

YUJI AGEMATSU

Real Fine Arts, New York

Yuji Agematsu is primarily known for doing one thing, and for having done that one thing for a very long time. That particular activity is walking the streets of New York, his adopted city. (Born in 1956 in Kanagawa, Japan, Agematsu moved to New York in 1980.) Of course, so do lots of people. But, while the city's other walkers might pick up a trinket or two off the street, not many do so with Agematsu's obsessive, magpie-like eye for detritus: during each walk, taken daily since 1997, Agematsu collects bric-a-brac off the ground and places it into a box of cellophane, the kind usually used to wrap packs of cigarettes.

Presented as a single, multi-part sculpture, a year's worth of these miniature vitrines made up *01-01-2014 ~ 12-31-2014* (2014), at Real Fine Arts this summer. The show was Agematsu's second with the Brooklyn gallery, following a solo show last year at Portland's Yale Union and a recent Whitney-commissioned performance centred on the artist's walks around the museum's new building and neighbourhood. *01-01-2014 ~ 12-31-2014* saw the 365 cellophane wrappers arranged calendar-style on freestanding shelving units. Each unit contains a month's worth of material, each shelf a week. At first, I was tempted to look for obvious markers of time's passing or possible concessions to seasonal change, like winter road salt or summer sand. Yet the packed wrappers don't reflect the weather getting warmer (though a stretch from March to April is remarkably verdant and moss-filled, perhaps nodding to spring's arrival), instead yielding, microscope-like, Agematsu's clarity of focus with regards to the city's debris, as well as his esoteric sculptural sensibilities. The artist likes to accrete accreting materials, inclining towards the sticky – gum, hair, sugar – and whatever

they've dragged along. Sometimes, the packs are arranged like terrariums, a cigarette butt or the head of a bright-green spoon jutting out from a topsoil of compacted trash. At other times, they have an ethereal, feathery quality, the cellophane's walls holding loops of hair or a dust bunny in place, arcing towards the wrapper's open top. Occasionally, Agematsu throws in a surprising outlier that breaks any sense of a strict taxonomy: an oyster-like wad of blue gum encasing a faux-pearl of enamelled stone here, half a desiccated lemon there. There's a one-time-only replacement in mid-April of the cellophane with an actual cigarette box.

As a whole, *01-01-2014 ~ 12-31-2014* felt both loose and unified, demonstrating how Agematsu has fashioned a singular aesthetic via constraint, repetition and the occasional experiment over a dramatically prolonged period of time; all of which means, essentially, that he has a keen sense of rhythm. (Interestingly, besides his daily habits, the other prominent detail about Agematsu is that he studied with jazz percussion legend Milford Graves.) That rhythm and repetition in this sense can elevate the quotidian is a somewhat commonplace notion, if not a tired one, especially in light of the recent Guggenheim retrospective of his fellow reclusive time-obsessive, the late On Kawara. For those who find Kawara metronomic in his portentous mundanity (or enjoy his work the way you'd enjoy a slick, minimalist clock), Agematsu provides more improvisation while still alluding to the same existential questions raised by Kawara's compulsive rituals. Moreover, his choice of materials evinces a sense of humour about those questions. Searching for meaning, or lack thereof, in life can involve solemnly terse statements; an equally meditative and somewhat less navel-gazing pursuit might be attending and giving order to the world's cast-off crumbs, even if that means scraping gum from the sidewalk and grasping at other people's loose hairs.

MATTHEW SHEN GOODMAN



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LEIDY CHURCHMAN

Murray Guy, New York

Some unexpected reading material lay on the bench at Murray Guy on my visit to Leidy Churchman's solo exhibition: a copy of *Cell*, billed as 'cell biology's top research journal'. The issue featured a painting by Churchman on its cover – the snappily titled *Native Elongating Transcript Sequencing Reveals Human Transcriptional Activity at Nucleotide Resolution* (2015), the original of which also hung nearby.

Though the gallery explained the story – the issue includes a paper of the same title, co-authored by the artist's sister – it felt like an almost fabular illustration of some natural tendency to circulation: an affirmation that images get around, dispersing like spores. Art had also got out of place in *Calder Over the Ocean* (2015): an airplane decorated with red and blue stripes to Calder's design (commissioned in the mid-1970s for Braniff airlines), floating oddly against a blue-black sea. And there was a slightly gaudy copy of Jacob Lawrence's 1947 *Victory* (*Jacob Lawrence 'Victory' from the War Series*, 2015) its bare title and fidelity almost suggesting one of Lawrence's originals had been lifted up from MoMA's concurrent Lawrence retrospective and deposited across town.

Meanwhile, an acid-pink bathtub had somehow no less disconcertingly been plucked and plonked down before a vertiginous view of Manhattan dusk in *Tallest Residential Tower in the Western Hemisphere* (2015). The wide window framing the tub seemed unusually exposed, as if unglazed. The picture has the longing, unreal quality of an artist's impression in a property development investment brochure – indeed, searching online for the picture's title brings up '432 Park Avenue', a new 'supertall' Manhattan apartment tower.



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In some sense, most of the pictures in the exhibition were 'artist's impressions', renderings of things not accessible to direct observation; un-built or long-vanished (the decommissioned Calder plane; a 2015 portrait of the last of the now-extinct passenger pigeons, *Martha*). *Billions of Never Ending Universes* and *The Great Global Ocean Conveyor Belt* (both 2015) charted phenomena – the distribution of states and cities across the globe and the worldwide circulation of deep-sea water respectively – that, while vaster than the micro-activity of the *Nucleotide Resolution*, are no more accessible to the senses.

This emphasis on rendering things not-merely-seen is one way to read the show's invocation of Henri Rousseau. (The painter's surname is the title of its largest individual work, a 2015 study of *The Meal of the Lion*, 1907, after which Churchman's show was named.) Part of Le Douanier's legend is that his awful but cheerful vision of the jungle was based on experiences no more exotic than trips to Paris's Jardin des Plantes.

In this way, the artist's description of the assembled works as a 'junkyard of images' is a red herring. Despite the surface diversity of subject matter and range in canvas size, a teasing logic was at work here. Just-submerged themes, shared motifs and concerns threaded between the pictures. Yet, Churchman seemed to sense these connections as if by sensory reflex – like that of the rodent, sniffing-out its own broken reflection in *Insecure Rat* (2013), hungry for self-knowledge in the form of images, doubles and mirages.

In a 1963 essay on Jean-Paul Sartre's biography of Jean Genet, Susan Sontag posited, in parallel to 'the primitive rite of anthropophagy, the eating of human beings', the 'philosophical rite of cosmophagy, the eating of the world'. This, I think, is the salience of the show's title: like Sontag's Sartre, Churchman's response to 'the brute reality of things' is a kind of consumption, the paintings' tacky, stippled, chewy surfaces declaring an art which is oral, masticatory, digestive; a great intestine, writhing like *Ocean Conveyor Belt* across the earth. *Crab and Plankton* (2014) might have been the artist's displaced self-portrait: a great crustacean surrounded by feed glinting like constellations, his universe flat and edible.

MATTHEW MCLEAN

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Yuji Agematsu
01-01-2014 ~ 12-31-2014, 2014,
mixed media, cellophane
wrappers, aluminium shelving,
dimensions variable

2

Leidy Churchman
Martha, 2015, oil on linen,
100 x 81 cm

3

Anthony Lepore
'Bikini Factory', 2015,
exhibition view

4

Anthony Lepore
Gimme, 2015, archival pigment
print, 86 x 69 cm

ANTHONY LEPORE François Ghebaly Gallery / The Bikini Factory, Los Angeles

The string bikini has been carving tanlines in the erotic imagination since its birth in 1946. With a less-is-more design, it announced a new sexual awakening and body consciousness. Anthony Lepore's dual projects 'Bikini Factory', displayed at François Ghebaly Gallery, and 'Splash, Glow, Fullflex', installed at a women's apparel factory by Lauren Mackler of curatorial collective Public Fiction, dissected this dream in a flurry of bright fabric. Like a poolside cocktail, the show's photographs were sun-drenched and saturated with tropical colours.

The photographs were taken at the Lepore family bikini factory in east Los Angeles, founded by the artist's grandfather in 1971. Lepore began the series when he moved his studio there last year, displacing two rows of obsolete sewing machines that were then displayed at François Ghebaly. At the factory, the four walls of Lepore's studio form a sky-blue cube that sits incongruously in the centre of a vast hall, the drone of sewing machines and laughter of seamstresses playing *Lotería* always audible through its open ceiling. Lepore's photographs are filled with childlike wonder at the harlequin delights of this workspace; one can almost envision the artist playing hide-and-seek as a boy in rows of garment racks. Iridescent spandex stretched over the jagged edges of wooden frames evokes the body even when no skin is shown. In *The Boss* (2015), his father's balding head bobs through a hole in fabric printed with stars and shadowy moons, the saturnine factory owner hiding beneath what could be his son's pre-teen bedspread.

Lepore relishes chance moments, photographing the scalloped guts of dropped fabric reams or the kaleidoscopic chaos in piles of discarded Lycra samples. Some images, installed in situ at the factory, engage with the steady work flow: a pyramid of packed shipping crates matches the fleshy foam of *Gold Cup* (2015), and a yard of red fabric left half-cut in front of *Pusher* (2014) amplifies its mermaid teal tones. *Mirage* (2015) records the reflection cast by swimsuit fabric on a puddle of mop water. Cleaners had arrived at the factory to wash the floors of 'bikini dust', a toxic film of pulverized polyester formed by fabric-cutting machines, when Lepore noticed the trick of light and snatched his film camera. The result is an LSD dreamscape, like rainbow ribbons of gasoline dashed across hot desert earth.

There was a seamier side to this show; a story of alienated labour and displacement. Some of the show's strongest works are portraits of seamstresses' metal chairs, hung from an outdoor wall hook in the sun's full glare. The women covered the seats and back rests of their chairs with quilted scraps of recycled bikini fabric in order to make them more comfortable; each bears the trace of its owner's hand and the weight of her body. The exhibition text refers to the colourful upholstery as an aesthetic 'intervention,' veiling the factory's working conditions with art-historical jargon. Lepore's formal appreciation for

these uncomfortable chairs betrays his class privilege, his familial history obscuring this relationship in the service of an uncompensated creative exchange.

Lepore found the sweeping gestures of arms, buttocks, and breasts beneath tight fabric more aesthetically compelling than the slight yet dexterous movements of fingers holding sewing needles. Certain kinds of sweat – artistic sweat or beach-bum sweat – were privileged over the sweat of industrial labour. Lepore's one nod to workers' rights came in *Cover-Up* (2015), a photograph of a legal notice board obscured by a gauzy net of pink fabric. The board is a palimpsest of paper, layered pages listing minimum-wage increases and childcare services. All US employers are required by law to post such boards in public view, and the photograph's title hints at the obstructionist tactics often employed by sweatshop owners to prevent workers from unionizing. At the bikini factory, another work (*Spaghetti Strap*, 2015) was installed over the board, hiding some of the flyers pinned to its surface. The installation was visually appealing but probably illegal, implicating both artist and curator in a cover-up that neither intended, one that aestheticized a long and difficult history of labour reform.

Visitors to the factory mostly amplified the racial and class divide between the photographer and his subjects, lending the experience an air of voyeurism. Without the aid of a didactic tour, Lepore's photographs appeared to combine commodity fetishism with a fetish for the Other. The artist's enviable talent for capturing light and texture produced a visually stunning series, yet approached a politically fraught subject with formalist disengagement. This attention to surface resulted in work content to remain there, floating above murky waters.

EVAN MOFFITT

