

Matthew Brown

Leelee Chan & Heidi Lau

Chrysalis Spectre

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712 N La Brea Ave

A plastic moth made from a shipping pallet rests on a white wall. A miniature ceramic pagoda rises out of a funerary vessel. Such tricks of scale and materiality define the topsy-turvy worlds of self-taught sculptors Heidi Lau and Leelee Chan, whose dual exhibition at Matthew Brown marks a convergence of their interests in the alchemical and the arcane.

Central to both of their artistic practices is a reverence for relics, a belief that emotions and narratives can be held within objects in powerful ways. Perhaps it is their preternatural attunement to the secrets of artifacts that led Chan and Lau away from painting and printmaking—the respective mediums in which they were formally trained—and toward sculpture instead. In a sense, relics also brought the two artists together: at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Lau reached out to Chan on Instagram after seeing a photograph of the latter's *Celadon Weaver* (2020), a swath of chainmail adorned with silver-bezeled shards of Song- and Ming-dynasty (960–1644) burial porcelain. Lau saw in this a parallel with an artwork of her own titled *The Blue Robe* (2018), a handmade chainmail garment modeled on traditional Chinese funerary attire and ornamented with ceramic bone fragments. The two artists developed an easy rapport, beginning a two-year-long conversation that culminated in the creation of the new works for this exhibition.

Yet what the two artists do extends beyond merely referencing or utilizing classical objects and aesthetics. They are rather concerned with deeper issues of memory and myth, of how hierarchies form and how value is ascribed. More alchemy than archeology, their sculptural practices revolve around states of change, as seen in mysterious hybrid forms that straddle the boundaries between past and future, between the living and the dead.

Lau often finds inspiration in Daoist mythology and Chinese folk practices—a legacy from her deeply spiritual grandfather, who escaped the religious repression of Maoist China and put down roots in the then-Portuguese colony of Macau (sovereignty was only transferred back to China in 1999, two years after the handover of Hong Kong by the British). The artist eschews romanticized notions of Eastern spirituality, however: “One of the fundamental tenets of Daoism is the return to nature, but what does it mean when this idyllic natural order might not exist anymore, or never existed to begin with?”

In Lau's retelling, the classic creation myth of Nüwa, the snake goddess who made human beings out of mud, is as violent as it is beautiful. *The Primordial Molder* (2018) renders the deity in serpentine segments of clay that stretch across the floor, with glistening scales in turquoise and cobalt-blue glazes. Rocky outcroppings appear to burst out of the sculpture while another section rises up to form an archway, conflating body and architecture, nature and civilization. Preferring to laboriously hand-sculpt her works, Lau herself is a kind of “primordial molder,” coaxing strange, sometimes monstrous, forms out of clay in her New York studio. “It's like I am having a conversation with the material and letting it reveal what it wants me to do with it,” she says.

If the realms that Lau envisions are mired in chaos and contradiction, it is because these conditions govern reality as she sees it. The spaces we inhabit are inexorably shaped by cycles of birth and decay, aspiration and failure. This is manifest in Lau's home city of Macau, where traditional Chinese-style gardens and crumbling colonial architecture exist side by side with recently built casinos that house tacky simulacra of European monuments. Versions of the past are coeval with competing visions of the future—an absurd, pluralistic, and non-linear temporality that is also captured in Lau's *Spirit Vessels* (2020–present). Influenced by mingqi (ancient Chinese burial objects), these sculptures merge elements of urns, architectural ruins, and fantastical landscapes. In *Floating Mountains*

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(2024), a tiered blue framework is fused atop a craggy green structure from which glistening black fingers sprout. A hand appears again in *Releasing Metal in the Air* (2024), holding a bronze butterfly above a ceramic construction of arches and white-glazed railings.

Other recent works push further into abstraction, with orbs and orifices visible in vaguely geologic or coralloid formations. Occasionally a ghostly hand or face can be distinguished, as if otherworldly beings are struggling to escape from their ceramic confines. In the wall-mounted *Rorschach Test Tile III* (2024), what could be an inkblot from the eponymous psychometric exam is rendered in three dimensions as a set of green and flesh-toned ridges inlaid with silver spheres. If not for the clue in the artwork's title, one might imagine it to be some kind of crustaceous alien. Informed by the Chinese *Shanhaijing* (Classic of Mountains and Seas), a millennia-old compendium of mythical lands and beasts, Lau's new works are chimeric and ambiguous, alluding to non-hierarchical, fluctuating states of being in which the animal, vegetal, mineral, and artificial coalesce.

In Leelee Chan's practice, too, disparate elements meld in unexpected ways. Employing all manner of urban detritus, ancient artifacts, and industrial and organic materials, Chan creates sculptures with complex interlocking parts and layered constructions that reward the attentive viewer. Born into a family of antique dealers and restorers specializing in porcelain and pottery mingqi, the artist has a knack for salvaging and repurposing found objects for her practice. From polystyrene packaging and windshields to cracked slabs of asphalt, many of her materials are sourced from dumpsters and sidewalks outside the warehouses and auto-body shops that surround her Hong Kong studio. Her finds are then integrated with delicate stones and glittering metallic inlays in works that make ingenious use of the materials' properties and activate dense networks of associations. "My practice is about making things not behave how they are supposed to behave," she explains. "I have to abandon what I think I know about the materials I use."

One substrate that reappears in Chan's oeuvre is the plastic shipping pallet. The humble object feels familiar to the artist, who grew up in an apartment overlooking Hong Kong's sprawling Kwai Tsing Container Terminal, and often watched goods being loaded and unloaded. In Chan's *Lucid Formation* series (2022–present), the small hollows in black shipping pallets are filled with brightly colored resins to evoke the stained-glass windows of Lingnan architecture, a Southern Chinese style that can still be found in old neighborhoods of Hong Kong. Such works not only challenge the normative distinction between trash and treasure but also bring separate material histories—vis-à-vis Hong Kong's identity as a port city and as a distinctive cultural region—into contact. *Cambium Wanderer* (2024) features the addition of bronze-coated, 3D-printed wildflowers and sculpted epoxy clay corners that recall gnarled roots, as if nature is reclaiming a remnant of human civilization.

In Chan's hands, materials are always masterfully manipulated to resemble something else. Mimicry is not an end, however, but a means to invite alternative points of view. Take her wall-mounted *Moth (Emperor)* and *Moth (Pink lined Sphinx)* (both 2024), in which slabs of petrified wood and natural magnesium in triangular plastic pallets suggest the velvet flutter of lepidopteran wings. The artist has been fascinated by moths and caterpillars for some time, noting their powers of camouflage in response to both organic and anthropogenic changes in their habitats. In its interplay of nature and artifice, the *Moth* series prompts viewers to adopt a non-Anthropocentric perspective, considering how other species are grappling with the ways that humans have irrevocably transformed the planet. The works are inflected by the moth's cultural associations with death and the afterlife—perhaps Chan's creatures are harbingers of a ravaged future in which survival depends on postnatural adaptation.

Chan brings her expertise in Chinese artifacts to bear on *Double Passage (Verdigris)* (2024), in which two discs inspired by jade bi are placed on top of a shipping pallet. The structure is flanked by vertically oriented bumper packaging, coated in epoxy clay to resemble patinated pillars. Bi were historically placed in the graves of high-status individuals, and thought to symbolize a connection

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between the earth and the heavens. Sans human body, Chan's onyx bi invoke more abstract flows of energy between the artwork and its environs, which is emblematic of the artist's belief that all objects are "alive" in ways beyond what we can perceive or comprehend.

Also incorporating antiques are Chan's *Present Relics* (2020–present). In these small-scale works, the artist recombines mingqi fragments with contemporary readymade objects to engage layered temporalities. In *Tête-bêche II* (2024), two funerary figurines face each other, separated by a piece of plastic pallet—a composition that brings to Chan's mind the concept of parallel lives. In other pieces, abstract configurations of metal, stone, and pottery are precariously balanced. Chan imbues these works with a feeling of spontaneity, testing different arrangements of objects to see what curious patterns might emerge.

According to Chan, both she and Lau favor experimental approaches over strictly outcome-directed modes of working. "When we start a sculpture, we don't do sketches," she says. "We're very drawn to this sense of the unknown, trusting that the materials and the process will take us somewhere." Dissatisfied with neat categorizations and narratives, Chan and Lau pursue the buried and the unruly. To immerse oneself in their work is to go on this journey with them, and enter anachronistic realms richly populated by specters and shapeshifters.

-Ophelia Lai

Heidi Lau (b. 1987, Macau) lives and works in New York.

Selected solo and two person exhibitions include *A Cacophony of Rocks*, Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York (2024); *Shadow Speak*, with Biraj Dodiya, Bureau, New York (2023); *Gardens as Cosmic Terrains*, Green-Wood Cemetery, New York (2022); *Empire Recast*, Grand Lisboa Palace, Macau (2021); *Spirit Vessels*, Matthew Brown, Los Angeles (2020); *Blood Echoes*, AALA Gallery, Los Angeles (2019); *The Sentinels*, with Rachel Frank, Geary, New York (2018); *The Primordial Molder*, The Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York (2017); *Third Rome*, Deli Gallery, New York (2016); and *The Obscure Region II*, Macau Art Museum, Macau (2014).

Recent group exhibitions include *Shanshui: Echoes and Signals*, M+ Museum, Hong Kong (2024), *Cosmos Cinema: The 14th Shanghai Biennale*, Power Station of Art, Shanghai; *Horizons: Is there anybody out there?*, Antenna Space, Shanghai (2023); *And the Moon be Still as Bright*, Harper's, New York (2023); *Body Without Organs*, Chapter, New York (2023); *River Styx*, Sea View, Los Angeles (2023); *Crossing*, KOTARO NUKAGA, Tokyo (2023); *Liquid Ground*, UCCA, Beijing (2022); *Concrete Spiritual*, curated by Ajay Kurian, Morán Morán, Los Angeles (2022); *SSSSSSSSCULPTURESQUE*, Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong (2022); *Mouthed Echoes*, Lyles & King, New York (2022); *Recent Sculpture*, Matthew Brown, Los Angeles (2022); *The Hearing Trumpet Part 2*, Galerie Marguo, Paris (2022); *Liquid Ground*, Para Site, Quarry Bay, Hong Kong (2021); *Social Recession*, NCECA Annual, Weston Gallery, Cincinnati, OH (2021); *Earthly Coil*, Magenta Plains, New York (2021).

Lau's practice has been supported by numerous residencies and awards, including the Green-Wood Cemetery Residency, Greenwich House Pottery Fellowship, NYSCA/NYFA Artist Fellowship, Colene Brown Art Prize, Emerging Artist Fellowship at Socrates Sculpture Park, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council Process Space, the Martin Wong Foundation Scholarship, and the Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters and Sculptors Grant.

In 2019, Lau presented *Apparition* for the Macau-China Collateral Exhibition at the 58th Venice Biennale.

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Leelee Chan (b. 1984, Hong Kong) makes enigmatic sculptures that incorporate urban debris, ancient artifacts, natural materials, industrial and mundane products, generating visual paradoxes in which these objects move seamlessly between past, present and future. Reflecting the shifting urban fabric in her immediate surroundings in Hong Kong, Chan's sculptures undergo an elaborate transformation through tactile experimentation with materials and processes. The artist pushes the limits of her objects' physicality and expands the possibilities of the language of abstraction. Her sculptures provoke a particular atmosphere and feeling that conjure ambient poetry of the built environment. Chan's visceral exploration of the unknown encapsulates her interest in urbanism, architecture, material culture, craft, and antiquities. Her interplay of abstract forms, intricate details, and unexpected materials calls for a physical experience and encourages a new way of seeing and perceiving.

Chan received her MFA in painting from the Rhode Island School of Design, in 2009, and her BFA from the School of Art Institute of Chicago, in 2006. In 2020, Chan was the recipient of the ninth BMW Art Journey. Her solo exhibitions include: *Silica Meadows*, Capsule Shanghai, Shanghai (2023), *Antinomies*, Klemm's, Berlin (2022), *Pallet in Repose (Resurfacers)*, Discoveries, Art Basel Hong Kong (presented by Capsule Shanghai) (2021); and *Core Sample*, Capsule Shanghai, Shanghai (2019). Her selected group exhibitions include *Shanshui: Echoes and Signals*, M+ Museum, Hong Kong (2024), *Strange Strangers*, Para Site, Hong Kong (2023); *Joan Miró – The Poetry of Everyday life*, Hong Kong Museum of Art, Hong Kong (2023); *Poetic Heritage* in Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong (2021); *Liquid Ground* in Para Site, Hong Kong (2021); *KölnSkulptur #10* in Skulpturen Park Köln, Cologne (2020); *How Do We Begin: X Museum Triennial 1st Edition* in X Museum, Beijing (2020); *Holy Mosses* in Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong (2019); *Notes from Pallet Town* in Ullens Center for Contemporary Arts Dunes, Beidaihe (2019); *Hysteresis* in Downs & Ross, New York (2019); *Scaffolds of Meaning* in Mine Project, Hong Kong (2019); *Rehearsal* in Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong (2018). Chan's work can be found in the permanent collections of Long Museum, Shanghai; UBS Art Collection, Hong Kong; M+, Hong Kong; Skulpturen Park Köln, Cologne; J. P. Morgan Chase Art Collection, Hong Kong and Kadist Art Foundation, Paris/San Francisco. Her work has been featured in *Frieze*, *Artforum*, *Mousse Magazine*, *Art Asia Pacific*, the *Financial Times*, and *Ocula*, among others.