



CFGNY, *Collecting Dissonance*, 2021, installation view

## CFGNY: Collecting Dissonance

Auto Italia, London, 21 May to 22 August

For its 2018 'New Fashion II' collection show, CFGNY (Concept Foreign Garments New York / Cute Fucking Gay New York) presented a selection of sheer mesh dresses and T-shirts on which the group had sewn supplementary protrusions that tightly encased cuddly toys. The bulbous, drooping silhouettes were inspired by Rei Kawakubo's infamous 'Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body' 1997 collection for Comme des Garçons, later churlishly coined 'lumps and bumps' by fashion critics who associated the surplus mounds of stuffing with pregnant stomachs and tumours. In CFGNY's exhibition at Auto Italia, the group's use of plastic toys and stuffed animals recurs, this time flayed, cut into pieces, sheathed in netting and stitched into the rhizomatic, patchwork multimedia structure installed in the first room of the gallery. This sizeable sculptural threshold, crafted from cardboard, includes several textural woven elements made from clashing swatches of faux fur in animal print, pink and orange, teddy print textiles, padded fabric in pastel hues, strips of garish diamanté rhinestone material, and a coarse red knit that undulated and cut across the surface.

Daniel Chew and Tin Nguyen initiated CFGNY in 2016 and were joined by Kirsten Kilponen and Ten Izu in 2020. This is the collective's first exhibition as a quartet. The spirit of collaboration and kinship is intrinsic to the group's practice, which the members define as an 'ongoing dialogue on the intersections of fashion, race, identity and sexuality', utilising the term 'vaguely Asian' to demonstrate the expansiveness of racial identity. This discourse of vagueness, which encompasses a politicised right to opacity or unintelligibility, is physically realised in the artistic output for which the group intuitively assembles and repurposes a selection of incongruous materials that carry multifarious interpretations (a literal collection of dissonance).

The use of toys brings to mind the work of Mike Kelley, who remarked that 'the stuffed animal ... is a cutified sexless being'. Through an equally perverse

deconstruction of 'cute' commodity objects, CFGNY also deconstructs the meaning of cuteness itself, which is revealed to be a fantasy of power with historic roots in the acceleration of consumer culture. As argued in 2012 by the theorist Sianne Ngai in *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, the consumption of cute objects signifies both the aestheticisation and eroticisation of powerlessness. The diminutive and malleable form of cute things appeals to their domination. CFGNY's use of the cute object, which occurs in numerous cultures such as Japan, China and South Korea, also intersects with their focus on a generalised or commodified 'Asian-ness', and the intricate ways the politics of labour and forms of cultural identity can be conflated.

CFGNY's interest in the reformulation and recontextualisation of materials, notably the practice of bootlegging, could also be interpreted as a form of queerness, particularly if considered via Sara Ahmed's 2006 definition of queerness as an uncanny 'disorientation'. In *Queer Phenomenology* she writes that, before queer was a sexual term, it was a spatial one, signifying something that was 'wonky' or 'twisted'. As a direction of orientation, queer can mean 'oblique' and 'non-linear': 'to make things queer is certainly to disturb the order of things'. The reverse of CFGNY's cardboard threshold contains a prime metaphor for the disturbance of time, in the form of a large, defective water clock. This conjuring of an abstract or adjourned temporality continues in the second room of the gallery, which is saturated in artificial yellow light, as if in a state of perpetual sunset.

This is where CFGNY's new capsule collection has been displayed. There is a tactile tenderness to the group's hand-made, collaged approach. The language of 'cuteness' is also implicit within these garments, which include oversized bows, white fluffy-lined sandals, a shawl made from a synthetic fleecy child's blanket, and a jacket covered with a constellation of felted wide-eyed and smiling cartoonish handprints. The clothes are scattered around and draped over three furniture-like constructions made from sheets of cardboard that have been folded and bolted together, the adaptability of this ubiquitous material being suggestive of global exportation and labour practices. Each sculpture is adjacent to a campaign poster-sized photograph showing members of CFGNY modelling the various outfits, as if ready to be bought from shopping catalogues now the pandemic has rendered the live fashion show verboten. The co-existence of the garments both piled on the floor and seen on the walls creates a sense of déjà vu, extending the feeling of lapsed time and disorientation. This dual reality also signifies and reiterates the ability for a garment, image or textile to conjure a plethora of interpretations, exemplifying the radical potential of creating a space for vagueness.

**Philomena Epps** is a critic and writer living in London.

**the HARRIS**

theharris.org.uk

**LOOK, LISTEN,**

**MAKE THINGS**

**4 June - 2 October 2021**

**Free Entry**

by **Bob &**

**Roberta Smith**