



Present Tense

Interviews Thor Shannon Photography Alex John Beck

Xavier Cha

OOO: *Hi, Xavier. So where are you from, where did you go to school, and how did you get into art-making?*

X C : I was born in LA, but I moved to Dallas when I was around three and grew up there, which was miserable.

Why's that?

It was super alienating. I had a difficult time finding people I could relate to. I ended up going to RISD and then to UCLA for my MFA, and have been in New York since then.

It feels like there's been a lot of talk in the art world recently about the Los Angeles art scene and its specific sensibility. Would you say that going to school in LA was a formative experience for you as an artist?

I don't know if "formative" would be the word I'd choose. Grad school is a luxurious thing; it allows you to focus entirely on yourself. When I moved to LA, however, I knew that I would move to New York afterward because so many of my friends from RISD had moved here straight after graduation. If I did it over again now, I'm not sure I'd go straight to grad school; I'm not sure if that model is even necessary anymore. But it was really good for me, just to develop my work. I was already doing performances at RISD, so it wasn't an enormous breakthrough time for me, but I did do some performances I was really happy with.



It seems like when you moved to New York you really hit the ground running. What year was that?

I moved here in 2004. I had already met Kelly and Pascal, the co-owners of my former gallery Taxter & Spengemann, when I was at UCLA, so when I moved here I already had a gallery. Somehow it just worked out.

Evidently! I always find it fascinating to hear the influences that artists cite, or how certain artists arrive at similar concerns in their work from totally different angles. I'm curious as to how you landed on the themes you focus on in your work, and how those became important to you.

For one, I don't usually think about art. It's been really important and productive for me that I've networked with different communities that are completely separate from, and un-indoctrinated in, the art world.

Can you give me some examples?

In the first solo show I did with Taxter & Spengemann, *Holiday Cruise!*, in 2006, I created these three characters' online profiles. This was before Facebook, so the characters had Friendster and Myspace profiles instead. I created these three characters, each with distinct personalities, and networked as much as possible, deliberately trying to accrue "friends" and build up a fanbase.

That seems very prescient!

I suppose so—this being before Instagram and all. The schedule of that show was split up into thirds, each dedicated to one of the three characters, and was open to the public as a means of networking IRL. All of the fans I met online were welcome to come and interact and do performances with the character, and I stayed in character the whole time. Weird shit happened every day of the show, and often involved total freaks. Each character had different esoteric interests, so it brought in totally different communities—people I would not ordinarily meet, especially in New York—like pagan groups, subway performers, or people who met to reenact their dreams together. Anyway, *Holiday Cruise!* provided a platform for anyone to perform in the gallery with the character, develop their own performances, and bring in their own audiences—an intersection of totally different communities, of eccentric subcultures. People who might not have ever gone to a contemporary art gallery otherwise. My last piece, *Fruit Machine 2* at the New Museum, was also an example of that. It featured three deaf and two blind performers, which brought in an unusual mix of audience members to the New Museum theater. The concepts behind my work aren't about art, but rather about different cultural interactions. I'm trying to convey these broader concepts through the talent of specific people—people who most often aren't artists themselves.

The art world can often feel like this kind of recursive echo chamber. Certain artists only address an art-world audience and incorporate elements from the art world into their work.

Yeah! I get so bored. It gets really stale. I go through periods of not going to Chelsea and to galleries, because it can be really uninspiring. It's often a lot of stuff that's already been said, in a very specific language that speaks to itself.

Which is really alienating too. Reading press release language for example...

Which says nothing!

Exactly! I recently went to a bunch of Lower East Side galleries with a friend who knows very little about the art world, and I found myself spouting this total art-speak mumbo jumbo about materiality and process that I don't actually even believe in. I had to catch myself, because I realized I was justifying the appearance and existence of work that I actually don't care about at all.

Totally. I had that experience with a musician friend of mine, who's also not in the art world, but is still peripherally associated and aware. We went to the Independent Art Fair last year, and he told me that he didn't know how to enter most of what we were seeing. It occurred to me that a lot of my understanding of the works on view came from reading the gallery's sign before seeing the art, then being able to engage with these works as a result of that pre-understood context, of the branding of the gallery name. You and I already know what we're supposed to look at, but my friend understandably hated it because he didn't have that prior knowledge of what those names signified.

In a past iteration of the art world, artists would subscribe to and associate themselves with particular movements and styles. Now, however, it feels those movements and styles have been replaced with galleries, like brands. Viewers see and judge artists completely differently based on the gallery that represents them—they're contextualized based on the space that exhibits their work. Actually, I'm curious to hear what you think of that, because you yourself seem to benefit from that model. Your gallery, 47 Canal, has such an amazing and exciting reputation.

I know! I'm really excited about 47 Canal and their program and that I'm a part of it. I mean, I can't avoid it. I make performances, so I need institutional context in order to show my work—I can't just create performances in my apartment. After Taxter & Spengemann closed, I wanted to go to a space where I would be part of a community, like I had with Kelly and Pascal—not just a commercial entity. I feel so lucky to have landed where I have, with Margaret and Oliver [Lee and Newton, the gallery's directors]. 47 Canal is really an artist's gallery.

And people have obviously responded to that really well. The gallery encompasses an amazing community of artists, with such a wide array of interests. It seems that the artists who hover around 47 Canal and

who are represented by them are, like you, keen on engaging scenes and communities beyond the traditional art world—nightlife, fashion, music, and so on.

Definitely. I am more excited and inspired by the energy of people living their lives creatively and intelligently than by the art world itself. Most of my friends' main concern, I think, is enjoying life by being creative. And as ambitious, smart, and imaginative as they are, I think most of them don't really care about art.

I often feel that it's a strange position being both complicit with the art world and opposed to it. You're also involved with nightlife, though, correct? I've started to find the current character of New York nightlife increasingly exciting—it seems there's a new, honest engagement with the body happening in nightlife spaces that isn't happening in the art world. I'm thinking of figures like Juliana Huxtable and Colin Self, for example.

Right. To me, dreaming is what made me want to be an artist. You can be whatever the fuck you want to be if you're an artist. But I think that freedom is becoming less and less the case as the structure and professionalism of the art world have grown more rigid, and its conventions more prescribed and predictable. It makes the art world so much less exciting. I think that those you mentioned, Juliana and Colin, and so many other inspiring creative individuals around us, are actually doing that thing that drove me to get out of Dallas and pursue a career as an artist in the first place.

They get to exist in this kind of idealized, safe nightlife space where you can be whatever you want to be, and represent yourself however you want to be represented.

I don't even want to say it's safe—it's creative. They're creating that space; it's not safe-on-arrival. They're molding their environment. That's the exciting part.

It seems connected to the way you've seemingly explored representations of identity in your own work, be it at your last show at 47 Canal or at the Whitney.

It's funny you say that because I don't feel as though I deal with identity at all!

I must have gotten something totally different from those exhibitions then! Seeing your show at 47 Canal, for instance, which featured various figures shown on video screens staring blankly at the camera without speaking, reminded me of the way that screens instantly image and mediate the identities we construct and publicize, for both ourselves and an absent audience, on social media and in the media proper.

Interesting. In my mind, that show was more about the removal of ego than it was about its construction. All of those people featured in the show were actually on a low dose of DMT when I shot them. DMT completely explodes your sense of identity. I wanted to evacuate identity and the self, not represent it. Those people weren't capable of self-consciously representing themselves at all. They weren't managing their appearances like in a selfie or profile picture or whatever.

Wow, that's fascinating. I think I experienced the negative image of that—what you intended in reverse.

Right. It's interesting that you brought your own projection to those people's existence and significance on those screens. I think, with that show, most viewers ended up experiencing it based on their own projections. Since the people featured had their personalities completely removed, they became eerily blank or void. In real life many of those people look totally different—the shattering of their egos by the dose made them hold their faces in a completely different way. But the show wasn't meant to be a “drug piece”—in fact, I intentionally didn't talk about that element at all in the exhibition's press materials. It was simply a means of accessing that vacancy, an out-of-body emptiness.

I'm kind of embarrassed—and fascinated—about how wrong I was about that one, but it makes total sense to me now. The evacuation of identity is not something I've thought much about, because it seems we are all constantly trying to do the opposite—shaping and building up our identities instead. It's uncommon to strip back identity rather than add to it. Thinking about that exercise now, though, it seems even more intriguing to me than its inverse—my initial reading—precisely because of its rarity.

I often attempt to give palpable form to those gaps and in-between spaces that remain after all else is stripped away. The Whitney piece, *Body Drama* (2011), also wasn't about representations of self or identity, but creating a vacuum for acting and the privileged vantage point of the camera. That was a very plastic situation. An actor performed in the main floor gallery while wearing a body-mounted camera rig, and in between performances the footage from the camera was projected on a large freestanding wall bisecting the space. That piece was primarily about acting itself, and the presence of the camera. Seeing the camera attached to the performers' bodies, you understood that the performance was intended for the screen, for filmic space, and so the camera had the effect of fracturing the space into parallel dimensions. There was no narrative. You walked in and experienced the objectified craft of acting itself—acting as object and form.

Whether you're there with the performer or not.

Right.

I think my experience of your work is really, and necessarily, channeled through my own frame of reference and interests. Perhaps this is obvious, but I've been thinking a lot about the representations of identity lately, and how those representations are so malleable, so easy to shapeshift dependent on the context in which they're expressed, be it online or IRL. I think that's why the screen-based elements featured in both of the shows we're discussing activated such completely different thoughts in my brain than you intended for, because of the associations I have with the screen and how it both represents and modulates my own identity.

That makes sense. The presence of the camera is like the presence of that context. It shifts how you might behave.

To me, the camera represents an absent viewer. I think in today's world, whether you're an artist or not, you're constantly performing for an absent viewer on the other side of the screen.

That's what's creepy and intriguing to me about acting, actually. An actor's craft is constantly performing for that absent viewer. The actors in *Body Drama* intensely emote, but without any real reason or purpose except to express and capture "good acting."

How about the New Museum piece, Fruit Machine 2? When I saw it, it seemed related to the work of yours I'd seen before, but also somewhat of a departure.

Well, there was a different, first version of *Fruit Machine* that I had done earlier at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, which also had to do with acting. It involved a projected fruit machine app just like the second, more recent version, but it looked more literally like a slot machine than the piece at the New Museum. The ICA performance featured four actors, all wearing tall tees with individual fruits printed on them. There were four set roles from stage left to right. Every minute for 30 minutes the fruit machine app randomly reset the actors into one of four roles, thus resetting and shifting their emotions. It was really psychotic because they were constantly shifting between emotional extremes. *Fruit Machine 2*, meanwhile, dealt more readily with language, cultural baggage, and the way we perceive things. It featured several performers—some who couldn't hear, some who couldn't see—trying to communicate a phrase from one to another, with the original sentence changing pretty dramatically with each round. A single expression can mean such different things and carry completely different weight to different people—even just depending on who your friends are or your cultural background or interests—and that slippage is accentuated

when translating through different senses and modes of communication, as deaf and blind people have to do. I didn't want the piece to be about disability or any hierarchy of perception; it was about subjectivity, language, and the transmission of meaning.

That piece was performed in December, correct? What are some of the things you're working on and thinking about now?

Yes, it was. I have a performance in an upcoming show at the Kunst- halle Düsseldorf called *Smart New World*. It's about digital capitalism and the current state of our information society. I'm working on a performance for it with two ex-Merce Cunningham Company dancers, Rashaun Mitchell and Silas Riener. I'm having a programmer track the online traffic of consenting individuals, then using those patterns—the neurotic and compulsive checking of email, Instagram, Facebook, email, Facebook, and so on—as the algorithmic basis for the choreography. I want it to seem mental but beautiful—slow abstract movements that represent different actions online. It will most probably be quite repetitive, like animals in zoos that pace in circles because they're losing their minds in captivity. I want it to have a similar feeling, a similar kind of neurosis and psychosis.

This all seems to loop back to the body, which we were discussing earlier. In art history, The Body is such a loaded concept, associated often with art made in the nineties. It means something totally different now, however. My thinking about the body—the body being so tangible and real—serves as a kind of foil to my thinking about identity, which is constructed largely in immaterial space, and is so nebulous. Both of those poles seem to be engaged by your upcoming piece of choreography.

It's as if we're in the awkward phase of transitioning. We exist mostly outside our bodies or in phantasmic representations of our image, but we are still left with and inside these heavy corporeal structures. It's kind of like *Fruit Machine 2*, as well. One can be born without sight, or without hearing, yet language exists on a totally different plane.

That's another reason why I'm attracted to nightlife as a space and concept and community, because nightlife is so totally about the expression of the body in physical space—in a way that seems increasingly rare.

True! It's very generous to say: "let's experience something physically together."

Dance really foregrounds the body. You don't see that as much in art.

Right. I went through a phase when I wished I was a dancer. I can't think of many careers so premised on that yogic union—or what have you—of mind, body, and spirit. Usually we have to seek out those components via separate pursuits. Not even athletes have that same union, because their jobs lack the intellectual/creative component that's so central to dance.

Is there a way of importing that union into the sphere of art? Do you attempt to do that in your practice today?

I think I'm constantly seeking this union in my pursuits. Ultimately, I'm interested in an elevated experience. I'm interested in this gratifying connection as viewer and as a human. I recently went to see



this exhibit, which, for personal reasons, I had a really hard time with. I became a bit depressed seeing it, though not at all because it was a bad show. It was about a previous generation of performance artists and, though there were many works and artists in it I admire, its archived theater-prop and dated documentary-footage feeling made the work feel dead and difficult to engage with. This is intrinsically problematic to the medium of live performance. I remember thinking, “I do not want my art to feel this way.” I very vividly felt the impossibility of experiencing performance after the fact—really, truly, no matter how well documented or curated—and that made me very sad. *How do you confront that inevitability then?*

I don’t know! It’s depressing. It’s kind of a losing battle, unless the performance is successfully restaged. Video documentation of performance will eventually look dated no matter what. And in any case, a video of a performance, even a live stream, will never feel the same as the live experience. It’s a problem. Sculptures and paintings can end up feeling dated too, but I don’t think to the same extent—as long as they aren’t damaged, they will always inhabit their intended materiality. They don’t lose their charge over time in the same way. I guess that’s what I mean by “experience”—what I want to maintain and capture. The cultural mindset behind a piece, the conditions of the moment—they’re so important, and that’s why that show depressed me, because

of how difficult it is to encapsulate these things. But then again, I guess you can’t really think about that. I mean, even net art gets dated.

Net art is dated! Even that term has been historicized. Now it’s all about “post-Internet” art.

Totally! Yet so many people are still operating in that zone.

It feels as though the art world is only now becoming interested in that kind of work, but it’s as if it’s perpetually five years behind.

Anyway, I went to that show wanting it to feel powerful, hoping for that transcendent feeling of seeing something that affects you. I was hoping to feel moved by the exhibit; I suppose I did, but in the opposite way I was expecting.

I guess I'd never thought about how, as an artist, I might approach documentation preemptively.

It's an old conversation. I try not to get bogged down by that. It's kind of lame to think about how I might be historicized one day. Basically it goes back to prioritizing the experience. It's like chasing a high—that powerful feeling of being inspired or struck by ideas and concepts. It's often easier to feel that by going out and sharing the energy of enthusiastic, creative people.

I think we chase transcendent experiences through nightlife because of how common they are there—through drinking or drugs or dancing or what have you.

Right, because they help you feel alive.

I'm interested in the art world, though, because those transcendent experiences can happen there—they might be few and far between—but they can happen, and are sort of exceptional because when they do occur, it's not on the dance floor but in these quiet, sober places.

Totally. Existing in the realm of creating transcendent experiences is such freedom. It's why I chose to be an artist and live in New York in the first place—to chase those highs, and to create them. ●