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Mo Kong by Louis Bury

Installation and design that combines cross-cultural influences.

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(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Lounge-of-a-Prophet-Mo-Kong1.jpg)

Installation view of *Mo Kong: Lounge of A Prophet*, 2022. Cuchifritos Gallery + Project Space, New York, NY. Photo by Brad Farwell. Courtesy of the artist.

Mo Kong's homespun installations imagine dystopian futures that feel a bit too close for comfort to potential reality. *Making A Stationary Rain on the North Pacific Ocean* (2019), for instance, rendered CUE Art Foundation into a geopolitical map of a near future in which China and the US are engaged in an ecologically motivated cold war. *Personal Ark* (2021–22) transformed a Queens Museum gallery into the showroom for an eponymous collection of survivalist furniture and quasi-decorative, quasi-utilitarian sculptures, such as a lamp-cum-bug zapper (fabricated out of pasta noodles) entitled *Dilemma* (2021). *Lounge of A Prophet* (2022) reconfigured elements of *Personal Ark* to fit the confines of Cuchifritos Gallery + Project Space as though it were the home business of an Asian American fortune teller in a time of societal collapse.

The hallmark of Kong's installations is their mysteriousness, specifically the way in which they're riddled with coded, ambiguous details. A metaphorical map in *Making A Stationary Rain*, for example, incorporated two fish bowls containing the artist's own pet fish alongside contoured rectangles of Styrofoam whose labels—"Sea Salt"; "Family Value"; "Sail Route"—bore little resemblance to the objects' representational contents. Kong values aesthetic misdirection based on their experience as a former journalist in China where the bounds of permissible discourse are often curtailed. Though this approach can feel unfamiliar to US audiences, learning to read between the lines of Kong's work offers vital, prescient warnings against complacency in all its insidious forms.

—Louis Bury

Louis Bury
Where did the idea for *Personal Ark* come from?

Mo Kong
I'm a reality television fan and became fascinated with the show *Doomsday Preppers* in which Americans plan for an upcoming apocalypse. Most of the people on the show are rich, white, and from the Midwest or South. I wanted to think about what it might look like from both a personal and business perspective to preserve an Asian culture in the United States. The companies who build survival bunkers all have Biblical names, so I decided to call my company "Personal Ark."

LB
What were the design considerations for the company's fictional product line?

MK
Everything in the project's design derives from two charts of the past ten years: one on international trade rate and one on natural disaster rate. I overlapped these two charts together and used the spaces between them to form the furniture's basic shapes, which reminded me of an optimistic, 1960s space-age aesthetic. I took that aesthetic and twisted it by using a dark, sturdy-looking palette. The furniture has sharp and pointy edges, which offer greater protection in the

event of an earthquake. The sculptures contained within the furniture are home decorations that also function as science equipment. They're designed to monitor the environment but are all self-made and fragile.

LB

What's an example of such decor equipment?

MK

There's a pair of what I would call lamps; one hangs from the ceiling, the other stands on the floor. They're each made out of recycled jars connected by kelp that can only be purchased in Asian grocery stores. I was interested in how techniques from food preservation might be used as sculptural materials and decided to layer the pieces of kelp almost like a fabric. Inside the top part of each lamp is a radiometer that spins in reaction to light and heat. I imagined myself living in this underground environment and monitoring its changes based on the lamps' reactions.

Installation view of *Mo Kong: Lounge of A Prophet*, 2022. Cuchifritos Gallery + Project Space, New York, NY. Photo by Brad Farwell. Courtesy of the artist.

LB

It sounds like your design considerations were based in part on how you'd like to use the objects.

MK

Definitely. I can be obsessive in certain habits on account of my Asperger's syndrome. I check my phone for the weather very often. I have the NOAA app tracking hurricanes and rainfalls. I even keep the lava lamp sculpture in my own living room!

LB

That's interesting because *Personal Ark* doesn't appear particularly homey in the sense of putting your feet up and relaxing.

MK

Yes, that's how I feel about home. My partner is always telling me, "You like things that aren't comfortable!" A rough couch, a hard bed. He would say that I live like an eighteenth-century monk, but I feel the need to live this way to be more alert. I remember growing up in China when we experienced an earthquake. Afterward, my dad would do things like balance an empty beer bottle upside down on the floor to see if any tremors shook it. We had that beer bottle in our living room for over three months.

LB

Wow, I knew in the abstract that your work was personal….

MK

… It's way more personal than others might think!

(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Personal-Ark-Mo-Kong3.jpg)

Installation view of *Mo Kong: Personal Ark*, 2021–22. Queens Museum, New York, NY. Photo by Hai Zhao. Courtesy of the artist.

LB

Can you say more about why you work this way?

MK

In the US, people prefer doing things directly, but in China things are handled less straightforwardly as an extra layer of protection for yourself. When I worked as a journalist there, I spent a lot of time thinking about workarounds, about how to tell a story without actually telling the story. I became interested in playing with those cultural differences in how I make art. Instead of talking directly about censorship, I use self-censorship as an unspoken method.

LB

How does that impact the way in which your art engages in world building?

MK

I think people today imagine the future differently than in the recent past. The current political climate is shrinking the time we allow ourselves to imagine ahead, maybe only five or ten years. Everything changes so fast now; we're more aware of a projection's limitations, and the projections

we do make stick closer to what's happening today. I began researching *Making A Stationary Rain on the North Pacific Ocean* in 2017; several years later, a lot of the political and meteorological scenarios I'd imagined had actually occurred.

LB

How has your work changed over time?

MK

I've changed from being an Asian person living in the US to an Asian American. There's been a new type of immigration since the 1980s in which people come to the States for school. When you're deciding whether to stay here or return home, you're like a migrating bird, always going back and forth. When I decided to stay, I wanted a better understanding of this country's history of racism. The position of Asian Americans in US history is strange; there's a level of denial about the discrimination that's taken place. In the 1920s, for example, it was difficult for Asian Americans to use public bathrooms because they were marked either for white or Black people. COVID has maybe put issues of Asian American identity a bit more in people's consciousness.

LB

The way in which your work asserts its strongest ties to Chinese identity is through the senses, particularly foods and scents.

MK

A lot of my strongest memories are of food preparation when I was a child, especially fermented foods and dehydrated citrus. In the US, those scents are typically considered foreign or strange. I became interested in the question of what might happen in the event of a trade war, or serious economic isolation, and people became cut off from culinary staples in their culture. Many places in the world maintain a seed vault to ensure regional spices don't disappear, but it can be hard to know today what might feel urgent to preserve in the future.

(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Personal-Ark-Mo-Kong4.jpg)

Installation view of *Mo Kong: Personal Ark*, 2021–22. Queens Museum, New York, NY. Photo by Hai Zhao. Courtesy of the artist.

LB

What role can art play in cultural preservation?

MK

Art can provide a fuller picture of cultural history because it deals with the relationship between originals and replicas. Imagine someone shows you a photograph and tells you a story about it. Then later you find out that photograph was actually cropped and there's another layer to the story. Then later you discover a third version of the photograph and another layer to the story, and so on. Art can add more and more layers to the story; it's almost archaeological.

LB

The way you describe art's role reminds me of Plato's allegory of the cave.

MK

In one section of *Personal Ark*, there's a fictional audio story called "When The Beast Rests Its Head" by James Grammer. The story itself is a MacGuffin; it's actually an allegory about layers of knowledge and censorship. I'm curious how many visitors listened to or understood the whole story. It's hidden in a corner of the installation, really quiet, like a lure.

LB
What are you working on going forward?

MK
My next project explores racial melancholia and information gaps faced by Asian immigrants from a literary perspective. In classical Chinese literature, swifts are birds that are compared to wanderers who have difficulty finding a sense of cultural identity in a new environment. A trained AI will translate three versions of four different classical Chinese poems: a word-by-word translation, a version in which content is given priority over syntax, and a rewrite of the original poem based on English-language rhyme.

LB
Each version has strengths and drawbacks.

MK
Exactly. There's no version that gets everything and loses nothing.

Mo Kong's work can be seen in the group exhibition Augurhythms (https://hesseflatow.com/exhibitions/93/overview/) *organized by Fragile Institute at Hesse Flatow in New York City until August 26.*

Louis Bury is the author of *Exercises in Criticism* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2015) and *The Way Things Go* (punctum books, forthcoming). He is Associate Professor of English at Hostos Community College, CUNY, and contributes regularly to *Hyperallergic* and *Art in America*.

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