1	Meng-Yu Yan, *Postcards from Hyrule 6,* 2021, inkjet print on Ilford Metallic gloss, 10 x 15 cm.	Ed.7+ 2AP	$490
2	Meng-Yu Yan, *Postcards from Hyrule 5,* 2021, inkjet print on Ilford Metallic gloss, 10 x 15 cm.	Ed.7 + 2AP	$490
3	Meng-Yu Yan, *Postcards from Hyrule 8,* 2021, inkjet print on Ilford Metallic gloss, 10 x 15 cm.	Ed.7 + 2AP	$490
4	Xi Li, Brain Island: Hyperreal City, 2019, video, 08'27", 1920×1080.		NFS
5	Joseph Blair, *Snowcone (From series The Tongue of Missing Lovers)*, 2022, inkjet prints, diptych, 37.13 x 21cm.	Ed.1 + 1AP	$700
6	Joseph Blair, *A Much Larger Tip (From series The Tongue of Missing Lovers)*, 2022, inkjet prints, diptych, 37.13 x 21cm.	Ed.1 + 1AP	$700

photo access

Transcending Bodies
Xi Li, Meng-Yu Yan and Joseph Blair
Curated by Gabrielle Hall-Lomax

Unbridled technological development is continually transforming our sense-of-self and social interactions with others. Hybrids of machine and organism are a reality, as technical interventions and materials fuse with the body, becoming central to our existence. The physical self is extended into the virtual realm on a daily basis through social media platforms, video games, phone applications and so on.

With the rise of the Metaverse[1], tech giants are promising an immersive virtual world where we will have the ability to shape ourselves, social dynamics and the environment to how we desire. Despite whether you believe the concept will gain traction or not, this situation challenges us to speculate on what such a world can offer or would cause us to forgo. The artists in this exhibition have responded to this challenge, at the same time giving us a glimpse at the future use of the photographic medium in such a world.

Transcending Bodies draws into focus the possibilities and limits of existing online, untethered from the physical body. Through video, 3D animation, AI and printed photo-media, the artists in this exhibition challenge traditional and normative ideas of identity and envision new ways of existing in the virtual age. The works of Meng-Yu Yan, Xi Li and Joseph Blair also draw us to fundamental questions about the nature of photography and the moving image, in particular the tension between real and virtual, between representation and imagination.

In *Postcards from Hyrule* by Meng-Yu Yan, the artist takes on the role of photographer within a virtual world. The works were created during the COVID-19 global pandemic lockdown in Sydney, Australia. As a result of enforced stay-at-home orders, the artist began playing 'Zelda: Breath of the Wild' on Nintendo Switch. From the virtual world of Hyrule, Yan captured screenshots as they traversed its sublime geographies.

1 The Metaverse is a virtual environment where users (via digital avatars) can interact with each other in real time. In this vast and immersive one-stop shop, users can play games, buy digital commodities including real estate, go to school, watch the news, meet people etc.

From these, the artist has created a series of phantasmal landscapes. An apparition appears in the wreckage of a church; faint globulous forms drift through the velvet black sky; a falling star pierces the atmosphere. Printed to the size of a post-card, the works appear like souvenirs from an alternate planet.

For many people of Yan's generation, the avatar within online platforms serve as 'other beings' - an extension of the physical self that is ripe for self-expression and exploration. As described by Yan,

'This work contemplates the exploration of virtual worlds during isolation. Video games were the first place the artist began experimenting with notions of gender identity as a teenager. This series revisits that space and the endless realms, possibilities and wanderings available to us -- even when one is alienated from society and the world at large.'

The capability of the digital avatar to host a range of intentions and possibilities, moving beyond the constraints of physical embodiment, is also a focus in artist Xi Li's work, *Brain Island: Hyperreal City*. Based on the concept of Heteroptopia[2], as proposed by Michel Foucault, Li has woven various aspects of her identity into a non-linear narrative structure, depicting a hypothesised world, full of visual symbols and dazzling scenes. The artist inserts herself into the virtual space via green screen compositing, collapsing the boundary between simulation and reality. As Li moves through Brain Island she embodies various alter-egos such as deities, political figures and the media. Contradictory ideologies, cultures and religions exist simultaneously. This reflects Li's experience living under both the Chinese and Western political systems and the struggle to discern between fact and fiction.

In the creation of this world, the artist is God-like; she carves out terrain, orchestrates where light and shadow fall; in short, it is she who makes up the rules. While the work has employed a Western theoretical framework, Li creates a visual language drawn from her Chinese heritage. High rise urban architectural forms are subtly juxtaposed with traditional building design and glistening ice-scape formations, inspired by her hometown Harbin, China. The result is a layered and multi-dimensional exploration of self.

Whilst Yan's and Li's works focus more on the opportunities offered through the virtual realm, Joseph Blair's work The Tongue of Missing Lovers reveals the limitations of existing online. AI Generated portraits are drawn from personal descriptions in Craigslist 'Missed Connections' posts. The wants of the human individual are manifested through various divergent emotional and pragmatic perceptions, which are continuously refracted by the sheer indifference of AI. The desires of one play against the careless function of the other until we are left with a grim shadow of human impulses. Implicit in these sinister portraits is a yearning for the digital to serve as an extension of the physical/human creator, which is thwarted by the realisation that possibilities are limited online as in life.

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2 Heterotopia is a concept elaborated by philosopher Michel Foucault to describe certain cultural, institutional and discursive spaces that are somehow 'other': disturbing, intense, incompatible, contradictory or transforming. Heterotopias are worlds within worlds, mirroring and yet upsetting what is outside.

Transcending Bodies reflects how the production process and outcomes of photo-media artists are rapidly evolving in response to the Metaverse. Photography in the virtual realm unlocks a new space to explore light, colour, perspective and output. Online worlds offer artists endless possibilities for exploration of nonphysical identity, moving away from the singular concept of 'self' to something more fluid, or multitudes of self. We have also been shown a disturbing side to these technologies, their potential to disrupt real-life experiences and connections, socially and between body and mind. This emerges as a kind of cautionary spectre rather than a discouragement to explore, as we increase our immersion in the virtual.

- Gabrielle Hall-Lomax

Artists

Xi Li

Xi Li (b. 1997) is an interdisciplinary artist from Harbin, China, based in Tāmaki Makaurau, New Zealand.

Li's practice includes film, digital image, photography, installation, performance, 3D animation, VR, game design, music, and other multidisciplinary fields. She uses both Eastern and Western philosophical frameworks to explore themes such as identity, ideology, subjectivity, subculture, popular cultures, and globalisation.

Meng-Yu Yan

Exhibited in over forty exhibitions across Australia, China, France and Mexico, Meng-Yu Yan (b. 1992, Sydney) is a cross-disciplinary artist working with photography, time-based media, and installation. Their practice is mesmerised by ideas of mirroring and reflection, and their early Honours work investigated the origins of photography through the Claude Glass, black mirrors, and scrying practices. As a first generation, Australian-Chinese, queer, non-binary artist, their practice disrupts notions of the binary and temporal linearity, prevailing in liminal spaces.

Joseph Blair

Melbourne-based artist Joseph Blair (b. 1995) works between photographic, mixed media and moving image mediums. His practice involves the social and emotional impacts that stem from our collective relationships with technology and online spaces. Within this field of focus, he is particularly interested in surveillance and security, artificial intelligence, the blurring geographic lines within technological realms and the ties between the natural and electronic worlds. His works explore this liminal space/self by grappling with raw and vibrant imagery taken from both the obscure and the mundane.