

MOMUS

How Do We Decolonize Desire? Evelyn Taocheng Wang Massages Difficult Truths at Château Shatto

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Installation of Evelyn Taocheng Wang, "Heatwave Wrinkle," 2017, Château Shatto.

There is very little consent to be found, for example, in the fact that Flaubert's encounter with an Egyptian courtesan produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history.

– Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978)

My reluctance to receive a massage at the gallery [Château Shatto](#), which offers the service on Saturdays as an element of Evelyn Taocheng Wang's solo exhibition *Heatwave Wrinkle*, hinged upon a slight crisis of identity. I am – ostensibly – Said's Oriental woman: a figure once metaphorically rendered ahistorical and now hyper-sexualized through the machinations of [white sexual imperialism](#). My body, and bodies like mine, are undeniably mediated by sexism, racism, and colonialism; they are always at an intersection. The idea of a trip to a massage parlor, often staffed with Asian women from the "[global care chain](#)," fills me with dread. However, Wang proposes an unusual economic structure that complicates the presumed exchange of labor. Intrigued, I relented.



Evelyn Tacheng Wang. "Untitled No. 2" (detail). 2016.

Wang's offer is deceptively simple: clients may bring an image of a landscape to receive a discount on a massage. By my second visit, an assortment of quickly-drawn pictures, postcards, and fuzzy pixelated printouts were piled atop a counter. Tellingly, most of the offerings (including mine) read from side to side: latitudinally aligned in the Western art-historical tradition. Wang devised the system of exchange – your landscape for her landscape; your labor for her labor – to establish connections across multiple sites that both reflect and challenge her present inability to produce work in Los Angeles. As a Chinese national based in Amsterdam and currently undergoing a gender transition, Wang was wary of traveling to the United States while her new documentation was being processed. The recent immigration ban and its chaotic implementation confirmed her fears of being trapped in a bureaucratic purgatory. Wang's transnational odyssey, which foregrounds the experience of affective labor among women of the Asian diaspora, overlaps with her transitional journey, entangling the viewer at a productively complex interstice of narratives.

Heatwave Wrinkle grew from Wang's ongoing project *Massage Near Me*, into which she weaves stories from her time as a masseuse funding graduate study in Dutch art history. The parlor where she worked sat on the edge of Amsterdam's Red Light District (and misunderstandings regarding her work's non-sexual nature) ensued daily. Wang notes that her employer usually hired cisgender women, and she felt compelled to tiresomely perform a brand of femininity that was recognizable to the clientele. Logging frequent diary entries, which often wander into the realm of reverie, the artist recounts the tense encounters that characterize spaces where ethnicity, gender, and implied labor prescribe an expected identity. "The majority of clients are male, many of them come for massage only because of sexual desire, which means they do not really want a normal massage. This makes 'my identity' a very difficult and embarrassing situation. I still need to smile at them and make them feel happy."

Wang has tucked these diary entries behind three untitled paintings featured at the gallery. The canvases depict ancient vessels found close to bathing locales from Greece and Rome. The shapes feel familiar, but the details veer slyly into imagination. A trail of hearts dances along the perimeter of one vase. Two ink drawings hung near the entrance of the gallery portray local landscapes Wang has never visited, spun from a similarly dislocated fantasy.

The drawings situate scenes in what the painter Mary Heilmann has described as “Asian space ... where you have deep space – sort of Renaissance perspective – and then you also have abstract marks painted flat on the canvas.” The drawings themselves graft together Los Angeles clichés and hallucinations. *Landscape of LA 1* (2016), a square panel on rice paper, is dappled with dots of ocean blue in the top left corner and pointillist specks of red and orange in the bottom right. Languorous palm fronds droop along the top perimeter and two round fruits are delineated in gold. Two faces, one without eyes, appear in the center. A disembodied forearm tenderly reaches for a chin. *Landscape's* companion, *Fantasy of Collar* (2016), depicts a similarly dreamy scene, punctuated with plump nightshades, dark spiny leaves, and impressions of women with rippling crimson and sun-colored tresses. More cerulean freckles mingle around inky grey pools that bloom across the surface. These complexly-overlapped signifiers of place and history recall the fraught encounters of her Amsterdam parlor.



Evelyn Taocheng Wang, "Landscape of LA 1," 2016.

Wang's chronicles, first published on the artist's Facebook, were collected in a book, *Unintended Experience (A Job in Amsterdam)* (2017), which accompanied the exhibition *Evelyn Taocheng Wang: Allegory of Transience* at [De Hallen Haarlem](#). Longing and yearning stretch between the masseuses and the clients, among the masseuses themselves, and outwards towards the broader world. Lisa flirted with Americans for better tips; Tracy beseeched her employees to warn her if anyone tried to masturbate in the booths; Yang kissed a Pakistani man with whom she had fallen in love. Wang's co-workers take care to provide intimacy (but not sex) to their customers, while treating each other with a deep tenderness that provides a form of protection against the brutality of emotional labor. So bolstered, they carefully perform the strictly regimented roles of the affective economy, while straining against the singularity of their own particular positions.

Heatwave Wrinkle imagines a domain in which the Oriental Woman can form her own subjectivity, absorbing historic and contemporary episodes nullified by systemic oppression: a dreamscape that obstructs the tragic prospect of colonial desire fulfilled.

A number of tall, deep-purple screens zigzag through the center of the gallery, demarcating the space, and providing discretion for massages. A rectangular mirror, plain and immaculate, is hung at eye level near the cloistered area – a staple in such settings. A small wooden tray also affixed to the wall is filled with tightly-rolled hand towels. The masseuse asks the client to lie belly-down on a standard black massage table, the face cupped by an upholstered doughnut. She inquires about ailments of which she should be aware, sets a timer, and reminds them to relax as she kneads the muscles loose. How do we decolonize desire? Can there be an affective labor without erasure and subjection? In a brief note, Wang writes, "Massaging someone's skin does not mean I relax their history."