

FRIEZE

Diane Severin Nguyen's Millennial Revolution

At SculptureCenter, New York, the artist's new, K-Pop inspired, video sees revolution as an illness

BY TRAVIS DIEHL IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS, US REVIEWS | 01 DEC 21

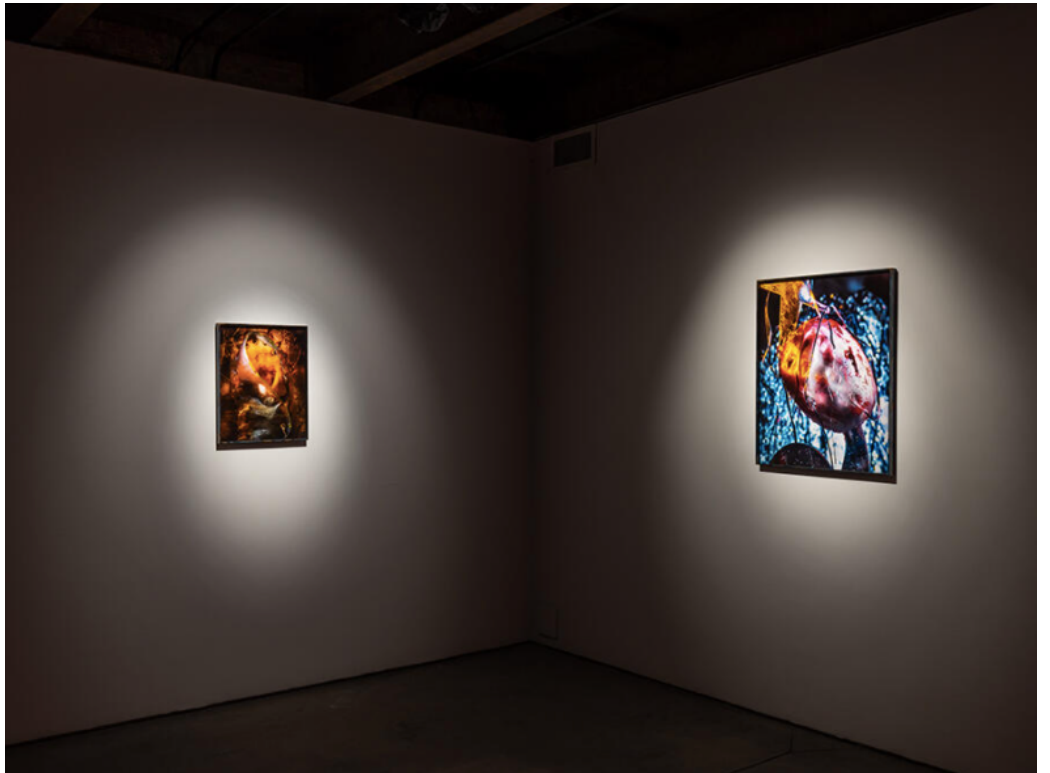


Diane Severin Nguyen's new video, *IF REVOLUTION IS A SICKNESS* (2021) at SculptureCenter, New York, opens on desaturated pastures; a voice speaking Polish, subtitled in a blotchy monotype font, speaks of the perils of isolation, while a piano broods. Cut to a waterlogged child washed up on a foreign beach, with the sound of a camera shutter, as if we were watching footage of Chinese influencers cosplaying flood victims. The child's eyes open and the roll advances. Dressed in red and yellow and blue in an earthtone Europe – a young girl in an old country – she's a colour pop. And maybe we can only digest revolution as pop: the palette of cartoon stars and hearts, the banners of Soviet Russia or the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. A montage shows the girl, Weronika, growing older: dressed in a headscarf, she rehearses dance moves and sings into a hammer. Underlying the promises of socialist work and free-market self-betterment is the rhetoric of disease: spread, infection, inoculation of other politics. Revolution is also a sickness the way love is, as one is overcome with impulse and passion. 'If I don't become an artist,' says Weronika, 'then I will just remain a victim.'

While the title of Nguyen's exhibition asks whether revolution is an illness, the pop song that comprises the video's second half states it outright. The song – a baroque, razor-toned production in the style of AJ Cook – runs a little long, with several builds/drops and tempo shifts, but no hook. (This is what revolution sounds like, maybe.) Nguyen's best hooks are visual. Her highly composed cinematography, a series of still lifes and *tableaux vivant* shot through a stationary camera, has the synesthetic style of her photographs – a handful of which are also on view, theatrically spotlighted in a dim back room. A silver necklace that spells 'DARK' draped on a stone; skeins of goo on barbed wire; a girl nibbling a slice of bread beside tall grass – every prop and image in the video is loaded, like the last phrase of the voice-over, now subtitled in gothic red and yellow, before the song kicks in: 'We are a nation' destined to 'shoot at the enemy / with diamonds.' The music video is spectacular. A K-Pop crew, with the young heroine at the centre, juke and gesture in loose unison in a series of derelict Soviet settings. Nguyen's video is affective, not analytic – dramatic in both a teenage and a structuralist sense. The dancers' motions are stylized with 64-bit sound effects like heart beats or swords slicing the air as they wave.



Diane Severin Nguyen, *IF REVOLUTION IS A SICKNESS*, 2021, installation view, SculptureCenter, New York. Courtesy: the artist, Bureau, New York and SculptureCenter; photography: Charles Benton



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At one point, the teens press red and yellow foil balloons into a murky pond to write out '1989': the year in which Glasnost and Perestroika helped bring down the Berlin Wall and the Chinese Communist Party crushed student dissidents in Tiananmen Square. That same year, in his eponymous essay, Francis Fukuyama, observing the rupture of the communist sphere of influence, questioned whether 1989 was the 'End of History'. That's a line in Nguyen's song, too, mouthed during an instrumental break by a girl shouldering a bulky, 1980s camcorder. The millennial generation to which Nguyen belongs was born in the dregs of one revolutionary wave and the confused rush of another. Now, China has President Xi Jinping and communism with Western characteristics, while Polish kids rehearse K-Pop in the ruins of the Eastern Bloc. All the drama of Nguyen's show ends up being earnest in its ambivalence towards its stated question. Revolution is a sickness, whether terminal or lingering, that presents as social choreography, a dance of self and others. Revolution is like saying 'The Youth are the Future': a trite, saccharine line in a pop song that, in this Western high-art context, seems dismissive of an idea many millions have died for and of— but is also grievously true.

Diane Severin Nguyen's exhibition 'IF REVOLUTION IS A SICKNESS' is on view at Sculpture Center, New York until 13 December.

Main image: Diane Severin Nguyen, IF REVOLUTION IS A SICKNESS, 2021, installation view, SculptureCenter, New York. Courtesy: the artist, Bureau, New York and SculptureCenter; photograph: Charles Benton

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