

<https://doi.org/10.38055/FS020106>

Hyper-Consumerism and Abstract Landscape in Asia

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Abstract: This project examines the politics of abstract desire, hyper-consumerism, and the notion of fantasy in the Asian and Chinese fashion industries. The fascination for logos is often rooted in nostalgia and is an important part of the visual landscape in popular culture. However, China's replicas have been labeled as "imitations" or "knock-offs" by Western society. This paper focuses on abstracting the notion of hyper-consumerism and interrogating the relationship between visual advertisement, its materiality, and its representation in the global marketplace. How does advertising contribute to the production of consumer goods? Can we create a cyclical vision for new materials? How is the value of luxury created, displaced, transformed, and consumed via physical space? This project confronts the relevance of luxury and its banalization by proposing new relationships to consumption and examines the visual language of logos and their representation in society.

Keywords:

Luxury
Identity
Authenticity
Hyper-Consumption
Advertisement

Context

In the past few years, I have spent several months in various Asian cities, primarily China, exploring and documenting consumption and, while doing so, observed changes in aesthetic and cultural values of design. Young designers are now engaging and critiquing celebrity culture, hyper-consumption, image consumption, online in-temporality, the new relation to objects and materiality, dissemination of culture, and surveillance capitalism. In 2016 I was awarded an Artist-in-Residence at the Red Gate Gallery in Beijing, China. This particular residency work was a collaboration with Joseph Jagos, an installation artist and photographer based in Brooklyn. The International Contemporary Artist Residency program is committed to the promotion of multicultural art dialogue within an immersion setting. By using the area of the residency as the inspiring landscape, the goal of this research was to extract and then abstract the culturally-driven surroundings in order to make new environments. The residency supported a series of research outputs inspired by the industry, community, and activity of the region.

Entering into this research, it is important to consider Western biases, assumptions, or unclear perceptions. In previous years, I have worked with many Chinese students (both in the US and China) and have a deep connection to the culture behind their design processes and the overall climate of Chinese manufacturing due to my previous experiences. Most people, and specifically researchers, new to this facet of academic investigation may associate objects or garments made in China with poor production and manufacturing practices, a common Western bias and assumption I know not to be true. Instead, my research investigates why are these objects and garments made, where and how they are housed, and the desire to obtain them.

Introduction

The fascination for logos is often rooted in nostalgia and is an important part of the visual landscape in popular culture. However, China's replicas have been labeled as "imitations" or "knock-offs" by Western society. The frequently busy and chaotic distribution in China creates an ideal commercial environment for fake goods, as Western designers outsource the production of luxury materials to China and frequently lose control over their product designs and supply chains as well as unwittingly contributing to an active commercial environment for fake goods. Luxury has become mainstreamed and normalized. With the popularity of knock-offs, copies, and replications, the copyright in fashion has become far more complex. This project confronts the relevance of luxury and its banalization by proposing new relationships to consumption and examines the visual language of logos and their representation in society.

Hyper-consumption is often defined as the extreme maximalist consumption of goods and commodities for non-functional purposes. Also attached to hyper-consumption is the significant pressure to consume these goods in order to shape one's identity. Luxury, capitalism, advertisement, exclusivity, and authenticity are important social agents to the consumptions of objects and experiences. Advertised goods, travels, and market landscapes form universal codes of luxury that contribute to the representation of "high" status in society. Hyper-consumerist structures, such as malls, demonstrate the power of the manufacturing industries in Asia.

Luxury is also often associated with the quest for exclusivity and authenticity. When it is exclusive, luxury becomes a symbol for success. Scheppe (2015) explains that "luxury consumption is the consumption of the feeling of having excluded others [...] and of being able to warm oneself in the agreeable sensation of their admiring envy. It is nothing other than the enjoyment of total separation" (p. 75). However, most objects of mass-consumption are made through a production flow system that engages dozens, hundreds, or thousands of individuals. Wang (2013) described authenticity as a salient imperative of identity making that involves strategic, complex processes of semiotic maneuvering that orients towards multi-scalar, polycentric systems of norm. In the creators' quests to offer authentic design and identity, they can be viewed as lacking credibility the more aware they become of their outward intentions towards a larger audience. Using brand status to display authenticity often negates credibility. Baudrillard (1968) understood that "the [f]antasy of authenticity is sublime, and it is always located somewhere short of reality (sub limina)" (p. 84). Nothing is ever authentic; the idea of authenticity is an elevated emotion of the purity.

Today, hundreds of giant hyper-malls all over Asia are connected to the distribution of fake “stuff.” These commercial emblems have become an integral part of China’s visual and social landscape. The quantities of fake goods using Western brand images (e.g. logos, symbols, and language) have grown for centuries to become an abstract superstructure of falsely branded lifestyles and design integrity. For example, in a Beijing mall where all garments are sold for less than \$50 USD each, the decor consists of crystal chandeliers, shiny marble, and mirrors. These overt indications of luxury are important to social status — and shoppers. The aesthetic of the store’s environment is of high interest in the context of this research because it lends a form of prestige and exclusivity to the fake goods. With the sophistication of the production system, one can recreate an almost exact visual replica of a luxury product. Crewe (2017) tells us:

The emergence of high quality “super fakes” whose inauthentic assembly is discernible only to the well-trained eye, is damaging the values that are fundamental to the perception of luxury designer brands. The copy, they argue, represents an inferior craft, a failure of creativity. (p. 56)

Fake brands are, after all, “inauthentic only in the eyes of certain people and only in certain moments or contexts” (Craciun, 2013, p. 70). Only through knowledge of the craft can one identify authentic products from an array of luxury goods. However, if the products in question are not related to luxury, the low-quality goods still exist as a product of use but not of quality.

The ritual of consumption and its social agenda are in constant flux. Douglas and Isherwood (1979) believed that a ritual process’ main function consists of gaining meaning from an ongoing change of events. The constant social movements act as a vehicle for capitalism — extracting popular concepts into brand messaging. In one of his most important writings, Guy Debord (1967) found:

Capitalist production has unified space, which is no longer bounded by external societies. This unification is at the same time an extensive and intensive process of banalization. The accumulation of commodities produced in mass for the abstract space of the market, which had to break down all regional and legal barriers and all the corporative restrictions of the Middle Ages that preserved the quality of craft production, also had to destroy the autonomy and quality of places. This power of homogenization is the heavy artillery which brought down all Chinese walls (p. 165).

This series of photographs examines the politics of abstract desire, hyper-realistic landscape, and the notion of fantasy. Today, giant hyper malls all over China are commercial emblems that have become an integral part of China’s visual and social landscape. This series of photographs depict hyper-consumerism and natural landscape by interrogating the relationship between visual advertisement, its materiality, and its representation in a global landscape.

Series I

In the past three years, both artists have compiled photographs taken in Asia (Thailand, Vietnam, and China). The relationship between advertisement, landscape, and material consumption is depicted in a series of photographs where consumption agents — i.e. a salesperson or manager engaging in an over-charged retail or ritualistic space — are portrayed with stuffed, piled, wrapped, and discarded garments. An obvious lethargic attitude and boredom can be seen in almost every image. This series became important in exemplifying the notion of desire — boredom — and the creation of falsely branded luxury objects that shape one's perceived identity.



Hanoi, Vietnam. July 2018.



Shenzhen, Guomao, China. July 2017.



Bangkok, Chinatown, Thailand. July 2017.



Bangkok, Chinatown, Thailand. July 2017.



Hanoi, Vietnam. July 2018.



Hanoi, Vietnam. July 2018.



Beijing, Dahongmen, China. June 2017.



Hanoi, Vietnam. July 2018.



Hanoi, Vietnam. July 2018.



Hanoi, Vietnam. July 2018.





Hong Kong, Sham Shui Po. August 2016.



Guangzhou, China. August 2018.



Shanghai, Putuo Qu, China. June 2018.



Dali, Yunnan, China. July 2018.



Lijiang, Yunnan, China. July 2018.



Lijiang, Yunnan, China. July 2018.



Hanoi, Vietnam. July 2018.



Dali, Erhai Lake Market, Yunnan, China. July 2018.



Beijing, Dahongmen, China. June 2017



Shanghai, China. March 2018.



Bangkok, Chinatown, Thailand. July 2017.



Hanoi, Vietnam. July 2018.



Shanghai, Zhabei District, China. March 2018.



Shanghai, Zhabei District, China. March 2018.



Shanghai, Zhabei District, China. March 2018.



Shanghai, Zhabei District, China. March 2018.



Shanghai, Zhabei District, China. March 2018.



Shanghai, Zhabei District, China. March 2018.



Shanghai, China. March 2018.



Guangzhou, Fashion Heaven, China. August 2018.



Hangzhou, Shangcheng, China. June 2018

Series II

In Chinese culture the most prized image is that of a beautiful landscape. Beautification banners and construction developments of mega luxury malls often dominate the constantly growing urban landscape. This series aims to capture these three visual references at work abstracting their surroundings. One image shows a city's hyper realistic HDR (High Dynamic Range) photo banner of itself against the actual landscape on a lake, another an indoor water park simulating an Italian style mega villa, and others showing that even construction at landmarks such as Temple of Heaven can be obscured by a beautiful landscape. This documentation has become essential to understanding the concept of malls and markets dedicated to fake-luxury.



Shenzhen, Luohu, China. July 2017.



Shanghai, China. March 2018.



Hong Kong, New Territories, China. July 2017.



Chengdu, New Century Global Center, China. August 2016.



Beijing, Temple of Heaven, China. June 2017.



Beijing, 798 Art District, China. July 2018.



Lijiang, Yunnan, China. July 2018.



Lijiang, Yunnan, China. July 2018.



Zhujiajiao Water Village, China. March 2018.



Shanghai, China. June 2018.



Beijing, Olympic Park, China. June 2017.



Beijing, China Science and Technology Museum, China. June 2017.



Chengdu, New Century Global Center, China. August 2016.



Chengdu, New Century Global Center, China. August 2016.



Beijing, Fragrant Hills (French Door to Silk Road), China. July 2016.



Hanoi, Vietnam. July 2018.

Conclusion

While traveling around Asia, I was fascinated with knock-offs and counterfeit malls and wanted to see how accessible they were. As I traveled, I observed a variety of counterfeit brands, experienced security strategies in such environments, and identified different customer brackets. For example, in Beijing the knock-off mall-goers were local and didn't care that much about the designers being knock-offs; but in Guangzhou, customers from Nigeria or Russia and were placing large orders on various "super fakes." On the streets in China, Vietnam, or Thailand, in more open space, I was intrigued by the amount of knock-offs being sold or on display in various districts, especially the least tourist-heavy areas.

Throughout this research, the idea of copying is not offensive. Learning from repetition is embedded in Buddhism and traditional craft all around the world. The practice of re-producing clothes is not new either. At this point in the global world of design and information channels, academics should not have these views and disintegrate the idea of "East" and "West." The concept of "East" has often diminished the importance and relevance of China and Asia's contributions to the progress of art and design. Design approaches should be taught and studied together, not as a separate or "additional" electives (I say this because in design/art history programs Eastern philosophy of design and art is often considered "additional" and not mandatory). This puts "The East" into an "Othered" category.

Luxury has become mainstreamed and normalized — or so it appears. It is no longer considered impressive and exclusive to own a Prada bag or Gucci sunglasses. Marketing and branding have built new social and human connections to material objects — in this case, clothing. Personal identity has become more complex with various means of communications. In our contemporary society, many people possess multiple identities that they construct, collage, and display in various forms, and clothing is arguably the most valued identity shaper of these constructions. The rise of hyper-consumerism gave Asia the ultimate opportunity to create a new identity for itself through consumption. Following the accumulation of Western social symbols, China is redefining its design aesthetic through heritage and innovation. This clash of visual references has created new markets, discovered new talents, created an obsession with "coolness," and developed large-scale fan databases via social media.

Author Biography



Marie Geneviève Cyr

Marie Geneviève Cyr is an Assistant Professor of Fashion Design at Parsons School of Design. She has an MA in Visual Culture/Fashion Theory from New York University, a BA in Design and Applied Arts from the Edinburgh College of Art and was nominated in 2009 for a Genie Award by the Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television for “Best Costume Design” for the feature film *Who is KK Downey?*. Her research examines the politics of abstract desire, hyper-realistic landscape, and the notion of fantasy. Her work focuses on abstracting the notion of hyper consumerism and interrogating the relationship between visual advertisement, its materiality, and its representation in a global landscape, with a focus on Asian popular culture. As an interdisciplinary practitioner and academic, her interest lies on the investigation of experimental design processes and in understanding the current state of global design practice.

Cyr has spent extensive time in Asia, more specifically China, studying design practices. In the past few years Cyr has created and taught experimental design processes workshops for universities such as Donghua University (Shanghai), RCA (UK), China Academy of Art (Hangzhou), HEAD (Geneva), RCA (UK), and companies based in China such as SIA, SFK, and VO Art Union and the Vietnamese Art Organization’s FACE Fashion Masterclass. At Parsons School of Design, her role extends to Alumni Lead, acting as a creative satellite in support between students, industry, and alumni. Cyr engages with graduating students and alumni in NYC and Shanghai, developing opportunities such as panel discussions, studio visits, exhibitions, external partnerships, and shared promotional press packages.

Author Biography



Joseph Jagos

Joseph Jagos primarily produces installation, video, photography, sculpture, and painting. He focuses mostly on identity as well as spacial relationships. Since 2015 Joseph has been conducting research investigating common and fine art objects in today's world of declining regional identity in a world advancing toward a global identity through hyper consumption and luxury products. His research has led him to ten different cities in China, documenting and writing about how and where our identities are manufactured. This has led him to work on a long-term book and video project titled *Horrible Item*, which has removed him from exhibiting or producing any physical work till as of 2018.

Spring 2019 Joseph has signed on part-time as a professor at Parsons, The New School. He is creating curriculum for technical workshops and lecturing on examining the deeper foundational structure of images and experiential environments used in marketing.

Article Citation

Cyr, Marie Geneviève, and Joseph Jagos. "Hyper-Consumerism and Abstract Landscape in Asia." *Fashion Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2019, pp. , www.fashionstudies.ca/hyper-consumerism-and-abstract-landscape/, <https://doi.org/10.38055/FS020106>.

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