

In *Orchids That Look Good in Bad Lighting*, Jueqian Fang presents exactly what is indicated by the title—lights and flowers. The exhibition can be taken literally, as an arrangement of decorative objects, but also read as a more ambiguous situation. Through physical means, Fang evokes online spaces, creating a subtle link between those worlds.

Fang exhibits potted orchids alongside light fixtures made of rock, bamboo, with lampshades made of shopping bags from various big-box retailers. These sit atop various chrome Ikea furnishings: a utility cart, a towel rack, a stool, and a plant stand. Braided cords drape across the installation in vibrant shades of blue, green, pink, purple, gold and silver, adding another visual accent. The result is a highly integrated experience for the viewer. Each element functions as a considered choice in an overall aesthetic statement, although the ultimate meaning remains open to interpretation.

The exhibition's press release, written by the artist, functions as another element within the installation. The text consists of a technical discussion appropriated from the online forum thread *Orchid Board - Most Complete Orchid Forum on the web ! > STYLES, SETUPS & ENCLOSURES > Growing Under Lights > Affect of Artificial Light on Orchids*

“Just check out the various specs, anything in between 4000-5000k is pleasant to look at, and 80+ CRI is great... 90+ is awesome... On the PDF they even have graphs of the output peaks if you want to get crazy, but it would be hard to guesstimate the PAR active energy, and it's been my opinion that 4000k bulbs work just fine for all around growing. HPS is just ugly to look at, although extremely efficient, so you get a bit more bang for your buck with HPS, I have my dad a little 250w HPS bulb I made out of an old down light, he keeps his geraniums etc... healthy during the winter.”

- Ocelaris, Senior Member

Difficult as it is to parse, the forum jargon can be seen as an oblique reference to Fang's working methods in creating the installation. The artist used lights with varied bulb temperatures, a technical measurement of artificial illumination. The higher the number, the bluer the color. These lights differ from “pleasant to look at” to providing an output that will sustain growing plants. During the install process for the exhibition, Fang arduously tested numerous possible lighting arrangements, changing bulbs, shades, and the spacing between fixtures. The result of this trial and error process is a unified environment that is nonetheless shaded with various technological and emotional overtones.

Since the early 1970s, there has been significant research regarding the physiological psychological impact of lighting. Humans generate a vast array of responses to varying arrangements of artificial light. John Flynn, a professor of architecture and psychology at Kent State University, has researched these responses extensively and found that “for some impressions, changes in the lighting produced significant changes in the response – impressions such as spaciousness, visual clarity, privacy, pleasantness, relaxation, and

complexity.” Fang’s installation forms a highly cohesive space that examines the impact of artificial light, spatial relationships, and the arrangement of living objects indicated by the title.

Though her work tends to avoid direct references, Fang is also engaged with wider trends happening within internet culture. *Orchids that Look Good in Bad Lighting* is no exception. The installation unexpectedly evokes the commercialized environments found in casual gaming apps. Fang is particularly interested in Neko Atsume, a widely popular mobile game from Japan. In a separate text, provided after the exhibition’s opening, the artist wrote a short description of Neko Atsume for gallery patrons:

“A smart phone game, you place food, furniture and toys in your virtual cartoon house and backyard to attract cats to come play. Cats who visit leave you sardines, with which you can buy a variety of food, furniture and toys and do remodeling to change the style of your house decor. Players have published a handful of datasheets that examine how much fish each furniture piece and toy earns in each house decoration style per day. However, there is a lack of controlled variables in these data analyses when considering that the cats might be capable of distinguishing the consistency of the decoration style, as well as appreciation of an aesthetically pleasing arrangement of furniture and toys. I found several items that I bought for the Zen style house, such as the lacquered bowl, the temari ball, the wood pail and the sunken fireplace, a lot less appealing to cats in my new Rustic style house.”

What seems like a straightforward explanation of how Neko Atsume works is actually something more reflective. Fang’s creative process mirrors the mechanisms found in the game. Elements of the in-game environment are materialized: lamps, furniture, and houseplants, each has its visual analog within the world of Neko Atsume. Users play the game by first designing a space and adding consumables to make it inviting for the virtual cats to visit. Fang invited gallery patrons to exchange comments about their relationship to the app:

“I have the rustic house right now, but it's really starting to feel too claustrophobic for me, I think I may go back to the modern.”

“You had the Guy Ferry cat show up and make a pizza on your space heater, that’s incredible!”

“I just really want that pyramid cat house so the Pharaoh Cat will visit, but honestly I don’t engage with the app regularly and I just can’t afford it.”

“I got all the cats and now abandoned them, I am feeling so guilty.”

These comments reflect the habit forming tendencies of the game, how it plays on a compulsion to collect and purchase. The more we buy in the game, the more cats we welcome into our digital homes. Just as players construct domestic environments for virtual pets, Fang creates physical environments for actual patrons.

*Orchids That Look Good in Bad Lighting* speaks to our commerce oriented habits by bringing digital commodities into a physical space. The artist uses orchids within the installation as retail products, their label and price tag still intact. The shopping bag lampshades further emphasize this connection. They serve as a reminder of an all-encompassing, 24-hour consumption culture enabled by modern retailers, both online and off.

By bringing these digital references into the concept of the physical gallery, Fang can be considered part of the artistic movement labeled as “post-internet.” Established through online galleries, and conversations by artist curators such as Marisa Olson, Gene McHugh, and Artie Vierkant, post-internet refers to the internet’s broad and continuing impact on culture and aesthetics. Critic Ian Wallace describes post-internet artists as:

“moving beyond making work dependent on the novelty of the Web to using its tools to tackle other subjects. And while earlier net artists often made works that existed exclusively online, the post-internet generation (many of whom have been plugged into the Web since they could walk) frequently uses digital strategies to create objects that exist in the real world.”

Critic and curator Domenico Quaranta describes the movement as:

“... These [post-internet] artists “use” their gallery work as another way to discuss and popularize the issues and concerns they confront in their non-gallery work. They do their best to match an art-oriented audience with a broader, participative audience which can be reached through the internet and other platforms and which is interested in their work not just for the issues it raises, but also for the way it empowers them with a new level of creativity and access.”

*Orchids That Look Good in Bad Lighting* brings the aesthetics of internet commerce into physical realization. The work itself is so subtly presented that it takes investigation for the viewer to uncover the references Fang is making.

Fang provides the viewer with a stimulating visual experience that can be engaged without added conceptual framework. It is the ambiguity of the artist concepts that ultimately leads the work to be conceptually opaque. With time and investigation, conceptual threads may become more apparent, but the viewer may realize that opacity, a resistance to interpretation, is also one of its defining qualities.

Through the artist’s esoteric references (Neko Atsume, online orchid forums, emotional effects of lighting, and consumerist culture) the installation serves as a representative work of a wider post-internet movement. *Orchids That Look Good in Bad Lighting* successfully combines the varied worlds of gaming, e-commerce, and fine art without being too explicit. . The instantiation of digital culture within the physical installation allows patrons to engage the work in different

ways. They need not necessarily engage on a conceptual level. The aesthetic environment is engaging enough, but there are entire worlds hiding within it.

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June, 2016