

# PUDY TONG

iterations, duplications

Nick Novak Fellowship Exhibition

January 12 – February 10,  
2018

Artist Talk and  
Opening Reception  
Friday, January 12  
6:00-9:00pm



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# JOSH BRIEN

the waiting is the doing of the day  
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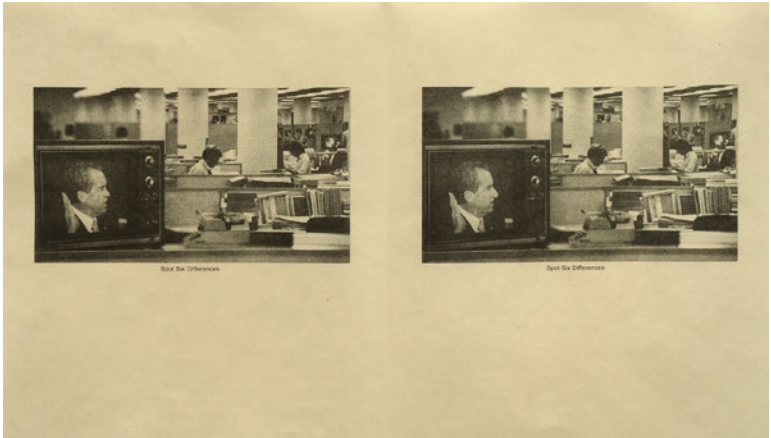
# PROLIFERATING VIEWS AND THIN MONUMENTALITIES: ON PUDY TONG AND JOSH BRIEN

BY LAURA DEMERS

If Pudy Tong's and Josh Brien's practices differ in almost every manner, both artists take great interest in the creation of language and poetic aphorisms, in the infiltration of mediatized images into our conception of reality, in the contemporary discourses on printmaking, and in the potential of print media moving forward alongside the digital.

Sold for a modest price at every street corner, gazettes litter the floors of the subway on the morning commute, while also keeping citizens abreast of current affairs. While the repetition of headlines might render them banal and effortlessly overlooked, "the news" and its relation to our understanding of the current global and political reality is what Pudy Tong explores in *iterations, duplications*.

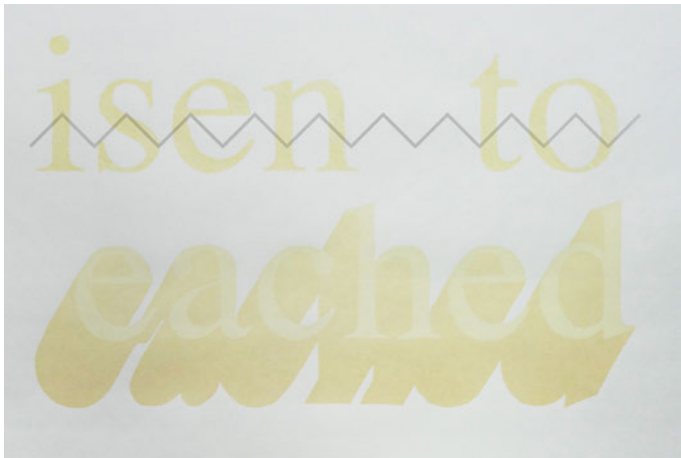
Piles of brittle newsprint are discarded daily; they crumble under the rays of the sun, their ink smudging even under the delicate touch of a licked thumb. And yet, they carry within their pages much more than just "the news." In the words of Tong, the newspapers conjure up a "distilled snapshot of the world, a multi-dimensional mosaic that weaves together a wide narrative of collective experiences: documenting tragedies and celebrations, marking achievements and failures, announcing births and deaths."<sup>1</sup> Tong's interest in the newspaper as a collage of social phenomena echoes influential media theorist Marshall McLuhan, who also used the analogy of the mosaic to describe the "communal daily exposure of



multiple items in juxtaposition, which gives the press its complex dimension of human interest."<sup>2</sup>

The histories of the printing press, of information dissemination, and of printmaking have long been tightly intertwined. Tong's previous bodies of print work zoomed in on the technological, material, and self-referential qualities of news media, on the rhetoric of obfuscation of public information, and on the quasi-archeological procedures one needs to perform in order to attain a semblance of a clear picture. This recent body of work elegantly and succinctly exhibits these formal and conceptual concerns. McLuhan, in his treatise on the press, mentioned that in the early days of American journalism, there existed an assumption that the "principal function of the newspaper was to correct rumors and oral reports, as a dictionary might provide 'correct' spellings and meanings for words [...]. Soon, the press began to sense that news was not only to be reported, but gathered, and indeed, to be *made* [my emphasis]."<sup>3</sup> McLuhan thus hinted at the inherently biased and fictionalized nature of the news. With the recent talk of fake news, pseudo-events, and other contested neologisms, which, as we can now surmise, have long been neatly embedded at the very core of printed matter and all media, Tong's intervention—echoing McLuhan's discourse—seems all too timely.

Journalist Brooke Gladstone recently compared journalism to a funhouse: "the media landscape is so cluttered with mirrors facing mirrors that we can't tell where an image begins or ends."<sup>4</sup> If critics and media historians have highlighted the distorting lens of information technology, Tong hones in on those distortions of reality. Tong's *Unauthorized DT Activity Book* consists of 23 "spot the differences" puzzles using film stills from Alan J. Pakula's *All the President's Men* (1976), a film



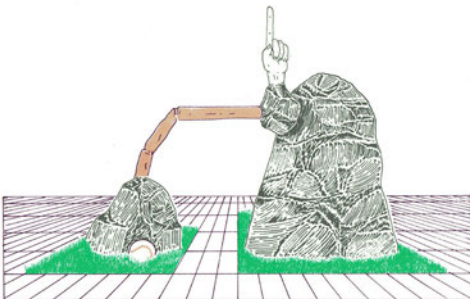
based on the memoir by Woodward and Bernstein, whose investigations eventually revealed what is today known as the Watergate scandal. Within each pair of images, one is digitally manipulated and skillfully compromised by the artist. The viewer takes on the role of a detective as they are invited to uncover the six disparities, and ultimately, to identify the “real” image. These puzzles, gathered in a cheekily titled<sup>5</sup> takeaway booklet, are featured in a semi-narrative visual arc organized by media; newspapers appear first, followed by telephones, typewriters, and televisions. The last pair of images—which is also presented in the form of a photolithograph on the gallery wall—features the famous shot of a televised Nixon in the foreground, while the two journalists are typing away in the distance. The most iconic scene from the film is also featured; sitting side by side in the Library of Congress, Woodward and Bernstein are seen sifting through clues as the camera hovers above their heads, performing a dramatic aerial pull-back<sup>6</sup> and revealing the spectacular vastness of the building—and of their quest. A neat *mise en abyme* of the viewer/reader’s own investigative endeavour.

Tong is aware of the fragile nature of newspapers as informational vehicle. Television, the internet, and above all, social media, have greatly transformed and shaped the way we consume written media. Additionally, these news platforms have redefined the roles of media producers, upending the politics of production and dissemination of information. On February 3rd, 2017, Tong fell upon a Twitter post about an emergency statement issued by the White House Press Secretary after the Trump administration announced its plan to implement a travel ban targeting refugees and countries of Muslim faith. A journalist had noticed the small but significant discrepancy

between the first and second version of the same statement; the qualifier “outrageous”—used to describe the judicial measures taken against Trump’s policies—was omitted from the latter. This visible erasure prompted Tong to search the web for more instances—sometimes crucial, but often trivial—of statements being scrubbed off the Internet, of news pieces being edited as they enter the public sphere, and of other similar ghost traces.

As a result of this endeavour and compulsive fascination, a series of whimsical phrases and nonsensical words have been produced; they are now plastered on the walls of the gallery space, in a manner reminiscent of protest posters that cover the surfaces of the city. Tong accumulated these words-in-process while sleuthing through the archives of [www.newsdiffs.org](http://www.newsdiffs.org), an algorithmic platform that attempts to keep up with the ever-evolving world of online journalism by tracking edits made to news articles from major publications as each updated version goes live. “Because the program compares individual characters,” Tong explains, “sometimes poetic lines of text get compiled.”<sup>7</sup> The word “mistake” is replaced by “missteps,” but in the process, the two are combined to form the new visually compelling term “misstakeps”. Tong inserts himself in the editorial process by isolating and reproducing these words. While these neologisms are duplicated in their original typeface, the arduous labor that goes into each print imbues them with a hand-drawn quality. Rather than incendiary messages or bold calls to action, these obscure and poetic posters allude to a world of latent nuances embedded in the media’s subtly loaded language.

Josh Brien’s work also draws from poetry. As a zine-maker and print artist, Brien often combines word and image. As he collects snippets of text and rearranges them into verses, in a parallel fashion his images operate as visual poems. In *the waiting is the doing of the day*, Brien’s surrealist illustrations exude an air of reverence





towards stillness. Commonplace objects—house ferns and rocks, among other things—float in water tanks, or remain otherwise suspended in motionlessness. Human figures bearing content expressions are in the process of petrification, or perhaps it is the rocks that are gradually growing limbs and coming to life.

Throughout Brien's work, a cryptic symbolic lexicon emerges from repeated motifs and objects. For example, pointing hands sprout from boulders here and there, beckoning. The manicule—a small pictogram of a pointing hand in the margin of a text—was used by both annotators and printers in medieval times and during the Renaissance, and served to punctuate or call attention to a passage of interest. In Brien's work, the elongated index fingers point enigmatically to the sky, hinting at something outside of the image, and outside of the earthly realm. Although the practice of drawing manicules died in the 18th century, the symbol continues to appear on directional signs, advertisements and, as many have pointed out, as a cursor on our computer screens.

The imagery of our epoch—especially that of Brien's generation—is largely influenced by the internet's aesthetics. His collage methodology stems from this

episteme; graffiti coming out of the Microsoft Paint spray can tool, along with potted plants, proliferate in a copy/paste manner across his prints. Brien's imaginary environments are made of surfaces upon surfaces upon surfaces that cleanly reconfigure themselves infinitely, seemingly, at the click of a button.

Resting on small grassy islands amidst a topography of grids—as though the earth was flat—precariously built structures made of plywood and lumber offcuts recall a hand-made stage set, a construction site, or a child's treehouse. These ephemeral and haphazard constructions are likely built by Brien's characters, if not by Brien himself; they are perhaps intimate shelters for self-preservation, or simply a secluded place reserved for the naïve act of daydreaming. Brien composes these "thin monumentalities" and "ramshackle dwellings"<sup>8</sup> by using a screenprinting technique, as the sought effect is one of flatness. The prints oscillate between the hand-made and the digital; Brien's hand-drawn characters and wooden habitats are set in a subdued vaporwave landscape of perspectival grids engorged with nostalgia for early video games, animation, and 1990s internet imagery. In a book on vaporwave and global capitalism, Grafton Tanner describes vaporwave music and album covers as the sounds and images of "non-times and non-places."<sup>9</sup> While Brien doesn't necessarily adhere to the main tenets of the micro-genre, his work borrows some of its formal elements—washed of their acidic colors—to speak to this landscape of timelessness and placelessness.

<sup>1</sup> In an interview with Tong, on November 30th of 2017.

<sup>2</sup> McLuhan, Marshall. "Press; Government by News Leak." *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man*, MIT Press, 1994, 204.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>4</sup> Gladstone, Brooke, et al. "Introduction." *The Influencing Machine*, W.W. Norton & Company, 2012, xxi.

<sup>5</sup> As Tong stated, the initials "DT" can stand for *Deep Throat*, the pseudonym given to the secret informant who provided information to Woodward and Bernstein about the involvement of Nixon's administration in the scandal, and for Donald Trump, the United States' current President.

<sup>6</sup> Cavanaugh, Michael. "As 'All the President's Men' Turns 40 Today, Let's Follow Our Favorite Shots from the Movie." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 9 Apr. 2016, [www.washingtonpost.com/news/comic-riffs/wp/2016/04/09/as-all-the-presidents-men-turns-40-woodward-and-bernstein-share-their-favorite-shots-from-the-movie/?utm\\_term=.050d078dcf00](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/comic-riffs/wp/2016/04/09/as-all-the-presidents-men-turns-40-woodward-and-bernstein-share-their-favorite-shots-from-the-movie/?utm_term=.050d078dcf00).

<sup>7</sup> In an interview with Tong, on November 30th of 2017.

<sup>8</sup> As described by Brien.

<sup>9</sup> Tanner, Grafton. *Babbling Corpse: Vaporwave and the Commodification of Ghosts*. Zero Books, 2016, 10.



Artist Bios

**PUDY TONG**

Pudy Tong's memories of his Canadian childhood are punctuated by the images of large stacks of Chinese newspapers landing at his doorstep every two weeks, air-freighted in from Hong Kong to a small rural town in British Columbia. His print-based art practice draws on elements from journalism as the subject through which our experience of contemporary, media-saturated society is refracted, reinterpreted and re-imagined. Based in Toronto, Tong is an instructor and custom printer at Open Studio. Pudy Tong would like to acknowledge the support of Ontario Arts Council's Visual Artists Creation Projects grant. He would also like to thank the tireless staff at Open Studio, as well as the professional photopositive films provided by Smokestack.

**JOSH BRIEN**

Josh Brien is an artist from Calgary, Alberta. His art is a tool for pointing, gesturing towards a reality found in the warmth of sunlight on skin or the prickle of grass under bare feet.

Author Bio

**LAURA DEMERS**

Laura Demers is an artist, a writer, and a museum professional who currently lives and works in Toronto. She holds a BFA in Painting and Drawing from the University of Ottawa, and an MA in Art History and Theory (Modern and Contemporary Art) from the University of Toronto. Recently, she has worked at the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery in Toronto, as well as the Canadian Pavilion during the 2017 Venice Biennale.

Cover images:

Pudy Tong, *fsupport*, 2017, screenprint, 28"x22". Created under the auspices of the Nick Novak Fellowship.

Josh Brien, *yes in the spring grass*, 2017, screenprint on paper, 8" x 10". Created under the auspices of the Don Phillips Scholarship.

Interior images:

Pudy Tong, *DT Activity Book 2:14:54*, 2017, photo-lithograph on kitakata paper, 12.5" x 21.5". Created under the auspices of the Nick Novak Fellowship.

Pudy Tong, *r*, 2017, screenprint, 28"x22". Created under the auspices of the Nick Novak Fellowship.

Josh Brien, *a grey simplicity along the space of a finger*, 2017, screenprint on paper, 9" x 12". Created under the auspices of the Don Phillips Scholarship.

Josh Brien, *waiting for the layers to collapse into themselves like thin monumentality*, 2017, screenprint on paper, 9" x 12". Created under the auspices of the Don Phillips Scholarship.

## Open Studio

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