



JEQU, *BLEU (Mid)*, 2011, mixed media. Installation view.

JEQU

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, ROSKI SCHOOL OF FINE ARTS

Like a good tagline, the final phrase of the wriggling, poetic manifesto accompanying “BLEU,” the latest exhibition by JEQU (curator Howie Chen and artist/attorney Jason Kakoyiannis), cut earnestness with cool illegibility: “It’s about a feeling,” they wrote—and yet, the mundane components of the show amounted to nothing if not an airy intellectual impression. The installation *BLEU*, 2011, consisted of three “sensorial arrangements” corresponding to the top, middle, and base notes of the men’s fragrance Bleu de Chanel, displayed in sequence for six days each. The cologne had been resynthesized into three separate scents, each emitted in turn from a ceramic ring diffuser placed around a low-watt lightbulb in a cheap white sconce on the floor. As the exhibition progressed, the gallery’s fluorescent lighting dimmed accordingly: bare and bright for “top,” gelled purple for “mid,” and turned off for “base.” The last installment contained only the sconce, spray-painted black and hidden behind a pane of tinted glass.

The various ready-made objects decorating the space—for example, an unlit white candle partially submerged in a glass vase of Windex, or a functional Tony Hawk skateboard

clock mounted high on the wall—privileged direct sensation over mediated interpretation. Collectively, these items seemed willfully beyond language, offering a quasi-Surrealist break with logical signification. Yet the individual components of *BLEU* were not so much uninterpretable as they were pre-interpreted, loaded with a lifetime of aesthetic and consumerist conditioning. A standard cork bulletin board in the “mid” section was densely layered with scraps of flyers bearing fragments of sentences—words such as YOGA, NEED, DEEPER, and YOU. A department store display rack (doubling as a LeWitt-ish metal grid) encased the board, blocking it off from use. Repurposed as aesthetic objects, neither functioned as intended; the bulletin board contained no useful information and the rack held no products.

3001 Gallery is an alcove the size of a folding table in the hallway of the building housing the MFA program of the USC Roski School of Fine Arts. The stated purpose of the space is to engage current students with the larger LA art community. Indeed, JEQU’s installation operated as a somewhat perverse “object lesson” in aesthetics. *BLEU* demonstrated the stylish manipulations through which we are taught to interpret, as well as to *not* interpret; to consider de facto the value of “things” or ideas like “cleanliness.” Interrogating the work and its components, the viewer likely found meaning to be subjective and bottomless, yet not always rich. But just as an affective scent such as Bleu de Chanel can never quite be explained in terms of its constituent chemicals, singling out the individual elements in this mini-exhibition for closer analysis—the grubby, chipped plinth of “top,” the hand-sanitizer smell of “mid”—seemed crass when the ideas behind the piece as a whole were more compelling. As with the complex subliminal signifiers of a perfume, meaning in this show was not to be found in its discrete components but in their resonances (drawn out beautifully in the accompanying text). Thus, perfume and exhibition alike appeared as perfunctory yet elusive products.

The members of JEQU are self-described “wage slaves with artistic pastimes” who approach art with the pragmatism of ad men. Art school, they suggest, is trade school for artists, providing a modular education (“the vagaries of a double major”) in the ways of professionalized, polyvalent aestheticism. The three movements of this exhibition articulated a narrative of aesthetic refinement. Over time, through an illogical arrangement of immediate products around a stylistic zero, *BLEU* designed an instantly available

homme. This was couture by Macy's, if not custom-tailored then at least modular and therefore customizable. The hypothetical zero-subject of *BLEU* began with the cheap furniture, magazine clippings, and pop-punk memorabilia of an adolescent, grew into a wry, educated, fashion-conscious young consumer, then arrived at last as a postmodern aesthete—eager to adorn himself with a sharp suit, acquire some tasteful contemporary furniture (a dark glass coffee table, perhaps), and splash on a respectable cologne.

—Travis Diehl

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