

Interview with Amia Yokoyama

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Text by Yves B. Golden



Amia Yokoyama is a multimedia Los Angeles-based artist who works with experimental animation, video, sculpture, and installation. The imagery in Yokoyama's work stems from her speculation about the future and exploration of the duality between wonder and horror. Yokoyama seeks to ensure that her work evokes a playful, otherworldly feeling while creating a style that is suggestive of the future and the past.

Throughout our friendship, I've been awed by her sense of scope and by her thirst to observe and understand the depths and heights of the universe. This is clear in what she makes and how she makes it. While Amia works within a cohesive language of form and color, she intersperses nuanced personal reflections and dialogue into her exhibitions, constantly keeping me guessing what might show up next. She recently created a series of untitled holographic works—*Untitled (green) Ed 1 (2022)* pictures a holographic cluster of her familiar, fluid ceramic figures. The image is lined with a thumbly and elaborate ceramic frame that resembles fossilized plant matter. I am struck by the juxtaposition between what is clearly there—the weight of the frame, its textures and scale—and what appears, but what is not quite present. As much of her work takes either the form of sculpture or video animation, the medium of the hologram—a kind of screen that cradles an image of a physical sculpture—feels like a perfect marriage between these two mediums. It acts as an inquiry into a more immaterial place, seeking a connection to worlds beyond the one we all share here and now.

Yokoyama's new hologram works allowed me to approach some of my favorite of her previous works with fresh eyes—namely, her 2020 installation at the Brand Library & Art Center, *Initial Conditions*, a two-channel animation featuring objects that wriggle and remake themselves in a kind of alien non-space. With these revelations in mind, we picked up on our ongoing conversation about hybrid materiality, the theory of the holographic universe, and how to imagine new possibilities.

Yves B. Golden: As I understand it, your sculptural work comes from a lot of research—from religious iconography to scientific quandaries—while also reflecting and refracting your past and present experiences. Where do you typically start in the studio?

Amia Yokoyama: I definitely think about religious iconography, but additionally, cosmology, and mythology. What could be called “real science” as well as science fiction [both] influence my work, partially because I think something that they have in common is the way they attempt to explain what seems to be unexplainable. Within those attempts to try to explain, there's a lot of falling short, a lot of failure. There [are] a lot of breaking points in that space that I find to be fertile ground for my practice.

YBG: In what ways do your reproductions of the self or your experiences go beyond the figure?

AY: The figures [in my work] represent a human and are hyper-feminized, but they actually behave more like a fungus or a virus. They are these kind of borderless, or semi-solid, oozing beings. They seduce their prey, absorb, and destroy human beings by feeding on their bodily fluids. Then they reproduce in aromantic ways. It's similar to the way a virus can multiply and take over, or the way a fungus can grow on the surface of a decaying body. I also use some animals and iconography from different Japanese myths. I incorporate this and weave it into internet myths. I enjoy remixing or almost collaging different levels of mythologies or fictions with reality in my sculptures.



Amia Yokoyama

The lack of contentment governs the persistence of Amia Yokoyama to unfold the transaction between permanence and impermanence, fragility and strength. She tells NR about the void she desires to fill with whatever gnaws at her at the time she falls under its spell. She always seeks something, always on the hunt to uncover more, the reason she keeps sculpting and producing videos and animations. Somewhere between these works of art, she finds the depth of herself, the truth she owns that lies within the realms of her material and immaterial creativity. When she describes her practice, she lends her audience a piece of herself, and they soon realize the fidelity she upholds, questioning the elements of the Earth, the states of matter, the spaces that live within the physical and the memories, and the existence of layers in the digital world.



Whatever theme she touches upon, she borrows from other cultures, such as the prowess of Anime in Asia, to magnify, and sometimes distort, her objects, videos, and installations. In one work, viewers can find two naked feminine figures in euphoria as one caresses the skin of the other, beneath her breasts. In another work, a talk show occurs, hosted by two tech-driven figures who look the same. The Japanese-American artist gravitates towards a psychedelic approach to her practice, offering drugs to satiate the high-maintenance affairs of her viewers towards modernized, digitized, and sensual art. For NR, she taps into the poetess in her, layering the narratives about her art, self, and beliefs in a nature that reflects what she creates.

Amia, how has your journey been so far with your work? Was it easy achieving the creative process you have today?

It has been long, unruly, twisty, and unpredictably slippery at times, but I would not have it any other way. My process has been guided through searching for moments that trigger my creative spirit. These moments are the catalyst for my motivation. I get excited when these senses are tickled simultaneously like intellect, feelings, sensory, emotions, beauty, and tension, to name a few. When all of these are activated as I work, I know I am on the right path. If they are not, I keep searching.



Having a Japanese-American profile, in what ways do your cultural background and upbringing influence your art and the way you make it?

I think that my early acknowledgement of my childhood and the feeling of not belonging encouraged a propensity to imagine and create worlds where I did feel I belonged. Inside my head, it was much more exciting, nurturing, and generous than my external social world. I began to develop my own relationship with my environment rather than a relationship that was heralded by my parents, teachers, or peers. I grew up in a multicultural household isolated within a vast sea of homogeneity, so differences, misunderstandings, and uncertainties were regular companions. This gave way to always feeling and knowing I was sutured of diverse and often disparate parts that do not fit into the ways the world told me they should. When the world told me that I did not make sense, I began the process of liberating myself from their idea of this 'sense' and allowed myself to expand the rules of existence.

Going through your video installations, your works engage the meeting between utopia and dystopia. How do you conceive these realms? Are they based on personal or external experiences?

I would say they are based on both my internal and external experience and perhaps even more so where those distinctions begin to overlap. I do not think of the concepts of dystopia or utopia when I am conceiving of these realms. I think of them more as personal mythology. Utopia connotes perfection, and perfection has no place here. Dystopia connotes something harmful or undesirable. That being said, I do like the literal translation of utopia – “no place” – as if it were a space of refusal.



7 Asian American Artists Using Ceramics to
Break New Ground
- Harley Wong
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In Anne Anlin Cheng's 2018 book *Ornamentalism*, in which the scholar lays out a feminist framework for conceiving of Asiatic womanhood, she also describes the phenomenon in which a nation's exports became synonymous with its people. "The fates of Chinese female bodies and Chinese porcelain ran parallel to each other," Cheng wrote. "As Euro-American acquisitiveness began to run in excess of what it could offer China in return, the early romance with china and China began to deteriorate...China's meaning in the American popular imagination changed, with Chinese porcelain itself coming to connote tacky crockery."

Porcelain has held an immense presence in the Western imagination and relevance in Chinese artistic production. Its denigration can be linked to the devaluation of Chinese labor and people. It's a material that has a rich tradition and layered colonial history; this can also be extended to ceramics at large and its connection to East Asia.

Here, we focus on seven East Asian American artists and how they approach a medium loaded with inescapable connotations related to East Asia and Asianness. Whether self-taught or working as professors, they find varying ways through ceramics to relate to, subvert, or toy with expectations.



Amia Yokoyama

B. Illinois. Lives and works in Los Angeles.

Slick glaze seems to congeal into thick droplets that slide down Amia Yokoyama's smooth porcelain figures and pool at the base. In varying opacities of baby blue, the nude sculptures recall water and fluidity. Inspired by anime, Yokoyama's female forms have accentuated features that defy gravity and human anatomy. Whether they're lying down or positioned on all fours, they have perky, spherical breasts without need of support, narrow waists, flat stomachs, round butts, thick thighs, and diminutive calves.

Yokoyama's figures are not necessarily a critique of anime's hypersexualized depictions or the West's enthusiastic consumption of such portrayals, but an exploration of alternative modes of Asiatic personhood existing on the fringes of mainstream culture. "Asiatic femininity is the hinge on which my work opens into a deeper, more complex phantasmagorical understanding of myself and my dense ever-changing relation to the world," Yokoyama said. "They embody borderless beings, an amalgamation of bodies, fluid, and overflowing with desire and excess; the portion of their bodies that does not form the shape of a woman literally collecting at their feet; they seduce by promising ecstasy and death." Working with the imagery of one of the most popular forms of entertainment exported from East Asia, Yokoyama further embraces her work's Asiatic ties through her choice of material—porcelain. "It carries with it an origin of desire, disgust, and diminishment, the sought-after pleasure technology of the 'other' non-phallic, non-European body. Something to be conquered, distributed, stolen, commodified," Yokoyama explained. "From the origin of the word 'porcelain' to its historical and political use, it's a material whose exoticism evoked desire in the form of domination and colonial pursuits between Europe and East Asia."

Porcelain becomes the flesh of Yokoyama's female figures. The phrases "porcelain doll" and "porcelain skin," which have been used to describe white femininity, are now embodied by Yokoyama's sculptures. Returning to *Ornamentalism*, Cheng asks, "How do we begin to think about racialized bodies that remain insistently synthetic and artificial? What about bodies not undone by objectness but enduring as objects?" Despite their monochromatic surfaces, Yokoyama's works beg the same questions through, as the artist described, "clay bodies, clay avatars, fetishized bodies, bodies suspended between human and non-human."

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Amia Yokoyama is an artist who works within a space of paradox and contradiction. Her digital animations give us a world of utopian bodies, tenuously held together with the dynamic magnetism of marionettes: they fall, fly, and walk through vast spaces, buoyant and bouncing, body parts coming apart and back together again. A body in pieces, yes, but also a body that holds those pieces together, moving through time and space. Her sculptural works—made of porcelain and complex glazes—propose another kind of imaginary body: these melting, goopy girls are materially present in a completely different register. Protuberant and bulgy, they are shiny personifications of a life force. Their solid curves counter the evanescent and multiple video girls, balancing out their light forms. Right now, the artwork I care about most proposes a dynamic tension between our 3-dimensional bodies (weighty, sculptural) and the 2-dimensional virtual image (dematerialized). Amia is a light in every room she enters. Her work makes that light take form as objects, as artworks.