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"JUNK IS NO GOOD BABY" — Justin Chance, Nina Hartmann, Lyric Shen, Mike Yaniro
Silke Lindner, New York City, 26 October to 3 December 2022
by Sasha Cordingley

Try to peek inside Silke Lindner's compact space in Tribeca, New York, and you'll find your view partially obstructed. Parked in the centre of the gallery's floor-to-ceiling window is a thermogram image of an obscured figure, caught in motion between departure and arrival, with only their featureless face and a sliver of their wrist distinguishable, each radiating a deep crimson. Enclosed in black metal rods which suggest the bare-bones simplicity of an Amazon bed frame, almost every component of this imposing vinyl print by Nina Hartmann is blurred, as the depicted central figure bleeds into the surrounding it is embedded in. At the print's edges, a transparent orange border morphs into an arrow that points in opposition to the figure's direction. This graphic offers the only chance at pictorial clarity.

Hartmann's *Surveillance Study I (Diagram Excerpt)* (2022) is an apt introduction to the works on view at Silke Lindner. As with the life-sized print which hails the viewer behind glass, nothing is legible in the eight multimedia works in the gallery's inaugural exhibition, "JUNK IS NO GOOD BABY." Featuring artists Justin Chance, Lyric Shen, Mike Yaniro, and Hartmann, the exhibition's objects refuse any possibility of comprehension by distorting or clouding materials, language, and images alike.

While most of the objects are discernible in craft, Shen's three sculptural works evade easy identification. Warped ceramic mimics the qualities of a dried-out sponge, its exterior pockmarked by cavities like a planet impacted by unceasing welts of solar debris. Intimate in size, the sculptures' surfaces hold images—transferred through hydrographic printing—of the artist's personal memories. And personal memories they will remain, for a cohesive portrayal of Shen's recollections is dissimulated by purposeful collage, which renders the snapshots something akin to crumpled and soiled newspaper—visible in fragments, yet abstruse in their lack of complete content. A woman's head embellished with a headband and claw clip is visually interrupted by the drapery of an emerald fabric; a pile of garbage bags left out on the sidewalk is reduced to blobs of white, pink, and black. In *Jewel's Stand* (2022), any gesture toward a coherent image is foreclosed as the assortment of photographs dissolves into marbled ornament. At the sculpture's base, black steel has been cut and crafted into two elongated seraphic figures and a tip-of-the-tongue assortment of letters and numbers, which recall the chapter and verse format of biblical citations. Linguistic recognition is yanked away as words dissolve into gibberish.

Language is further jolted out of its communicative structure in Chance's jigsaw puzzle-cum-wordfinder, *Psalm* (2022). Assembled by gallery-goers the night of the opening, less than a handful of the words and phrases on the provided list have been accounted for. Attempting to detect the remaining nouns and statements that drift among a sea of confused letters is a fool's game, and scanning the work's grid in persistent obsession merely engenders frustration when the seemingly meaningless repetition of alphabetic signs yields to half-formed words and glossolalia. The supplied word list, too, seems extraneous. It's a smorgasbord of syntactic formulations that feign apophenia: "Next Week," "Adblock Plus," "Nightsweats," and "Marriage," among others, all erroneously grouped by the title of a Bobby Womack song. It's semantic mumbo-jumbo.

Harder to decipher is Yaniro's hieroglyphic dyad, *The Approach* (2022). Composed of precise renderings of microscopic calibration patterns, the successive arrangement of plus signs and concentric squares proportionately laid out according to a faint gridded backdrop echoes the rigid lattice of snap-together model kits. Without an instruction pamphlet, all that remains are shapes and outlines, a cipher with no code book.

Perhaps these objects are not meant to be understood. Cryptic and veiled, they evoke Édouard Glissant's theorization of the opaque. Glissant's "demand [for] the right to opacity" refers to a strategy of active resistance among the colonized, which foregrounds the unknowable elements of personhood in opposition to the reductive lens of Western imperialism. It's the intentional clouding of the self as a defence against the dehumanizing classification of "Other" which occurs in racialized relationality. As Fred Moten writes, opacity "corresponds to the need to hold something in reserve, to keep a secret."

With data extraction as the status quo, keeping secrets is an increasingly arduous task, especially as it relates to biographical fact. Online forms, email subscriptions, web-page trackers, face-recognition software and advanced algorithms seem to know everything about us, categorizing us neatly into interest niches and biodata, which ensure every aspect of our lives can be mined for profit or surveillance. AI selfies are biometric goldmines. If, as Foucault states, being legible enables examination, discipline, and control, then the objects in the exhibition, along with the histories and memories embedded in them, thwart categorization and the asymmetrical power relations that come with them.

Let's return to Hartmann's towering vinyl print that stands anterior to the gallery. The surveilled figure is completely opaque despite the surge of light which floods in from the window. People on the sidewalk drift in and out of frame, visible in the fragment of transparent orange film, and monitored from margin to margin in brief passage. But for just a few seconds, behind the figure, they are a blur. There is nothing to scrape, nothing to comprehend. What "JUNK IS NO GOOD BABY" offers us is the possibility of refusing legibility and momentarily avoiding the networks of extraction that constitute our current malaise. Scramble your addresses, pixelate your profile pictures, and input false DOBs: this is the escape from the panopticon.

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