

Homo oriental ism

Curated by Noor Bhangu
June 23—August 6, 2023

Damien Ajavon
Aika Akhmetova
Hector Canonge
Jin-Yong Choi
Banyi Huang
Maya Jeffereis
Jongbum Kim
Zahra Pars
Sa'dia Rehman

Homorientalism

In the first volume of *Turkistan: Notes of a Journey in Russian Turkistan, Kokand, Bukhara, and Kuldja* (1876), American writer and explorer Eugene Schuyler dedicates a section to the dancing boys of Central Asia and writes:

“These *batchas*, or dancing boys, are a recognized institution throughout the whole of the settled portions of Central Asia... The natives seem most pleased with those dances where the *batcha* is dressed as a girl, with long braids of false hair and tinkling anklets and bracelets. The *batcha* is much besought to sit here and there among the spectators to receive their caresses.”

Schuyler’s study on the dancing boys of Central Asia is evocative of the broader genre of Orientalist writing and visual culture, which fetishized the homoerotics of the non-Western world through a civilizational homophobia. Put differently, the desire to capture and gain knowledge of the libidinal lives of the colonized world could only be facilitated by an overarching rebuke to its cultures. Countless Western scholars and artists, such as Schuyler, zoomed in on and fetishized the sexual economies of the colonized in service of the broader colonial project of establishing the superiority of the West against the degeneration of the colonized others.

Three years after the publication of *Turkistan*, French Orientalist Jean-Léon Gérôme produced the iconic painting *Snake Charmer* (1879), building on the ambient depravity of dancing boys and their perverted audiences. The painting depicts a prepubescent boy, referencing the love of beardless youth in Persianate cultures, performing with a snake in front of a group of male spectators who are huddled together in their licentious desire. While these two works are set three years apart and concentrate on Central Asia and the Middle East, they nonetheless represent wider mythologies of Orientalism, which mixed gender, race, and sexuality in the making of Western empire. The homophobic attributions of Orientalist literature and visual culture, in turn, produced an internalized Orientalism within colonized cultures, which has resulted in both the exclusion of homoerotic legacies of the past and the widespread homophobias in the present.

This exhibition seeks to tackle the homoerotics of Orientalism alongside its homophobias through the lens of contemporary art. Gathered in this exhibition are nine artists who enter Orientalism’s troubling history of rep-

resentations through diverse subject positions and investments. While some artists, such as Maya Jeffereis and Sa'dia Rehman delve into the existing grammar of Orientalist archives, others like Hector Canonge invoke the past through embodied archiving. Alongside a critique of Orientalist visual archives and the historical violence of colonization, *Homorientalism* also laments the reach of Orientalism in private spaces and contemporary modes of self-representation through the work of artists Aika Akhmetova, Zahra Pars, and Jin-Yong Choi. Finally, Damien Ajavon, Jongbum Kim, and Banyu Huang subvert the fictions of Orientalism by building an inventory of possible affiliations and future gestures.

In the works of Maya Jeffereis and Sa'dia Rehman, the visual grammar of Orientalist archives is remixed to undermine its politics of representation. Maya Jeffereis' video installation, *Silhouettes Remain*, explores the fetish discourse of racialized and gendered bodies in visual media to name an implicit, yet coded, language of gender, sexuality, and deviation. Jeffereis samples different Oriental materials, such as nineteenth century paintings and the yellowface minstrelsy of early Hollywood films, to gesture to Western media's investment in erotic and exotic content while blurring the boundaries between cultures and ethnicities. Beginning with the visual abundance of Orientalist tropes, the video slowly empties out the sexual signification of these materials, vis-à-vis the erasure of bodies from Orientalist paintings.

Sa'dia Rehman's collages similarly trouble Oriental archives through the recuperation of its bodies. Whereas Jeffereis' focus is on the female body, Rehman singles out the figure of a child in the history of Orientalism and sexuality. The collages are an accumulation of scanned family photographs from the artist's childhood and cut outs from *National Geographic* from the 60s and early-70s, marking a specific moment in the removal of the Rehman's family from their ancestral home in Pakistan and their connected diaspora in the United States of America. One reading of the artist's demarcation of the child within the diasporic family unit can be done in relation to works like Jean-Léon Gérôme's *Snake Charmer*, a work also revisited by Jeffereis. Instead of being used as a vehicle for eroticism, the child in Rehman's collages is a sign of the reproductivity of the nuclear family and a future settling of diaspora. Yet, as gestured by the repetitions of the child's body alongside the family's oscillating grasp, Rehman's work can also be read as a destabilization of the heteronormative narrative and a defiance against the fixed visual archive.

Moving from the visuality of the archive is the work of Hector Canonge,

who uses performance and installation as a form of historical recovery. Canonge's performance, *A Matter of Wholeness*, unfolds in the central hallway of Smack Mellon during the opening reception of the exhibition and touches on several histories affected by the homophobias of Orientalism. During their performance, the artist dresses in a garment of the Guarayo peoples and engages with a small tree through varied actions of pulling, caressing, and carrying. The performance simultaneously enrolls the violent uprooting of Indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands and the subsequent nostalgia of Indigenous and queer bodies to their roots. Following the performance, the documentation and ephemera will be arranged as an installation, marking moments of loss and desire that may be read in relation with histories and cultures referenced by other exhibiting artists.

While artists working with archives and histories play a critical role in understanding the homoerotics and homophobias of Orientalism, the works of Zahra Pars, Aika Akhmetova and Jin-Yong Choi illustrate the alarming extensions of Orientalism in the present. Zahra Pars' three paintings are inspired by the Sara and Dara dolls introduced in Iran in 2002, as a Persian alternative to Barbie and Ken. In two works, *Sara in Utopia* and *Sara in Tabriz*, Sara is so intertwined in a lush landscape of floral and decorative motifs, it is difficult to understand where her own body ends and Persian culture begins. In essence, the locking of the body in such ornamental utopias gestures to strategies of self-Orientalism that nations like Iran have adopted to mask their contemporary politics. The Sara doll is not only reminiscent of Iran's attempt at civilizational differentiation between themselves and the West, as represented by Barbie, but we can also discern the heterosexual pairing of Sara and Dara as a link to Iran's ongoing erasure of its homoerotic past.

Objects from Aika Akhmetova's larger installation, *Traditionally Unnurturing Nurture*, are also included in *Homorientalism* to consider the reach of Orientalism in private spaces and cultures of sexuality in Central Asia. The tableaux is made up of a typical Orientalist rug, broken and reconstructed mirrors, and various kitschy ornaments mimicking Kazakh domestic interiors. Instead of inviting visitors to see the objects as functional, the work sits as a stark reminder of the ways in which homoerotics of Orientalism have paved pathways for the homophobias in the present, invading and regulating queer domestic life around the world.

Also responding to the concerns of the queer present are Jin-Yong Choi's mechanized sculptures that highlight the sexually charged stereotypes

imprinted on Asian bodies in diaspora and Western media. *S.W.M.S.A* is a skinless human torso, with its bloody and digital veins veiling a host of mute organs. Choi responds less to the mechanization of sexuality in the twenty-first century than to specifically questioning how Asian bodies are mechanized through Western cruising optics. The body is stripped of its humanity and reduced to its parts, asking us to imagine—as Jeffereis, Rehman, and Canonge do in their turn to history, if there are any ways of recuperating the loss of the present.

The work of Damien Ajavon, Jongbum Kim, and Banyu Huang subvert the fictions of orientalism by building an inventory of possible affiliations and future gestures. Damien Ajavon's *djorkhme se loxo* is a series of two textiles, drawn from their ongoing research on Islamic symbols of protection and queer global networks. Using photographs of the hands of queer friends and strangers, Ajavon produced a talisman to protect themselves and the other artists working together to make sense of historical ruptures and present disunities.

As Ajavon's topos of hands abstracted from their bodies produce a queer ornament of protection, Jongbum Kim's *Dreamland* is shrouded in ornamentation to impart a vision of queer and cross-cultural relations. Culled from objects and fabrics gathered in their home and visited lands, *Dreamland* is an arching visual deluge, in effect, rejecting Orientalism's founding relationship between self and the other.

Finally, Banyu Huang's video installation, *.obj Worship*, performs a ritual of propelling non-gendered bodies from the present into the shared flashes of our queer destinies. The short film and installation comprising *.obj Worship* is inspired by the Fujian sea goddess, Mazu, reimagined and reembodyed by Huang as a queer deity who guides us into a future time and space of healing. The future world presented by Huang, and prepared by Ajavon and Kim, sits in sharp contrast to the discontents of Orientalism, critically mapped for its grammar and ruptures by artists Maya Jeffereis, Sa'dia Rehman, Hector Canonge, Aika Akhmetova, Zahra Pars, and Jin-Yong Choi.

Eugene Schuyler's research on the dancing boys of Central Asia concludes on a grim note: "More often a batcha takes to smoking opium or drinking kukhnar, and soon dies of dissipation." Schuyler's work, as we see in the work of countless other Orientalists, aspired to provide both a study of and an end to the homoerotic plenty of the Orient. The Orient's vast cultures of sexuality were expected to surrender to the dawn of Western sexuality

just as the dancing boy succumbed to death by dissipation. In view of the homoerotics and homophobias engendered by Orientalism, *Homorientalism* hopes to both recuperate the rupture in the historical continuum and formulate a new language for understanding gender, race, and sexuality that does not transcend, but rather incorporates the losses.

— Noor Bhangu, 2023

Noor Bhangu is a curator and scholar, whose practice employs cross-cultural encounters to interrogate issues of diaspora and indigeneity in post- and settler-colonial contexts. Through curatorial intervention, she hopes to involve politics of history, memory and materiality to problematize dominant histories and strategies of presentation. Bhangu completed her BA in the History of Art and her MA in Cultural Studies: Curatorial Practices. Her curatorial practice includes projects: *Not the Camera, But the Filing Cabinet* (2018), *womenofcolour@soagallery* (2018), *Digitalia* (2019-2020), *Ornament and Crime* (2022), and *the excess is ritual* (2023). In 2018, she began her PhD in Communication and Culture. Noor is currently based in Oslo, Norway.



Damien Ajavon
djorkhme
se loxo

2023
Digital Jacquard Knit
157 x 28 inches
Courtesy of the artist

Damien Ajavon is an Afropean textile artist born in Paris with Senegalese and Togolese roots. Ajavon's work explores the manipulation of textile fibers by hand. Their creative process is influenced by the interaction between visual and tactile experiences, and they use their African and Western influences to tell stories through textiles. Their work is driven by their desire to search for their identity, blackness, queerness, and relationship to home, origin, and spirit. They have gained significant international exposure across Europe, Africa, and North America. They have recently completed their masters in textile arts at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts. They have learned various skills such as hemp weaving, cashmere dyeing, feather work in Italy, digital knitting, Manjak traditional weaving, felting hats, and creating accessories in Quebec.

Ajavon's artwork has been exhibited in several group exhibitions and artist residencies across North America, Europe, and Africa, and their work has even been included in the Oslo kommune public collection. Their practice is deeply rooted in their heritage, influenced by African and Western cultures and the queer community. Their work with textiles is a tool to create culturally representative pieces, merging generations of African craftsmanship with their diasporic and transoceanic knowledge and experiences. Their work is a testament to their strong desire to merge cultures and create something new and beautiful.



Aika Akhmetova
A Rug
for
You to Live On

2021

Carpet, acupuncture spike mats,
pillows, wooden coasters, flooring
underlayment
108 x 72 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

Aika Akhmetova is an artist based between New York and Almaty. Akhmetova studied Painting at Rhode Island School of Design and holds an MFA in Visual Arts from Columbia University. Their practice consists of installation, video, sculpture, and text-based work exploring the intimate corners of being. Coming from a complex cultural background, Akhmetova has absorbed the fading heritage of the Post-Soviet generation in Kazakhstan along with processes followed by the expansion of late capitalism and secular education. They currently have a solo installation on view at Ortega y Gasset Projects. They had a solo exhibition at A.I.R. Gallery in 2021 and participated in group shows across the US, Central Asia and Europe. Akhmetova was an AIM fellow at The Bronx Museum of the Arts in 2022 and currently an artist in residence at LMCC Arts Center on Governors Island.



Hector Canonge
A Matter
of
Wholeness

2023

Mixed media installation
dimensions variable
Courtesy of the Artist,
OKK, Berlin

Hector Canonge is an American artist of Catalan and Bolivian descent, born in Buenos Aires, Argentina. His work in Performance Art, Social Practice, Multimedia Production and Installation treats notions of identity, gender roles, migration politics, and neo-de-colonizing discourse. Through his investigation of somatic expression, he has developed a corporeal theory for the practice of Performance Art presenting it in workshops and conferences around the world. Challenging the white box settings of a gallery or a museum, or intervening directly in public spaces, his performances mediate movement, endurance, and ritualistic processes. His performances, films and media installations have been presented and exhibited in the United States, Latin America, Europe and Asia. Canonge is the founding director and curator of the performance art festivals: ITINERANT in New York City, LATITUDES in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, and AUSTRAL in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He is responsible for the international initiatives and platforms: ARterial Performance Lab (South America), PERFORMEANDO (New York-Berlin), and NEXUS (Miami). In 2020, during the pandemic, Canonge launched the virtual world-wide program, CHRONICLES of CONFINEMENT, featuring artists from various countries in the five continents. In 2022, Canonge launched and curated PAUSA, Performance Art USA, the new seasonal platform for live art and its various modalities of presentation.



Jin-Young Choi
Perro

2022
Sex machine, dildo, epoxy clay,
resin, beads, wire, acrylic paint,
found object
18 x 12 x 32 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

Jin-Yong Choi is a New York-based artist born in South Korea. Choi received his BFA at Kookmin University in Seoul, South Korea and MFA at Pratt Institute in New York. He creates artwork inspired by his own apocalyptic fiction, exploring the intersections of culture, religion, and identity in a hopeless world. He aims to create and release haptic desire in sculptures using tactile and visually appealing materials that engage the viewer on multiple levels. He juxtaposes digital and non-digital images, and natural objects with man-made objects to create pieces that offer a unique material experience that can only be experienced in the real world.

Choi's artwork has been shown in galleries and museums in South Korea and the U.S., including Seoul Museum of Art in Seoul, Jamaica Center for Arts & Learning (JCAL) in NY, Shin Gallery in NY, A.I.R Gallery in NY, Wassaic Project in NY. He has participated in the Artist Residency Program at Sculpture Space in Utica and ChaNorth in Pine Plains, and Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC) Art Center Residency Program, NY. He earned the Stutzman Foundation MFA Fellowships and won the Gold Prize from AHL – T&W Foundation Contemporary Visual Art Awards.



Banyi Huang
ReMazu: Iterations
of
Devotion

2023

Single-channel video, 3D-printed
sculptures on motorized turntable
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

Born in Beijing, **Banyi Huang** 黄半衣 (they/them) is an artist, writer, and designer based in Brooklyn, New York. With a background in art history, their interdisciplinary practice combines animation, digital fabrication, and writing to explore queer reenactments of Chinese mythology, folklore, and spiritual practices. Through the creation of digital-ambient environments and talismanic ritual devices, they address themes of shame, alienation, and intergenerational wounds within the Asian diaspora, aiming to create a feedback loop of healing, unblocking, and recursive transformation.

Their work has been shown at The Soto Velez Clemente Center (New York), Special Special (New York), Artist's Space (New York), and the Flat Earth Film Festival (Seydisfjörður, Iceland). Banyi has contributed writings to the Brooklyn Rail, Hyperallergic, Spike Art, ArtAsiaPacific, Artforum China, Performa Magazine, Frieze Magazine, and has realized curatorial projects at the Musée des Arts Asiatiques (Nice, France), PRACTICE Yonkers (New York), Assembly Room (New York), Center for Performance Research (New York).



2022

Single-channel video installation

TRT 10 min

Edition 1 of 5

Courtesy of the artist

Maya Jeffereis

Silhouettes

Remain

Maya Jeffereis is an artist working video, performance, and installation whose work seeks to expand upon overlooked histories and archival gaps through counter and personal narratives, offering both critical perspectives and speculative possibilities. Jeffereis' work has been presented in the United States and internationally, including the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Brooklyn Museum, The Noguchi Museum, and Queens Museum, among others. Jeffereis has been an artist-in-residence at Lower Manhattan Cultural Center (LMCC), Banff Centre for Arts & Creativity, and Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts. She is a recipient of the A.I.R. Gallery Fellowship and Cisneros Initiative for Latin American Art. She is currently a 2023 The Bronx Museum of the Arts AIM fellow and an artist-in-residence at The Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts SHIFT Program. She teaches art, art history, and Asian American Studies at Parsons School of Design and Hunter College. She earned an MFA from Hunter College and BA and BFA from the University of Washington.



Jongbum Kim
Dreamland

2022

Hand-drawn illustrations digitally printed, quilted and pleated on recycled silk, organza and neoprene. Embroidered with recycled beads, hot fix, recycled tube
195 x 41 x 11 inches
Courtesy of the artist

Jongbum Kim is a New York-based artist, who explores the ideas of gender and multicultural communities through the medium of cloth. With a strong belief in seeing the world and experiencing it firsthand, Jongbum's designs are filled with color and symbolism, both literal and figurative, engaging the viewer and provoking them to respond. He strives to create paintings and fiber artwork that are an expression of his personal voice and life's journey.



Zahra Pars
The Hunt

2023
Acrylic on wood panel
8 x 10 inches
Courtesy of the artist

Zahra Pars (born 1974, Tehran, Iran) is a painter and photographer, who lives and works in New York City. Her paintings, both representational and abstract, explore contrasts: East versus West, femininity versus masculinity, and handmade versus machine made. As an immigrant from an authoritarian regime, she is acutely aware of what can and cannot be said, and is interested in creating work that has a plurality of meanings, without an explicit political agenda.

Her work has recently been exhibited at the Staten Island Museum, the Schweinfurth Art Center, Ejecta Projects, the Textile Arts Center, 440 Gallery, Richard Meir's 1 GAP Gallery, and the Tandon Digital Media Center at New York University. She has a Bachelor of Arts in Art Practice and Art History from the University of California, Berkeley, and has also pursued graduate studies in Art History at the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University.



Sa'dia Rehman
Maidens
for
Companions

2011
Collage on paper
11 x 9 inches
Courtesy of the artist

Sa'dia Rehman (they/them) is a multidisciplinary artist and educator. In 2023, Rehman had their first major solo show at the Wexner Center for the Arts. In 2022 Rehman delivered a keynote address with Pulitzer Prize winning poet Natalie Diaz regarding the Global Imagination of Racial Justice at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Rehman was selected and exhibited as an Artist to Watch in 2021 by and at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. In the last five years, Rehman was awarded residencies at the Film/Video Studio at the Wexner Center for the Arts, Art Omi, Abrons Art Center, Asian American Arts Alliance, Edward Albee Foundation, Vermont Studio Center, and NARS Foundation. Recently, their work was featured in the Brooklyn Rail, The Center for Sustainable Practice in the Arts, Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas, Colonize This! Young Women of Color On Today's Feminism, Breakthru Radio and Hyperallergic.

Homorientalism

June 23-August 6, 2023

This exhibition is supported, in part, by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council, New York City Council Member Lincoln Restler, and the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Kathy Hochul and the New York State Legislature, with generous support from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Lily Auchincloss Foundation, Robert Lehman Foundation, Select Equity Group Foundation, many individuals and Smack Mellon's Members.

We acknowledge support for *Homorientalism* from the Canada Council for the Arts and Office for Contemporary Art Norway.

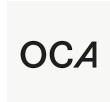
Smack Mellon's programs are also made possible with public funds from the National Endowment for the Arts and with generous support from The Edward and Sally Van Lier Fund of The New York Community Trust, Jerome Foundation, The Roy and Niuta Titus Foundation, Milton and Sally Avery Arts Foundation Inc., and Exploring The Arts. In-kind donations are provided by Materials for the Arts, NYC Department of Cultural Affairs/NYC Department of Sanitation/NYC Department of Education.

Space for Smack Mellon's programs is generously provided by the Walentas family and Two Trees Management.

Smack Mellon would like to extend a special thanks to all of the individuals, foundations, and businesses who have contributed to the NYC COVID-19 Response & Impact Fund.



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Public Programming

Performance during the opening reception

Hector Canonge, *A Matter of Wholeness*

Fri. June 23, 7 PM

Curator-Led Tour

with Guest Curator Noor Bhangu

Sat. July 1, 1 PM

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