

Audrey Schmidt
*FUCKY, WITH
COMPLIMENTS*

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**CREATIVE
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Spencer Lai

*A smile forms into a
grimace mid-slumber
as the earth spins— it's
funny, such is the
sound of laughter —
it is like god's hands
on the shoulders of a
troubled world*
31.10.18—24.11.18

Bus Projects' ongoing curatorial series, *With Compliments*, explores the relationship between artists and their influences, across generations and international borders, that remain a vital force throughout an artists career. For the 7th outcome of the series, Spencer Lai has organised an evolving group exhibition, building its form over the course of the show with each iteration adding another layer.

A constant for Lai in their practice is a fascination with 'fuckiness'. 'Fucky', an adjective of murky origins (but probably coined by Jake Swinson, who is one half of Monica's Gallery along with Lai), has something of the quality of being 'off' — astray, adrift, spoiled, off-the-mark. An affectionate term, Lai is invested in art and artists that make the everyday alien, or just a little bit askew, creating environments imbued with an ambient uneasiness as opposed to explicit anxiety or instability. *A smile forms into a grimace [...]* in its varied, evolving state, employs a 'fuckiness' that has something of the logic of slapstick in that it speaks to the comical frustrations of interacting with objects and spaces — the unassuming and humorous violence of collisions between humans and the things, or remnants, that point to our existence in a quiet, self-consciously cultivated chaos.

FUCKY PHASE 1

Spencer Lai with Lou Hubbard and Paul McCarthy
(with Mike Kelley)

Opening: Wednesday 31 October, 6 - 8pm

In recent exhibitions, particularly their solo exhibition, *hushed pupils*, at Fort Delta (September - October 2018) and their contribution to Beth Caird's group show *There is pain - so utter* (April - May 2018), Lai has included plastic storage container tubs, of the likes found at Ikea or Kmart, in their eclectic materials list. The multi-purpose tubs have both an institutional, archival quality and a sense of the domestic as a consumer product sold to contain, organise and neatly conceal personal effects. In many ways the plastic tubs are an 'anti-display', designed not to exhibit their contents so much as to efficiently and systematically hide them away – a condition that Lai manipulates.

Phase 1 of *A smile forms into a grimace [...]* sees the tubs reappear as a sprawling floor installation – equal parts cooling misting system (as one might find in an amusement park or Las Vegas), and industrial farm-like irrigation system. A video work by Paul McCarthy (with Mike Kelley) titled *Cultural Soup/ Family Tyranny* (1987) represents one of two external influences included in the first iteration and speaks to the slapstick nature of Lai's cultivated fuckiness. The short film mimics a place somewhere between the set of Playschool during an instructional craft project session and dysfunctional family living room. In their largely improvised TV-family-sitcom lookalike, Mike Kelley plays the son with McCarthy as a tyrannical abusive father who together reenact the fundamentally psychosexual relationship between adult and child. The film finds its humour in a slapstick-esque loss of bodily and social control, a vaudevillian dramatisation of the conflict between human nature and culture in processes of social conditioning. Libidinal, perverse and hysterically violent, yet hilarious in its absurdity, the link between *Cultural Soup/Family Tyranny* and Lai's practice is not simply a 'slapstick' mentality but a

fascination with an art historical or visual history of violence, particularly apparent in their now characteristic felt-relief works. McCarthy and Kelley's use of materials as props: condiments as bodily fluids, cheap styrofoam as phantom limbs etc. is also noteworthy as recurring elements of the everyday that often appear in Lai's work in the absence of clear characterisation.

Lai's Honours supervisor and visual artist, Lou Hubbard, represents the final inclusion in phase 1. Hubbard's work weaves artifacts of the personal, everyday, art historical and domestic into her sculptural assemblages that intersect with appropriation and in this sense, the link to Lai's practice is clear. However, it is the aesthetics of choice, the visual fuckiness, that resonates most strongly as an influence for Lai. A Prada boot remade in acrylic, a soccer ball flattened in pastel, or the chainlink of a necklace/prisoner constraint remade as dysfunctional pool toy. The elegance of minimal sculpture and design fused with the destabilising humour of being just a little bit 'off'. Lai's interest in Ikebana, the Japanese art of floral arrangement, comes to mind here and recalls the Japanese philosophy of finding beauty in irregularity: the *Wabi-sabi* principle of *Fukinsei*.

Amongst the works in the gallery, Lai has positioned six free standing carpeted charcoal partitions (1200 x 1800mm). The connotations of partitions are both corporate, in an office setting, and institutional in the context of an art fair, high school or conference – a functional display of information and budget division of space. As display, a dynamic that so preoccupies Lai, partitions create the dramatics of a maze: contracting, expanding and negating spaces to intricately structure an experience.

The contained, organised, almost dispassionate gesture of the tubs and partitions stand in contrast to the works Lai has included in phase 1, which act as a core study and set the tone for following iterations.

FUCKY PHASE 2:

Spencer Lai with Lou Hubbard, Paul McCarthy (with Mike Kelley), Samraing Chea, Hana Earles, Chris Hill with Joshua Petherick, Kate Meakin and Elizabeth Newman

Opening: Friday 9 November, 6.30 - 8.30pm

In *hushed pupils*, Lai installed a large, divisive wooden display structure in the centre of the gallery which served as ancillary gallery wall to feature their faintly sadomasochistic felt-relief works and was flanked by a collection of tiny balsa wood architectural models of hanging gallows. In a similar ritual, the partitions in this phase are re-configured, shifting the mise-en-scene as if in a theatrical intermission: works are hung directly onto the partition, placed in front of the partition, adjacent to the partition – their fate is determined by the partition even if their method of display is decidedly nontraditional.

Returning to ancient Japanese philosophies of packaging and display (see: *How to Wrap 5 Eggs*): “the fate of the things inside will be decided by the box itself” (Katsu Kimura). In the context of an exhibition comprised of works that have been influential to Lai’s practice, the partitions come to create an unstable, shifting, large-scale diorama of learnt behaviours and a silly little puzzle to be solved.

Samraing Chea's colourful pencil drawing, *Everyone think Dogs put their Machine-interface that controls their Brains* (2014), is a humorous take on childhood imaginaries and scholastically/institutionally structured creativity (see: colouring between the lines, comic books, pen licenses etc.) and sits particularly well in the partitioned space, as does Elizabeth Newman's minimal collage. Beyond such works-to-be-hung, Lai has included:

- ✿ An elegant yet ethereally disquieting, chastened-steam-punk installation from Kate Meakin
- ✿ A (spooky?) Patricia-Piccinini-on-the-cheap sculptural colab from Christopher Hill and Joshua Petherick: a child with its face to the wall in play or punishment
- ✿ A furry, (kooky?) 'meow!' sculpture-painting from Hana Earles

While these works are certainly fucky, it is their cultivated quietude that unites them — a rare ability to make the familiar perturbingly unfamiliar, and a distinct 'community of practice' for Lai.

FUCKY PHASE 3:

Film screening of works by Beth Caird, Matthew Linde with Harry Hughes and Giovanna Flores, Helen Marten and Jordan Wolfson

Thursday 22 November, 6.30 - 8.30pm

The pretext for Matthew Linde's *Run Through* (2017) is undeniably funny. A cast of middle aged extras looking to fill their resumes in affordable formal attire sit in a lecture theatre talking out the sides of their mouths respectfully, giggling and making small talk as a strange ceremony with unclear motives unfolds. Confused or bemused, the extras-as-audience look down at the camera with polite smiles as if at a child (a stranger) as a vague Simon-Says ritual of 'tasks' develops. The loud nondescript hum of chatter at a busy social event is contrasted with the well-mannered whispers and unbroken gaze of lecture hall conversations. A suit jacket and shirt on a coat hanger; an empty packing box; a sticky string of packing tape hover above the heads of the actors as it is passed from one person to the next. Simon says pass the remnants of twentieth century bureaucracy unaffectedly to the person behind you.

Processes of socialisation and institutionalisation are at the core of this work, yet unlike the familial intimacy of *Cultural Soup/Family Tyranny*, *Run Through* is emotionally distant and almost plunges the motif into absolute flappedoodle. Perhaps it is that liminal space between satire and utterly absurd where 'fucky' lies.

Jordan Wolfson's now infamous oeuvre embodies the contradictions of children's animation – at once childlike and humorous yet pervaded with deranged, violent disorder. In *Raspberry Poser* (2012), chirpy medical CGI animations of the HIV virus bounce gleefully around high end showrooms, an apartment complex gym, an office, construction sites. A smug clip-art-esque red-headed enfant terrible floats around the New York cityscape self-harming as a CGI condom fills and empties its red love heart/HIV contents. A

chopped and screwed version of Beyoncé’s *Sweet Dreams* blares as we follow the curious troupe of symbols; segments of Mazzy Star’s melancholic *Fade Into You* builds to an emotional crescendo and then cuts to deafening silence. Wolfson (Jewish) dressed as a kind-eyed skinhead (of the ‘poser’ variety: Iggy Pop, Clash City Rocker, Disco Sucks) is presented as flaneur and dopey fetishised sex symbol – ass in the air and jeans to his knees in a public park. Chaotic, edgelord Google image clickbait reimagines the gentrified New York habitat (and world wide web) as torture chamber. Yet the violence is undermined by its preposterous humour – a trope intrinsic to children’s cartoons and firmly in the realm of the fucky.

The inclusion of *Evian Disease* (2012) by Helen Marten speaks to the role of language and poetry in Lai’s work – an assemblagist approach to structure in language as with sculpture. Regularly devising a fucky poetry in their titles for works and exhibitions, Lai has also created the unsettling, rambling scripts for video works such as Phebe Schmidt’s short film series, *Your Time* (2017) and *Being On* (2018) as well as performing their poetic works in gallery settings and as a part of Monica’s Gallery. In *Evian Disease*, a practically uninterrupted script of Northern English voices narrate a culture (metropolis) versus nature dialogue. An old woman’s voice narrates as a CGI baby makes vaguely sexualised gestures with its tongue, mouth and hands; a raw steak sits on a pool table. Here, the unsettling ‘uncanny valley’ aspect of humanoid simulations is comparable to that indeterminate space of ‘fucky’ – discomforting in its lack of verisimilitude, rejecting empathic viewing, yet undeniably recognisable.

When I asked Beth Caird what her brand of fucky was, she said “low-no-fi regional Victoria trauma oopsie daisy fucky.”



What evolves from Lai's contribution to Bus Projects' *With Compliments* series, is a hypercomplex web of influence that sees the re-staging of the detritus of 'life' – vignettes of fucky assemblages and modes of display that produce a distinctly uncomfortable humour. From the quiet familial asymmetry of phase 1, through to the unassuming chaotic anarchy of phase 3, Lai has deftly created a pyramid scheme of fuckiness that illustrates the evolution of a very particular brand of (almost) misanthropic humour in their work and interests – an industrial irrigation system of influence that mirrors the constant influx and accessibility of all things in the Information Age.

What Spencer, my sweet shnubbles, has produced with *A smile forms into a grimace [...]* is a fucky diorama of the perverse humour of existence and a unique insight into their practice.

Spencer Lai (b. 1991, Malaysia) is Melbourne based artist, curator and writer. They graduated with a BFA (with Honors) from The Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne in 2014. They are represented by Fort Delta and are the co-founder of Monica's Gallery. Spencer Lai's practice navigates the visual lexicon of design, fashion, and window display, with specific interest in subcultural identities and aesthetic cultures. Their process involves the collation and editing of found/personal materials, objects and clothing to reflect and disseminate narratives surrounding consumer cultural consciousness. Spencer Lai is represented by Fort Delta, Melbourne.

Audrey Schmidt (29, brunette ;) is a writer and editor based in Naarm (Melbourne). She Co-Edited the third issue of Dissect Journal, curated their web program and exhibition, and has written for various other publications including Art Papers, Art Monthly, Art + Australia, un Magazine and Memo Review. Audrey has presented papers, panels and workshops and sits on the advisory board of protean Greek duo-institution, FYTA. She is interested in art, (sub)cultural studies and apocalyptic capitalism.

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Bus Projects,
25-31 Rokeby Street,
Collingwood,
VIC 3066 Australia.
busprojects.org.au/

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