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RENEE SO

# T E S S E N C E

Renee So's exhibition **The Essence** brings together two distinct bodies of new work, which together speak to interconnected legacies of visual history and collision, cultural translation and appropriation, and the lingering influences of 'Orientalism' on present-day understandings (and cultural consumption) of the East. Presented within the context of Lowry's **'Local / National / International'** exhibition series, So's show invites audiences to look at these geographic delineations with a critical eye, keenly aware that the confluence of art, history and culture cannot be neatly contained within these boundaries. **Here is an artist whose works take visual cues**

**from what surrounds us, and digs deeper into their meaning to bring forth new - and at times, surprising - interpretations.**

The first room of So's exhibition features two shelves of perfume bottles and snuff bottles, scaled up by the artist to ceramic larger-than-life counterparts. The selection of perfumes has been consciously chosen by So to reflect histories related to Western imperialism and colonisation in existing perfume lines (such as 'Colony by Jean Patou', 'Snuff by Schiaparelli', and 'Brit by Burberry'), and are displayed alongside snuff bottles designed by the artist. Through this pairing of real and imagined, So traces the historical lineage of contemporary perfume bottle design back to snuff bottles, which originated in China during the Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911) and were widely collected by wealthy Western trade merchants and patrons. The exhibition design furthers this reading of collecting and connoisseurship, with the ceramic bottles displayed in a clean line on a white shelf, akin to a display room (or contemporary art gallery).

One of the central themes that arises from this body of work are the lasting legacies of opium trade, and the way that this history continues to shape cultural discourse and meaning today. A key work in So's perfume series is the Opium bottle, made in the likeness of the real-life Yves Saint Laurent perfume. When Opium was first commercially released in 1977, it courted widespread controversy over its name and branding, which was viewed by its critics as glamourising the history of forced opium trade, which led to the Opium Wars (1839 and 1860) between Britain and China and the British colonisation of Hong Kong. An examination of the advertising material from this time to the present reveals a heady mix of exoticism and sensuality, steeped in Orientalist tropes. In 1978, when speaking about the perfume, the designer had said he had wanted a scent to "evoke everything I like: the sophisticated Orient, imperial China, and exoticism." Even in the present day, website sale listings for the perfume still identify it as a "rich, opulent soft oriental fragrance," using its imagined relationship to the 'Orient' as a main selling point. Interestingly, the main figure for advertising material of YSL's Opium has focused exclusively on the figure of the beautiful white woman, positioned as a consumer of the fragrance and by extension its opulent possibilities. So references this white-washed legacy through the inclusion of a figura-

tive ceramic sculpture in the room, modelled after Sophie Dahl, whose 2000 campaign with its overly sexualised imagery was so controversial at the time that it was banned in the UK. This depiction adds another layer of critique to the experience of the exhibition, as it reveals the way in which cultural difference is treated as a flourish, a costume, a style, an 'experience' to be bought. This fetishization is further encapsulated by the inclusion by So of the Nuit de Chine by Rosine perfume bottle, the first Western designed scent inspired by China. And the question still lingers: where are the Asian women in all this?

The second room of So's exhibition offers audiences a different visual experience, this time focused on cuju (蹴鞠), an ancient Chinese football game that far precedes the contemporary sport. Within the context of Lowry, with its affiliations with nearby football clubs and matches, So's presentation offers both a Chinese and female perspective of the so-called 'beautiful game'. So has recreated a bronze 'magic mirror', named because of its properties of image-creation through light and reflection. Her piece is inspired by a bronze mirror in the collection of FIFA Museum, which depicts both Chinese men and women playing together around a ball. So's mirror has simplified the design to focus exclusively on two women figures facing each other.

Like the history of snuff bottles in the preceding room, So has once again chosen a cultural artefact, the 'magic mirror', whose lineage can be traced to China during the Han Dynasty (206 BC – 24 AD). By recreating this artefact in a contemporary context, and showing it alongside the perfume bottles, So is inviting viewers to consider the ways that things that are familiar to us or shape our everyday life (football, perfume bottles) actually embody long-lasting visual legacies and inheritances. Much like the 'magic mirror' itself, Renee So's magic as an artist is reflecting back to us what already exists, and attuning our visual senses to the things we may otherwise miss, hidden as they are underneath the surface.

