

Julie Oh: Sesame, open yourself

Essay by Rose Bouthillier

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The first thing you might notice when entering the gallery is the warm smell of sesame oil. Opened on the first day of the exhibition, a large, bright yellow can of the aromatic liquid creates a sensory and metaphorical threshold. *You're inside.*

Such moments are repeated throughout Julie Oh's exhibition, which is full of ruptures, openings and moments of transformation. The title is the more literal English translation of "*Sésame, ouvre-toi*," found in Antoine Galland's 1704 -1730 French publication of *One Thousand and One Nights*, a collection of ancient Arabic folk tales.¹ As the story goes, Ali Baba utters the incantation at the mouth of a cave holding untold riches, and the large boulder blocking the entrance moves aside, granting him entry. In contrast to the more common—and more impatient—version of the phrase, "Open sesame!", *open yourself* indicates a slower, reflexive, internal process. There's a lot more to the story, but Oh is less interested in the morality of the tale, and more interested in the responsive stone, animated through a precise request.

Oh's work with objects relies on such communication, on finding the right language to unlock something. Her process is an open-ended gathering of things together—from thrift shops, her own home, news articles, the internet—things that hold curiosity, feeling, potential or weight. In the studio, she engages these things through a series of spatial and symbolic questions, and in response, they make their own alignments and propositions. This nuance is crucial to Oh's work. There's a tendency for the logic of "ready-mades" to hinge on the supposed power of the artist to grant higher status to otherwise banal, mass produced objects. Oh recognizes the power of the objects themselves, and their abilities to transform both their surroundings and their observers.² In this exhibition, that power presents itself as sharper and darker than it has in most of Oh's past projects. It's a reflection of the times we find ourselves in and the ways in which some of our most intense human desires—safety, control, connection and purpose—have been collectively stressed.

Messenger (2020) alludes to the story of the cave quite directly—the front of a storage crate appears to magically float itself open, revealing a stack of folded t-shirts within. Individually, the shirts are emblazoned with an American Eagle brand graphic, a patriotic bird taking flight. Folded just so, they stack up into a much more ambiguous and ominous form; part bird, part smoke, part shadow, or the outline of a swirling funnel cloud. It gives the impression of something being unleashed, and, once out, hard to contain. Nearby, a large black form rests on the floor. Oh was drawn to this object—a front end vehicle cover—as it recalls the face masks that have become a ubiquitous part of our lives throughout the pandemic.³ It evokes the wing span of another large bird, the contours of an animal hide, or the mirrored form of a Rorschach ink blot. Below its centre fold, a soft pink cast set of human teeth peeks out. The impression was taken from the artist's own mouth, which bears the telltale signs of bruxism, nightly grinding and clenching of the jaw.⁴ The title of this work, *dormant* (2021), evokes both the unconscious state of sleep, and something—a seed, a virus—lying in wait to be reactivated.

¹ The particular folk tale that this phrase comes from, "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" was added to the original collection by Galland, who heard it from Syrian storyteller Hanna Diyab.

² I once asked Oh to suggest one word that could best describe her work. Her answer, "friendly," surprised me at first, but as I thought about it more, it seemed perfect. To be friendly is to invite, to propose a mutual exchange. Later, when I asked her about this quality of friendliness, and why it is important, she responded, "When you humanize an object, it humanizes everything around it, including people."

³ This item has a range of names suggesting bodily garments, including car bra, and the explicit connotation here: car mask.

⁴ It's been widely reported that during the pandemic, dentists in North America noticed a significant uptick in cracked, broken and eroded teeth, which many attributed to an increase in stress-induced grinding.

On one side of the gallery, *OX M-K,S,Q* (2021-22), a row of 70 medical grade oxygen tanks lines the wall. The title represents the tanks' contents and sizing options, an impersonal product code that contrasts with both the life-saving function they serve, and the personalities they seem to easily take on. They stand in single file, human-like, with sloping shoulders and small heads; some appear bored, staring impassively ahead, while others chit-chat to one another, or scan the room. This arrangement of bodies will be familiar to those that have spent more time in lines as of late, waiting on vaccines, QR scans and capacity limits; it also calls up growing surgical backlogs. The tanks are heavy and awkward to move; when they collide, they ring out, with different sizes creating different tones.⁵ Oh recorded their movement into the gallery and created *chime* (2022), a sound piece emanating from the darkened room the line is waiting to enter (a way out or a dead end?) The sound recalls church bells or a warning call, but it's too random and discordant to be either. There's no announcement to follow, no clear beginning or end, just an erratic clanging that rises, then falls, only to rise again.

In the centre of the gallery, *time* (2022) hangs from the ceiling. Assembled from two large thermostats installed in a casing typically used for for clocks, it draws on the physical similarities of these two objects to capture the psychological state of suspension. Indoors, we try to keep the temperature stable, within a few degrees, to make ourselves comfortable. We have far less control in our relationship with time: we can only attempt to modify our own experience and perception of it. The temporal anxiety wrought by the pandemic is also given shape in *what does the future hold?*: a Ouija board, flipped over to expose its plain, particle-board underside. It appears to float off the floor, a blank slate offering no clarity on what's to come, but granting a brief moment of levity. In *audience* (2022), a collection of colorful dog toys peers down from the ceiling nook. While in their daily lives they would be subject to all manner of chewing and thrashing (several have their eyes or faces torn off), here they sit as wise observers. Not benevolent, not judgmental, just watching, knowingly, as we go about our business, wearing clothes and sending emails and searching for meaning and really fucking things up. *Cute.*

A similar note of humorous futility is struck in one of the exhibition's first moments: *Grand Opening* (2020), a set of red ribbons that flank the gallery's entryway. They repeat their festive proclamation again and again, lush, bright and silky. While these ribbons are made to be held by beaming business owners and dignitaries, here they are supported by simple toilet paper dispensers. The near identical dimensions of these rolled items is another symbolic coincidence; both are also intended to only be used once. This work speaks to never ending cycles of consumption and disposal, the fleeting nature of what we build and attempt to sustain and which inevitably ages, fails and needs to be replaced. And still we celebrate.

People often point out that humans are just another part of the natural world, even though we tend to think of ourselves as separate from it. We are also, in another way, inseparable from the world of objects. We operate under the illusion that we direct them; in reality we are just as directed by them. In Oh's work, objects are recognized as teachers, holders of knowledge about us, knowledge that is in turns difficult, disappointing, comforting and profound. *Sesame, open yourself* invites viewers into this way of attending to the things that surround us, the multitudes that they hold. It doesn't stop at the gallery doors; you can carry this out of the cave.

⁵ Oh learned more about the tanks from the Linde company rep that dropped them off at the gallery. These tanks have long lives; some are date stamped as far back as 1920. In the 40s, they picked up other stamps, too: small Swaztikas. After the war, the German company altered the shape by adding four new lines to create a four-pane window, which continued to serve as the company insignia.

KENDERDINE ART GALLERY
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