

A Felt Sense of Whether

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Mechanically reproduced cut-out felt materials were often used as visual aids in many North American classrooms in the mid-1960s to early 1990s because of their ability to instruct kindergarten students on how to dress appropriately for each weather condition. Through a series of thirteen felted works—each of which combine mechanically-reproduced felt with traditional craft techniques—*ACCORDING TO WHETHER* recontextualizes these early childhood educational tools as cultural artefacts with larger social implications. Creating conditions that give each viewer an embodied sense of looking at these recognizable subjects and objects, multidisciplinary artist Lesley Loksi Chan lures us with an invitation—or a challenge—to question nostalgic assumptions surrounding events such as childhood while at the same time allowing individual and collective histories to bear on the meaning of each work.

Elements of touch and tactility backbone Chan's body of multimedia work.¹ The cut-out clothes at times stand on their own or overlap each other; at other times they lie on close-to-identical-figures, distinguishable only on a spectrum of colour progression (yellow, green, blue, violet, orange) across each felt set and discernible only due to expected gendered markers. The clear-cut contours of each figure's outline suggest anything but "neutral" figures, pointing to the violence of repression and erasure while provoking a consideration of the complexities that rest in children's bodies. What details, for example, are withheld and excluded in images of appropriate dress, what contours of children's experiences are left out alongside forcibly abandoned clothing?

A seductive feel to the series and to the materials used in them invites touch and also layered interpretation. The cotton batting matboard for the prints, a

¹ *Curse Cures* (2009), for example, is a film about women working in a jeans factory, told through moving images printed on acetate sheets on an overhead projector. The moving images are framed by hands that push each slide (and hence the narrative) forward, mimicking the movement of hands pushing fabric through sewing machines. And then there's *Making Ladies* (2010), a short documentary about feminist textile artist Allyson Mitchell's Lady Sasquatches. In more recent performance art works, *Tree of Human Touch* (2017) and *Massages by Strangers* (2018), Chan explicitly focuses on the experiences and meanings of touch and tactile knowledge in contemporary culture.

warmth-providing layer of fabric, brings to view the hidden textile background of the ubiquitous glossy fashion spread. Given this natural fiber's often-disavowed colonial and racial history, the visibility of cotton as the breathing surface on which the felt lies, conjoins the violence of cotton production to the material violence of felt making (of putting woolen fibers under extreme agitation) and is a detail not to be missed. This layering gesture—the ordinary, quiet intimacy of fabric on top of fabric—displays Chan's artistic skill as well as her acknowledgement of the lurking presence of violence behind beauty.

Another striking feature about this series is the way the pieces redeploy formulas of mass produced and machine-printed goods under Chan's precise hand-crafted techniques. Rather than reproduce the violence of these screen-printed and dyed felt cut-outs, Chan's exhibition offers an ethical and political challenge by refusing to conflate or view difference as a marker of separability.² The pieces invite viewers to meditate on the rhetorical gesture of the “mass” in mass production; they lure us out of a cultural investment in the moral value of local, homemade, and handcrafted goods, and into a discussion of how our aesthetics are changing as a result of mass production and mass consumption in artist productions. By explicitly engaging in tactile difference, Chan refuses the undifferentiated force of “mass” production and the ways its representations favour heteronormative whiteness while obscuring the material and bodily reality of sweatshops. Foregrounding people of colour, Chan allows us to see that hidden in this tactile production are the global labouring bodies of racialized people, and, given the industrial markings of technology in mass production, we furthermore come to see people of colour's labour in imagining different technologies.

Chan's style of approach, her sensitivity to the texture of our moment's movements (ranging from #metoo, #blacklivesmatter to #translivesmatter), allows her to search for an utterance that values the difference between direct and indirect modes of communication, an approach that can be seen in the series' playful title. Referencing Ai Wei Wei's high-profile exhibition, *According to What?*—itself a title which calls back to Jasper Johns' 1964 multi-paneled painting, *According to What*—Chan's turn³

² See Denise Ferreira da Silva “On Difference Without Separability” in J. Volz and J. Rebouças (eds.), *32nd Bienal de São Paulo. Incerteza Viva* (Fundação Bienal de São Paulo: 2016).

³ By now we are attentive to the space a turn makes thanks to Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* and Simon Unwin's *Analysing Architecture*—exemplified, in this case, with Ai Wei Wei adding a question mark to turn Johns' imperative phrase into an interrogative one. While Wei Wei's interrogation reveals Chinese totalitarianism, Johns' cryptic, indirect language suspends revelation towards concealment. Chan's engagement with these works reanimates an ongoing conversation between Contemporary Art and Art History.

from *what* to *whether* registers a playful pun with weather marked in the series by the presence of the thermometer. We can read in this homophony a connection to the educational context which instructs school children on how to dress according to the temperature as well as read “the weather” as Christina Sharpe does in *In the Wake*: as the debilitating and overpowering force of white supremacy across history and geography. These linguistic turns undermine the stability and transparency of *ACCORDING TO WHETHER*, and reveal a playful and subversive temperament that is against fixed, authoritarian discourse.

The ethics of Chan’s exhibition, then, is in its loud quietness that protests without the moral fictions of imperative or interrogation. The insubordinate spirit of *ACCORDING TO WHETHER* rises through how Chan subordinates the single polemic points of view of the male artists she references to foreground the unseen but felt spaces of racialized bodies. Through her deep engagement with the materiality of her art objects, Chan draws our attention not only to *ACCORDING TO WHETHER*’s invisibly charged objects but equally to the ways in which a layered aesthetics is also necessarily a collective aesthetic. ■