



Skin, 2020, image by artisan

artisan

Facing the Times

Essay by Sophia Cai

Unprecedented times. Extraordinary circumstances. Essential workers. Flatten the curve. Social distancing. Self-isolation. Quarantine. Lock Down.

These are some of the words and phrases that have entered our daily lexicon over the last few months. Turn on your television, scroll through your newsfeed, walk to the shops, the signs (and language) of COVID-19 appear around us as a constant reminder of the 'new normal.'

To create art in this climate is to grapple with a constant and existential question of purpose: what (or who) is art for? And what role can art play in a time of crisis? When literal lives are at stake, it can be easy to dismiss artmaking as a frivolous indulgence. While we should certainly acknowledge the privileges that afford many artists the opportunity to continue creating, we should also be incredibly wary of binary distinctions that equate 'value' purely on economic terms of profit and return. The question isn't whether artists are 'essential

workers' – but rather, why should that matter?

About Face is an exhibition that responds to COVID-19, using the mask as both a symbol and medium. The exhibition was born following the physical closure of Artisan's doors during lockdown, and was led by the collective support and comradery shared between peers on Artisan's Facebook group. Through an open-call process, Artisan asked makers from around the world to submit masks, with all works shared online and a curated selection displayed in the physical gallery space. Notably, all the works are displayed anonymously without names, reflecting the non-discriminatory nature of the virus. While artmaking is often a solitary pursuit, *About Face* presents a collective snapshot of the times.

From 84 submissions received, clear themes and provocations emerge. A number of masks respond directly to the day-to-day experience of living under new rules of social distancing. *Stay Away From me* is one artist's playful reminder to others to keep distance, with the outstretched forms sewn over the mask acting as a physical barrier to the wearer. The

idea of distancing is also implied in the three masks made using cyanotype photographic process, *Lacetopia*, *Life Before Us*, and *Oats Tick Me*. At a time when physical contact between

people minimised, these masks, which relies on a physical 'contact' between sunlight and sensitized fabric to produce an image, remind us of fleeting nature of touch.



Lipa, 2020, images by artisan

As the human world slows down, we see changes in other ecosystems. A number of artists in *About Face* have created works that draw inspiration from nature. *Skin* is a mask that takes the form of an animal's snout detailed with small insects and bugs. The artist reflects on the ironic proposition that while the virus has wreaked havoc across the world, it has allowed the planet "to recover from a more invasive power of destruction, us." A similar sentiment is shared in *Blessing in Disguise*, which depicts the local green spaces of the artist as a space for respite and healing.

With time for reflection granted by lockdowns, also comes time for

questions and actions. COVID-19 has revealed on a global scale some of the ongoing inequities in our societies regarding access to resources, safety, and care. While it is true that the virus does not discriminate, the way that it affects people and the severity of its impact is indeed different. *New Fragility* confronts some of these issues through the perspective of someone with compromised immunity. The mask stands out, much like how the wearer feels when they don one in a public – if mask-wearing is not mandated, those who do wear a mask can feel exposed through the action. This same contradictory feelings of protection and exposure are at the heart of "I'd be embarrassed if I wore

one”, a work whose title is a direct quote from the artist’s 81-year-old father.



I'd be embarrassed if I wore one, 2020, image by artisan

Recently, masks and the wearing of them has become a hotly debated issue. From the rise of self-declared ‘anti-maskers’, to inconsistent and

misleading (or sometimes outright wrong) media reports and differing public responses, the act of wearing a mask has become politicised.

Xenophobia and racism have seen an increase, particularly targeted against Asians, migrants and communities of colour. This makes the act of mask-wearing a double-edged sword of protection while also simultaneously exposing the wearer to potential harm, through the implication of being sick, diseased, or otherwise ‘unwanted.’



COVID-19 Made Me Buy It, 2020, image by artisan

A number of works in *About Face* directly address this underlying racism and draw attention to experiences of micro-aggression faced by members of

the Asian community in Australia.

Don't stare at us is a pointed message about alienation and discrimination.

The artist uses cut-outs of eyes,

noses, and mouths, pasted over a person in PPE, to comment on the “panic and mistrust” that has persisted amidst the pandemic. A work that brings a similar attention to unwanted gazes is *COVID-19 Made Me Buy It*, which was inspired by the maker’s anxiety going grocery shopping as an Asian-Australian. The mask features hand-stitched embroidery of foods that were quickly sold out during panic-buying, reflecting in part the

As a Chinese-Australian woman, I can’t help but notice the racial ramifications of this pandemic. When I walk down the streets of my inner-city Melbourne suburb, which has at the time of writing entered a second lockdown, I observe how there is a racial divide between who wears masks, and who doesn’t. I wonder if this reflects a cultural difference, the clash in thinking between collectivism and individualism – and the question becomes one of individual ‘choice’ versus community care. With medical expertise informing us of the efficacy of mask-wearing, it is critical to think about how sometimes the onus should be on individuals to make decisions for the social good.

dissonance between racism and the multiculturalism that we see on our supermarket shelves.



Don't Touch Your Face, Alienation and Inflammation, 2020, image by artisan

About Face is an exhibition born from these disparate experiences – at heart it is an exhibition that acts as a living archive of the times we are currently living in. While all the works are unified in the common medium and symbol of the mask, the exhibition presents a multitude of perspectives and stories from COVID-19. It is clear that as much as we want to return to ‘normal’, we are still in the depths of the pandemic and all its accompanying fears, anxieties and uncertainties. A project like *About Face* can offer us an opportunity to reflect on the differing impacts of this pandemic, and the importance of our individual actions and choices in taking care of the whole community.