

Yam Lau, Nūshu: Echo Chambers, Brandon, Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba

Dagmara Genda

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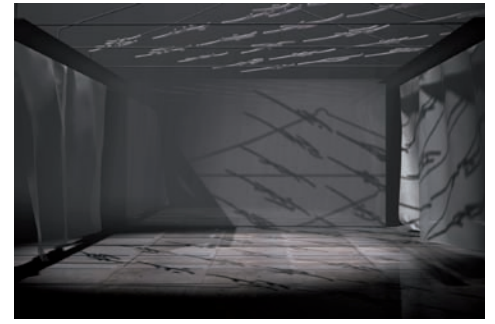
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Yam Lau

← *Nüshu: Echo Chambers*,
exhibition view, Art Gallery of
Southwestern Manitoba,
Brandon, 2015.

Photo : Kevin Bertram

↑ *Nüshu: Echo Chambers*,
video still, 2015.

Photo : courtesy of the Art Gallery of
Southwestern Manitoba

Yam Lau *Nüshu: Echo Chambers*

Negotiating one's expectations of an exhibition with the actual experience of it is common in a time when we are so saturated with images that they often come to stand in for reality itself. Our perceptions are mediated by a surplus of visual information that can keep us one step removed from what lies before us. After viewing the promotional material for Yam Lau's recent solo show, *Nüshu: Echo Chambers*, I was expecting to find myself in a room where scrolling text would be projected over floors, walls and any present visitors. Instead, the space I saw in photographs turned out to be virtual, appearing as one of two computer-generated rooms projected on the walls of an otherwise dim, empty gallery. Between loops, as I listened to the ambient hum of the ventilation, I began to wonder where the experience of art takes place. Curiously, this question might also parallel the spatial concerns in Lau's project.

Lau's installation is a call and response between two brief, monochrome animations projected at right angles and separated by a translucent screen. Seated on one of two white cubes in the space, I can watch one video and occasionally peer through the nylon-like material to see the other. Each pictures a rotating, spotlighted chamber, over which scrolls a 3D script casting layers of moving shadows across its walls and floor. The text, to me, is foreign and indecipherable, as is the language of the two female voices that form the overlaying audio tracks. The voices, one young and one old, echo each other as the animations fade in and out. The only other objects in the gallery are found in an isolated corner, presented as artefacts under a spotlight vitrine—Lau's photographs from China and current examples of *Nüshu* script in journals and embroidery.

The subject is rich, complex, and entirely new to me, as, I can only suspect, it will be to most viewers. The voices are singing in *Nüshu*, meaning "woman's hand," a language

developed and used exclusively by women in feudal China. This ancient script filled journals gifted to young brides and was also embroidered into clothing. The passages, according to the exhibition didactic, narrate the sorrow and isolation common to married life. Today the language is all but forgotten. Lau's subject opens an incredibly fertile ground through which to think of the space of communication, resistance, as well as the layers of code written into any given space, each of which is only readable to its particular audience. But like the distanced videos echoing each other in the empty room, that space is held at a careful distance. It is kept in the realm of discourse rather than inarticulate, contradictory experience. Perhaps the projected spaces are meant to parallel the ghostly inaccessibility of this ancient language, though I wonder if the strategy might not truncate the project's timely potential. Using metaphors of containment—rooms, vitrines, spotlights—Lau treats his subject with the careful respect that it deserves, though perhaps his approach verges on timidity. With such powerful material, *Echo Chambers* seems like the start of a far larger project.

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Art Gallery of Southwestern
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January 21—March 26, 2016