

Stephanie Syjuco



ART PRACTICAL

Locating Technology

Raiders and Empires

By Genevieve Quick
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Locating Technology considers technology and artworks in rather broad terms, such as: mechanical objects, analog and digital photography and video, and computer and web-based work. Through these types of works, writers explore the evolution of technology and its effects on artists' processes, disciplinarity, and the larger social context of media creation, dispersal, access and interactivity.

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Much of the history of museum collections is related to the concentration of wealth and power of empires, and more recently corporate monopolies. While museums take great care in contextualizing the aesthetic, cultural, and historical significance of their artworks, they often omit most of their object's acquisition histories. These backgrounds, extending from antiquity to present, would most likely include emperors and profiteers, along with their contemporary counterparts: the business tycoons that museums name as donors. In *RAIDERS: International Booty, Bountiful Harvest (Selections from the Collection of the A___ A__ M_____)* (2011) and *Empire/Other* (2013–ongoing), Stephanie Syjuco alludes to the questionable acquisition of museum artifacts. In these projects Syjuco harnesses technologies of distribution and reproduction—the web, photography, and 3D scanning and printing—to create objects that reveal the tangled history of colonization and cultural hybridization. Syjuco's web-sourced imagery and 3D manipulations create imperfect objects that declare their simulation while entering into the same economic exchange system as the artifacts that they reference.



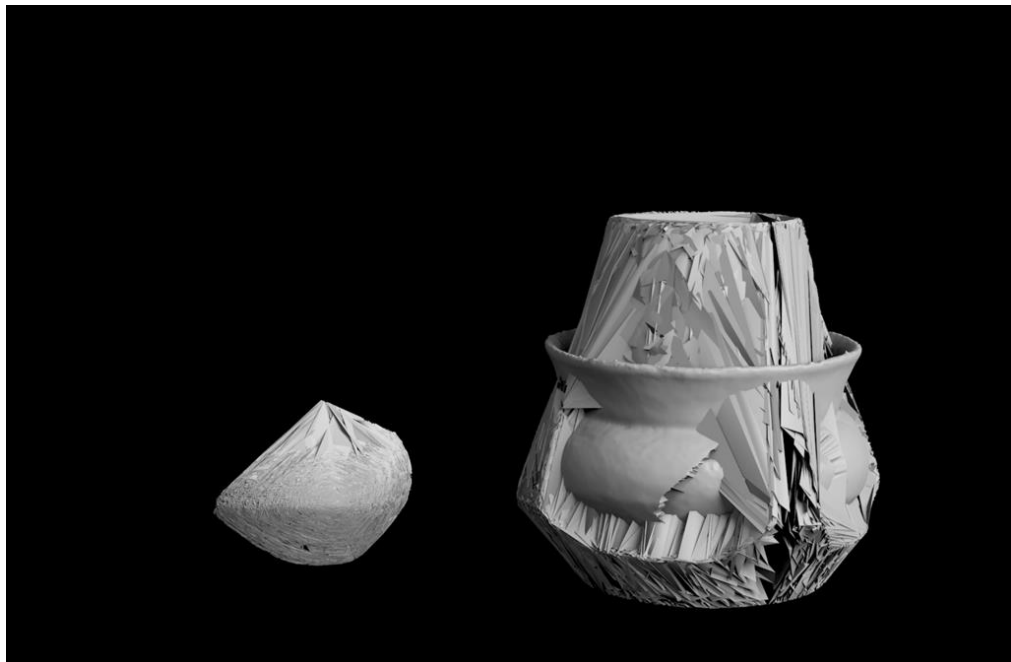
Stephanie Syjuco. *RAIDERS: International Booty, Bountiful Harvest (Selections from the Collection of the Asian Art Museum)* (installation view), 2011; digital archival photo prints mounted onto laser-cut wood, hardware, crates; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the Artist and Catharine Clark, San Francisco.

For *RAIDERS: International Booty, Bountiful Harvest (Selections from the Collection of the Asian Art Museum)*, Syjuco downloaded images from the Asian Art Museum's (AAM) website and printed them on individually shaped supports. While the "raiders" of Syjuco's title invokes the Hollywood version of tomb raiding in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), the phrase "international booty" points to the fact that museums today still hold artifacts, especially those from non-Western countries, that may have been obtained under specious conditions or looted outright.¹ While the "Elgin marbles" were legally exported from Greece, the debate regarding them questions the ethics of collecting antiquities, especially when contracts are made with occupying empires.² Theft is also still a problem. Just this year, the federal government charged Subhash Kapoor with smuggling, prompting several museums to repatriate objects and causing others, including the AAM, to scrutinize items purchased from Kapoor.³ While Syjuco does not identify individual items in the AAM's holdings as having been looted, she prompts viewers to consider more broadly the legality and ethics of museums' collections, and suggests that museums are institutions of cultural appropriation.

Just as museums have taken artworks and objects from foreign contexts, Syjuco took images from the AAM's website. While the AAM has commendably begun collecting and exhibiting contemporary works, most of its history has been dedicated to antiquities, thus excluding Syjuco as a contemporary artist. As an uncommissioned project, *RAIDERS* allows Syjuco to insert herself into the museum, but from a public position or as an outsider. As an Asian American artist who has largely lived in the United States, Syjuco's appropriation can be seen as both a gesture of cultural vigilantism, reclaiming the heritage of Asian ceramics, and as an inquiry into her relationship to Asian antiquities.

As hybrid image/objects, the "ceramics" in *RAIDERS* traffic in the tension with reproduction, illusion, space, and place. From a distance, the photographic images of the AAM's vases appear dimensional, their crenellations casting shadows that conform to the vases' shapes. However, when viewed from the side, the pieces' flat backings become apparent and the illusion is revealed. On closer inspection, the pixilation of the

images reveals their history as being sourced from low-resolution, web-hosted files. Syjuco's images doubly declare their status as copies of both the original ceramic vases and their web-based photographic reproductions. Like the cultural and temporal displacement that surrounds antiquities in museums, the image-objects in *RAIDERS* will forever be foreign.



Stephanie Syjuco. *Empire/Other: Morphset E*, 2013 (video still); 3D animated video. Courtesy of the Artist and FLACC Workplace for Visual Artists, Belgium.

Syjuco also positions her objects as transitory commodities, displaying them on shipping pallets and wooden pedestals, rather than the white pedestals of museums and galleries. These 146 objects, produced in an edition of three, echo the variety of a product line. Syjuco has exhibited portions of *RAIDERS* in galleries and art fairs, where collectors and museums have purchased elements of this work. These items, like the original antiquities they reference, have entered the commercial exchange system of art and will find another home, or possibly be stored, loaned, or resold. Presumably for sale, Syjuco displays some of the elements from *RAIDERS* on Catharine Clark Gallery's website. The items are listed as "Selections," "Variety Packs," and clusters based on taxonomy, like the vases' color, style, or shape.⁴ These groupings are sometimes numbered as *Variety Pack #1*, *Variety Pack #2*, and so on, furthering the sense that these are commodities that collectors can select from. As the web exists as both an ever-expanding encyclopedia of our activities and knowledge, one of its main drivers is commerce. With her imagery derived from the web, Syjuco's objects also reenter the web, but as commodities.

For *Empire/Other*, Syjuco is creating three-dimensional scans of colonial-era and Belgian Art Nouveau ceramic vases. She then morphs them through digital rendering and eventually will produce the composite objects in clay using 3D printing. Thus far into the project, Syjuco has been collaborating with two Belgian museums: the Museum Aan de Stroom (MAS), Antwerp, and the City Museum Stellingwerff-Waardenhof, Hasselt.⁵ With Belgium being a former, but rather small, colonizing power, both museums have large holdings of modern European ceramics and its binary Other.⁶

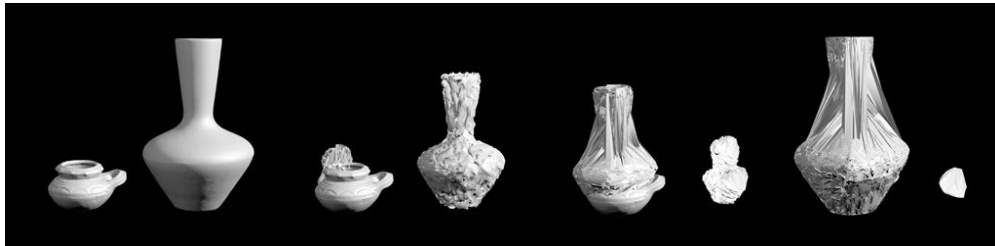
Even before Syjuco morphs her vases, the scanning process simplifies the vases' forms, reducing the detailed marks of their age, condition, and the artisan's hand. Additionally, Syjuco has rendered them in tonal grays, which eliminates the color and characteristics of the vases' glazes and surface treatments. Much like the online photographs Syjuco used as source material in *RAIDERS*, here, 3D scanning also operates as an indexical format.



Stephanie Syjuco. *RAIDERS: International Booty, Bountiful Harvest (Selections from the Collection of the A_____ A_____ M_____)* (installation view), 2011; digital archival photo prints mounted onto laser-cut wood, hardware, crates; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the Artist and Catharine Clark, San Francisco.

Beginning with her scans, Syjuco uses 3D software to shape-shift her Belgian and Congolese vases. Theoretically Syjuco should end up with replicas of the originals. However, videos of the process like *Empire/Other: Morphset E* (2013)⁷ demonstrate the imprecise way that a Belgian vase shrinks in size and almost collapses inward while vertical icicles grow from the center of the Congolese vase. The glitches in Syjuco's algorithm result in forms that are unrecognizable as Belgian or Congolese, reflecting the precarity inherent to reproduction and hybridization. Moreover, as *RAIDERS* spoke to the transitory location of Syjuco's object-images, *Empire/Other* addresses the instability of objects as they transform.

With the data from her morphing process, Syjuco eventually plans on using 3D printing to create these objects in ceramic, the same material as the original vases. While the original works are prized for their artisan craftsmanship, Syjuco turns away from the hand, using technology to manipulate and reproduce her vases. As Syjuco produced *RAIDERS* in an edition of three, it is conceivable that she will print these vases as multiples, once again declaring the absence of an original. Additionally, Syjuco's forms become imprinted with the digital technology that has enabled their creation, which as a medium has its own limitations. In particular, the 3D morphing process creates random floating pixels that linger in the air within the artificial world of the screen. However, unlike the pixilation in *RAIDERS*, these errant particles face the challenges of gravity and form when transformed into clay; these technologically produced ghosts become part of Syjuco's objects as they transfer from shape to shape.



Stephanie Syjuco. *Empire/Other: Morphset B*, 2013 (composite still); 3D animated video. Courtesy of the Artist and FLACC Workplace for Visual Artists, Belgium.

As Syjuco negotiates her own critique and engagement with museums and galleries, museums' visitors must also negotiate their appreciation for artifacts while understanding the conditions, historic or more recent, through which artworks have been acquired. In using indexical media, photography, and 3D scans, Syjuco's projects insist that her viewers reflect upon the original source. Rather than using high-quality and "perfect" images, Syjuco activates the errors of her process, mining the web and computer glitches, to declare their complex history and their simulations. Like the original artifacts, Syjuco's projects speak to the exchange of art objects within the economies of galleries and museum collections.

Notes

1. In 2005 the Italian government tried Marion True, former curator for the J. Paul Getty Museum, for conspiring to loot Italian archeological sites for the Getty collection. Because of the statute of limitations, the court did not issue a judgment; True has confessed to obtaining items for the Getty that she knew were stolen. Under fear of prosecution, the Getty and other museums have repatriated hundreds of objects to Italy. https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/the-curator-who-vanished/2015/08/19/d32390f8-459e-11e5-846d-02792f854297_story.html More recently, the FBI has issued a warning regarding antiquities looted from Syria and Iran. <https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2015/august/isil-and-antiquities-trafficking>.
2. Now part of the British Museum, the "Elgin Marbles" were legally removed by Lord Elgin from the Parthenon from 1801–05, when Greece was occupied by the Ottoman Empire. Since the early 1980s, Greece has sought repatriation of the marbles, claiming that they belong to their place of origin.

3. Kapoor is suspected of running the largest smuggling ring on American soil. The AAM purchased four items from Kapoor, all of which are believed to be in good standing. The Toledo Museum of Art, Honolulu Museum of Art, and the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, have returned items purchased from Kapoor that were believed to have been stolen. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/08/arts/design/museums-begin-returning-artifacts-to-india-in-response-to-investigation.html>
4. <http://cclarkgallery.com/artists/works/stephanie-syjuco#slide5>
5. This overt collaboration provides an important point of contrast with *RAIDERS*, for which Syjuco was operating independent of the museum in the public domain of the web. Because handling the objects is integral to her process of 3D scanning, Syjuco must abide by the museum's strictures. It is foreseeable that, as a work in progress, Syjuco's project could be extended to collaborate with other museums, possibly working with museums with larger collections or contested objects. Moreover, as Syjuco continues to work with galleries to distribute her work, these objects and videos may also enter the commodity stream as *RAIDERS* has, and likewise reenter museum collections.
6. Belgium occupied the Belgian Congo, Ruana-Urundi, and Tianjin, China.
7. http://www.stephaniesyjuco.com/p_empireother.html