



# 211 YULI YAMAGATA ON INTIMACY, SELF-WORTH AND CHEWING GUM

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A recent work by São Paulo-based Brazilian artist Yuli Yamagata has been haunting us since we first came across it. It is simply titled *Chiclete* (2019), a reference to the popular chewing gum brand Chiclets, which is now a Portuguese word, both in American and European Portuguese, used to refer to any kind or brand of chewing gum. Curiously enough there are several of these occurrences in the Portuguese language: brand names being appropriated, then bastardized and finally given the status of a common word. In the process the reference to the brand is lost and no one remains aware of such a commercial etymology. Such linguistic processes are not mentioned randomly. Instead, they do hold a strong resemblance to Yamagata's own artistic *modus operandi*. But we will come back to this in a bit. Before we do though, and as with all obsessions, we need to return to *Chiclete* and linger.

*Chiclete* is stretched on a wooden structure like a painted canvas would be and from a distance it successfully mimics a painting's bidimensionality. But any pretense the work has of inhabiting the representational space as well as the narrative codes of painting ends there, at a distance. It is not a painting and it will never be able to become one. It is a patchwork of different colored pieces of lycra, the technical fabric that compresses athletic bodies making them even more appealing to the eye, sewn together and given volume through the use of silicon fiber. It is a bulbous, organic object, projecting from the wooden frame directly into the viewer's mind. Two mouths are caught kissing, one mouth inserting its yellow tongue into the swollen, half open red lips of the other.

Each mouth is chewing a protuberant and rotund piece of gum, the giver chewing white gum while the one being chewed by the receiver is neon green. What flavor translates into that shade of green? We can only assume that those two chewing gums, like other fluids, have been exchanged as a result of an incredibly intense embrace, going back and forth as both tongues move them around the shared space defined by the two mouths. Gender is an afterthought. These are genderless mouths engaging in a genderless kiss which has us as its primary target. Both mouths are facing us rather than each other, as if they are more interested in interacting with us than actually engaging in an intimate gesture. Maybe it is a kiss meant for Instagram, or for some social media chewing gum campaign, maybe it is a young influencer's attempt at placing a product within her community of followers. The square shape is not without a reason: nowadays, everything looks better in a figure with four equal straight sides and four right angles. In any case the kiss feels teenage-like and carefree, if not careless, hot yet repulsive, disturbing yet terribly familiar.

Yamagata's use of everyday fabrics has somewhat shifted recently. In newer pieces like *Chiclete*, *Brick Sneakers*, *Milho*, or *Pneu*, for instance, the artist has been exploring the tension between flatness and three-dimensionality, between form and color and between the codes of painting and its massified and low-brow appropriation, not unlike the way the Portuguese language has appropriated brands in order to create new nouns that later lose any ties with the original. Bastardization is a form





of reclaiming ownership and control, and Yamagata has become a master when it comes to it. Simultaneously, a certain understanding of intimacy, or of its enactment, and the performative nature of intimacy take center stage in these works. Whether an explicit kiss, the more demure act of holding hands, as seen in *Together*, or just hanging out with friends, as in *Chat and Drinks*, Yamagata seems to be invested in trying to understand what physical closeness and sociability may signify presently.

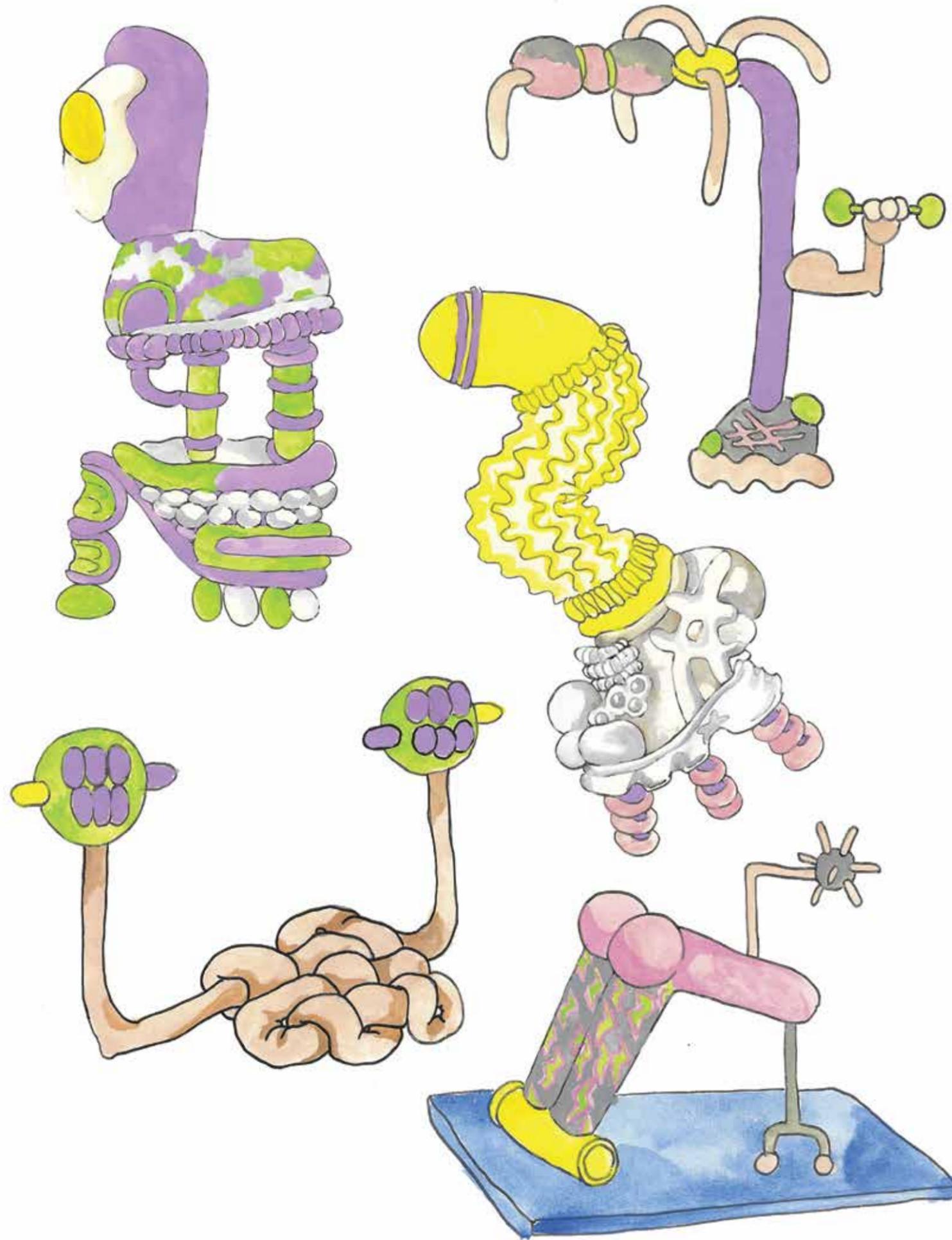
Previous works, on the other hand, tend to misbehave. Despite risking anthropomorphizing artworks, we perceive these pieces as mischievous, loud and obnoxious. They plot and scheme behind your back, while in front of you they keep a cool, somewhat aloof, demeanor. The technical fabrics of sports attire, such as lycra, and their bright, vivid, sometimes neon colors, which Yamagata has been using recently, give way to animal prints, denim, velvet or even fake fur. These are the fabrics available in street markets in São Paulo, which the artist purchases by the roll. They offer a grammar of deceit and illusion, and a democratization of taste. Everyone can wear snakeskin or leopard fur, or both, as long as everyone commits to the fantasy. Yamagata understands the politics of these fabrics. Not only does she understand it, she enacts it and pushes it to its extreme absurdity.

Take the example of the works shown in *Roly-Poly*, a group show presented at Pivô, in São Paulo in 2018, and the result of a residency at the same institution. *Jeans*, a sculpture modeled from a customized pair of jeans, is an exercise in fashion contortionism, both literal and metaphorical. The very long legs (a recurring theme in Yamagata's work) of the pair of jeans circle back until they rejoin the waist from above in a seamless manner, creating a fabric *ouroboros* of sorts and creating a sense of a limp body which can be shaped into any form imaginable. Perched above a window, close to the ceiling, the artist installed *Lagostine*, a seemingly aggressive and ready to attack hybrid of an oversized crustacean and a perfectly manicured hand. The flesh-colored chimera continues the artist's attempt at unraveling the body. Similarly, *Paola & Paolina* is a wall sculpture taking the form of two snakes turning into the legs of a child wearing sneakers. Or maybe it is the legs, and the sneakers, that are turning into snakes. Cause and effect seem irrelevant, but the metamorphosis of the body at the hands of these textiles, these prints, seems to be pointing to the very intimate bonds between fashion, lifestyle, body image and self-worth.

Do you wear the fabric or does the fabric wear you? Are we talking about empowerment or its opposite, disenfranchisement? These works thread a very thin line between the two poles and we wonder how long the seams will hold.

A series of works from 2017, titled *Pintura, paisagem e crossfit* (Painting, Landscape and Crossfit) is another example of Yamagata's interest in the relationship between body and self-worth in today's consumption saturated mindscape. The series researches patterns, colors and prints characteristics of sports and crossfit attire as well as of the many accessories marketed as essential to the proper execution of such physical activities and it sheds light into how those patterns behave, changing the image of the body and as a result the context in which people exercise, whether at the gym or outdoors. The works in *Pintura, paisagem e crossfit* are made from the actual technical fabrics used to produce the sports garments as well as many other materials and utensils produced by the sports industry, such as dumbbells, sports bottles, shoes and many others. *Jogging*, for instance, is a sculpture which presents itself as the hyperbole of the act of running. Two impossibly very long leg-like appendixes wearing what seems custom-made snakeskin running tights and brightly colored running shoes are fixed in an exaggerated and extravagant jogging stance, which bares no functional value whatsoever. The work *Diorama para Jogging* (Diorama for Jogging), also part of the series, is a rosy pink mountainous landscape which exists in between painting and sculpture, between set and character, in a fitness driven narrative of self pleasure and physical wellbeing.

Whether through exploring the transfiguration of the body, self-imposed or otherwise, or through looking into the role intimacy and togetherness may play, Yamagata has been constructing an idea of the body which transcends its own physicality. Yes, it still is organs, muscles and bones sewn together inside a custom skin suit, but it is also affect and desire, digital and interconnectedness, social and community, politics and resistance, consumption and subjugation. The body is not a simple, unidimensional entity but the crux where all these dimensions overlap and produce a physical consciousness which is, despite its own self-awareness, simultaneously critic and complicit, agent and subject of the forces thrust upon it. These are the bodies whose mouths in *Chiclete* belong to. The reason why that kiss, if one still wants to think of it as a kiss, is so enticing, so mesmerizing, resides in the fact that it is both private and exhibitionist, intimate and meaningless, an act of productive antagonism and of irresponsible complicity.



Finger (soft), 2018 Photo: Alexandre Bretzner (p. 214)  
Brick sneaker, 2018 Photo: Alexandre Bretzner (p. 215)

Crossfit, 2018 (p. 217) All images Courtesy: the artist