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Cole Lu by Ho Won Kim

Art and archival work about how the past is remembered and made visible.

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(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Cole-Lu-Here-lies-all-his-love-of-life-1.jpg)

Cole Lu, *Here lies all his love of life. For what gives value to travel is fear: deprived of our mask, completely surface. Soul-sick, miraculously, the whole of life. The whole of lie. (Second Manifesto)*, 2026, burnt linen, bronze, marble, cherry, facsimile case. Courtesy of the artist and Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University.

Cole Lu makes images by burning into wood and linen, a technique known as pyrography. He works slowly across these surfaces, drawing on themes from mythology and personal history. Burning wood produces charcoal, a material that can itself make a mark. Through this transformation, Lu asks how destruction might change our understanding of preservation.

We spoke as Lu was preparing for the group exhibition *Knowledge Is Myth: Chimeric Continuities* (https://carpenter.center/exhibitions/knowledge-is-myth-chimeric-continuities), organized by Danni Shen at Harvard's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts. His new installation combines earlier and newly made works as well as found furniture and reproductions of archival images. Our conversation centered on how Lu works within the museum's own conventions to question the authority it gives to objects and histories, and how fictional approaches can preserve stories absent from official records.

Ho Won Kim
You're still making the work for the Carpenter Center. What's taking shape, and what remains undecided?

Cole Lu
I'm in the final stage. The new work will appear as a room-scale display: a pair of burned-linen panels, a bronze sculpture whose form dates to 2018, and two archival images in a custom facsimile case. Some elements are new; others are recomposed from earlier work. The arrangement itself is the work. The institution hosting it also becomes part of the language. Some of these compositions developed in conversation with the curator, Danni Shen, as the exhibition itself took shape. I'm still building the case and working on the titles. Writing usually comes last. I need to see the finished thing before I can write.



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Cole-Lu-Little-did-he-know-once-he-had-sovereignly-2.jpg)

Cole Lu, *Little did he know, once he had sovereignly closed his eyes, he would end up no longer seeing. (Second Manifesto)*, 2026, Optium museum acrylic, mahogany case comprising: facsimile prints reproduced at roughly 90% of their original scale: George Baxter, *Crystal Palace and Gardens*, Harvard Art Museums, M3283; and George Baxter, *The Great Exhibition (Interior)*, Harvard Art Museums, M3208. Photo by Danni Shen. Courtesy of the artist and Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University.

HWK

You're designing the facsimile case yourself. What role does it play in the work?

CL

A case gives an image institutional weight. Display helps define an object's identity. Furniture, labels, and titles are where those systems take form. Harvard's original archival materials require controlled temperature and light, while my installation will experience natural light and spotlights. The facsimile case becomes a real fiction that reconstructs the apparatus of display. Conservation restrictions also shape which images I can include.

HWK

What did working with the archive make visible to you?

CL

I think of the archive as a technology for engineering attention. Someone decided what was worth naming, measuring, keeping, and comparing. That tells us about the power that entered the record. Harvard is a particularly charged place because its history of knowledge production includes slavery and racial classification. The Peabody Museum holds Felix von Luschan's skin-color chart, which is a set of thirty-six glass tiles used to classify skin tone. That chart speaks to the construction of racial categories through measurement. My new large-scale composition will also include facsimiles of two George Baxter prints from the Harvard Art Museums: *Crystal Palace and Gardens* and *The Great Exhibition (Interior).* Working with these prints, I can explore how exhibition, architecture, and archival reproduction shape what becomes visible and how it is remembered. Recomposition lets me address these questions through materials and evidence already in the collection.

HWK

The exhibition uses *chimeric* to describe both hybrid bodies and ways of producing knowledge. Where does that appear in your work?

CL

For me, chimera is a structural method. I choose materials according to what the concept needs. If I need to learn stone carving, I do stone carving. In the burned-linen diptych, I'm looking at Lascaux and the Crystal Palace as two constructed historical beginnings. The Lascaux panel is from 2024; the other is a new composition, cropped and enlarged from an earlier Crystal Palace work. Lascaux has been positioned as an origin of art, with cave painting used as evidence of human superiority. The Crystal Palace helps me think about how industrialization and nationalism shape the organization of cultural knowledge. I keep returning to how these origin stories establish hierarchies. Industrialization itself is not the main issue for me. Its beginnings held novelty and productive potential. What concerns me is when it becomes a demonstration of power for its own sake.




(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Cole-Lu-The-Dust-Enforcer-Geryon-3.jpg)

Cole Lu, *Thus, on any day, at any hour of any day, the stretch of sky left me wild and breathless. If the world ends now we are free, not a bee moved up from your spine inside. (Geryon)*, 2019, fiberglass, aqua resin. Courtesy of the artist.

HWK

I like how *chimeric* suggests something monstrous without deciding whether it's good or evil. It makes me think of Geryon. How does he enter this arrangement?

CL

Admiration doesn't necessarily mean you're seeing a creature on its own terms. With Geryon, there's an autobiographical entry point. *Thoroughbred (No caster of weather foretold)* began in 2018 with a silicone cast of my face, which I built onto with oil clay. It was an early version of Geryon before I understood him as a surrogate for myself within the story. I later developed a life-size Geryon through my own process of recognizing my gender and physical identity. The freestanding sculptures were almost character studies. The wall works became fragments of the stories those characters go through, like pages from *One Thousand and One Nights*. Bronze connects the figure to commemoration and permanence. In this installation, recomposing the bronze with a found cherry side table with a black marble top brings it into a deliberate relationship with domestic furniture. At human scale, the sculpture makes viewers aware of their own physical presence, so the myth becomes less abstract and leaves a bodily imprint.

HWK

Does Geryon give you a safer space to speak about your own experience?

CL

Yes. There are times when I'm not sure I can speak as myself. A character can contain overlapping experiences without everything having to be entirely autobiographical. Fiction can be a strategy of survival, allowing stories to endure even when they are erased from official records. Someone else might recognize a fragment of their life in him. My own experience is limited, and I want the work to speak beyond me. I use Western mythology because it is a foundational language where I work, reside, and exhibit. I want to use that understanding to challenge its values from within.



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Cole-Lu-Before-the-law-stands-a-doorkeeper-4.jpg)

Cole Lu, *"Before the law stands a doorkeeper," his mother makes sure he firmly memorizes this—the mechanism of existence, the linguistic life of a single person. Each night, he marches on a long journey outside the language so that the garden from the history house remains alive. (Amnesia)*, 2024, burnt birch. Photo by Jackson White. Courtesy of the artist and Herald St, London and Bologna.

HWK

Your titles seem to offer a similar space. They read like fragments of a much larger story, with room for more than your own voice.

CL

The title is where I have the most freedom. It can contain something remembered, something read, or an invented event. Each comes out of what I'm experiencing at the time. I don't have to hide the autobiographical part, but I want the voice to remain composite. I shift between "he" and "I," between the perspective of a mother and that of a child witnessing an incident. I hope that exercise in shifting perspective can generate compassion. Memory itself is not a clean internal archive. It has different sources. I imagine someone encountering the work without context, forming their own reading, then comparing it with the title. That wrestling is what I want to invite without turning the work into a direct declaration.

Memory itself is not a clean internal archive. It has different sources.

— Cole Lu

HWK

In your 2026 essay "How Does the Voice Travel?" you call titles "published beings yet unhoused." What happens when an institution tries to accommodate that language?

CL

Institutional housing gives the language continuity. But I think there's a problem when the object is emphasized and the text becomes an accessory. Within the commercial art economy, poetry carries little monetary value, while painting can carry a great deal. I see poetry as painting in words and painting as poetry in a visual sense. I don't want to separate them. There are practical limits. Some applications and cataloging systems can't accommodate my full titles. I'm often asked whether my long titles have a shorter form. Some titles include parenthetical designations that connect them to recurring figures or narrative groupings, but those aren't abbreviations. The full title still matters, and keeping it intact requires more attention. I didn't set out to create extra work for anyone, but the detour can be interesting.

HWK

That detour points to a less visible kind of labor around the work. How does it relate to the physical labor that viewers often focus on?

CL

A lot of the labor is in thinking through the arrangement and choosing the gestures. I'm using the museum's systems within the work, but those decisions are much less visible than the physical process. I don't use labor to demonstrate virtuosity. Burning is slow, repetitive, physical, and irreversible. The duration gives the work a temporal structure; my attention and time are embedded in the object. I find that repetition meditative and calming. With burning, there's also an intention that runs against conservation: creation through destruction. Wood becomes charcoal, which can itself make a mark. I'm interested in how destruction can also become a kind of preservation. What do we mean by preserving something, and what is the life of an object?

HWK

Is there something you think will become clear only after the installation?

CL

Each component arrives with its own history, date, material, and prior context. Once they're in the room, I can see how those histories work in relation to one another. I can't fully anticipate what happens visually or emotionally when someone encounters my work alongside the archives and the other artists' works. I'm waiting to see what draws your attention when you walk in and how those meanings stay with you as you move through the show and come back. We have to witness that together. It's the part I'm most uncertain about, but also the most exciting.

Cole Lu's work can be seen in the group exhibition Knowledge Is Myth: Chimeric Continuities (https://carpenter.center/exhibitions/knowledge-is-myth-chimeric-continuities) *at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts in Cambridge, Massachusetts, until December 13.*

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Ho Won Kim is a Seoul-born, New York-based curator and writer.

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