

Theta

Spencer Lai

Academy for the Sensitive Arts

September 9 - October 22, 2022

Theta is pleased to welcome you back to school with Spencer Lai's first solo exhibition at the gallery. Lai's creative practice explores the expressions and utilities of design at the intersection of art, fashion, pedagogy, and political rhetoric. *Academy for the Sensitive Arts* is a culmination of Lai's furtive mining of the culture wars and conventions of modernism, incorporating a mix of formal and ideological references into three new bodies of work. Together they explore the material and stylized applications of imagery and text that blur the line between tools for education and fetishization.

The synthesis of educational and aesthetic reform throughout the modern era were fundamental to the cultural project of building a new man. Within the heaps of a progress-oriented canon, Lai unearths and examines the movements and manifestos driven by design and intertwined with ideologies of "the greater good". The proximity of dogma to propaganda or populism to fascism is the line of intrigue embedded in enigmatic pictures of our forward-looking past. Plucking and reconstructing, redefining the rules seems a natural exercise to Lai, whose inspired present feels something like a skeuomorphic Steiner schoolhouse in a Bauhaus by Superflat x Nintendo Wii universe.

The ideal environs of childhood are preeminently soft. Edges are round, surfaces are padded; nothing can hurt you. Lai has developed a signature form of "painting" over the last five years collaging hand-cut felt—a material tailored to the gentle arts and crafts of youthful play—into layered monochromes resembling bas-reliefs wherein figure and ground are quite literally cut from the same cloth. For *AFTSA*, the artist presents a new suite of oversized slabs of trapezoidal felt booming with words like "crushing spit," "reincarnation," and "thoughtless, rendered in flesh." The compositions are pictographic montages of mechanical components, factory lines, and fashion maquettes, punctuated with universal symbol-graphics like stars or hearts. Faces are indistinguishable, reduced to Isotypes not unlike those created by the Constructivist subgroup called the Cologne Progressives, whose flat pictorial language articulated labor solidarity and diagrammed class struggle in radical publications during the Interwar years. Isotypes depicted figures as reductively as the operations of their labor, as de-individualized as capitalism made them. Lai, a century later, troubles the delineation between form, feeling and structure in a softened echo of educational initiatives for the post-woke proletariat.

Archetypes continue to take shape along the gallery walls in bold geometric abstractions rendered in powder-coated steel. Lai's concerns with surface, youth aesthetics, and the grotesque charm of kitsch converge in ovoid homages to problematic fave Lucio Fontana's 1963-4 *La Fine Di Dio (The End of God)* series. Lai expands upon Fontana's invented notion of Spatialism with delicate insertions of color-blocked rectangles within each inorganic egg. Inset foam core, felt, and rubberized rectangles throw plastic emotions of color into each niche, organized in a manner of De Stijl-ish simplicity. Within several, sporadically embellished mini compositions present tactile paintings within the paintings, stitched in beads and sequins. This formula advances to a set of shimmery snowflakes, rounded, of course, at the tips of each branch. As the artist reinterprets Fontana's decorative/destructive manifesto on contemporary symbols of fragility, the object lesson of (im)maturity is called into question.

Lai's construction of the educational complex takes on corporal form with a set of sculptures reminiscent of Japanese *kokeshi* dolls, traditionally composed of bipartite (round head, tube body) painted wood. Lai's dolls, rendered in clear resin and blank-faced like the subjects of their felts, present another site for projection in the artist's experimental schema for individuation of the masses. They stand at attention in clusters on children's IKEA tables. Several sport vintage wigs of bygone styles, or are adorned with butterflies or craft feathers. Bulbous, clown-like noses protrude from the wigs, recalling the absurd fetishism of Hans Bellmer's *La Poupée*, or the delightfully glossy forms of anthropomorphic Alessi domestic products. Blending militant uniformity with campy expression, Lai injects design-driven obsession and a healthy dose of depraved humor into the delicate project of modeling identity.

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Spencer Lai (b. 1991, Malaysia) lives and works in Melbourne, Australia. They received their BFA with Honors from the Victorian College for the Arts, Melbourne, in 2014. Solo and two-person exhibitions include; *Oriental Painting*, Neon Parc, Melbourne (2022); *A Patience Game*, Jürgen Bauman & Spencer Lai, Holden Garage, Berlin (2022); *Bitch Biscuit*, Victoria Todorov & Spencer Lai, Bossy's Gallery, Melbourne (2021); *buddhaminefield*, Ge Hinnom Small Group Love, London (2021); *Air becomes metallic scented as anger is emitted [...]*, Kimberly-Klark, New York (2018). Selected group exhibitions include *You're Finally Awake!*, Theta, New York (2022); *More Love*, Asbestos, Melbourne (2022); *Freedom is the gentle exploration of boundaries [...]*, Discordia Gallery, Melbourne (2020); *On the Homefront*, Lubov, New York (2018); and *Untitled show*, Sydney Sydney, Sydney (2018). Lai is the co-founder and curator of Bossy's Gallery in Melbourne.