

SOPHIA CAI

READING BETWEEN THE LINES

I am no stranger to receiving messages coded in threatening language. Over time, I have learnt to take a deep breath before opening any unsolicited ‘message requests’ from strangers on Instagram. Most of the time it’s someone asking me a question about something I shared, or cooing over the latest pictures of my two dogs, but sometimes when I least expect it, when I have allowed myself to finally breathe out, I am reminded of what it feels like to exist as a visible women of colour on the Internet who has opinions.

“I hope you get Corona, bitch.”

“If you don’t like it here go back.”

“Do you eat dog?”

There was a time when I used to save these messages to my phone, as if their digital remnants made my experiences of racism and sexism more ‘real’. When I heard such remarks spoken in person (“Speak better English”, “ni hao” – always from men) there was no doubt of their underlying threat, but in the murky territory of online

interactions and through the medium of written words, I doubted myself. I asked myself if I was too sensitive, that I shouldn’t let it affect me, that I should just carry on. Ignore. Block. Repeat.

Does a woman ever feel safe walking home alone?

Does a woman of colour feel safe in a room of white faces?

Walking into Michelle Hamer’s studio in early 2020 (before COVID-19 prevented such interactions) and previewing the works she made

for this exhibition reminded me of these experiences. This body of work continues Hamer’s interest in the meaning of text found in urban spaces, but marks a new direction for the artist in her deliberation of subject matter. For *Are You Having a Good Night?* Hamer has collected the thinly veiled language of threats that women experience everyday; the words we hear, see, and read around us. There is something ominous and unsettling about

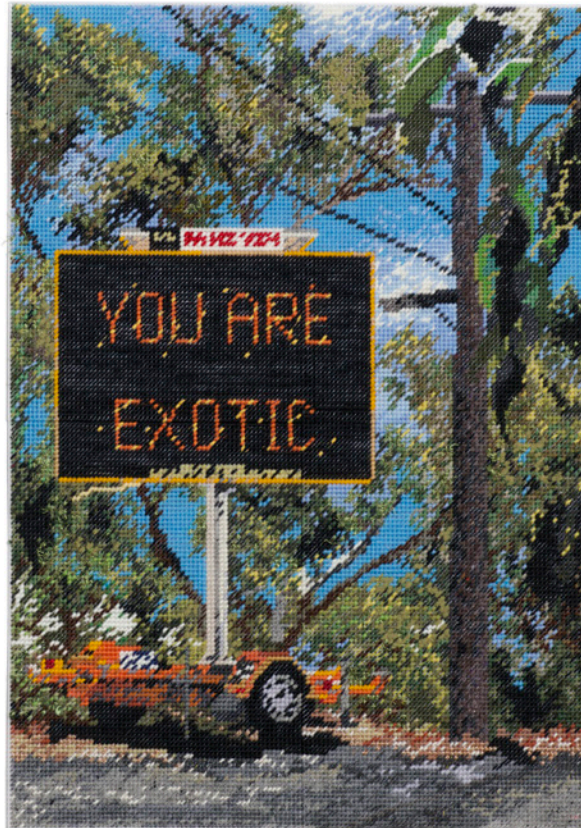
the casualness of these phrases – an eerie familiarity as we view these works with a sense of recognition.

“You are exotic.”

“Smile luv.”

“Yellow bitch road.”

This sense of familiarity is aided by Hamer’s choice of materiality. Working from a combination of found images and her own photographs of different places, Hamer translates the scenes into drawings and hand-stitched works. Both her wool embroideries and works on paper are guided by an overarching grid structure – one that invites audiences to view the scenes through a critical lens as constructions. The handcrafted aspect of Hamer’s textile works also challenges stereotypical reading along stereotypical gendered lines, which has typically regarded needlecraft as ‘women’s work’ connected to the domestic sphere. This reading of gendered labour adds an element of contestation within Hamer’s practice, particularly within the context of





this exhibition that is centrally about the experience of women in public spaces.

One should not mistake the material 'softness' of Hamer's materials for compliance. Starting from the first work that Hamer completed for the show that reads "There Is No Threat" it is clear that the declaration of 'safety' only reinforces the precariousness of this position. This work is based on a photograph that Hamer found in an online newspaper taken by Jihune Liwanag in Hawaii following the false ballistic missile scare in 2018. The initial message, intended to calm and offer relief, instead reads as an unsettling

confirmation of fear. To say that there is no threat is to imply that there was or *will be* one. When considered alongside the two other scenes that make up the triptych ("I'm Just Being Friendly," "You Chicks Are All the Same"), this becomes a message of intimidation rather than comfort.

For Hamer, this is an exhibition about microaggressions and gaslighting, about the accumulation of everyday interactions that over time populate and dictate a lived experience. It poses a question of what it means to exist in the world as someone who is 'othered', whose body and existence are a matter

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HAND-STITCHING, MIXED YARN
ON PERFORATED PLASTIC
26 X 33.5CM

for uninvited solicitations, commentary, and violence, and how frequently these might occur. Hamer tells me that the original inspiration for this body of work was the immediate aftermath of the numerous public reports of women in Melbourne killed in public spaces, heading home from the pub, returning from work, otherwise just *existing*. It also follows the artist's reflection on the use of text in her own practice, and a realisation of how threatening language is at times so deeply embedded in our social fabric that we may not even fully see it for what it is.

Language is power, after all. There is what is said explicitly, then what is implied by reading between the lines. A man telling a woman to "smile more," a manager telling their employee they "should calm down," and a white person asking a person of colour "where are you really from?" are never statements without further implications. Rather, in all these instances there is an unequal power dynamic, and the use of language is a means of retaining power – a way of saying "this is how you should exist in my estimation of the world." These small acts of dehumanisation maintain hierarchies of power and we are gaslit into accepting less than we deserve, normalised to believe that a reaction is an overreaction, that we should not be so 'sensitive.'

Microaggressions are not called 'micro' because they are small, but because of how commonplace they are. When Chester M. Pierce first developed the

term microaggression to describe the everyday slights he witnessed against black people, he wrote about the "incessant and cumulative" effects of these behaviours on members of the black community. Writing more than 40 years after Pierce, Cathy Park Hong identified what she called "minor feelings" living as an Asian-American, "from the sediments of everyday racial experience and the irritant of having one's perception of reality constantly questioned or dismissed." I can't help but think about all the ways I've similarly experienced such 'minor' feelings in my years living in Australia as a migrant and a woman.

I no longer screen cap the unsolicited messages I receive. I no longer want to keep track of these words as 'evidence' to the harm that words can cause. Instead, like in Hamer's exhibition, I want to use words and language as my own power, to reclaim what has long been thrown against me. To stand in front of these signs and say "I am here and I see your words. And I resist."

Sophia Cai is a curator and arts writer based in Melbourne, Australia. She is particularly interested in Asian art history, the intersection between contemporary art and craft, as well as feminist methodologies and community-based practices.