

Cici Wu

## "Upon Leaving the White Dust"

47 Canal

18.04. – 27.05.2018

When Korean-American artist and novelist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's unfinished film *White Dust From Magnolia* (1980) was screened at New York's Museum of Art and Design in 2017, Cici Wu was in the audience, capturing it with her *Foreign Object No. 1, Fluffy Light* (2016). This artwork – a functional, globular sculpture – records light data at twenty-four frames per second. The result of Wu's recording, converted to digital video, is the centerpiece of "Upon Leaving the White Dust", her first solo exhibition at 47 Canal. The pacific flicker of the thirty-minute looped projection of the movie sans images frames an ensemble of sculptures, almost all of which are small, acutely allegorical objects laid in a grid on the gallery's floor and refract Cha's literary and artistic accomplishments. In 1982, Cha left behind *White Dust* following her unjustifiable death at the age of thirty-one. A film and historical novel begun in 1980, it tells the story of a young woman who is Korean yet resides in China following Japan's 1909–1945 occupation of her native land (Cha's parents grew up in Manchuria, present day northeast China, in exile). She is also known for the experimental novel *Dictee* (1982) and edited *Apparatus: Cinematographic Apparatus* (1980), with contributions by Roland Barthes, Jean-Louis Baudry, Maya Deren, and Cha herself, among others. This volume approached film theory through the psychoanalytic and poststructuralist lenses then being developed in France, underlining the ideological significance of the mechanics of representation, and the nuanced political meanings of the viewer's relation to filmmaker, camera, screen, image, and so forth.

This anthology, as well as Cha's unfinished work, provides the conceptual underpinning of Wu's project. Her sculptural works, arranged in columns representing the eleven pages of Cha's *White Dust* storyboard and bathed in the

beam of the projector, cast enigmatic shadows that appear in somewhat jumbly, unfamiliar compositions on the gallery wall. Psychologically loaded, these have an unruly, disruptive implication – most people aren't happy when some object interrupts the hypnotic reverie of what Barthes called the "cinematographic cocoon". Shadows index a cinematic apparatus, yet their presence is traumatically unresolved and politically impartial, hinting towards the fleeting constitution of the dream-screen, and its entrapment of the spectatorial subject. Every so often, for a fraction of a second, the light brusquely drops as a scene changes in *White Dust*. The effect is quietly destabilising.

All handmade (with the exception of a half-arched section of a model train track), the sculptures constitute a translatory reading of Cha's notes for *White Dust*, and score certain thematics of her practice more largely. A scattering of LEDs in hand-blown glass bulbs are connected by enameled wire, glowing with the conviviality of jellyfish. Unglazed ceramics make the majority of the installation's recognisable elements: aeroplanes (one grounded, yet without wheels, another wingless), steam trains, tenderly crossed hands, and strange,

cuboid clay cartons with glass drinking straws. Across many scales, these represent techniques of overcoming distance, from touch, most simply, to industrial and globalised modes of transportation. Yet a corollary of each of these technologies is displacement: in a psychoanalytic mode, that of desire, as structured by the relation to the mother, and, in a geopolitical mode, that of diaspora, as introduced in Cha's work, and Wu's in turn. The installation holds these forces in uneasy equivalence.

A flag, made of rice paper and plastic, droops from the ceiling, with Chinese inscriptions reading "woman, man" on one side and "father, mother" on the other. Deliberate, tantalisingly detached, and romantic in its logic of fuzzy metonymy and formal transformation, the exhibition complicates the individuated subject that is formulated by dominant apparatuses of representation, delicately undermining some of the slippages of post-structuralist thought. In its afterglow is a paean to the legacy of a non-white postmodern avant-garde in the US, in which a social and psychological distance regarding Asia is troubled, a poetics of displacement collapsed.

Harry Burke

Cici Wu, *Upon Leaving the White Dust*, 2017/2018

Ceramic, clay, handmade glass, silicone, plaster, white fabric, rice paper, ink, plastic drop cloth, sponge, mop, Lehmann Gross Bahn train tracks, white LED, enameled wire, dupont connectors, arduino, video, dimensions variable