

Lap-See Lam "Tales of the Altersea" at Portikus, Frankfurt

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Lap-See Lam "Tales of the Altersea" at Portikus, Frankfurt, 2023. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Nordenhake, Stockholm/Berlin/Mexico City. Photo: Alwin Lay

In the 2010s when many Chinese restaurants in Sweden went insolvent or changed ownership, including the one run by Lap-See Lam's parents, the artist set out to make 3D scans of as many of them as possible to preserve their histories. Resulting in an expanded archive, these glitchy reproductions have since defined her visual vocabulary. Spanning from sculptures to videos, Lam's works decode the ambiguous connotation of *chinoiserie* and address the cultural transformation of the Hong Kong Chinese diaspora in Europe. "Tales of the Altersea" continues her reflection on the conflicting ideas between cultural affinity and disidentification.

Starting point for the exhibition is the singular story of the Sea Palace, a three-storey floating restaurant in the shape of a dragon that sailed from Shanghai to Europe in the early 1990s. After a series of unsuccessful ventures, the ship docked in the waters of Stockholm, finding a new purpose as a haunted house in the Gröna Lund amusement park. The restaurant's history and its emblematic Chinese décor has informed Lam's imagery and serves as a reference for "Tales of the Altersea," which comprises a new group of works that extend from the exterior to the interior: *Portal* (2023), a gate on the Portikus' bridge, recalls the Sea Palace's ornaments depicting two dragons chasing a flaming pearl, while *Dahlia* (2023), a ghostly neon silhouette floating under the ceiling of the entrance, leads the visitor into the main space.

At the heart of "Tales of the Altersea" is the eponymous 8-channel video installation, projected onto the walls and floor of the gallery, giving the impression of being inside a magic lantern. The phantom-like aesthetic trope of the piece draws from the visual language of shadow puppetry, a traditional form of storytelling that is closely linked to Chinese folklore, which reached Europe through imperialistic trade relations. Serving as a backdrop for the work is the Sea Palace, sunk to the bottom of the ocean by Hunger, the play's evil spirit which capsizes ships and devours children. The video begins with two searching eyes emerging from the darkness, which soon give way to the protagonists, twin sisters Dahlia and Julie, swimming towards a map of Europe. During their underwater journey, the girls encounter a series of characters directly related to or inspired by Cantonese mythology and history. While the sisters swim towards the Sea Palace shipwreck, they meet Lo Ting, the tale's narrator, a hybrid fish-human who is considered the ancestor of the Hong Kong people. Their path

is lined with terrifying figures, such as a weeping emperor, monsters and ghosts. After being separated from her sister upon touching the flaming pearl whose light glows green, Julie ends up being swallowed by Hunger and meeting Freedom Swimmer in his stomach, the Intestinal Bay. Lam's characteristically detailed imagery, yet often ambiguous, delivers a liberating tale when the heroine's glowing light helps them see in the dark, break the Hunger's curse and eventually escape. Throughout their journey to safety, the Sea Palace slowly dissolves into fragments and the characters as well: Julie wears a dragon's head, Dahlia grows a dragon tail and the Freedom Swimmer mutates into Da Peng, a giant bird which is said "to cover the sky and roam the ocean." With the sisters finally reunited, they resurrect the dragon spirit, escape from the decaying ship, and fly high into the sky. Much as shadow plays are accompanied by songs, the composers Linus Hillborg and Marlena Salonen, with vocals by Bruno Hibombo, created an original music and soundscape for Lam's rendition.

By employing the narrative strategies of magical realism, Lam interweaves complex mythologies with transnational experiences to both claim ownership of and complicate the idea of cultural heritage. The dragon and flaming pearl, often used as a means to represent Chinese culture, here becomes an allegory for the experience of the Cantonese diaspora. Blending old and contemporary techniques, "Tales of the Altersea" speaks to the different meanings of 'generation loss.' On one hand, she refers to what is lost in translation between different media and, on the other hand, addresses what knowledge is not passed on from one generation to the next, from one culture to another.

Curated by
Liberty Adrien and Carina Bukuts

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