

To Hold and Be Held

By Vincent van Velsen

A sculpture is like a person.

There is an appearance that we see when we first encounter the work. There is a background that we can read when we make an effort. Then there is the content and context that we can learn about if we ask further. And beyond that immediate knowledge there is a whole history that can be explored.

Here, interpretations, knowledge and relationships come into play.

In the work of H       Yamba-Guimbi the same kind of cascading acquaintance exists. Her recent sculptures resemble minimalist, transparent display cases whose life began as storage boxes. She has been showing different iterations of these forms since 2021, but it was only this year that they started to become inhabited by photos and colored sheets that go against the transparent nature of these objects. Through these additions H       Yamba-Guimbi's sculptures became spaces for gatherings in which other objects sit together: elements from different geographies and moments come together to give rise to something new.

Yamba-Guimbi roves the streets of Los Angeles, photographing what strikes her. What emerges are snapshots of the city's everyday signage and surfaces. Billboards and shopfronts urge passersby to "Establish Credit History", get "Fast Cash", "Free Towing" or "Get Paid" —echoes of loneliness, isolation and dreadful poverty in the potential paradise that is the richest country on the planet. H       Yamba-Guimbi captures the paradox of hyper-capitalism and weaves these photographs into the fabric of her work. Presented alongside poems and lights, the images are not merely documentation but integral part of her sculptural assemblages. These lamps in themselves introduce another paradox: they allow us to see what is present, but also blind us in order to keep us from inspecting it too closely. It becomes a metaphor for having the potential that lies there at one's toes, while the boundaries to engage prevent real interactions. H       Yamba-Guimbi brings together moments, languages and places into quiet constellations that draw us into relation, attuning us to the contours of distance, proximity and the fragile bonds between us.

At a time characterized by mechanisms of distinction that are silently applied and noticed, her minimalist design language stems from cultural relevance. Current-day stealth wealth and quiet luxury reject screaming patterns and loud colors. There is a focus on refined materials and silhouettes with details only recognized by the in-crowd—if you know, you know. It's a class coding with a secret password. Many people use storage boxes similar to the sculptures as well-designed, good-looking, well-functioning objects in their living environments. Its Japanese design is rooted as much in lived experience as in functionality. These principles, the attention to craft, material, and detail, have found numerous commercial expressions that have resonated with a wider audience. And as readymade containers, here also in the arts.

In a modest yet incisive way, Yamba-Guimbi's works respond to questions of desire, appearance, and the quiet economies that shape how we move through the world. Her sculptural storage boxes themselves are evidence of the fact that taste can be affordable—provided you *know* what the right aesthetic is. Their minimal forms and subtle materials evade easy classification, yet those attuned to certain visual cues will recognize their aesthetic alignment. This quiet legibility—perceptible only to the initiated—reinforces their value not through cost or rarity, but through coded familiarity and cultural discernment. It's in the way people move and in how they hold and carry themselves.

While aspiration might be universal, taste cannot be bought. In that vein, Yamba-Guimbi shows us thrift stores and storage spaces without people, empty motel rooms, dead-end corridors, and streets with graffiti. In these photographs that were mainly taken in Los Angeles the artist shows the city devoid of any direct human presence. This absence could be alluding to the consumer culture of the United States, the mythology of the American Dream, and the bankruptcy of society it conceals.

The long-held belief that hard work guarantees reward has devolved into a collective and cruel illusion in which we are all donkeys chasing a carrot that forever dangles just out of reach. Everything will get better later; and since we can't find anything else to eat at the moment, we keep walking, often even running, to get the carrot. It is the fate of the American Dream as an accepted delusion in a world marked by Technofuturism and nostalgia. A toxic combination accompanied by fascism on the rise—both in Europe and the US. The promise of the future has made way for a hypercapitalist society that is driven by naïve nostalgia.

Many Western countries are longing for the fifties, when life was easy and cheap, heavy industry was flourishing, America was great, and Europe was white. Moving toward the future while wanting to go back reminds me of Octavia E. Butler's writings, in which she describes our current days, which are technologically advanced, but the vast majority of people are unable to access, let alone benefit from this progression. The Hobbesian war of all against all is reloaded in Butler's novels, of which *The Parable of the Sower* (1993) is best known.

Yamba-Guimbi's small-scale photos are embedded within the described sculptures, which are stacked containers that take on the function of minimalist glass vitrines. On the one hand, the act of placing objects within these containers is reminiscent of the way cherished belongings are arranged in elegant, carefully chosen storage objects. On the other hand, the gesture has similarities to the way brains store knowledge, experiences, and memories, where novel input sparks fresh associations, giving rise to new thoughts and unexpected combinations. If we approach these sculptural assemblages as we might a person, histories and places visited come together within a layered structure. What you come to know is based on how closely you look, how closely you delve, and from what perspective this looking takes place. Within this shared space, the individual aspects enter new relationships, and—as French-Martinique-born poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant famously said—we all exist in relation, thereby generating new meaning. Interaction inevitably takes place, which causes new knowledge to emerge. The sand erodes on one shore and washes up on the next beach, where it comes together with grains and pebbles from other places and times.

Migration does just that. Bringing grains and pebbles from different places together. With people, along come cultures and languages. The language of the Metropole is influenced by the influx of others. Initially their contributions are labeled as street or slang and sometimes as an accent or dialect. But the longer the presence lasts and the more it mixes with the initial culture, the more it seeps through and brings about change. Initially this is still identifiable or distinguishable, but over time there is a seamless incorporation of the one into the other. Every culture is creole. Englishman in New York, or Française in Los Angeles, the combination creates new meanings. Just as every person is an assemblage of histories, genetic compositions and cultures.

For this matter, Hélène Yamba-Guimbi uses the term 'speaking in tongues', which she borrows from Zadie Smith. The British author speaks about an exploration of how where you come from shows itself in your mouth, your way of speaking. And how, as your way of speaking changes, you actually change where you come from and belong to. We speak different languages at different times. Anyone who is multilingual knows how often one switches, but even those with only one language move within its folds, bending tone, accent, intonation, slang, or formal versions to match the moment: code switching. Identity is never static, the contemporary call for self-improvement and the migrant dream of a better life elsewhere are merged. Meaning changes based on context and circumstance. Identity is thus an ever-changing entity, and we can dream of bettering ourselves: physically, mentally and financially.

Los Angeles is the place where this potential is ever present. Hollywood, acting, a new life, fake it until you make it, in relative new city on the Pacific coast. But L.A. also provides circumstances in which people get lost in the rat race and become hopeless. Hélène Yamba-Guimbi refers to cultural theorist Lauren Berlant, who questions the idea of the “good life” as an ideological, normative, and marketable construct: “a fantasy [...] that has become increasingly imaginative, with less and less relation to how we can live”.

In *Cruel Optimism* (2011) Berlant describes the desire or attachment we experience for an object (a person, an idea) that we perceive as a “cluster of promises” even though “evidence abounds of its instability, fragility and all that it costs us.”¹ Especially in turbulent times, like our current ones, this applies to most of our lives. Yamba-Guimbi reflects on how dreams might become dreadful, but also, that there is beauty in the ways that we are still able to live—together.

1 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2011 via Salome Burstein, Dazzle, Tether, <https://yamba.work/Dazzle,Tether.pdf> 2025