

Essay by curator Yael Buencamino

“Gina Osterloh's solo exhibition, *her demilitarized zone*, reflects on the current human condition and contemplates an alternate way of being where words and images are de-weaponized; implements of brutality, violence, and exclusion metamorphose into a poetry of pleasure and possibility. The slow and labor-intensive processes of creating each image and object in this exhibit embody the difficult and committed work necessary to see the other without preconceived notions and ideology.

Ruminations on the etymology of photography : writing with light - led to experiments using a welder's torch to inscribe words on steel. Words that initially seem like scriblings of black paint are burned onto steel bars, the intensity requiring the artist to stop after each gesture is rendered. The steel of industry, modernization, and militarization - steel bars that wall off the other - are slowly transformed. Intractable steel is blistered and scarred with phrases suggesting release, letting down defenses. Unlike earlier works on steel plates, these are not left to rust but are subjected to a series of processes akin to darkroom photographic chemical baths that infuse them with the black color and coatings that fix the surface, rendering them forever irreversibly altered. The intangibility of the words ...

her
demilitarized
zone

pleasure

after
centuries
of
war

they
saw
each
other

without
weapon
he
wept

in perpetual tension with the permanence and weight of the steel.

Body as contested site - a theme that Osterloh has continuously investigated - is magnified in the “portraits” *Mirror Woman* and *Shutter Vision*. In these photographs, she sits as one does for a traditional portrait but she covers her arms, torso, and head in tape, denying the viewer the convenience of quick judgement and categorization based on skin color that was ever present while growing up Filipino-German-American in Ohio and living in the racially charged climate of America today. *Shutter Vision* unsettles the viewer with its resemblance to BDSM images. Not intended to allude to sex, the artist articulates its reference to image as fetish. (‘An object, the possession of which is believed to procure the services of a spirit lodged within it’, which also shares origins with ‘magic’, the Portuguese word *feitico*, and the Latin root words for ‘artificial’ and

'to make' *facere*.) "I simplify, amplify, lay bare the photographic field, a terrain of power – our global cultural and political landscape – dominance and submission: the two inextricably intertwined through looking." The dizzying *Pressing Against Looking* underscores the overwhelming nature of our current visual culture that calls for constant looking, seeing, and being seen, that the artist describes as "the frenzy of vision".¹

In *Mirror Woman*, the reflective tape that serves as skin appeals to the ego centric instinct to glean our own image, to gauge ourselves based on our estimation of the other. Inevitably, this proves unrewarding; what we see is distorted and fragmentary.

As she deprives the viewer of the power of judgement through vision, she denies herself as well. Eyes sealed shut, she is blind to the viewer; photos are taken, impressions made without seeing. Despite being cut off from sight and sound, the artist exudes a calm energy, slowly reached through hours of meditative cutting and taping. Turning inward, she shuts out visual noise, allowing for the possibility of relating on a different level. In that shared vulnerability of not being able to appraise each other visually, a space opens for a spiritual connection.

Visualized through room sets that Osterloh uses to invite viewers to inhabit the photographic space, *Psychic Drop- Pink* and *Psychic Drop - Grey* refer to a concept the artist encountered in reading philosophy and art theory texts describing the act of camouflage as a momentary loss of one's individuality, a psychic drop in ego. In resonance with the idea of de-weaponization, camouflage is conceived of "not as a tactic of war, but instead a strategy to inhabit other points of view". Silencing oneself demands time and work, it requires shedding the artificial, ultimately ineffective protections we layer on ourselves, layers that like the tape in the portraits adhere to skin becoming one with the body, leaving their marks when ultimately removed."

¹ Gina Osterloh acknowledges the influence of writer Marina Chao with the phrase "frenzy of vision." Marina Chao is currently co-director of Higher Pictures Generation, Brooklyn, NY.