



Eugenia Lim
The Ambassador

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The Ambassador, 2017
Digital image, dimensions variable
Photo by Zan Wimberley

Introduction

The Ambassador presents three distinct series by Melbourne-based artist Eugenia Lim that centre upon a gold-suited figure who appears halfway between truth and fantasy. In each series, Lim transforms herself into her eponymous invented persona, the Ambassador, an insatiably curious character who traverses time and space, playfully exploring Australia's cultural and built landscapes.

This exhibition marks the first institutional solo exhibition of Eugenia Lim's work and presents all three bodies of work together for the first time. Together, they represent a compelling and witty examination of contemporary Australia from a female, performative and Asian-Australian perspective. As the Ambassador, Lim 'shapeshifts' to unearth multiple dimensions of the Asian-Australian narrative – drilling down into racial politics, the social costs of manufacturing, and the role of architecture in shaping society – exploring how national identities and stereotypes cut, divide and bond our globalised world.

Curated by Mikala Tai, Director, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, *The Ambassador* will travel to eight galleries and art centres across Australia between 2019 and 2021 through Museums & Galleries of NSW.

A 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art and Museums & Galleries of NSW touring exhibition. This project has been assisted by the Australian Government's Visions of Australia program.



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Quiet Disobedience:

the work of
Eugenia Lim



Eugenia Lim in 1983.
Courtesy of the Lim family.

Over the summer of 2018, an email conversation commenced between artist Eugenia Lim, writing from Melbourne and the south coastal remote region of New South Wales and curator, Natalie King, writing from Melbourne, the Thar desert near Pakistan, New Delhi and Mumbai. Lim's family migrated to Warwick, Queensland in 1973 in the final years of the White Australia Policy before settling in suburban Melbourne in 1974 where Lim continues to live and work.

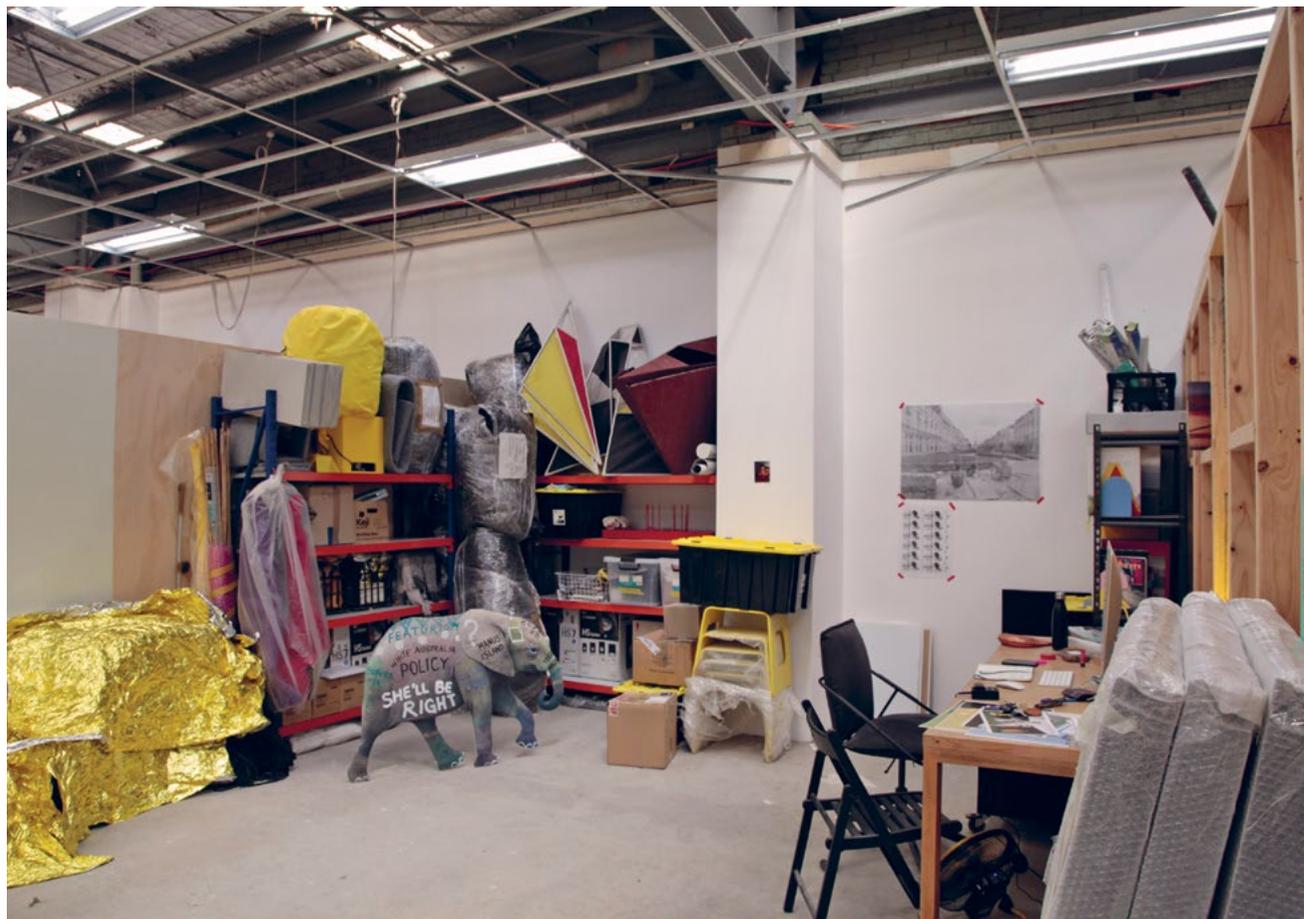
Eugenia Lim's work encompasses performances and installations, liveness and screen mediation while adopting the guise of a fictitious 'Ambassador' character resplendent in a gold lamé Mao suit. Her discussion with King meanders from migratory patterns and obligations, improvisation and performance, cultural stereotypes and colonial complacency. Their dialogue culminated on the cusp of Lim's touring exhibition's first presentation at the Samstag Museum of Art as part of the Adelaide Festival. Initiated by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art and Museums & Galleries of NSW, the exhibition comprises a newly conflated trilogy of works centering around Lim's Ambassador persona: *Yellow Peril*, *The People's Currency* and *The Australian Ugliness*.

How did you become an artist – was there an epiphany or specific moment?

I grew up in a conservative migrant household, part of an extended family of doctors and high-achievers. For my parents, gender roles, moral values and world views were tightly defined – and I found this utterly stifling. As a thirteen-year-old, I remember making a texta-drawn poster with 'PATRIARCHY SUX' and sticking it on the wall in my bedroom.

My grandparents, and later my parents, worked hard for their kids. I grew up with the pressure to live up to expectations and make something of myself in a way they could understand (and boast about to their friends and relatives on the Chinese grapevine). When I was a kid, we'd go as a family to this Chinese-English church in the suburbs. I tried to see the world as they did, in black and white – to have blind faith in a higher being. I always felt outside it – why should it be that some people are chosen, and others not? I've always felt more comfortable in ambiguity than absolutes.

I'm actually a failed or wannabee musician. When I was thirteen or so, I started a fanzine with my best friend. We interviewed our favourite Australian bands, went to all-ages gigs and festivals and wrote and drew about it. I had lots of unfulfilled crushes on singer/guitarists. Listening to music and going to live gigs (at that time, lots of grunge and indie – the lyrics and melodies are bittersweet, melancholic; perfect for teenage angst) spoke of beauty through ambiguity and dissonance – and about performance. I found art through music and film: watching (and making poor imitations) of Godard and New Wave cinema, Chris Marker, Pipilotti Rist and Doug Aitken.



Eugenia Lim's studio at Gertrude Contemporary in Preston, Melbourne. Courtesy of the artist.

Through art, I keep finding 'my people' and new languages. There was no singular epiphany, but rather, a long, slow awakening that continues for me as time goes on, as I question 'established' orders through my work.

Can you discuss your studio practice and working methodology? It seems that there is a purposeful and deliberate research component yet some of the performative elements are provisional.

I work both in the studio and in the field, on location, in public. My studio practice more closely resembles a writer's office or a design researcher – I read a lot (high and low) and love weird tangents and internet wormholes – I like allowing time for connections and resonances to occur. I can't draw but I can write; writing is critical to my process; it's where those initial and longest lasting associations and images appear and are first articulated. I like wordplay and double or multiple meanings, so a strong title gives me the blueprint for the shape, form and themes of the work to follow. Once upon a time I thought I'd be a poet.

Thorough research provides the groundwork, but collaboration and spontaneity are equally important. The work of other artists is key. I see my work as a continuation of what has gone before, my own embodied response to questions raised by artists I admire. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Tehching Hsieh, Amie Siegel, Mika Rottenberg are touchstones; I spend as much time as I can looking at artists who have wondered about similar things to me, considering what I can add to the conversation. Much of my thinking is done in solitude in the studio – I need time for deep thinking (but most of my time is art admin!), but then in a work's production, I become a director, conductor as well as performer. I love the editing process, whether in video or with words – this is where the work really shows itself beyond the early chaos and intuition.



Let's discuss how your family's history of migration has influenced your work and the central 'Ambassador' persona of your performative gestures?

Migration made me who I am – not through movement of my own, but that of the generations before me. I consider myself as Australian as they come, but because of my skin and appearance, I still encounter casual racism and stereotyping to this day; in the workplace, the art world or the tram. But growing up Asian in Australia, this feeling of being different was hard to pin-point – for me it wasn't a battle cry, rather the lingering unease of never quite fitting in; of wearing difference on one's skin.

New Australians (Yellow Peril),
1980/2015), 2015 (detail)
Screen print on mylar emergency
blanket, 210 x 160 cm,
Courtesy of the artist.



Narcissus, 2012,
Durational performance at KINGS ART,
Photo by Rachel Feery.

My family used to travel back to Singapore, my parents' birthplace, every year while I was a kid. I found the sweaty tropical climate and overt class and caste system troubling; I still do. I just wanted to stay home in Australia and read *The Babysitters Club* and eat McDonalds like every other suburban kid. I didn't fit in over there. But really, it wasn't until I was on exchange at the Rhode Island School of Design in 2005 that performance became a 'thing' for me. In this context, I had no family, no existing networks, no history – and performing on camera came to be a way to 'write' myself into being, in whatever way I chose. I could kind of become anyone, through the act of performance.

Although I see the Ambassador persona as open and unstable, shifting in relation to the questions and concerns of each distinct work, the self-conscious portraiture and gestures of the Ambassador speak to decades of almost identical posed snapshots of my mum and dad across continents and eras: on their honeymoon as tourists through Europe in the 1960s; as new arrivals in the Australia in the late 60s; in front of Ron Robertson-Swann's *Vault* in 1980; or as proud owners of a new Honda in 2015. Their expressions and stance remain constant no matter the context, a mixture of determination and compliance. Perhaps theirs is the ultimate photographic performance series!

There is a distinctive dexterity in your practice as you work seamlessly across media and form from video to installation, participatory performance to gleaming yellow reflective portraits. How do you select and manipulate materials for efficacy and impact?

Lim's parents and daughter in Huairou, China during her 4A Beijing studio residency in 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

Behind the scenes:
The Australian Ugliness, 2018
Photo by Tom Ross,
Courtesy of the artist.

I am a jack of all trades (master of none). I guess this means that nothing is sacred and anything is possible through experimentation, a strong vision and trusted collaborators. Working primarily with video means that production and presentation are incredibly important to me; the way a video is installed, technical precision and the viewing environment becomes as critical to the meaning and reading as the content of the work itself – it's a total environment, *gesamtkunstwerk*. Video is inherently a spatial practice – a world of space, sound, sight and relations within the frame – and how it is viewed extends this enquiry outside, into the architecture of the installation, gallery or viewing environment. Video has taught me to be obsessed with detail and world-making and I guess this carries through no matter the media, material or form.



Your work is a kind of unrehearsed, live choreography. Can you elaborate on how this modality intersects with aspects of Australia's self-image?

In contemporary Australia, we live in a daily state of denial: about climate, the torture of people who seek refuge on our shores, and Indigenous genocide. Performance is important to me because it's about 'always becoming' – it's unfixed and unrepeatable – you can do the same thing twice but it'll never be exactly the same. So performance as a modality and a strategy is, to me, critical, when it comes to national self-image, which is something that should not be fixed, but changing; made collectively, self-image should be as contradictory and alive as the people who make up the nation.

Performing and improvising in public or live contexts, allows me as the performer and you as the audience to negotiate space together, in dynamic, loaded or funny ways. Together we can go into the uncertainty, where there is no script for what can unfold. Shooting or performing on location is controlled chaos – you're at the whim of the weather and any photo-bombers on the day. I actually love this chaos; it produces some of the best moments in my works.

I am not a trained dancer, so my body is 'untrained', not necessarily 'compliant'; I can't really move as I would like to (I'm also a wannabee contemporary dancer!) but I love the challenge of bringing choreography to this.

How have you imagined and constructed the fictitious 'Ambassador' character?

My work is part of a continuum, and my Ambassador persona developed in response to Tseng Kwong Chi's *East Meets West* (1979-1989) series of photographs. Tseng made this extraordinary self-portraiture series across North America and Europe dressed in a standard-issue Mao suit with a lanyard that read 'Slut for Art' clipped to its breast pocket



(no one looked close enough to notice it). I loved his brazen exploration of cultural stereotypes and I guess I was interested in the Mao suit as something distinctly 'Chinese', that could be adapted or abstracted through the use of gold, and through the more ambiguous gender of my Ambassador.



In the apartment of Myra Demetriou of Sirius while filming *The Australian Ugliness* with cinematographer Tim Hillier. Photo by Tom Ross.

In a way, the costume came first and the persona was built around it – and then the character is also shaped by context/location/geography. When I made *Yellow Peril* (2015), the existing performativity of Sovereign Hill meant that my Ambassador character had to come down a notch, to be more of a subtle observer; in *The People's Currency* (2017), the Ambassador had to become a bombastic factory boss to step up to the loudness of the street. I like that the Ambassador can shift and be a cipher for the themes and contexts of each particular work.

Why is Robin Boyd's blistering account of suburbia in The Australian Ugliness (1960) a seminal text for you and how have you used his title in your work to signal ideas of exclusion, alienation and anxiety? Your three-channel video of the same name comprises yourself in a gold suit gliding through screens and architectural spaces, patterns and apertures, gardens and suburbs in an almost somnambulant daze of distance. The scene in Glenn Murcutt and Hakan Esvli's mosque in Melbourne is

particularly evocative as your vantage point is detached yet there is a poeticism to your visual renderings.

Firstly, since a friend (Laura Castagnini, a curator) told me that the term 'seminal' derives from the word 'semen', I hate using it – maybe down to that aversion to patriarchy, ha! But I guess that term is also fitting in relation to my approach to *The Australian Ugliness*, and the history of architecture in Australia more broadly.

I first came across Robin Boyd's book a few years back; a key text I wanted to read for myself, to understand how it's been both valorised and refuted by generations of Australian architects since 1960. And, to see if Boyd's take on Australian identity still rings true. I found Boyd's obsession with taste and aesthetics somewhat dated (too much airtime is given to rage against phone wires and commercial signage), but I was struck by Boyd's politic. In the book, he links what he saw as the national tendency to settle for what's 'skin deep', surface, and a 'she'll be right' attitude, to a more unsettling complacency that leads to the racism and violence of colonial settlement and the White Australia Policy. Boyd was active in not just writing about the importance of democratic design and architecture in Australian suburbs, but in creating access for lower and middle-income households through his work on the Small Homes Service (which provided architect-designed house plans for five pounds).

In my work, we visit Myra Demetriou, the then 91-year-old, last-remaining resident of Sirius, a public housing project and a gem of brutalist architecture in Sydney, and site of the NSW conservative government's culture wars. We also go out to the peri-urban fringes of Melbourne to developer-led housing estates selling an outdated and unsustainable 'Australian Dream'. By contrasting these places of lesser privilege with the grand icons of Australian architecture, the work is interested in the limits of architecture – where is architecture absent, where can it do more? If most Australians live in the suburbs, why has architecture become something aspirational, only for affluent inner-city urbanites; the fall-guy to property developers' visions of their city?



The Australian Ugliness, 2018
(production still). Photo by Tom Ross.

In my work, I take up Boyd's provocations – of identity, place, design and class – but I bring to these my own experiences as a woman, non-architect and Asian-Australian (an identity largely invisible or under-represented in architecture and architectural discourse). The work is a challenge to both the profession and the public: architecture shapes us, and we all must have agency in this process of who we become.

How have you revisited the canonical, lauded and criticised sculpture Vault (1980), colloquially referred to as 'Yellow Peril' by Ron Robertson-Swann as a performative series of actions? Interestingly the 'yellow vest' protests in Paris demonstrating against declining living standards also use yellow as a signal. Yellow and gold, seem to be a central motif and palette not to mention the derogatory 'yellowness' of Asianess-as-other.

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Both *Yellow Peril* (2015) and *The Australian Ugliness* (2018) respond to and reanimate Robertson-Swann's *Vault* and the loaded history of the sculpture itself, and the spectre of racism and anti-Asian sentiment in Australia. As a Melburnian, I've known of *Vault* and its nickname 'Yellow Peril' since forever; it's not until I started making art myself that I delved deeper into its controversy. And in my work *Yellow Peril*, I adopted it as a symbol of Asian presence within Australia; the cyclical nature of culture and identity in which both people and art can start as social pariahs; later to become an integral part of how we see and understand the culture of contemporary Australia.

Vault (1980) is a hard-edge geometric sculpture – in rigidity and formalism, it lends itself to being 'played' or 'performed' upon with amusing results. Working with choreographer Nat Cursio, the Ambassador strains against and falls down its hard lines, kind of like Sisyphus in a Mao-suit. I see the choreography and movements of the Ambassador throughout *The Australian Ugliness* as a pushing back, an insinuating and inserting of non-dominant identities into the spaces and architecture of Australia.

I can't claim any connection to the 'gilets jaune' movement in Paris, but I can identify with the need to be seen

and heard by the powers that be. The yellow of their hi-vis is coincidental, yet yellow is a colour that always stands apart, as I see it in my work.

Your touring exhibition conflates three series that focuses on the Ambassador. Let's discuss the conceptualisation of this exhibition and the resonances you are seeking between these works, as if they accumulate and accrue.

This will be the first time all three works are united as one, in a trilogy. It's actually a bit unknown to me how it will feel to see everything together as the works were never mapped out systematically, as in 'this one will be about personal history and migration, that one about globalisation and the next about architecture', it was a journey and process, part intuition, part curiosity and obsessive research. For me, my work is a lot about making sense of how I live within global and local systems – how am I implicated? How can I live with myself within these contradictions; how can I navigate the tension between ethics, aesthetics and art?

Mikala Tai of 4A has been a consistent supporter of my work, and had the initial idea to bring the Ambassador works together. I'm as curious as anyone to see how the works sit together; it's been a busy and productive few years and I'm looking forward to having space to reflect on the resonances between the works. Also, to see if there's still more to uncover with this persona, whether the Ambassador will continue on, or whether she might morph into a new entity in future.

Natalie King is a curator, writer and Enterprise Professor, Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne. She is President of AICA (International Association of Art Critics), Australia, Series Editor of Mini Monographs, Thames & Hudson and she was a finalist in the AFR 100 Women of Influence 2018.

Rhythmic

Cadence



Lim 'manufacturing' ceramics in 2016
in preparation for *The People's Currency*.
Photo by Georgia Nowak.

Rhythmic

Cadence

There is a precision to Eugenia Lim. Even in a dusty studio, the punishing humidity of a Beijing summer or a 4am install in the rain, she is poised. She approaches her work with a deep commitment to an overarching conceptual vision informed by extensive reading, a myriad of visual references and her own witty sense of humour. Much like the fictitious figure of the Ambassador, Lim is deeply curious; a curiousness that is playful but unwaveringly ambitious.

'Let me think on this.' Even in the flurry of install, Lim makes space to consider. There is a rhythmic cadence to her manner of working, a consideration and testing, before any selections are made. Lim has the ability to slow down, to seemingly stretch time, keeping a metrical pattern to her practice. In the midst of ambitious and large-scale work, it is this inbuilt tempo that has a reassuring and regulating effect. She is never hurried but rather, she returns to the beat, reassesses options and tables ideas. It is a calm and measured manner of working that leads to the precision that she is known for.

It's dark at 4am – not even McDonalds is open. At the bump-in of *The People's Currency*, Lim is in a yellow raincoat holding an architectural drawing, attempting, as the cold rain slides in at an angle, to reconcile carefully laid plans with a vastly different reality. Taking cover against a nearby building, I watch as she paces out the space, checks for sight lines and paces again. Nearby, a shipping container dangles off a forklift while one of Melbourne's main roads sits closed and a series of burly men watch on, waiting for final orders. Unrattled by the urgency, Lim checks and triple-checks before, with a slight nod of confirmation, she authorises the work to continue. Hours later, Lim and I stand in front of a final installation and I marvel at world created, the precision and gravitas of each object in the space.

Months later, Lim and I meet at Bunnings. ‘Wish they’d give me a sponsorship’, says Lim wryly – much of her work transmutes industrial or low-fi materials into her stylised aesthetic. We compare lists and attempt to wrangle impossible trolleys. Lim remains, as always, calm. While I attempt to execute an eight-point turn, she inspects our items looking for blemishes. As she exchanges a few imperfect items, I wait in the car, keenly aware of our list of tasks and trying to quell hunger pangs, not wanting to interrupt the flow of our work. As we drive back to her studio in Preston, we hatch a plan of attack, hoping to finish mid-afternoon. In her studio, it is an explosion of yellow – yellow curtains, yellow tape and yellow carpet all in piles and interspersed by crates, photographs and Ambassador paraphernalia. As we stand and comprehend the enormity of packing her studio for a two-year tour, we both take almost simultaneous sharp intakes of breath. It is Lim that breaks the silence, ‘But we should eat first right?’ I nod in agreement.

Over Lebanese pizza and the dissolution of our carefully laid timetable, Lim and I talk about anything but the task at hand. After years of working as an artist but also an editor, a curator and an arts facilitator, her practice is at a turning point. In 2019 alongside the national tour of *The Ambassador*, Lim is part of *The National* exhibiting at MCA; a newly appointed co-director of APHIDS and in numerous curated exhibitions. It is an overnight success a decade in the making. In the midst of our lunch, her phone rings; a courier has arrived unexpectedly to pick up work and she races back, abandoning her lunch. Back in her studio, I help identify the photographs and we lift them out from behind the mass of yellow for the courier who waits impatiently. Lim takes a second or two to regroup before, once again, settling into her rhythm.

The afternoon is spent picking through Lim’s studio and packing objects for the tour. As we pack, our conversation from lunch continues. Being on the cusp is sometimes an uneasy place. With significant exhibitions ahead, Lim can feel the pace shifting. As her practice becomes more widely recognised and her schedule fills up in advance, there is less space for dreaming. One of the biggest ironies of the art world is that once you are

regularly exhibiting, time for creativity is much more elusive. As I drive away from Lim’s studio I realise that, for the first time, we didn’t talk about what she is working on, or thinking about, and I chide myself. *The Ambassador* trilogy is so far the largest and most ambitious showing of Lim’s work. It has required extensive support and collaboration and the most complex of funding, or ‘The Hustle’ as Lim calls it, and has monopolised her creative – and logistical – thinking. With preparations for the show nearing completion, I imagine she is already considering new ideas and life beyond yellow, gold or lamé. Or perhaps the Ambassador may appear again, in another geography or context.

Back in Sydney I re-watch her video work *The Australian Ugliness* late one night in the office. It remains beguiling even on my third or fourth viewing. While the Ambassador first appears in the video *Yellow Peril* and was performed live in *The People’s Currency*, it is in *The Australian Ugliness* that Lim’s confidence and inner pace is perceptible for the viewer. There are moments in the film, like when the Ambassador traces the edge of a pathway with deliberate placement of her feet, that echo the momentum of Lim’s practice. There is a sense of unhurried thoughtfulness that underpins the editing of the entire film; considered cuts that linger for a reason and a score of strings that epitomise this internal reassuring rhythm. Time seems to slow and stretch leading the viewer into Lim’s world of careful, but critical, consideration.

Mikala Tai is a curator and academic specialising in contemporary Asian art and Australian design. Curatorial projects include Closing the Gap: Contemporary Indonesian Art at Melbourne International Fine Art; Yang Yongliang at 45 Downstairs, Melbourne among others. Tai has taught at RMIT and the University of Melbourne. She was the founder and director of Supergraph – Australia’s Contemporary Graphic Art Fair, previously the Cultural Program Manager for the Melbourne Fashion Festival and currently the Director of 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art. Tai holds a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) from University of Melbourne and a PhD from UNSW Art & Design.

Yellow

Peril



Yellow Peril, 2015 (video still)
Single-channel HD video,
colour, sound, 17:55 mins.
Courtesy of the artist.

In *Yellow Peril*, Eugenia Lim's deftly critical yet comical Ambassador persona first appears. The central video was shot on location in regional Victoria at Ballarat's Sovereign Hill, a historical theme park memorialising Australia's gold rush era of the 1850s, where the Ambassador tries her hand at panning for gold.

Among the tourists and mock-colonial performers of Sovereign Hill, the Ambassador appears as a time-traveller of sorts. With a sense of studious examination, she negotiates the terrain, peering into shopfronts, diligently searching and approaching each encounter with wide eyes. Her diplomatic mission, whatever it is, is a serious one. Amusing as this video is, it is also a critical examination of the complexities of Chinese migration to Australia. Since the gold rush of the mid-1800s, Australia has had a fraught history with Chinese migrants punctuated by racial flashpoints and violence; the twin emotions of fear and fascination, and the repercussions of The White Australia Policy.

Eugenia Lim extrapolates the ominous, existential fear of Asian 'invasion' (or 'yellow peril') in a pair of photographs screen-printed on gold mylar that span three decades of her family's presence in Australia. One depicts a stiffly posed Ambassador holding a papier-mâché replica of the Welcome Stranger, the world's largest-ever alluvial nugget (found in 1869 in Moliagul, Victoria) in a Sovereign Hill photo booth; the other, an archival snapshot of her parents close to their first arrival in Melbourne standing proudly in front of Ron Robertson-Swann's 1980 public sculpture *Vault*. While the Ambassador's stiff pose and fake gold is comical, it is the image of Lim's parents that is most powerful. The much-maligned and now iconic *Vault* has been nicknamed 'Yellow Peril' for many years, capturing the public's disapproval of the hard-edge geometric structure.

Yellow Peril, 2015
Single-channel HD video, colour,
sound, 17:55 mins.
Courtesy of the artist.
Installation at Arterial Gallery in 2016.
Photo by Zan Wimberley.





Archival snapshot of Lim's parents in front of Vault (1980) in City Square, Melbourne, 1980. Photographer unknown, Courtesy of the artist.

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Yellow Peril, 2015 (Installation view) at Bus Projects, Melbourne. Photo by Zan Wimberley. Artworks (L-R):

Yellow Peril, 2015
 Single-channel HD video, colour, sound, 17:55 mins.

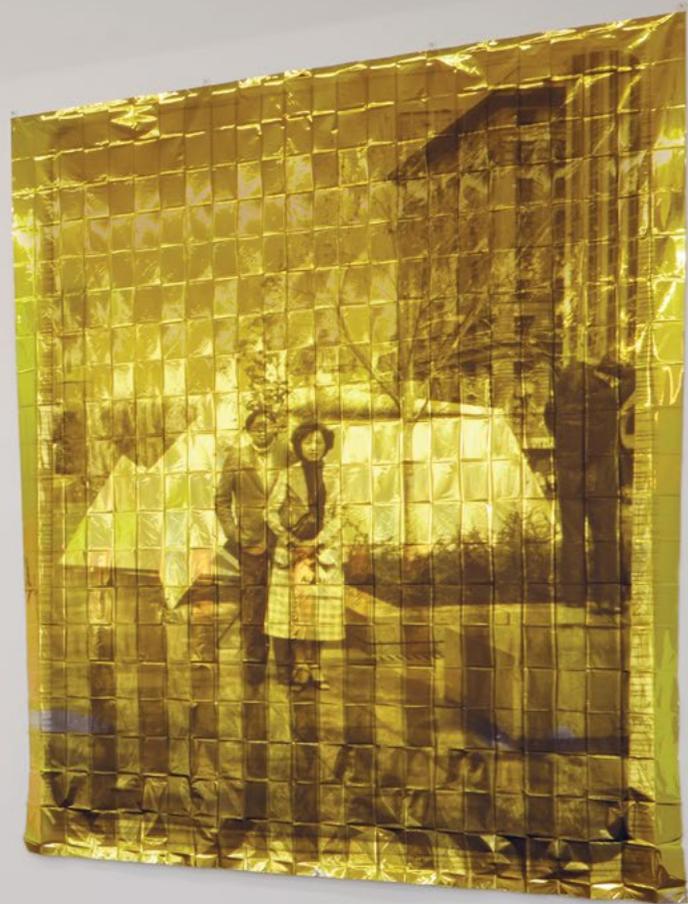
New Australians (Welcome Stranger 1889/2015), 2015
 Screen print on mylar emergency blanket, 210 x 160 cm.

New Australians (Yellow Peril 1980/2015), 2015
 Screen print on mylar emergency blanket, 210 x 160 cm.

Lim's parents' determined expressions signal both the hope and uncertainty of their new life in Australia. For Lim, the loaded history of *Vault* acts as a reminder of the complexities of Chinese migration to Australia.

Lim's Ambassador persona nods to the work of Hong Kong-born, US-based artist Tseng Kwong Chi. In *East Meets West* (1979–89), Chi captured himself in a series of self-portraits in front of iconic tourist sites and monuments of Euro-American culture. Drawing inspiration from Chi's deadpan 'diplomat', the act of self-portraiture is of equal importance to Lim, allowing her to explore, frame and represent a more nuanced Asian identity and history.

For Lim, as an Asian-Australian born and raised in Melbourne, 'Yellow Peril' is, as she says, 'in her blood.' As the Ambassador evolves in later works to become a conduit to interrogate architecture and the built environment, it is the reoccurring motif of Robertson-Swann's *Vault* that has become Lim's 'own visual shorthand to collide a personal, national and geopolitical exploration of identity.'





Yellow Peril, 2015 (video still)
Single-channel HD video, colour,
sound, 17:55 mins.
Courtesy of the artist.

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New Australians (Yellow Peril)
1980/2015), 2015
Screen print on mylar emergency
blanket, 210 x 160 cm
Courtesy of the artist.
Photo by Zan Wimberley.

New Australians (Welcome Stranger)
1869/2015), 2015
Screen print on mylar emergency
blanket, 210 x 160 cm
Courtesy of the artist.
Photo by Zan Wimberley.



Yellow

Peril

Welcome Stranger, 2015
Papier-mâché, paint, 50.5 x 13 x 33.5 cm
Courtesy of the artist.
Photo by Zan Wimberley.





Yellow Peril, 2015 (video still)
Single-channel HD video, colour,
sound, 17:55 mins.
Courtesy of the artist.

The
People's

Currency

LIFE IS ONE CONTINUOUS SHIFT
AFTERLIFE IS EXTENDED OVERTIME
WE ASPIRE TO THE ASSEMBLY LINE
WE WORK FASTER THAN MACHINES
WE MANUFACTURE DESIRE
TOGETHER IN GLOBALISATION
WE TURN AN ETERNAL PROFIT
IN THE AMBASSADOR WE TRUST
WHAT WE TOUCH TURNS TO GOLD



The People's Currency, 2017
Mixed media installation and performance,
dimensions variable. Photo by Zan Winderley
Courtesy of the artist.

The People's Currency is a participatory performance and 'Special Economic Zone' run by the Ambassador. Here, the Ambassador occupies a 'world factory' – an imagined China – where Eugenia Lim tests Australian understandings and expectations of a place we are increasingly economically and socially tied to. The work takes its name from China's currency, the *Renminbi*, and explores the social impact of globalisation on those who seek their fortune in the factories of China – or what economists like to call the 'workshop of the world'.

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While remote from Australia, these factories and their activities have local and global impacts. When almost everything is now 'Made in China', how are we all implicated as consumers in the labour conditions of the production line? In the Ambassador's factory, she presides over short-term workers (members of the public), leads factory 'calisthenics' workouts, and monitors the production of 'iDevices', all while printing counterfeit currency of her own design. Each 'worker' completes basic menial tasks, the products of which are inspected by the Ambassador. Remuneration of workers is unpredictable – some receive standard payment, some nothing, while a chosen few are gifted their own iDevice to keep. In this closed looped 'Special Economic Zone', mass production and money-printing become strategies for contemplating the human impact of the 'long march' of global capitalism.

This project was commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, supported by the City of Melbourne and part of the inaugural Asia TOPA Triennial of Performing Arts.







The Australian

Ugliness





The Australian Ugliness, 2018.
(production still)
Photo by Tom Ross.

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The Australian Ugliness (the leg), 2018
Digital C-type print, 39,5 x 59,5 cm
Photographed by Tom Ross
Courtesy of the artist.

The third and most recent iteration of the Ambassador is the artist's most ambitious work to date. *The Australian Ugliness* is a contemporary examination of architecture's role in shaping national identity, using Robin Boyd's 1960 polemical book of the same name as its catalyst. In his text, Boyd ponders Australian urbanism and its tendency towards 'featurism' – a lazy satisfaction with the mediocre or cosmetic. Aligned with his discussion of architecture and aesthetics is Boyd's still timely and biting assessment of Australia's national identity as one satisfied with the status quo.

More than half a century later, Eugenia Lim locates her video and photographic series as an almost wordless yet outspoken update to Boyd's text. In the era where box-like apartment buildings and cookie-cutter project homes form concentric rings around Australian cities, Boyd's scathing appraisal still holds. In Lim's *The Australian Ugliness*, the Ambassador shape-shifts as a student, tourist, client, property investor and resident as she visits over thirty architectural sites and spaces across Australia. Tracing architecture from the academy to the office, the city to the suburban fringe, and contrasting places of lesser privilege with the grand icons of Australian architecture, Lim is interested in the limits of architecture – where is architecture absent, where can it do more? Is 'The Australian Dream' unsustainable and in need of an update?

As the Ambassador negotiates each space, from Jørn Utzon's Sydney Opera House to Denton Corker Marshall's Melbourne Museum, she appears incongruous, at times absurd, in her surrounds. In *The Australian Ugliness*, Lim and her small cast of performers of diverse ages, body shapes, fluid genders and sexualities intervene into public and private space, 'othering' architecture through choreography and costume to ask: who holds the right to design our spaces, and who are they designed for? Who shapes our built environment and, in turn, how do these forces shape us?

This project was originally commissioned by Open House Melbourne and the Melbourne School of Design and supported by Australia Council for the Arts, Creative Victoria, City of Melbourne, Australian Cultural Fund, Creative Partnerships Australia, Museum of Contemporary Art, Robin Boyd Foundation, Plot Media, WOWOWA, The Post Lounge, Kane Constructions, HASSELL, Ontera, Wojo Signs and Gertrude Contemporary's studio program.



Eugenia Lim

The Ambassador

The Australian
Ugliness



The Australian Ugliness (visit to the museum), 2018
Digital C-type print, 39.5 x 59.5 cm
Photographed by Tom Ross
Courtesy of the artist.





The Australian Ugliness (Infinite clean), 2018
Digital C-type print, 39,5 x 59,5 cm
Photographed by Tom Ross
Courtesy of the artist.

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The Australian Ugliness (selfie steps), 2018
Digital C-type print, 39,5 x 59,5 cm
Photographed by Tom Ross
Courtesy of the artist.

Next page

The Australian Ugliness (Utzon dance), 2018
Digital C-type print, 39,5 x 59,5 cm
Photographed by Tom Ross
Courtesy of the artist.



Eugenia Lim

The Ambassador



Ugliness

The Australian



The Australian Ugliness, 2018 (video still)
Three-channel high-definition video, 33:58 mins.
Courtesy of the artist.

Eugenia Lim

The Ambassador

The Australian Ugliness, 2018 (Video stills)
Three-channel high-definition video, 33:58 mins.
Courtesy of the artist.



The Australian
Ugliness

Next page
The Australian Ugliness (adham), 2018
Digital C-type print, 39.5 x 59.5 cm
Photographed by Tom Ross
Courtesy of the artist.







The Australian Ugliness, 2018 (video stills)
Three-channel high-definition video, 33:58 mins.
Courtesy of the artist.



Eugenia Lim

The Ambassador



The Australian
Ugliness

The Australian Ugliness, 2018 (production still)
Photo by Tom Ross. Courtesy of the artist.





The Australian Ugliness (Bondi sunbather), 2018
Digital C-type print, 39,5 x 59,5 cm
Photographed by Tom Ross
Courtesy of the artist.



The Australian Ugliness, 2018 (video still)
Three-channel high-definition video, 33:58 mins.
Courtesy of the artist.





Previous page
The Australian Ugliness (yogic shine), 2018
 Digital C-type print, 39,5 x 39,5 cm
 Photographed by Tom Ross
 Courtesy of the artist.

The Australian Ugliness, 2018
 Three-channel high-definition video,
 33:58 mins. Original installation
 design by WOMOWA during The
 Australian Ugliness (2018), at the
 Melbourne School of Design. Photo
 by Tom Ross.





The Australian Ugliness, 2018 (production still)
Photo by Tom Ross. Courtesy of the artist.

Next page

Eugenia Lim as the Ambassador while in residence at the Robin Boyd Foundation, 2017.
Photo by Tim Hillier.



Eugenia

Lim



Eugenia Lim
Photo by Bryony Jackson.

Eugenia Lim (b. 1981, Melbourne) is an Australian artist of Chinese-Singaporean descent who works across video, performance and installation to explore the formation of nationalism and stereotypes with a critical but humorous eye. Her work has been exhibited internationally at festivals and venues including the Museum of Contemporary Art (SYD), Tate Modern, Dark MOFO, ACCA, Melbourne Festival, Next Wave, GOMA, ACMI, firstdraft, FACT Liverpool and EXiS Seoul. She has been artist-in-residence with the Experimental Television Centre NY, Bundanon Trust, 4A Beijing Studio and the Robin Boyd Foundation. Her work is held in private and public collections internationally. She is a 2018–2020 Gertrude Contemporary studio artist and since 2019, is the co-director (with Mish Grigor and Lara Thoms) of artistic company APHIDS. She holds a Bachelor of Media Arts (Hons.), RMIT University, and a Bachelor of Creative Arts, VCA. Lim is the co-writer and host of *Video Becomes Us* (2018) on ABC iView, co-directed the inaugural Channels Festival (2013), was founding editor of *Assemble Papers* (2011–2016) and co-founded temporal art collective Tape Projects (2007–2013).

List of works

Yellow Peril

Yellow Peril, 2015
Single channel HD video, audio, 17:57 min

Welcome Stranger, 2015
Papier-mâché, paint, 50.5 x 13 x 33.5 cm

New Australians (Yellow Peril, 1980/2015),
2015
Screen print on mylar emergency blanket,
210 x 160 cm

*New Australians (Welcome Stranger
1869/2015)*, 2015
Screen print on mylar emergency blanket,
210 x 160 cm

The People's Currency

The People's Currency, 2017
Mixed media installation and
performance, dimensions variable

The Ambassador, 2017
Digital image, dimensions variable
Photo by Zan Wimberley

The Australian Ugliness

The Australian Ugliness, 2018
Three-channel high-definition video,
33:58 min

The Australian Ugliness (Bondi sunbather),
2018
Digital C-type print, 39.5 x 59.5 cm
Photographed by Tom Ross

The Australian Ugliness (Utzon dance),
2018
Digital C-type print, 39.5 x 59.5 cm
Photographed by Tom Ross

The Australian Ugliness (selfie steps), 2018
Digital C-type print, 39.5 x 59.5 cm
Photographed by Tom Ross

The Australian Ugliness (yogic shine), 2018
Digital C-type print, 39.5 x 59.5 cm
Photographed by Tom Ross

*The Australian Ugliness (visit to the
museum)*, 2018
Digital C-type print, 39.5 x 59.5 cm
Photographed by Tom Ross

The Australian Ugliness (the leg), 2018
Digital C-type print, 39.5 x 59.5 cm
Photographed by Tom Ross

The Australian Ugliness (adhan), 2018
Digital C-type print, 39.5 x 59.5 cm
Photographed by Tom Ross

The Australian Ugliness (infinite clean), 2018
Digital C-type print, 39.5 x 59.5 cm
Photographed by Tom Ross

All works courtesy of the artist.

Acknowledgements

Yellow Peril

Eugenia Lim – writer, director, performer, editor
 Tim Hillier – cinematographer
 Dan West – composition and sound design
 Kat Chan – costume and props design

The People's Currency

Eugenia Lim – writer, performer, ceramics
 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art – curatorial and production
 Kat Chan – installation design
 Anita Archer from Pegasos5 – production manager
 Future Method – design consultant
 Fieldwork – design consultant
 Tristan Main – currency design
 Andrew Treloar – choreography
 Michelle Tseng – voiceover
 Angela Pye, Georgia Nowak, Jenny Zhe Chang, Clementine Barnes
 and Jeremy Bakker – factory angels

The Australian Ugliness

Eugenia Lim – writer, director, performer, editor
 Alexandra George – producer
 Virginia Kay and Jamie Houge – executive producers
 WOWOWA – original installation design
 Tim Hillier – cinematographer
 Dan West – composition and sound design
 The Post Lounge – Kurt Royan (General Manager), Ela Furdas
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 Editor)
 Amos Gebhardt – mentor
 Nat Cursio – choreography
 Kat Chan – costume design and art department
 Julia Spizzica – wardrobe assistant
 Shylo Tui – lighting consultant (Walsh Street)
 Tom Ross – stills photographer
 Eleanor Orchard, Alice Cummins, James Andrews,
 Gregory Lorenzutti, Alice Dixon – performers
 Miao Teng Tan, Daria Tolotchkov, Aryan Azizkhani,
 Rifat Muharram, Phoebe Kramer, Alex Jeanne Macdonald,
 Tamara Baksheev, Matthew Li – MADA Wearing the City designers

With additional gratitude to

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Eugenia Lim The Ambassador

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Eugenia Lim, artist

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