

# *the body is a blade*

*(that sharpens by cutting)*

Samira Yamin  
Kenneth Yuen  
Charlotte Zhang

Curated by Vinhay Keo & Evelyn Hang Yin

October 9 — December 4, 2021

FOCA Curators Lab









“When they ask you  
where you’re from,  
tell them your name  
was fleshed from the toothless mouth  
of a war-woman.

That you were not born—  
but crawled, headfirst—  
into the hunger of dogs.”

*the body is a blade (that sharpens by cutting)* takes its title from the poem quoted above—Ocean Vuong’s *Headfirst*. Curators Vinhay Keo and Evelyn Hang Yin saw this line as a way to articulate the ways in which the body cuts through violent frameworks of representation.

In their curatorial process, the pair aimed to remain astutely aware of the question: What does it mean to be represented? And how does the modern apparatus of representation reinscribe violence?

Representation comes at a cost, becomes reduction, reverting the body to mere material, for it is through violence that the body comes to be seen.

Vuong’s poem is rooted in intergenerational traumas and the stories we carry about who we are. Written with the intention of Vuong’s mother as his narrator, she / the poem examine Vuong’s own legacy, how he was made by such pains, and how they cannot be divorced from his present self.

In his body of writing more generally, Vuong interrogates the legacies of war and violence particularly as directed by the United States. He calls attention to the ways that such atrocities are embedded in ourselves today—in the histories we are told, the words we utter, the ways we relate to others. Such legacies are personal but also national, stated but unspeakable.

There is an impossibility to full comprehension, to full repair.

However, rather than arriving at or attempting to declare a concrete answer, all of the artists in this exhibition open up channels for us, the viewers. Through these channels, the artists ask us to question our modes of engagement, question our understandings of legibility and illegibility, the conditions that have a hold on us, and which impact the way we interact with both art and one another.

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Samira Yamin is an Iranian-American artist whose work destabilizes the United States’ reductive portrayal of life and conflicts in the Middle East. *Refractions* obfuscates images of the Syrian Civil War and reimposes dimensionality, forcing the viewer to reexamine the neo-orientalist gaze with a more critical eye.

Through the reappropriation of photojournalism and the use of intricate optical glass carvings, any viewer of Yamin’s work is asked to look again, to consider what is truly known and what has been made a consumable fiction.

The nature of Samira’s work is that it requires the viewer to wholly spend time with each piece, a required slowing down, juxtaposing our usual insatiability and quickness. We consume images faster than



we can process them, much faster than we can understand the nuance, the bias, or the root of what is being represented. We consume violence, too, at such a rapid speed that the bodies become lost to us, their condition nothing more than a cog in the endless scroll. It is in the slow looking at Yamin's work that the viewer comes face to face with discomfort, the body as remnant—the literal, physical aftereffect of global harm.

It has been written about Yamin's work that "In order to understand the optical image in its entirety, the viewer is required to move around its surface." Thus, her work pushes spectators up from their comfortable seats, away from the narratives they've unquestioningly swallowed, and forces them to orbit new grounds.

This is the artist's continual effort: to shine a light not only on the reality of violence in the Middle East, but on the realities of what it means to truly see.

In a similar vein, Kenneth Yuen's work investigates the role of objects in representing complex cultural and historical contexts. Yuen is also calling attention to viewers' surface level understandings of identity and place, and is particularly interested in the role that the material object plays in this.

He presents the viewer with an enlarged fiberglass fortune cookie, which becomes a type of caricature—a familiar and comfortable Asian food item, consumed by the American masses as their post-Chinese-takeout dessert. Yet the fortune cookie has no Chinese origins; it grew to popularity after being mass-produced in 20th century America, and is, more than anything, a byproduct of our globalized society, which reduces world cultures into consumable, bite-sized bits.

Yuen's work asks us to consider: What is the function of these objects and what do they signify? Do they make the *other* more palatable?

Perhaps it's a way to build a bridge between what is known and unknown. But perhaps this is optimistic, for any object has limits.

Can viewers really know history, grief, or love from these items?

Can the object stand in for a body?

And when does cultural richness and complexity become a mere token?

In his writing, Yuen states: *there will always be that we cannot shed, and whom we cannot shake. / and the prices that must be paid for us to find our piece.* There is a violence that always lingers, and Yuen does not attempt to eradicate it, or to break out of the modes of representation it lives in. Rather, through his re-making of such objects, he sits within the systems that captivate the global eye—the systems we all participate in, no matter how idealistic we may be.

It is there that he attempts to critique the masquerading tropes of identity politics, and how our reductive materiality falls within them.

Charlotte Zhang's work lies in the intersection of violence, technology, and body; or better said, it lies in the caving in of such things. Zhang is interested in what she calls the "perpetual collapse of invincibility and injury, punishment and celebration, vengeance."

Her piece, *...And the shortcoming flutters once to ensure it is still there flush with its own pathetic fiction turning*



*over in the wet of its own defeat; if it's pleasure at the center of all things then I'd rather not wait*, carries a narrative in its title alone. Using roll cages as an entry point, Zhang invites the viewer to witness the absence of the body. We see the structure but its subject is gone, such that protection is imperfect, perhaps futile. The roll cage is supposed to safekeep the “vehicularized body, the body that is mutable, extending, expanding and encompassing,” but to what end? It is a form meant to protect but also a form that encloses and entraps. This is Zhang's perpetual collapse made material.

Zhang's work also calls to mind the spectatorship of car racing and the inevitable complicity of the viewer. Where have the bodies gone? And who gets to see them? Once more, we are invited to look, and once more, what we look at subverts the expected.

Orbiting pleasure and excess, Zhang's play with roll cages and seatbelts reading *NO RIGOR IN DESPAIR WITHOUT NUMBERS* and *NO AMBITION IN HUMILIATION WITHOUT VENGEANCE* force the viewer to once more be witness to the presence of violence, and to the extreme emotions that encircle it. She continues the thread of taking what is known and disrupting legibility, asking the viewer to pivot, to sit with discomfort, to question their positionality and complicity.

To witness its echoes in objects that we take for granted, objects we assume to know.

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All of the works in the exhibition ask us to re-consider how we look, and at the same time, to turn outside of ourselves. Who is *not* looking? Who *should* be?

The exhibition deconstructs our surface level notions of representation and instead presents a version of being represented that is multifaceted and wholly honest. A version that does not proclaim to be healing the body, but which forces us to reckon with the presence or absence of the body, and what those things really mean. Each piece subverts some sort of societal understanding or relationship, an assumed viewpoint which has permeated our common knowledge. And each piece, too, reaches out towards the systems which require reorientation most. It is through our viewing—through our act of looking and considering and self-examining—that perhaps we come one step closer to disrupting such systems, to achieving a version of representation that does *more*.

As a writer and poet, I am drawn to texts that have similar aims, not only because I find them intriguing, but because I find them vitally honest. I am invested in work that moves beyond diversity as simply *being there*. What I mean by this is: having diverse bodies in a room does not mean being seen—it does not mean being represented. I both read and write work that refuses to tie a neat bow on identity or self, and this is the truth of what it means to be both human and othered. We are complicated, our histories layered with both harm and love, and the greatest agency we can claim is insisting that these complexities have space in dialogue.

Perhaps space on a gallery wall is a sacred first step.

Sarah Sophia Yanni



# Charlotte Zhang

Charlotte Zhang is an artist living and working on the traditional territories of the Snuneymuxw First Nation and the Tongva peoples. She is interested in reenactments of shared fantasy, social scripts produced by spectacle, the libidinal investments and erotic economies which undergird state-sanctioned violence and other practices of nation-building, the perpetual collapse of invincibility and injury, punishment and celebration; vengeance.



*...And the shortcoming flutters once to ensure it is still there flush with its own pathetic fiction turning over in the wet of its own defeat; if it's pleasure at the center of all things then I'd rather not wait*  
Polyester webbing, spray paint, seatbelt buckle, shoulder straps, steel tubing, sheet metal, burnt orange engine metallic, acrylic lacquer  
2021



## TECHNOLOGIES OF LEGIBILITY

That which attempts to abbreviate and situate the un-languaged and un-translatable within the taxonomies of capital, value, virtue, morality

Methods of performing narrative that ossify as Historicity (which rationalizes the brute and irreconcilable)

Race and other visual procedures



## THE UN-AVENGED DEAD

The impure and the unaccounted for.

## SENTIMENTALIST PIN-UPS

Figures conjured by the hegemon

Which serve to obfuscate structural abuse and paths to liberation through the exploitation of affective economies, the overvaluation of private feeling

Distilling the aesthetics of helplessness (which essentialize and eroticize abjection)

The latent and obscene masquerading as the merciful and fair

The “dignified” body; that which is recumbent and bleeds to prove a point.



## TESTIMONIAL MARTYRS

The crystallization of the body that has absorbed excessive violence (establishment of “the price”, “the cost”)

The corpse that is subject to narrative flaying and epistemic flattening via iconography (the invincible surface) and the tension of in/dignity

The state’s warning shot



## MANIFESTO READERS AND/AS MANIFESTO WRITERS

Refusal, injury, revenge, recalibration -

Ecstasies of the political theater



## AVATARS AND BODYBUILDERS

The vehicularized body, the body that is mutable, extending, expanding, and encompassing; elastic at the hand of collective desire - deployed as containers, events, encounters, and ontological hazards (Sign-value splitting the margins of the flesh)





## DIGITAL AUDIENCES

Translocational kinship forged through collective witness  
The disintegration of the out-of-field, the gaze blunted by violent indifference.

Collapse of surveillance and care (pageantry in a techno-sentimental wonderland)

## THE INDEBTED

Those who inherit debts which presuppose any act of living  
The dispossessed, the imprisoned, the defaced, the erased  
Who are forced to entertain and produce, whose payment spans  
many forms of currency; metaphorical, material, and psychological

## DEBT COLLECTORS

The accumulative class; those who construct and reside  
within an imaginary which positions the act of living as  
inevitably at the cost of others  
Whose enterprise hinges on the fear of retribution, who  
charge interest as a strategy of annihilation



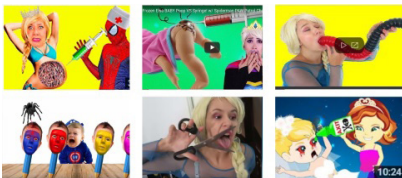
## “ROMANCE SCAMMERS”

Those who hack networks of desire, who make use  
of the erotics of servitude and delay  
Who simultaneously destabilize and elucidate the  
exchange-rate of libidinal currency by means of  
radical and radically untenable notions of compen-  
sation and recuperation  
Private acts of betrayal as uneasy retribution for  
geopolitical trauma (in the domain of the symbolic,  
often the only within reach)



## SURPLUS BODIES; THE NON-PRODUCTIVE AND THE NON-PROCREATIVE

The deformed, the collateral, the liable  
The to-be-liquidated, the negative space forced by jurisprudence and the market economy  
Who cannot or can no longer accumulate profit; who go so far as to entirely reject the debt  
of being [painfully legible]



## THE HYPOTHETICAL CHILD

Ideological and rhetorical zero - infinitely mutable  
base upon which collective aspiration and paranoia  
may be finely honed and weaponized  
A figure constructed in an attempt to contend with a  
wildly incomprehensible inheritance  
A nation-building device



# LANGUAGE HERMENEUTICS INTIMACY CITIZENSHIP\*\*

\*\*Second edition; initially published in *Pacific Crossings*, an ongoing conversation and public presentation series conceived of by Makiko Hara, Bopha Chhay (Artspeak), Allison Collins, and Shaun Dacey (Richmond Art Gallery), taking place on the unceded Territories of the xwməkwəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and Səlilwataʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) First Nations.



# Kenneth Yuen

Kenneth Yuen is a Los Angeles and Vancouver based artist. At the center of Yuen's practice is object making. With these objects Yuen hopes to explore intersections between cultural/historical contexts and objecthood; how these objects may relate to their own possible masquerading identities. While participating as an artist, Yuen has also participated in his respective communities as a fabricator and as a curator.



*Wicked Games (i hope you find what you seek)*  
Fiberglass, Resin, Bondo, Automotive Paint, MDF  
2021

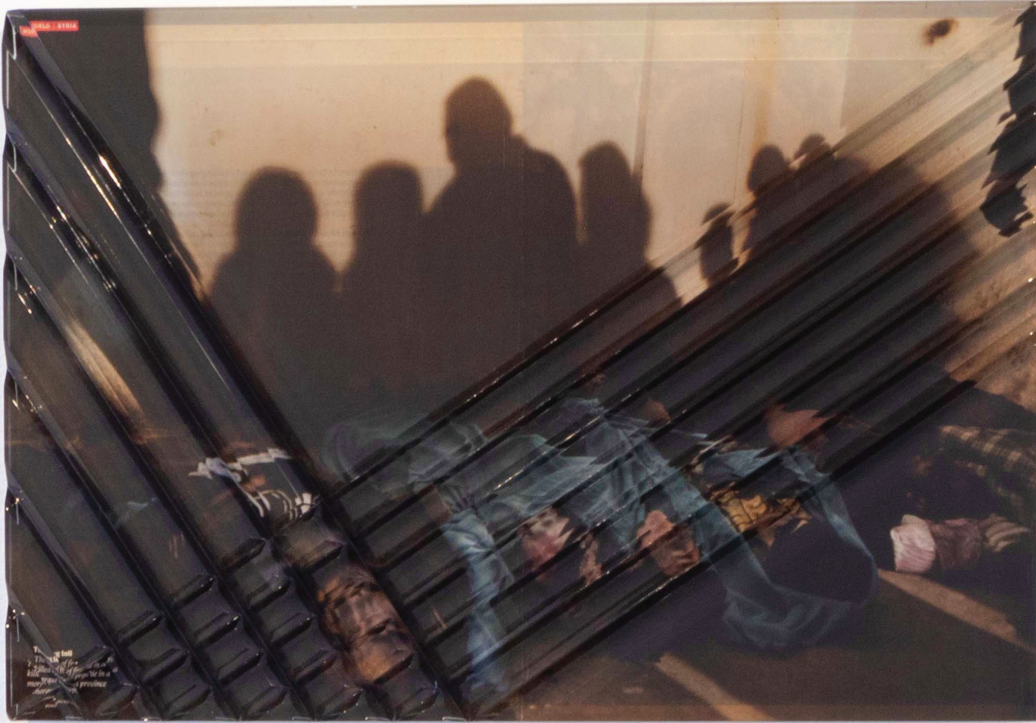


“the fault, dear brutus, is not the fault in our stars/but in ourselves, that we are underlings”

however, there will always be that we cannot shed, and whom we cannot shake.  
and the prices that must be paid for us to find our piece.

no matter; these are dreams that passions buy.





# Samira Yamin

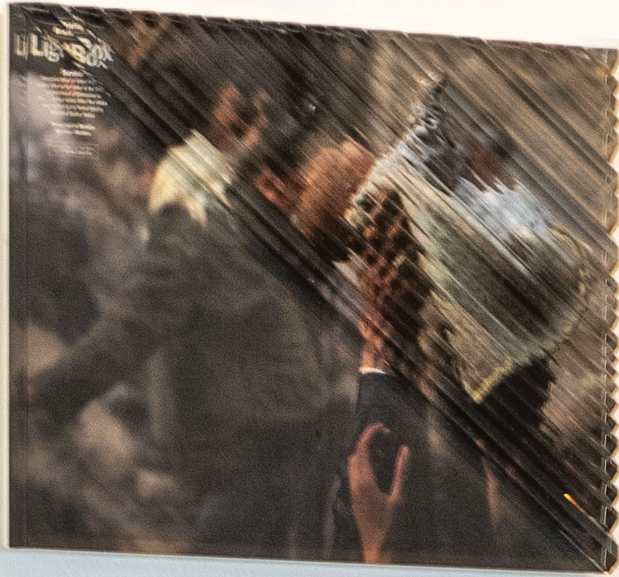
Samira Yamin's work explores the narrativization and representation of war through an interrogation of documentary war photography. Using repetitive, precisely articulated gestures, Yamin dissects, reorganizes, and often obliterates documentary images, resulting in a collision of representation and abstraction and the confusion of objectivity and subjectivity.

*(Refractions)* March 12, 2012  
Wheel-cut optical glass, TIME magazine pages  
2018



If you want to know  
the truth  
of a magazine,  
take out the staples.







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Additonal images by Evelyn Hang Yin

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