

Sydney Shen: Onion Master

Sydney Shen (b. 1989, Woodbridge, NJ) creates sculptures and installations that evoke a sense of abject dread. Informed by a range of historical and contemporary sources—including Peking opera, supernatural horror fiction, and the darkest recesses of the web—Shen frankensteins organic and synthetic materials such as Chinese and Western medicinal aromatics, 3-D-printed plastic, and biological specimens to produce uncanny environments.

“Onion Master” reimagines an arcade claw machine with a bizarre prize: artificial onions. The lowly vegetable emits tear-inducing gas when sliced, to tragicomic effect. Scattered alongside the onions, solar-powered toys—which the artist sees as captive performers—are encased within clear acrylic balls. Shen has lined the window with lyrical excerpts from a song by English Renaissance musician John Dowland, whose compositions often ruminate on melancholy.

Combining the spirit of an amusement park with morbid cues from funeral parlors, the installation highlights the macabre within carnivalesque and Gothic imagery. The claw machine, also known as a skill crane, is at once enticing and deceptively difficult; it is designed to give the false impression that a player will be able to claim the prize. Shen’s design amplifies this frustration, offering a game with no way to play and no prize to collect. “Onion Master” presents a Sisyphean task—in the end, no one wins.

“Sydney Shen: Onion Master” joins a new series of window installations that relaunches a program the New Museum originally mounted in the 1980s.

This project is curated by Francesca Altamura, Curatorial Assistant.

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