

Christy Chan:
Who's Coming to Save You?
Extended Exhibition Text

On View:
Sep 30, 2022–Jan 7, 2023
Codec Gallery



Pulling the Hood Off White Supremacy

Theadora Walsh

In the 1982 television series *Knight Rider*, David Hasselhoff stars as a police officer who's undergone full physical reconstruction to become the crime fighting vigilante of a self-made billionaire's fictional utopian justice league. Oh, and he has a talking supercomputer car named KITT. The show was extremely popular. The ultra-eighties synth of the show's theme song was the soundtrack to TV dinners all across the country.

Despite the show's primary emotional tension being the nuances of a man's friendship with his car, its success isn't that surprising. Taking the law into your own hands to defend a personal sense of justice is a very American premise.

In Sterling, Virginia, established in 1962 as a sanctuary city for "members of the Caucasian

race," the show had an avid following. Known or unknown to the Hollywood producers who created *Knight Rider*, its title shares an association with one of the American South's oldest social groups. The Ku Klux Klan uses the eponymous title to speak about their members, calling those who participated in night time raid, Knight Riders. Language is unsettled. Context defines our experiences of reality.

Christy Chan grew up in Sterling, where she was confronted by exclusionary narratives and racist mythology daily. In school she was forced to encounter a Southern perspective, her town was surrounded by Civil War monuments, and that war, known by a different name, the War of Northern Aggression. White nativism abounded. As explicitly excluded from her town's white





Christy Chan, *Long Distance Call*, 2012 (video still)

supremacist rhetoric, Chan was in a unique position to see through the visage of self-aggrandizing mythology. The bones were laid bare.

In the book, *Performing Remains: Art and War in the Times of Theatrical Reenactments*, Rebecca Schneider interviews participants in civil war reenactments. She recounts speaking to one Civil War buff named Woodhead who described his commitment to “keeping the war alive” which he clarified as a commitment to “keep telling the story history leaves out.”¹ The sentiment described is common in the United States, tied to a conviction that the Confederate has not yet lost the war, and instead exists as a parallel power structure, active and waiting to rise again. Civil War reenactments, common in Virginia, are a fundamental way perceived threats to white nativism are enlivened in the present. They dramatize an ongoing racist struggle to impose one group’s version of reality onto another’s.

“On the surface,” Chan says, “the South is one of the nicest places—but someone can speak in a calm tone while saying something horrible.” The calm, certitude of white supremacy with which Chan grew up, alongside the overt racial violence she also experienced, led her to be deeply critical not only of clear-cut cases of racism, but also of its more subtle, seemingly banal manifestations. Racism exists, for example, clearly in the language of

hate groups operating online, but the company platforming them is also equally implicated, and the engines of capitalism indifferent to what they engage are also part of the violence. To quote the artist, “The banality of evil doesn’t make evil less evil.”

This calm, insidious evil is on full display in *Long Distance Call* (2012), in which Christy Chan presents transcripts of her phone calls with a Miss Anne of Alabama, a seamstress who makes “authentic” KKK robes. Weaponizing her knowledge that racist Southerners would not presume someone who spoke English to be Chinese, Chan tactically employs the whiteness she knows will be conferred to her to transgressively purchase a KKK robe. On the surface, their exchanges appear polite, tactical—it’s easy to forget what’s being discussed. Miss Anne, who never gives a last name, is distracted every time she speaks to Christy; she’s dismissive and rude but not in a particularly notable manner. Her malice is calm, entrenched in power, and unafraid.

Christy Chan and Miss Anne speak the same language. Miss Anne is human. Her brother dies over the course of their phone calls, and she shares the news with Chan. Her professionalism and commitment to legacy break when she speaks about her animals. And yet, she can confer humanity to the artist only when she presumes Chan is a “clansman,” an identity proscribed to her by Miss Anne and her assistant multiple times. Their confidence in Chan’s whiteness, in her Christianity, reverberates in

¹ Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactments* (London: Routledge, 2011), 45.

the words they choose. A strange tension is on display.

"The sensationalized version of white supremacy is so often the only one that we are culturally equipped to recognize," Chan observes, "A more nuanced version is spoken about within communities of color, but the larger, mainstream only recognizes the extreme version."

Hannah Arendt's concept of the banality of evil, which she famously used to characterize Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi official and one of the major organizers of the Holocaust, was so controversial because her theory refused to characterize Eichmann as uniquely villainous. Instead, she forced the world to admit their own degrees of responsibility for what happened in Europe during the Second World War. "Evil," Arendt famously proclaimed, "comes from a failure to think."² Exploring the idea in this context, we could also say that evil comes from a failure to see. Christy Chan's series *Who's Coming to Save You?* makes visible innocuous forms of white supremacy, pulling the hood off its many disguises to expose its naked face.

In *As Seen on TV* (2014), an actor wearing the robe purchased from Miss Anne is substituted for the *Knight Rider* (David Hasselhoff). Cut to the exact length of the original, Chan's reproduction of the show's opening credits is eerie. She's collaged in original footage. In order to convincingly

intermix new footage, Chan shot her video materials with a camera doctored intentionally to derive a poor-quality image that mirrors the visual language of the original. An uncanny feeling of disconcertion spews from the ease with which the show's imagery—yacht clubs, beautiful women, fast cars, burning fires, gunplay—situates itself around the KKK robe, around a bastion for white nativism. The substitution is disturbing, but not disjuncting.

At one point in the montage, the hooded figure jumps. Chan frames the actor's body tightly in the shot. One can imagine her on set, calmly giving her actor directions and then assessing the quality of his performance.

"I can tell him what to do and he will do it because I'm directing him." Chan says, "He jumped when I wanted him to jump, he ran when I wanted him to run. Every physical movement was dictated by me."

It's a withering reclamation of authorship, one that evocatively restages a power dynamic. Simple, but immediate. Because Chan is working with collaged footage, it's possible to imagine that the original materials were selected from potentially infinite directorial sessions. Perhaps she's been commanding the inanimate KKK suit for weeks. Her power as visual author is endlessly iterative.

When we deal with reënactment, Valeria Luiselli wrote to characterize famous gunfights dramatically staged in the American Southwest, "we are dealing with the legacy of myths. . . fiction can spill back into reality."³ Fiction can



Christy Chan, *As Seen on TV*, 2014 (video still)

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Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963).



Installation photograph, *Christy Chan: Who's Coming to Save You?*, Utah Museum of Contemporary Art, Sep 30, 2022–Jan 7, 2023, photo by Zachary Norman, © UMOCA

spill back into reality. In *As Seen on TV*, Chan's intervention takes the robe, and *Knight Rider's* opening credits, and furnishes them with new context. This invites the (white) American to consider a slippage between normative narratives and violence, locating culpability in upholding narratives of white supremacy in something as simple as identifying with a popular television show. The audience participates in Christy Chan's videos, intrinsically becoming active collaborators in the substitution she directs.

Hollywood presents historical acts of racism as unthinkable evil, the least complicated imagination—people foaming from the mouths with pitchforks. Something very rarely seen in day-to-day life, a kind of crazed hyperbole rather than a structural, bureaucratic system of punitive laws. It's actually Miss Anne answering the phone and asking you where you are from because she doesn't like your handwriting. Evil's banality is on view in the work of the seamstress, who makes robes explicitly for active members of the Ku Klux Klan, conducting her business on PayPal. If these everyday occurrences are understood as white supremacy, then its prevalence is evident.

In a recent interview, Trinh Minh-Ha described the tendency for people to "go for a new object of study, or a new product to consume, but actually we should work on new ways of seeing, perceiving and living in the world."⁴ Chan's work imbues the viewer with an attuned sensitivity. It fights back against a limited imagination, one that wants

to narrow what can be understood as violent and perpetually attempts to locate racism as elsewhere, as outside of the self. It insists that a limited imagination, one which nurtures a desire for exoneration and passivity, which benefits from finding itself empowered, be exposed for what it is: an insidious participation in white supremacy.

Toward the end of *As Seen on TV*, Chan directs her actor to lift his hood and take a sip of champagne. In this moment, at once innocuous and chilling, the viewer learns that an image can be split from its cultural position. A symbol's authenticity can be interrupted, shaken loose by new association. Humor stripes the instrument of terror of its own aura and throws out the historical power it hatefully drags into the present. Christy Chan re-stages the legacy of white supremacy, presenting its costuming not in the context of its own narrative, but in an absurdist one of her creation.

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The New Yorker, The Fiction Issue June 2019, June 3, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/06/10/the-wild-west-meets-the-southern-border>

⁴

BOMB Magazine, issue 160, July 18, 2022, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/trinh-t-minh-ha/>

Christy Chan is a Virginia-born, San Francisco Bay Area-based artist who uses video, installation, performance, and social practice to question the everyday power structures that uphold white supremacy in the United States. She is a 2022 recipient of a *Guggenheim Fellowship Award in Fine Art* and the founder of *Dear America*, a guerilla public art project that projects the art works of Asian-American artists on to high-rise buildings in urban areas in response to an epidemic of anti-Asian violence. Chan's work has been exhibited at YBCA and Mills College Art Museum in California; Wassaic Project x NY State Council of the Arts in New York; Film Independent in Los Angeles; Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts in Omaha; and on NPR, among others. She has been awarded residencies and support from Montalvo Arts Center, California Arts Council, Kala Art Institute, Berkeley Film Foundation, SFFILM and other institutions. Her public art project, *Fainting Couch*, will be travelling the United States in 2023.

Theadora Walsh is a writer and poet based in Oakland, California. Her art criticism have been published by *Artforum*, *BOMB* magazine, *Hyperallergic*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Art in America*, and elsewhere. She holds an MFA from Brown University and teaches interdisciplinary writing.

Printed on the occasion of the exhibition **Christy Chan: Who's Coming to Save You?** at the Utah Museum of Contemporary September 30, 2022–January 7, 2023.

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Exhibition Support Provided by



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& Janet T. Dee
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Associated Programming

Virtual Exhibition Discussion
Christy Chan with Theadora Walsh
Thursday, October 20, 6pm, Zoom

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UMOCA is a six-time recipient of funding from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and a two-time recipient of the Art Works Grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

The Utah Museum of Contemporary Art is a 501c3 institution that is supported by public, foundation, and corporate gifts. Your donation in any amount is greatly appreciated, and admission is a \$8 suggested donation.

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