

Life of a Craphead, Entertaining Every Second, Centre Clark, Montréal

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Life of a Craphead

← Exhibition view, *Entertaining Every Second*, Centre Clark, Montréal, 2019.
Photo : Paul Litherland, courtesy of the artists & Centre Clark, Montréal

↑ *Find the U.S. Soldier Who Killed Your Grandma*, detail, 2018.
Photo : Paul Litherland, courtesy of the artists & Centre Clark, Montréal

Life of a Craphead *Entertaining Every Second*

In *Entertaining Every Second*, Life of a Craphead's raucous yet poignantly confessional exhibition at Centre Clark, Amy Lam and Jon McCurley transform their trademark mastery of comic timing into an urgent and affecting exploration of intersectional histories both personal and geopolitical. *Ceilings with Clowns*, a minimalist bamboo-and-glass checkerboard-topped pavilion, showcases the duo's clever redeployment of the performative logic of first-generation conceptual titles to craft literalist punchlines aimed at the structures of institutional racism. The work ostensibly invites viewers to momentarily inhabit the subject position of female-identified labourers of Asian descent in the tech industry, whose professional progress continues to be halted by a formidable combination of so-called glass and bamboo ceilings. The clowns rollicking atop this otherwise austere counter-monument mock the white institutional voices that blocked Lam and McCurley's initial proposal to site the project in a mid-sized Canadian city famous for being a tech hub. Without diminishing the seriousness of the artists' message, this ludic gesture generates an unforgettable image.

Other works train this institution-critical gaze on more personal histories. In particular, Lam and McCurley's harrowing use of social media to identify and locate the now elderly killer of McCurley's grandmother, murdered in cold blood by American GIs during the Vietnam War. Originating as an implausible proposal for an app, *Find the U.S. Soldier That Killed Your Grandma* deftly engages the differential temporalities of personal and collective memory through the lens of what media historian Siegfried Zielinski has termed the "deep time of the media"—a capacity to recognize the sometimes-startling contemporaneity of old technologies. In Lam and McCurley's haunting narrative, the transparency of smartphone screens unnervingly gives way to the opacity of yellowing court documents and ghostly crematoria.

The labyrinthine manhunt chronicled in gripping graphic novel format by *Find the U.S. Soldier That Killed Your Grandma* recalls the conventions of crime thrillers, thereby linking the work to an adjacent series of first-person text panels in which Lam turns her English-lit university education against the canon. Performing close readings of Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, the work draws attention to the book's demeaning representations of Phuong, an Asian woman relegated to performing menial and sexual tasks for Greene's American and British male protagonists. A related form of close reading propels *Making Something Positive out of Chris Cran's Painting "Self-Portrait with Combat Nymphs of Saigon" (1985)*, in which Lam and McCurley enact a ludicrous formalist edit of Cran's racially-fraught figurative canvas: the blank whiteness of the gallery walls exposed by the duo's "cuts" paradoxically reveals the otherwise occluded subjectivity of the white male painter.

Probingly self-reflexive, *Entertaining Every Second* is compelling confirmation of Lam and McCurley's mastery of institution-critical messaging in a crowded media environment. Life of a Craphead's "sticky" concepts and titles prove efficient but also durable carriers for complex histories.

Adam Lauder

Centre Clark, Montréal
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