

Extremely absorbent and increasingly hollow

Dec. 14 – Feb. 3

**Xandra Ibarra
Alison Kuo
Tiffany Jaeyeon Shin**

curated by
Alexis Wilkinson

Presented with Abrons Arts Center

The artworks included in ***Extremely absorbent and increasingly hollow*** complicate the notion of a discrete body as separate from the unruly matter of the physical world and impervious to the penetration of cultural signifiers from the social world. Working across sculpture, performance, and video, artists **Xandra Ibarra**, **Alison Kuo**, and **Tiffany Jaeyeon Shin** forego direct representation, instead employing materials that stand in for the mass of the body and the surface of the skin to consider processes of consumption and anxieties around contamination.

Both consumption and contamination occur in the body by way of ingestion and proximity—we continuously absorb elements of the world around us. These systems also extend to the social, marking bodies and populations with sometimes dangerous physical and social implications in the form of ideologies, perceptions, anxieties, and desires as examined in different ways by the artworks included.

In the exhibition, Shin cultivates the growth of bacteria on the porous surface of unfired porcelain vessels, drawing connections between skin, objecthood, and agency. Ibarra aligns with the qualities of endurance manifested in the figure of the cockroach and its process of ecdysis, when the insect sheds and regenerates its shell in an ongoing cycle not of transformation, but of sameness. Kuo engages notions of sacrifice, sensuality, and aspiration contained in the material properties and social history of gelatin in the United States, tracking its transformation from its early use in wartime rationing to its emergence as a colorful object of desire. Across the works, the artists implement living and moving processes: the visible growth of bacteria, the contours of a cockroach skin costume enlivened and rendered void by a vacuum, the vigorous contact between flesh and gelatin. The works privilege viscous, slippery, and transitional states over the solid and static. They implement materials often deemed disagreeable and impure over clean and controlled to examine how value is perceived and assigned. Through their materials, the artists evoke modes of hollowness, absorbency, void, and excess, registering the potentials and dangers of these interrelated—and sometimes conflicting—conditions.

Checklist

Xandra Ibarra

Spic Skin (Cucaracha) Installation, 2016

Cockroach garment, plastic bag, pest control vacuum, lightbox
57.5" x 45.5" x 10"

Alison Kuo

The New Joys of Gellies, 2018

Video, 10:19 minutes

Sound design by Williamson Brasfield

Tiffany Jaeyeon Shin

Untitled (3 Vases), 2018

Cinder blocks, wood, vinyl, pvc, silicone, steel, glass,
humidifier, unfired porcelain, homegrown bacteria
32" x 12" x 54"

Events

Performance by Alison Kuo

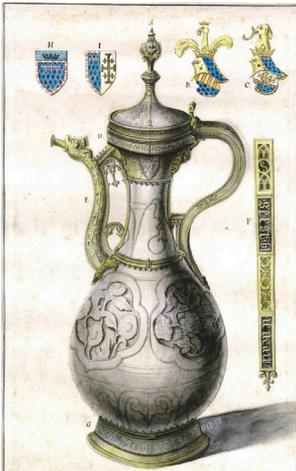
January 29, 2019

7:30pm

Abrons Arts Center

Facilitating the growth of bacteria on three identical unfired porcelain vases, **Tiffany Jaeyeon Shin** examines entangled histories of fetishization, purity, and contamination. Porcelain is implicated in a long material history of fetishization as objects of trade between the West and China beginning in the 16th century. Coveted for its purity, whiteness, durability, and resistance to staining, porcelain embodies qualities that have been historically ascribed to East Asian flesh and personhood.¹

Shin highlights the way in which the language of the popular K-Beauty skincare industry continues desires for a “porcelain” complexion, reducing Korean skin to an impermeable surface.² Text within a 2018 body of work, *Universal Skin Salvation* reads: “The porelessness of Korean skin, “glassy,” and “porcelain”, speaks the language of engineering a vitreous object, bodies-as-vessels reproduced for the consumption of whatever is held inside.”³ In altering the clean, blank surface of her ceramic containers, Shin complicates the desires for “porcelain” skin found in K-Beauty that emerge from a long history of women pursuing the sterile flesh of Western modernity following the Korean War. The process of firing porcelain not only sets its milky white hue, it makes the material poreless and durable, therefore useful as a proper vessel—what is contained inside won’t seep through. In this state, it is “pure.” Unfired porcelain, however, is porous and more vulnerable to fracture; it functions like skin and is receptive to coloration. Interior and exterior bleed together, permeable, rendering it useless as a tool to contain anything.



Both Images: The Fonthill vase is the earliest Chinese porcelain object to have reached Europe. It was a gift to King Louis the Great of Hungary in 1338.

Porcelain's associations with purity are not only tied to imposed gendered, ethnic, and sexualized fetishes, but also to its early material use as a filtration device. Because of its pore size, unfired porcelain was one of the original tools used for early water purification, and thereby an early mechanism to control contamination by invisible organisms like bacteria. Undermining the cultural and material notions of purity and durability associated with fired porcelain, Shin facilitates the growth of bacteria on unfired porcelain in an activated gesture to unsettle the long-held popular imaginary that fired porcelain holds.

Concentrated bacteria culled from home-brewed lactic acid visibly populates the surface of each vase in *Untitled (3 Vases)*, 2018. Areas of bacterial growth speckle the interior and exterior of the vessels and, over the course of the exhibition, will visibly expand and coat their surfaces with pigmentation. Populated by live bacteria, Shin's porcelain vessels are intentionally contaminated: she re-animates the porous material that has been culturally coerced into an empty state of idealism, rendering organic what she calls the "petrified flesh of the yellow woman."

Although the multitude of bacteria that make up the human microbiome are essential to most of the body's internal functions, bacteria is more often associated with germaphobia and anxieties over cleanliness. Bacteria are often framed as agents of disease to be controlled, repelled, and sanitized. Ideas of contamination play out on social, cultural, and political registers: from racialized and sexualized stigmas attached to disease epidemics and historical anxieties surrounding miscegenation, to discriminatory nationalistic rhetorics pertaining to immigration, further evoked by Xandra Ibarra's 2014 *Spic Ecdysis* series and sculptural installation on view *Spic Skin (Cucaracha)*, 2015.

¹ In her text theorising Ornamentalism, the objectification of the Asian femininity, scholar Anne Anlin Cheng asserts, "Connoting old-world exoticism and modern material, civilization and decadence, durability and fragility, heat and coolness, imperviousness and susceptibility, Chinese ceramic was thought to embody characteristics that are mapped onto Asiatic persons and bodies." Anne Anlin Cheng, "Ornamentalism: Feminist Theory for the Yellow Woman," *Critical Inquiry* 44, no. 3 (Spring 2018): 430.

² K-Beauty is shorthand for the Korean cosmetics industry.

³ *Universal Skin Salvation (Dermis, Lactic Acid, Porcelain, and Vitrification)*, 2018, digital collage, 60 x 84 inches.

While Shin's work addresses the ways in which porcelain is entangled with racialized and gendered stereotypes and fantasies projected onto the East Asian subject, **Xandra Ibarra** takes up the molting process of cockroaches, whereby they repeatedly shed their exoskeleton as they grow, in order to explore the limitations of her own body to transcend the politics of representation despite ongoing negotiations of aesthetic transformation.



L: Xandra Ibarra, *Molting in Pool*, 2014. Archival pigment print, 20 x 30 inches.

R: Xandra Ibarra, *Carcass*, 2014. Archival pigment print, 20 x 30 inches.

In a 2014 performance photograph series titled *Spic Ecdysis*, Ibarra aligns herself with the cockroach, a common insect that evokes associations with race, class, and immigration, alongside visceral sensations of fear and repulsion. In the U.S. American popular imagination, the cockroach invokes fears of invasion and contamination related to immigration from Mexico. In a text about Ibarra's work, scholar Christina A. León explains: "The cucaracha has an uncanny potency as a trope in Latinidad, historically speaking, as both a fear-mongering and a revolutionary metaphor for the browning of the Americas."⁴ Importantly, cockroaches are also known for their endurance; they frequently stand-in as symbols of post-apocalyptic survival.

In a clever play on the term ecdysis, which means "to take off, to strip off," Ibarra explores the notion of self as container within her ongoing practice of transformation of her visual appearance. The *Spic Ecdysis* photograph series is a response to Ibarra's own attempt to "shed her skin" after a decade of performing parodic burlesque critiques that she calls "Spictacles" using exaggerated figures of Mexican stereotypes under the moniker La Chica Boom. Over time, as evidenced by comments from her (mostly white) audiences, Ibarra realized that she was in fact reinscribing rather than challenging the stereotypes she was attempting to dismantle.

Ibarra thus turns to the cockroach, aligning herself with its quiet capacity for endurance and the slow, cyclical process of ecdysis. In ecdysis, the cockroach casts off its exoskeleton and generates a new shell: shedding its skin only to emerge the same. The *Spic Ecdysis* performance photographic series depicts cast-off costumes (referred to by Ibarra as “spic skins”), which lay flaccid, sometimes on the side of the road, sometimes beside her, without a body to fill them. Ibarra writes, “Aren’t Latinidad and spichood similarly fucked—the fuckedness of always already being the same or of resemblance in repetition? Even when I attempt to reassemble new skin, sick of my spic casings, I remain destined to be crucified through them. I can only discard and abandon the carcass; I’m stuck. My new being through ecdysis remains within “the order of the same.”⁵

In the exhibition, Ibarra presents a sculptural installation of her cockroach costume, *Spic Skin (Cucaracha)*, 2015. Encased in a vacuum sealed bag, Ibarra’s cockroach skin is displayed as an artifact of exhaustion, one of her many shed skins. A pest control vacuum is affixed to the bag containing the cockroach skin, animating the sculpture with an abrupt and violent mechanical breath every half hour. Deploying the vacuum to suction the encased cucaracha carcass of air, Ibarra conjures the definition of vacuum as “a space entirely devoid of matter” echoing the hollowed-out parodic signifiers she has sloughed off like dead skin. However, Ibarra maintains that she remains a “predetermined body unmarked by change and limited by the visual field of Latinidad in the United States,” and mediates on stuckness (and “fuckedness”) of the denial of a present over progress of the future, turning to endurance as a quality necessary to survive as a racialized body.

⁴ Christina A. León, “Forms of Opacity: Roaches, Blood, and Being Stuck in Xandra Ibarra’s Corpus,” *ASAP/Journal* Volume 2, Number 2, (May 2017): 380.

⁵ Xandra Ibarra, “Spic in Ecdysis | A series by Xandra Ibarra,” *Women & Performance*, May 3, 2016. <https://www.womenandperformance.org/ampersand/ampersand-articles/spic-in-ecdysis-a-series-by-xandra-ibarra.html>. Accessed December 5, 2018.

Ibarra's self-in-ecdysis interrogates the conditions that can render her body both hollow and absorbent, an empty signifier for desires to be projected onto aside the empty shed skins. Through video and performance, **Alison Kuo** examines the material properties and social history of gelatin, a protein-rich animal by-product, produced from collagen from bones and connective tissue. Gelatin is a colorless and tasteless receptacle, ready to take on the properties of flavor and color of one's choosing, resonating with Ibarra and Shin's figuring of the self as a vessel that absorbs its surroundings. It operates as a container and something contained: it is a vessel for flavor and color while it readily adheres to the contours of whatever it is "set" in.

In the United States during the mid-twentieth century, gelatin was staple ingredient used to promote the illusion of abundance during post wartime rationing. Kuo notes, "In the 1943 Knox Wartime Recipes booklet *How to Be Easy on Your Ration Book*, recipes including gelatin as a main ingredient were promoted as a way to enact a duty of citizenship: to maintain the bodies of young Americans; to *stretch* food; to avoid waste and the appearance of having less than is needed to live well."



L: Alison Kuo, *Bone Bath*, 2017. Performance documentation. Photo: Williamson Brasfield
 R: Alison Kuo, *Bone Bath*, 2017. Performance documentation. Photo: Henry Sekimotto

Kuo began working with large quantities of gelatin in a 2017 performance titled *Bone Bath*. For the opening of a new Chelsea luxury high-rise apartment building in New York City, exhibitions were staged within the pristine new units, ostensibly to imbue the property with cultural value. Kuo's contribution was a durational performance during which she lay submerged in a tub full of unflavored jello to a chopped-up score of Patsy Cline's "I Fall To Pieces." Kuo laid prone as an uncolored, unflavored pool of gelatin coagulated around her submerged body. Perhaps, like Ibarra, she too is stuck, buried in proteins and fats that commingle with her flesh, resembling her own body matter and spilling over in excess. While the cockroach regenerates its shell, Ibarra is stuck in her own skin no matter how she

tries to shed it and Kuo occupies the broken-down and coagulating animal matter, enduring as object as visitors uncomfortably witness her in repose, being consumed by other means. Kuo states, “I make my body into a capitalist object and I fall to pieces. I become jellied, break down into my proteins and fats.” In *Bone Bath*, she is paused, she is waiting, she is served. The performance indicates the ways in which the body, like gelatin, is subject to absorbing the world around it.

In a new video *The New Joys of Gellies*, 2018 and a related performance, Kuo extends her engagement with gelatin, tracking its history from wartime necessity to extravagant and strange 1970s Jello recipes. She arrives at its present-day inedible counterpart, slime: a goopy, stretchy mixture of glue and household chemicals like borax, baking soda and contact solution that is often colored with dyes and glitter. While it cannot actually be consumed because of its toxic makeup, the substance can be made to smell and feel like desirable foods such as bread, Coca-Cola, or *crème brulee*. Examining these viscous substances, she asks: “What does it mean to be a “wartime American”? To exist in a generations long condition of lack and alienated desire for sensual pleasure: eating, touching bodies, languorously looking at beautiful things?”

In the slime videos that circulate ubiquitously online, Kuo responds to the manifestation of the intimacy, sexuality, and destructive excess in the exhibitionary engagement with slime. “There is something so clearly sensual in their pleasure, in their codified hand gestures of caressing, poking, squeezing and kneading. Who are we to watch them explore their sexuality on this public platform? How recognizable even is this post-internet, post-body sexuality?” Taking an operational cue from slime, Kuo approaches gelatin as an object of desire, caressing, kneading, prodding it, and experimenting with its material properties through touch. Imposing ephemeral destruction as one would with ever-expendable slime, she propels her body into the rendered bodies of anonymous animals that transform from powder back into sinews and cartilage with the addition of hot water and kinetic energy.

Bios

Xandra Ibarra is an Oakland-based performance artist from the US/Mexico border who sometimes works under the alias of La Chica Boom. Ibarra uses hyperbolized modes of racialization and sexualization to test the boundaries between her own body and coloniality, compulsory whiteness, and Mexicanidad. Her practice integrates performance, sex acts, and burlesque with video, photography, and objects. Throughout her works, she teeters between abjection and joy and the borders between proper and improper racial, gender, and queer subject.

Ibarra's work has been featured at El Museo de Arte Contemporáneo (Bogotá, Colombia), Broad Museum (LA, USA), Popa Gallery (Buenos Aires, Argentina), PPOW Gallery (NYC), Anderson Collection (Stanford) and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (SF) to name a few. She has been awarded the Queer Art Prize for Recent Work, Art Matters Grant, NALAC Fund for the Arts, ReGen Artist Fund, and the Franklin Furnace Performance and Variable Media Award. Her work has been featured in *Artforum*, *Paper Magazine*, *Hyperallergic*, *Huffington Post*, *ArtNews* and other academic journals nationally and internationally. Ibarra's work has also been featured in several recent and forthcoming books: Juana Maria Rodriguez's *Sexual Futures*, *Queer Gestures*, *Other Latina Longings*, Amber Jamilla Musser's *Brown Jouissance: Feminine Imaginings*, and Leticia Alvarado's *Abject Performances: Aesthetic Strategies in Latino Cultural Production*.

Alison Kuo makes art that examines power and class dynamics through the language of food. Her participatory performances invite her audience to collaborate, and to eat, within the framework of an installation. Her photographs and videos remix coded representations of food from advertising, cookbooks, and popular media. Kuo received an MFA from the School of Visual Arts in New York, NY and a BA from Southwestern University in Georgetown, TX. She has exhibited her work within the US at Motel gallery, Beverly's, CANADA, ICI, Present Company, Cathouse FUNeral, The NARS Foundation, E.Tay gallery, Space Heater, the New York Art Book Fair, and Superchief in NYC, and at the UNTITLED art fair, OHWOW, and the Young at Art Museum in Miami. International group exhibitions include the 2016 Nanjing International Art Festival, the MATERIAL art fair in Mexico City, Paraiso Bajo in Bogotá, and

Malagana Macula in Managua. Kuo teaches workshops on performative cooking and dining at the Abrons Art Center, and is on the faculty of the School of Visual Arts MFA Fine Arts program in NYC. She is the creator of the popular blog *Accidental Chinese Hipsters*.

Tiffany Jaeyeon Shin explores the porousness of bodily boundaries and the ceaseless movement of living processes, like fermentation echoing the history of colonialism. Shin is interested in entangling the history of conquest and the literal digestion of material – herbs, medicine, and food – into a new system of relations that emerge from a complicated history of entanglement. Shin has exhibited at SPRING/BREAK, New York, NY (2018), Disclaimer Gallery, Brooklyn, NY (2018), AC Institute, New York, NY (2017), Abrons Arts Center, New York, NY (2017), Miranda Kuo Gallery, New York, NY (2017), and many others. Forthcoming exhibitions include *Universal Skin Salvation* at Knockdown Center, Maspeth, NY, *Phantom Limb* at Cody Dock, London, England and *Ghost in the Ghost* at Tiger Strikes Asteroid, Brooklyn, NY. Shin lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

Alexis Wilkinson is a mover and a curator working across dance, performance, and visual art. Recent curatorial projects include *Chloë Bass: The Book of Everyday Instruction* at Knockdown Center, NY (2018), *A Collection of Slow Events* at The Luminary, MO (2017), *In Practice: Material Deviance* at SculptureCenter, NY (2017), *objects are slow events* at the Hessel Museum, NY (2016), and *Matter to Whom?* at the Judd Foundation, NY (2015). She has also organized exhibitions and performances for Abrons Art Center, NADA NY, and A.I.R. Gallery.

Wilkinson is the Director of Exhibitions and Live Art at Knockdown Center in Queens, NY, where she programs and produces interdisciplinary exhibitions, performances, and events. She is currently the 2017 – 2018 AIRspace curator-in-residence at Abrons Art Center, New York. Previously, she was the 2017 Curatorial Fellow at SculptureCenter, New York, and has held research, administrative, and curatorial support roles at the New Museum, New York and the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Wilkinson holds an MA in Curatorial Studies from the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College and a BA in Cultural Studies, Dance, and Art History from the University of California, Los Angeles.

About

Cuchifritos Gallery + Project Space, a program of Artists Alliance Inc, provides exhibition opportunities to hundreds of emerging artists and independent curators. Founded in 2001, Cuchifritos is housed within the Essex Street Market on Manhattan's Lower East Side. This unique setting fosters a deep connection between art and the local community, encourages dialogue among artists and very diverse audiences, and enhances the Lower East Side's status as a place of historical importance, exploration, and exchange. Cuchifritos responds to changing needs within the art world, supports work that's reflective of our broader community, and finds ways to advance artists' and curators' practices. We're dedicated to ensuring the Lower East Side remains a powerful place for making and viewing art.

The **Abrons AIRspace Residency Program** offers time-based residencies to interdisciplinary artists engaged in the fields of visual art, performance, curatorial and social practices. A variety of residency program structures provide a range of support to artists, including workspace, production support, in-progress performances and exhibition opportunities, commissioning funds, a monetary award, and opportunities to collaborate on projects with the broader Henry Street Settlement/Lower East Side community through guest artist residencies. To date, Abrons has provided over fifty-thousand hours of residency support to artists working through ideas at various stages of development.

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