

SPIKE

8-BIT INTIMACIES

Mak 2, “Love Pool” at Peres Projects, Berlin

by Ido Nahari



In triptychs of hot and heavy bodies at Peres Projects, Berlin, Hong Kong-based artist Mak2 materializes the tensions of synthetic desire and our urges to gawk and look away.

Pixelization invites a funny contradiction. Its most common use, to condense vivid imagery into grids of bland squares, is meant to reduce and obfuscate, serving as an optical method of blotting out saucy and often explicitly sexual subject matters. But in doing so, pixelization also works at odds with its prescribed function for a fairly simple reason: Abstracting profanity and treating it as a taboo draws notice to what ought to remain hidden. We gawk at cubist censorship not only for the absence that it shows, but also for the presence that it conceals and the reality that it breaks apart.

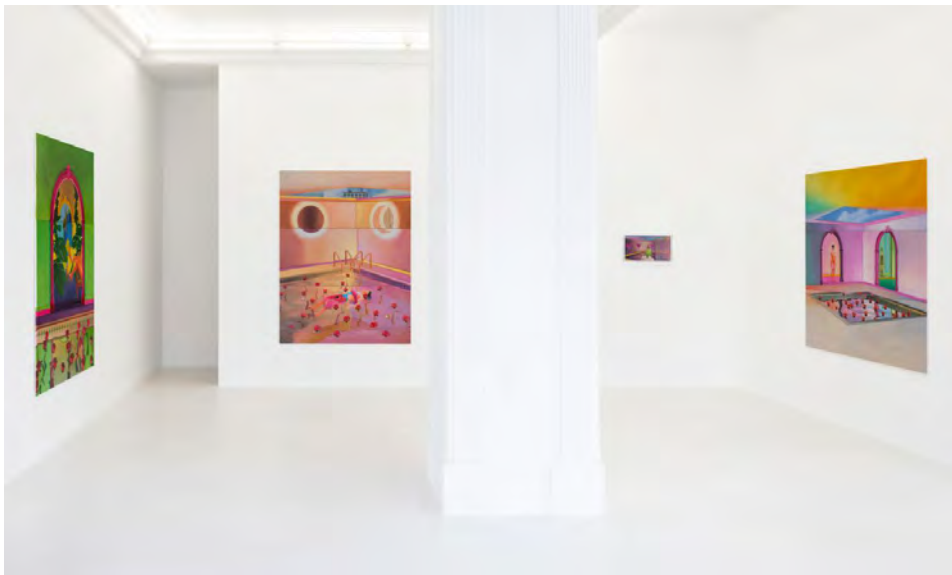
Hiding in plain sight, pixelization is the unmistakable leitmotif of “Love Pool,” the painter Mak2’s (*1989) first solo exhibition at the Berlin gallery of Peres Projects. Flaunting digital elements on physical canvas, the humor of the show is apparent, as this definitive marker of poor quality and inaccuracy plays an integral role in it. Her paintings and sketches of pixelization, deployed here among intimate minglings of bodies near ornate indoor swimming pools, their surfaces covered in roses and glowing flatly, do not feel like puritan inconsistencies; instead, each placement of these trite squares produces yet another forbidden lure.

The generous interiors of these triptychs are a subset of “Home Sweet Home,” a series initially undertaken from the confines of her tiny Hong Kong apartment in 2019, at the height of local clashes between police and protesters opposed to the legalization of judicial extradition to mainland China. She started each work by taking

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a screenshot of an opulent home interior from the video game *The Sims* (2000–), before splitting these glossy images into thirds and commissioning three different artists from the online shopping platform Taobao to each paint one part, without reference to the larger picture. Reassembled in “Love Pool,” their lagging, out-of-sync looks clash with the pools’ symbolic fluidity, inverting the process of distortion that more typically occurs in the digitalization of the material world; the paintings are false representations of virtual space exactly because they are tangible.

The scenes in “Love Pool” are staged for a particular kind of sleaze, but still feel highly unerotic, most likely because the triptychs lack exactly the sense of depth integral to sensuality. Take *Home Sweet Home: Love Pool 12* (2022): Placed in the middle of the painting, a figure lays flat on their front, elbows and knuckles scraping the rims of the pool as they crawl in clumsy desperation towards a pineapple, their skin enveloped from thighs to shoulders in a blanket of pixels. Are we deprived of an artistic, tasteful nude? Below them and underwater, a reflection of the knuckle-scraper arches backward, pixel-less. Once carved apart by blurry swatches, sexuality becomes liquid and unified once again.



Home Sweet Home: Love Pool 8 (2022) plays out a similar spiel, albeit in a swimming pool shallower in terms of decor and taste. Tacky, flat, neon palm trees and pastel hearts embellish the room’s back wall, alongside a couple of arcade video games, some taped-up posters, and one statuesque bust. Resurfacing vaporwave is not its most curious feature: With their back turned to us, a lime green-haired figure getting out of the pool faces an embracing couple through an arched doorway and a grid of dark-red pixels to match. While one is definitely shirtless, clothed legs around the pixels’ rigid edges reveal that the two are not naked, raising the question of who and what the obscurement is for. Can the third figure facing the embracing couple see them without any limitations, or are they just as severed from the intimate squeeze as we viewers are outside the picture plane? Like so much else in the gallery, *Love Pool 8* raises hurdles to directly approaching the thing in question. In this case, the difficulty of observing others without succumbing to passive voyeurism. Despite the viewer’s immediate, conditioned urge to uncover, expose, and interpret in works of art, “Love Pool” presents us with visuals that request that we look away, seemingly betraying our role as an audience.

Circling the exhibition space one last time, a memory of using dial-on-demand Internet routing pops into my head. Back when I was relying on sluggish computer processors and an online connection that beeped and buzzed, loading any detailed image meant sitting in front of my screen as row after row of pixels loaded, waiting attentively for the picture’s final form. In that sense, pixelization is not strictly censorship, but could just as easily be the act of processing intense, condensed imagery. Mak2’s work convolutes the two, articulating in doing so how would-be concealments can double as slow acts of revelation.