

Momus

The Contemporary Erotics of Laurie Kang

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Sometimes a cliché is the only way to describe an experience so fundamentally mood-inducing that it illuminates the very reason we do what we do. Walking into Laurie Kang's solo exhibition *Deferring Diffractions* at Toronto's [8-11 Gallery](#) is a moment made for cliché. By passing through the entrance we feel we are entering the artist's internal intimate space. In so doing, we are awarded one of the art-viewer's principle joys: an immediate feeling of deep and ineffable personal connection to the pure physicality and ingrained contemporaneity of a work. Initiated from a close relationship between materials and concepts, a sexual energy spills and slips from piece to piece, available for absorption and digestion by a conscientious viewer. The exhibition is like a tour of Kang's erotic inclinations.

Grounded – fittingly, if not a little snugly – in 8-11's character-rich space, the material elements of *Deferring Diffractions* include a modular sculptural installation, an artist book, an outdoor sculptural work, and a projected video work. The show is centered on a series of three-dimensional abstract compositions on mirror-polished aluminum that mimics the relationship between canvas and paint. Although these gestural arrangements could be called painterly, the look and feel of the work is more closely aligned with the dimension of the digital screen.

The artist book, a limited-edition Risograph publication titled *Entangles*, is a stunning 128 pages of screen-shot close-ups of mating flatworms. Appearing as abstracted clusters of wavy flesh in Chromira and Inkjet prints, the phylum creatures are also present in Kang's sculptures as implied inhabitants, protruding supporters, and dangling bodies. An enigmatic conversation between two anthropomorphized flatworms forms the basis for the exhibition text *Is 1hr 1hr?* penned by artist-writer Tiziana La Melia. The script, produced prior to installation, is also reprinted in the book. As an extension of the exhibition, *Is 1hr 1hr?* was performed by Kang and 8-11 co-founder and curator Christine Atkinson as part of [Villa Toronto](#). This reading-performance was in turn accompanied by a salon-style group reading of an essay by American queer/feminist theorist Karen Barad titled "Nature's Queer Performativity" and led by curator cheyanne turions as part of the series *No Reading After the Internet*. With its stated focus on "reconfigurations and shape-shiftings, nonhuman agency [and] queer critter behaviors," Barad's essay theorizes atoms as a vehicle for the queering of causality, matter, space and time, forming an appropriate conceptual backing for *Deferring Diffractions*. Like Barad, Kang has adapted the physical and behavioral makeup of a non-human species as a metaphor for human (queer) sexuality.

So what can we make of Kang's creative claim over an inter-sexed species of worm? By moving through the exhibition with queer theory's radical questioning of identity and binaries in mind, we note the pervasive presence of an empowered, fluid sexuality. In *Second Skin* a mirrored panel acts as support for two scenes of soft penetration. Kang has photographed knots of rubber cord, magnified and abstracted to bring out the erotic grace with which they intertwine. Cut into the surface of the panel are wobbly lines of flatworm tunnels (a reoccurring detail in several of the works), one with a white, viscous substance spilling out from its top. In the upper left-hand corner is pressed an object resembling the ring and flaccid body of a used condom. The rubber cord makes another appearance in *Leaking Modularities*, this time as a physical object, appearing umbilical or intestinal and connecting two panels by way of being wedged into the slits of more flatworm tunnels.

A visual hallmark of the sculptures – the fleshy, pink, and shiny silicone sheet of *Deferring Beings* – dangles prominently from the end of one of two wall-mounted aluminum bars. This installation-cum-modular-dance-studio includes brass brackets modeled after flatworms and another tunnel-marred mirrored panel. Just abstracted enough to avoid being overt, each of these works present a tight composition endowed with a sensuality that is as grotesque as it is erotic. The installation's sense of fluidity and spillage expresses a foregoing of control as a counterpoint to the male-

dominant oppression of female emotional and sexual emissions. The work positions itself in a history of art-making which omits the female body but embodies the feminine (think Eva Hesse and Helen Chadwick). It also underscores Kang's position in a generation of young female abstractionists characterized by a materials- and process-driven fabrication style that combines sculpture, photography, and found objects in the production of idiosyncratic and even surrealist work (Rochelle Goldberg, Rachel De Joode, and Letha Wilson come to mind).

Evidence of Kang's hands-on process, as well as her relinquishing of control, is present in the intermittent scrapes and fingerprints that have been left on the surfaces of the work. In the same way that her script, book, and readings embody and expand the show, the physical works are self-referential, mutating out of one another to create new, same-but-different things.

Despite the weight of its conceptual backing, Kang's show remains playful, guarding itself against the trap of too-precious *objects d'art*. Her sense of humor is perhaps most evident in *Abyss Thing*, a black-and-grey lump of oven-bake clay that could be mistaken for discarded detritus on the gallery floor. *Abyss Thing* seems useless and pathetic, an apparent aesthetic outcast from the rest of the work. I draw a visual connection to it only upon close examination of its exterior texture which is marked by an imprint resembling the rubber cord from *A Second Skin* and *Leaking Modularities*. It's the work's title, however, that locates it as a repository for the exhibition's conceptual framework. Used by French feminist theorist Hélène Cixous in her essay "L'Écrit de la Méduse" (The Laugh of the Medusa), the abyss has come to denote the female body as a fluid and effective power against phallo-centrism. Cixous sought to empower women by encouraging a practice of "écriture féminine," a method of writing that was accessible only through the female body.

The implications of this connection between the corporeal and its creative output can be felt throughout *Deferring Diffractions*. Kang carries the metaphor of the abyss forward in *Provocations of a Nubile Rock*, a three-minute looped video that features a direct quote from another Cixous ("La"). Located in the unfinished basement of the gallery, *Provocations* features a Google-sourced stock image of a pale pink rock overlapped with a slowly moving text that is edited mid-stream so that "It's as if you are frightened of solitude" becomes "It's as *well* if you are frightened of solitude." With this slight intervention, the weight of the statement is shifted from uncertainty to acceptance so that it lays claim to a feminist take on solitude as freedom. The rock, for its part, is anthropomorphized in its bust-like shape and the way that it blushes a deep glowing red after the new text is revealed.

In all, the materials, look, and concepts of *Deferring Diffractions* read as so much contemporary art. The work expresses a self-awareness of the socio-historical and technological conditions of its making. It speaks in the enigmatic tongue of a young abstract conceptualist and with the odd juxtapositions and free appropriations common to post-internet art. In other words, it feels contemporary because it "gets it." Although not a categorical match for the sleek stationary objects of post-internet art, these works fit the *fashion* of the network, using the internet as source material and in many ways speaking its language. This is particularly evident in Kang's [documentation](#) of the exhibition. Even the most straight-forward photographs of the exhibition cannot help but obscure the physical boundaries of the work. In the framing of varying angles and reflections we find entirely new compositions that are only possible in digital form.

As if to further emphasize the work's potential for digitization, fellow Toronto artists [Nadia Belerique](#) and [Lili Huston-Herterich](#) performed a lighting intervention on *Deferring Diffractions* that effectively dyed the work with deep planes of green, blue, and red. The resulting images are like digital paintings with little distinction made between the original referent and its new virtual space. By allowing the work to be positioned in this way, Kang is inviting us to read it in a category of art [described](#) by critic Ben Davis as "not internet specific, but simply [living] in and out of the internet as if that was just the default condition for artistic production."

Deferring Diffractions speaks, but does not preach, the language of its context. It communicates an unabashed eroticism and sexual openness that feels feminine but largely resists the male-female binary. It draws from and speaks to – but does not make a subject of – the internet. It is conceptually grounded in feminist thought and queer theory but maintains an ambiguity through

abstraction. It is physically amorphous, appearing as an exhibition, performance space, artist book, reading group, documentation, and digital work. And the iterations continue.

Kang is set to team up with Belerique and Huston-Herterich for a collaborative project opening in June at the Power Plant. Building upon the aesthetic and conceptual platforms of *Deferring Diffractions* and combining with the equally nuanced photo-sculptural practices of Belerique and Huston-Herterich, the show is sure to communicate Kang's desired effect of an "entanglement of intuition and cognition." By virtue of its inherent lack of certainty and the way it encourages the unconventional, the act of collaboration itself is often deemed queer. Kang's work, it seems, will continue to live up to Barad's perception of queerness as "a lively mutating organism ... an agential dis/continuity, an enfolded reiteratively materializing promiscuously inventive spatiotemporality." And for that, we can only be thankful.