



YOUNG JOON KWAK MUTANT DREAMING

TEXT BY CECI MOSS

A utopian presence exists within Young Joon Kwak's work. It's messy, charged, and fierce. It echoes José Esteban Muñoz's poetic refrains about the "not quite here" of queerness, of horizons "imbued with potentiality." There's an attempt to summon a feminine and (purposefully Muñozian) queer energy, to fill the space with it, through and beyond the walls of the gallery. In her 2017 exhibition *Hermý* at Commonwealth and Council, her sculptures seep, ripple, squeeze and generally render surfaces porous. This liminal focus emerged from the exhibition's attention to the Greek myth of the two-sexed deity Hermaphroditus and the in-between suggested by such bodies. For her *Face Wipe* series of sculptures, makeup dirties fiberglass cloth hardened by resin, like discarded wipes frozen in time. These delicate pieces pour out of a ceiling vent or float along the wall, as if animated by an unseen force. Stalactite forms cast in aluminum from the interior of Fleshlight sex toys, creating shapes from the negative space of the calculated rendering of an artificial vagina, mushroomed throughout the exhibition, appearing on walls and plinths. One is perhaps embodied by the space, but not in the (Enlightenment-ridden) progressive trope with which we're so familiar—where the artwork provokes a revelatory experience in the viewer, inviting them to ascent to purity or a "higher" self. Rather, we're immersed in a churning movement, where the feminine and the queer are not directed here or there, they're neither this or that, but a rumbling.

It makes sense, in many ways, that performance is a central aspect of Kwak's practice. She's the lead singer of Los Angeles industrial noise group Xina Xurner. The thoroughly abject nature of noise

positions the genre as one that eludes easy co-option. In that vein, Xina Xurner's music is uncompromisingly unpredictable, fervent, and operatic. Voice, manipulated through the use of layered effects, is a driving force in the compositions. During a recent show at the venue Human Resources, guests San Cha, White Boy Scream, and Sarah Gail joined Kwak on vocals throughout the set. Performing at the audience's level, and not on an elevated stage, Kwak and the other singers repeatedly pushed out into the crowd, who reciprocated by further encircling the band. The creative emphasis on the chorus within the performance seemed to feed outward, in all directions, bringing people closer in.

Mutant Salon, a collaborative happening organized by Kwak and Marvin Astorga beginning in 2012, builds a similar space. Orchestrated at museums and artist-run galleries, per its mission statement the roaming project strives to "foster connections between queer, trans, POC, womyn and mutant communities to celebrate an ethos of transformation and critical togetherness in the act of self care." For some of the events, Kwak built "mutant" beauty stations equipped with tools and props such as custom mirrors, and combs and brushes attached to contact microphones for public use. Attendees could get makeovers, tattoos, haircuts, concurrent to revolving performances, blurring the lines between the two. In the temporary moment set up by the event, adorning oneself and others is not transactional or constructed around an economy of lack, but a gift of potlatch. *Mutant Salon* is an effort to reclaim beauty from this empowered position, to hack and wield its rituals towards ends that encourage bonding and personal connection.

Kwak's 2018 Summer show at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) advances some of the ideas nascent to the *Mutant Salon* project. Kwak described the show to me half-jokingly as a "femme cave" which operates as an inviting location of retreat and relaxation, replete with artist-made couches and furniture. She also discussed an interest in engaging more closely with the street culture around the gallery, which is based in Hollywood, and collaborating with the neighboring Los Angeles LGBT Center. She hopes to diminish the gallery's frame as a codified art space, along with the various trappings that go along with it, by using exhibition design and public programming to pierce the duality between inside and outside. Importantly, Kwak emphasized the informality and sense of comfort she hopes will be affirmed within the show, on all levels. One sculpture in her studio, which will likely be included in the final installation, is a LED sign bent to look like handwriting, and it simply reads THEIRS.

Perhaps a prototype for the femme cave is the set-like installation *Grotto of the Celebration of the Re-Birth of the Free-Form Creatures* in her *Hermes* exhibition. Kwak, working with Corazon del Sol, transformed an entire small room of the gallery. They painted the walls and ceilings with glossy black paint, and covered the floor with plush carpet and bulbous seat cushions. Gigantic, shiny black vaginal sculptures enclosed the windows, circling the viewers, as if they were birthed into this place. A portal-like sculpture with a water fountain at its center protruded from the wall, like a threshold to another realm. Videos of a costumed Kwak and her collaborator Kim Ye performing around Los Angeles looped on a flat screen above, with a soundtrack by Astorga. Whether a grotto or a cave, both are structures that offer an opening, rather than an enclosure. Further, the "free-form creatures" mentioned in the work's title allude to the mutant symbol that appears across Kwak's practice, suggesting that within this constructed configuration we find both the fluidity of selves and spaces.

A shattered disco ball, titled *Brown Rainbow Eclipse Explosion*, was a central feature of the *Hermes* exhibit. The sculpture silently circled at 1.5 rotations per minute, following the beat of a slow jam. Rainbow lights reflected off the tiny mirrors and illuminated the

space, which then cast multiple shadows across the gallery, intermingling with the shadows of visitors' bodies. The disco ball—itself a potent symbol of gay liberation—in this instance points to a fractured time and musical signature, one held by the exhibition, and truly Kwak's work, overall. Like the vaginal forms that stealthily emerge from the gallery's walls, there are cracks and fissures in the present. Walking in the rainbow light, we're invited to wander amongst these flickers and gaps, and be within them.

**Mutant Salon: We Make Each Other Beautiful, 2016
Performance, the Broad, Los Angeles
Photo: Barak Zemer Courtesy: the artist (opposite page)
Mutant Salon: Exorcises, 2016 Opening performance,
Commonwealth & Council, Los Angeles Photo: Kelly Akashi
Courtesy: the artist and Kelly Akashi (p. 200)**

