

JENNIFER TEE: HORIZONTAL LIMBO

Karen Archey, 2018

In: *Jennifer Tee, Ether Plane ~ Material Plane*, ISCP

Jennifer Tee most often orients her works horizontally, a lateral plane most familiar to animals and landscape, and unfamiliar to bipedal vertical humans, unless of course we are sleeping or dead. In Tee's work, colorful knitted swathes oftentimes dot gallery floors, acting as ethereal planes. Terracotta swirls slither through them as if grassy knolls, while elsewhere glazed ceramic rings and oval spheres appear as outsized puka shells. This lateral orientation says much about Tee's interests and artistic strategy. In her work, this horizontality suggests a shift in both communication and perspective: the ineffable nature of exchange surrounding human subjectivity is seen in another light via the embodied communication of animals, and the "worm's eye" vantage afforded by laying on Tee's floor pieces offers a perspectival change from the hegemonic vertical, wall-mounted, 60-inches-on-center artwork. Though subtle, these elements suggest a shift in viewership away from the traditional subject assumed by the museum: the white, vertical male. This research into new modes of communication, affectivity, and identity is termed by Tee "the soul in limbo." She is particularly interested in liminality, whether in terms of race, gender, or even material states such as life and death.

Tee's work "Ethereal Plane ~ Material Plane" further details this sense of liminality, specifically between the dead and the living. The piece was originally commissioned by Manifesta 11, which took place in Zurich, Switzerland in 2016 and was appropriately titled "What People Do For Money," charged artists with collaborating with a local tradesperson to make a new work. Tee chose to work with undertaker Rolf Steinmann, who acts as head of the Zurich Funeral and Cemetery Office. Undertakers, or morticians in American English, are among the few who professionalize in the sad business of our transition from vertical to horizontal beings. The very term "undertaker" would suggest that it's this person's responsibility to take the body under the earth into the ground. While working with the undertaker in Zurich, Tee bore witness to the enormous industry behind death. She saw Zurich's six cremation ovens process approximately 35 bodies per morning as well as the uncannily banal nature of cadavers occupying the funeral home. The dead body, Tee thought, was accompanied by a sort of emptiness, and freed from emotional baggage and other forms of damage. There was peace to it, but also brutality.

Tee's artwork "Ethereal Plane ~ Material Plane" manifests as a wall-mounted installation of various prints with handmade ceramic elements and borrowed funerary artifacts installed next to it and floor elements nearby. Tee chose to work primarily in black and white to mirror the binary of life and death, and created a monographic checkerboard pattern upon which she placed funerary artifacts, mostly sourced from Swiss collections by originating from the global South, such as ancient South American urns and African funeral masks. Through this pan-cultural panoply of rituals on death, she suggests both death's empirical uncertainty and the myriad ways in which every culture has attempted to come to terms with its mystery.

Along with Tee's oval spheres split in black and white, there's are other ambiguous spherical ceramic piece, appearing as if they've been pinched in their portly middle. In actuality these are imprints of human faces, which are then glazed and fired. Titled "ABSTRACTION OF A FORM, SHAPE OR PRESENCE," these ceramic spheres appear uncannily akin to the funerary masks installed nearby, such as a 19th century Tolai mask from Papua New Guinea. If one is to imagine the action that created the imprint, or to fill the negative space suggested by the ceramic piece, it conjures a sort of ghostly presence. The title "ABSTRACTION OF A FORM, SHAPE OR PRESENCE" is telling of Tee's interest in the West's deeply colonialist history of abstraction propagated by artists such as Hilma af Klint, Robert Rauschenberg, Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky via trips to the global south.

If we take Tee's aesthetic usage of black-and-white throughout her work metaphorically, we can infer she is conceptually interested in the grey areas; the difficult to define—the soul in limbo. If we think of social issues such as race—particularly the white tendency to only understand people of color as white or black, familiar or other—we can come to the understanding that binary thinking can be a human defense mechanism. Stacked upon a Friso Kramer "Revolt" chair (its appearance quite benign, belying its name), is a collection of books that deal with the subject of liminality, whether in regards to the body or identity. The titles in the "Resist Stack of Books" range from 19th century titles such as Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (1899) and Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) to 20th century classics such as Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) and *Poems of the Black Object* by Ronaldo V. Wilson (2009) to contemporary greats like Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* (2009). A quick scan of the diverse collection of books reveals several threads: many references to color, such as the colors black and blue as evidenced by the titles above, as well as personal narratives on dealing with adversity, specifically how sociological phenomena like race are felt through lived experience. In Tee's practice, color is a motif from which resistance is formed—be it skin color, or

blue for depression, obsession, etc. Tee has diligently read through all of these books and marked them, and in many of her exhibitions invigilators or performers read through them. In some instances, Tee collaborates with poet Jane Lewty to write the "Resist Text," a poem that appropriates passages from the Resist Stack of Books, which is then read aloud in the exhibition space. Viewers are invited to lay down on Tee's knitted works and take in the text on a horizontal plane.

Watching this experience attests to the immense amount of detail found in Tee's work, from the knots making up these knitted zones to an hours-long choreography, to the hundreds of thousands of words in the Resist Stack of Books. The result of this labor-intensive practice is a sense of multi-vocality that attests to the ineffability of feeling unsettled or in between. Tee's practice points to feminized and sometimes exoticized and racialized labor-intensive art forms, usually relegated to craft: weaving, pottery and ceramics, knitting, large-scale flower harvesting and drying. It is through her very collaborative, historically informed practice of making that Tee's work finds its voice to embody the ineffable.