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?? (Shady Mansion)

AMY LIEN, ENZO CAMACHO

Julia Moritz

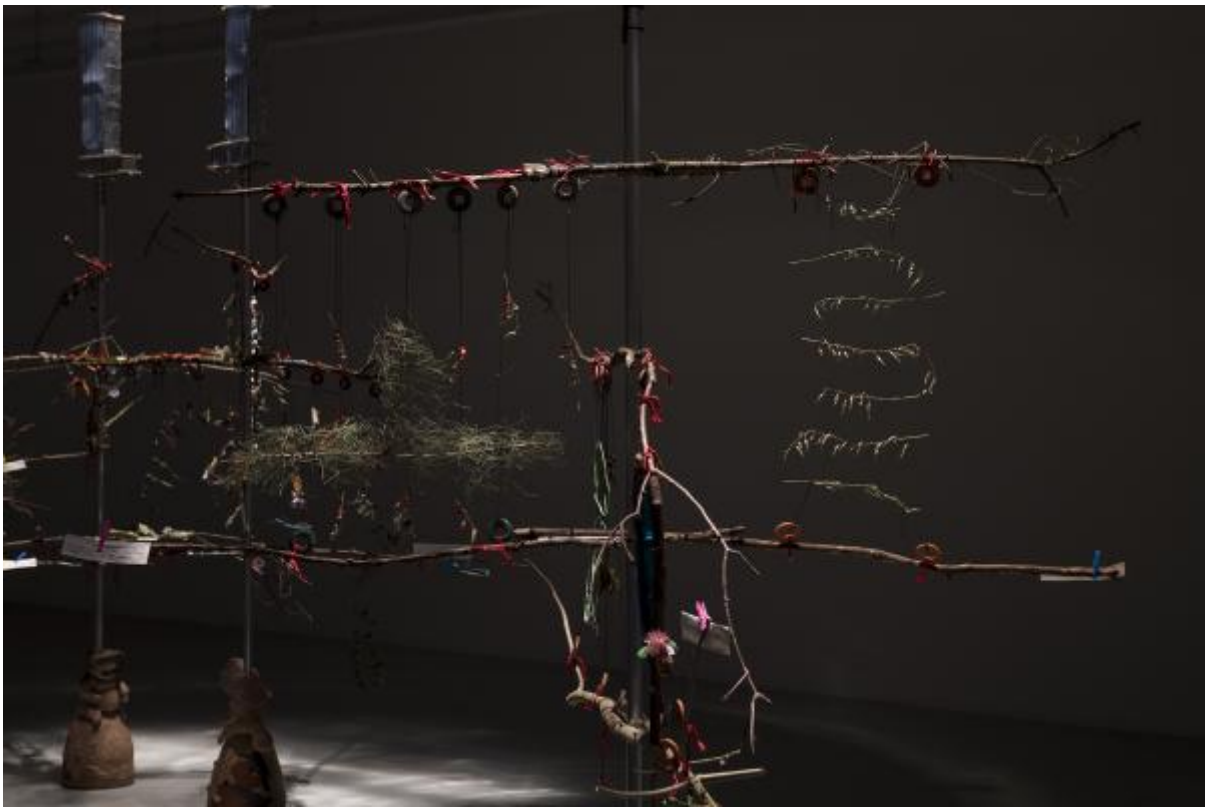
To some, there's darkness, to others, there is light. To Amy Lien & Enzo Camacho, there is shadow. *??(Shady Mansion)*, their first institutional solo exhibition in the German-speaking countries presented at Kunstverein Freiburg (September 14 – October 28, 2018), unpacks a startling array of shadowy business, spirituality, sites, aesthetics and the related politics. Julia Moritz disentangles those threads for the purpose of reviewing the show, and re-entangles them for the sake of a fresh look across the border.





Amy Lien & Enzo Camacho, ?? (Shady Mansion), photo: Marc Doradzillo

Do you, too, enjoy swimming underwater, eyes wide open, adoring the water's surface from below, the dance of light, of a sun or bulb, mirrored towards an underneath uninhabitable to us, as it were? Hold your breath, imagine actually being able to stay here, in the calm, in the twilight, underneath the surface of the ocean, an ocean of thoughts, here in the pool. A public pool indeed it was, the impressive building now housing the Kunstverein Freiburg. To generations of artists, the generous daylight was essential for their presentations – Amy Lien & Enzo Camacho came to turn those conditions upside down. And they came to stay, for a six-weeks-residency in this city which prides itself on being ranked at the top of Germany's livability index. *??(Shady Mansion)*, their first institutional solo exhibition in the German-speaking countries, presents an installation of many means which dealing with the dark sides of modern living, globalized labor, mediatized resistance, and belief – and the light at the end of those tunnels. In between, shadow rules, a substance with some philosophical heft that Lien & Camacho utilize with great care. In detail:



Amy Lien & Enzo Camacho, ?? (Shady Mansion), photo: Marc Doradzillo

When you first enter the mansion of the Kunstverein at Freiburg's picturesque riverside you see – nothing. Pitch black is your first impression of the space; you hardly dare to walk; your senses calm down; your mind gets excited. A blink of an eye, or two, and your vision begins to adjust. You are still clueless about the dimensions of the space, but the thing right next to you slowly starts to form an image on your retina: a tall dead tree in a very dim spotlight. Is it covered in smaller objects? The ‹creature's› animistic allure draws you into the space, make a move. Yes, this sculpture of branches, taken from the splendid Black Forest surrounding the city, is decorated with vernacular matter such as noodles, red ribbons, plastic dingus, and some origami-like ornament. You think of a Christmas tree. But that's just you. Others think of a money tree (as the comprehensive exhibition booklet will reveal to you later), a Chinese version of sacred-tree belief where relatives spruce up a tree with money bills when a person has passed away, so as to grant the deceased wealth and fortune in the afterlife.



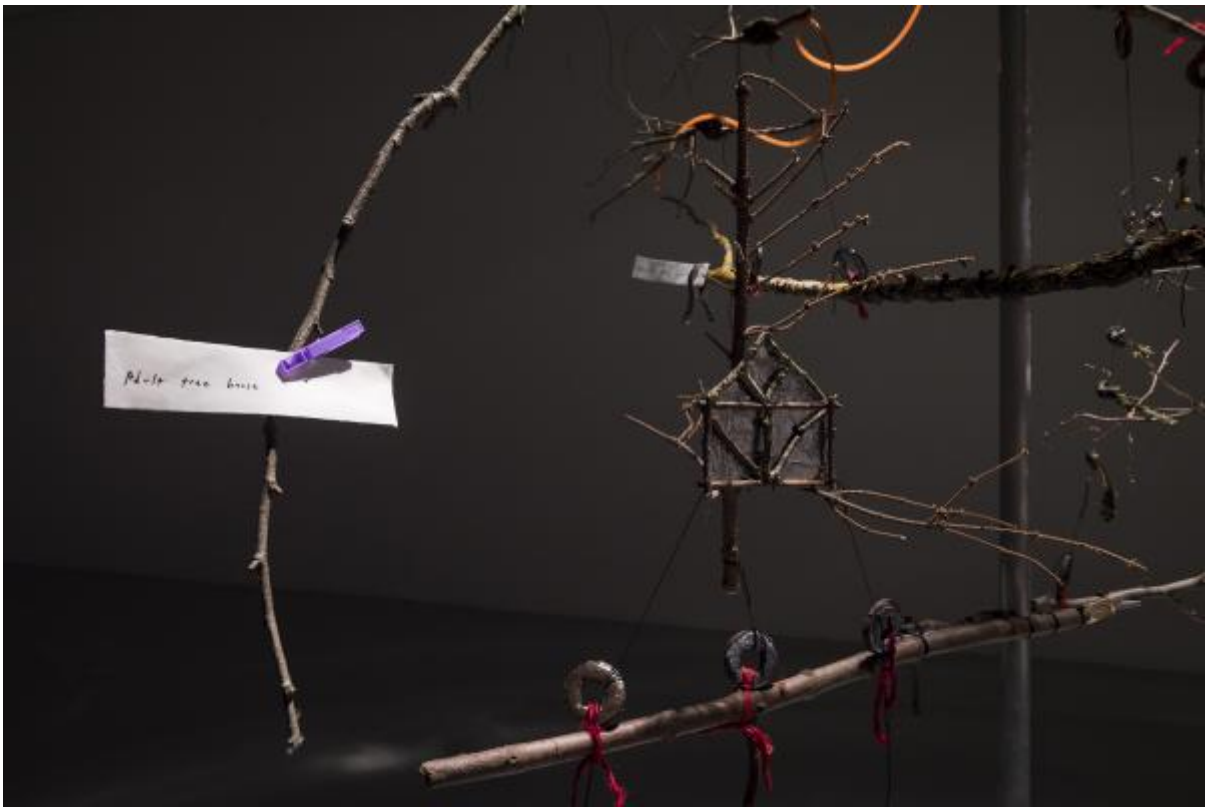
Amy Lien & Enzo Camacho, ?? (Shady Mansion), photo: Marc Doradzillo

Yet the exhibition title, *??(Shady Mansion)*, points in a different direction: It's the Chinese word for hell. And now, just as you've got the hang of those branches, you may start to wonder about that gloomy light. Glancing upwards, you discover a makeshift miniature model sitting atop the tree top. It resembles something like a skyscraper, scraping the ‹sky› of the space's ceiling, almost. True, the artists do occasionally reside in New York. The leaflet confirms (by now your eyes are able to decipher a few lines) that the models are meant to resemble a block of planned high rise projects in New York's Lower East Side, an area already seen as a textbook example of urban gentrification. The blade runner-like twilight at the very bottom of those model buildings – the underworld of the dead tree that forms their base, which is right where you stand – aims at more than just evoking the misery of eviction and precarity of the more unfortunate population forming the monumental downside of development, life in the muck. The specific reference of the diffuse lighting here is, in fact, to the sun: it's also a simulation of the proposed Lowline project (the most successful Kickstarter crowdfund campaign ever), a plan for subterranean solar parks underneath those very New York skyscrapers, where sunlight is channeled to underground vegetation.



Amy Lien & Enzo Camacho, ?? (Shady Mansion), photo: Marc Doradzillo

Too much developmental doom for fine Freiburg? Not at all! Germany's «Green City» is widely powered by solar energy, and a global leader in solar research. And yet, this supposed Pleasantville of civic sustainability comes with its own rent hikes and residential displacements, with solar technology hardware production (and labor), moreover, moving offshore. You sigh, you look down, your gaze travels down the tree once more when another detail catches your eye: little fortune cookie-type pieces of paper with handwritten notes. Like stage directions, or acts in a play, they comment on those rather grand issues of post-Fordist mayhem from a pretty private perspective. Small gestures displaying grassroots resistance (taken from activist meetings in the Lower East Side). Through the peephole of those literary splinters you see: ecological struggle is a struggle of and for the subject, the wresting of agency from the impasse of degrowth vs. development, sustainability vs. accumulation, two sides of the same capitalist coin, ultimately.



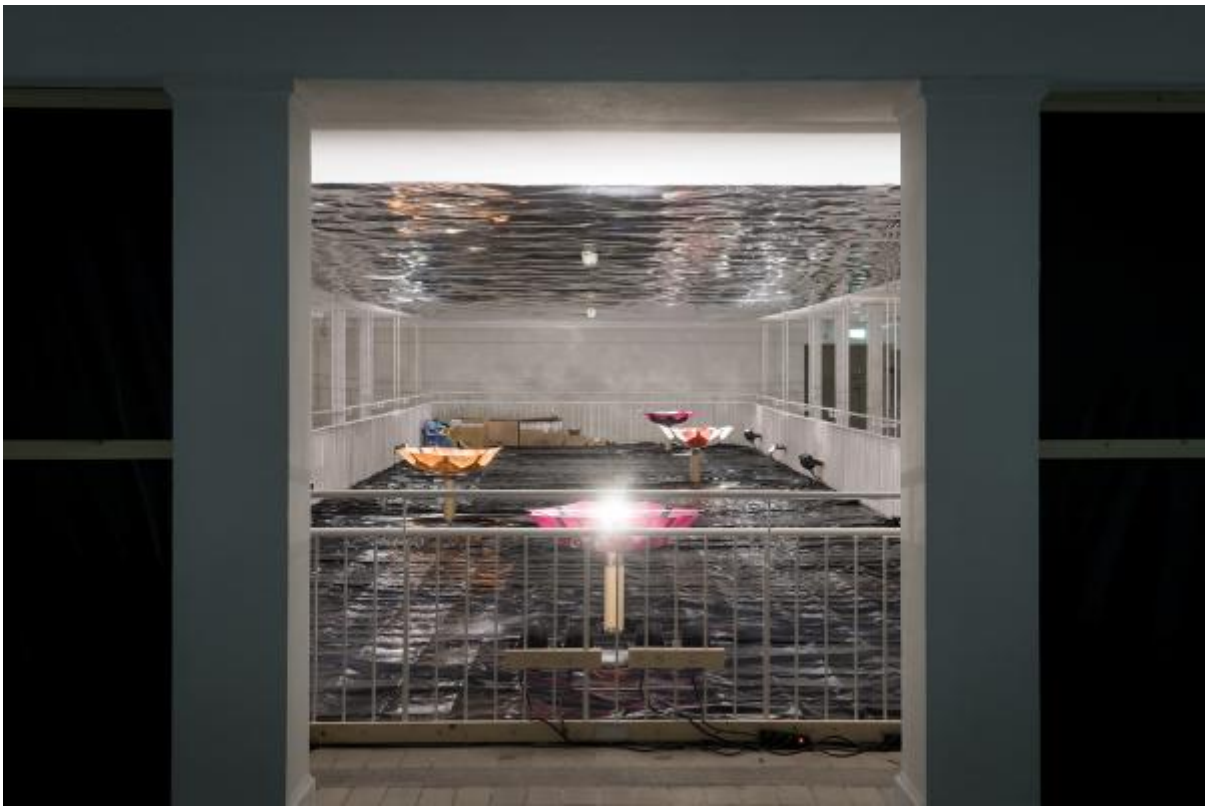
Amy Lien & Enzo Camacho, ?? (Shady Mansion), photo: Marc Doradzillo

A lot to take in. Because by now you've noticed: it ain't just a single tree, there a few, so you better get going. And as you do, a final detail becomes apparent. You thought you were at the base? Well, no – the raccoon is. A life-size raccoon sculpture in earthy clay (commissioned from a local ceramic artist) carries each money tree on the very floor, in the very spot of the light (akin to the halo for carrying our burden). Sure, the witty masked mammal – nocturnal and omnivorous – seems well suited for grass, roots, and resistance. And it would not be a Lien & Camacho show, if there wasn't another specific reference, namely to the popular 1960s Japanese anime Pom Poko. As the leaflet reads: «… it chronicles a group of shape-shifting raccoon dogs as they collectively attempt to resist the destruction of their habitat by urbanization. Their most ambitious protest is the staging of an enormous ghost parade, a large-scale illusion by which the raccoons attempt to scare away the humans from the newly built settlement …» They fail. All-out recuperation. You can't beat the spectacle (of development) with the spectacle (of belief), even in the world of spectacle (of anime). Sadly enough.



Amy Lien & Enzo Camacho, ?? (Shady Mansion), photo: Marc Doradzillo

Time to go. But wait! As the ever-friendly staff explains, you must make a turn, and climb the two flights of stairs. Right, this was a swimming pool, as you remember when you arrive at the upper floor. But there's no way you would have expected such a watershed revelation up here! And in no case should you, dear reader, read on if you still have a chance, as I hope, to see this scenic show. So here comes the spoiler:



Amy Lien & Enzo Camacho, ?? (Shady Mansion), photo: Marc Doradzillo

A brightly lit balustrade (the former changing rooms) reveals the artistic channeling of the public pool's lighting system from a mirror foil covering the ceiling through upside down umbrellas forming domes (an immortality flower?) that focus the diffuse light onto a small makeup mirror and from there down into the lower gallery where you just saw it enlightening the money tree mystery/misery. For this show only, the lower floor has been sealed off from the light of the upper gallery by black plastic tarp of the trash bag kind – a pitch black retina for this ocular operation; and, like the retina, also a mirror, and also a screen. Plato's shadow philosophy, the Cave Analogy, comes to mind (to your Western one, that is): in it, the dubious relationship of ‹real things› and their metaphysical idea is narrated from the perspective of another civic institution of self-improvement, the prison.



(hyperlink:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E4XXItJYFKA&feature=youtu.be
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E4XXItJYFKA&feature=youtu.be]
)

To the eye of the beholder, you, the plastic tarp surface insertion (or inciscion) by Amy Lien & Enzo Camacho's may also suggest the catastrophic rise of the pool's water level (be it as a result of mere pole cap-melting apocalypse or of Indonesia's average tsunami just occurring over here), submerging all life underneath, and kickstarting its afterlife (with the verticality of the sculptures below now looking like ladders – to an ark?). Merry the haloed raccoons to ascend to this upper gallery, because food's here in plenty – or was, at least, across from the entrance in a stack of empty poke bowls, the high rise resident's new trending food. What remains to be harvested is light, which the artists-as-engineers stage in striking low-tech fashion in this sewage system from above. Call it heaven or call it hell.

JULIA MORITZ

Julia Moritz is a curator, art mediator and critic currently working at Berlin's Gropius Bau and prior to that at Kunsthalle Zürich. Previously, she served as head of the Maybe Education and Public Programs for dOCUMENTA (13).

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