

**Beautiful Prisoners: Victoria Fu at Simon Preston and the Whitney**  
**By Raphael Taylor**  
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Victoria Fu's first solo exhibition at Simon Preston Gallery is centered primarily around two complex large-format video installations, *Belle Captive II* and *Belle Captive III*. These works, like *Belle Captive I*, which was shown at the Whitney Biennial in early May, are immersive digital projections, created via an overlay of diverse time-based and light-based materials and approaches. In each work, the context/content becomes a mysterious but partially decodable sum larger than its parts.



The three *Belle Captive* video installations are non-narrative, and the subject matter is hard to distinguish. In *Belle Captive II*, an ethereal purple-pink atmosphere serves as the constant background of the projected video (this hazy imagery is actually derived from footage that the artist shot of a sunset, on 16mm film). In the foreground we witness people dressed in business-casual attire as they perform certain tasks, and pose in specific interactions with one another. The figurative imagery in this work was culled from commercial stock footage downloaded by the artist over the internet, which she subsequently re-cropped and re-edited. In the six-minute looped piece which is projected on a central wall within the gallery, we watch various actors at both close and medium range as they make sign language gestures, climb up an ascending series of leveled stairs, stand in half circles smiling, and most strikingly, hold large green-screened placards in front of themselves, which render parts of their bodies invisible.

*Belle Captive II* functions more on an abstract level than as a form of "critique," associated with the appropriation of found images. The gestures of its borrowed main characters are stripped down to being little more than the actions of human beings within a certain barren digital atmosphere. A surreal dramatic quality takes over, heightened by the consistently-haloed appearance of the green-screened objects and people. A close-cropped smile on one of these characters faces, for instance, implies something different than it ever did in the source material, where it must have been scripted for easy infomercial digestion. Without using any overarching narrative or single dominant technology, the work seems to profile some heightened, futuristic, but closed-off version of reality that exists within its own time-based capabilities.

*Belle Captive III*, which is situated on the other side of a wall from *II*, is unpopulated by contrast, containing no characters or recognizably sourced footage. This work seems even more inherently technical than the other videos. It consists of a projection that spills off the wall and onto the floor, containing two-dimensional shapes that are the color and consistency of the sunset-pink imagery found in the other video. Many of the shapes are abstract, but at times others represent the silhouettes of human figures, objects, and settings, some of which appear in *Belle Captive I* and *II*. In actuality *Belle Captive III* was created by recording within a physical set, and with the cut-out shapes we see as props. There is a strange, self-reflexive and iterative quality within the cross-referencing between these works. In comparison to *Belle Captive I* and *II*, this piece was created within real time

and space . In another sense, though, this video is almost the dry template to the dramatic environs found in the other two *Belle Captives*. It envisions the digital realm as a stage, and proceeds in two dimensions to block out all the loaded symbols and moments that in the other instances become activated in a digitally-fabricated world.

The exhibition also includes two additional works. There is a 16mm black-and-white film where a mirror held by the single pastorally-situated protagonist occasionally reflects into the camera and washes out the image, and there is a sole photographic work created by documenting the projection of a room's corner onto the corner itself. These media-based explorations are interesting, but they do not have the immediate reach of the *Belle Captive* video installations, which aesthetically delve into the reality of a mediated world rather than alluding to it.

*Belle Captive I*, as it was installed at the Whitney, would seem to be the most all-encompassing realization of this series. As with *Belle Captive III*, there are nods to the experiential, phenomenological, and disorderly capabilities of video installation. The main projection falls across a small wall in the foreground, then jaunts unevenly onto the wider wall in the background, setting up the sense of a semi-narrative video "framed" within a larger airy video installation. The *mis-en-scene* in *I* is more expansive than the contents of *III*. The imagery is derived from similar commercial stock footage of business-attired actors, but also includes a range of characters of diverse ages, and footage of specific objects, flora, and fauna. In one memorable montage, a teenage actress drinks a glass of water until she is obscured by a time-lapse of a leafy plant growing. In another, a colorful bird in close focus sits on a hand, followed by a markedly-red tomato that appears in front of an out-of-focus face. The inclusiveness of the material has increased just to the point that the commercial nature of the source footage remains barely evident (one giveaway is that all of the images are "positive"—hands with thumbs up, flowers growing, dog drinking water, child smiling).

Victoria Fu's practice indulges in media-based content in a similar manner to how Pop artists in the 1960s indulged in the seduction of visual advertising. At the same time, though, the pieces have a distinctly sociological feel. Maybe at heart, the work tries to split the difference. These videos, which share a name with the 1983 avant-garde mystery film directed by Alain Robbe-Grillet, attempt to wade into a digital world we are still in the midst of creating, and don't yet fully understand.