

# *Knowledge Is Myth: Chimeric Continuities*

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Extended Exhibition Labels

## Enzo Camacho and Ami Lien

### *Waves Move Bile*, 2021

Mixed media installation with materials including 3D printed PLA, aluminum and copper wire, cotton (dyed with avocado, bark, sumac and turmeric), banana peel chia seeds, cilantro, copper wire, corn husks, dragon fruit, garlic skins, grass, human hair, kombucha scoby, lemon peel, lokta paper, mulberry paper, onion skins, orange peel, plastic bags, plastic and steel filament, parsley, police tape, rice, scallions, spinach, morning glory vine, seaweed, reeds, wheat flour, light, and audio programming Courtesy the artists and 47 Canal, New York

Harvard VES/AFVS alumni and artist duo Enzo Camacho and Ami Lien share a collaborative practice that explores the lasting localized effects of imperialism and colonialism in the Philippines and beyond. Originally commissioned by *Manifesta 13* in Marseille, their installation *Waves Move Bile* collects organic material that animates the *ahp*, a female folklore spirit that haunts the region once known as French Indochina. Depicted as a floating, disembodied head trailing internal organs and a distinct glow, the *ahp* is traditionally cast as a cursed figure. For Camacho and Lien, she becomes an uncanny and fractured lens through which to understand postcolonial and diasporic conditions of plurality, adaptation, and survival.

In *Waves Move Bile*, each version of the spirit's facial features are modeled from Louis Botinelly's 1925 sculpture *Les Colonies d'Asie* (representing colonial Asia, sitting across from colonial Africa as *Les Colonies d'Afrique*): a nude reclining woman surrounded with an abundance of "exotic" goods, including a vase and a Khmer lion, adorning the Saint-Charles train station in Marseilles. By transforming this allegorical celebration of French colonial expansion into a hauntingly grotesque yet vital folkloric presence, the work reclaims a monument to empire.

Produced in 2020 in New York City and a small town outside Milan, the work's lantern-like components are constructed of found organic matter that highlights bodily consumption and lived environments. A five-part soundscape of medical and ambient recordings—running water, hiccups, and footsteps, among other sounds—plays from each floating being, creating a collective body as the installation's pulsating lights respond to one another. The work also visualizes traditional Chinese medicine's cosmological understanding of health as a dynamic relationship among interconnected organ systems, each characterized by elements of earth, water, fire, metal, and wood.

Through this evolving network of body, light, and sound, Camacho and Lien not only hold the trauma and monstrosity of the colonial project but also imagine alternative forms of

relation and collective survival through alternative modes of knowledge and mythology. Together they recast the *ahp* as a chimeric embodiment of resilience, capable of carrying histories of violence while gesturing toward new ecological and social futures.

— Sheridan Liew, BA in History of Art and Architecture, Folklore and Mythology, with a secondary in Art, Film, and Visual Studies, Harvard College (2028)

## AYDO (Ayoung Yu and Nicholas Oh)

*Fermented Dreams*, 2022–26

Two-channel video, sound

Courtesy the artists

Two women pace through a dark room lined with *onggi* (Korean earthenware crocks used for fermentation). Another feels and searches her way—wet and achingly slow—out of a hanging womb. An altar lit ablaze, steered by a swan with a human face, drifts across dark luminous water. In their performance video *Fermented Dreams* (2022–26), artists Ayoung Yu and Nicholas Oh explore mythmaking as a process of creation and becoming, as a “language for inherited experiences that cannot be expressed through testimonial narration.” The film’s fragmented scenes are sourced from dreams collected from women in the artists’ families, transformed from intimate visions into ecological rituals. Performed across real landscapes of personal and geopolitical significance and conflict—including Kauaʻi, Hawaiʻi; Seyðisfjörður, Iceland; Hudson Valley, New York; and the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and Jeju Island, Korea—the film continues the artists’ ongoing commitment to unraveling layered, site-based legacies of settler colonialism, war, and displacement.

How can landscapes be engaged as co-collaborators? The work unfolds over a slow, intense burn, punctuated by the sound of water and a low hum. Wearing chimeric animal-plant masks, the film’s main figure performs arcane rituals alongside the ocean, in meadows, beside waterfalls, and between trees. Wordless, the artists summon a language that favors the sensory and enacts opacity. Milk flows throughout the performances, connecting generations of women across time and space. Through ritual and repetition, a new mode of communication emerges. Drawing from premodern Korean myths and the practices of *mudang*—Korean shamanic and folk religion practitioners who mediate between human and spirit worlds—*Fermented Dreams* embraces ritual as a mode of learning and visioning. In this context, knowledge is not fixed or solely human but emerges through intimate and embodied encounters with land, ancestors, spirits, and more-than-human beings across different lands and times. For Yu and Oh, speculation is not an escape from history but a method for approaching new forms of memory and diasporic inheritance.

— K Yin, PhD Candidate in American Studies at Brown University, writer and educator

*Morphologies of Becoming* (series of 3), 2026

*Silla-Ware II*, 2026

Ceramic and bronze

Courtesy the artists

What can a vessel hold? As collaborators in their ceramics and performance work, Ayoung Yu and Nicholas Oh's fountains, *Morphologies of Becoming*, reimagine the crane, tiger, and snake as beautiful, monstrous figures imbued with power. Limbs become feathers become orifices. Their forms draw on imagery from precolonial ceremonial objects excavated from burial mounds, and from the *Samguk Yusa*, a thirteenth-century collection of mythologized histories, legends, and folktales attributed to the Buddhist monk Iryeon (1206–1289).

Written during the late Goryeo period, the *Samguk Yusa* (1281) preserves stories from Korea's Three Kingdoms (Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla). The Kingdom of Goryeo (918–1392) reunified the Later Three Kingdoms and the broader Korean peninsula in 936. By the time of the text's compilation, the state had endured decades of Mongol invasions (1231–1270) and eventual political subordination to the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1271–1368). For Iryeon, this practice of recording might be viewed as a form of salvage, preserving a distinct Korean identity amid incursion and attempted cultural erasure.

For Yu and Oh, whose work explores Korean diasporic practice, returning to these fragments of an earlier past acts as a way of tracing cultural memory across multiple temporal and geographical displacements. Placed in conversation with *Fermented Dreams* (2022–26), the fountains open pathways into familial, ancestral, and political memory through ecological imagery shaped by dreams. Water flows through them continuously, symbolizing restoration, renewal, and cleansing in the gallery space. Sacred sounds, recorded in the field, welcome us in. Like guardians, these creatures represent portals that remain open—between past and present, life and death, human and more-than-human worlds, and the artists and the audience.

— K Yin, PhD Candidate in American Studies at Brown University, writer and educator

## Candice Lin

In this interconnected series of works, artist Candice Lin speculates on the visual languages of natural history, evolutionary biology, ethnography, and anthropology. These disciplines are entwined with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European imperial projects of collecting, mapping, and governing life, from British botanical networks to the ethnographic classification and exploitation of colonized peoples. Here Lin deftly reveals these systems of knowledge as systems of power, turning their classificatory impulses—to name, differentiate, establish hierarchy, and dominate living beings—on their heads. Together, these works constitute a feral epistemological fieldwork for a radical remaking of the world, rooted in the precarity and porosity of being.

### *Cannibalizing Cultural Memory*, 2015

Graphite, archival pigment printed images, dried Rose of Jericho, and silkscreened text on paper

### *Animal Within the Animal*, 2015

Colored pencil, acrylic, archival pigment printed images, dried orchid, and silkscreened text on paper

Courtesy the artist and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles

*Cannibalizing Cultural Memory* and *Animal Within the Animal* (both 2015) appropriate the scientific plate, historically used to isolate, observe, and classify specimens. Here, however, constellations of images collapse any stable reading of “natural order.” *Cannibalizing Cultural Memory* juxtaposes photographed archaeological figurines with a diagram of a planarian flatworm, capable of regenerating its body from a tiny fragment, its biomatter suffused with memory. Above, a dried Rose of Jericho, or “resurrection plant,” enters dormancy during drought and can survive years without water. Below, a passage by scholar Mimi Sheller describes French anthropologist and ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss’s distinction between societies that absorb individuals into the social body (“anthropophagic”) and those that expel them (“anthropoemic”). Against the regenerative capacities of worm and plant, Western society’s inability to integrate or metabolize its classified “others”—through racialization, criminalization, or abjection—suggests a malignant sociocultural indigestion. Colonial fear and science become obsolete ideologies, unable to explain or remedy our contemporary maladies.

*Animal Within the Animal* similarly complicates boundaries of reproduction, care, and interdependency. Cordyceps fungus branches from the body of a tarantula until fungus and spider become difficult to distinguish, unsettling the opposition between parasite and host. A medical text by the second-century Greek physician Aretaeus describes the womb

as an autonomous, sensory animal within the body, while a colonial postcard titled “A Cuban Wet Nurse” depicts a woman holding an infant to a goat’s udder. Who, the image suggests, is really the wet nurse—the woman or the goat? Here histories of gendered and racialized labor become entangled with distinctions of woman and animal, transforming these positions of alterity into sites of resurgent power. By referencing hegemonic scientific methods of knowing, Lin gestures toward their limits, instead positing fantastical modes of being that are marvelous insofar as they are rooted in reality. Across both pieces, taxonomic frameworks meant to render differences legible and establish separatist hierarchies instead reveal and valorize bodies that refuse to be discrete.

— Sofia Thiệu D’Amico, independent curator

*5 Kingdoms (Book)*, 2015

Archival digital pigment print on rag paper, linen cover, handmade binding, petrified paw, jet (carbonized plant material), petrified wood, and amber

*5 Kingdoms (Etching)*, 2015

Etching

Courtesy the artist and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles

Lin’s *5 Kingdoms* series extends this proposition into an alternative evolutionary atlas. The lushly illustrated accordion book moves between *Bacteria*, *Protoctista*, *Fungi*, *Plantae*, and *Animalia*, crossbreeding scientific diagrams with the visual vocabularies of illuminated manuscripts, field watercolors, alchemical texts, and medieval bestiaries. Its fold-out form allows every kingdom to be witnessed at once, each touching and informing another. The accompanying etching gathers mythic processes and entities interacting through technologies, fluids, infection, sex, empire-building, digestion, and fermentation within a continuous mandalic plane. Its images are every bit as otherworldly as they are didactic. Here Lin imagines evolution not simply through competition and genealogy but as metabolic, relational transformation.

Together, these works enact Lin’s mythopoetic mode, reaching beyond the ontological limits of our present world order. From the wreckage of racial science, fantasies of biological purity, and environmental apocalypse, Lin repopulates the world with recombinant, chimeric bodies that queer and sabotage speciesist distinctions. Attending to the sensuous, interpenetrating forces of life-making itself—in which all things eat and are eaten—where do we locate the self and other in an increasingly enmeshed and symbiotic world?

— Sofia Thiệu D’Amico, independent curator

## Cole Lu

Cole Lu recasts figures from Western folklore, drawing upon his studies in Greek mythology and demonology to rethink not the hero, but the “monster” and the nonhuman, subhuman, and dehumanized subject. Queer and trans studies scholar J. Jack Halberstam wrote in *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (1995), “the monster itself is an economic form in that it condenses various racial and sexual threats to nation, capitalism and the bourgeoisie in one body.” Lu’s monster emerges from a diasporic subjectivity that intersects with debility, race, queer, and trans identity. Rather than the beings that undergo Frankensteinian processes of bodily manipulation by which they are torn apart and stitched back together into objects of fear that are eternally othered however, the artist’s personal narratives carry in them his own experiences of illness and alienation as informed by new myths—as well as materialities—of monstrosity. As Ursula K. Le Guin wrote more hopefully in her essay *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (1988), “it sometimes seems that that [heroic] story is approaching its end. Lest there be no more telling of stories at all, some of us out here in the wild oats, amid the alien corn, think we’d better start telling another one, which maybe people can go on with when the old one’s finished. Maybe.” Akin to Le Guin’s “maybe”, Lu’s speculative fictions provide alternate possibilities of transformation and kinship amongst everyday conditions of survival.

*In the last seconds, it is as if everyone leaped off the mount, holding hands. The end approaches like approaching ground. Like honey is the sleep of just. (Orthros)*

2019

Fiberglass, aqua resin, polyurethane, concrete, plaster, MDF, polycarbonate

According to Cole Lu, the re-writing of myth provides alternative perspectives through the lens of “the Other” without appropriating the white gaze: from monster, demon, to evil. This large-scale sculptural work was developed from the artist’s experience in quarantine and recovery from tuberculosis, as well as burnout. In Lu’s story, pervasive illness also expands into ecological catastrophe, where dust and volcanic ash overtake a churning world. The demonic deity Pazuzu brings wind and disease, while the two-headed, serpent-tailed dog Orthros carries companionship and protection. Orthros—who guards Geryon’s red cattle in Greek myth—becomes also a symbol of companionship and protection housed within an iron lung-like encasement: an altar also to the artist’s two cats, who were his only companions during a time when both inner and outworlds seemed uninhabitable. Autobiography and inherited figures here thus share a mythic field.

— Danni Shen, Senior Curatorial Assistant, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University

*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, installation comprising:

*Thoroughbred (But you, you were born for a lucent day), 2018–2026*

Bronze, found carved cherry side table with black marble top, comprising:

*Thoroughbred (No caster of weather foretold)*

2018

Bronze, found carved cherry side table with black marble top, date unknown

*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: *Crystal Palace and Gardens*, Harvard Art Museums, M3283; and George Baxter, *The Great Exhibition (Interior)*, Harvard Art Museums, M3208

*(Left panel) In the darkness of the cave, they lit fire to cook tender roots — the blind eyes in the dark cave filled with salt tears. The blind eyes of the mother and the father filled with salt tears. In the darkness of the dark cave, the blind eye of the bison filled with salt tears. (One day the sun fell)*

2024

Pyrography on linen

*(Right panel) Asbestos glory these men set around their dear fatherland, watching a black cloud storm from the horizon, thinkers of late times, they trade metals, weapons, letters of the alphabet. To think and to thank are words of one and the same origin. A slow leak of immortality. (Crystal Palace)*

2025-2026

Pyrography on linen

Encompassed within the umbrella title *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)*, this new installation by Cole Lu brings together independently titled earlier works and reworked elements into a new display. What the artist calls a “working recording”—of exhibition histories, reference structures, display methodologies, and cataloging principles—the piece plays on the mythology of the museum as an active framework of knowledge production. Furniture, cases, supports, materials, sightlines, height, sequence, and adjacency determine how objects become legible and how authority is distributed across collections.

The overarching wooden structure here also draws from various sources of Lu’s historical research within museums, from eighteenth-century historical interiors and period rooms in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s American Wing, where furnishings are assembled into contextual narratives, as well as the Musée des Arts et Métiers in Paris, where the museum’s surviving late nineteenth-century Decauville rails allowed pedagogical models and objects of demonstration to be moved from vitrines into teaching amphitheatres on small wagons. A custom-made mahogany display case placed atop Lu’s own version of this pared down amphitheater stage, holds two facsimiles produced from the Harvard Art Museums’ collection of Baxter prints that depict scenes from The Great Exhibition of 1851, officially named the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations). Held in the Crystal Palace, The Great Exhibition was the first world’s fair celebrating modern industrial technology, culture, and design. The exhibition organized more than 100,000 objects into a four-part sequence ordered by: Raw Materials and Produce, Machinery and Mechanical Inventions, Manufactures, and Fine Art. When the Crystal Palace was rebuilt at Sydenham in 1854, it was organized as an encyclopedia of cultural history through architectural courts that moved across civilizations and historical periods.

As seen in its original 1854 print form within this exhibition’s interinstitutional loans, the *Crystal Palace and Gardens* facsimile in Lu’s display case is juxtaposed with another Baxter print from the same series of world’s fair images. Like the world’s fairs themselves that also displayed other cultures such as “India” depicted in the right facsimile of the Great Exhibition’s interior, the dinosaur representations were also a type of cultural spectacle that showcased not only modernity and the scientific frontier at home, but also deeply reflected the nationalist, socioeconomic, and imperialist core of the knowledge-as-power industry. Lu’s display case is further flanked by two other works: to the right, a diptych on linen was made by the artist’s archetypal use of pyrography (Greek for “writing by fire”) that obscures and obliterates references to the industrial walls of the Crystal Palace, while reimagining a scene of dinosaurs roaming its cavernous interior made lush by both overgrown flora and fauna. On the left atop a marble table, is a bronze cast (originally

made for the series *Animal Fancy*) entitled *Thoroughbred (No caster of weather foretold)*, made from the artist's own face before he underwent gender-affirming care and transition. Melded with horns, mane-like hair, and enlarged ears, the chimeric sculpture further brings together autobiography, inherited figures, and knowledge systems into a shared mythic field.

— Danni Shen, Senior Curatorial Assistant, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University