



BOMB

Lap-See Lam Interviewed by Jenny Wu

An artist enters uncharted waters, inspired by the story of a floating restaurant.



Installation view of Lap-See Lam, *Tales of the Altersea*, 2023. Portikus, Frankfurt am Main. Photo by Alwin Lay. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Nordenhake, Stockholm/Berlin/Mexico City.

Stockholm-based installation artist Lap-See Lam weaves history into futurity and alterity into the quotidian. Using video, sculpture, performance, smartphone apps, and immersive digital installations, Lam creates a critical third space for afterimages of the Hong Kong-Chinese diaspora. At the heart of her work is both absence and wildness, both survival and invention, in the margins of time and space. In 2014, her parents sold their Chinese restaurant in Stockholm, and Lam's desire to preserve images of the place drove her to create an archive of 3D scans that glitched the visual aesthetics of similar restaurants across Sweden. Having gained recognition for a trilogy of exhibitions centered on these scans, Lam has pivoted in her latest body of work, *Tales of the Altersea* (2023), from land to water—specifically, to a ship named *Sea Palace*.

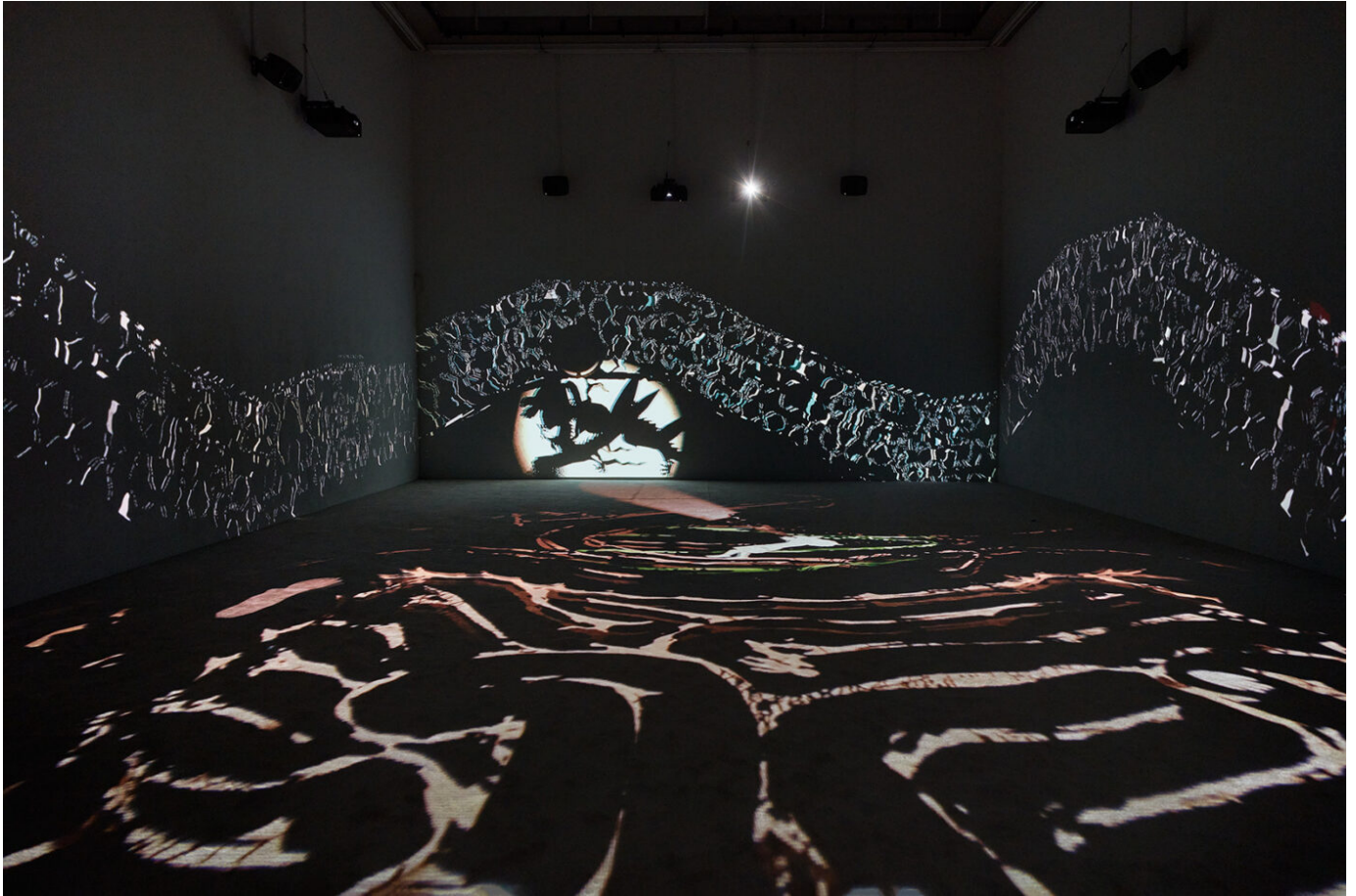
—Jenny Wu

Jenny Wu

Let's talk about *Sea Palace*. From the photos I've seen online, the ship, which was formerly a floating Chinese restaurant, looks like this hyperbolic symbol of displacement, combining the visuals of sea travel and early immigration with the spectacle of exoticism. And it functions nowadays as a haunted house?

Lap-See Lam

I first noticed *Sea Palace* in 2018 from the window of my studio at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm where I was studying. One day, out of nowhere, a three-story floating Chinese restaurant appeared across the water with Stockholm's Gröna Lund amusement park in the background. An internet search revealed that the boat was a new attraction for Halloween. The ads described it as "a ship from the Orient" housing "an evil presence from a thousand-year-old curse." Through a conversation I had with someone who'd worked on remodeling the floating restaurant into a haunted house, I learned that the ship was missing its *loong*-shaped head and tail. The *loong*, as you know, is the mythical creature known in the West as a "Chinese dragon," although "dragon" is a mistranslation. Apparently, the original owner of the ship had chosen to remove the decorations from the front and back of the ship. The mysterious removal of the *loong*, combined with the overtly Orientalist vocabulary people were using to describe this attraction, piqued my interest in its story.



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JW

How did you go about conducting research?

LSL

I didn't begin my work on *Sea Palace*, which Bonniers Konsthall facilitated, until two or three years after my initial encounter with the site. First, I met with Hasse Möller who runs Högmarsö Varv, the shipyard where *Sea Palace* is docked when it's not being used by the theme park, and through him I met Johan Wang, the ship's original owner. During our conversations, Hasse and Johan explained the reason behind the removal of the head and tail: Wang had only discovered that the theme park intended to use the ship as a horror attraction after the leasing agreement had been made. He also found out after the fact that the *loong* had been animated into a sinister dragon in the promotional materials. In an attempt to prevent the creature from being misused and misinterpreted, Wang decided to remove it entirely from the ship.

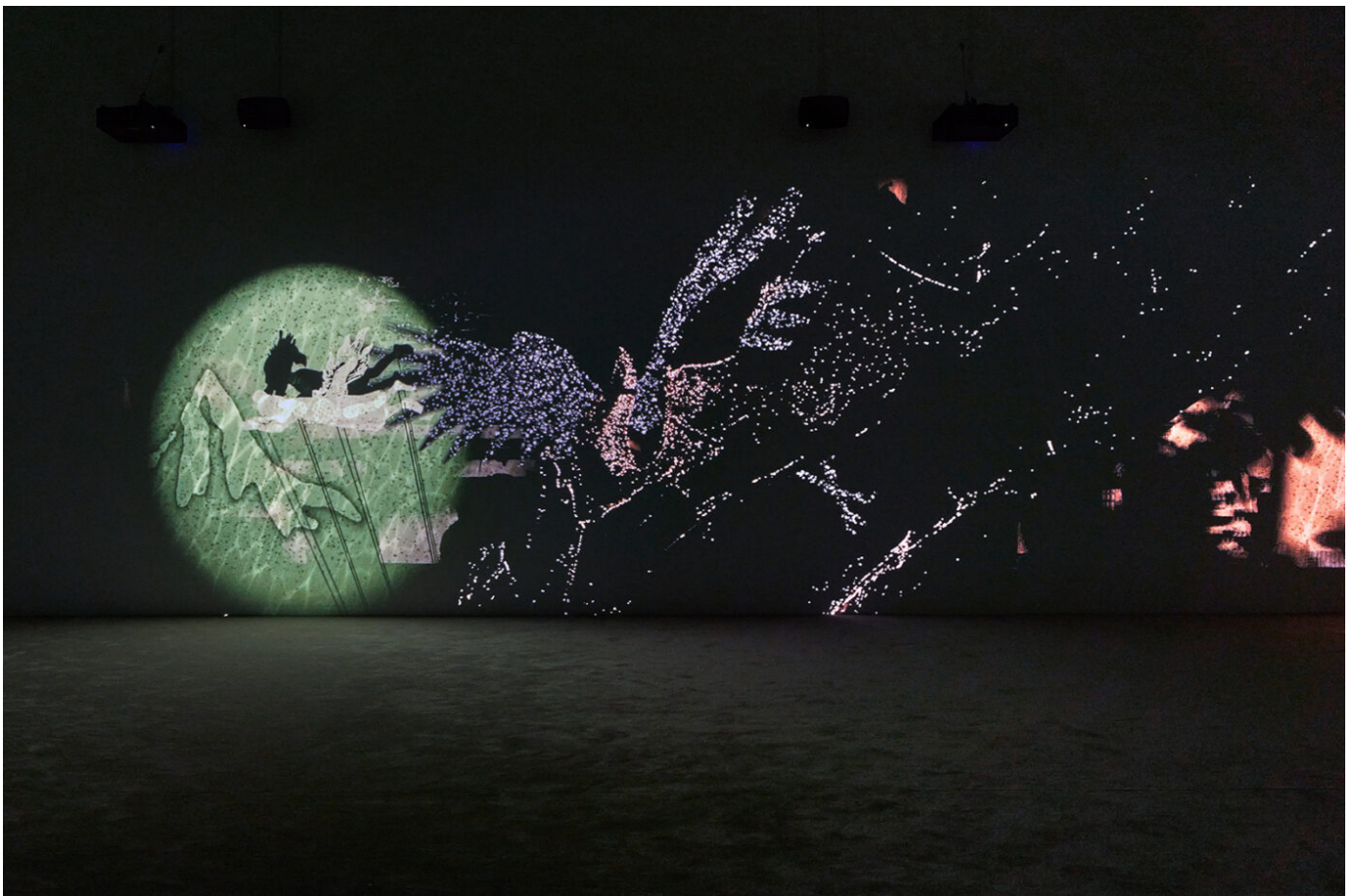
JW

How fascinating—and sad. So much of what you're drawn to in your work, I think, deals with absence and loss. I'm recalling your *Singing Chef Suits* (2022),

which are the washi paper uniforms I saw at Kasmin Gallery earlier this year swaying on hangers without a body to fill them, as well as *Phantom Banquet Ghost* (2019), the fiery neon tubes you arranged on a restaurant chair suggesting the faint traces of a human figure. And now you're working with this ship that's lost both its original purpose as a business and, for absurd reasons, its protective icon.

LSL

I found this narrative intriguing since it speaks to the generational loss of a cultural symbol and to the process by which a symbol becomes otherized, Orientalized, and mistranslated from one context to another through the Western imagination. Just as with chinoiserie, the translation of *loong* as "dragon" represents the European construction of Chineseness and the way meaning changes as it crosses the sea. *Sea Palace's* story offered up many themes that I could explore, including displacement, sea travel, and migratory movements.



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Your current show at the Swiss Institute, *Tales of the Altersea*, which deals with the imagery and history of this site, picks up some of the themes from your previous projects as well, such as spectrality, disidentification, and the ubiquitous visuals of Chinese restaurants in Sweden. In what ways do you see *Tales of the Altersea* extending or departing from your previous works, like your celebrated trilogy *Mother's Tongue* (2018), *Phantom Banquet* (2019–21), and *Dreamers' Quay* (2022), and the historical-fictional worlds you built there?

LSL

When I start new projects the point of arrival is always unknown to me, although my works often seem to expand from the same historical-fictional universe. Usually, I tend to begin my projects with a site that holds a certain spatial history that has caught my attention, a certain narrative resulting from the movement of people and goods through the space. I treat the site itself as a main character that I eventually will get to know through various methods, and from there I let this relationship guide my way through the process. With *Tales of the Altersea*, in contrast to earlier pieces, I was able to contextualize the Chinese restaurant within a broader cultural-historical narrative. While my earlier works, such as *Mother's Tongue* and *Phantom Banquet*, situated the Chinese restaurant within Swedish history in near time and the speculative future, my recent work has been traveling in new directions, with the floating restaurant as both a subject of research and a protagonist, bringing the story to new destinations.

JW

You've been traveling quite a bit for this work as well.

LSL

Researching *Sea Palace* brought me physically to Gothenburg, Sweden, where the ship had been moored, and mentally into the early trade history between Sweden and Canton in China, since the two countries developed a relationship through a material exchange and through the Western demand for chinoiserie. And of course, *Sea Palace* brought me to the seabed of the fictive Altersea and to a series of characters and events related to or inspired by Hong Kong-Chinese mythology and history. Personally, this piece feels very different to me than the trilogy, not only because I looked into a part of Hong Kong history that previously had felt out of reach but also because I have a feeling it will open up avenues for future works that might look different from what I'm doing now.

JW

For this piece, are you still working with the visual vocabulary of traditional Chinese shadow-puppet theater as you did in *Dreamers' Quay* and other

previous shows?

LSL

Yes, *Tales of the Altersea* continues to employ an immersive, digital shadow-play technique I developed for *Dreamers' Quay* where the animations are created based on the walls and floor as if they are translucent surfaces through which the shadows of figures and motifs can shine. At the Swiss Institute, I adapted the work for the downstairs exhibition room, making it quite different from previous iterations. But this process of dismantling the theater, packing it up, and moving it to new locations also falls in line with the nomadic history of early shadow-play theater.



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JW

Tales of the Altersea involves a pair of twin sisters whom we follow on an underwater journey. The twins meet a cast of figures from Cantonese mythology and history, but there's also this other, more spectral protagonist, the *loong*, which is rendered in these spare but frenetically bent neon tubes on the ceiling. I have to say, I at first mistook the *loong* for a human figure—a corpse—because in the past you have used neon in a more anthropomorphic way. Later, I

appreciated how you winnowed the creature down to its essential lines. In a way, you'd gotten rid of the visual markers of its cultural origin, and yet it still functions as a sort of guardian over the exhibition space.

LSL

The way I see it, the show is less culturally specific than it is about migratory movements between cultures. For example, people are leaving Hong Kong today, and I was able to draw a comparison between contemporary migration patterns and those of the generation before me, which had immigrated to Europe for similar reasons. I utilize the distorted "dragon" figure in the stairwell and hallway outside of the installation as an allegory for the Hong Kong-Chinese diaspora. At the end of their journey, the sisters unite and resurrect the dragon spirit.

JW

Out of curiosity, how did you come up with the show's title?

LSL

Since the writing is more or less a byproduct of everything else I do beforehand, my titles are created quite late in the process. Words are not my primary artistic language or tool to begin with; they come later. I sometimes refer to my process as "reverse scriptwriting" where the process shapes what it is I ultimately want to articulate in the work. "Altersea" is a combination of two words: "sea" and the verb "alter," meaning to make or become different. "Alter" is related to the Latin word "alterity," or otherness. I chose to pluralize "tales" in order to underscore the fact that the work is not about a single thing but instead a number of stories and histories that all have this strange, altering sea as a common theme. And speaking of words, the dual meaning of the *loong* or "dragon," another recurring motif in the Altersea, positions it both as protector of the water and as a European object of desire. I think about the Altersea as a sea that changes or something that alters the way we see things.

[Lap-See Lam: Tales of the Altersea](#) is on view at the Swiss Institute in New York City until August 27.

Jenny Wu is a writer and independent curator.

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