

ArtReview Asia



Body Politics

Eisa Jocson Pinaree Sanpitak Gudskul Singapore Biennale

Liang Luscombe *Sweaty Scales*

Sutton Gallery, Melbourne 7 September – 5 October

Installed against a canary-yellow wall, a comedy of manners plays out onscreen in Liang Luscombe *Sweaty Scales* (2019). Exploring the impact of racial and gendered stereotypes found in film, television and advertising media, this playfully structured narrative video features two central female characters who navigate their individual identity and sexuality through a quagmire of pop culture imagery that fetishises and typecasts Asian women. The result is an interrogation of the Western, male gaze from a contemporary, intersectional perspective. With critique delivered through observational humour and conversation, Luscombe places fresh characters against a familiar backdrop of pop culture genres such as the rom-com and web series.

The highly stylised 30-minute video focuses on the social scene and self-conscious musings of young creative characters in an unnamed US city. Scripted scenes portray a thirtieth birthday party, dinner dates, seduction and sexual fantasy, building a loose narrative of romance between Oliver (Caucasian-American) and Lisa (Asian-American), who have been introduced by mutual friend Julie (also Asian-American). The scenes take place against a brightly coloured backdrop of makeshift props and sets, and are intercut

with shots of a narrator (the artist) speaking directly to camera.

“Oliver would often get quite sweaty when he would dance at parties...,” says the narrator. This becomes an ongoing and unflattering visual gag, as the pair go on a date (to a Chinese restaurant) and Lisa gets concerned about how much Oliver seems to be sweating. When Lisa tries to talk about her career, as creative director of an advertising firm, Oliver swiftly turns the conversation to his sexual fantasies involving an elaborate ‘dragon lady’ costume. The sweating becomes more profuse as this conversation, and Oliver’s initially low-level creepiness, escalate (hence the title, *Sweaty Scales*).

Intercut with the action are photographs of iconic imagery of Asian women, including 1930s film star Anna May Wong, an originator of the dragon-lady stereotype – a typically Chinese femme-fatale, portrayed as an enigmatic or deceitful seductress. A scene from the 1960 film *The World of Suzie Wong* is also included. Set in Hong Kong, it stars William Holden as Robert, an American architect/artist, and Nancy Kwang as Mei Ling (a prostitute who poses as a virgin and becomes Robert’s model). The appropriated film clip cuts to a re-creation with Lisa and Oliver in costume playing the

roles of Mei Ling and Robert as they meet on the Star Ferry.

Cinema has a long history of whitewashing and yellowface, which sadly continues. For all the buzz around Asian-American stories and actors taking the lead in Hollywood productions – *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), *Always Be My Maybe* (2019), *The Farewell* (2019) – it has not been long since a pale and blonde Emma Stone was cast as a mixed-race Chinese-Hawaiian character in *Aloha* (2015). Luscombe has highlighted yellowface in a previous videowork, *She inches glass to break* (2018), which refers to Mickey Rooney’s clownish Japanese character in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961), a performance often overlooked in appraisals of the film and Rooney’s career.

In a reversal of the cinematic gaze, the male character is reduced to a trope rather than a rounded character: Oliver is a Woody Allenesque skinny guy with glasses whose confidence is wildly out of balance with his talent and social grace. In sex scenes the actor is replaced with a puppet, delivering a literally wooden performance. Glimpses of the puppeteer on camera further undermine the artifice of constructed narratives and performed identities that, in this comic pastiche, Luscombe so effectively critiques.

Rosemary Forde



Sweaty Scales (still), 2019, HD digital video, 29 min 26 sec.
Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne