

Xenophobia (still),
2020.
HD color, 8 min.





States of FLUX: A Conversation with Jes Fan

by Jan Garden Castro

COURTESY THE ARTIST



Jes Fan's work unspools complexities, unifies diversities, and creates new forms of beauty. His unique vision includes abstract systems that allude to gender and racial distinctions as well as to outer/inner structures, merging art, science, philosophy, and cultural histories. This fluid approach embraces trans and queer states of flux—beyond traditional binary masculine/feminine categories. Using glass, testosterone, estrogen, melanin, wax, and soybeans, Fan, who identifies as trans, creates sensuous forms that fit into the body's curves and folds, sometimes transitioning from liquid to elastic to solid states. Through these works, he updates and reinterprets Heraclitus's maxim "No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man" to demonstrate another truth applicable to every human being—"We're always in a state of flux." In ways both subtle and dramatic, Fan proves that binary oppositions are false, outdated constructs that differ from biological facts. In fact, he suggests, what's inside counts most.

This year, Fan, who was born in Canada and raised in Hong Kong, is participating in both the Sydney Biennale (March 4–June 8, 2020) and the Liverpool Biennial (July 11–October 25, 2020). He also has a show scheduled for 2022 at The Kitchen.

Jan Garden Castro: You have said that your work is about biology but is not biographical; you address themes "beyond trans-ness," which are about "the liminality of being a biological body in an age when the body is reconfigured in terms of the molecular, the digital, and the

THIS PAGE:

Testo Soap,
2017.

Lye, cottonseed oil,
Depo-Testosterone,
and silicone,
20 x 13 x 15 cm.

OPPOSITE:

Forniphilia II,
2018.

Aqua resin, fiberglass,
pigment, plywood,
and artificial fur,
38 x 35 x 20 cm.

informational (to borrow the words of Rachel C. Lee).”

Could you discuss these directions further?

Jes Fan: I don't want my identity to hyphenate the work I do or my status as an artist. In so much of the art world now, the artist becomes the spectacle and also the content of the work. I'm not interested in that. My work has to do with decentering not just in terms of the role of the artist, but in terms of humans in general—the importance of history or value that's anthropocentric. By quoting from Rachel C. Lee's *Exquisite Corpse of Asian America: Biopolitics, Biosociality, and Posthuman Ecologies* (2016), I am trying to say that when you think about what constitutes *you* as an individual in late capitalism, I am hesitant to call the sausage casing that I'm encased in completely mine. We're in a day and age when apples are packed in plastic cling film in supermarkets. Everything is neatly packaged. We think of ourselves as impenetrable with no leakage or porosity, but in fact, we're more entangled with each other; and what leaks out at stages is not what we think of in literal terms.

For *Mother is a Woman*, I made an estrogen cream from my mother's urine and distributed it to people outside of my kin. If you are feminized by my mother's estrogen, who are you to her and who is she to you? What if I re-feminize my masculinized body? Is that natural? How do we make these complications clear? Also, my mother's femininity is manufactured by the fact that she takes estrogen for her menopause. There are more than pharmaceutical entanglements and

a more nuanced way of thinking between what we present as an authentic self and reality. Think about cartilage as a joinery between bones—small connections tether us to each other and to plants. Birth control pills come from testing done on women in Puerto Rico, which is discussed in *Beyond the Natural Body* by Nelly Oudshoorn. I push back from calling myself a trans artist. I'm an artist.

JGC: You constructed *Visible Woman* using 3D-printed body parts. Did they start out as real body parts?

JF: No, they came from a modeling toy. Two years ago, I was living in Red Hook, and I found a Visible Woman kit left out on the street. I took her essential organs, which in that kit included a fetus. Can you believe that? A lot of women don't have fetuses, or uteruses for that matter. I splayed them out as an architectural display. The frame design came from the Gundam anime model. My father ran a factory making Gundam toys. I spent a huge part of my childhood watching my siblings snapping the robot parts off of these frames. I didn't play with them. I loved Barbies. I chopped their hair off, gave them tattoos, and disembodied them.

JGC: Does your work assert that binary theories are false?

JF: These loops and holes connect us. Binary draws a line between this and that. I'm cautious of it. To be othered is the result of needing to mark oneself as not the other, a.k.a. normal.

JGC: Like much of your work, *what eye no see, no can do*, which you made for the 2019 Socrates Sculpture Park Annual (on view through March 8, 2020), calls attention to what's unseen inside our bodies.

JF: In that piece, I was trying to imitate a stomach or an organ with an elaborate but not useful digestive system. The piping imitates the possibility of fluids going through, in, and out. That motif of circulation goes through my systems series. In my mind, the piping marks an entanglement that I was trying to describe earlier, but in a more graphic and visual way. It also references the imagery of scientific diagrams. Many of the systems series works, *what eye no see, no can do*,





“ What drives my studio practice is to probe the ‘what-ifs.’ What is that? Where is this from? How is this made? **”**



LEFT TO RIGHT:
Disposed to Add,
2019.
Silicone and pigment,
dimensions variable.
View of performance
with work.

Disposed to Add,
2019.
Silicone and pigment,
dimensions variable.

and the work for the Sydney Biennale are attempts to turn the skin inside out—like when you take your socks off and the inside comes out first.

JGC: What are you planning for the Liverpool Biennial?

JF: I'm going to make more of the series "what eye no see, no can do." It will be a living system in a warehouse space. The title is a quotation from Lam Qua, the celebrated early 19th-century painter, who said that if his eye can't see it, he can't do it. There's something funny about that. Lam Qua was known for not flattering the sitter. His medical drawings from the 1830s through '60s are at the Yale Medical Library and the Gordon Museum of Pathology in London. I have an obsession with him and see myself reflected in his work. In some way, I try to do the opposite—to bring a microscope to what you think you saw. Close up, when your eye actually sees the molecules of oil, the grains of melanin that denote race, it's so absurd that you don't know what to do with it.

My older works are mostly castings. Now I'm rendering them in a different material, such as silicone, and turning those castings of a barbell or a weight into abstractions. If you push things that we've associated with certain identity categories, such as sex hormones in a specific sex or race and melanin, to the smallest molecular level in an attempt to find a biological anchor to it, it becomes remarkably absurd and abstract. Those flecks of melanin contained in tubes in my studio look like nothing more than wet dust—abstract at that basic material level.

The figure is not enough to explain the potential of that. I see a lot of figurative art during this current identity politics discussion. I don't trust the figure. In America, figuratively is the opposite of literally; it is used to mean "abstractly speaking." What's more telling than that?

JGC: That relates to your idea of putting biological markers into glass molds that fit into body parts.

JF: I have an obsession with vessels. Ever since I was a little kid, I've collected vessels and capsules, things that contain. When I discovered thrift stores in America, I bought vintage suitcases. In a residency at Wheaton Arts, I first made cement knots, and I blew glass on top. It came out remarkably well. Even my obsession with mold making is trying to capture the negative space around an object. I'm interested



in something about that relationship. The mass can become a container. I started casting body parts on a friend, including the belly, back, armpit, and pecs. I had them replicated in plaster and blew glass on them. That creates the perfect fit, meaning they can fit back into the body part assuming the body didn't change form.

JGC: In your studio, next to the Lam Qua painting of a Chinese lady with a huge tumor, you have test tubes and kinetics. What kinds of experiments are you doing?

JF: When I have an idea, I go for it. The kinetic experiment was for *Resistance Training*, which imitates an organ inflating or deflating as you sleep. I'm wary of discussing ideas that haven't materialized; in the past, other artists have plagiarized my work, so I can't talk about future projects. What drives my studio practice is to probe the "what-ifs." What *is* that? Where is this from? How is this made?" I ask fundamental questions, but push them to a point of absurdity.

JGC: As a Studio Artist at the Museum of Arts and Design, you experimented with soybeans. How did

you discover that testosterone and estrogen both come from soybeans, and how are you using this as an artist?

JF: I'm curious about where things come from. I grew up in the highly capitalized society of Hong Kong. Imagine descending from your apartment building into the subway, which is a mall, and then you travel through the subway to your office on top of another mall—in Hong Kong, you can go from work to home completely mediated by public transport and not go outdoors. And everything is air conditioned. The generation before me did manufacturing, but the manufacturing industry is no longer there. I grew up not asking, "Where is that from?" In Hong Kong, they interviewed children who had just graduated from kindergarten and asked, "What color is an apple?" They said, "It's red in the textbook, but it's white in life." Most of the time, their parents peel the skin off for them. It's that disjunction with nature and not questioning where things are from or how they are made that drives me.

Studying glass made me ask these questions. One experience that bore a hole through my psyche was visiting a glass factory in Corning, New York, when I was



FROM LEFT:
Mother Is A Woman (Cream),
 2019.
 Estrogen, lotion,
 test tube, silicone,
 and pigment,
 25 x 20 x 8 cm.

Systems I,
 2018.
 Metal, aqua resin,
 silicone, melanin,
 and glass,
 183 x 168 x 168 cm.

taking glass-blowing classes. We took a trip to a factory making white glass that mimicked porcelain. Imagine a furnace the size of a living room, maybe three stories tall, with silica melting in a pot and raining downward to the other floors of the factory. As this honey drips through the belts, it gets pressed through rollers and starts looking like Fruit Roll-Ups. Giant cookie cutters cut circles and circles of flat plates that get draped over a slight curvature, and two balloons print an image on them. This is all going on through the floors of the factory. Meanwhile, the glass is pliable. When the balloons print the plate, I realize, “That’s the plate my mom has in her kitchen, the plate I grew up with.” That plate is my Proustian madeleine moment. It’s my plate, but also not my plate. My childhood, also how I’ve come to contextualize my adulthood, is really not that special. I’m just an object among objects.

JGC: You began blowing glass at RISD. How does your notion of what you want to do with glass differ from the goals of most glass blowers?

JF: I was obsessed with mastering glass blowing for four or five years in my early 20s. Hotshops and glass culture are extremely macho and steeped in the idea of being virtuosic with traditional techniques. I wanted to

attain that in order to be respected by the other men in the hotshop, so I tried really hard to blow the thinnest goblets or make the largest bell jars. At some point though I realized that, ultimately, it’s a performance, and I can go buy masculinity instead of trying to perform masculinity. I also realized that I’m not sure whose virtuosity or whose tradition we’re trying to replicate. Why am I interested in the Italian tradition? Why are these burly men whipping out iron sticks to blow the pansiest goblet to imitate lace? I also had pyromaniac tendencies, and glass blowing became a huge Venn diagram for my obsession with vessels and containers.

JGC: Your library is extraordinary for its depth and breadth, including books by Judith Butler, Carl Jung, and Nelly Oudshoorn. You’ve recommended Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*. What are your formative books or authors?

JF: I like a balance between contemporary art research and poetry. Right now I’m reading James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*. I treasure fiction as being a more potent way of truth-telling than science research papers. I like Rebecca Solnit and *Jane* by Maggie Nelson—she can master four sentences to paint a full picture with the right balance of poetry and precision.

JGC: Which books discuss nonbinary systems?

JF: Butler, in particular, talks about othering as an attempt to establish the normal—without the other, there is no normal. That kind of thinking is similar to Chinese painting; most Chinese ink drawing is trying to use the ink to demarcate the negative space in the landscape.

JGC: Your glass work creates bodies in which hormones and melanin are isolated from biology.

JF: With a glass container, your eye can see and your hand can get as close as it can to biological matter without it being inside of you. The glass has a barrier. The cream doesn't have a barrier, and you can feel the heaviness and the lightness of the matter. They're still markers, but they are isolated from the container of our bodies.

JGC: Could you talk about your sensuous videos of everything from a dough-like Kombucha SCOBY to a Xenophora shell?

JF: *Xenophoria* is named for the *Xenophora* shell, which scientists call the artist's shell; it's a living being that grafts objects onto itself. I feel akin to this animal. The video imitates this animalistic impulse—one beyond what our minds can logicize or make sense of. It's a montage of me attempting to find melanin in fungi, the ink sac in squid, *E. coli* in the laboratory, in skin, in irises, in molds.

JGC: What's the message from finding and isolating melanin?

JF: It's a pigment for many markers—how people draw the line of othering darker bodies. I find melanin in almost every single organism whether or not people see it as alive. I want to make it more apparent that we all contain melanin.

JGC: What is your direction now?

JF: I'm obsessed with materials that show states of transformation such as from liquid to solid. There's nothing crazier than encountering a furnace at 3,000 degrees and bringing liquid out, almost like stirring honey in a pot, and solidifying it and inflating it with your lungs. There's something poetic about that process, and my desire now is to play, to unlearn what I took from the lessons of trying to attain machismo. ■■■

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