Studio Visit: Jes Fan by Lumi Tan

*Giving melanin a life of its own.*

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Essay  Art
The first thing Jes Fan asks me to do in his studio is hold the melanin, slowly rocking back and forth a test tube in which a thick, black liquid moves at its own particular pace. Fan remarks that it carries the weight and viscosity of a Chinese sesame soup dessert; its unyielding darkness reminds me of another
popular Asian dessert, grass jelly. Later, he’ll put a few drops directly on my palm, leaving me to deliberate how tangible this simple pigment is, and what an outsized role in racial identity—and thus racial construction, colorism, and racism—it accommodates.

I’m visiting Fan in the first few weeks of his Recess Session residency “Obscure Functions: Experiments in Decolonizing Melanin.” Melanin in this studio exists as a genetically modified E. coli bacteria made with Brooklyn Bio, a for-hire research lab, then collected and grown in test tubes and petri dishes. Organically, melanin exists in fungi, mold, and cephalopods, in addition to humans. One of the most pertinent questions in Fan’s work is the possibility of kinship outside biology, which was explored in his previous project *Mother is a Woman* (2018), a custom beauty cream infused with estrogen from his mother’s urine. (I also apply this on my hand during the visit, a generous and thick mass.) With this cream, Fan asked if femininity and maternalism was communicable through a commercial product. Similarly, *Obscure Functions* releases the melanin from the confines of our human biases into a potential binding for interspecies kinship.
Pinned to Fan’s research board is an academic paper that touts the anti-radioactive properties of melanin, complete with a cartoon rendering of humans landing on Mars in which the bright whites of NASA spacecraft and suits are now a dark brown. In this future, science becomes disconnected from the purity and objectivity of whiteness; within the context of Fan’s project, it is inextricable from the centuries-old myth that race is based in scientific fact, a potent form of
racism still to be debunked for many. In a forthcoming video, Fan plays on the anxiety produced between the sterility and automations of the lab and the invisible contamination that permeates our everyday. Fan informs me that one of the most radioactive sites in New York City is a major transit hub a few blocks away from Recess’s Clinton Hill location.

Despite this description of his work, Fan does not primarily employ ephemeral matter. In fact, he is deeply invested in object-making, with a particular investment in glass as a transformative material. Fan has been suspending the melanin in glass globules that act as imaginary organs, intimately scaled to the body. They suspend themselves around a central frame, a playground of sorts for these comforting anthropomorphic forms. The glass provides a permanent archive for the melanin, giving it a solidity and weight but never a prescribed function. It grants the melanin a life of its own, without us.

Jes Fan: Obscure Functions: Experiments in Decolonizing Melanin is on view at Recess in New York City until October 26.

Photo: Minú Han.
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