

Thea Yabut – VIBRISSA

September 13 – December 1, 2018

Consider: Whether you're a human being, an insect, a microbe, or a stone, this verse is true.

All that you touch

You Change.

All that you Change

Changes you.

The only lasting truth

Is Change.

God

Is Change.

(Octavia Butler, *The Parable of the Talents*)[1]

To begin, I'd like to start from behind, with what is trailing and tailing. The background - a space that builds and nurtures the conditions for making something a *thing* or form[2]. Normally delegated to the rear, it's an interiority meant to fade into invisibility. I want to move from the inside-out. A sound: *Whirrrrrrrrr*. This is the voice of an Osterizer Galaxie; the household blender was a popular domestic staple of the 70's and 80's. Outfitted with heavy-duty motors, the appliance assisted mostly women in shredding, beating, and creaming their dreams and duties. This is the object and tool of our background: the Osterizer Galaxie used by Thea Yabut in her studio, where ingredients *whirr* into a slimy soup before becoming the hardened forms we see in *VIBRISSA*. Vibrissae are the hairs around an animal's snout. Sensing the world around them, these organs of touch create knowledge through physical contact. Yabut's equal may be her hands; she mixes torn bits of paper and old drawings with water, blends and then strains them. Glue, joint compound, powdered pigments and chalk pastel are added, blended and strained again. This process produces thick wet blobs of pulp in hues of alien greys, sandy browns and faded pansy purples. She's aiming for a specific consistency in her mush, repeating this process until it is found. The paste is soggy and cold; it feels regurgitated.

We have lived before. We will live again.

We will be silk, stone, mind, star.

We will be scattered, gathered, molded, probed.

We will live, and we will serve life.

My memories of the Osterizer Galaxie are around my mother doing her best to make a no-bake cheesecake, grinding down graham crackers and whipping up cream, set in layers and topped with canned blueberries. It was the only dessert she ever really made, and stood in sharp contrast to the other culinary treats in our household: kimchi, oxtail soup, seaweed, squid jerky, dried anchovies, funky fermented soybeans. Her being an immigrant from Seoul, this simple cake, in hindsight, symbolized her integration into western domesticity. The exciting, violent sounds of the strong motor desiccating its contents together still linger in my memory. Yabut pulls a bit of gunk from the lump, pinching and placing it down on a drying rack constructed from mesh window screen laid atop a gridded light diffuser. This DIY rack is the skeleton holding the mush, for now fleshy and soft, soon to become skeletal forms of their own. The eventual forms emerge from squeezing and sticking small bits of the goo, one finger-ful at a time. The water drips out of the guck as she lays it down; her fingers remain imprinted on each pinch. It's arranged in wormy lines and blobs, resembling fish skeletons whose vertebrae have become curvy mazes of knots. These shapes come from Yabut's intuitive movements in relation with the material's necessity to clump in one way more than another in order to hold form. The forms represent this blurry union of matter and body. Sometimes these lines congregate around clay nodal ovals, coloured by hand-burnished graphite that gives a dull mirror-like effect. Air-dried over several days, the hardened forms resemble auras, tentacles, lichen, skeletons and whiskers emanating from cloudy nodes. They are soft scaffolds of mush, for now.

*Alter the speed or the direction of Change. Vary the scope of Change.
Recombine the seeds of Change. Transmute the impact of Change.
Seize Change, Use it. Adapt and grow.*

These mysterious figures have everyday materials behind them; there is familiarity in the foreign. It is through facing the mush *behind* these forms that I feel and know them. Yabut's mush-making entails a significant amount of verbing. In 1967-68, the artist Richard Serra produced *Verb List*, an artwork consisting of 84 verbs hand-written onto a sheet of paper. Some of the verbs include: to roll, to store, to spill, to knot, to repair, to dig, to weave, to cut, to continue. Using it as a guide for his own practice,[3] he described the list as a series of "actions to relate to oneself, material, place, and process". I'd like to propose that the verbs enacted in and through work are not necessarily mere actions taken to relate to oneself through a one-way path, but rather, are potentials that are already entangled within our own beings. There is no verb to seize, the actions are inextricably tied in me, and seep out as expressive forms of identification. I am curious about verbs constituting identity, that what one *does* with materials might indicate who they are, albeit in another representation. Verbing as being. Perhaps the multiplicity of the verbs one inhabits fester along untraceable routes to make identity. Serra's verbs gain more depth when thought of as fragments and stories of a self. Yabut, together with her Osterizer Galaxie, adds a rich set of terms: to blend, to desiccate, to mush, to liquefy, to pinch, to pull, to probe, to wet, to burnish, to vibrate, to draw.

*The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars.
It is to live and to thrive on new earths.
It is to become new beings, and to consider new questions.
It is to leap into the heavens. Again and again.
It is to explore the vastness of heaven.
It is to explore the vastness of ourselves.*

Through Yabut's work, a form of life emerges that feels against dominant modes of representation, and this life-form is experienced inside my body, though somehow still foreign to me. An interior-exteriority.[4] Her forms show me other modes of existence. Titled after terminologies used for the hand, they describe the puffy part of the palm, or the muscle from which the thumb radiates from the rest of the hand, for example. Vibrissa is another kind of limb. Whiskers that feel and know simultaneously; tactile threads to navigate self and other. Yabut's work defies a uniform or singular read. Through it, I imagine new worlds, a body otherwise, or a different kind of skin evolving out of ours. At the same time it stays with a present moment of stickiness. Paper, water, glue, pulp, mush. Her own feelers pinching and pulling the matter. It pushes back in bumpy fingerprint-laden ridges as it is pushed upon. Who's absorbing whom? They face us, held up by handmade clay and graphite tacks, bones in another lifetime. They speak through showing themselves as fragile exoskeletons, for now.

-Laurie Kang

[1] Butler, Octavia. *The Parable of the Talents*. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2000. Print.

This is an excerpt of scripture from Butler's fictional religion *Earthseed*. All following scriptures are taken from *Earthseed* passages.

[2] Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006. Print.

[3] Friedman, Samatha. "To Collect." *MoMA*. 20 Oct. 2011. Web. 24 Aug. 2018.

[4] Povinelli, Elizabeth. "Routes/Worlds." *e-flux*. September 2011. Web. 22 Aug. 2018.