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# In Our Place

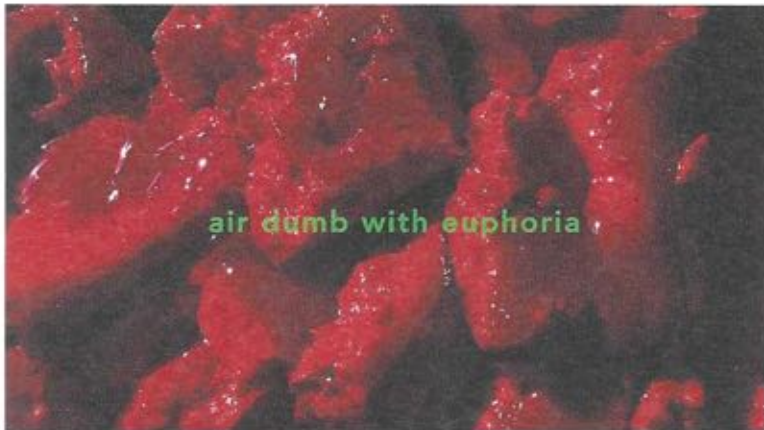
Context and conditioning as sites of inspiration



1

**Chan Ka Kiu**

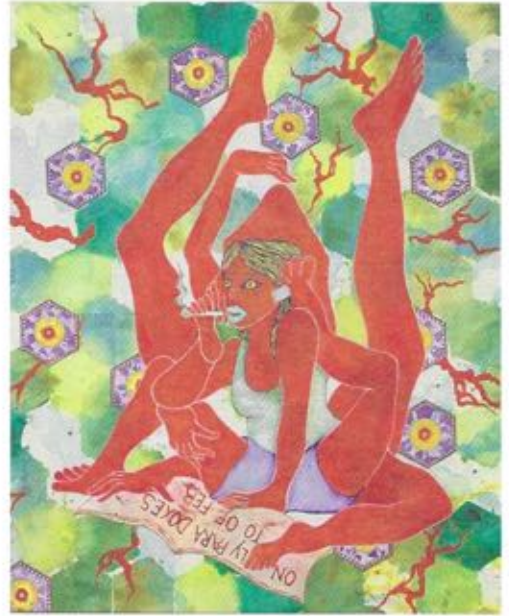
*Miss Toilet*, 2017, still from digital video: 1 min 29 sec. Courtesy the artist and Para Site, Hong Kong.



2

**Jala Wahid**

*Oh Leander!*, 2017, still from single-channel video with sound: 4 min 15 sec. Courtesy the artist.



3

**Nadira Husain**

*Performative Body - Embodied Performances, Red*, 2018, tempera and acrylic on canvas, 180 x 140 cm. Photo by Dotgain. Courtesy PSM, Berlin, and Galerie Tobias Naehring, Leipzig.



1  
**Chan Ka Kiu**  
HONG KONG

In 2003, a deadly outbreak of acute respiratory syndrome forever altered Hong Kong's handling of hygiene. Concerned with the isolation and apathy that arose from the resulting collective germophobia, Chan Ka Kiu proposes an alternative perspective to contamination in her video *A Theory About Flu* (2018): instead of us catching the flu, it catches us, swaddling us in its "love" and giving us a break from the endless swirl of work and modern life. At her duo show with Wu Jiaru, "Post-Flu Syndrome" at the Hong Kong Arts Centre in 2018, the video was screened on a vintage television set positioned on a toilet as part of the larger installation *Germ No. 1, 2, 3* (2018), in which a projected image of a perspective drawing of a virus played on the screen and the wall behind, while a robotic female voice delivered a romanticized narration around influenza.

Born in 1995, Chan responds, primarily through the medium of moving image and meme-gathering, with wit and humor to the numbness felt by the Millennial generation, often prompting viewers to engage with their present physical and emotional states. In *Modern Love Story* (2016), she references the contemporary dating experience with a cache of 1990s pop culture, including clips from the film *Ghost* (1990) and iconic television commercials of G. Sushi, a now-defunct chain restaurant that was once a popular date spot in Hong Kong. When combined, these visual elements speak directly to the childhood memories of those of her generation and to the idea of "romance" in the popular imagination as falsely perpetuated by mass media.

Chan similarly builds and dissolves layers of intimacy in *Miss Toilet* (2017), shown at her provocative solo presentation "Don't Come So Fast, Darling" at Para Site's booth at the 2019 Art Basel Hong Kong. In the video, the artist caresses a toilet like one might a lover. We see grainy flashes of nude- and milk-colored contours, the scenes mimicking the obscene graphic content of lo-fi, soft pornography—occasionally she rubs a nipple-like nub. Placed in the public setting of an art fair, Chan's moving-image work, set against stereotypical "bedroom" music, teases the notion of sexuality and plays with viewers' sensations, at once stimulating a consciousness of their own desires and investigating the tensions between private and public.

PAMELA WONG

2  
**Jala Wahid**  
LONDON

Near Kirkuk, in modern-day Iraq, lies a vast oil field called Baba Gurgur ("Father of Fire"), where a natural flame has burned for millennia. Over the past century, this area has violently alternated between Iraqi and Kurdish control, and it remains, for many Kurds, a reminder of bloodshed, expulsion and the precarity of statelessness. When artist Jala Wahid first visited the site, her cousin remarked that he was "so Kurdish that he was born in the Baba Gurgur." For the London-born artist, however, returning to her Kurdish origins elicits "a sense of belonging but simultaneously a sense of removal."

Such ambivalences are central to Wahid's multidisciplinary practice, which dissects the cultural, political and physical violence enacted upon the Kurdish body, and its capacity, conversely, for ferocious self-preservation. Implicit in this is Wahid's attempt to locate her own diasporic experience within this context, as seen in *Born From and Buried In Baba Gurgur* (2018), an oil-well-shaped platform the color of dark honey, with a wax cast of the artist's upturned rear in the center. Provocative, humorous, yet darkly suggestive of submission and dismemberment, the work encapsulates both vulnerability and resilience, while symbolically merging the artist's body "with the land from which it was displaced."

Wahid's fascination with antagonism—between persecution and resistance; healing and toxicity—seeps into her alchemistic and occasionally grotesque combination of forms and materials. *Akh Milk Bile Threat* (2017) involves painting "Akh!" on a wall using a mixture of breast milk and bile, two ingredients—one "life-giving," the other, digestive—used in traditional Kurdish tattoo ink. In *Bare and Writhe* (2017), two objects resembling excised flesh, made from jesmonite, glass wax, honey and grapefruit, hang from steel chains, evoking brutality and perishability. Brimming with similar menace but also defiance, the video *Oh Leander!* (2017) depicts glistening, offal-like gelatin chunks to a dolorous soundtrack by Kurdish singer Leila Fariqi, while neon-green English text flashes on screen. Wahid subverts the song's romantic context, aligning the original lyrics with her own telling of the poisonous effects of oleander—*jala* in Kurdish. The deliberate mistranslation and self-referencing reiterate the artist's authorial power, and challenge the colonizing of language enacted against Kurdish minorities.

OPHELIA LAI

3  
**Nadira Husain**  
BERLIN

In their seminal book *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari set out to probe "nomadic" thinking. According to the pair, such an approach opens up possibilities beyond arborescent modes of thought, which engender the binary, cause-and-effect and hierarchical ways of perceiving that we, by default, use to understand our world. Drawing from botanical rhizomes—root systems that grow horizontally—and horizontal gene transfer, they propose an alternative perspective that "ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences and social struggles," in nonlinear and elastic manners.

Nomadic thinking comes naturally to Nadira Husain, whose multimedia works embody Deleuze and Guattari's concepts. Born to French and Indian parents, Husain grew up in a Parisian apartment with distinctively "Indian-flavored" furnishings. As a child, she automatically associated the Smurfs with the Hindu deity Krishna, seeing them simply and equally as blue-skinned beings. The elves and Krishna are just some of the seemingly disparate elements that coexist in her compositions, which eschew even foreground-background distinctions with overlapping, translucent layers and canvases with ikat- and *kalamkari*-dyed motifs. For example, in the set of curtains *Cosmic Trips* (2018), Smurfs populate the body of the winged Assyrian deity *apsasu*, which perches amid a cloud-like pattern and guards the threshold.

The connective points between realms are fertile ground for the artist, who creates human-animal hybrids—such as a horse-headed woman riding a centaur, seen clearly in the tempera-on-ikat painting *Équiloque* (2017). Such imagery parallels her interest in the furry fandom subculture, which involves participants dressing up in animal suits, and embodying "fursonas." For Husain, the practice encapsulates how all identity is acted out, and as such, demonstrates the possibility of deconstructing conditioned perceptions of ourselves and others. She finds the same potential in Hindu deities, whose numerous limbs, typically signifying omnipotence, suggest the simultaneous existence of one's multiple facets. Mirroring a Hindu god, the woman in the painting *Performative Body – Embodied Performances, Red* (2018), shown in Husain's recent exhibition at Leipzig's Galerie Tobias Naehring, uses her five arms and legs to smoke, take a phone call, steady herself and read. The pages spread under her state: "Only paradoxes to offer."

CHLOE CHU