

Karen Tang and David Ben White

Cats' tails and TV sets

Ellen Mara De Wachter

'I wanted to play, not plan.'

–Karen Tang

'I learn how I can see by spending time looking.'

–David Ben White

When Karen Tang and David Ben White crossed paths outside their studio building in Stratford last summer, she showed him pictures of her recent work. He identified something familiar in those images and immediately carried his paintings to her studio so that they could consider their works in each other's presence. Tang also recognised an aesthetic kinship in White's work, sensing an instant simultaneity that the artists have described as 'different ways of seeing the same thing'. That difference is also evident in the energetic properties of the works: if White's paintings exude a quiet intensity, Tang's sculptures are animated and voluble. In sharing the environment of the gallery for *it's for me, it's for you*, their works carry on the artists' dynamic and revealing conversation.

In 2008, Tang took part in the group show *An Experiment in Collaboration* at the Jerwood Space in London. Her contribution to the exhibition was the result of her collaboration with architect Daniel Sanderson. Together, they made *Modern Molluscs* (2008), a sculpture that adopted the scale of a small minimalist house and was colonised by a motley crew of mutant forms. The amorphous outlines of Tang's many-legged sea creatures and aliens stood out against the sharp edges of the plywood pavilion. Their disorderly presence within such a precise structure suggested these modern molluscs might be the vanguard of an influx of creatures or 'things' taking over the built environment. Tang revisited this invasion scenario in 2014 with *Synapsid*, a public sculpture installed in Bermondsey Square, which reimagined the monster from *The Giant Behemoth*, a science fiction film shot in the same neighbourhood of South London in 1959. In fact, Tang's entire oeuvre demonstrates a tendency for sculptures to take on swollen and outlandish shapes. Occasionally, they recall the malevolent alien beach ball with claws in John Carpenter's film *Dark Star* (1974), a key reference for the artist. During the making of *Modern Molluscs*, Tang and Sanderson had discussed the way globulous and rectilinear forms collided in their collaboration, calling it

'Cartoon Modernism'.

This Cartoon Modernism offers a useful framework for considering what Tang calls 'the analogue of cartoon memories', an ongoing area of fascination and experimentation for the artist. Tang's most recent sculptures are echoes of forms from *The Flintstones*, Garfield the cat, and a number of other cartoon cats including Battle Cat from *He-Man*, and Tom from *Tom & Jerry*. Tang breaks these characters down into their essential parts, which function as metonyms for cartoon animals whose overall form, movement and narratives can sometimes exceed the powers of memory. Thus, favourite cartoons live on in tubes bent into semi-circles and painted with distinctive markings: Garfield's unmistakable triangular stripes, Tom's grey and white tail. They adhere to galvanised steel structures thanks to concealed magnets, and can be moved and repositioned at will. The result is an effect in which these convertible sculptures start to reconfigure themselves like cartoon characters whose severed limbs have been stitched back in the wrong place; they begin to create the illusion that they can move in space.

What you see isn't always what you get, which is another way of saying that the colour and form of an object have a mutual and combined influence that affects our perception of that object. Bright colours show up details, curves and angles in ways dark colours could only dream of, while accents of form can be obscured by more sombre tones. This illusory effect in some of Tang's sculptures is a function of her elaborate technique, which involves joining and carving Styrofoam shapes, hand painting and then bathing these sculptures in marble dip, then applying fiberglass and finally coating them in a layer of matt varnish. The mottled colours and swirling patterns that result conjure up a range of associations, from the sublime expanses of milky ways to the more humble hues of bacterial colonies. Their matt finish exacerbates the sense of flipping from macrocosm to microcosm, and through a curious optical effect, it appears as though the surface is forever being pushed back, belying its smoothness and suggesting an illusory depth and texture.

The way White creates space in his work takes this sense of illusory depth and augments it with the uncanny feeling of looking into other people's domestic interiors. In 2012, he created *Temples to the Domestic*, a series of pavilions installed in the offices of the law firm Clifford Chance. Set within truncated spaces, with walls shorn off at sharp angles and flooring reduced to shrunken islands, were vignettes of warmly-lit intimate environments complete with household furniture, lamps, artworks and decorative objects. These excerpts of domestic life were dwarfed by their corporate surroundings. White worked with a theatre

company to produce performances in these pavilions, further toying with the illusion of reality and triggering an even greater sense of the uncanny. A memorable moment in the life of these temples was when the performance of a romantic breakup in Henrik Ibsen's domestic drama 'A Doll's House' (1879) coincided with a boisterous huddle of lawyers exiting a meeting in which they had struck an important deal. At that moment, White says, suddenly 'everything became self-conscious as a performing entity.'

With their depictions of private spaces as colourful interiors furnished with expressive chairs and sofas, White's paintings offer a rebuke to a modernist hegemony, which took hold in institutions as varied as law firms and art galleries starting in the early 20th century. After staging an encounter between domestic and corporate environments in *Temples to the Domestic*, White felt that he wanted to 'pull away from narrative, to make the work quieter.' This ambition is achieved in two recent painting series: 'Not at Home' and 'Undivided Attention', which use bold colours and an architectural line to paint domestic environments that are as enticing as they are unsettling. The human form is invariably absent from these works, and sitting rooms are painted from an unlikely point of view. It's the perspective of an eye looking sharply down from the top of the opposite wall – perhaps peeping through a clerestory window. The horizontal plane of the floor rushes into the vertical of the wall, and each is rendered in a contrasting colour. Together they pop, sizzle and vibrate.

In many of these paintings the presence of a solitary white TV set, whose bulbous back suggests an old-style cathode ray tube, offers the only hint of a world beyond the depicted space. Just as Tang's cats' tails, which function as a metonym for an enquiry into questions surrounding the temporality, movement and image-making of cartoons, White's TVs stand in for the super-connected state that currently defines so many people's lives and claims their undivided attention. But if there is a world beyond the spaces White paints, it seems to be a world mediated into abstraction. The imagery being broadcast is indecipherable, akin to White's 'Esperanto' paintings, which resemble close-ups of petri dishes populated by elementary shapes of different sizes and colours. These paintings enable White to multiply forms and colours, and to develop what he calls 'a topography of abstraction'. The Esperanto of the title suggests that these paintings operate as a simplified language, quoting and mapping more complex versions of themselves from historical modernist and abstract paintings. But these works are more than just a rear-view mirror reflecting the faded utopianism of early abstract painting; they are also fundamentally present, and they engage in a conversation with their surroundings.

What becomes apparent in *it's for me, it's for you* is not just that there are resemblances between Tang's and White's work – and there are uncanny moments when bean-like forms and pebble-like shapes seem to echo one another – but that the differences between these two artists' works also enable a conversation to take place. An example of this dialogue can be found in the relationship between White's painting *Esperanto 3* (2016) and Tang's *Magnetic Combo: Hyperobject 1 & Hyperobject 2* (2016), a large pod-like sculpture that rests on a galvanised steel altar, installed nearby. Immediately one becomes aware of the artists' shared sensibility for bulbous forms, such a commonality is exceeded by their highly individual treatment of texture, scale and materials, driving the viewer even further along in their journey of exploration and discovery. To place these works together is to reveal a dynamic of exchange, rich with nuances of opinion and feeling, and to celebrate it as a fundamentally creative and productive space.

Ellen Mara De Wachter

Ellen Mara De Wachter is a writer and curator based in London. She is a frequent contributor to Frieze magazine, and her writing has featured in numerous publications and exhibition catalogues.

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Printed on the occasion of the exhibition, Karen Tang and David Ben White: *it's for me, it's for you*

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