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Samson Young, *the highway is like a lion's mouth*, 2018, video, color, sound, 10 minutes 53 seconds.

Samson Young

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The history of dreams of modernization might be conceived, in sonic terms, as a series of catchy refrains. With each turn of the media cycle, a new crop of saccharine propagandistic jingles and overly sincere advertising slogans harbors visions of a better world to come. Specific messages and imaginations may be updated for the times, but, as Samson Young suggests in his "Utopia Trilogy," 2018–19, we remember them through a haze.

"Silver Moon or Golden Star, Which Will You Buy of Me?" at the University of Chicago's Smart Museum of Art marked Young's notable departure from the sonic performances and drawings for which he is best known and presented his music videos together for the first time. The videos, which mix 3-D animation, text, and original and found footage, exude a zany intensity carried by Young's energetic scores, which riff on jingles, show tunes, and radio hits. Each of the three videos references grand visions for transnational modernization, from the Chinese Canadian civic leader Won Alexander Cumyow's plan for

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the Chinese Empire Reform Association at the turn of the twentieth century to the model homes constructed for the 1933 Chicago World's Fair and the recently opened sea bridge connecting Hong Kong to Macau and mainland China. These geopolitical fantasies, set across the world-historical stage, are interlaced with more intimate popular-culture references from Young's childhood in 1980s Hong Kong: the consumerist dreamworld of neighborhood malls and TV spots advertising emigration to a utopic Singapore.

Young weaves these disparate narratives of desire into comically nightmarish musicals. In *the highway is like a lion's mouth*, 2018, a safety jingle that describes a world of mass automobility becomes an anxiety-inducing mantra in a CGI realm of distended figures driving across fragmented landscapes. A revision of the 1959 Rodgers and Hammerstein song "My Favorite Things" loops in *Da Da Company*, 2019, where an animated figure has been trapped in a labyrinthine mall, doomed to forever repeat the absurd gesture of reaching out to grab products from store shelves. In *Houses of Tomorrow*, 2019, Bing Crosby's 1933 single "Did You Ever See a Dream Walking," campily performed by the German musician Michael Schiefel, makes for a joyfully apocalyptic soundtrack to scenes of the world's fair model homes set ablaze.

The chaotic intensity of these videos may come as a surprise, for the appeal of Young's past work has lain largely in its restraint. In *Liquid Borders*, 2012–14, Young transcribed the sonic atmosphere of the fenced border between Hong Kong and mainland China into colorful drawings that double as music scores; with *Nocturne*, 2015, he re-created sounds of bombings in the Middle East using an airsoft pistol, Tupperware, and other nontraditional musical instruments; for *Canon*, 2016, he programmed a sonic weapon to blast birdsongs. Young's sleights of hand charm and disarm. Alongside the usual associations of power and terror that attend to the subjects of his works, Young is interested in eliciting captivation through aesthetic pleasure. Sounds of violence beget scenes of beguiling reverie.

Here, Young inverted his usual conversion process, recasting as detachment the enthralling sentimentality that has historically suffused the soundtrack of utopian dreaming. Emotional attachment faded as he remixed lyrics and melodies into quirky sonic fragments that, though still energetic, felt devoid of urgency and haunted by hollowness. The libidinal intensity of his score belies a lack of conviction in the rhetoric of progress. Even as things are set ablaze in *Houses of Tomorrow*, he makes sure we know that the fire is merely a dispassionate simulation rather than a real flame of yearning or protest. With "Utopia Trilogy" as a whole, Young is less interested in rousing audiences out of apathy than in making do with failed promises and ruinous fantasies.

— Chanon Kenji Praepipatmongkol

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