

Shuang Li "Forever" at Peres Projects, Milan

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Shuang Li "Forever" at Peres Projects, Milan, 2023. Courtesy: Peres Projects. Photo: t-space studio

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A video projected on the bottom of a heart-shaped fountain makes up the central axis of this exhibition. Titled *Heart is a Broken Record* (2023), it is an impressionistic montage of videos uploaded to YouTube by fans, taken during concerts of the band My Chemical Romance throughout the last twenty years. For this video, the artist collects the brief moments before the band appears onstage, drowned by lights and screams, in effect cutting off the concert footage before it even begins. Interspersed with this concert imagery are images of spattering blood that morph to form veins, intravenous lines, sparks turning into lava, as the video continually defers and suspends the sound the audience waits eagerly to hear. Thus, at the bottom of a wishing well, the installation re-stages a concert that never happens, composed of footage of concerts that have actually taken place.

My Chemical Romance, the emo pop-punk band that has swept the world since the early 2010s, has had a significant impact on Li's life and practice. Indeed, Li often says that My Chemical Romance saved her life, a sentiment that is shared among those who make up the band's international fan base, and it is the emotionally weighted experience of fandom that the artist investigates through her multidisciplinary artistic practice.

Fandom: what does it mean to be a fan? And more specifically, what is a fangirl? Through this body of work, Li investigates the at times gendered terminology that is associated with strong admiration for notable people, that often has a connotation of an unthinking, mindless devotion. In "Forever," surrounding the video installation are resin cast wall works that freeze various ephemera and mundane objects in time: trinkets, gadgets, fabric, and other personal articles are trapped in transparent molds, along with found objects that are reminiscent of fan art. Li's own writing appears in the works, contained in small notes which she encases in the translucent substance. Many of the objects are not only signifiers of pop punk culture, but also that of the fangirl and girlhood in general, which here the artist distorts to be mildewed and mutant, and suggestively grotesque. Collected together within an uncanny substance, these various fragments reveal how the position of the fangirl is one in which an identity is built and strengthened through attachment and association, while also acting as a type of iconoclasm that unsettles the paraphernalia of cult followings.

A group of standing sculptures make up the final component of the exhibition. They are semi-abstracted, distorted and elongated feet and legs, clad in ribbed leg warmers and platform boots. The works are a reference to an earlier performance titled *Lord of the Flies* (2022), part of the 2022 exhibition *Where Jellyfish Come From* at Antenna Space in Shanghai, in which Li mobilized a team of twenty identically dressed surrogate performers to stand in for her when she was stranded in Europe during the most severe years of COVID-19. More than playing her avatars, however, the performers are a reminder of Li's absence in China and her consequent placelessness, as well as the often immaterial characteristics of digital intimacy forged between people who live great distances apart. With an aim to re-stage the performance, the sculptures expand on the symbolism of the shoes, which function as containers for absence by suggesting existence.

Indeed, these works emphasize the absence of the physical body—the physical bodies of "idols" alluded to in the video installation, the physical bodies of performers in *Lord of the Flies* activated here by sculptures of shoes, as well as the physical body of the artist herself—and the abstract fantasies that are inherent to conjuring a missing person. For Li, it is in this absence that fandom occurs, an experience that was amplified by her upbringing in a small town in China, without access to the forms of culture that she longed for. While exploring different fandoms of different artists, it has become clear to Li that not only the premise of the fandom is universal, the narrative of "XXX saved my life" is also prevalent in every fandom. Further, the absence creates a gap that allows forms of expression and identification to mutate, expressed in Li's work through the plastic pearls encased in the wall pieces, that echo the drops of blood in the fountain.

In "Forever," charms and objects bleed out of the resin, as if leaking from a screen while becoming their own shape and form, extending the artist's research into the relationship between body and screen. As Li speculates in *Ether (Poor Objects)* (2021), which was shown at the 59th Venice Biennale "Milk of Dreams," as well as in *This Mirror Isn't Big Enough For The Two Of Us* (2023), currently on display at Milan's Fondazione Prada as part of the exhibition "Paraventi: Folding Screens from the 17th to 21st Centuries," the relationship between body and screen has taken new dimensions, such that the screen now begets the physical body. And so, in the case study of fandom enacted by "Forever," which wouldn't come into being at all without the existence of screens and digital platforms, this infiltration of the digital realm into embodiment has even greater resonance.

at Peres Projects, Milan
until January 26, 2024

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