

DIVISIVE DEVICES

Shota Yamauchi
 SAGAMIHARA

Though we have an abundance of tools that allow us to connect with one another, loneliness can still plague us. Japanese new-media artist Shota Yamauchi

addresses this issue by bringing to life fictional worlds populated by an assembly of characters. Growing up, he often dreamed about living in role-playing games such as Final Fantasy. During his postgraduate studies, he picked up skills such as photo scanning, which facilitated his creation of his own virtual companions. These uncanny figures eventually became the protagonists in his interactive VR work *ZONE EATER* (2017), first exhibited at Tokyo's NTT InterCommunication Center. The participant can choose to step into the bodies of the inhabitants in Yamauchi's game, possessing them as a phantom. Yet donning VR goggles and groping around the exhibition space with "Let's Hyoi!!" (to possess like a ghost) printed on the floor, their actions add another ironic layer to the work. The experience of VR is often considered a lonely one, since only one person can use the hardware each time. Yamauchi's work rests on the disassociation between what the participant and other viewers are seeing to convey the absurdity of our technologically mediated world.



Still from SHOTA YAMAUCHI's *Detour*, 2017, multi-channel video installation with PC, rear screen, projector, chair, dimensions variable, video: 21 min 20 sec. Courtesy the artist.

In other videos, Yamauchi placed himself in his fictional worlds, inspired by a range of science fiction, films, and mythologies. For example, *Detour* (2017), a two-channel video installation, shows a mysterious long drive to a convenience store. Discontented with his ordinary life, the artist was trying to re-create his own version of the 1945 titular film, incorporating CGI effects and reimagining the story's events. In Yamauchi's work, the view seen through the car's back window is an imposed clip recorded from a train, and is an obvious clue that Yamauchi is in a fantastical world. Similarly, his stop-motion video *Loki's Dämmerung* (2018) takes viewers to an imagined realm. The sequence, projected on a circular, convex screen, was shot in a dark house covered by clay, in which the artist spent two months trying to summon the Nordic demigod and shape-shifter. With an absurdist sense of humor, Yamauchi traverses the line between reality and fantasy, underscoring the bizarre aspects of contemporary human perspectives.

PAMELA WONG

Vivien Zhang

LONDON

Born in Beijing, and raised in Bangkok and Nairobi, Vivien Zhang examines the nature of national boundaries in the digital era. Her vibrant oil paintings

combine motifs of wide-ranging origins, and juxtapose the strokes of brushes with marks that evoke computer graphics. Neither embracing the digital realm nor rejecting it, Zhang's stance toward technology and its geopolitical impacts is seen in *Soft Borders* (2020). The image features repeated Sierpiński sieves—equilateral triangles continuously subdivided into self-similar parts. The shape represents hierarchical structures in which authorities controlling technology wield the most power, while the fractals within the triangle allude to segregation by way of technological access, and the many internet ecosystems specific to different countries. The motif is intermixed with mountain peaks rendered in the conventional Chinese-ink style, referencing the ranges of disputed regions such as along the Crimea-Ukraine and North-South Korean borders. In this way, the painting critiques widening socioeconomic gaps and the increasing pervasiveness of inward-looking nations despite advancements that have made global communication easier. Yet, the artist is not without hope. This is evident in her employment of kilim patterns, which are part of the traditional iconographies of multiple peoples, suggesting the possibility for humanity to transcend these divides.

Zhang's interest in geopolitics is also reflected in her orange-peel-shaped *Cartographer's Fugue* (2019), inspired by the Goode map. The 1923 equal-area projection was created to reduce land-mass distortion found in traditional maps, which enlarge the northern hemisphere. Her canvas, portraying rows of Gömböcs—a sphere-like form with one stable point of equilibrium—in various degrees of rotation, gestures to global instability amid growing protests for fairer treatment of the common people. Another



VIVIEN ZHANG, *Spiral Columns (Paper Trails)*, 2020, acrylic, chalk, and oil on canvas, 95 × 75 cm. Courtesy the artist.

of Zhang's recurring icons, the Solomonian column, a Byzantine architectural element characterized by its twisted, ridged surface, similarly conjures movement. Adapted for European churches and secular ornaments, the design is also appropriated by Zhang in *Spiral Columns (Paper Trails)* (2020). Set against a purple, web-like background, Zhang's free-floating spirals are laden with 21st-century symbols such as the logos of Twitter and the climate-crisis movement Extinction Rebellion, celebrating cultural fluidity. Drawing imageries from the past and present, Zhang conveys the complexities of the information age.

LAUREN LONG

Anvar Musrepov

VIENNA

In 1969, archaeologists unearthed the remains of an ancient, gold-armored warrior at the Issyk burial mound in Kazakhstan.

The so-called Golden Man, believed to be of Saka nomadic nobility, was seized upon as a national symbol by the post-Soviet Kazakh leadership, and appears as a statue at the apex of the independence monument in Almaty.

Yet, given the lack of sex-determinant evidence from the degraded skeleton, it is possible that the warrior-prince was, in fact, a warrior-princess, a theory that conflicts with the patriarchal strongman politics of post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Anvar Musrepov, whose multimedia practice interrogates the many contradictions of contemporary Kazakh identity, imagines this alternative scenario



ANVAR MUSREPOV, *Golden Woman*, 2019, still from video installation: 5 min 32 sec. Courtesy the artist.

in the 3D-animated-video *Golden Woman* (2019), in which the gold-suited heroine battles a number of adversaries in outer space. The fiery demise of a yurt-shaped, Wellsian automaton from her well-aimed arrow angers a pudgy man wearing nothing but a pair of VR goggles—a character influenced by Kazakhstan's first president of 30 years, Nursultan Nazarbayev, whose techno-nationalism permeates Kazakh political discourse. By the video's end, the Golden Woman stabs him and is carried out of frame on her winged snow leopard. Screened at the 2019 Astana Art Show beneath a diaphanous, purple-lit tent, *Golden Woman* recasts the hallmarks of Kazakhstan's nomad-romanticism through a cyber-fictive lens, enacting the clash of premodern nostalgia and techno-utopianism while acknowledging the artifice of both mythologies.

Musrepov articulates similar concerns in *QORQYNYSH* (2018), a laboratory-like installation with components including a silicone face mold; a printed facsimile of human skin; a swiping robotic hand; and adyraspan grass, which is used to cleanse spaces of evil spirits in Central Asian folk rituals. *QORQYNYSH* is a vision of human plasticity, alluding to the USSR's brutal transformation of Central Asia. Under the new banner of capitalist modernity, Kazakh identity continues to be remolded, now caught between nationalist atavism and techno-authoritarianism. "I see my generation as mutants with hybrid identity," the artist explained. Droll and sharply critical, Musrepov's projects dissect the touchstones of Kazakhstan's cultural-political consciousness, and gesture at plural expressions of self beyond the limits of ideology.

OPHELIA LAI