

Yoshua Okón: Future Shock

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Mexican video artist Yoshua Okón's work crosses the boundaries between reality and fiction, art and politics. He blends staged situations, documentary, and nightmarish illusions to create a context to better understand the contradictions and unbelievable nature of the world we live in. His first solo-show in London *Future Shock*, curated by Giulia Colletti, showcases his early and more recent works relating to the misinterpretation of nationality, disproportionate consumption, and rampant dispossession.

The exhibition is currently running at Chalton Gallery until 10th November 2018. Okón discusses the pieces chosen for the exhibition and how they work together to create this narrative that runs through the exhibition.

Okón tells me "We live in an increasingly globalised and transnational world, one where the interconnections and interdependencies are greater than ever in history. The power of national governments has been eroding for decades. It is the forces of global capitalism that define our lives in much greater ways than the forces of nation states. Nevertheless, the forces of global capital tend to be invisible, changes are happening so fast that we are having a hard time mapping and conceptualizing them, and we continue to understand ourselves as defined by our nationality. In other words, we continue to live under a paradigm that, for the most part, no longer exists."

Although he has exhibited at Hayward Gallery and Tate previously, for Okón a London audience is placed to interpret and look deeper into his work. Global issues are as relevant in London as they are in North America, where his work is more well known. However, he hopes that some further distance, in particular to *The Indian Project: Rebuilding History* (2015) viewers will engage on "a deeper, more structural level" as the sensitive post-colonial nature is usually viewed by American audiences on a less analytic level. The piece produced whilst in Skowhegan – a town whose identity is built around Native American Culture – was the site of "one of the worst genocide against Native Americans", which Okón explains has left no identifiable trace of the pre-colonial society.

He says that although the town's logo, public signaling and even a sign narrating an 18th Century history of buying the town "for bags of provisions including peas" documented in his film, the identity was actually a response to the collapse of the lumber industry in the late 1960's and the decision by the town's Chamber of Commerce "to invent a 'Native American' identity as an attempt to boost the economy by attracting tourism." Okón's film documents the current fundraising efforts in the town for restoration of a wooden statue said to be "the tallest Indian in the world." In documenting this, and further encouraging the participants leading the fundraising efforts Okón explains "basically I encountered a big everyday-life collective fiction unfolding in that town (which, I have to say, is a nation-wide collective fiction), and my role was to ask some of the representatives of such fiction to perform it for my camera, as well as to push it a notch further by asking them to include the "trance ceremony".



Yoshua Okón, *The Indian Project (Rebuilding History)*, 2015, installation view Chalton Gallery

All of the works in the exhibition disrupt the boundaries between re-enactment and actuality. Okón explains; "My work departs from the assumption that, in consumer culture, our sense of reality is highly mediated and it is mostly been informed by our exposure to mainstream media and advertisement. When confronted with a particular tension between fiction and actuality, our minds tend to activate and to automatically search for meaning. This has the potential to destabilize predominant narratives and the "natural order" of things and gives us the opportunity to creatively re-think and reconsider our ideas about reality."

Another significant work within this exhibition is the one-channel video installation *Freedom Fries: Still life* (2014), in which he worked with a loyal customer of McDonald's as a counter-model, to strike a pose on the "fast food catwalk" a real McDonald's that he hired for an overnight photo shoot. He explained that once he'd agreed on the hire of the venue he sat in the restaurant to find the model, and "it didn't take long".

Okon's approach, using documentary forms to explore the unstable relationship between fact and fiction presenting this model as 'still life' in an almost unreal, less than human way, but this isn't a judgmental or personal attack from the artist; "We live under a social and economic system that increasingly favors profit over human values. So the dehumanisation and violence portrayed in *Freedom Fries: Still Life* is not caused by any particular individual, and certainly not by me, this is a systemic issue. In other words, we all occupy the passive position of the counter-model *vis à vis* the forces of global capitalism, she doesn't represent herself or any other particular individual, but rather she represents us all." His work is grounded in the theory of Mark Fisher, and the concept "focusing on individuals is an act of deflection", a way to avoid addressing "the systemic causes of the crisis". His responsibility, lies on attempting to understand and convey the violence that arises from the neo-liberal system so that we are better equipped to resist it.



Yoshua Okón, *Canned Laughter*, 2009, Installation View of the Exhibition *Future Shock*, Chalton Gallery, London

The third piece in the exhibition *Canned Laughter* (2009) was originally conceived as a response to the dystopian industrial reality of the maquiladora, a subcontractor factory in Mexico run by a foreign company and exporting products to that company's country of origin. Okon's explains that this came out of his time in Ciudad Juarez, working with NGO's and local activists who posited the advent of neoliberalism, via NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) to the decline of the city making it at that time one of the most dangerous cities in the world.

Okon's affirms, "One of the direct results of NAFTA was the massive displacement of millions of, mostly rural, people who lost their livelihoods. 12 million went to the US and many others ended up in the "free-trade-zone" of the Mexico-US border where the maquiladoras are. This "zone" is a 30km line across the entire border where a different set of rules and a different standard applies. Mexican customs only begins 30km after you cross the US border. This territory is a corporate paradise with no regulations or restrictions and no environmental or human rights protection whatsoever. The conditions of the displaced people that settle here are terrible, there is no infrastructure, and they live in shacks with no running water. Busses pick them up in the morning and take them to the maquiladoras where they spend from 12 to 14 straight hours, because inside the maquiladoras there is day-care, restaurants, etc. And besides labour exploitation, all kinds of violations, like toxic waste being dumped in the middle of the desert, feminicides with no investigation and many other atrocities, take place. The legal void of the unregulated "free trade" areas is fertile ground for organized crime and it reveals the dark side of post-capitalism.



Yoshua Okòn, Canned Laughter, 2009, Installation View of the Exhibition Future Shock, Chalton Gallery, London

Okon's powerfully articulates, "When Mexican authorities, under social pressure, have tried to regulate, multinational corporations threaten to move somewhere else in the planet. So, of course Mexican officials are colluded, but it is important to understand that the forces behind this environmental and human rights violence goes way beyond the nation sate. It is global capitalism's forces at play and therefore Ciudad Juarez needs to be understood as a neoliberal, global city".

This is at the heart of what makes the *Future Shock* exhibition work, the artists first solo-show in London is perfectly placed to, with a bit of distance, give Londoner's a chance to think about what it means to live in a 21st Century global city.

Maisie Linford

Maisie is a writer, curator and co-founder of Concrete Assembly, an arts collective programming interdisciplinary events that address key themes and ideas in contemporary art and culture. She is currently based in Belfast.