Art Review Oxford

Spectral Ecologies

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Issue 12

Editorial Note

In the 12th Issue of Art Review Oxford, *Spectral Ecologies* is approached as a methodology—a way of reading across materiality and absence, sound and silence, land and loss. It refers to the ecological dimension of memory, the intersection of environmental and archival hauntings, and the 'recovery' of the past through artistic practices.

This issue assembles contributions from a call for papers that confront the ghosts embedded in our landscapes—traces of empire, extraction, and displacement. As violence continues to rage through the human lives and environments of Palestine and Ukraine, the spectral becomes a vital framework for remembering and reckoning with ongoing loss, and the haunting persistence of historical injustice.

Spectral Ecologies urgently gathers artists and writers who refuse to separate land from memory. Together, they explore spectral practices from across the planet, whether from the insurgent poetics of a fenced-off lot in Oakland, to transatlantic rituals of cleansing colonial ghosts, even to pierced apples as witnesses of collective trauma in China—these collective practices shape our understanding of place, history, and survival.

This issue could not have been produced without the assistance of contributing editors Jason Waite and Joni Brown. We would also like to thank the following artists for allowing ARO to feature their work in this edition: Ayrson Heráclito, Mónica de Miranda, Liu Yaohua and Alia Farid, as well as the edition's designer, Brandon Saunders.

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Spectral Ecologies
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Spectral Ecologies

Genealogy of a Vacant Lot

Ashia Ajani

Ashia Ajani is a Bay Area based writer, educator and author of one poetry collection, *Heirloom* (Write Bloody Publishing, 2023).

"The only solution to pollution is a people's humane revolution."

— Bobby Seale, Co-Founder of the Black Panther Party

A fence is a fiction. A crude one, at that. Nasturtium, thistle and knotweed challenge what it means to be contained. Gone are the tulips. The dahlias and their strange blooms. Monstrous vines spill over steps mimicking andenes, a possibility for insurrection. Land remembers. Lot number ___. Former community garden turned private eyesore. Ages before corner stores and tax returns, this used to be marshland – meeting point between earth and ocean. Portola couldn't imagine such splendor, so he wanted to own it, constructed open-air cages to store all his clippings. Years later, high rises grow like protrusions, eager for a chance to be the first to colonize the sky. That mighty blue staircase, waitlisting souls alive in memory only. The only place with enough room for everybody. All our dead go unnamed while street signs bear titles of men rendered immortal, stuffing civility into Ohlone basketry. Strange seeds fastened to imported livestock, sparking settler ecologies. Aerosol dyes provide temporary refuge, we throw native seeds over our shoulder and hope they land somewhere safe. Nature is not a dainty miracle, but a critical insurgency. Chaos reigned supreme long before we chiseled our common clan into gods. The only ones who survive are opportunists. Weeds poke through metal like Dahomey swords, regal in their rage. Derek Walcott says "I have no nation but the imagination" and I suppose all my wonderings are just that, wandering paths towards a forest that flourishes only when a wish slips from my lips like a spore, this trickster tongue of mine sculpting dirt into estuary, radices that whimper at the weight of their heritage. We know too much to do too little, and therein lies the fracture. Come, let me show you what origins my hurt. In America, there are thousands of empty lots where our dead like to gather. My madness is a headscarf. Sometimes mirrors reveal more than I can handle. Capitalism loves a fixer upper, renewal synonymous with removal. Every two years the lot changes hands, roots lay dormant, emerge after winter rain. Hawks don't like to venture this far into the city, but occasionally they pass through, hoping for change each feather beat. I suppose they enjoy our graffiti, turning space into place, these vivid hues remind us that locks are meant to be broken.

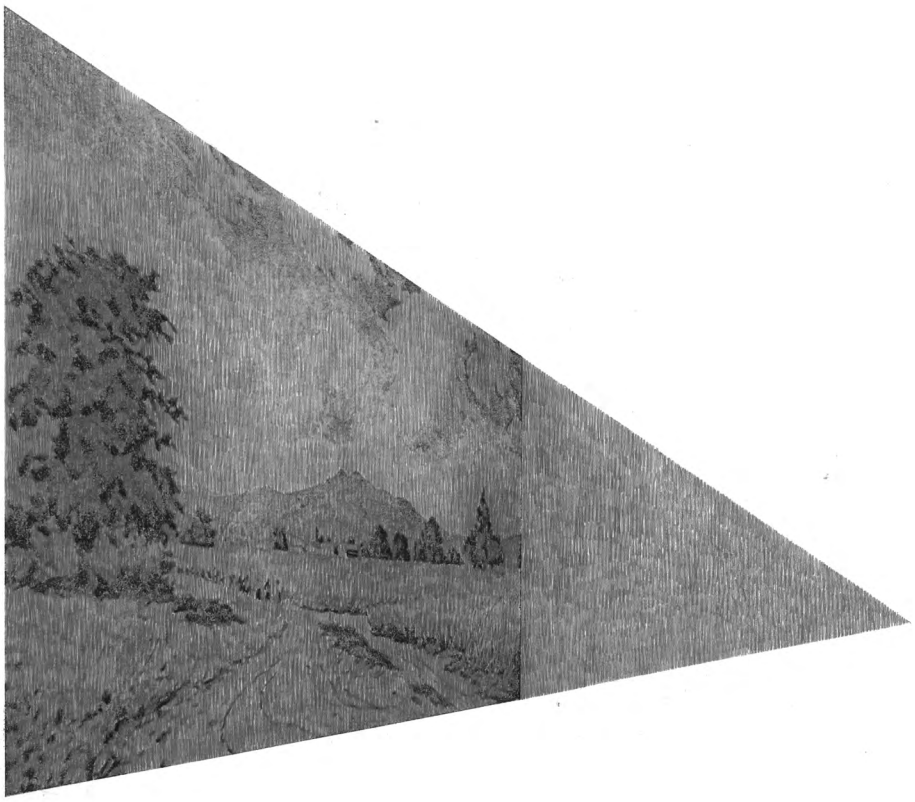
Call it dump site, squatters' rights, urban forest, block party, abandoned ecology, incentivized ecotone, the only thing keeping the neighborhood from erupting red. A healthy dose of compost could cure this illness, if only temporarily. Bay area blues, this gray green madness melting into spring hues, a return. Saturn's come with its growing pains. In its shadow, slavery's harms linger. Protected areas are signs of defeat. Harbingers of industry to come. Bees are buzzing and only suspend their sound to re-catch the beat. They're targeting trees now. It takes ten years for an oak to establish, less than ten minutes for it to be torn down. Remediation is a bad translation. Land back is more appropriate. The post in post-pandemic is the same as the post in post-colonial. Everywhere we go our medicine follows. She's eating sweet earth, flakes of soil peppered through layers of single-use plastics. Here, I hope to stumble across that initial chasm and sew it shut, patch it with mud and goldenrod and diamond dust stolen back from people whose only business on the continent is to carve it up beyond recognition. I'd like to go back there – pluck my greedy heart out from behind eucalyptus and plant it back into a familiar horror. We are all reaching back somewhere, a natural symptom of coloredness. Legality is rarely an indication of ethics. Despite the ordinances, we gather. Make noise. Obelisks seared into the street our earth-ladened anthems. Burn asphalt in ceremony. Boys run, dust diesel from their clothes, gather in concentric circles where nothing can break the cypher. On the other side of the Atlantic, a father drinks the moon. Murals with their watchful eyes soak up prayers like rum. Libations are a terrible thing to waste. There are innumerable fractures in this city's pavement. In a barren field ghost ridden with apologies, what is, will always be more important than what could be. Perhaps when one world ends, another opens.

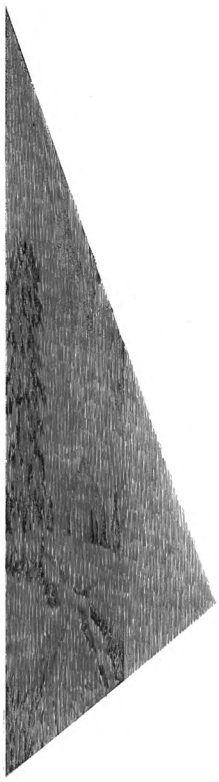
I hope the green finds time to also reclaim me.

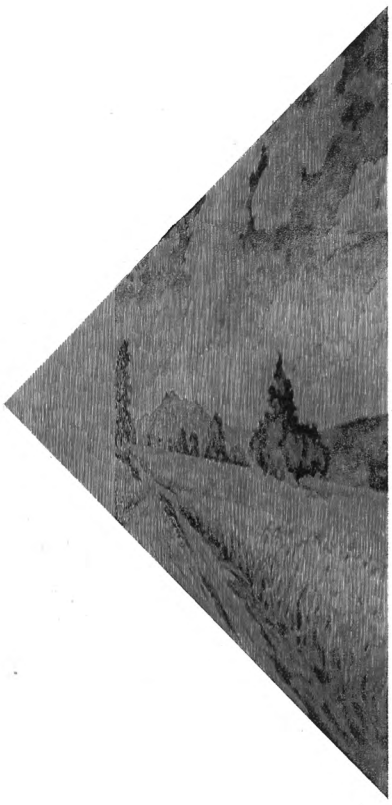
Perspective Reduction

Lada Nakonechna

Lada Nakonechna (b. Dnipro, Ukraine; residing in Kyiv-Kassel) is an artist and researcher whose cross-disciplinary work reveals hidden aspects of visual and verbal structures, while exploring the connection between art and practices of power production.







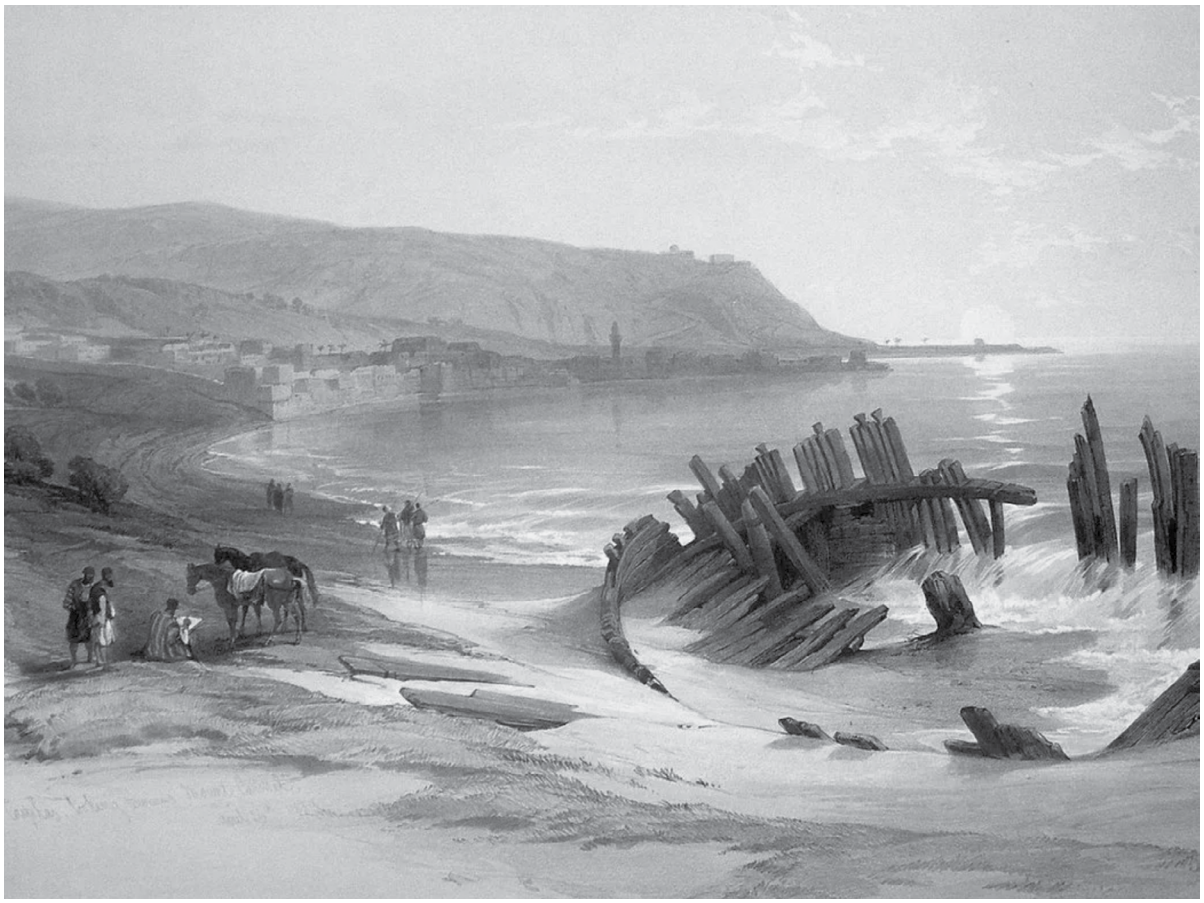
In *Perspective Reduction*, Mykola Burachek's 1937 *Road to a Collective Farm* (National Art Museum of Ukraine) undergoes a morphological transformation. As a Ukrainian painter, Burachek completed his work during the Great Stalinist Terror – producing an idyllic landscape to follow, and subsume, the reality of recent famine. Nakonechna treats the painting as a document of the history of Soviet Ukraine. She turns its coloured pigments into the black-and-white of a photo-, and now printed, risograph. Distorting the idyll's perspectives, Nakonechna questions the futurity to which the landscape, in its often-politicized formations, has long laid claims.

Stones of Atlit

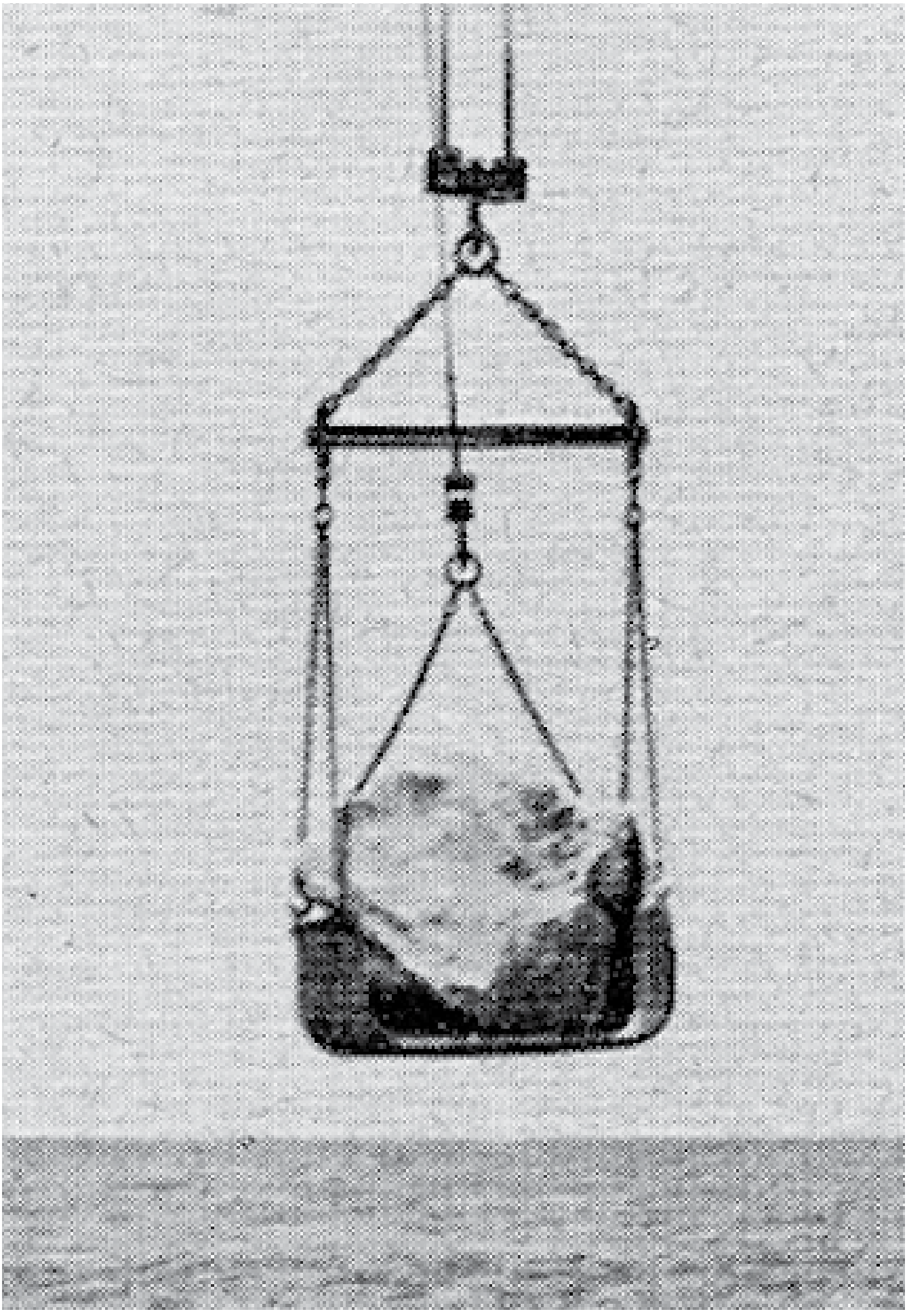
Ale Nodarse Jammal

Ale (Alejandro) Nodarse Jammal is a writer, artist (MFA Candidate, Ruskin) and art historian (PhD Candidate, Harvard) concerned with art in relation to observation, memory, language, and ethics.

At Atlit, the cliffs assume a new form.[1] Stone follows another course, and the sediment morphs. The calcarenite ridges of the kurkar stone, the stone at my grandfather's door, wear their history on the water's margin. Their grains of sand are pressed and lithified, carved by sea and hand.[2] Now time's slow degradation meets a different force. Metal lifts stone and stone breaches water. The hull of an imagined ship breaches and rests as a fossil rests.[3]



And the past breaches, too, but does not rest. On October 7th, 1948 the Haifa District Headquarters orders the 123rd Battalion of the IDF to halt the demolition of Atlit, home to Christian and Classical monuments.[4] Some stones are called precious. Nearby, the British dredger speaks of ruins and promises oil. Seven stones mark an ancient well; wooden anchors sink and rise.[5] The stones from the quarry draw a strange harbor over a familiar range.



The photographic jetty spells infinity now as the rail and the pipeline run interminable, and the metal carries stone and ushers movement across it, but this movement is not without friction and the line, if seldom pictured, comes undone, so that a new ruin is made before being swept away.

And for a time the off-white of the stone at Atlit glimmers, perspiring still-wet and flashing a soft violet hue where sea-lavender rises at the lithic edge.[6]

[1] The present sequence of photographs comes from the Middle Eastern Center Archives at St. Antony's College, University of Oxford (see "Palestine, Loose Prints," PA–1–619 through 621).

[2] Used as a building material, kurkar is an aeolian quartz sandstone found throughout the Levantine coast.

[3] The print was set first in a sequence of photos within the *Port of Haifa* (Jerusalem, 1936), published to commemorate the development of the port — along with the iron rail and the oil pipeline — during the British Mandate of Palestine. Images two, three, and four belong to the 1936 publication. The lithograph was completed by the Royal Academician, David Roberts, in 1839.

[4] Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 354.

[5] Excavations of the Tel Shikmona or Tell el-Semak, an archaeological mound on the coast, began in 1934 and mark the remains of an ancient port.

[6] The railway was continually targeted by both Palestinian and Jewish Zionist groups, beginning in the 1936 Arab Revolt (or Great Revolt), and continuing through the formation of Israel. Largely funded by the British government, which nationalized Palestinian Railways in 1920, the rail was a site of real and symbolic upheaval, fear and violence. During the Revolt, British armored rail-cars often included Arab hostages positioned on a pony truck as a deterrent to attack. The railways that once connected large portions of Gaza and the West Bank were blocked or destroyed in 1948. See Paul Cotterell, *The Railways of Palestine and Israel* (Tourret, 1986). Galilee sea-lavender, or *Limonium galilaeum*, is presently endangered.

Trees, Spirits, and Colonial Hauntings in Ayrson Heráclito's Atlantic Rituals

Emi Koide
and
Camila Maroja

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Emi Koide (PhD, São Paulo University) is an Associate Professor of Visual Arts at the Federal University of Recôncavo da Bahia specializing in visual cultures, postcolonial studies, and African and Afro-Brazilian art.

Ayrson Heráclito's two-channel video, *O sacudimento da Casa da Torre e o sacudimento da Maison des Esclaves em Gorée* [The Shaking of the Casa da Torre and of the Maison des Esclaves in Gorée] (2015) was conceived as a diptych in formal, temporal, and spatial terms. The artist performed "sacudimento," a ritual cleansing, at two sites across the Atlantic: the house known as Maison des Esclaves on the island of Gorée in Senegal, the final departure point for enslaved Africans forcibly sent to the Americas, and in Bahia, Brazil, at Casa da Torre, a colonial property belonging to the Garcia d'Ávila family, slave-owners who also decimated the indigenous population. The juxtaposed spaces, linked by maritime currents that made navigation between the two continents more efficient, reveal a shared history of brutal transatlantic slave trade.

Sacudimento is a common healing practice in Brazil performed both by initiates of Afro-Brazilian religions, such as Candomblé, and the general population in order to expel the spirits of *eguns* (the dead) that linger in the present. The ritual involves sweeping spaces — using gun leaves, known for their hot energy — to force these spirits, with their cold energy, out. For Candomblé practitioners, some ritualistic materials can generate, store, and transmit sacred vital energy. Energy is thus viewed not just as a physical phenomenon, but as a vital, spiritual force that underpins human and non-human actions. In Heráclito's two videos, three men dressed in white perform rhythmic movements within the aforementioned colonial structures on both sides of the Atlantic. The camera captures their synchronized movements through cramped corridors and open courtyards, as the green gun leaves arranged in bundles swish against walls to create a hypnotic audiovisual experience.

The two videos mirror the cleansing ritual as performed in both Senegal and Brazil, and create a visual dialogue that reinforces the power of the diptych format. As the actions across the two continents are juxtaposed, we observe the interplay between repetition and difference. Seen together, the images echo and reverberate. They appear as waves reaching across distant Atlantic shores. The meaning of the whole emerges from this juxtaposition, creating a third space that generates something beyond what each screen contains individually — not merely the content of each performance, but the conversation between them, a resonance that creates a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

Heráclito stated that his ethical and aesthetic guide follows the saying of the Iyalorisha (priestess) of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, known as Mãe Senhora, who distinguishes practices *da porteira para dentro* (from the gate inward) and *da porteira para fora* (from the gate outward).[1] She distinguishes, in other words, those practices which safeguard the sacred and liturgical dimension of Afro-Brazilian Candomblé from those which affirm the defense and expansion of an Afro cultural legacy largely excluded, or unrecognized, in the context of Brazilian society and its structural racisms. Faced in the 1940s with both police repression and increasing interest from intellectuals and anthropologists in Candomblé, Mãe Senhora developed this distinction between practices as a form of strategic gatekeeping. This allowed for a careful negotiation between what could be shown and shared — by powerful advocates such as the French photographer Pierre Fatumbi Verger — and what needed to be kept hidden. Heráclito's own approach has paralleled this division: respecting the sacred and the invisible while affirming, and expanding, an Afro-Brazilian conception of the world.

Ayrson Heráclito Novato Ferreira, *O sacudimento da Casa da Torre e o sacudimento da Maison des Esclaves em Gorée* [The Shaking of the Casa da Torre and of the Maison des Esclaves in Gorée] (2015). Courtesy of artist Ayrson Heráclito. ©Ayrson Heráclito

The video, accordingly, registers only a fragment of the action performed within each space. With a minimal crew—the artist as one of three performers, in addition to the camera operator— Heráclito conducts the breadth of the ritual in secrecy. The specters to be exorcised are no longer the *eguns* of the dead Africans or indigenous people, but the remnants of the slave owners and the apparatus that transformed humans into commodities. For the artist, these spirits linger in the present; they haunt ex-colonies and feed a patriarchal society which perpetuates a colonial legacy in its repression of the vulnerable, its racism, and its domestic and ecological violence.

Heráclito's artworks may best be understood as visual *orikis*. In the Yoruba context, *orikis* are forms of verbal art present in everyday life. In Afro-Brazilian Candomblé, *orikis* that sing and praise different Orishas are well known. In her anthropological research, Karin Barber demonstrates the remarkable variety of *oriki* practice, noting that they extend far beyond spiritual entities to encompass virtually all aspects of existence. She observes that these poetic forms address an extraordinary range of subjects: from deities and ancestors to ordinary people; from animals to plants; from abstract ideas to tangible objects; from the deceased to the living; from the absent to the present. Barber emphasizes that each of these diverse subjects can be recognized and honored through its own unique *oriki* formulation.[2]

Orikis function, then, as temporal bridges connecting the past and present and bringing historical elements into contemporary contexts. As Barber explains, they serve as vehicles to transport events and language from earlier moments into current experiences.[3] These poetic forms map complex relationships across time periods, between individuals and their communities, and between material and spiritual domains. According to Barber and philosopher Olabiyi Babalola Yai, their essential nature involves differentiation and bifurcation. Their fragmentary nature renders them "labile, elliptical, and often deliberately obscure or incomplete."[4] This quality enables *orikis* to generate multiple and simultaneous interpretations rather than fixed meanings. They accumulate attributes and associations that branch in different directions, creating pathways between visible and invisible worlds. While seemingly unchanged in form, their meaning continuously evolves across different contexts, embodying a non-binary worldview that embraces multiplicity over singular interpretation. Indeed, as Yai suggests, it is "[t]he ability to reconcile opacity and difference and openness [that] might explain the success and popularity of Yoruba culture in the New World where it has greatly contributed to cement and creolise African and non-African cultures."[5] This capacity for ambiguity and multivalence demonstrates the power of orikis as tools for cultural preservation and transformation, as they have allowed Yoruba traditions to maintain their tradition while adapting to new environments.

On each side of the Atlantic, Heráclito found trees sacred within African and Afro-Brazilian cultures: a large baobab near the Maison des Esclaves, and a *gameleira* or fig tree at the Casa da Torre. The baobab, a tree venerated for its robustness and longevity, is linked to the cult of the orisha Nanã, to the cycle of life and death, and to the passage from one side to another. The Brazilian fig tree, in turn, is related to the orisha Iroko in Candomblé; while in Yorubaland the name of the tree remains homonymous with the orisha itself. Iroko is the divinity that connects *Àiyé* (the earth) to *Orun* (the spiritual world).

The French anthropologist Roger Bastide, who spent nearly two decades in Brazil and engaged deeply with Afro-Brazilian religions, described the powerful image of a tree in a Bahia *terreiro* or temple, whose roots symbolically crossed the Atlantic and functioned as a two-way connection linking African orishas to Brazilian lands, and Afro-Brazilians to their ancestors in Africa.[6] This metaphor captured Bastide's understanding of how spiritual practices maintained vital cultural continuity despite the physical separation that resulted from the transatlantic slave trade.

Heráclito's videos and the rituals within them depend, similarly, upon transformation. Like *orikis*, they live in a state of differentiation and bifurcation. They create pathways across time and space that connect divided histories into an entangled experience of ritual cleansing and remembrance. Through his transatlantic sacudimento, Heráclito demonstrates how ritual performance, both hidden and revealed, can activate the ecological dimension of memory and allow traumatic historical traces to be acknowledged and addressed. His work reveals how landscapes themselves become archives of colonial violence while simultaneously offering possibilities for healing.

[1] Jean Paul A. C. Silva; Kleyson R. Assis; Roberto H. Seidel (ed.). *Deoscoredes Maximiliano dos Santos - Mestre Didi: o reverberar ancestral africano-brasileiro* (Editora na Universidade do Estado da Bahia, 2017), 32

[2] Karin Barber, *I could speak until tomorrow: Oriki, women and the past in a Yoruba town* (Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 21.

[3] Ibid, 15.

[4] Ibid, 16.

[5] Olabiyi Babalola Yai, *In Praise of Metonymy: The Concepts of 'Tradition' and 'Creativity' in the Transmission of Yoruba Artistry over Time and Space*, in *The Yoruba Artist: New Theoretical Perspectives on African Arts*, edited by R. Abiodun, H. J. Drewal, and J. Pemberton (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2004), pgs. 107–118, 114.

[6] Roger Bastide, *Préface* in P. F. Verger, *Dieux d'Afrique* (Paul Hartmann, 1954).

Ecologies of Recovery: Mónica de Miranda's *As If the World Had No West*

Vera-Simone Schulz

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[Fig. 1] Still taken from Mónica de Miranda, *As If the World Had No West* (2024). Courtesy of the artist.

A woman lies nestled within the sprawling leaves of a giant plant [Fig. 1]. Her body, partially enveloped by the plant's twisted foliage, appears both cradled and consumed by the desert organism. The muted, earthy tones of the leaves blend seamlessly with the arid landscape. The woman's posture suggests a state of repose and protection, while the plant takes on an almost womb-like quality, simultaneously sheltering and entangling the figure.

The scene is both a photograph and a still from Mónica de Miranda's film *As If the World Had No West* (2024). A Portuguese artist of Angolan descent, de Miranda is recognized for her work critically examining the intersections of politics, gender, memory, space, and history. *As If the World Had No West* centers the ecologies of Angola, challenging Western conceptions of memory, history, and land. One of the protagonists of the film is a plant, a *Welwitschia mirabilis* forming the bed for the sleeping woman.

Endemic to the Namib desert, which stretches across present-day Namibia and Angola, the *Welwitschia* is a living fossil that has survived for millions of years in some of the most extreme conditions on the planet. With its two ever-growing leaves, which can persist for over a thousand years, it stands as a symbol of ecological endurance and resilience. However, its history is also intertwined with colonial exploitation and scientific extraction. The *Welwitschia mirabilis* was first written about in 1859 by Austrian botanist Friedrich Welwitsch during an expedition in Angola, which was then a Portuguese colony.[1]

Welwitsch had been commissioned by the Portuguese government to document the region's flora, reflecting the broader European scientific expeditions that accompanied colonial expansion. Such expeditions were not purely academic; they were also instruments of imperial control, mapping the natural wealth of colonized lands for potential economic and scientific exploitation.

When Welwitsch encountered the two-leafed plant, he immediately recognized its uniqueness. He sent specimens to the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, in Britain, where Joseph Dalton Hooker, one of the leading botanists of the time, further classified and named the plant after Welwitsch.[2]

While this naming honored its European 'discoverer', it also exemplified the colonial practice of erasing or marginalizing Indigenous knowledge. Local communities in Angola and Namibia had long been familiar with *n'tumbo*, as the plant is called in Angola, using parts of it for medicinal purposes.[3] The term *Welwitschia mirabilis* is in fact not only problematic because of the alleged 'discoverer' of the plant, but also because of its attribute. The term mirabilis, Latin for "wonderful", "strange", or "curious", raises the topic of European and Eurocentric travel writing, such as Marco Polo's *Livre des Merveilles du Monde* (*Book of the Marvels of the World*), and the cabinets of curiosity which gathered mirabilia, "strange or wonderful things, both of nature and man-made," together.[4]

De Miranda's film, in contrast, draws inspiration from the research of the Angolan anthropologist Augusto Zita N'Gonguenho in the Namib during the early 1980s. In 1983, he initiated a project titled "An Anthropology of Utopia: Formation of Utopian Identities," aiming to explore the concept of utopia and its connections to European colonial expansionism.[5] He meticulously documented various elements of the desert environment, including reptiles, insects, plants, as well as the ruins of colonial infrastructure, such as road maintenance houses. Zita believed that all matter possessed a spiritual essence, enabling it to bear witness to past, present, and future events.

As If the World Had No West includes many scenes in dialogue with Zita N'Gonguenho's approach, such as the ruins of Cantoneiros houses, which stand as silent witnesses to Angola's colonial past [Fig. 2]. These decaying structures, juxtaposed against the vastness of the Namib, evoke a sense of temporal dissonance, reflecting the lingering impact of colonialism on the present. The film uses these remnants to question the permanence of imposed histories and to suggest the possibility of reimagining space and time from non-Western perspectives.

One of the film's most poignant scenes is that of the woman resting within the embrace of a n'tumbo. To rest within: the scale of the plant is telling and speaks to another temporality at work. A n'tumbo of this size would be nearly two-thousand-years old, a living witness to

precolonial Angola, to the time when the first Europeans arrived in the late-fifteenth century, to colonial atrocities, the war of independence, and the period of decolonization. As both a living archive and a witness of history, the texture of the n'tumbo—dry, fibrous, almost visibly 'ancient'—reinforces the notion of deep time, survival, and an ongoing dialogue between past and present.

In de Miranda's film, which centers the female gaze, the resting woman inside the n'tumbo plant also raises Black feminist thought. According to Tricia Hersey, rest is a pathway to healing, imagination, and collective liberation, especially for historically oppressed communities. In her book *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto*, she argues that capitalism thrives on exhaustion, particularly the extraction of labor from Black and marginalized communities.[6] She traces this exploitation back to enslavement and colonialism, highlighting how historical trauma has shaped the modern world. Recovery, in her framework, is both a spiritual and political act to position sleep, napping, and daydreaming as forms of defiance. De Miranda's film likewise proposes a landscape conceived through the lens of communal nurture and mutual care as forms of resistance and even liberation.

Countering systems that do not only exploit the environment but also dehumanize human beings, the film shows a rehumanizing process through a plant-human-relationship, and the "recovery" of history and humanity in dialogue through the botanical. Justin Randolph Thompson emphasizes that recovery is often framed as a return to a previous state of wholeness, inherently tied to experiences of harm or loss. The term's origins, which reference turning back or regaining something, reinforce the idea that recovery is rooted in a form of absence or deficiency, positioning those in pursuit of it as longing to restore what once was. Thompson challenges this framework, urging a critical examination of how we define recovery and stating the needs for a "reflection on recovery through a lens that is not grounded in victimhood".[7]

In *As If the World Had No West* a redefinition of recovery occurs on various levels. Millennia old, the plant itself already calls for a rethinking of the scales of history. At the same time, the film questions the position of race within geological histories, raising issues elaborated within Kathryn Yusoff's *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*.[8] Yusoff critiques the dominant narratives of the Anthropocene, arguing that they erase the deep histories of anti-Blackness, colonialism, and racialized extraction. According to her, the processes that led to planetary transformation—resource extraction, dispossession, and racial violence—were driven by European colonialism and racial capitalism. One of Yusoff's central arguments is that race itself has a geological history. In de Miranda's film, the colonial ruins materialize these historical entanglements, showing how racialized labor and geological transformation were fundamentally linked.

Moreover, *As If the World Had No West* disrupts the idea of geological time as neutral or apolitical. Yusoff has shown how Western geological narratives often present the Anthropocene as a universal epoch, overlooking the fact that the processes that shaped it were racialized. The film counters this perspective by arguing that Angola's landscapes hold their own histories, characterized by extraction, but also by endurance. Through this lens, recovery in the film is not simply about reclaiming the past but about revealing and resisting the ways in which racialized extraction continues to structure present-day realities.

De Miranda readdresses these issues by means of visual storytelling. Recuperating the past, and confronted with the ruins of the present, the film invites the viewer to rethink how we understand both history and futurity while imagining new possibilities for a world beyond racialized exploitation and ecological destruction: when the memories of the millennia-old plant seem to inspire the dreams of the woman, teach her both when awake and when asleep, unfolding archives for ecological and human recovery, and dismantling extractivist logics, to move towards environmental, social, and historical justice.[9]

[Fig. 2] Still taken from Mónica de Miranda, *As If the World Had No West* (2024). Courtesy of the artist.

[1] Gillian A. Cooper-Driver, *Welwitschia mirabilis – A Dream Come True*, *Arnoldia* 54.2 (1994), 2–10.

[2] Joseph Dalton Hooker, *On Welwitschia, a New Genus of Gnetaceae*, *Transactions of the Linnean Society of London* 24 (1863), pp. 1–48.

[3] Bob Ursem, *Ex Situ Horticulture of Welwitschia mirabilis*, *Sibbaldia: The Journal of Botanic Garden Horticulture* 2 (2004), pp. 47–50.

[4] Marco Polo, *The Description of the World*, translated, with an introduction and annotations by Sharon Kinoshita (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2016). Martina Mazzotta (ed.), *Naturalia et mirabilia: Il collezionismo enciclopedico nelle Wunderkammern d'Europa* (Milan: Mazzotta, 2005); Eddy Stols, Werner Thomas and Johan Verberckmoes (eds.), *Naturalia, mirabilia & monstrosa en los imperios ibéricos* (siglos XV-XIX) (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2006).

[5] https://www.tectoniktombwa.com/ (accessed 26.02.2025).

[6] Tricia Hersey, *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 2022).

[7] Justin Randolph Thompson, *The Recovery Plan: Collective Paths to Re-Member and Re-Pair*, *Savvy Journal: The Restitution of Dignity 1* (2022), pp. 9–14: 9.

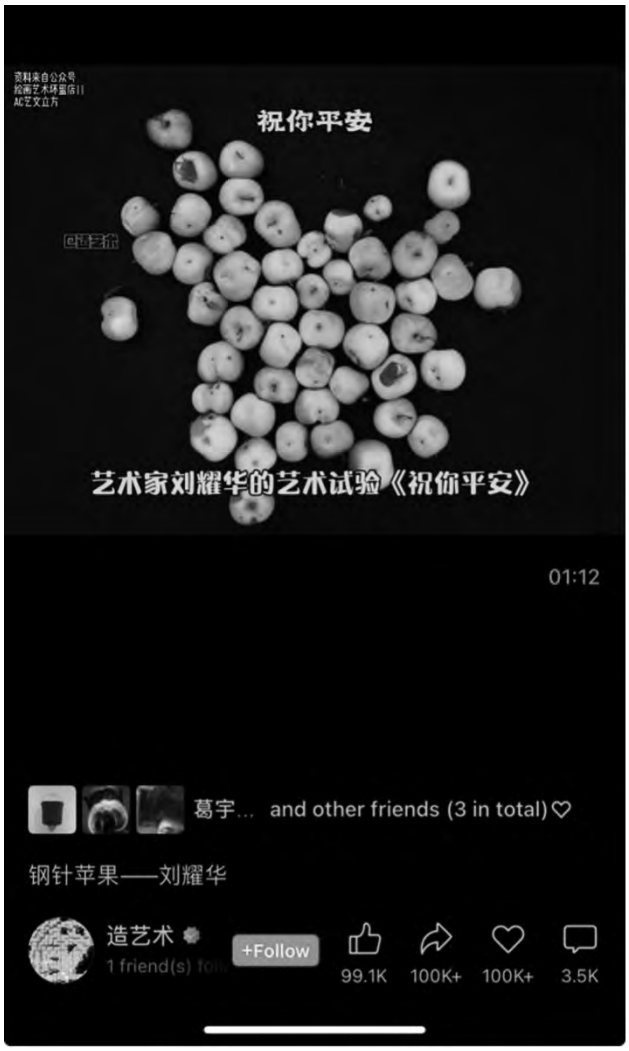
[8] Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes Or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

[9] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants* (Minneapolis: milkweed, 2013).

Pain is Pain: Liu Yaohua's *Disturbed*

Sia X. Yang

Sia X. Yang is a Sydney-based researcher with dual PhDs in Art History and Comparative Literature, who is now taking career gap years due to motherhood.



Screenshot of video *Wishing You Safe and Sound* via a WeChat account 'Making Art'.[1]

In early 2024, a one-minute video released by a WeChat account went viral in China. Deceptively titled *Wishing You Safe and Sound*, the video shows artist Liu Yaohua processing his 'cruel experiment' in the 2022 piece *Disturbed*. Produced during the 'Zero-COVID', the artist slowly inserted needles into apples growing on a tree and tracked their developing deformities.[2] The visible Likes and Reposts hit the maximum of 100K+, while click-through rates reached over twenty million, according to the account owner. To see a conceptual art piece appreciated by such a vast audience seems, in and of itself, a phenomenon.

One of the most common Chinese sayings goes, 'No pain, no gain'. Or, in a more literal translation: 'Only the one who suffers the greatest pain can be the best' (吃得苦中苦, 方为人上人).'

My mother was born in Mao's hometown, Hunan, in 1960, during the Great Chinese Famine, 1958–1961. One of the deadliest famines and man-made disasters in human history, the estimated death toll due to starvation ranges from fifteen to fifty-five million. My mother became an orphan, like many of her peers, when she was four years old and was raised by her elder brother who dropped out of primary school to work as a child labourer. She survived by collecting discarded food.

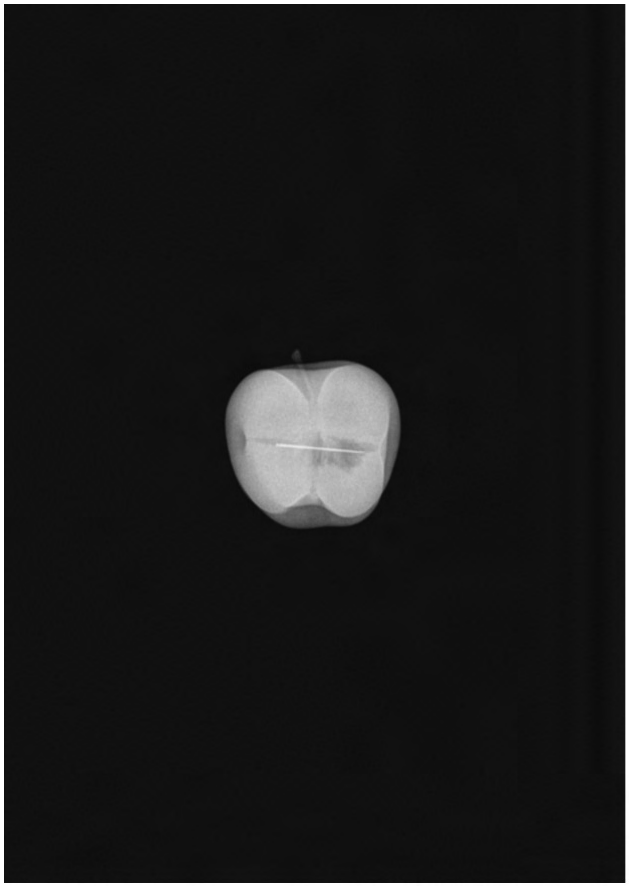
By nature or nurture, my mother remains a lively woman with an almost sunny disposition. Her unshakable belief in 'no pain, no gain' seems an eternally unsolvable mystery to me. My mother has another philosophy for staying content: comparing today's China to the one she was born in, making her comfortable with the paramount leader's reign, but ignoring how painfully resilient she herself has been. How could the Chinese people, having suffered so much pain created by their own 'most beloved and greatest leaders', still be so invincibly positive, optimistic, and unified? Have they been implanted with the strongest painkillers? No, pain is pain, only pain.

It is, unexpectedly, Liu Yaohua's *Disturbed* that endeavoured to prove this during the state's three-year Zero-COVID period; a period as long as the Great Chinese Famine, and with a similarly obscured death toll.

In February 2022, due to the zero-COVID restriction, an orchardist in Beijing struggled to run his business and pay his rent. Huang Daoming, an artist, started to call on his friends to help this farmer by adopting his trees: only two kinds, peach and apple. The annual adoption fee for a peach tree was RMB 400 (approx. £43), while an apple tree cost RMB 300 (approx. £32). The 'adopters' were encouraged to pre-order all the fruits produced by one tree because it was too hard to predict a good or bad harvest during such a tough time. Thus, Liu Yaohua, an architect-turned-artist and a former assistant to Ai Weiwei, had the opportunity to find an apple tree as the 'material' for his 'very cruel experiment'–as many audiences would commend and criticise–in the name of art. Reasonably, Liu spent RMB 600 (approx. £64) on adopting two apple trees: one for art, one for food.

The apple tree was young. Liu started inserting a 3.8 cm needle into each baby apple, ensuring all needles went through right to their cores. Liu's experiment disturbed 175 baby apples' natural development; he frequently returned to the orchard to check all of the apples' growth and to record them in cellphone photographs. The growth of these apples slowed dramatically. They appeared malformed; some looked rotten, but continued to grow, while others 'died' and fell off the tree. Some were 'survivors'; strong-willed but tortured, they swayed in the wind whenever it blew, struggling fiercely with the needles in their bodies. Liu felt genuine empathy for these apples and what they had been through. He saw his life in his apples.

The harvest was designed for show. Seventy five apple survivors were exhibitable and collectable; the survival rate was less than half. Liu and a team made a twenty-five-minute documentary about the artist's thoughts before picking those apples from the tree. Then, the apples were photographed within collective and individual portraits. One was even taken to have an X-ray scan, as if to present a medical diagnosis and to introduce a sense of pain through the medium itself.



Liu Yaohua, *Disturbed Heart,* X-Ray CT film, 29.7cm* 42cm, 2022. Image courtesy of the artist.

Astonishingly, Liu's Disturbed was reborn as one of the most controversial 'masterpieces' in recent years by social media circulation in 2024.[3] In Liu's words, from our personal correspondence, 'It seems like another pandemic, too many viewers join in spreading it, of their own free will. Too many people feel the pain and see themselves as apples.' Pain, both physical and psychological, is readily sited in the body – and perhaps it is rooted in the soul. In Elaine Scarry's theory, pain is an interior sensation whose external communication can stimulate sympathetic and empathetic reactions in viewers while remaining entirely individual: one's personal manifestation of pain can never be wholly understood or experienced by another.[4] At the same time, as Joanna Bourke argues, pain is not always circumscribed to the pain-experiencing individual; rather, it is like 'an event that is rendered public through language', a phenomenological occurrence that cannot be divorced from the subject that endures it and from those, self or others, that articulate it.[5]

Affectively, the visual representation generated by apples has 'infected' the public with Liu's personal pain and reflections. Those who could not help hitting 'Like' or 'Repost' might still firmly believe in the state's propaganda, or are struggling to distinguish political fact from illusion, but they also acknowledged 'pain is pain'. Learning a lesson from Beijing authorities' appalling treatment of Ai Weiwei, Liu has never dared touch the 'red line'– the work is still open for free viewing and circulation–and viewers remain unconscious about their spontaneous protests. Seemingly, the circulation of Liu's 'cruel experiment' led to a cyber populist movement. In this sense, Liu's Disturbed has achieved a short-lived art-historical status even though the artist himself deems it only an 'accident'. As Liu and many artists repeated, 'In China, the most important thing is neither art nor freedom, but personal safety.'

[1] Anonymous founder, record shows the account owner is a postgraduate from the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Image captured by Sia X. Yang, 4 July 2024.

[2] China's Zero-COVID policy refers to its strict public health strategy implemented from early 2020 to late 2022, to eliminate COVID-19 transmission within its borders. It involved aggressive measures like mass testing, mandatory quarantines, lockdowns, travel restrictions, and digital surveillance to detect and isolate cases quickly. Unlike many countries that shifted to 'living with the virus', China aimed for complete suppression, often at significant social and economic cost.

[3] A book titled *Wishing You Safe and Sound* 祝你平安, which records the whole development of the project, is completed and due to be published by Shanghai Sanlian Press 上海三联出版社 in 2025.

[4] This notion underlies Elaine Scarry's seminal work on the topic, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985).

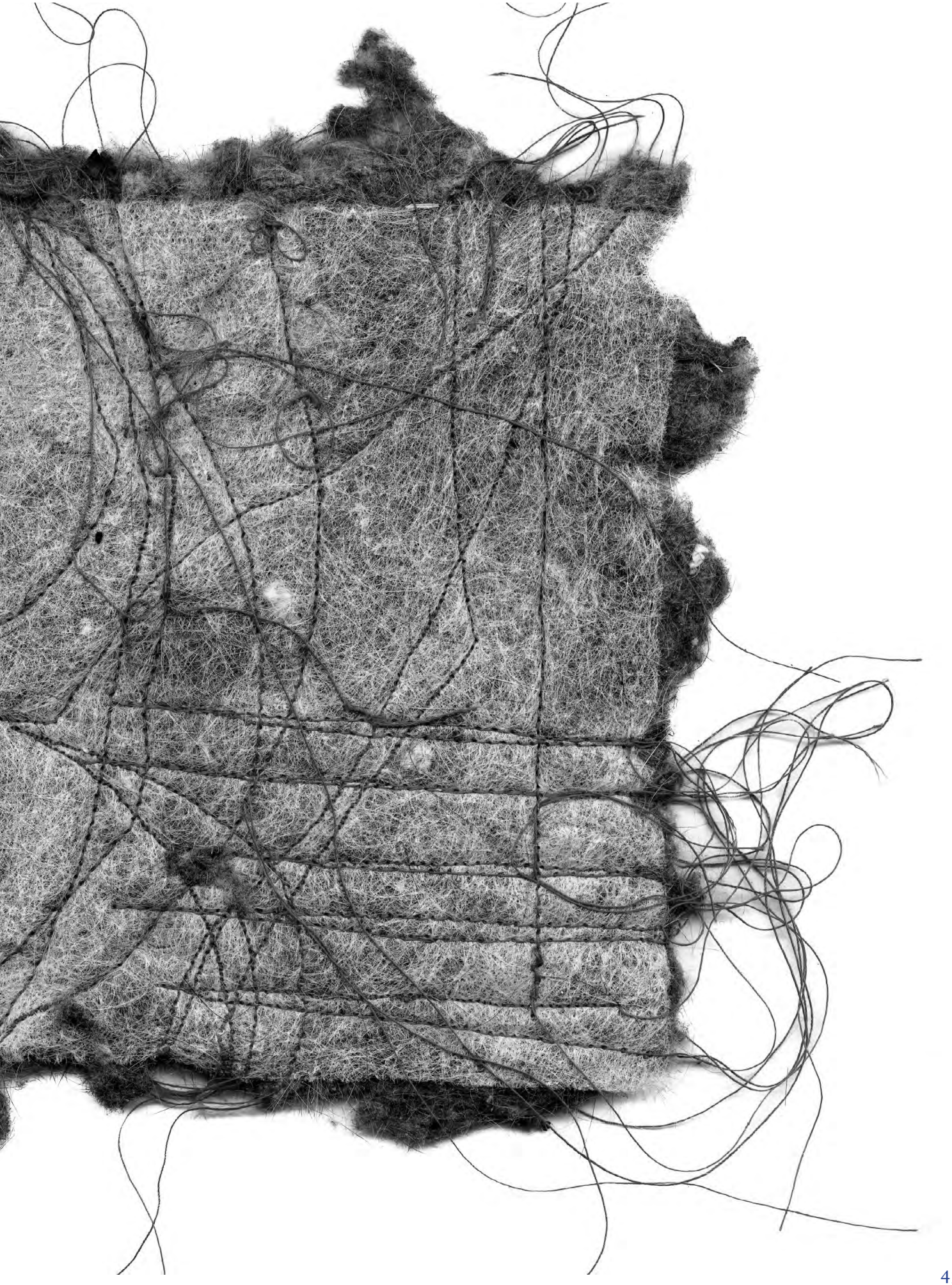
[5] Joanna Bourke, T*he Story of Pain: From Prayer to Pain Killers* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014).

Erosion and Sediment: Post-Polymer Soil Memory

Adelaide Theriault

Erosion and Sediment is a series of digitally scanned map-like compositions of laundry lint, thread and dryer sheets collected from public laundromats. This series is part of a study of the deep-time ecologies of synthetic polymers– from their extraction as fossil fuels to their terrestrial movement as they are eroded. New, post-polymer ecologies have emerged in agricultural soils through the use of wastewater biosolids as fertilizers, and in plastiglomerate rock-bodies that compact along oceanic shorelines. This work tends to an anxious curiosity over the digestion of plastics by the land, by the water, and by human and more-than-human bodies alike.

Adelaide Theriault is a multidisciplinary artist based in New Mexico and Texas, working through trans-species sensory inquiry to nurture a practice of place-based ecological research, with a current focus on sound studies and tactile installation.



The Meeting of the Waters

Marissa Clarke

Marissa Clarke is a PhD Candidate at the University of Edinburgh and former Visiting Doctoral Fellow at the Arts Institute, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, researching the phenomenology of yoga, the body and sound.

It was Friday, May 3rd, 2024. I was coming to the end of my residency in Porto Alegre, Brazil. I travelled to Foz do Iguaçu to visit the UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Iguaçu Falls, located in the Triple Frontier between Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay. *Have you ever thought about how rivers are often used as borders?* The river creates a barrier to divide people and the ideologies of nation states. This land is OURS. That land is YOURS. Before the Spanish and Portuguese crowns colonised the region in the sixteenth century and established borders, the indigenous Guaraní people lived in kinship with the land, close to the Iguaçu Falls, which they regarded as the mother of All Waters. For the Guaraní, the land was animated with spirits, present in natural features such as the rivers, rocks, trees, mountains, and waterfalls. The name Iguaçu comes from the Tupí-Guaraní word, meaning BIG WATER or GREAT WATER.

The Water was indeed

BIG

GREAT

LOUD

POWERFUL

At the foot of the falls, rainbow-coloured mist from the sprays majestically ascended towards the sky. Butterflies would land spontaneously on my skin. Puddling on my skin. Drinking up the salts and minerals in my perspiration. "Do not touch the butterflies," they said. *But what if the butterflies touch you?*

Later that evening, I received a message to say that — over 550 miles away — Porto Alegre was in a crisis. After heavy rainfall, a hydroelectric dam collapsed, causing Rio Taquari and Caí to burst and flood into the Rio Guaíba. The city was underwater. Guaíba is a Tupí-Guaraní word that means meeting of the waters or bay of all waters.

the meetings of the water

became

DISASTOUROUS waters

PERILOUS waters

waters that KILL

DESTROY

DEVASTATE DISPLACE

My body felt tense.

The heavy rainfall and extreme weather were connected to El Niño-Southern Oscillation, a climate phenomenon that changes ocean temperatures, surface pressure, winds, and rainfall. El Niño's warming of the Pacific Ocean caused large evaporation, and this created higher levels of humidity. This humidity created an atmospheric blockage, worsened by deforestation and by the corresponding lack of vegetation in the central region of Brazil. The rain was stuck.

The city was unprepared for the crisis. 2.4 million people were affected. Over 422,000 were displaced. The state's Civil Defence Agency confirmed 806 injuries and 183 deaths. The flooding affected already-marginalised communities most severely, including 240 favelas, forty quilombola communities, and five Indigenous villages. Many residents were left with no water supply or electricity. Violence of all kinds increased. Did you know that gendered-based violence tends to increase during and after disasters?

Porto Alegre Airport was closed indefinitely. I was stranded in the land of GREAT WATERS, in Iguaçu, and the city I had to return to was drowning.

In this durational performance composed in response to the flood in Porto Alegre, the artist oscillated between moments of calm and intensity. Her movements negotiated the spatial constraints of plastic sheets, paper sculptures and broken objects.

Credits

Written and performed by Marissa Clarke (PhD Candidate, University of Edinburgh)
Photography by Nathália Striebel and Gabriel Celestino (Visual Artists in Porto Alegre)
Art Direction by Douglas Jung (Movement Director, Porto Alegre)

The Seeping of the Years

Eve Aspland

Eve Aspland (b.2003) is a British artist working between painting, drawing and installation, whose work considers the capacity for wetland spaces to hold memories of the landscape.

I came to the fen this time by way of the Caldecote Dyke, hewing closely to Burnham's Mere, across that marshy stretch to the posts.[1] The Mere has recently been rewetted, near the site of the Whittlesea Mere, alders and willows clawing at the clay and dark brown murk, the bog iron rusting and spinning in the liquid. Burnham Mere feels like a gaudy replica, like a model village of one swallowed up by the sea or washed away; like a tokenistic gesture, where Siskin and Redpoll and Blackcap reenact their past warbling.[2] Where once the fizmer hung in the air between drowned pools, there now lies tracked lines in the overturned ground.[3] With all the pressing and drying and blowing of the brenner, the last eighty years has swallowed up more and more of the reed beds with the turn of a tractor's wheel and a plough.

The fields quilt the flatlands, stitched together with neat walkways and waterways; and across the land, towards the sea, the tide brings in shingle in wheaten swathes, and strings of radar masts stretch back out towards the East and further still, where the Doggerlands once lay.[4] We've heard pieces here and there from that part of the country, that the fishermen who skirt the drift for cod and herring would occasionally return to the shore and stray through a fence and onto the beach where strange huts on stilts, half-buried in the shingle, could just be seen.[5] Who knows what goes on there, or went on there, among the sea campion and the false oat grass and besides the white masts strung-up on the horizon like points on a map. But here on the fen with the roke descending, another pin places another plaque right at the base of the post.[6]

We had realised the ground was beginning to sink. Eel traps became emptier and emptier as we began to see a waterline rim around the meres where sedge was becoming dislodged. We came from Holmewood Hall with the timber post across that sinking swell and began to dig down until we hit deep clay. In that grave we slid the post, filling the gap with the wet soil shovel upon shovel. Where the post lay slightly above the ground we sawed the excess off. The other men in their britches and waders began to loop back to the hall, but I stayed a little while to watch over the ooze leftover from our digging. I pictured it moving and a great cavern opening up, the mouth of the earth liable to swallow it whole, the post and the pieces of oak that lay below the surface of the ground all twisting down into this earthy pile. Perhaps all the way from Holmewood Hall to Ely, perhaps out towards the wash and along the coast, towns and willows and eels, all the flat land furling upon itself down and down and down. I thought this land and I knew each other like neighbours, but more and more the sinking took away any sense of my knowing, and each field and mere and canal line began to appear skewed. It occurred to me then that time had expanded and shrunk, and all the memories brought up with that pile of peat now lie there on display for all to see.

[1] Burnham Mere now exists on the site of Whittlesea Mere, once the largest lowland lake in England. The lake was also a large source of income for many who lived and worked in the fens fishing, wildfowling, and gathering sedge for thatch and peat cutting.

[2] Fizmer, or the sound of grass moving in the light wind, from: Peter Trudgill, *East Anglian English* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2021).

[3] Brenner, or a sharp gust of wind on the water, from: Trudgill, Ibid.

[4] See W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* (London: 2019), 175.

[5] See Noreen Masud, *A Flat Place: Moving Through Empty Landscapes, Naming Complex Trauma* (New York: Melville House, 2023), on the hauntological nature of Orford Ness, an ex-military site on the Suffolk coast.

[6] Roke, or the rising of the evening fog, from: Trudgill, Ibid.

Review:

Alia Farid

– V&A, London U.K. & Radcliffe Institute, Cambridge U.S.

The following dialogue is a transatlantic review of Alia Farid's two exhibitions held in 2025, in both London (U.K.) and Cambridge (U.S.), tracing the thematic and material threads that connect them.

Avin encountered Farid's fluid, multidisciplinary practice in February 2025 during the seventh edition of the Jameel Prize Exhibition at the V&A Museum (London), spotlighting contemporary art and design inspired by Islamic culture, under the theme 'Moving Images'. For the group exhibition, Farid submitted two pieces: *Zamzamiya*, a sculptural installation evoking an enlarged *ma'a sabeel* (communal water fountain), and *Chibayish*, a two-channel video work documenting the the young Ma'dan (marsh-dwellers) of southern Iraq.

Kacper visited *Talismans (Kupol LR 3303)* in March 2025 — Alia Farid's solo exhibition at the Johnson-Kulukundis Family Gallery, in the Harvard Radcliffe Institute (Cambridge), where Farid was a Fellow in 2024-2025. The installation consisted of photographs from the Farid family's archive printed alongside spiritual charts on plastic sheets, manufactured in collaboration with a plastics workshop in Kuwait.

[Still taken from] Alia Farid, *Chibayish* (2022). Courtesy of the artist.

Avin Houro:

Kacper, you recently went to see Talismans (Kupol LR 3303) at the Radcliffe Institute. What kind of narrative, or feeling, began to take shape for you as you moved through the space?

Kacper Koleda:

You move through the installation as you'd move through memories; individual images cannot be distinguished from one another. As you enter, most light coming from the singular window at the end of the room is filtered out by the row of thick, semi-translucent resin sheets that the artist installed. Sheets are joined in twos, with each side containing a different magnified photograph from Farid's family archive. The single light source turned gelatinous screens into sites of projections, as each surface contains the blurry traces of the images behind it. No past image, she suggests, can ever be seen with clarity.

Farid purposefully limited the conditions of visibility, shielding familial photographs from immediate exposure to the viewer's gaze. In a similar gesture, the last surface facing the window superimposes a magical square filled with numbers that obscure the image of the sitters. The viewer can only see the reverse of the photograph, which is facing inwards, into the tight space between two screens held together by metal bolts. Does this talismanic magic that Farid's show references seek to protect her memories from us, or from her own forgetting?

— This mode of display references memory, but also appears cinematic; it revolves around slideshow-like movement from one image to another. I wonder if, in her works in England, you sensed a similar tension between movement and immobilization, displaying and obscuring?

AH:

In London, this interplay was unavoidable. Viewers' gazes were regulated by the exhibition's curatorial framing of Moving Images. But what remains unstated is that these themes are foundational to Farid's work. She contests the archives as un-static, so that they become living, breathing entities where power, memory, and identity stand mediated in the present. Where in *Zamzamiya* and *Chibayish*, stories of water are weaved as both memory and wound.

Although, 'subtle' is the word I'd use with these pieces, rather than 'obscuring'. In *Chibayish*, movement is ever-present — the lapping of water, children's laughter, a camera that lingers — but it is also restrained by the weight of ecological and historical violence. Similarly, *Zamzamiya* may be static in form, but its edifice-nature, materiality, and cultural referent speak to a flow that has been interrupted, redirected, and lost. In both, Farid doesn't so much hide as she filters, gently guiding us through layered acts of witnessing — where memory surfaces gradually, and never in isolation.

Given that *Zamzamiya* incorporates petroleum-based fibreglass in its structure, I wondered whether you see oil functioning in Farid's practice, not just as material, but as memory, or another kind of wound — like water in the above pieces.

KK:

How do you think Farid's 'contesting the archives as un-static' manifests itself in her work? I'm drawn to her use of family photographs in Talismans; they make it easier to see archives as breathing entities that connect us to what came before. But Farid's installation, through its reliance on the by-products of oil production, reminds us that those personal stories cannot be detached from the broader, collective archive.

Talismans' surfaces are viscous, uneven and reminiscent of water. In a strangely organic way, they exude smell. When the gallery assistant told me they believed the smell had become stronger since the show's opening, I was reminded of oil's organic genesis — an ancient substance that contains particles of life forms that existed on the Earth eons ago turned into hydrocarbons; transformed, but still there. Is oil a kind of archive for Farid too? It melts the ecological with the economical, if we think about the history of oil as a new gold: the source of impossible wealth coming from underneath, from under the waters. Something that is seen as denaturalized but in fact contains so much life archived into it. Through their oil-heavy material support, Talismans stage the tension between the personal and planetary archive.

Though oil appears invisible at the Radcliffe, it is made present with the smell, and the installation's title Kupol LR 3303: the name of the petroleum-based resin manufactured by United Oil Projects. Its apparent invisibility speaks to something beyond the show itself: on the economic, political, cultural, and material levels, it structures everything around us.

Have you noticed any more or less direct references to oil and the intersection of ecology and economy in the London show? As a Kuwaiti-Puerto Rican artist, Farid's personal and cultural history appears inseparable from oil; I imagine it has to play a role in other works by her too.

AH:

For me, Farid's work constantly refuses fixed historical narratives. Ripples of Okwui Enwezor's 2008 Archive Fever lie lucidly at the bedrock of Farid's art. But she goes beyond this. Rather than presenting memory as something excavated and displayed, she activates it — through sound, surface, and, apparently, smell. It's not an archive we observe from a distance, but one we are made to wade through.
In *Chibayish*, historical trauma isn't just told to us; we're submerged in it. Even the 'stillness' of *Zamzamiya* contains embedded residues embodying marked change in Gulf ecologies. These pieces mark impact. Yes, the intersection of economy and ecology, and oil, are explored, but through their consequences.

I also think the interplay you draw between the personal and planetary archive is where Farid's work gains so much strength. Her pieces are intimate without being confessional, material without being didactic. I think that's why I keep returning to the idea of filtering rather than obscuring — nothing is fully concealed, but everything passes through layers: of substance, history, and atmosphere. The idea that something invisible is also infrastructural, even sovereign in its structuring force, seems crucial here. And oil is key to this.

The bracketed title "(Kupol LR 3303)" is a perfect example of this subtle, yet powerful, critique — it's not just resin, or a decaying smell; it's a symbol of the pervasive, invisible influence that oil has in shaping our world, even in spaces that seem distant from its extraction. It's almost as if the oil, like its economic power, is a ghost in the system, quietly shaping everything from the plastics we use, or the way water is distributed (like the *ma'a sabeel*), to the very funding of exhibitions. That makes it all the more intriguing — an artwork that critiques the very foundation of its own production.

Through her work, how do you think Farid sees herself as an artist — can her practice be viewed more as a form of activism, academic inquiry, or something else entirely?

KK:

I really like what you said about the focus on the consequences and the idea of filtering. It is impossible to get to the core of any of the problems Farid tackles in her work, because her interest suggests complex, horizontal implication of subjects and agencies.

Oil does not figure in her work as an evil cause of ecological destruction or as the region's blessing; it just is. It permeates everything, both locally and globally. Its conflicting status, as a simultaneously natural and seemingly unnatural substance, it's also generative qualities (so many things can be made with and through it!) demonstrate that we cannot return to any kind of pure conditions. The artist deals with the world as it is.

With this in mind, I do think of her work as related to academic practice; not without a reason I met Farid when she was a resident artist at the Radcliffe. It is not academic, however, in the sense of being abstracted from life. Her research focuses on the lived conditions of the place and culture that are her subject-matter.

When it comes to activism, I think with Farid we need to go beyond the classical meaning of this term. You know, she doesn't blow up a figurative or material pipeline. The term that comes to mind is "harm reduction": the viewers learn of the consequences and entangled nuances of certain implications, but the judgment is withheld. It's up to them to decide.

AH:

To me, Farid's practice can be seen as a form of embodied academic inquiry. She assembles fragments, objects and memories to produce a new epistemic framework through which a history of ecological violence in the Gulf can be understood. I think *Zamzamiya* acts as a form of 'material history', magnifying a singular object, a receptacle, to epitomise the weight of cultural memory and environmental loss. And therefore, *Chibayish* acts as a form of 'oral history', recording a lament for a landscape forced into compromise.

It's not accidental that it's Farid's work which first welcomes visitors into The Jameel Prize group exhibition. Her art provides these alternative modes of knowing, a reimagining of the ways historical knowledge is produced, inviting viewers to engage with the rest of the exhibition through this lens. She produces a framework to rethink history, and those lingering impacts on the present — challenging how we remember and engage with the ecological past.

Alia Farid, *Kupol LR 3303 Talisman 02* (2025). Courtesy of the artist.

Avin Houro is a Global and Imperial History MSt student at the University of Oxford, interested in how contemporary artists engage with colonial history, memory, and struggles for self-determination.

Kacper Koleda is an art historian and writer based at Harvard University. They write about the Anthropocene and cataclysms, working on their dissertation Landscapes of Disaster.

Review:

New Pastoral, Pusher Gallery (London)

Pip Hudd

Pip Hudd is a writer who lives and works in East London. They studied at the University of Oxford before receiving an MA in Critical Theory from King's College London and will be beginning work for a PhD on the theorist Adriana Cavarero this autumn.

Memories of my school's Pastoral Team — with their wetted blue paper-towels, ominous form-filling and weak smiles —— make me feel a little queasy.[16] Meanwhile, the dull colors of late-winter fields and hedgerows, sliding past the train window on my way to Norwich, turn into the pulped swirls of gravy and mashed potato on a compartmented school-dinner tray.

Perhaps these feelings come, in part, from the pastoral's fusion of landscape with a sickly kind of care. Stemming from the Latin *pastoralis* as the tending of livestock, 'pastoral' was inflected with its modern meaning in the 4th century, when St Gregory dictated the responsibilities of the clergy to their 'flock' and bound our imaginary of bucolic landscapes to those of paternal relations. Here are the associations of enclosure and empire that still haunt our relations to the ground: tepid do-gooding as a front for the often-violent reconstruction of landscape.

Echoing across our lives in in the form of School PTA committees, anti-homeless architecture, telling-your-daughter-not-to-dress-so-suggestively lest someone do her harm, local planning authorities, raised eyebrows at the GP: landscaping involves a gentle but covertly forceful construction of the ostensibly nice and proper. A rural utopia troubled by the specter of protective dominion it relies upon to exist. It is this tightly knotted dyad of pasture and pastor that Angus Wood attempts to loosen in his recent curatorial project, New Pastoral, at London's Pusher Gallery (February 7 — March 1, 2025).

Nancy Allen's *Open Hollow* (2024) consists of a globe, opened into two hemispheres and bound loosely together. The red and yellow carpet from which it is made feels, on one hand, comfortably domestic — even a little dated, as if taken from your grandparents' living room. On the other hand, it sits awkwardly. It neither coheres fully into two sides of a bowl nor collapses back — flat — onto the floor. There is an ease in transposing this awkwardness of relation, between the flat and curved, onto the intractable problem of representing the curved surface of the earth on a flat paper map. The Mercator projection has long been accused of being favoured by the western colonial metropole, with its tendency to stretch those countries nearer to the poles whilst shrinking its colonies. Allen takes these distortions as necessary for cartographical representation and makes them concrete. By acting out the impossibility of making the world perfectly fit an image, she causes the repressed fact that landscape is produced via the colonial project, rather than merely discovered, return to haunt the otherwise comfortable domestic space.

Problematics of construction continue in Farah Corrigan's *My sorry name has made it to graffiti* (2024), in which segments of canvas, stained light brown with nettles, have been sewn in an irregular grid. Stretched upon a frame, the patchwork resembles fields split by hedges and viewed from above. The thick air of the last days of summer — where the hay has been cut to bristles in the fields and the nettles grow above your waist and the swallows gather on telephone wires — is pierced by two red lines transecting the canvas. The two boundary lines drawn ruler-straight against an uneven ground, like margins in a school exercise book or gridlines on a map, signal what is to come and return us towards the pastoral's benevolent mastery.

Directly to either side of Corrigan's work, *Elliot Robert's Dugout* (2024) and *Untitled* (2025) both add further ambiguity to the pastoral. Dugout, a small model of a minor fortification made of cardboard and tape, treads a careful line between the childlike and the military. Old fortifications haunt the landscape: children play in overgrown concrete pill boxes, leap between long lines of anti-tank blocks on beaches and build forts in their back-gardens. Robert's naïve construction invokes a scene from a school classroom – where shared investments in landscape, and the nation it often represents, bubble up in fantasies of wartime defence, protection and safety. Untitled, a small oil painting showing two dynamic figures also navigates the uncertain border between play and control. Robert's colours compliment Corrigan's late-summer nettle brown, an idyll troubled by the looming reprimand of the schoolteacher or parent. The right figure turns on the ball of their heel towards their neighbour. But is this part of a game or an attack? Does the left figure raise their arms in jubilation or surrender?

Moving further into the gallery, we are again confronted with the pastoral as a site of control. Charlie Godet Thomas displays a selection of three works from his series Unfolding Landscapes (2023), landscapes simplified into only a block of colour (acrylic paint and coloured paper) and a descriptive word applied in the spaces, demarcated by unfolding salvaged envelopes to lie flat. Displayed at 45 degrees from the wall, we are given the sense of standing at a hilltop viewpoint and looking at a diagram of the scene laid out below us.

In the striking simplicity of his depiction of landscape, Thomas brings into sharp focus the processes of careful organization and demarcation that any attempt to faithfully capture every last detail might risk hiding. The soft edges of objects in Constable's idyllic and cluttered landscapes cause them to falsely appear timeless, already existent and untouched by power for example. Instead, Thomas creates landscape in physically undoing envelopes, making them lie flat and creating surfaces able to receive blocks of colour — a process that speaks to Allen's Open Hollow in its mediation between the three dimensional and two, between reality and its representation. But, now, instead of turning a flat carpet into a hemisphere, the envelope is opened out and pressed flat for display.

What happens when we try to flatten a landscape? What do we lose when we move between the real and the image? To what extent is 'real' landscape (we may recall that the word's original usage described a type of painting rather than a natural scene) already an image produced by a frame? If landscape must always be viewed through a frame, what kind of frame does the pastoral provide, and what does this framing hide? Whilst Wood does not seek to provide conclusive answers to these questions, his curation allows us to pose them in a way that has the potential to unsettle our tidy notions of landscape, care and the bucolic.

[1] In UK state schools, the group of teachers and administration staff often designated as the 'Pastoral Team' deals with both discipline and student welfare.

[2] The Oxford English Dictionary records its first usage in English (borrowed from Dutch) in 1598 as follows: 'In a table donne by Cæsar Sestius where hee had painted Landskipes'. Only afterwards did the word slowly take on a direct reference to a natural scene alongside a form of painting.