

Faraway, so close #3: The future with Cyrus Tang and Lucy McRae

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LUCY MCRAE [INTRODUCTION QUOTE]

I would ask you the question, does it help to feel scared? If you're holding the hand of a kid and you're saying, we're going to go down this really dark alley, but, you know, don't be scared. You inspire, and you, you go in there as like... You're going to conquer it.

TIARNEY MIEKUS [INTRODUCTION]

How do you think about the future at a time when the future feels so uncertain? In this episode of Faraway, so close a podcast dedicated to considering the anxieties and opportunities emerging in the arts and our new Covid-19 world, we're considering how artists are thinking about the future. And for this episode, we spoke with Cyrus Tang and Lucy McRae. While Cyrus and Lucy have quite different practices—Cyrus looks at how loss and nostalgia can lead us to imagine new futures, and Lucy's art considers the ways in which technology is transforming our bodies and biology—I wanted to know how each of them were thinking and feeling about what comes next. While Cyrus and I talk about her work and the ideas of loss, transformation and the future, our conversation first started with Cyrus's experience of having migrated from Hong Kong over 15 years ago.

CYRUS TANG

I think that you may be aware that a lot of my work is really related to memory and how to capture the loss and disappearance. And it's partly because of my journey. And I moved to Australia and leave just one year after my father passed away. And I think it's that triggered me a lot and not talking about it really... Thinking about, I want to move to Australia at that time. I just want to find a place, I want to leave. And then so that I can start a new life. And so I never really think about, I'm going to settle down in this place, but funny thing about the Covid-19, and then I got a lot of time to just really sit down, to think about my situation. And I guess it's because of the social isolation. And then I don't have a lot of time to catch up with friends.

And then I must say in the last 20 years, and then I pretty much, I don't have a lot of time really think about, "Am I really love this country, or I want to go back to Hong Kong or move to another country?" I guess it's because I have a little bit more time. And then I start to walk every morning and then think about, and I look about everything around my area. And I start to think about how fortunate I'm living in this place. And I can see so spacious everywhere, and I can see the sky. And because in Hong Kong we hardly see the sky because it's all the high rise. And everything made me feel that I start to connect in Melbourne—is really weird. And then I start to talk to more with my neighbor, which is never really have a chance or have the time to really pay attention to all this. And then I guess it's because of the lockdown. And then we all slow down and then we all do a lot of different things. And then in the past I never really stay in my neighborhood. And now I start to stay a lot, spend a lot of time in my neighbourhood, and then talk to my neighbour. And then I walk around with my neighbourhood every single morning. And so, and I start to enjoy a little more time in this place.

TM

And it's interesting because even though your art practice deals so much with loss, it sounds as if, at the moment, that despite all of the loss that does come with COVID and the loss that a lot of people are feeling right now, that you've been making an effort to find what can be gained from the moment.

CT

Exactly. And then I'm so, so sad about all the loss. Because I think since the Covid-19, and then I'm one like other, a lot of people. And then we observe the news every single day. And I'm checking about all my friends overseas and then, because all my family's in Hong Kong. And then I contact my family pretty much like every day and then to see how things is going. And then I got the chance to—I started thinking about all my primary school friends, and then I start to contact with them, which is, I never really think pay attention to all this. I guess it's because the loss of life and make me don't take things for granted. So, and then I finally, I got a very good relationship with my family and which is, I never really expected about this. And then we

talk a little bit more and then we laugh a little bit more than before. So I think this is something that I gained.

TM

And so I guess on the other side of that gain is a sense of loss and disappearance. And they're both ongoing themes in your work. And obviously loss is something that's experienced all of the time, both for people personally, and then collectively. But I wonder with COVID-19 do you think that's going to reorient our sense of how we perceive loss?

CT

I think my work is always about loss. In the Eastern philosophy and the loss is not really like a loss, is a little bit like a transformation. It just transformation from one state to another state. So this is how I see it. And then even though I deal with a lot of history and the loss, I always keep on thinking about because of the history so that we can perceive about future. And so this is how I always see my work in this way. Before that, and then my, my idea is a little bit like my whole travel memory in Hong Kong and partly because of the protest. And then make me feel like I want to echo my old place and compare with where I live now. And then what is the difference. Because of the Covid-19, because all of these loss about life and over the world.

CT

And I just think about right now at the moment in Australia. And so I stopped to collect all the photograph and all the images, and that I got from the internet or that I took every day. And when the time I go on for a walk or I collect from my family. And I start to build up that archive, and then to go to use that new period of time. And then for me, and the Covid-19 is trigger quite a lot because the first of my memory is the SARS in 2003. And that is the same years I moved to Australia. And that just the first trigger. I was very fortunate, and once I moved to Australia two months after the outbreak in SARS and all my family, all my friend and in Hong Kong is devastated and in that period of time. So I walk out from that disaster and then 10 years after, and then that coming back again. And I just keep on thinking about—actually when, when the time we go through about the whole history is every now and then, and then we have that invisible enemy and attacking us, and then how much we remember about all this crisis. And so, and I've just really want to remember that period of time. And then hopefully we won't forget when the time we move on.

TM: Yeah. And just to pick up on something you said on, on the idea of loss, actually being a time and a space of transformation.

CT

Yes, yes.

TM

In a way, I guess that makes any sense of loss is kind of orientated towards the future in a way. Have you been thinking about the future a lot at the moment? Or is it hard to conceive of the future right now?

CT

At this stage, to be honest it's quite hard to perceive the future because every single day is changing, but I guess we do need to have that hope and then to move on with the future.

TM

And I know that in the past, in your work, you've also looked at the idea of, of loss in the future as opening up a space for activism and opening up a space to imagine new futures. And I think that's, you know, a lot of people sort of talking about that as something that could really come of Covid. Do you have a sense that that could be possible?

CT

Yes. Yeah. And I keep on thinking about actually human being is really strong. And then when we think about our history go through in the past hundred years, we deal with the crisis and then we, yeah, and then we move on. We always managed to move on. Even though when you think about a few weeks ago, and then we all stay at home. And to be honest, I'm a little bit depressed and I'm panicking and I'm worried. And then I don't, I don't even want to step out the house. And then for the first week. And so now I'm feeling a little bit more comfortable and then I walk out the house and I start to do things. And I believe other people is the same. And because my day job is working in the aged care industry. And then I deal with people in their old age, and then they are talking about the end of the night. And they are positive about the situation. They don't plan about 20 years time, but they plan about maybe in the

coming few months, what they're planning to do. And then I guess we were talking about future is, they're talking about and this a lot of different stage. And I still thinking about there is a hopeful for the future is all depending on how we perceive the future. In what sense.

TM

In a creative sense, if your work often uses loss to look toward the future, does, does that make it hard to create right now if the future does feel so uncertain?

CT

Hmm, yes or no. Because by the time I make work and I don't really thinking about, "Oh, how I'm going to see the future." I always thinking about the future is all depending on how people interpret. And most of my works, like my book, I burning the book and then when the time I burned the book, and then I don't really—I want the people, once you see the burn book and then you will think about the history. And then hopefully they will go into think about because of the history, and then how you as a human being, how you create a future. And this is how I see it. And then most of my work is really related to the memory. And my new work is mainly about this period of time. And then, because I really want to record a whole period of time because I'm thinking about is really important for us to remember and show that everyone we're going to make that little bit of ourselves and then to create a better future.

TM

I guess, as, as a person and as an artist, does that leave you ultimately feeling anxious about the future or hopeful or a bit of both?

CT

I think it's a little bit of both. So sometimes no matter what it is, and the uncertainty is always a little bit anxious, this is also one thing I really enjoy making art. Whenever I think about a new idea, and then I get myself into that kind of really anxious state because of all this uncertainty. You don't know what is coming out the next, and then suddenly you lost the confidence and then you just need to working on this situation. And so I think it's sometime it's good to have that kind of anxiety so that we can be a bit more alert. And then so that we got the kind of resilience to with uncertainty. And I guess maybe in Australia, we are kind of quite comfortable compared with a lot of other country. And so, but to be honest and nowadays, and then life can be a bit more unpredictable and we don't know what is coming up around the corner, and then we can go out and then we, we, we have car accidents and that's it.

And life sometime is a form of unpredictable changes. I guess it's particular to Covid-19 and then make everyone including me aware about this. And I think everyone needs to sit on this kind of uncertainty and a little bit anxious about things. And then in the meantime, and then carry with that kind of anxiety and then to move on. And sometimes I don't take anxiety as negative. I just always thinking about everyone needs to be that kind of a little bit anxious so that we can alert, and then to don't take things for granted.

TM [NARRATION]

Cyrus has given such a personal insight into how she was feeling about the future. Yet since we often couple technology with how we imagine the future, I'd been thinking a lot about Lucy McRae, whose practice represents possibilities of our bodies and technology. With everything being so uncertain right now, where was that trajectory heading next? So I called Lucy. And since she's currently based in Los Angeles, living in a country that's been heavily affected by coronavirus, I first wanted to know how things were feeling in LA.

LUCY MCRAE

It's 79 and sunny. You know, when you look outside, it's, it's calm, there's more people than ever walking their dogs or running. But I, I think that, you know, a really good way to describe it is it's kind of like a perfect storm. Everyone's stuck inside. There's a global pandemic, there's a kind of potential revolution rendering in the background and the opportunity that comes out of hitting rock bottom, despite the discomfort and the suffering, is a really great way to create change and transformation. And I live 10 minutes from downtown. So it really depends on what day do you ask? What, what does it feel like in LA because I've experienced helicopters flying over in fleets, not just one or two, but like many, many fireworks, tear gas, you know, but it's not that sensation at the moment. It seems really peaceful. So I think that like everywhere in the world, it's, it's really—it comes back to how we react, how we, how we are individually kind of reacting to the situation.

TM

And there's a lot in there that I want to unpack, but before we go any further—you're known as a science fiction artist and a body architect, and I was wondering if you could just first talk through what those labels mean.

LM

It's a fabricated name that allows me to tap into film, photography, installation, science, biology—but what I really consider myself, or the work that I do, is that I'm an interpreter. My job is about sensing the fringes of culture and understanding what is happening there. And then turning that, manifesting that into visual stories, scientific 'what ifs'.

TM

Through your work it's so clear that you know, so much about the ways in which technology can transform the human body and human biology and the way you so poetically weave that knowledge into your art is just, it's really tremendous. But is your sense of these possibilities...Have they been changing in the last four to five months under Covid?

LM

I'm eternally optimistic about the potential of humanity: the way that restrictions and limitations forces us to become creative. And I think that we are these isolated islands living at home, and it has become a battle of the mind where we're confronted with ourselves. And I think that unpacking the idea of the future is, is about resilience and what I have always dealt with and what we are all dealing with right now is how to, how to cultivate or sit with uncertainty. Every single person is a forecaster right now, we're all independently unpacking the future. And we just don't know. So it's, for me, it's about human resilience, this collective consciousness and our rhythms of consciousness are being changed, forced to change, whether it's small things working from home and how can you turn your living room into a, you know, optimal working place. Or larger things like the pandemic. And I think that, you know, it's the mind that is this gateway and change only happens when we're confronted with obstacles.

TM

And it makes me think about something that you, you said sort of at the very beginning, that when you reach a type of rock bottom, that's when a lot of opportunities start to emerge that maybe you hadn't thought about before. Are there any kind of opportunities specifically that you're imagining when you say that?

LM

I think that it's, for me, it's like the opportunity for everybody to confront themselves And actually whether you like it or not, you're having to do that. So this opportunity is is an opportunity for everybody to really... You know, somebody said to me, "Mother nature sent us home to our rooms to have a look at what we've done." And that was a quote that was shared right at the beginning of the pandemic. So I don't think it's my role to provide solutions or say, "This is what the opportunity is. This is what the future is." It's more about asking questions. I think that's, yeah. It's about asking questions and being uncomfortable or comfortable with not knowing.

TM

Have you had moments where the uncertainty has just felt overwhelmingly stressful or has made you feel really anxious?

LM

Suffering. Suffering is the first thing that comes to my mind: yes. In capitals. And I don't think that that is intrinsic to me. I think it's, you know, everybody is at different times of the day, the month, the week, continue to, to suffer on different scales. But, you know, through suffering is the only way that you can transform. So I think that we will be a more resilient world after this. And, and what is, what is after this? Anyway, I think we are...we're, we're in training.

TM

Does feel strange to you though when so much of your art focuses on the future. And then right now, the future just does feel so uncertain?

LM

I was really in complete disarray when this happened. Because for the last six years, my work has all been about isolation and touch, and then suddenly it wasn't a speculation. It was a reality. And actually, you're, you're the first person who I'm kind of speaking publicly because I've not wanted to—I've not actually had anything to say because I've been trying to work out how to respond and how I feel about it. And

I, and I, I would say I still don't have that answer, but I'm okay with saying that I don't know, and I don't have any answers and that we're all, you know, whether we like it or not having to live with this discomfort and some of us in much more concentrated levels than others, depending on where you are in the world.

TM

So does that make it hard when you're creating work right now and going into the studio?

LM

Ah yes. Our whole pipeline has radically changed. We are running two projects at the moment, one is a show in Amsterdam that opens at the end of August, which is a work that was originally commissioned by a science gallery Melbourne. And the other project is going to Switzerland the day after the opening of, of Amsterdam. And so, buying materials from the fashion district when everything was closed, felt like we were, you know, trying to buy drugs. It was, it was an undercover exercise, and it's, it's been really challenging. But I think that you'll see in both works, the tension, the anxiety. And both works are really very tactile, which is kind of not what we're allowed to do. We're told that we're not allowed to touch at the moment. And so maybe that has made the works even more squishy, even more cushioned, particularly with the biometric mirror, because I think that during moments of anxiety and suffering, you try and find comfort. And so these kind of cushions and, and it's very, it's sort of like domesticating technology. It's a series of three shrines where they're sort of temples of technology. So I think that both of these works really reflect how we've had to adapt and change whilst making work in a pandemic, which none of us have done before.

TM

No, and I think it's interesting because also I feel like Covid has really highlighted just how fallible our bodies are and how, like you say, like things like touch, which are so normal to us suddenly feel, it feels stressful. Like you think about what you can and can't touch and how your body sort of moves in space now. Do you think the future will be about addressing these fallibilities?

LM

I think that our weaknesses are what set us apart and, you know, I've, I've sort of been asking the question for about two or three years, what makes us human? So I think that our mistakes, our failures, our vulnerabilities are precisely what makes us human. So I think that it's really interesting that we are physically facing that speculative question. Prior we were asking that question because of technology, because of genetic engineering: what makes us human, when you can design the body from scratch and edit an embryo before it's even been born. And now here we are talking about the weakness about body now. And so we've been thrown, flung, into this extreme experience, but it's only through extreme experiences that we become more resilient. And one of the works at the NGV was the Institute of Isolation, which was about how to train the mind or body to become more resilient, particularly when it's—we may exit earth and colonise new planets. So I think that we are becoming stronger and perhaps we don't know that just yet.

TM

With your past work, having focused on touch and isolation and the body. Did it make you feel in any way at all prepared for what has happened or did it still, I guess, shock you like it shocked the rest of us?

LM

Oh, I was completely unprepared! Totally unprepared. I was like a rabbit in the headlights and I, yeah...And, and it took me a long time to, you know, if the opposite of unprepared is prepared. And my work is about preparing the body for the future. So it was very strange. It is very strange.

TM

Do you think going forward from here then, will the work have to change to encompass things like a global pandemic?

LM

How do you mean?

TM

Well, I guess if your work is about the body and the future, and has always been filled with utopian possibility and it's often so exciting—I feel like this place of possibility is where so many of us imagine the future of biology and technology, but now it just feels almost kind of pragmatic and survivalist, just in the sense that we want to be

able to touch people and touch things. And I guess what I'm asking is has the excitement now been taken out of the future?

LM

At the end of 2019, I did a project called 'The future survival kit' and the, the protagonist was a post-apocalyptic Sherpa. And it was this character who was carrying everything on their back, who had fled the city and was sort of like setting up in a, in a nondescript place. And the new work that I'm making in Basel is called the 'Solitary survival raft'. So it's interesting that you've talked about survival, and I think, you know, what is exciting is this kind of Renaissance of the DIY survival concept. And it sort of opens up the world to maybe this concept of, of having to be less of an expert and just more of a doer and maker, like roll up your sleeves. And let's just attempt that. I think that biology and technology are givens now, and maybe have been for a very long time.

LM

You know, I wonder whether there needs to be another theme. You know, you said art, biology technology, is it, is it the human condition? Is it the self? I think the body has always been really central central to my work. I do think that anything that is birthed or made when there are restrictions means that you have to be so much more creative. So would that be the case in, in science and technology? Are we going to have this kind of burst of creativity because we are all so restricted right now. And I think that that kind of, you know, going back to the beginning, like that restriction and hitting rock bottom will inform, you know, how we move ahead and where we put our focus.

TM

So it seems like overall, you feel pretty optimistic about the future?

LM

I would ask you the question, does it help to scared? If you're holding the hand of a kid and you're saying, "We're going to go down this really dark alley, but you know, don't be scared." You inspire, and you, you go in there as like an—you're going to conquer it as an explorer as an...You know, courage. And I just, I personally my process is about discomfort, uncertainty, unknown. So it's not that I'm, you know, having a great time while making the work. But optimism is for me, is, is one way to approach innovation and the future.

TM [NARRATION]:

This was something that Cyrus talked about too, that on the one hand, we have to sit with anxiety and uncertainty, but we also need optimism and action.

CT

Sometimes I find out action can make a lot of difference and then it's like a dance, and then you can see it and then you can be anxious and then not doing anything. And however, and then, or you can keep moving on every day. And then suddenly you find it out things is can get a bit better. And then your mood can get a little bit better. And so sometimes the more...your head space and then all your heart together with action is working together like a dancing. Is all depending on your work from your headspace or you work from your heart, or you grew up from your action. And I believe that it's not, once you find it out, all you got stuck. Why not we're just working on something. It can be anything. And then it will, I'm pretty sure that it will change your head space and then, and then it will change how you feel things and change how you see things.

TM

And that's it for this third edition of Faraway, so close. You can listen back to our first episode with Yvette Coppersmith and Alexi Glass-Cantor on solitude, and our second episode with Tai Snaith and Ross Coulter on parenting. And you can also keep up to date with new Art Guide podcast episodes via iTunes and Spotify and through Art Guide Australia online.