



Details of *The smell of exile is also that of gunpowder*, Beatrice Glow, 2022, Inkjet print on charmeuse silk and polyester chiffon with metallic embroidery details

BEATRICE GLOW: THE COLLECTION OF THE EOS 10~15

SARAH CHO

For her solo exhibition at San Francisco's Saint Joseph's Arts Foundation (SJAF), Beatrice Glow (b.1986) considers the dystopian past, present, and future in which the politics of the capitalocene¹ govern social and environmental interaction. Glow uses virtual reality, textiles, 3D-printed objects, and scent to explore these ideas in her *Empire of Smoke* (EoS 10~15) series. By co-opting and subverting the visual and olfactory language of opulence, the artist examines the generational accumulation of wealth that lays the foundation for hegemonic power dynamics of colonial empires. Glow uses the visual language of opulence to call attention to the artifice and façade of beauty in the luxury goods she emulates, directing viewers to critically examine the painful histories of capitalistic exploitation and colonialism that are embedded in her deceptively beautiful artwork.

¹ Termed by Jason Moore, the capitalocene, or 'age of capital' is the geological era during which capitalism has irreparably shaped and defined the survival of species. During this period, power and privilege held by a small group of the richest and greediest are locked into a cyclical system that defines not only human relationships with each other, but also with the environment.

Glow began developing the *Empire of Smoke* project in 2017 following her *Spice Roots/Routes* exhibition at New York University's James B. Duke House, a Manhattan mansion built by wealth derived from the tobacco industry. Tobacco, a plant sacred in many Indigenous cultures across the Americas, was bastardized and proliferated by white European colonizers and their descendants, and Black and Indigenous peoples were forcibly removed from their homes and brutally exploited to produce these crops. While conducting research, Glow learned that the Duke's tobacco empire money helped fund Doris Duke's (1912-1993) astounding art collection at her Shangri La estate in Hawai'i. To further explore the intersections between oppressive wealth, tobacco, and art history, Glow pursued collection-based research at the Smithsonian Institution and Baltimore Museum of Art. Out of this work, Glow began to imagine the type of art that the Doris Dukes of the future might collect with money from their family's unscrupulous trade.

In *Empire of Smoke*, Glow concocts a not-so-distant future where an ultra wealthy family lives deep within a bunker built to survive the post-late stage capitalist world,

a phenomenon that families like theirs brought into existence. The unsavory methods through which the family built their kingdom is reflected in the very objects they collect to decorate their own abode. For her site-responsive installation at SJAF, Glow expands *The Collection of the EoS 10¹⁵* to include jewelry, fragrance and garments belonging to the family's heiress. The objects simulate luxury through their appearance and visual language, and the collection feels uncannily at home on display at a church built in the early 20th century in the Romanesque Revival style. Catholic aesthetics are often drenched in sumptuous patterns and decorations, allowing Glow's works to eerily blend into a built environment that already carries the visual weight of wealth with its Renaissance Revival furniture, marble patterned walls, faux taxidermied bears, and heavy velvet curtains. In this space, Glow ties in the real with the imagined, a slippage that makes us uncomfortable in the beauty and opulence that *The Collection of the EoS 10¹⁵* is so comfortably situated in.

The heightened sense of real versus imagined is physicalized in Glow's work. Each of these objects may look to be composed of glimmering precious metals, stones, wood, or ceramics, but are actually made from a type of plastic called polylactic acid. The artist utilizes virtual reality software to sculpt these artworks, 3D prints the design files, then laboriously works the surface to achieve an illusion of the type of material she mimics. The objects' trickery in their seemingly seamless surfaces compel us to closely inspect each one, demanding us to be critical of all that we see.

While the artist's technical process draws in viewers to scrutinize the surfaces of her artwork, Glow additionally uses the visual language of luxury to question difficult histories. The artist considers the ways in which surfaces of historic, highly collectible decorative objects beautify the ugly histories of colonialism. For example, a blue and white gunpowder horn is decorated with the words "Pax Hollandica," written ever-so innocently in script. This horn's visual language draws inspiration from Dutch blue and white porcelain, itself a product of colonialism and trade with China. "Pax Hollandica" refers to the first period of Dutch colonial rule in Taiwan which was marked by years of tumult caused by the colonial desire to build trade ports to gain access to China. After a devastating defeat of the strongest villages on the island in 1636, other villages were forced into giving their land to the Dutch. By emblazoning this gunpowder horn with the phrase "Pax Hollandica," Glow teases out the histories of oppressive opulence imbued in the visual language of blue and white porcelain. The artist reminds us that a colonizer's peace is won through war and genocide, and that such a treaty inevitably abuses inequitable power dynamics. By creating this visual dialogue on a 3D printed object that is ultimately a plastic, hollow, nonutilitarian form, Glow gestures to the many layers of deceit in colonialism that are cloaked by the aesthetic language of luxury.

In her textile works, Glow takes the simulation of opulence a step further by fully embracing the real, physical materiality

of silk and gold. The artist uses these tantalizing surfaces to continue exploring the colonial histories of Taiwan in her chromatically saturated and gold-embroidered silk capes. These capes were inspired by 17th and 18th century paintings by Chinese artists who painted "cooked" (assimilated) and "raw" (non-assimilated) native Taiwanese people. Taiwan was coveted by the Dutch and the Chinese for its advantageous trade location, sugar-rich resources, and deer hide. The native Taiwanese people were forced to adapt to colonial rule to survive, as their livelihood was traded by colonizers for capital gain. The "cooked savages," as they were called, were depicted with silken capes in historic Chinese paintings, demonstrating their ability to assimilate into colonial society. Images of these "cooked savages," Dutch forts, high-value plant trade objects, and alluring tendrils of smoke decorate the outside of Glow's capes, and their unsavory histories are further gestured to in titles like *The smell of exile is also that of gunpowder, Flowers and Forts, and Golden silk smoke*. By using actual silk to create her capes, the artist draws attention to the connotations of wealth and colonialism that are inextricably embedded into the materiality of silk, prompting visitors to think critically about the social histories of luxury goods.

Glow's multidisciplinary practice also takes us into the olfactory world. Although the manufacture of custom fragrance is commonly associated with the affluent designer perfume industry, Glow creates scents that put the nose to work in deciphering the various layers of notes that evoke the dark histories of colonialism. For example, Glow composed a scent inspired by the rafflesia flower that is named after Stamford Raffles (1781-1826), the British statesman whose legacy of transforming Singapore into a British colony is the subject of many recent academic reinterpretations of history. This parasitic flora's beautiful and massive flower is the only visible part of the plant, and it surprisingly transmits a smell of rotting flesh. One cannot help but think of its relationality to the imaginary family that Glow constructs. Their wealth accumulation is parasitic, and although we might be tantalized by their wealth, glamor, and size, it is the rotten smell akin to a colonial stench that reveals the true cost of their empire-building.

In *Empire of Smoke*, Glow creates a dystopian world that is hauntingly believable in its audacious display of wealth and power because the artwork is embedded with evidence of how these very power imbalances have been built for the past few centuries. The artist draws on historical events and people to map out these extractive networks of trade, ones that clearly favor those who take, and not those who give, and have fortified over time through accumulated wealth and power. Using deceptively luxurious surfaces and playing upon notions of real versus the imaginary, Glow warns us of not-so-distant futures and compels us to examine our past so that we do not continue to follow this trajectory.