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'The Altersea Opera' Is a Multilingual Tour de Force

The multi-faceted Nordic Pavilion is a nautical *Gesamtkunstwerk* about language, translation and how it functions in the globalized world



BY CHARLENE K. LAU IN OPINION | 10 APR 24



This piece appears in the columns section of frieze 242, ['Mother Tongues'](#)

I met the Swedish-Cantonese artist Lap-See Lam in 2019, when I was a curatorial fellow at Performa Biennial in New York. Lam, then a student at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm, developed a piece for the biennial entitled *Phantom Banquet* (2019), which included a Cheetos-like snack, an immersive VR installation and a live performance by members of the Columbus Park Senior Orchestra. Lam is now at the helm of another multivalent project, *The Altersea Opera*, commissioned by Moderna Museet for the Nordic Pavilion at the 60th Venice Biennale.

Birthered from her ongoing exploration into the cultural imaginary of Chinese restaurants in the Cantonese diaspora, the project expands into a new chapter, navigating the turbulent waters of loss and cultural reclamation along with her chosen collaborators: Norwegian composer Tze Yeung Ho, Helsinki-based textile artist Kholod Hawash and an assembly of musicians, designers and writers from the Nordic region and beyond. Together, they have created a nautical *Gesamtkunstwerk* – featuring performance, music, costume, architecture and video installation – that will exist both as a live version to be performed during the biennial's first week and as a recorded iteration produced specifically for the months following.



Portrait of Lap-See Lam. Photograph: Mattias Lindbäck

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PACE **Adam Pendleton**
An Abstraction

An advertisement banner for Adam Pendleton's work 'An Abstraction'. It features the PACE logo on the left, the artist's name 'Adam Pendleton' in a large, bold font, and the title 'An Abstraction' below it. The background is a dark blue abstract image with some white lines. There is a small play button icon in the top right corner.

The work takes its cue from the true story of Swedish-Chinese entrepreneur Johan Wang who, in 1991, followed his dream and built a vast floating restaurant adorned with the head and tail of a giant *loong* ('dragon') at its bow and stern. Setting sail from Shanghai, the *Sea Palace* docked in various European cities but, within ten years, the venture had failed and the vessel had fallen into disrepair. It later turned up retrofitted as a haunted house in Stockholm's Gröna Lund amusement park. Today, it sits in a shipyard two hours outside of the city. The ghosts of its recent past are still very present on the former *loong syun* (dragon boat) – which Lam has left entirely intact for filming the opera's video portions – but the ship's appendages have been brought back to life again, where they bookend the exterior of the Nordic Pavilion as if floating a ghost ship through the building.

***The Altersea Opera* is not without its humour: it's a comical jab at the seriousness of the Western world's high holy pinnacle of contemporary art.**

While pavilions have always functioned as physical and figurative backdrops for nationalist ideas of citizenship and identity, the scenography of the hacked Nordic Pavilion serves as a site of internal restructuring, containing a replica in scaffolding of *Sea Palace's* interior constructed by a bamboo *sifu* (expert). *The Altersea Opera* is not without its humour: it's a comical jab at the seriousness of the Western world's high holy pinnacle of contemporary art. The work further superimposes its aqueous theme onto the city of canals, playing with ideas of inside and outside, centre and periphery. But it's also about cultural hybridity and the gaps between belonging and feeling unmoored, treading water to stay afloat. Who gets to arrive, remain, yet also thrive?

Drawing on the Hong Kong folklore tale of Lo Ting – the half-man, half-fish from Lantau Island – *The Altersea Opera* follows Past Lo Ting (played by vocalist and composer Bruno Hibombo) and Future Lo Ting (performed and co-created by artist Ivan Cheng) – along with a cast comprising a *loong*, an eel and a singing chef – as they return by ship to their homeland of Fragrant Harbour (the literal translation of Hong Kong). The twin existential crises of refuge and return produce an oceanic current for the splintered self, where the question of home springs eternal in the face of nativism and racial politics.



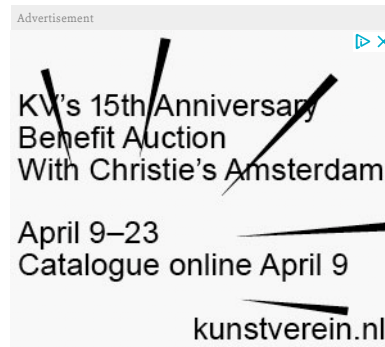
Hawash enrobes the characters and accompanying musicians in brightly coloured, richly embroidered costumes made using *jodaleia* – an Arabic quilting technique that she learned from her mother during the siege of Iraq in the early 1990s. Piecing together a variety of textures, colours and patterns, the act of quilting serves as a metaphor for the people and ideas that comprise the opera. Intensely vibrant and intricately crafted – hand-sewn pearls render luminous the scales of Past and Future Lo Tings, for instance – the energetic costumes vibrate with intensity, their stitching embedded with the movement of the characters' migration and, in parallel, the artists' and performers' individual ancestral journeys. Hawash's distinct iconography time-travels through fabric, vividly remixing traditional Mesopotamian influences with contemporary references: on Future Lo Ting's robe, for example, the character is depicted smoking a pipe and listening to music on a mobile device. It's a droll detail matched by Ho's composition and Lam's cheeky libretto.

Interspersed with traditional songs – like the Icelandic lullaby 'Bíum Bíum Bambalo' and Cantopop diva Anita Mui's 'The Years Flow Like Water' (1985), in a rendition by the singing chef, played by the artist's father, Ping-Kwan Lam – *The Altersea Opera* also showcases 雙龍出海 (Two Dragons Out of the Sea, 2024), a new composition by The Gong Strikes One, a Hong Kong-based group that specializes in traditional Chinese theatrical music. Although grounded in the tradition of Cantonese opera, of which some visual and aural elements can be discerned, *The Altersea Opera* has a broader reach that echoes the multilingual backgrounds of its collaborators.



Lap-See Lam, *The Altersea Opera*, 2024. Courtesy: © Lap-See Lam, Galerie Nordenhake and Moderna Museet, Stockholm

A veritable patchwork of musical references – in which the sound of an open mouth chewing and a faint alto saxophone give way to forlorn countertenor vocals playing with Western classical preludes – the work was described to me by its composer as ‘Cantonese, opera’. An introductory spoken passage by Future Lo Ting awakens my senses with a description of food waste: I can almost smell and taste the sour, soupy mess of yesterday’s feasts becoming today’s trash. Later, the crash of cymbals evokes the discord and tumult of Lo Ting’s subconscious, his emotional state of exile, his lamentation: ‘The alienation of my past self was kinda my own fault. But it didn’t feel like a choice. Losing my grip on the language I had before I thought it was language, the language of the sea’.



**Translation and language move in unison through the work,
crisscrossing between art forms.**

The Altersea Opera initiates a conversation around language, translation and how it functions in the globalized world, woven throughout colonial structures of the modern nation state. The libretto’s evocative lines bring into acute focus the many layers of forced migration and alienation experienced by those settling in new lands. Itself an orchestration of multidisciplinary makers from across numerous diasporas, the opera exemplifies what the Nordic region looks and sounds like now. Despite the work’s divergent histories, cultures and languages – Arabic, Cantonese, English, Estonian, Icelandic, Swedish – these ancestries converge and form a dense collectivity of experience.

As Lam told me when we met to discuss the piece in January, the work ‘embraces what is lost in translation’. Leaning into the natural flows and kinships that arise from close collaboration, the project expanded when it felt right. While journalist Maya Abdullah’s initial role was to act as Hawash’s Arabic-English translator, for instance, she ended up singing an Arabic lullaby and contributing an interview to the catalogue. Translation and language move in unison through the work, crisscrossing between art forms, exchanging visual, textual and sonic ideas. By intermingling with different disciplines and cultures, the Cantonese dialect – an older form of the Chinese language – is bolstered, its minority state kept afloat in the waters of political change.