

Mo Kong Maps a Post-Climate Change Future

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Louis Bury July 6, 2019



Mo Kong, “Dream’ Guid” (2018), acrylic tubes, handrail brackets, hand blown glass, rubber, ceramic , honey, shredded government documents, pollen, beeswax, handmade lens, drawings, 2 x 165 inches (all images courtesy of the artist and CUE Art Foundation)

An almost 14-foot-long handrail, “Dream’ Guid” (2018), is a fitting design element to usher visitors into Mo Kong’s *Making A Stationary Rain On The North Pacific Ocean*, curated by artist Steffani Jemison at CUE Art Foundation. Located in the hallway connecting the vestibule to the main gallery space, the handrail consists of interconnected acrylic tubes filled with a bricolage of rubber, glass, beeswax, pollen, and shredded government documents. Handrails provide physical support for humans as they navigate built space, but Kong’s artistic handrail, a notional “guid[e],”

offers visitors minimal physical or conceptual assistance. The artwork does not look sturdy enough to bear much body weight, and its mish-mash of contents and scare-quoted, misspelled title raise more questions about the exhibition than they answer.



Mo Kong, "Nightlight I" (2019), nightlight, wire, ceramic, dimensions variable

The main gallery is just as mysterious. Conceived as a geopolitical map of a near-future in which climate change migration has fomented a Cold War between China and the United States, the room's floor and the bottom halves of its lengthwise walls are covered in thin strips of blue painter's tape to form grids of footprint-sized rectangles. In some places, strips of white painter's tape, with descriptive markings such as "Arctic Circle" and "0°/ Equator," provide a semblance of geospatial orientation. Spartan sculptural works — for instance, nightlights plugged into the wall and resting on the floor ("Nightlight I" and "Nightlight II," both 2019) or diffusers dotted with sea snails that emit handmade fragrances ("Echo: China" and "Echo: US," both 2019) — are distributed around the room. The entire installation has a guarded and withdrawn quality, as if the grid that mapped this world was also as a dystopian surveillance mechanism.

Kong's background as a recent Chinese immigrant to the United States and, especially, a former investigative reporter help account for the exhibition's methods and mood. The artworks' numerous references to bees and honey, for example, derive from the artist's collaborative research into the international honey trade with science labs at Brown University, Rhode Island School of Design, and Shangxi Agricultural University. From this research, Kong discovered that

consumer honey branded as “American” contains honey of Chinese provenance that has been smuggled to avoid tariffs. He also learned that the North American continent has no indigenous bee species (its first bees were introduced by European settlers in 1622). Both facts metaphorically call into question the notion of a pure United States identity, a point “‘Dream’ Guid” makes with the smattering of ironic “American Honey/ made by/ American Bees” stickers affixed to it.

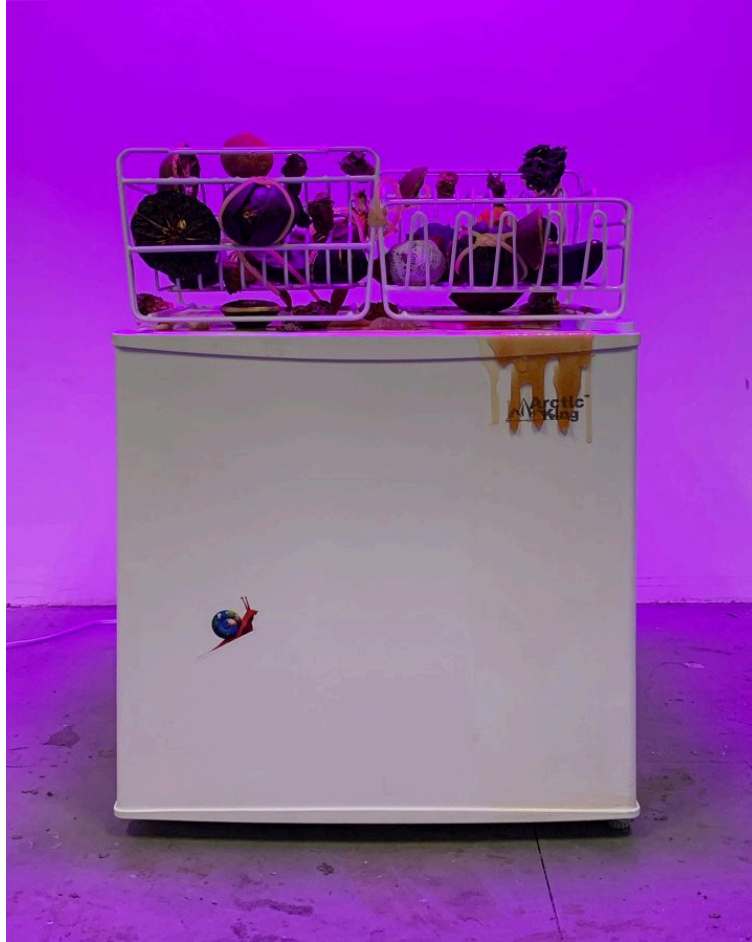
But this allusion might be lost on visitors who haven’t read the exhibition’s press release or its small, attractive accompanying catalogue. The short catalogue essays by Kong, Jemison, and independent curator Danni Shen approach the exhibition from varied angles and are all insightful. But these supplemental materials, while helpful for orienting visitors, don’t explain why Kong presents the results of his research in aestheticized, rather than purely informational, forms. His blend of reportage and poesis, fact and fiction, prompts questions about what visual art can do that journalism can’t, and vice versa.

Making A Stationary Rain On The North Pacific Ocean makes several different cases for visual art’s value in this regard. The gridded map room, for example, suggests that art can make complex abstract ideas more tangible and atmospheric. The room’s futuristic fictional setting also proposes that art has greater imaginative license than purely fact-based journalism. Yet the exhibition’s most unique and powerful notion — the one you might suspect is closest to Kong’s own heart — is that art allows for principled deceptions that can appear playful in some cases but in others can be necessary for self-preservation or even survival.



Mo Kong, "Falling Into A Stalemate" (2019), lead, prints, slow dried sand, The New York Times, handmade glass pollen from the index of pollens recovered by Shanxi Agricultural University and fabricated by artist Amy Lemaire, 44x 56 x 3 inches

Again and again, elements of *Making A Stationary Rain* purport to do one thing while, in fact, they do something else, in semi-secret. The "rain" of the exhibition's poetic title constitutes the first such feint: other than two small fish bowls, there's nary a drop of water in the show, as exemplified by the barren tract of sand in the installation *Falling Into A Stalemate* (2019). The map room's humble and understatedly humorous centerpiece, "Roundtable No. 2" (2017), is neither round nor a table. Its floor-level rectangular vitrine contains textured foam pads, sprinklings of dirt and minerals, and a plethora of slapdash display labels ("Microclimate Circulation"; "Language Barrier"; "Radical Encyclical"; "The People's International Cooperative Development Center") that evoke taxonomic natural history museum displays but undercut Linnaean certitude through disjunction.



Mo Kong, "Seeking the Common Ground" (2019), mini freezer, handmade popsicles with newspaper confetti, dish racks, preserved tropical fruits, frozen cubed fruits, plant lights, 25 x 18.5 x 17.5 inches

At times, the exhibition's hidden layers of meaning verge on hermetic. A diligent visitor can grasp the honey allusions without substantial background knowledge. But other references require obscure insider knowledge that can't be gleaned from the works themselves or their para-texts. For example, the two battle-fish living in the fish bowls are actually Kong's pets, a fact I only learned by attending Kong's and Jemison's public walkthrough of the exhibition. Likewise, the dish rack of preserved tropical fruits atop "Seeking the Common Ground" (2019) alludes not only to artist Zoe Leonard's installation, *Strange Fruit* (1992-97), but also to Kong's grandmother, who used to preserve fruit in a similar fashion. The misspelled "guid" in the handrail's title alludes to the acronym, GUID, or Global Unique Identifier, which Microsoft's programming uses to identify resources. Numerous other works incorporate language scraps into the artwork itself, but they are sliced and distorted so as to remain barely legible.

These veiled clues give the exhibition the feel of an Easter egg hunt, or a connect-the-dots game in which not all the dots have been numbered. Every gallery nook and cranny harbors colorful surprises, such as the unlabelled lollipop stuck to a floor corner, or the mini freezer in "Seeking Common Ground," whose door opens to reveal frost-covered, handmade resin popsicles. Similar to a Thomas Pynchon novel, the profusion of semi-connected signifiers tease the audience with the prospect of a conspiracy, while ultimately frustrating the desire for a transparent and cohesive larger meaning. This epistemological environment — with its interplay between disclosure and

concealment, inside and outside — produces a version of the paranoia that authoritarian regimes instill in their citizenry.

More than any of its particular facts and fictions, *Making A Stationary Rain*'s general atmosphere of self-censored vigilance leaves the strongest and most abiding impressions. The exhibition embeds deeply personal layers of meaning within apparently impersonal content; its deadpan map of an all-too-plausible eco-political future doubles as a trans-Pacific psycho-geography of the artist's own experiences and fears. Kong's aesthetic feints are equal parts impish and self-protective; they are playful ways to explore personal concerns while also hedging against potentially hostile responses to them. Made and exhibited in the United States, a country in which openness and oversharing are often perceived as virtues, Kong's strategy of indirection can also be understood as a warning about the naivety of wanton self-exposure. Like most eco-political warnings these days, Kong's likely won't be grasped here in the States until it's too late.

Mo Kong, *Making A Stationary Rain On The North Pacific Ocean* continues at CUE Art Foundation (137 West 25th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) until July 10th.