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Blue Willow



PLATE 46: Roberto Cavalli. Evening dress, autumn–winter 2005–2006. Blue and white silk satin. *China: Through the Looking Glass*, 2015, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Courtesy of Platon.

ALMOST TWO HUNDRED years after New Yorkers flocked to the Peale Museum in New York (later to become the New York Museum of Natural History and Science) to witness the living tableau of the Chinese Lady, and long after Anna May Wong's celluloid radiance had faded from public memory, throngs from all over the world gathered in Manhattan to witness another spectacular display of Asiatic femininity



PLATE 47: Fashion by Laura Grai. *China: Through the Looking Glass*, 2015, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo by author.



PLATE 48: Yves Saint Laurent and Tom Ford. Evening dress, autumn–winter 2004–2005. Yellow silk satin embroidered with polychrome plastic sequins. *China: Through the Looking Glass*, 2015, Metropolitan Museum of New York. Courtesy of Platon Images.



PLATE 49: Valentino evening dress from “Shanghai Collection” (1959). *China: Through the Looking Glass*, 2015, Metropolitan Museum of New York. Courtesy of Platon Images.



PLATE 50: Alexander McQueen and Philip Treacy, “Chinese Garden” headaddress, spring–summer 2005. Carved cork. *China: Through the Looking Glass*, 2015, Metropolitan Museum of New York. Courtesy of Platon Images.

qua ornament: the 2015 exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art entitled *China: Through the Looking Glass* (plates 46–50).

The exhibition featured more than 140 examples of mostly Euro-American haute couture and avant-garde ready-to-wear from fashion luminaries such as Paul Poiret, Yves Saint Laurent, John Galiano, and Alexander McQueen. Interspersed among these resplendent sartorial creations were decontextualized Chinese and Japanese artifacts from the museum’s Asian art collection. An eighteenth-century yellow silk satin imperial robe shadowed a sequined yellow silk satin evening gown by Tom Ford for Yves Saint Laurent. A Qing Dynasty snuff bottle and a twelfth-century kimono echoed a Cartier perfume flask. An early-fifteenth-century cobalt blue dragon jar accompanied a Roberto Cavalli creation in blue and white.

This sumptuous collection rehearsed for the twenty-first-century audience the basic tenets of nineteenth-century Orientalism: opulence and sensuality are the signature components of Asiatic character; Asia is always ancient, excessive, feminine, open for use, and decadent; material consumption promises cultural possession; and there is no room in the Orientalist imagination for national, ethnic, or historical specificities. Most of all, the show reminded us that China—conflated throughout the show with Asia at large, a cypher for a cypher—equals *ornament*. The Metropolitan had accomplished quite an ornamental feat of its own: a byzantine buildout replete with intricate corridors and concentric spaces, large decorative arches leading to secret, enfolded rooms, and a tall, transparent, plasticized bamboo forest.¹ One turned and

suddenly found oneself in a hushed “garden,” standing on a meditation bridge overlooking a large glistening artificial pond surrounded by winding corridors (plate 51). No natural light disturbed this dreamlike, highly man-made environment. The lacquer pond glimmered but did not flow. In this beautiful graveyard, Eastern nature appeared wholly continuous with Eastern artifice.

From the get-go, we realize the limits of Saidean Orientalism as a critical framework, as the exhibition itself has already co-opted the term as an internal critique and alibi. Introductory signage greeted visitors as they entered through a set of two-story-tall red lacquer doors:

Empire of Signs

For the designers in this exhibition, China represents a land of free-floating symbols, a land where postmodernity finds its natural expression. Like Marco Polo or Gulliver, they are itinerant travelers to another country, reflecting on its artistic and cultural traditions as an exoticized extension of their own.... When quoting Chinese artifacts or costumes, these designers are not reproducing literal copies or accurate facsimiles. Rather, they reinterpret them through seemingly paradoxical postmodern constructions.

The show recuses itself from the burden of authenticity even as its mis-en-scène fetishizes the artifactually and culturally real.² Invoking and recursively enacting Roland Barthes’s famously cool dismissal of the notion of (Japanese) cultural authenticity—“to me the orient is a matter of indifference”³—this exhibit disaggregates aesthetic pleasure from politics and reclaims postmodernism as the cure for



PLATE 51: Garden and pond display from *China: Through the Looking Glass*, 2015, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo by author.

Orientalism, performing exactly what Hal Foster has called capitalism's revenge on postmodernism.⁴

There is obviously much one can critique on the grounds of racial appropriation, inauthenticity, commercialism, and neoliberal bad faith. Although the Met exhibit was wildly popular—the show was extended three months past its initial end date—it also faced stringent criticism and protest. The *New York Times* published a scathing review, offering a history lesson about the so-called China Trade and its legacy for American imperialism along the way.⁵ The director of the Asian American Arts Centre, Robert Lee, wrote a letter of protest to the Metropolitan Museum that created its own problematic assumptions about authenticity:

If the Met were a department store or a movie theatre I think the public would understand that this is a commercial venture designed to entertain and promote... the mystery and inscrutability of China's distant past. Your disclaimer that this is not related to any commercial intentions and has a legitimate theme of re-evaluating Edward Said's ideas of Orientalism is clearly an excuse to affirm the acceptability and dominance of the Western market and its reliance on Orientalist notions.... [T]hese fantasies of China do not support your claims of overlapping creative complexity, rather they affirm the power of the dominance of Western Orientalist commitments to define the Other as they see fit.⁶

While the heart of the criticism is well taken, the critique of stereotype has the unfortunate side effect of reproducing a series of equally restrictive and problematic binaries: the authentic Orient versus the false Orient of Western projection; real (masculine) history versus illusory (feminine) arts.

The museum director, Thomas P. Campbell, clearly anticipated such critique and hoped, unsuccessfully, to forestall it by enlisting renowned Hong Kong filmmaker Wong Kar-wai as the exhibit's artistic director. Wong provided footage for large-screen projections of iconic scenes that reiterate the theme of China as beauty-cum-decadence: the opium dens of *Broken Blossoms* (1919) and *The Big Sleep* (1946); the imperial nostalgia of Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* (1987); and versions of the same nostalgia from contemporary Chinese cinema, including Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002) and *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006), Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), and Wong's own *In the Mood for Love* (2000) and 2046 (2004). In a statement in the exhibit's catalog, Wong reiterates the claim that the China of this exhibition is not the real China but one that belongs to the realm of "projection, reflection, and fascination," but he nonetheless concludes with this wistful note: "I hope that [this show] will... [provide] visitors to the exhibition and readers of this book with a closer view of Chinese aesthetic and cultural traditions."⁷

The museum's attempt to differentiate postmodern globalization from nineteenth-century Orientalism—or what Adam Geczy in one of the catalog essays calls “transorientalism”—falls short of its mark. Geczy explains transorientalism as “a self-conscious use of the Orient as a geographically uncircumscribed zone, whose cultural specificity is secondary to the imaginative uses to which it can be put,”⁸ but this definition could just as easily describe nineteenth-century Orientalism, itself the lubricant for the vast movements of objects in arguably the first early modern global economy. For all the exhibit's attempts to take on the critique of Orientalism, both in the staging of the show and in the catalog, we find ourselves in a closed loop. For if at one point the liberal left relied on the missing real as a safeguard against Orientalist appropriation, then we must now contend with the fact that *that* absence is now openly taken as the very rationale for continual Orientalist production. The opposition between fantasy and “brute reality,” a dyad that Orientalism both perpetuates and elides, continues to vex the war against the empire of signs.⁹

In the end, we should be less surprised by the tenacity of this racial imaginary than by the limits of our response to it. For a long time now, the concepts of Asian authenticity and Orientalist commodification have remained our only safeguards against the vice of racist consumption. But neither the longing for the former nor the allegation of the latter can address the complex relations between appropriation and susceptibility, or between embodiment and style. Moral outrage in the face of consumption or fetishization, however warranted, cannot address or relieve the truly striking, idiosyncratic, and intense exchange between thingness and personness into which a display like this draws us. The exhibition's dizzying invitation for visitors to lose themselves in extravagant aestheticism, the sensorial immersion of textiles and materials, the seductiveness of vivacious inanimateness and synthetic pleasures all work to facilitate that slide between things and persons, an erotic and erratic plunge that both preconditions the making of Chinese and Asiatic femininity and renders inadequate binary critiques of this kind of racial objectification. Thus while Saidean Orientalism and the Foucauldian critique that it embodies do much to help us identify symptoms and locate political culpability, neither can address the profound, queasily seductive entanglement between organic corporeality and aesthetic abstraction imputed to Asiatic femininity.

Let's face it, critical discourse has never been very good at addressing what Rita Felski calls the erotics of aesthetics beyond that of a critique of commodification or an assertion of transgressive pleasure.¹⁰ I don't try to make an argument for pleasure, though that is often elided by the morality and gendered politics attached to critiques of consumption. Instead, the exhibition gives me the opportunity to pay attention to the material, affective, and kinesthetic making of an aesthetic ontology that is the ornamental personhood of Asiatic femininity. How do we begin to think

about racialized bodies that remain insistently synthetic and artificial? How do we take seriously the life of a subject who lives as an object, and how do we do so without either resigning that figure to the annals of commodity fetishism or assigning it a reassuring corporeality?

FEATHERS AND SHARDS

The challenge here is to negotiate the very human consequences of “de-animated” persons and the very material effects of animated things. Of the many “enigmatic objects” (a term used by the exhibition) displayed in this extensive exhibition, the most mesmerizing and confounding one is surely the specter of the yellow woman, synecdochized through faceless and at times headless mannequins and metonymized through luxuriantly sensuous fabrics. This seductive presence does not require a biological body or nature; quite the opposite, Asiatic femininity is radiantly reproduced through inorganic and insensate mediums. Consider the evocation of warm Asiatic femininity via the cool surfaces of ceramics in plate 52. In a large hall devoted to the theme of Blue Willow, an imitation Chinese china pattern made popular by Thomas Minton in the 1790s, we find a grouping of blue and cream silk gowns designed by contemporary designers such as Roberto Cavalli and Alexander McQueen. If we dismiss this association between Asiatic femininity and Chinese ceramic as yet another Orientalist cliché, we miss a much more intricate and intriguing proposition: the affinity between racialization, imagined personhood, and synthetic invention.

In *China: Through the Looking Glass* the ornament, as artifact and gesture, acts as a medium through which the human is simultaneously invoked and displaced and powerful ideas of personhood, race, and objectness are transferred. Let us return to the interplay between Asiatic femininity and ceramics. Recent scholarship in the area of material culture has revealed the complex history of Chinese porcelain: its importance in early global imperial trade; its role in spurring European technological invention and decorative design; and its impact on growing economic, social, and cultural values in Denmark, Germany, and France, as well as England and its American colonies.¹¹ To this richly documented history I would add the wrought and fraught intimacy between this “white gold” and the making of yellow flesh.¹² More than economic or social values, Chinese porcelain personifies a set of affective and somatic values forged out of the kiln of what Gordon Chang aptly calls the centuries-old “fateful ties” between China and the West.¹³ Out of the era of the China Trade, Atlantic slavery, and their aftermath, we see the birth of a material culture that shapes the physical and affective values attached to racialized bodies. Objects and materials are racialized, yes, but objects and materials also racialize people.



PLATE 52: Trio display from *China: Through the Looking Glass*, 2015, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo by author.

Scholars like Mechthild Fend and Chi-ming Yang have demonstrated how material substances spurred chemical experiments with colors that not only fed artisanal and industrial innovations across centuries but also promoted racial ideas.¹⁴ Mahogany's red sheen, glossy black lacquer, translucent white porcelain, and the brilliant colors of indigo, cochineal dyes, and silver ore all carried and produced racial meanings. In short, race making in the nineteenth century is also an artisanal project, as indebted to ornamental practice and material making as it is to the pseudobiology of early ethnography.

Imported goods and materials of Asia and the Americas held novel, structural properties like durability or elasticity that Europeans not only strove to imitate and harness for their own manufacturing but also increasingly came to associate and project onto the racialized bodies from whom the objects came. Porcelain, what was known as true *kaolin* Chinese porcelain, is particularly interesting in this regard because of its alchemical and seemingly impossible properties: known not only for its glossy beauty, its refinement, its receptivity to color and design manipulation but also for its surprising durability, its miraculous capacity to sustain the extreme high heat that lends it its translucency. The invention of porcelain as a precious and rare new material—an advanced production process that baffled Western manufacturers for decades and served as something of a precursor to the twentieth-century fascination with *materia nova*—promised in the eighteenth century the magic of material transformation.¹⁵ Porcelain thus connoted both hardness and plasticity, old-world

beauty and new-world technology, fragile daintiness and insensate coolness: a mixture of antithetical symbolic meanings that are then ascribed to, indeed, *become* the very “stuff” of Asiatic femininity.

The seemingly trite association of Asiatic female skin with porcelain—from the cliché of the pearlized skin of Asian women to this exhibit—thus in fact carries this profound and layered history of ornamentalist transformation, affecting the merging of flesh and matter, persons and things. It is not surprising, then, that the fates of Chinese female bodies and Chinese porcelain ran parallel to each other. When it came to represent the precariousness of a system of Western wealth based on importing novel Eastern goods, porcelain, along with other things Asiatic, started to lose its radiance. As Euro-American acquisitiveness began to run in excess of what it could offer China in return, the early romance with china and China began to deteriorate. This breakdown left lasting traces in American law and economic policy, from U.S. foreign policy and trade agreements in the eighteenth century to discriminatory immigration laws in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. China’s meaning in the American popular imagination changed, with Chinese porcelain itself coming to connote tacky crockery. And crucially for our discussion, the breakdown of this country’s China romance marked the bodies of Asiatic women. The *New York Times* had this to say about the Chinese women’s gymnastics team at the 1996 Summer Olympics: “The Chinese remain the world’s most erratic top gymnasts, and today, like many a Ming vase, their routines looked lovely but had cracks in several places.”¹⁶

Thus more than exemplifying an incidental decorative motif or revealing the limits of the imperial imagination, the citation—indeed, the embodied objecthood—of Chinese porcelain in the Met exhibition, regardless of curatorial intentions, revives this long, expansive history about human imbrication with racialized and manufactured materials, fueling the fraught amalgamation between inorganic commodity and Asiatic female flesh. We might say that the ubiquitous presence of fine Chinese porcelain throughout the show generates a specific epidermal schema of its own.

For example, the creation in plates 53 and 54 by Alexander McQueen for his autumn–winter 2011–2012 collection offers a play of simulation and contrast, fusing the inorganic and the organic, the insensate and the sensorial, the hard and the soft. Most of all, it invokes a particular vision of the racialized female body as one that sustains these contradictions. The fluffy layered skirt, at first glance, looks made of supple feathers (animal) but turns out to be shredded organza (fabric). The exposed underskirt, suggestive of layers of artificial skins turned inside out, is at once beautiful and violent. It is offset by the startling weight of the bodice, which on closer inspection turns out to be not the proverbial bone but hundreds of reconstituted shards of blue and white porcelain: porcelain as flesh-and-skin and skin-and-flesh as porcelain.



PLATE 53: Alexander McQueen and Sarah Burton. Evening dress, autumn–winter 2011–2012. Cream silk satin embroidered with blue and white porcelain; white silk organza, from *China: Through the Looking Glass*, 2015, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo by author.



PLATE 54: Detail of plates plate 53. Photo by author.

Here Chinese femininity is not only more and less than human but also man-made; not only assembled but also reassembled. This reassemblage, by virtue of its fabrication, memorializes the practice of ornamentalism and the techniques of race making. This image of the flexible yet brittle body reminds us that this aesthetic discourse is fastened to a fractured history of craft, labor, and bodies in transit. Eric Hayot has traced the persistent Euro-American conceptualization of the Chinese male body as infinitely and stoically capable of sustaining pain and suffering, an association that led to the image of the coolie as at once “animal and superhuman,” an ideal laborer.¹⁷ Here I am sketching a Chinese female version of this discursive formation: a smooth beauty that bears the lines of its own wreckage, a delicacy that is also impermeable and insensate. The dream of the yellow woman is thus really a dream about the inorganic. From Anna May Wong’s thingness to Nancy Kwan as the late-night television spokesperson for Pearl Cream, porcelain has always represented flesh *and* not flesh.¹⁸

CHINESE DETAILS

Going back to the trio in our Blue Willow room (plate 52), we can now see a deeper grammar of the inhuman human structuring this stage. The McQueen gown is placed next to a Roberto Cavalli dress, and both in turn stand next to and echo an early fifteenth-century Chinese porcelain jar painted with a cobalt blue dragon: urn as beauty as death as gown as corporeal gesture. The sensorial and somatic realization of Asiatic femininity fulfills itself through the forms of these empty-yet-constructed vessels (plate 55).

There is no ordinary flesh here, by which I do not mean the obvious, that there are no real bodies on display, but rather that this show is palpably not that interested in the human, much less in women. These garments do not need the human; indeed, the human would disrupt their composure. We are looking at a peculiar form of anthropomorphism or prosopopoeia whereby the spectral human is being used to recall material objectness rather than vice versa. The objects on display, from frocks to vases, invite neither wearability nor usage. Instead of objects that function as appendages to the human (as one would expect fashion and furnishings to do), what we find here instead are objects that reference other objects.

In this room, the human is the ornamental gesture, and the ornamental in turn acquires its human aura by being “Chinese.” In other words, beauty here comes from the primacy of the object; the human or the anthropomorphic is the incidental alibi for, or afterthought of, relishing this pure objectness. At the same time, however, what renders this pure objectness legible as such is precisely the invocation of (very



PLATE 55: Roberto Cavalli. Evening Dress, autumn–winter 2005–2006. Blue and white silk satin. *China: Through the Looking Glass*, 2015, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Courtesy of Platon.

human) racial difference. Where Orientalism is about turning persons into things that can be possessed and dominated, ornamentalism is about a fantasy of turning things into persons through the conduit of racial meaning in order, paradoxically, to allow the human to escape his or her own humanness.

If the modernist relation to the fetishized object is fundamentally a melancholic one, then we are getting here something of a twist to that subject-object relation. Bill Brown tells us that we are prone to look for ourselves in lost or alien mass cultural objects: "It is all those spaces within [the Thing]—the inside of the chest, the inside of the wardrobe, the inside of the drawer—that...enable us to image and imagine human interiority."¹⁹ But here we are looking at objects that short-circuit that project by duplicating our own truncated or stunted relation to the very notion of interiority. In the Blue Willow room at the Met, all the empty containers—the urn, the dresses—are wholly filled by emptiness. We cannot fill these voids, because they are easily occupied without us. They only seem to offer the promises of anthropomorphic possibilities as a compensation for making us confront their (and our own) thingness. This is perhaps why one feels so essentially alone in a beautiful room filled with things presumably meant to enhance us. The relationship here, however, is not simply one of an object refusing the human but also of an object that does so by mirroring the inhumanness of the human.

To point to this enchantment of the inhuman is not to rehearse the problem of objectification or to downplay the issue of race but rather to point to a provocative dilemma about how the object preconditions, rather than being the product of, the human figure—a modern crisis that Asiatic femininity personifies for the West. As a result, ornamentalism not only is an object of feminist critique but also can be a vector of feminism. The eradication of the human, even as raced and gendered corporeality is being imputed, compels a reconceptualization of feminized, racialized flesh. The critique of power, from Michel Foucault to Edward Said to Ann Laura Stoler, has long taught us that carnality and flesh, instead of being private domains, are sites that have been deeply penetrated and structured by power. Human flesh has undeniably been one of the highest prices paid for the history of human enslavement. And often in feminist and racial discourses, understandably, we end up with a longing for that lost and violated flesh or, inversely, a total refusal of the body. But these stranded "bodies" in the Metropolitan invite further ruminations about the interplay between fleshliness and the inorganic for certain raced and gendered bodies. What happens to our notions of the subject when carnality is cultivated not out of flesh but from its fusion with inorganic matter? What happens when we accept that style, mediated through yet detached from a racial referent, may not be simply the excess or the opposite of ontology but may in fact be a precondition for embodiment, an insight that challenges the very foundation of the category of the human? What is at stake

here is not just the objectification of people but also how that objectification opens up a constitutive estrangement within the articulation of proper personhood.

Ornamentalism—the forging of the sense of personness through artificial and prosthetic extensions—articulates an allegory for the crisis of personhood that the modern ideal of an integrated, organic, individual person was meant to alleviate. If we think of the European conceptualization of modern personhood as indebted to an Enlightenment notion of natural and integral bodies, as has been posited by Locke, Hobbes, Descartes, Montesquieu, and Blackstone—a person, for example, is a living, organic, and organized human body “such as the God of nature formed us,” Blackstone argues—then we are tracing here another kind of body, one that not only poses a challenge to this ideal but also insists on the primacy of aggregated objectness in the experience of the human.²⁰

As if in answer to this bracing realization, we find the dress in plate 56 as well in the Blue Willow assembly. Here aesthetic congealment has grown into full-bodied edifice. The to-be-used Chinese female body seems to have petrified into domestic and collectible things (pieces of teapots, cups, plates) whose value now resides in their aggressive uselessness. At the same time, this congealed and fractured domesticity, offering repurposed purposelessness, transcends its own quotidianness to lay claim to art. Made by contemporary artist Li Xiaofeng (b. 1965), this piece is clearly not human, but nor is it entirely a thing. The weight (of material, history, domesticity, femininity) implies petrification, but the form suggests flight. Is this dress or armor? Winged victory or the madwoman in the attic? A tribute to monumentality or a concession to the mundane? What has died here, the human or the ornament? And finally, has the human outmoded itself or has the object outrun the human demand?

We cannot read this figure from the Chinese artist as a rebuke of the Euro-American commercial designers with whom he shares the space, because the work is itself an exploration of troubled authenticity and distorted temporality.²¹ Entitled *Beijing Memory No. 5*, Li's 2009 sculpture was part of a series known for using ceramics excavated from archaeological sites throughout China. The museum catalog attributes the ceramic fragments to the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912), commonly known as the last great Chinese dynastic empire, suggesting that the memory being recomposed here may be the memory of a lost imperial China, and the piece itself something of a layered exercise in what Rey Chow calls “the Chinese detail.”²² Chow has observed that the Chinese detail is always already an “ethnic detail,” even for the Chinese—that is, a self-conscious articulation signifying a culture’s “belated fascination with its own datedness, its own alterity.”²³ For Chow, this is the result of the imputed pastness of the Chinese in Euro-American modernity but also because of China’s own melancholic incorporation of that projection. *Beijing Memory No. 5*



PLATE 56: Li Xiaofeng, *Beijing Memory No. 5* (2009). Qing period shards. Red Gate Gallery, Beijing. From *China: Through the Looking Glass*, 2015, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo by author.

exercises a particularly intricate articulation of Chinese datedness by insisting on a historicity that, upon closer examination, has been subjected to much manipulation.

In the reconstructed rubble that is the body of this Ceramic Woman, we discern a scattering of some still intact Chinese ideograms (plate 57 and 58). Many are out of context and several are positioned upside down (an ironic statement of value? a jab at the old joke about Chinese illegibility for Western viewers?): words like *precious*, *tea*, *superior*. Others offer seemingly precise self-authentication with stamped reign dates, such as “Xuande Reign of the Great Ming Dynasty” (1426–1435), purporting to indicate a royal workshop.

The shards thus date themselves even further back in time, to the Ming Dynasty, prior to the Qing Dynasty indicated by the exhibition catalog. But we cannot remain complacent with these fragments’ promise of a more precious, commodified pastness, because these certifications of provenance, both inside and outside the artwork, only serve to underscore the homelessness of these remains. Indeed, given that the practice of inscribing dates onto objects degraded fairly early on into affectation and even forgery, this kind of designation is likely to be more misleading than not. And since



PLATE 57: Detail of plate 56. Photo by author.



PLATE 58: Detail of plate 56. Photo by author.

an earlier date would signal a grander pretentiousness and greater value, and since the Xuande era was exactly when such inscriptions first became common, these fragments are probably anything but Xuande.

Decorative ornament and utilitarian domesticity merge in this piece. Reassembled but stranded; an objet d'art and a collection of disposable things; a thing of memory and troubled origins; an object in transit between the junkyard, the workshop, the commercial gallery, and the museum: Li's Ceramic Woman underscores the unstable difference between curio and treasure, both mediated precisely through notions of Chineseness. The curio, denoting a piece of bric-a-brac from the Far East since the mid-nineteenth century and a shortened form of the word *curiosity*, already draws something from the enchanted transformation of ornamentalism: the *thing* that becomes *Thing*—but, alas, never quite free from a threatening intimacy with its original status as a mere thing.²⁴ This uneasy fluctuation between value and waste always haunts the curio, which is to say, haunts the “Oriental thing.”

I am reminded of a story that a friend once told me about a lecture given by Amar Bose, famed engineer and founder of Bose Corporation, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.²⁵ Trying to teach his students the lesson that technological innovation comes less from the inherent value of ideas than from the ability to *perceive* and *produce* value out of what may seem useless or failed, Bose related a Chinese parable told to him by his own mentor, an engineering professor who was a “very cultured Chinese gentleman.”²⁶ During World War II, Bose's professor, then a young academic in Beijing was making his way to Shanghai on his way out of the country when he was detained by the arrival of Japanese forces. This scholar, out of work and facing the dismantling of his country, found himself scouring the countryside looking for curios to sell in order to survive. “The curio dealer,” he told Bose, “has two dreams: first, to find a real treasure...and second, to be able to recognize it.” The pedagogical lesson here is a valuable one about the transformative power of the perceptive and imaginative mind. But there are other lessons too in this recursive tale. Chineseness here offers value for the Westerner (the sage advice of a wise Chinese elder; the goods of the Orient) *and* for the Chinese subject who can reconstruct his lost value for Western modernity by repackaging his own ethnic wreckage. If the Chinese bric-a-brac offers the Western consumer the promise of Orientalist contact, then it offers the stranded Chinese subject the salvation of ornamentalist conversion.

The Oriental curio, then, is the material sediment of the crisis of (national, ethnic) aura. And if the decay of aura has been attributed to technological development as per Benjamin, then we must remind ourselves that this Ceramic Woman, too, is a technology: a mechanical assemblage forged out of abandoned, auratic residue (plate 59). A lesson about cutting-edge technological invention in the twentieth century articulates itself through a fable about a disappearing China (a description,



PLATE 59: Li Xiaofeng, *Beijing Memory No. 5* (2009). Qing period shards. Red Gate Gallery, Beijing. From *China: Through the Looking Glass*, 2015, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo by author.

by the way that is as true of Li's sculpture as Bose's parable), because the dream of ornamentalism offers us technology wedded to aura.

For the Chinese subject, uselessness can be useful. The feminine uselessness of Chineseness, symbolized by no-longer-functional domestic porcelain objects in Li's piece, opens up the "gap" in "the symbolic universe of utilitarianism" through which the Chinese subject can slip, through the back door, as it were, of Western modernity.²⁷ *Beijing Memory No. 5*, itself a fragment in a series of re-production, pushes us right in the face of the simultaneity of recuperation and rupture. Li's fragmented plates and teacups—his reassembled "Chinese details," this weighty, nonhuman embodiedness—suggests that it may be in this very transition from mere thing to ornament (that is, the technology of ornamentalism) that things Chinese can maneuver for value. Entwined with the trauma of authenticity enacted by this sculpture dress is therefore the further possibility that this twenty-first-century Asiatic porcelain body made for an Euro-American audience may be seeking to outmode itself to continue to be relevant on the modern stage. Like a treasure dealer who is also a dumpster diver, Li compels us to consider our national and temporal assumptions about what modernity imagines is lost to it. Here the "ethnic detail" offers temporal recapitulation via the crafted insistence on its own death and lostness, as if to say "I am relevant today because I am no longer relevant." Indeed, like dead languages, Li's fragments can seem to become untranslatable, atavistic, Oriental, beautiful, and modern all at once.²⁸

Indeed, a similar fate has befallen the Chinese language itself, also prominently displayed in the Metropolitan exhibit as another aesthetic object (plate 60).²⁹ Written Chinese is considered beautiful to the general Western public, if not due to the ideographic myth perpetuated from Ernest Fenollosa to Derrida, then because Chinese as an illegible, aesthetic manifestation had been declared by missionaries, philosophers, and poets as no longer functional in the modern world. Consider, for



PLATE 60: Zhang Xu (ca. 675–759), stone carving. From *China: Through the Looking Glass*, 2015, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo by author.

example, what James Fenimore Cooper has to say about disappearing Native American languages by way of the Chinese language in his 1831 introduction to *The Last of the Mohicans*, another classic text of ethnic detail and nostalgia: “the North American Indian clothes his ideas in a dress that is so different from that of the African, and is Oriental in itself. His language has the richness and the sententious fullness of the Chinese.”³⁰ For Cooper, American Indian language became beautiful the very moment it became Oriental. Indeed, “Chinese” has become *the* metaphor for dead beauty, the living dying into ornamental life. And it is precisely this *dynamic dying* that lends these inhuman objects their melancholic human beauty.

Like the Chinese language itself, the idea of yellow female flesh invoked by *Beijing Memory No. 5* enjoys a bittersweet beauty precisely because it is petrified and yet still recalls organic life. For just as *Beijing Memory No. 5* invokes a vanished China only to unsettle the very thing it claims has disappeared, the sculpture also summons the memory of yellow female flesh only to replace it with a more insistent, inorganic presence. This feels less like nostalgia for yellow female flesh than a consecration of its fossilized (raced and gendered) afterlife. This is flesh congealed into porcelain as well as porcelain invoking the possibility of flesh. *Beijing Memory No. 5*’s combination of formal assemblage and stifling mass pushes us to confront the simultaneously dematerializing and materializing processes through which raced female bodies come to be present. It instantiates the salvage, the reassemblage, and the subjunctiveness behind Asiatic female corporeality. If the yellow woman has always been simultaneously embodied and erased through ornamental objectness, then this piece asks what is or could be life after such devastation.

Sigmund Freud tells us that one of the most unsettling effects for human ontology is to be confronted by a machine that comes to life.³¹ With *Beijing Memory No. 5*, what is uncanny is that the “machine” refuses to come to life, and in its lifelessness, imagines what life might have been. And it is in this very paradox of “might have been” that we experience the prospective and prosthetic quality of our ontology. In other words, *Beijing Memory No. 5* does not give us the memory of something; it is memory, the layered encrustations of absent but imagined lives. This yellow woman is instructive not because “she” offers us a sartorial performance as redemption, nor because she promises the possibility of the real behind the object. On the contrary, this “memory” insists that we take seriously, rather than simply decry, the entanglement between living and living-as-thing.

In the end, this complicated congealment may be what is possible in a life of precariousness. Sometimes, disposable lives find themselves through disposable objects. (Is this why, for some Asian American subjects, given limited options, they would rather be ornamental than Oriental?) Freedom for the captured may not be the gift of uncompromised liberty but instead the more modest and demanding task of existing within an entombed shell. It is not only that bodies can leave their residue in the things they produce (an insight that object studies has taught us), but also that objectness reveals the divergent, layered, and sometimes annihilating gestures that can make up personhood. More than memorializing bodies that might otherwise not be remembered, Li’s porcelain woman explores what it would mean to instantiate through excess materiality the dematerialized nonbody. The piece marks a kind of “third nature” that surrounds and approximates the human and manages to survive despite or through commodification. The perihumanity of Asiatic femininity (that is, something at once inside and outside of civilizational first principles) is why “she” is often enlisted to represent contemporary apprehensions about more-than-human entanglements.³²

The aesthetic language—the movement between animate and inanimate—with which the yellow woman has been infused draws from and sustains a dynamic but disturbing principle of artificial life that, rather than being peripheral to, intensifies and haunts modernism itself. The Asiatic ornamental object-person is often seen as opposed to modernity, but it actually contains a forgotten genealogy about the coming together of life and nonlife, labor and style, that conditions the modern conceit of humanness. This genealogy of modern personhood is peculiarly inorganic, aggregated, and non-European. This synthetic being, relegated to the margins of modernity and discounted as a nonperson, holds the key to the inorganic animating the heart of the modern organic subject. She/it brings into view an alternative form of life, not at the site of the free and individualist modern subject, but on the contrary, at the encrusted edges and crevices of defiled, ornamented bodies.

If liberal racial rhetoric has not been able to tolerate the possibilities of subjective failures or corporeal ambiguity on the part of its cherished objects, it is because the female body and its ineluctable flesh continue to offer the primary site for both denigration and recuperation. At the same time, if recent critical discourse about the posthuman or what has come to be known as object-oriented ontology can at times feel politically disconnected, even as its intention has been to unsettle a tradition of insular humanism and anthropocentrism, it is because it has forgotten that the crisis between persons and things has its origins in and remains haunted by the material, legal, and imaginative history of persons made into things. Not only can the “de-anthropocentric” object, at once not alive and useless to people, not shed the attachment of racial and gendered meanings, but it also has provided a vexing, constitutive potential for the human subject. This paradox is most powerfully and poignantly played out for the yellow woman, holding the potential for the most devastating consequences as well as the most challenging political and ethical implications, especially for our conceptualization of freedom and individual agency.