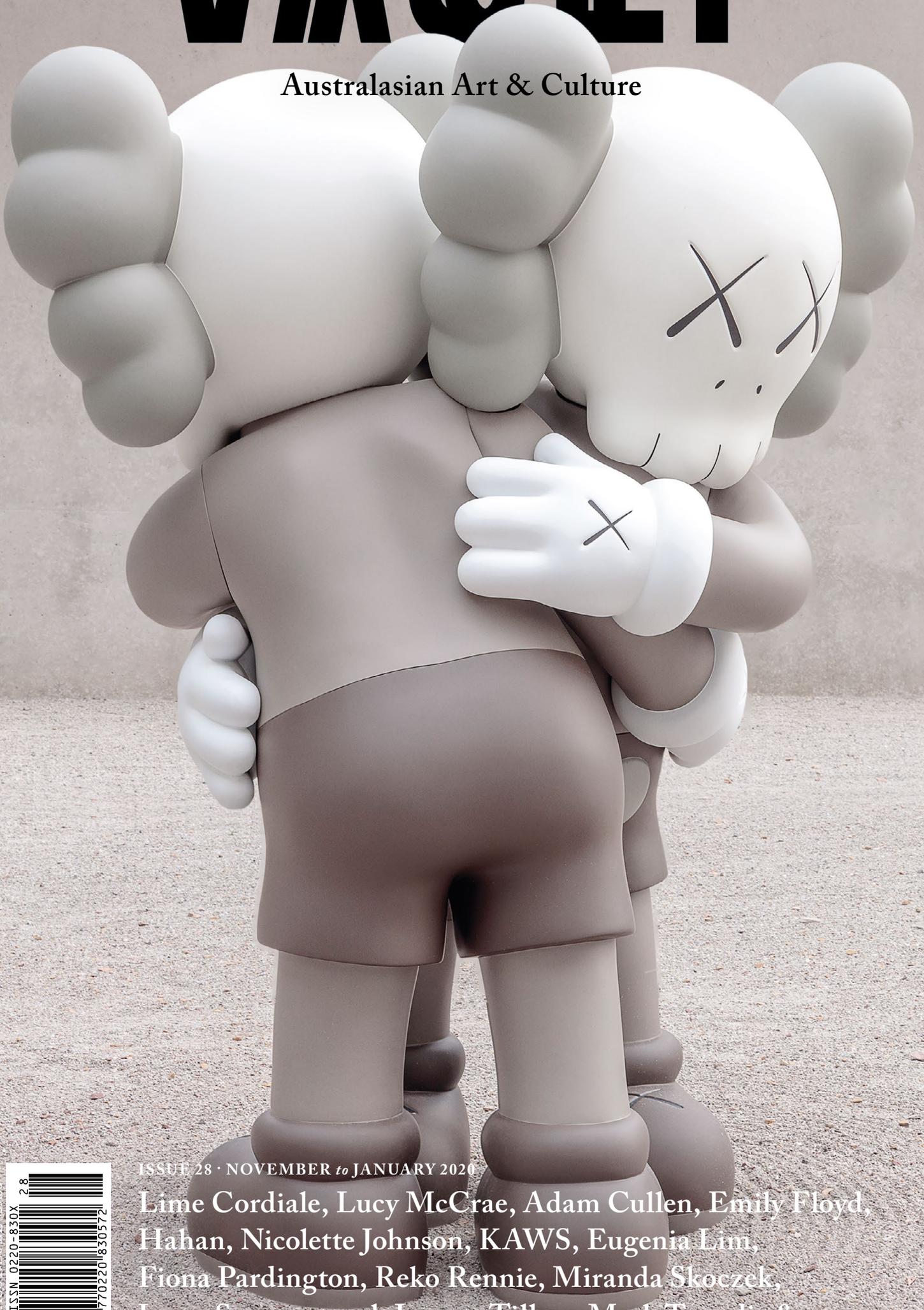


# VAVULT™

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Lime Cordiale, Lucy McCrae, Adam Cullen, Emily Floyd,  
Hahan, Nicolette Johnson, KAWS, Eugenia Lim,  
Fiona Pardington, Reko Rennie, Miranda Skoczek,  
Japan Supernatural, Imants Tillers, Mark Tweedie & more



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# EUGENIA LIM

## HIDDEN FIGURES

Eugenia Lim says that she's always had a 'motley approach to creativity'. Growing up in Melbourne, the interdisciplinary artist – whose output includes video, installation, performance and publishing – was less interested in art history than she was in making zines with her best friend. The medium's DIY ethos and defiant critique of power structures set the stage for an artistic practice that playfully skewers everything from national identity and spatial politics to the way the gig economy holds workers hostage. Ahead of *On Demand*, Lim's new show at Melbourne's Gertrude Contemporary, *VAULT* caught up with the artist to talk about architecture legacies, the failures of late capitalism and the cyclical nature of big ideas.

FEATURE by NEHA KALE





Your 2009 exhibition, *Australian Landscapes* at Kings ARI, signalled your early interest in the relationship between art, the built environment and our perception of the world. This fascination is also at the heart of *The Australian Ugliness* (2018), a three-channel video installation that showed at Open House Melbourne in 2018, which is both a critique of and love letter to Modernist architect Robin Boyd. What initially drew you to this connection between architecture and identity?

In Australian architecture, we love façade – but I think that what plays on the skin of that exterior is a signifier for what we want to be underneath. [In terms of] *The Australian Ugliness*, there is no unified whole – all these contradictions exist at one time and that is what Australia is. I feel like that is the beauty and difficulty of it.

It is not like I trained in architecture before I started looking at spatial politics but I [do think] a lot about how all of these things play out in massive ways through architecture and the design of space. Both *The Australian Ugliness* and *Australian Landscapes* were very much shaped by visits and recesses to sites, to try to get a sense of how my body feels in spaces. I started thinking about the aesthetics of architecture and issues of accessibility and visibility from a political and feminist perspective. Architects design with this kind of purity, with these perfect 3D models, and it is almost like living in these spaces is an afterthought.

**Both historically and still today housing is so bound up in our sense of self as Australians but we don't have much critical dialogue surrounding it.**

We accept it blindly or we rally against it. All the works I make [enter] these ambiguous zones between the binaries of what we think we want and what we think we don't want.

Your 2015 exhibition *Yellow Peril*, which was shown at Bus Projects in Melbourne and Artreal Gallery in Sydney, explores the influence of immigration on Australian identity. It featured photographs of your parents, newly arrived from Singapore, printed on the gold mylar blankets used in rescue and emergency. The show also speaks to the history of Chinese immigration to Australia as well as the economic relationship between China and Australia today. What were your hopes for that show?

Australia is built on xenophobia and scapegoating and otherness. For me, when I was looking at that work, there is a lot of discussion of the new 'yellow peril'. There was a lot of fear of the Chinese buying real estate and Chinese involvement in mining. [Chinese immigrants] were here before the first miners and I think a lot of my work is interested in that idea of time travel, [showing] histories that have been seen as minor or less visible as equal to [history] as we know it.

**For your 2019 exhibition *The Ambassador*, which showed at the Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art, Adelaide before touring around the country, you perform as *The Ambassador*, a figure dressed in a gold Mao jacket. The character riffs on the idea of the 'yellow peril' in late capitalism along with the fantasies and fears we project onto racialised bodies today. How did persona and performance become part of your work?**

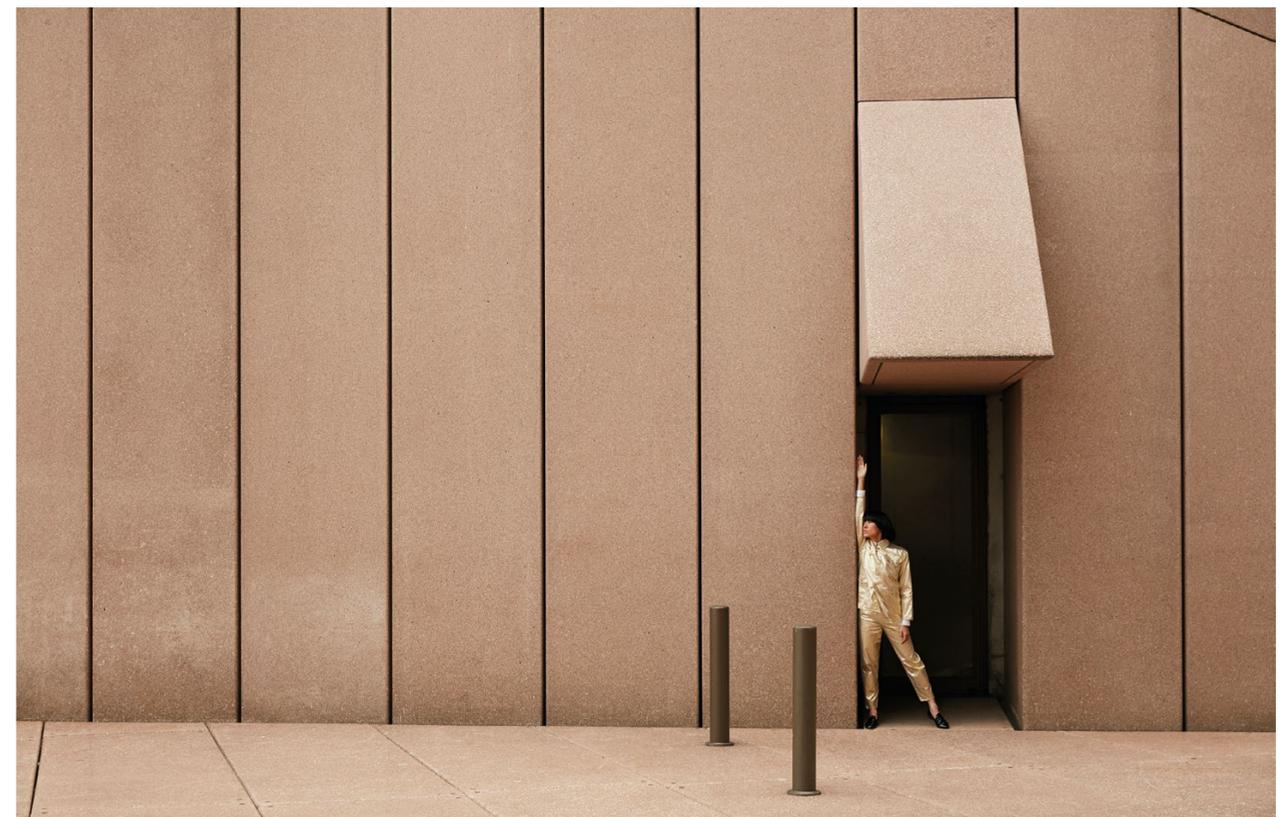
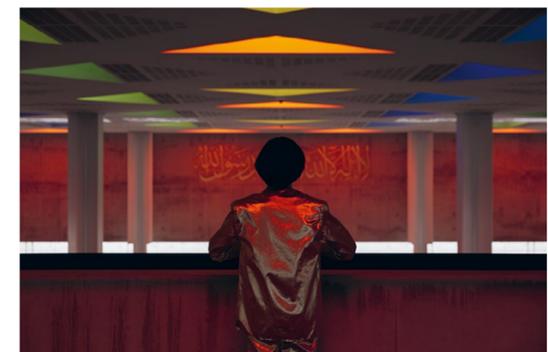
[Performance] has been part of my practice ever since I first started performing on camera years ago while on exchange at the Rhode Island School of Design, New York. It is the idea that masks and costumes enable you to embody and perform different realities. *The Ambassador* enabled me to look

Installation view  
EUGENIA LIM  
WITH KAT CHAN  
*Elephant*, 2018  
Gertrude Studios 2018,  
Gertrude Contemporary  
Photo: Christo Crocker

Opposite  
Top to bottom  
Left to right  
EUGENIA LIM  
*The Australian Ugliness*, 2018  
(production stills)  
Photos: Tom Ross

Previous page  
Portrait Eugenia Lim  
Photo: Bryony Jackson  
Courtesy the artist

*"In Australian architecture, we love façade – but I think that what plays on the skin of that exterior is a signifier for what we want to be underneath."*



at other artists' work and think about how I can be in dialogue with them.

There's an artist called Tseng Kwong Chi, who was from Hong Kong but lived in New York City in the '80s and at this time moved in the same circles as Keith Haring. He made this amazing series called *East Meets West*. (1979) He dressed up in a Mao suit and took self-portraits of himself in front of all of the monuments of [Western] architecture. I [discovered] those photos around the time I was making *Australian Landscapes* and was thinking a lot about self-portraiture as an act of reclamation. Tseng was very playful in his approach of trying to encounter stereotypes – he was an Asian man who dressed up in a Mao suit but had this lanyard that read 'slut for art' and the joke was that no-one ever looked close enough to realise. They just thought he was some Chinese diplomat and treated him really deferentially. That was when I thought about the Mao suit as this very loaded signifier of Chinese [identity]. Then there's the loaded nature of gold as a symbol. I also love that gold reflects but also disappears into the landscape.

**On Demand, your 2019 show at Gertrude Contemporary, was made in collaboration with people who work in the gig economy. The gig economy sells us this neoliberal fantasy of progress – yet it is also forcing many people into a precarious existence while pressuring us to commodify ourselves. Why is challenging these ideas around labour important to you as an artist?**

I've been thinking a lot about the ethics of the world that we live in. I'm trying to understand our complicity with neoliberal systems, the structures that enable it and how we live with ourselves. This thinking about work and labour harks back to *Artificial Islands*, a show I made at firstdraft in Sydney in 2017. [It was] about the Palm Jumeirah in Dubai as a symbol of capitalism to the nth degree, about what happens when you take what we are doing to this planet to its horrific logical conclusion. The workers who [built] the Palm

Jumeirah lived in shantytowns and were earning something like \$14 a day and every non-sustainable practice you can think of was embodied in that building. *Artificial Islands* was made with Sydney-based workers and the labour became part of the art-making process. But rather than thinking of the [Palm Jumeirah] as something that is 'over there' I think it is connected to how we live.

*On Demand* is an installation work that includes a single-channel video work and when it is installed, it becomes physical. There are two bikes that are hooked up to this magnet system and there is almost this gym-like or industrial nature to it. There's this idea of endless working, commodifying oneself to achieve success – it is hard because I'm part of the system but [I'm interested in] how these systems can be exposed through the system itself. The need for more speed takes a toll that is physical, emotional and psychological. *On Demand* is very much about that.

[Next], I'm working on a project with APHIDS, the experimental arts organisation that I'm a Co-Director of, for next year's Melbourne Festival. The work will have a cast of 20 gig-economy workers and will be the live, performative [evolution] of *On Demand*. When I start a project, questions that are raised are usually fed into the next project. The forms manifest in different ways and the ideas become larger. **V**

Eugenia Lim will show as part of *Between Two Worlds* at Newcastle Art Gallery from November 16, 2019 to February 16, 2020; with APHIDS as part of *Easy Riders: The Prologue Program* at MPavilion, Melbourne, from December 2 to 10, 2019; as part of *Gertrude Studios 2019* (group show), Gertrude Contemporary, Melbourne, from November 22 to December 14, 2019; in a solo touring exhibition presented by Museums and Galleries NSW and 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, *Eugenia Lim: The Ambassador*, Riddoch Art Gallery, South Australia, January 17 to February 23, 2020. *Eugenia Lim: On Demand* shows at Gertrude Contemporary until November 9, 2019.

nag.org.au  
mpavilion.org  
gertrude.org.au  
aphids.net  
riddochartgallery.org.au  
eugenialim.com



Top to bottom  
EUGENIA LIM  
WITH APHIDS  
*Easy Riders* (concept  
image), 2019  
Photo: Bryony Jackson

EUGENIA LIM  
WITH APHIDS  
*On Demand* (concept  
image), 2019  
Photo: Bryony Jackson

EUGENIA LIM  
*New Australians (Yellow  
Peril, 1980/2015)*, 2015  
screen print on mylar  
emergency blanket  
210 x 160 cm  
Photo: Zan Wimberley

Courtesy the artist