

A Study
in Gazing
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by

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Light slants off a tiny reflective moon. Walking closer, I see a makeup compact on an elevated pedestal. Like the compact I use each morning, the mirror reveals only the disembodied fragments of my face: the swell of a cheek, a blinking eye. Pieces of glass like this are used by millions, tools for spotting imperfections and painting on markers of identity. Kohl-rimmed liner during teen emo

phases, a youthful blush for a first date. One of the first gifts from my grandma was a velvet compact embroidered with chrysanthemums, a symbol of femininity she felt duty-bound to pass down.

Seeing this simple object valorised in a gallery space, I came to a realisation: something so small and ordinary can be integral to creating, shaping and re-defining the self you present to the world.

Gazing at Ourselves

OURSELVES
GAZING AT

How we gaze at ourselves, and others gaze back, is the thread running through *Glass*, curated by Amy Toma and Monisha Chippada. Voyeuristic and playful, the exhibit leans into the mutability and multiplicities of the ego. Jana Ortanez's diptych painting *Between Two Spaces* is defined by the in-between: figurative portraits of impassive women are layered with abstract limbs. Though the painting appears coherent at first, it is in fact fraught and boundless—one woman's head appears to be swallowed up by the stomach of another; a torso tapers off into a smear of white paint. Elements of dissonance reflect the artist's experience of growing up with both Filipina and Western convergences.

Alternately, Ladstreet's black-and-white photographs show the ways in which identity can be solidified and affirmed. *Die with your boots on* and *Yellow Line For Life* showcase defiant signifiers of punk subcultures: studded boots, tats of padlocked gates and crosses. But there's also a striking intimacy in these images, gesturing to the artist's personal investment in these markers. For instance, *Yellow Line For Life* features a close up of the words "ACAB" inked on the soft curve of a knee. In the same vein, Gillian Kayrooz's *Argileh at Wedding Cake Rock* expresses the life-affirming nature of culture and community. Documentary-style photographs of a Western Sydney friend group are printed on hanging silk sheets. The title is a satirical nod to the classic novel (and later film) *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, which follows a group of delicate, upper-class white girls vanishing into the sun-bleached Australian landscape. Though this delicacy is reflected in Kayrooz's choice of porous organza materials, her subjects oppose the doomed youth of *Picnic*. They're diverse, bold, vital—wrestling with one another, faces contorted with laughter and passion. Gathered in a suburban backyard, they eat shisha and pizzas from Mina Bakery, a goon sack swinging from a clothesline nearby. Everyone unapologetically follows trends, decked out in spotless kicks. The threatening, harsh sun of *Picnic* is joyous here, battled with 1L water bottles, coolers and broad grins. When I stand at one end, the images become overlaid, like a dusty film negative of memory: faces became so blurred that the figures could've been me and my area friends, wheezing at a stupid joke in a Guildford backyard, one golden summer.

Gazing Back

BACK
GAZING

Some of the works in the exhibition directly confront the spectator's projections. Leila Frijat and Monisha Chippada's *The Reverberation Room* features a series of jutting sculptural forms, resembling a cluster of alien stalagmites. Each structure has a hollow opening which picks up on external sounds—a car horn, a whistle, a hello—and mimics them electronically. Things I initially recognise (my voice, my words) become increasingly warped into abrasive, inhuman echoes, similar to the experience of standing within the heart of a real cavern. You enter the cave with the knowledge that any sudden movement or dislodged pebble will be bass-boosted across every surface. This triggers a sudden mindfulness over one's body, movements and environment, aspects we often take for granted.

A heightened sense of awareness is also key to Amy Meng's work *Game Boy Game Gal*, a large plushie made to resemble a handheld gaming console. The felt display of this console shows a woman in her panties, crouched on all fours, evoking the digital women of bishōjo games—dating sims targeted at heterosexual men, where players can experience choose-your-own-adventure relationships with digital women. Meng's tactile use of beads, stitching and sequins creates an image of hyper-femininity that, to me, appeared farcical: the pastel-coloured console seemed fleshy, glittery and soft, all the things players expect of their ideal avatar women. But, ultimately, these women are not real women at all—only mirrors of a player's internalised desires and biases.

Meanwhile, Ondine Manfrin's piece *Svalbard Global Seed Vault [ASMR Roleplay]*, features the artist as the host of an ASMR video—a typical display of whispering, crinkling and tapping, save for the simulated backdrop of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault. The real-life vault lies within an Arctic mountain, housing a backup collection of seeds in case climate disaster destroys our crop diversity. "I have your seeds for you," whispers Manfrin with a gentle smile, shaking the tiny plastic packets. Behind her, the titanic shelves of the vault loom. I feel a surge of panic—in recent years, the doomsday plan of Svalbard has become less speculative, and more of an impending reality. But Manfrin's voice cuts through the terror: "Must be changing so fast out there." Her head blocks the shelves. "I'm not allowed to open the seed packets, only guard them," she soothes.

Manfrin's work demonstrates how ASMR hosts can become conduits for our turbulent emotions, pacifying intense feelings of dread, while activating states of deep thought and reflection. Similar to "Storytime" ASMR videos, where hosts whisper about brutal murders¹ and the experience of serving jail time², the immersive, parasocial relationships we form with these hosts can allow us to unpack dark anxieties. Sometimes when the world is ending, when total self-annihilation is imminent, you just want someone to whisper that they see you, that it's okay.

How to Gaze

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HOW TO

My favourite works in Glass both concern the nascent stages of identity. In Bonnie Huang's video work *I AM A SHAPE. YOU ARE A SHAPE. EVERYONE IS A SHAPE. I AM NOT A SHAPE. ARE YOU A SHAPE?* clips from the British program Mister Maker loop over and over. A dancer inside a giant Styrofoam circle announces, "I am a circle" while the triangle dancer sings, "I am a triangle!" Clips from kids' staple *Soupe Opéra* also appear—disparate fruits congregate into impressive new forms, each slice always boasting a purpose. The upbeat repetition of the video reminds me of the way myself, and those around me, often repeat our identities to affirm and manifest them: *I am a ____ from ____.* *I identify as ____.* *My parents migrated from ____.* *I am an aspiring ____ who hopes to one day ____.*

As the video goes on, the bouncy soundtrack deteriorates. The slowed-down narration of "*I AM A SHAPE*" adopts a demonic quality. Straightforward footage becomes perverted. Flowers are injected with blue dye, bubbling like blood from a puncture wound; neat watermelon slices are mashed into pulp and placed inside their original shell. Despite the comfort of children's television, where chaos can be filed into strict categories, growing older comes with the realisation that ultimatums are hazy at best, oppressive at worst. Within societies where scientific and legal classifications have been wielded for racist, ableist and queerphobic purposes, how do we transcend that? What new shapes can we become?

Huang's work leans into the uncertainty of these questions, but there's also an edge of excitement at the thought of transcending traditional bounds. The sense of wonder inherent to learning is embodied by Naomi Segal's *on the*

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZMvGwDDsbjg>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5QvH5OWa4CE>

cusp of something, a small shrine of found objects and mixed-media illustrations. In one drawing, a young figure crouches over a piece of paper, surrounded by extracts from queer literature, First Nations scholarship and self-help newsletters. A quote by Julietta Singh is highlighted: “vulnerable reading as an open, continuous practice that resists foreclosures by remaining unremittingly susceptible to new world configurations.” Another by Renee Gladman: “flooded with sensations of a sexual nature.” In another sequential drawing, the figure wanders down a grassy slope, wading into a body of water. Pinpricks of warm light explode over the surface, floating between the reeds. Segal masterfully captures the wellspring of emotion that comes with reading—particularly for queer readers whose first brush with desire may be discovered between the pages of a book, words that declare oft-silenced feelings. These sacred gems of self-recognition are personified by the nostalgic knick-knacks that decorate the shrine: a rubber ball full of plastic stars, a crystal held in an oyster shell, a rock that could’ve been found by a lakeside.

As the ink figure in Segal’s drawings is transported to sublime new places—the lake, a dream of mist and sky—I remembered days of childhood reading in my suburban bedroom. It would be several years until I would first swim in the sea, but reading made me feel as if I already sliced through an ocean current, had my heart broken, experienced terrifying surges of fear and tenderness. Like all people grappling with who they are, and who they are becoming, I felt on the cusp of something new.

Autonomous, reflective and playful, *Glass* is a voyeuristic dive into the ways in which we look at ourselves and others. If the ego is a constructed self, then *Glass* is the vulnerable space of seeing the self and being seen. In this exhibition, the power dynamics of the gaze are interrogated to create a space for reclamation and self-documentation.

Published on the occasion of *Glass*, exhibited at Pari from 06.06.21–14.11.21. *Glass* was curated by Amy Toma and Monisha Chippada and featured works from Leila Frijat & Monisha Chippada, Bonnie Huang, Gillian Kayrooz, Ladstreet, Ondine Manfrin, Amy Meng, Jana Ortanez and Naomi Segal. Designed by Amy Toma.