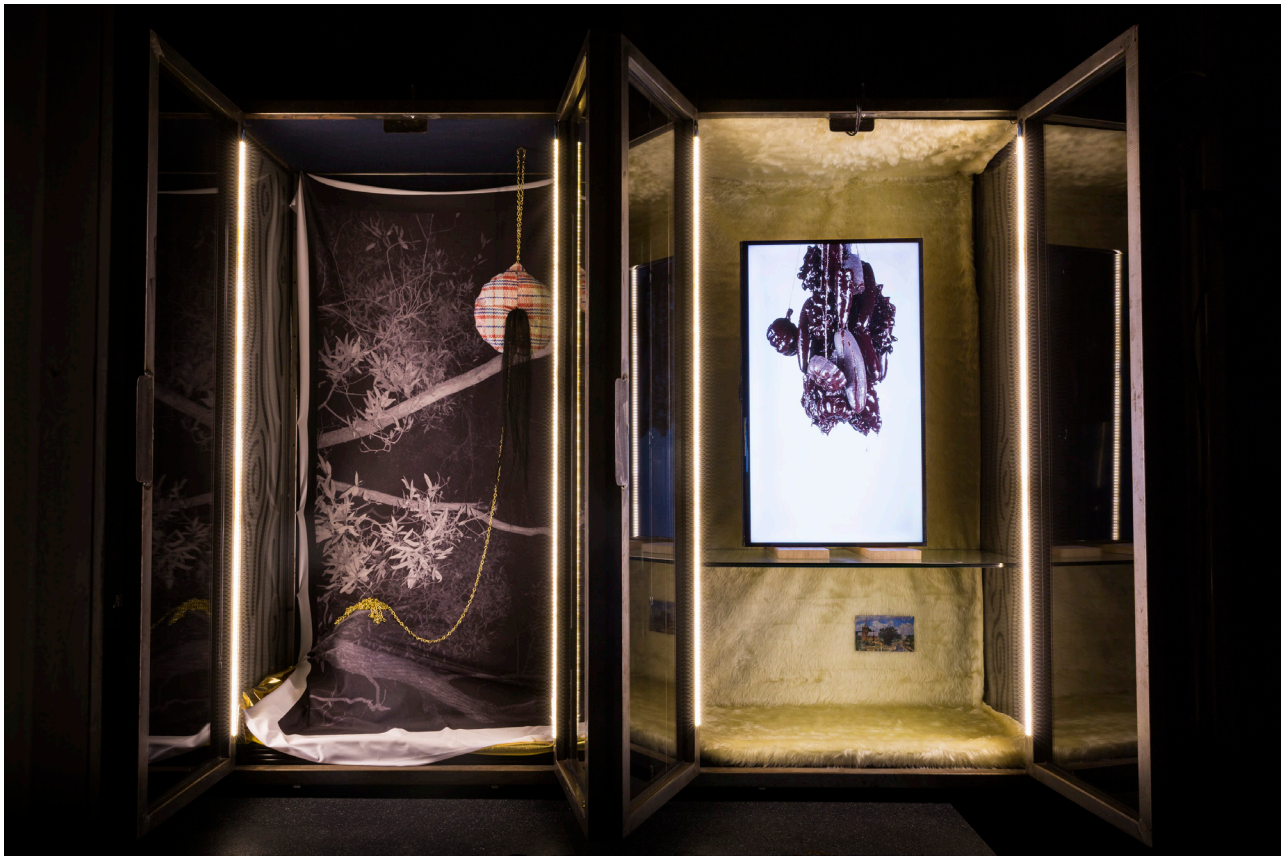

Image: An installation view of the work in the exhibition *Hair Caught in Kangaroo Paws* at Loop Bar. Photography by Janelle Low.

Artwork two – *Hair caught in Kangaroo Paws*. An installation inside six glass window boxes at LOOP bar. 2017. Metal chains, fabric with digital print, synthetic hair, human hair, plastic sheets, pillow filling fibre, HD digital videos, faux rabbit fur, found images, wood frames.

My hair falls at a fast pace. Long black hairs are often found on the surface of objects or floors. My movements could be tracked by following the black hairs in the rooms. My Mum disliked my fallen hairs, as they made her effort of keeping the house clean like a lie. And, of course, she doesnt like to give others, especially her mother in law, a chance to criticise.

Now they have become my domestic annoyance. I keep sweeping them off from the floors and I feel obliged to pick them up every time I see a hair, so that I can live in a same clean space like my parents'. But I cannot hate them. Instead, I am sentimental over them. After all, they are the by-product of my body, once attached to it. They create a kind of biological trace of me and provide the evidence of my existence in this physical world.

As an immigrant now, I have a constant urge to be associated with my present living place, Australia, a place that holds no histories of my families and very short one of myself. This disconnect from a geographically located past can create social isolation and generates a psychological distance to this place. How can I make this new place home? How can I obtain the sense of ownership toward this new life of being others?

Our connection to place are often built up in the imagined. In the effort of creating various connections with this place, I engage with the geographical sites, study its past and present, and search for the stories about other immigrants in Australia, especially the ones who share the same Chinese cultural root. When I sweep the hairs into the dust pan and discard them in the rubbish bin, I imagine them to be buried in landfill, or scattered into the air. The hairs inscribe my DNA on this land and plant a root for me.

The Australian bush is of significance to an 'Australian' identity. In book The Bush, Don Watson states that Australian bush holds the psyche of the nation. It is mythical and dangerous as well as recreational and remedial.[2] When I am in the bush, a cascade of history and memory rooted in the natural landscape washes over me. I feel the struggle of the early settlers battling against an unyielding landscape, and the horrors of the coloniser and black genocide. In the bush, I also discover the traditions of the first Chinese immigrants. These early Chinese communities have left more traces in the bush than the urban areas. The Chinese crockery, Buddhist statues, corrugated temple sheds and tomb stones with Chinese names are often found in the bush near the old camp sites and walks. It is an archaeology of immigration, of those who came before me.

While my study of the Australian bush is one established through the white man's gaze, and its depictions follow a European aesthetic tradition, I like to imagine again a different image of the bush in which Chinese bodies and psyche of the immigrant are the protagonists. How did their bodies rub against the surfaces of this fierce and strange natural land? How did they perceive the beauty and horror of this place?

In the thin historical records of Chinese migrants in Australia, that I have gathered so far, there are many stories about Chinese men. They are described as miners, carpenters, gamblers, farmers and husbands of cross-cultural marriages. Where are the Chinese women in the early Chinese community in Australia? They appear as wives and daughters in old family photographs displayed in the Chinese history and cultural museums. Nothing more.

I made a round soft pillow and sewed a bundle of long black hair at the centre. I see it as an Asian woman's body. It is small and light and has the quality of being easily carried around.

When it is placed in in front of an image of eucalyptus trees, it tells a story, an Australian story, an immigrant story and a story about a woman.

Images: The installation views of the work in details at LOOP Bar. Photography by Janelle Low.

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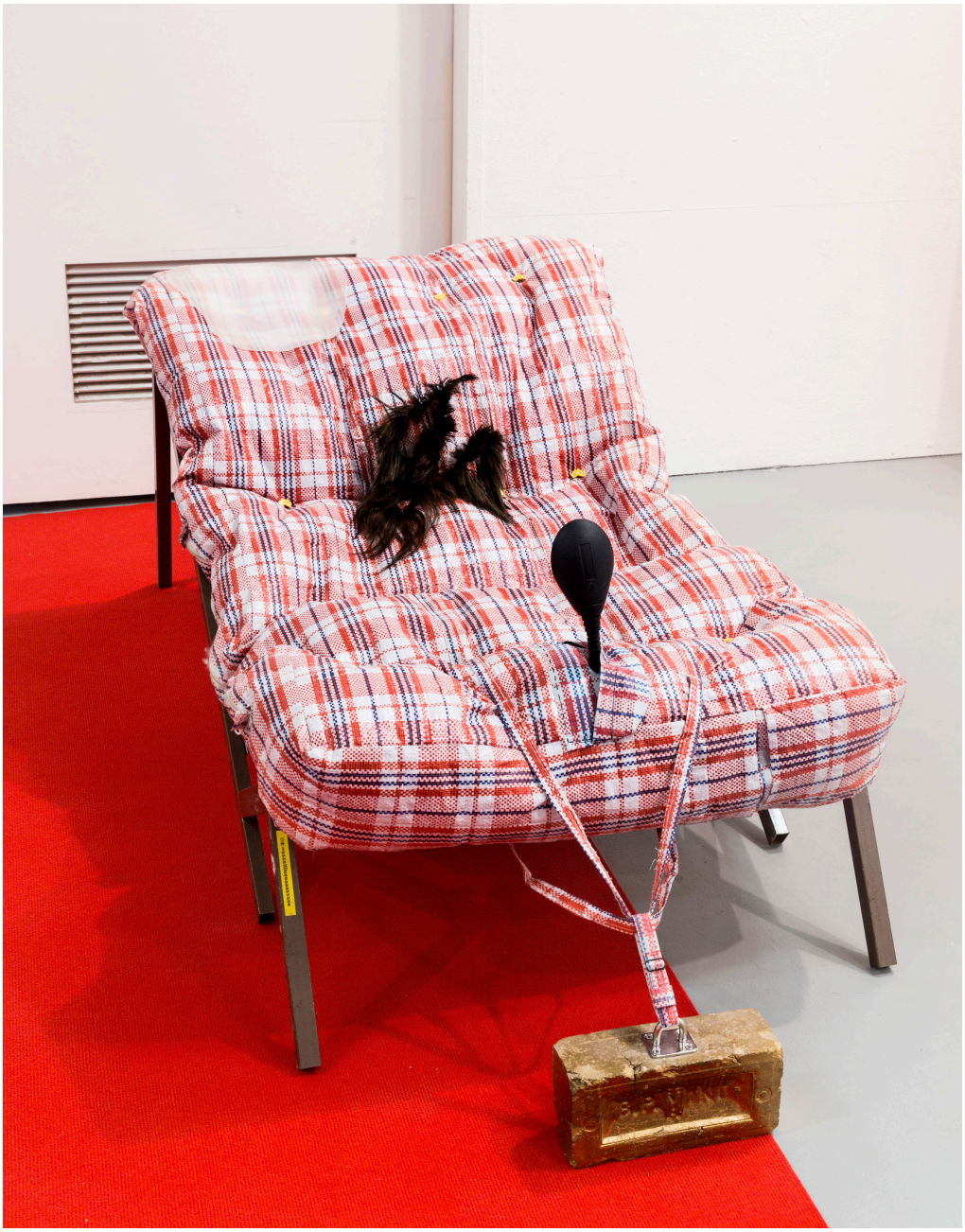
Then I made another hairy pillow. This one was bigger than the first one and in an oval shape. More hair were stitched on it. This time, I hide the pillow behind the same image of the trees. I stretched the image tight so that the pillow created a bump on its surface. Then, few holes were cut in the image. I pulled some hair out through them.

I think again of the ubiquity of my own hair, having traces around the house, and I think perhaps, despite the invisibility of the immigrant women, their hair become the traces, emerging through the multiple social layers. Perhaps, it could be seen as dust or wast, but when their hair is caught in Kangaroo paws, they become entangled with Australian land, almost in an accidental and passive way. The ambiguous space that the signifier inhabits expands the interpretation of the work. When the Kangaroo paws is an element in an ikebana creation within the domestic content, does the veiling of the ‘body’ by landscape suggest that those women’s interaction is only limited within the domestic frame?

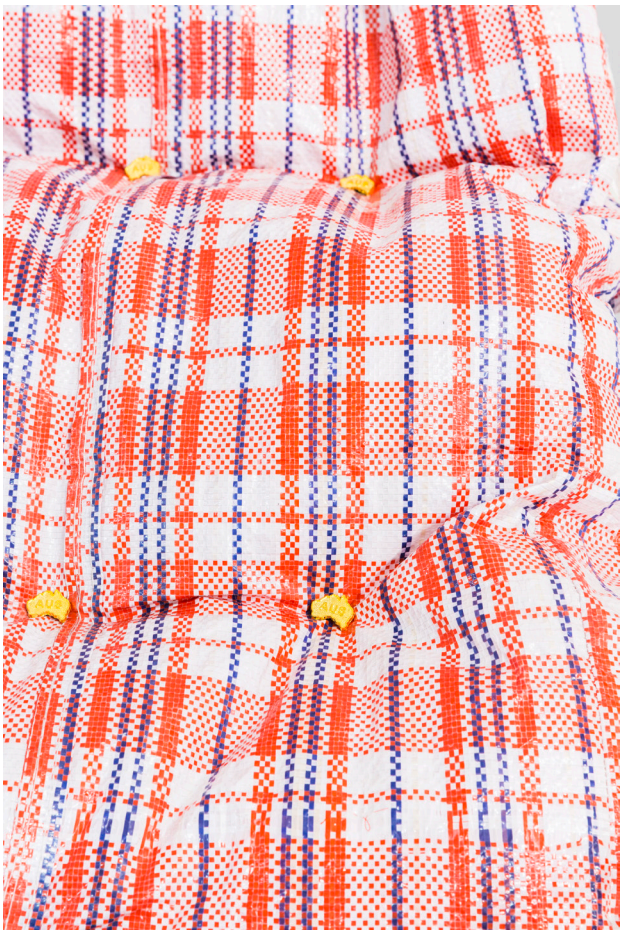
Images: The installation views of the work in details at LOOP Bar. Photography by Janelle Low.

Artwork three – *Just Call Me 'JO'.* A sculpture work. 2017. Metal frame, plastic sheets, pillow filling fibre, metal pins, human hair, silicon, bricks, strings.

In the bush, I am conscious of my physical body. The sharp edge of the leaves and spiky grass poke and scratch my skin. The surface of rocks and trees press against my palms. The broken shells and gravel cripple my steps. My eye sight is tested by the birds hiding amongst the leaves. The insects remind me about my blood type as I watch them fill their guts. But the longer I spend in the bush, the less aware I am of my body. It gradually changed and acclimatised to the bush, and to Australia. Along with my body, my selfhood and the self-perception had also shifted. I am no longer seeing myself a Chinese and I am more than Chinese. But how can I simply answer the question "Where are you from?"? How can I be assured of my honesty in answering "I'm from Melbourne, Australia." when others' look at me, dubious of how I present myself? After all, to be from Melbourne is to look non-Asian, right?



Images: An installation view of the work in the VCA maters exhibition 2017 at the Art Space, Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne. Photography by Janelle Low.



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To the immigrant, whose life is one of culturally hybridity. Our exposure to diverse knowledge and information through migration often opens a state of the unfixed and unknown. In this state, the self is frequently questioned, “What are you?”. And the selfhood becomes muddied. Under the pressure of another’s gaze, an immigrant turns into itself and asks: “Who I am? Where do I belong?” In searching for the material presentation of a body of an immigrant, I made a futon. In answering an absurd question, I came up with an absurd answer.

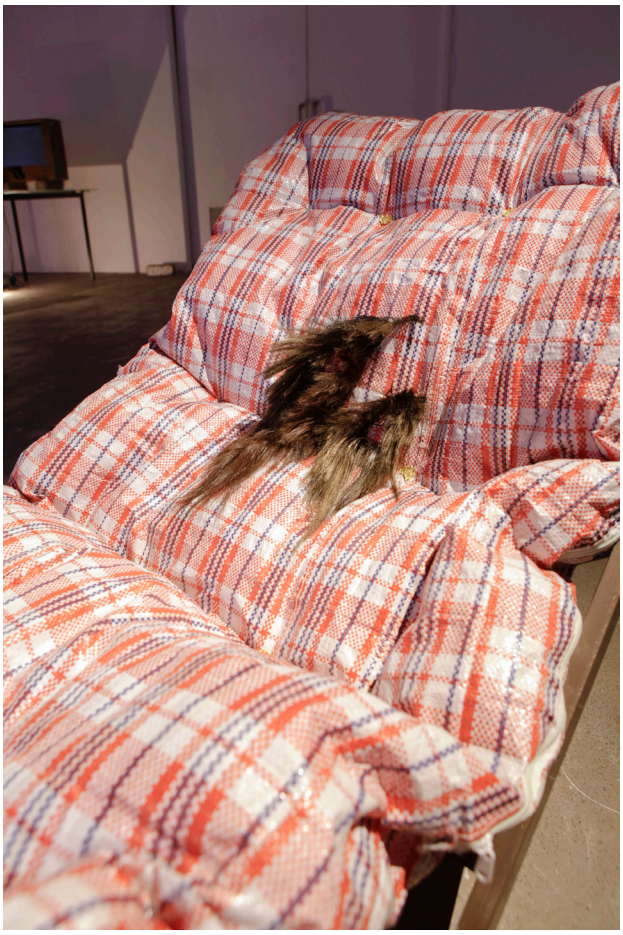
The futon is comprised of plastic sheets with a distinctive cross pattern of stripes, and stuffed with soft fibre fillings. The cross-pattern on the plastic sheet is easily recognisable as the material of ubiquitous cheap bags used to transport goods for travel. The head of the futon, two English letters ‘JO’ are embroidered with hairs, and at the its feet, a mirror is attached and held erect with a stick. The futon reclines against a metal structure.

Metaphysically, the futon is a human body. The plastic sheet, like the skin, gives the futon body an identity with its own cultural, political and economic values. As it covers the entire futon body, it suggests that the qualities that come with this pattern are innate attribute of this identity. This identity is that of the low economic traveller or migrant community or the Asian culture, since the bag from which the plastic was sourced by Asian migrants. The letters ‘JO’, evokes an abbreviation of a person’s name, another marker of identity. In comparison with the plastic sheet, JO is a social sign that indicates the psyche attached to the body.

Building on Jacques Lacan’s theory of ‘the Ideal-I’, Christina Emanuela Dascalu states that ‘the subject (a self) is determined both literally and metaphorically by the “letter”.’ So, a person’s name has a tremendous impact on forming one’s identity and fate. By giving itself a name, the subject Self creates another identity that matches the one projected by the Other.

Keeping this in mind, ‘JO’ potentially articulates a self that is defined by others, and an identity that is agreed upon and recognised by the subject Self. The internal expression of the selfhood is represented through the materiality of the ‘JO’. The hairs are stitched on the surface and it is, as if, the letters are shaped with the biological element that grows from inside outward, through the plastic skin. Under the conditions of cultural hybridity, the name’s ambivalent articulation of the Self complicates the identification process of cultural selfhood. Given that the name is another form of cultural representation, the culturally signified identity of the name ‘JO’ becomes quite blurred. This is because the difference inhabited by the futon body is unclear. It could be either an identity that is inherited through an innate process, or an identity that is acquired socially.

Moreover, the uncertainty of self-perception is informed by the narcissistic relationship between the mirror and the futon body. The mirror provides the futon an external gaze, in which the futon can see itself. As the mirror faces inwards, the reflected image is obscured from the public eyes, but easily accessible to the futon. The mirror self does not scrutinise the futon Self, but the mirror also presents the futon’s difference. With this difference, an ongoing psychoanalytic process of self-forming is envisioned. In the physical space between the futon and the image in the mirror, the production of the Other is imagined.



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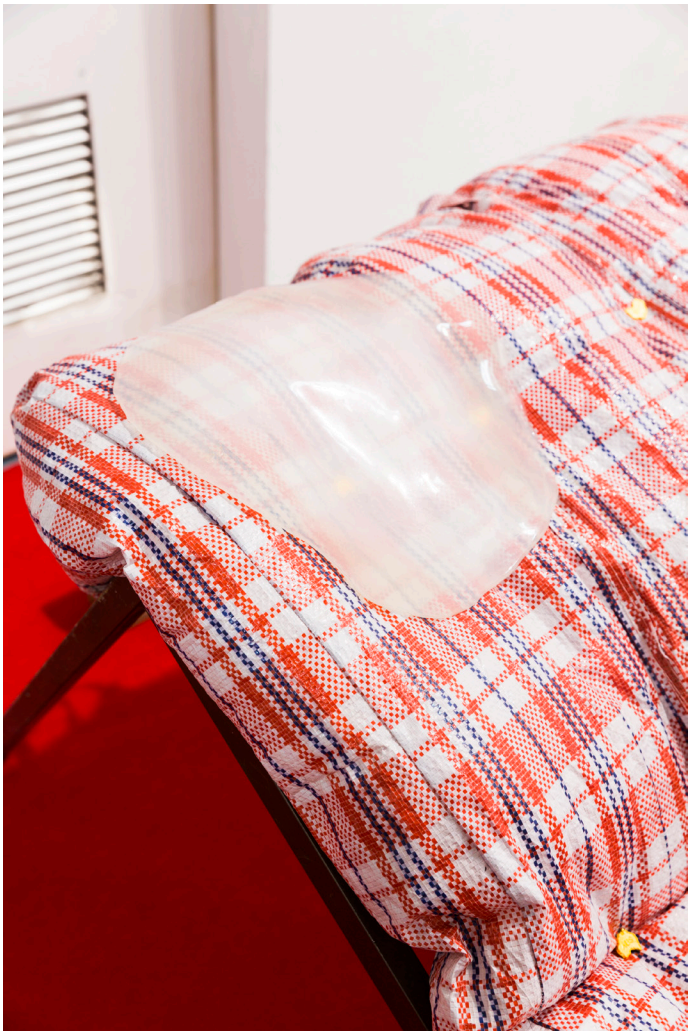

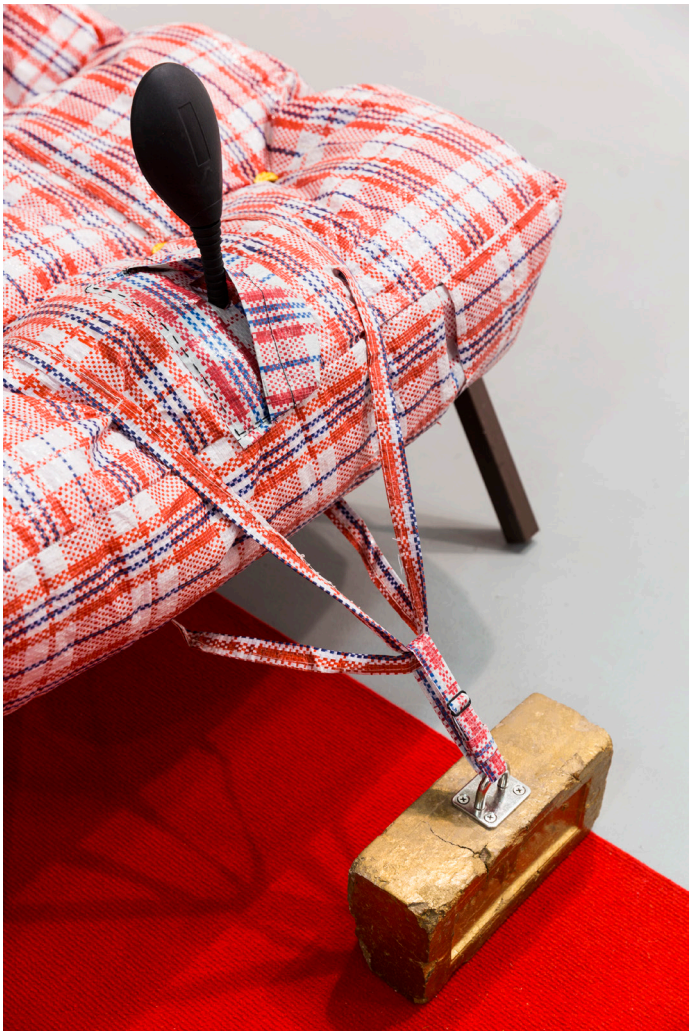

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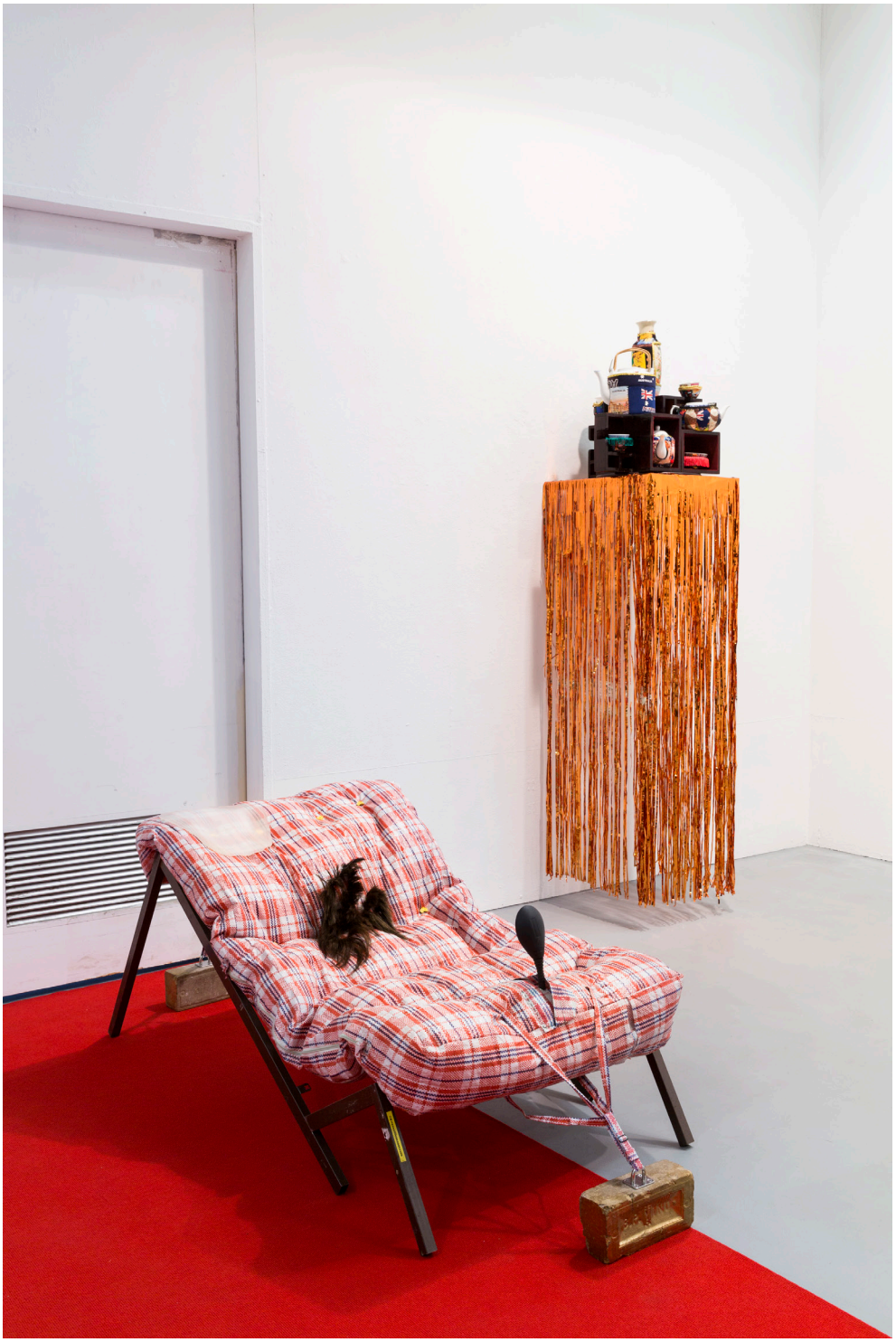
The futon could be a body of male or a body female. The mirror is poked out from the lower pocket on the futon, creating a the resemblance of the male genitalia. However, the materiality of the mirror that is inconsistent to the futon body suggests it could be inserted as an additional part or protrude from the futon's plastic skin. This ambiguous sexual identity echoes the indecisive gender reading from the name JO.

The suggested sexuality of the futon is structured and formed. The futon is tied with the two bricks on the ground and shaped by the tension of the strings. Perhaps, it indicates that one's sexual identity, is built through the negotiation between the social projection and self construction. I wonder if a body imbued with the ambiguous of sexuality could encourage a fair treatment and interaction from the others.



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Footnotes:

1. Lydia H. Liu, Rebecca E. Karl, and Dorothy Ko, ed.s, “On the Question of Women’s Liberation,” in *The birth of Chinese feminism [electronic resource] : essential texts in transnational theory*, (New York : Columbia University Press, c2013), https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unimelb/reader.action?docID=1103412&ppg=66.

2. Don Watson, *The bush : travels in the heart of Australia* (Melbourne, Victoria:Hamish Hamilton an imprint of Penguin Books, 2014).

Bibliorgraphy:

1. Liu, Lydia H., Karl, Rebecca E., and Ko, Dorothy, ed.s. “On the Question of Women’s Liberation” In *The birth of Chinese feminism [electronic resource] : essential texts in transnational theory*. New York : Columbia University Press, c2013. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unimelb/reader.action?docID=1103412&ppg=66.

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