



Disorientalism: A New Face

An installation in "The Food Groups" Series

2018

DISORIENTALISM

Katherine Behar & Marianne M. Kim

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Disorientalism: A New Face

ArtSpace West presents *A New Face*, a project by Disorientalism, a decade-long collaboration between Asian-American artists Katherine Behar and Marianne M. Kim. This mashup of the Sun-Maid raisin girl and John Steinbeck's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, stars Marianne's 73-year-old mother and explores migrant labor, aging, and the changing face of American agriculture. Recurring themes of debt and discrimination show the clash between the American dream of individuality and big corporate interests. A third figure, labor activist Cesar Chavez, signals possible solidarities under these conditions.

A New Face is the fourth chapter in "The Food Groups," Disorientalism's five-part series of installations and performances about race and labor in American food production and promotion. The series continues Disorientalism's study of the disorienting effects of technologized labor, junk culture, and consumerism. The Disorientals encounter five historical food industry characters: Aunt Jemima, Wendy, the Land O'Lakes Indian Maiden, Sun-Maid, and Chiquita Banana. Embodying these iconic identities, they spark solidarities between races and classes, and manual and affective laborers. In each installation, they willfully confuse depersonalized production and personalized promotion of industrial food.

A New Face references the 2006 digital makeover of the Sun-Maid mascot, originally based on a portrait of Lorraine Collet. A Fresno woman, Collet was discovered drying her hair in the sun and came to symbolize Sun-Maid's wholesome ingredients, "grapes and sunshine." Trademarked in 1916, Collet's image was transformed 90 years later into an animated 3D avatar, but the change was met with criticism. Many observers disparaged the ad campaign's "new face" as a sexualized departure from Collet's chaste image. Perhaps in response, the company retained Sun-Maid's "old face" on raisin boxes.

Sun-Maid Growers of California is a consortium of small, family-owned farms in the San Joaquin Valley. Today this area is home to numerous farmers of Laoatian descent. Although "American family farming" generally conjures an Anglicized image, Steinbeck's novel reminds us that historically white migrant agricultural laborers also suffered discrimination. This exhibition examines how despite changes in labor *supply* like this shifting demographic, labor

conditions in agricultural work persist over time. Steinbeck's vivid picture of ruthless capitalism resonates in today's economy as banks seize homes and the specter of socialist alternatives wafts in public consciousness.

In this spirit, the renowned labor organizer Cesar Chavez mobilized Latino migrant laborers in solidarity with Filipino farm workers, in the famous Delano Grape Strike and Boycott from 1965–70. Chavez advocated transracial solidarities by mandating that Latino and Filipino workers share picket lines and strike together. His hunger strikes drew national media attention to the farm workers' plight and personal support from the likes of Robert F. Kennedy and Jesse Jackson.

Drawing on these histories, this exhibition also considers opportunities for transracial and transnational solidarities in the present moment. Today, adjacent to the U.S.-Mexico border, Californian agricultural labor is a touchstone for fierce political debates about immigration in the United States, such as the 45th president's plans to "build a wall." Symbolically, "walls" stymie undesirable forms of migration, even though "building" (as in real estate development) facilitates preferred forms of migration, like the E.B.-5 visa (infamously tendered to Chinese investors by Jared Kushner) which sells the benefits of U.S. citizenship to "alien entrepreneurs" for a half million dollars. Walls appear throughout this exhibition; their shoddy cardboard construction indicates the shaky construct of national borders, while also referencing the mass produced generic consumer goods that recur in *Disorientation's* work.

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The video sculpture ***And Such Was Their Hunger for the Land*** presents a durational performance in which Mrs. Kim sits before a towering platter of grapes in her garden. She chops each grape with a garden spade, as dusk sets in. The voice of a younger Korean woman reads passages from John Steinbeck's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. The novel tells the plight of a family of migrant farm workers searching for a better life, like Mrs. Kim, who migrated from South Korea to the U.S. for work in 1972. The video is revealed on the interior of a suitcase, suggesting that Mrs. Kim's stationary figure has undertaken multiple journeys in her lifetime, traversing continents and memories.

West Again on 66 is a vintage suitcase filled with snack-sized boxes of Sun-Maid Raisins. Each box in the dizzying array replaces Sun-Maid's face with a yellow circle, creating the illusion that she is dissolving into the yellow sun behind her.

In the multi-channel video installation, ***A Red Drop of Sun***, Mrs. Kim, dressed in the Sun-Maid's iconic red bonnet, walks to and from the historic Gyeongbokgung Palace on a traffic median in downtown Seoul. The video imagery is fragmented and inset into a cardboard wall and isolated behind a faux barricade of toy nunchucks.

The single-channel video ***The Western States Nervous Under the Beginning Change*** shows a young Asian man celebrating an invitation to migrate to the United States in exchange for investments, such as luxury real estate development in Manhattan. Known as the "golden ticket," the E.B.-5 was created by the U.S. Congress in 1990 to stimulate the American economy through job creation and capital investment by foreign investors. The video is emblazoned with the E.B.-5 slogan "For You. For America" and incorporates Willy Wonka's "Golden Ticket" song.

Incorporated (Hunger Strike) is a five-channel video installation embedded in a cardboard wall. In each video, the five Food Groups characters appear as animated avatars who undertake a hunger strike in solidarity with Chavez and each other. Slowly starving, they wait in silent dignity for a coming revolution. Over the course of fifteen minutes, their trademark outfits disintegrate along with their bodies, while a jazz funeral march plays.

Reading Nook, on the reverse side of this wall, offers guests a quiet space to sit and read from Steinbeck's novel or a biography of Chavez, or to fill out an alien entrepreneur E.B.-5 visa application.

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