



Title

Jes Fan

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Jes Fan

by Sophie Guo • 14.02.2025

In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) the philosopher and psychologist Frantz Fanon lamented the reduction of the Black body under the gaze of the white man:

I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.¹

Fanon's realisation perhaps resonates with the artist Jes Fan (b.1990) in a distinct yet more expansive way.² Similar to Fanon, who identified a 'historico-racial schema' as underlying the body schema of Blackness,³ Fan explores the 'technology in creating the idea of otherness' over the course of colonial conquest, but then overturns it by deconstructing and reweaving it into an alternative material and semiotic system.⁴



Fig. 1 Still from *Xenophobia*, by Jes Fan. 2018–20. Video, duration 7 minutes 35 seconds. (Courtesy the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong).

In 2018 Fan collaborated with a laboratory in Brooklyn to synthesise eumelanin – a type of pigment that gives dark shades to skin, eyes and hair – out of genetically modified *E. coli* bacteria. The production of this 'infectious melanin' originated from the artist's rumination on the racialised discourse of contagion within colonial history: 'living in Hong Kong under British colonial rule and also living in the US for ten years now, I've observed how racial fear often runs parallel to our fears of microbial contaminations'.⁵ By isolating the colour pigment at the core of the chromatic racial

system, Fan underscores that describing race merely as a social construct is insufficient. Instead, their work reminds us that the epidermal schema of race – often misconstrued as a biological category – is, in fact, an artefactual construct shaped by the intertwined development of racial science and colonial medicine in the service of imperialist control.

The result is the silent film *Xenophobia* FIG.1, which features a delirious search for melanin across a constellation of human and more-than-human sources. These include squid ink sacs, mushroom caps, body hair, irises, moulds and a mole embedded in an enormous tumour depicted in a medical portrait by Lam Qua (1801–60), all captured with intimate, close-up shots. By visualising the bacteria-modelled melanin under a microscope FIG.2 – where it appears not inert but trembling and accumulating – the artist directly confronts traditional conceptions of race that hinge on phenotypical difference in skin colour. Just as the biomatter is detached from conventional racial implications tied to human skin and re-associated with black substances derived from various species across different taxonomic orders, melanin is similarly decentred from an anthropocentric notion of race and reimagined as a vital medium for forging interspecies intimacy and kinship, transcending the established boundaries of race and species.



Fig. 2 Still from *Xenophobia*, by Jes Fan. 2018–20. Video, duration 7 minutes 35 seconds. (Courtesy the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong).

A tenacious pursuit of the ‘material etymology’ of race and gender is fundamental to Fan’s research-based practice.⁶ Oestrogen and depo-testosterone – sex hormones that are often considered to be the concrete substances of gender – are presented alongside melanin or bodily fluids such as urine, blood or semen. They are cradled within hand-blown glass globules that rest upon, penetrate or hang from lattice- and dermis-like interfaces of sculptural assemblages, as seen in the *Systems* series (2018) and *Form Begets Function* FIG.3. At once seductive and repulsive, these corporeal substances – milky white, golden yellow and dark brown,

floating within their bulbous capsules – add a layer of animacy to the works. Both architectonic and porous, *Form Begets Function* alludes to the skin's dermal layer as being susceptible to the penetration of hormonal molecules and other objects of contagion.⁷ The sculpture reflects the body as a container in a perpetual state of circulation and exchange with external matters through its permeable skin. Continually infected and altered by non-human agents, it becomes entangled within a network of other objects.

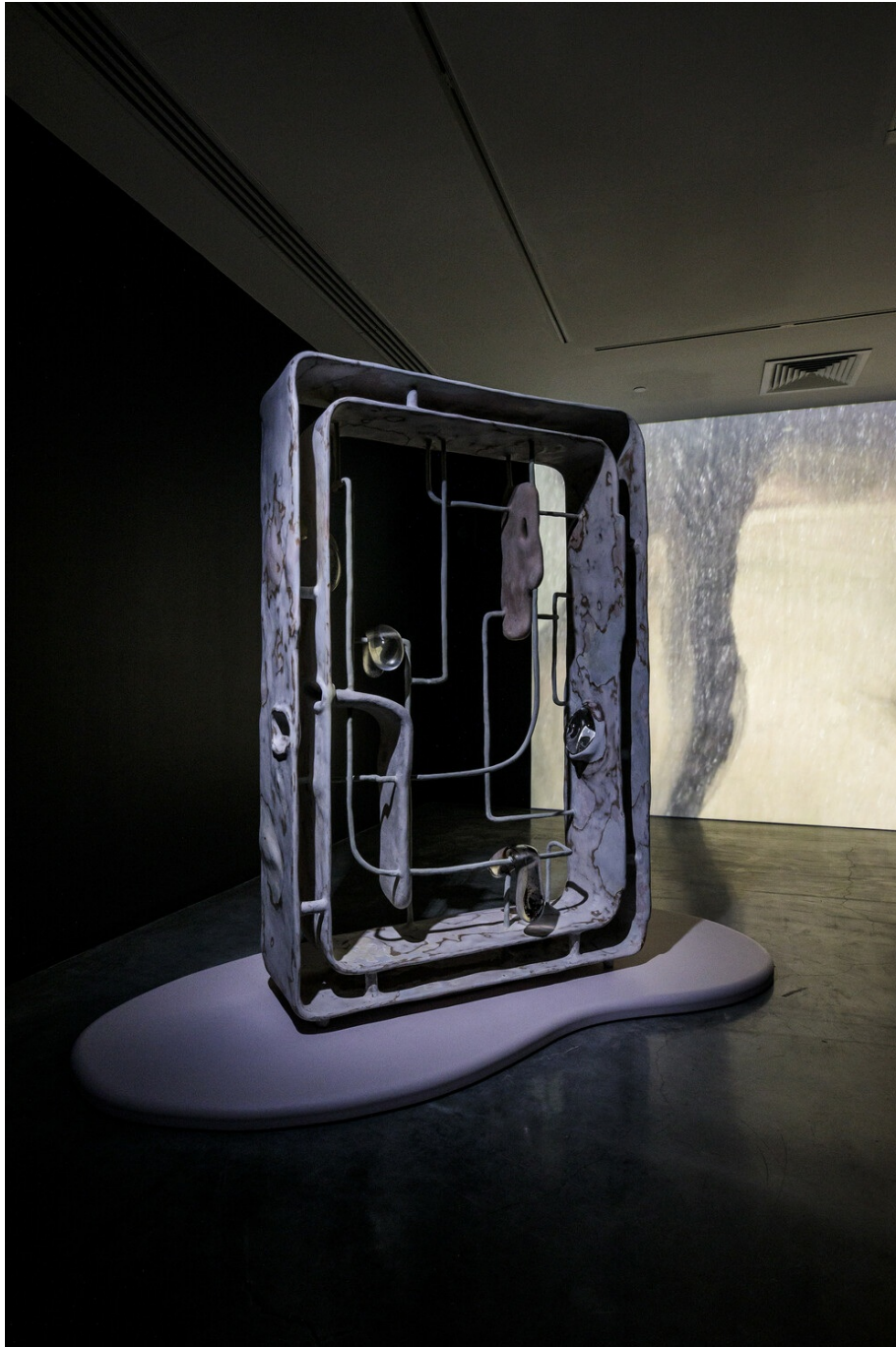


Fig. 3 Installation view of 22nd Biennale of Sydney: *NIRIN*, showing *Form Begets Function*, by Jes Fan. 2020. Aqua resin, pigment, wood, fibreglass, glass, urine, depo-testosterone and melanin, 193 by 127 by 40.5 cm. (Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney; photograph Ken Leanfore).

At times, more-than-human organisms, which propose novel and

alternative relationships between the host and the foreign body in nature, serve as a lens for the artist to reflect on colonial legacies and imagine queer futures. They liken themselves to a species of carrier shell called *Xenophora*, a sea snail that attaches foreign objects – such as other shells, pebbles and small rocks – to its own body.⁸ This xenophilic sea snail inspires the title of the work *Xenophoria* FIG.4, a reimagining of xenophobia that conveys its opposite. It offers an alternative to the fear of the foreign, countering Donald Trump’s exclusionary politics against immigrants before and during the COVID-19 pandemic – a dire dynamic that is currently resurfacing.



Fig. 4 Still from *Xenophoria*, by Jes Fan. 2018–20. Video, duration 7 minutes 35 seconds. (Courtesy the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong).

Fan’s multi-chapter project *Sites of Wounding*, which the artist has been developing since 2019 in response to the political turmoil in their native Hong Kong as well as a collective state of recovery following the pandemic, focuses on organisms capable of producing something precious and meaningful from infection and injury.⁹ The bodies of pearl oysters and an incense tree known as agarwood, both indigenous to Hong Kong, were appropriated by the artist as ‘raw materials’ to reflect and interrogate the trauma accrued culturally or socially within human bodies.¹⁰ Notably, agarwood, with its pungent earthy scent, also gave Hong Kong its name, which in Cantonese translates as ‘fragrant harbour’. The video work *Palimpsest* FIG.5, showcased in the first chapter of the project at Empty Gallery, Hong Kong, is the result of a three-year collaboration with scientists from the University of Hong Kong on native pearl farming, a practice that predates British colonial rule.

In the video, the artist embeds the Chinese characters for ‘Pearl of the Orient’, a colonial-era epithet for Hong Kong, into the mantles of the oysters. Agitated by the intrusion, the molluscs cloaked the characters in layers of nacre, in turn keeping the opalescent forms permanently inscribed upon their own bodies. While the original colonial moniker – linking the ornamentality of

the pearl to the exoticism of the 'Orient' – reflects the colonial gaze that frames Hong Kong not as a self-determined entity but as a prized possession of the empire, the meaning and connotations of 'Pearl of the Orient' have continued to shift and evolve over time and within different contexts. It became the title of a song by the Taiwanese singer Lo Ta-yu, written in the aftermath of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984, which sparked widespread concern among Hong Kong residents about the city's future after its 1997 handover. Lo used the song to celebrate the city's resilience, emphasising how it 'has thrived in the face of abandonment, navigating survival through compromise in the space between East and West'.¹¹ 'Pearl of the Orient' was later appropriated by the People's Republic of China as a propaganda song with anti-colonial undertones, serving nationalist purposes to reimagine Hong Kong as inherently belonging to China due to its shared ethnic heritage.

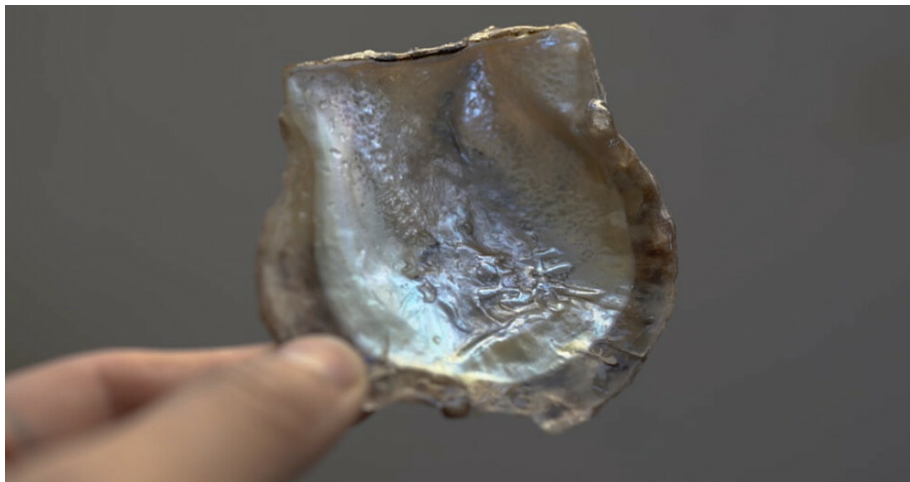


Fig. 5 Still from *Palimpsest*, by Jes Fan. 2023. Video, duration 5 minutes 43 seconds. (Courtesy the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong).

The Chinese version of the video explores the semantic extensions of the character 異 (*yi*), encompassing such meanings as 'alien', 'foreign', 'abnormal' and 'different'. Close-up shots of pearl-bearing oysters are interwoven with scenes of the Hong Kong cityscape. What captivated Fan was 'the process of trying to eject the other, and the other becomes part of itself', as the mollusc attempts to expel the foreign object but ultimately integrates it through ingestion.¹² True to its title, in *Palimpsest* Hong Kong perpetually exists in an in-between state. It carries the imprints of its former coloniser while being rewritten by those who came after. Much like the pearl oyster's ecology, the distinction between host and foreign remains perpetually blurred – or rather, its origins are inherently impure, layered and unsettled.

For the next iteration of *Sites of Wounding*, Fan turned to agarwood, a precious incense tree that secretes resin as a defence mechanism when wounded, as a metaphor to explore how queer and trans bodies accrue trauma in a sedimentary way – an idea

reflected in the weathered forms of their installation at the Whitney Biennale in 2024.¹³ In creating these works, Fan worked with their brother, who is a surgeon, to transform the cross-sectional slices of their own musculature into three-dimensional printed forms, which were then cast and developed into larger sculptures.¹⁴ *Cross Section (Right Leg Muscle I)* FIG.6, first exhibited at the Sigg Prize 2023 at the M+ Museum, Hong Kong, resembles a tree trunk resting atop an intricate network of pipes. The brown colour palette takes inspiration from medical illustrations and evokes the mottled surface of wounded agarwood. Its surface reflects a layered complexity, crafted through a meticulous casting process. Layers of resin were applied repeatedly, one atop the other, and then carefully sanded away to reveal the strata beneath, thereby blurring the distinction between surface and interior. A glass bubble nestles within a cavity as though emerging from a knot in a tree, its animacy evoking a sense of regeneration.



Fig. 6 *Cross Section (Right Leg Muscle I)*, by Jes Fan. 2023. Polymer modified

resin, PLA filament, fibreglass, pigments and glass, 88.9 by 78.4 by 81.28 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong; photograph Olympia Shannon).

Fan's engagement with materiality stems from their fascination with transformation, a process they describe as central to both their artistic and conceptual approach:



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Jes Fan: Sites of Wounding: Interchapter* at Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, 2024, showing *Screen for an internal landscape painting*, by Jes Fan. 2024. Soy milk, homemade endoscopy video, projector, hotplates and aluminium, 243.8 by 81.3 by 20.3 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York; photograph Olympia Scarry).

Materially and also conceptually, what I am most attracted to are matters that are suspended in transformation. Like silicone that is curing, glass that is teetering on the edge of relapsing into liquid, resin that sets and is then sanded back into its core, soy milk that is curdling into solid [...] my sculptures are a way of trying to describe this affect of change and transformation on a material level.¹⁵



Fig. 8 *Void*, by Jes Fan. 2024. Polymer modified resin, fibreglass, pigments and glass, 17.8 by 50.8 by 63.5 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York; photograph C. Creagan).

This notion of transformation – both material and conceptual – permeates Fan’s latest exhibition, *Sites of Wounding: Interchapter* (2024) at Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, where bodies were opened up to an unprecedented degree. A homemade endoscopic video was projected onto the surface of a gently heated pool of soy milk, positioned at the gallery entrance **FIG.7**. For Fan, the soybean is a vital component of the material etymology of gender. While tracing the material origins of the steroid hormones they had consumed, Fan discovered that soybeans serve as the pharmaceutical source for both oestrogen and testosterone – a biochemical engine of hormonal transformation – and are deeply tied to East Asian identity.¹⁶



Fig. 9 Installation view of *Jes Fan: Sites of Wounding: Interchapter* at Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, 2024, showing, in the centre, *To Shed*, by Jes Fan. 2024. Soy skin, metal and epoxy, 157.5 by 94 by 45.7 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York; photograph C. Creagan).

On low heat, the soy milk thickens and creates a thin film of solidified protein on the surface, known as *yuba* or *fupi*. Fan described the importance of this skin:



Fig. 10 Installation view of *Jes Fan: Sites of Wounding: Interchapter* at Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, 2024. (Courtesy the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York; photograph C. Creagan).

I wanted a surface that is also an interface. I was thinking of the myth of Narcissus, how he fell into the river into their own image, but here it is the image of one's interior tunnels and a bath of rotting soy milk [...] we tripped the entire building's electrical wiring, and caused quite a ruckus. I'll try to redo this for my upcoming solo in the United Kingdom.¹⁷

Fan's endoscopic body image, as an intense and visceral form of self-spectatorship, promiscuously merged with the soy milk in its constate state of transformation. The exhibition space itself had been repurposed as a body. A further 'interface' took the form of *Void* **FIG.8**, a large slit with a rounded rim in the wall, evoking the appearance of an enlarged pore or orifice. Here the wall could be

conceived of as a permeable dermis with a rupture that mirrors the internal wounding of agarwood.¹⁸ The act of peering into it became both erotic and somehow shameful, much like the experience of gazing into *Étant donnés* (1966) by Marcel Duchamp, where the act of looking is transformed into a private gesture performed in public.¹⁹

Through the membrane-like curtain, visitors entered an intimate interior space where *To Shed* FIG.9, a sculpture draped with an overflow of shredded soy skins, was situated. For Fan, the eccentric forms and transient nature of these organic materials draw parallels with the latex works of Eva Hesse (1936–70), which similarly evoke bodily reactions through their queer materiality.²⁰ In the corner, a tacky puddle of viscous, semen-like fluid FIG.10, with soybean capsules clinging to its surface, added an additional layer of eroticism. The artist began working with soybeans in 2017, drawn to their biochemical role in hormonal synthesis. This revelation – that an androgynous identity symbolically resides within a soybean – inspired *Animacy Arrangement (Cube)* FIG.11, in which soybeans are packed into capsules and arranged into a cube. Fan glued the structure together using their saliva; they carefully lined up the water-soluble capsules in neat rows and licked the tip of a brush to bind them to one another. In the *Sites of Wounding*, the enmeshment of a plant source of hormones with their own bodily fluids formed a deeply inextricable mix, perhaps reflecting a way of finding oneself in the midst of the other – of continually being, as Fan has said, ‘beyond myself’.²¹



Fig. 11 *Animacy Arrangement (Cube)*, by Jes Fan. 2017. Capsules, soybeans and water. (Courtesy the artist).

Footnotes

- 1** F. Fanon: *Black Skin, White Masks* [1952], London 1986, p.109.
- 2** Jes Fan has cited Fanon as a source of influence. See A.L. Heinrich: 'An interview with Jes Fan', in G. Hamilton and C. Lau, eds: *Mapping the Posthuman*, New York 2024, p.218.
- 3** Fanon, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.111.
- 4** Jes Fan, quoted from 'Infectious beauty: Jes Fan', Art21 (5th May 2020), available at art21.org/watch/new-york-close-up/jes-fan-infectious-beauty, accessed 10th February 2025.
- 5** Jes Fan, quoted from D. Roy: 'God is the microsphere: a conversation on the biochemistry of race and gender', *Art in America* (2nd April 2021), available at www.artnews.com/art-in-america/interviews/god-microsphere-jes-fan-1234588566, accessed 10th February 2024.
- 6** Jes Fan, quoted from a conversation with Sin Wai Kin, Greater Toronto Art 2024 programme at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Toronto, 23rd March 2024, available at moca.ca/exhibitions/jes-fan, accessed 10th February 2025.
- 7** Exhibition text for the 22nd Biennale of Sydney, 2020, available at www.biennaleofsydney.art/participants/jes-fan, accessed 10th February 2025.
- 8** J.G. Castro: 'Jes Fan in their studio: the miracle of gender', *In the Studio* (4th January 2017), available at sculpture.org/blogpost/1810776/348745/Jes-Fan-in-their-Studio-The-Miracle-of-Gender, accessed 10th February 2025.
- 9** Fan, *op. cit.* (note 6).
- 10** Jes Fan, quoted from *Ibid.*
- 11** S. Fang: 'Political pop songs: from Taiwan to Hong Kong – an interview with Lo Ta-yu', *The Nineties* 260 (September 1991), pp.66–68, at p.68. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the present author.
- 12** Jes Fan, quoted from *op. cit.* (note 6).
- 13** C. Iles and M. Onli: exh. cat. *Whitney Biennial 2024: Even Better Than the Real Thing*, New York (Whitney Museum of American Art) 2024.
- 14** Fan, *op. cit.* (note 6).
- 15** Jes Fan, in conversation with the present author, 3rd January 2025.
- 16** Fan, *op. cit.* (note 6).
- 17** Jes Fan, *op. cit.* (note 15).

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*

21 Jes Fan, quoted from Heinrich, *op. cit.* (note 2), p.218.

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