

A (Not Quite) Review of Martine Gutierrez's *China Doll*, Rated R
By (not quite) Noah Witke Mele

Toward the kitchen table, mug (full of hot tea), notebook, laptop, clutched in my arms, pen between my teeth, perhaps one object too many for the single trip, but unwilling to move back and forth more than once. Bend sideways, delicately placing the mug on the table and release the rest in a flurry (a bit more care for the laptop—it cost too much), and sit preparing to travel somehow. I've entered the gallery before, but not as someone who is going to try to write about it, and if my memory serves there will be a lot to take in.

I've cued it all up, Martine Gutierrez's [China Doll](#), a video-game-like e-gallery hosted by Ryan Lee, where I saw Martine's [Indigenous Woman](#) show a few years ago. I've followed her career for a while, unknowingly at first, as young people we danced at the same studio, a little small-town place in Vermont, but because she's a few years older we never really crossed paths. (Save for a works-in-progress showcase in a barn, where we were both dancing. I'll always remember how she described herself in that program: "artist/pop star/spy".)

I press play and clouds fill the screen, those perfect white ones, and music fills my ears, Martine talks, and her voice is just so that I decide that I don't really care what she's saying and leave behind any plans I had for critique, it's just really beautiful. She says something about blonde ambition and a lot about C/china.

Then there's something like a title screen, where I'm told that if I click the right(?) button someone will be able to watch me while I'm in the gallery. It's rather jarring, but I also like the idea of it, so I go and pull on a nicer shirt. Sitting down again I have some trouble figuring out what to do next, how to navigate beyond this choice to accept or deny the right to watch. I remember that I had this problem the first time as well, and decide that it's probably a fictional choice (if there is such a thing) since the only way forward is to click the X in the top right corner, plunging me into the gallery proper without feeling like the choice was really ever made.

Now I'm standing on a marble staircase that winds upwards indefinitely, stopping every so often at a small platform on which—suspended in the air—there are artworks, mostly portraits of Martine that feel familiar having previously seen her work. This whole thing reminds me of a computer game I played as a kid, where my anonymous character would wander through an abandoned island, there's a similar terror to feeling alone in a virtual space, exacerbated by the possibility of being watched (although that must not be true!). I go up the stairs, although I could just as easily descend them (below is a reflection of the slightly clouded sky, perhaps an unearthly still ocean, there is a dark horizon, but no landmass in site beyond the stairs), stopping to look at the photographs, and I realize that I can hear my footsteps...it is eerily like being in an empty gallery, at once too quiet and filled with the noise of my body. The photos are lovely, in them Martine is bleach blonde, often wearing little to nothing, staring at the camera with darkly mascaraed eyes, occasionally she has a spectral partner, an inanimate man, a mannequin. She really is so gorgeous.

I turn to go further up the stairs but am confronted with another platform, on which is a larger image...no it is not an image, it is the beginning of a film, the eponymous *China Doll*, written, directed, edited and shot by Martine (this is sort of her thing, she can do it all, *Indigenous Woman* was 124 pages of glossy fashion magazine, herself the only author). The film begins with a peach upon which crawls a millipede, a woman's voice repeats Martine's introduction, although this time in Mandarin, subtitled in English, then we are

in the empty basin of a pool, repurposed for drying laundry, pale fabric blowing in a soft wind. Martine is there, clothespins in hand, barefoot, then reclined atop a diving board, speaking again, silhouetted against a piercing blue sky, the sun reflecting off a sheet, illuminating her face. And now she speaks into the mirror of a powder pink vanity tucked up against the concrete wall of the pool, and behind her, sitting on a mattress is the mannequin, wearing loose white clothes. Then they are both naked, Martine straddling the unreal man. Apart again, she caresses herself with his detachable hand. It goes on like this. It is hot, and sometimes a bit disturbing in its sublimity, but it is always breathtaking. It's so sunny where she is. (I'm doing the film a disservice by not describing it in full...if this weird little piece of writing ever has a reader I'll address you directly: You should go watch it, although the live gallery will only be available for 17 more days (it's April 12th right now (and April 6th, almost a year later at the time of this revision)).

The artist statement that accompanies the gallery ends with this paragraph:

A popular interpretation of INDIGENOUS WOMAN is that of autobiography—perhaps because embodiment is easier to assume and understand as truth. We all project ourselves before we are ourselves. It is the subtlety of saying *am I this?* vs. *I am this*. I seek to produce the very conduits of advertising that sell us the identities I disassemble—the mass of media. CHINA DOLL fortifies this process of fiction-making as study to go deeper into the fantasy of self vision—to see if the projection even exists. The titles INDIGENOUS and WOMAN are two words I do not claim ownership over. A reminder of the duplicity in language. CHINA—in this instance, is not a claim to nationality—but the homonym for porcelain—a white, vitrified translucent ceramic. A mis-translation for the fragility of our own ideals. The trading of wealth and value, or meaning. DOLL—the self objectification of the femme experience. Becoming is to conform to an aspiration of womanhood that is both sold and naturalized. Just as science diagnosed us as transgender—DOLL is generationally our contemporary—yet another moniker on the verge of assimilation.

I've been trying to carry this with me as I've been writing about the work, although I haven't moved much beyond description. Martine's work does, I think, mostly speak for itself, it doesn't need me to mis-translate (although I guess I have done this by way of my written representation), and it makes its own theory, its own criticism (the page of Indigenous Woman that is [an add for soap made of bleach](#), followed by a page that reads: "[Maybe she's born with it, maybe it's white privilege](#)"). But I think about the line from her artist statement: "we all project ourselves before we are ourselves" as if being was a thing projection could achieve. I am projecting myself onto this page, in all my convoluted fictitiousness, the narrator I am drawing up is having an identity crisis because she's not me: she lives in a different house, wears different clothes, has a different name, and yet my projection of her is still mine, a sort of violent possessive thing, the imposition of my childhood and half-realized relations upon a fiction who doesn't want it!

There's some disjuncture in my thinking here, a split between my not really understanding what criticism is (should I have taken a journalism course in college? Is that what you take to learn this?) and the interjection of my history--I am a woman after all--although not an indigenous one, but then again, Martine doesn't claim to claim that either. I have, however, had blonde hair too, it fell to my waist before I decided I was done with it and buzzed it all off on stage in a rather juvenile piece of performance art.

Somehow I've stopped really watching the film, caught up in trying to think about it... now Martine says: "We like to think we're angels...We're not. We are the foils of our fear," and there is another mannequin now, a woman, wearing a blonde wig like Martine's hair. She lays on the bottom of the pool, a shadow cast over

her by the object-man. There are no angels here, and then Martine is standing over her doll, both bleached blonde by the sun (that's the poetics: it's hydrogen peroxide that does the real thing).

A few weeks ago Martine [posted some correspondences](#) with the VR designer who made the gallery, and for the 24 hours that was on her story I had a peek into how *China Doll* came to be, and some things that didn't survive the editing process. The sea below once had waves, you could slip and tumble down the stairs, but most dramatically: once the film ended the stairs began to burn, ending the gallery in fire.

(The tea has gone cold...too bad—I'm taking up my grandfather's habit of microwaving beverages back to hot, and forgetting them there, rediscovering the tepid liquid some time later, repeating the process.)

I'm pursuing Martine's Instagram now searching for some final clues of how to write up *China Doll*, perhaps into something that a friend's magazine might publish, although this write here has a little too much of me in it to be a proper performance review. She has [a photo in the empty pool](#)—in the background the mannequin rests against the concrete side—the caption is a little too long and delightfully a bit messier than I expected; she writes about Tom Hanks and the coconut from *Castaway* and wonders "...even if tom hanks was trans, how much would you have in common? wow right?! hours in this." There are little snippets about her relationship to the mannequins, in the (and this is me projecting again) way that they are like a mirror without the reflective capacity: a representation of body as an object upon which clothes can be modeled, or stripped off into an object of desire, unsexed by a smooth plaster crotch and nippleless breasts. (Sort of like when T Fleischmann writes about Ninja Turtles and Barbies being a funny little premonition of the t4t relations of their adulthood.)

The sunlight has left the room, the tea has gone cold, my eyes are tired of this screen, so I'm about to close the laptop leaving behind the strange gallery Martine has made. The floating marble staircases are too empty for me, I need to tell someone about this (that's you perhaps!) to find some new footholds rather than basking in the lonely digital glow, echoing footsteps without a body. Here—