

Altera, Altera: An Apparition at Sea
Asrin Haidari

“Truth becomes fiction when fiction is true; the real becomes not-real when the unreal is real.” ‡ Oscar Ho

Smooth bamboo is hollow between the stem’s scar-like rings, making it flexible and resilient. Dried and treated, the plant loses its mild grassy scent but becomes an effective construction material. In the process of creating the dragon ship that constitutes the foundation of *The Altersea Opera*, artist Lap-See Lam selected bamboo as her material of choice. Like the complex rhizomatic system of bamboo, the roots of this collaborative project are as entangled and manifold as those belonging to the multiple co-creators of the work. In *The Altersea Opera*, this system has drawn nourishment and inspiration from a range of histories and artistic methods, to ultimately be realized in the Nordic Countries Pavilion at La Biennale di Venezia in the Year of the Dragon 2024.

Lam’s research for the creation of the opera’s dragon ship began with her family’s country of origin, Hong Kong, and she has worked closely with master bamboo scaffolder, Ho Yeung Chan. For centuries, bamboo scaffolding has played an important role in the cultural and architectural history of the region, and has been used to build temporary stages for Cantonese opera, a celebrated art form in Guangdong province in southern China. The travelling troupe Red Boat Opera Company popularized Cantonese opera in the 19th century. The group performed along the Pearl River in China, living on red boats which during the performance season transported the ensemble and bamboo to various temple festivals. Typical of the genre is a combination of song, spoken narration, hand gestures, acrobatics, and the actors’ spectacular costumes and make-up. Musical accompaniment is performed on traditional Chinese instruments such as bamboo flute, *erhu* (two-stringed fiddle), and percussion instruments.

‡ Oscar Ho, “Lo Ting and Hong Kong Cultural Identity: Part One”, Asia Art Archive, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/like-a-fever/like-a-fever/lo-ting-and-hong-kong-cultural-identity-part-one/series/ask-the-curator-oscar-hos-curatorial-projects>.

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Authors

Lap-See Lam conceived and conceptualized the framework of *The Altersea Opera*, where Cantonese opera serves as a structure. In early conversations, Lam and I, as curator of the Nordic Countries Pavilion, developed the idea to draw upon Lam's artistic vision to produce an artwork together with artists in Norway and Finland. We invited composer Tze Yeung Ho and textile artist Kholod Hawash to respond to the opera's central premise, deploying their artistic methods in order to explore how identity across time and geography oscillates between consolidation and dissolution.

In her practice, Lam lets experiences of Hong Kong Cantonese diaspora influence her universe of tales. The worlds and narratives she creates in response to past and present migration of objects and people evoke the existential quandaries of being neither here nor there, not one or the other. Working across analogue and digital techniques, Lam's world-building practice engages with the notion of generational loss through artistic investigations into the displacement of people and objects from one context to another.

Tze Yeung Ho has previously composed experimental music for both chamber opera and musical theatre and collaborates closely with poets and artists internationally. For *The Altersea Opera*, he was invited to compose an original piece where the meeting of contemporary music with baroque ornamentation, poetry, and unexpected instruments creates a melancholia that seduces and lingers.

Drawing inspiration from folklore and archaeological landscapes as linkages between past and present, textile artist Kholod Hawash generates a distinctive world of motifs that she sews stitch by stitch through jodaleia and tatreez (Arabic for quilting and embroidery). Mythological tales across the world share common themes and characters and are rooted in the same universal yearning to explain human existence – to comprehend the inexplicable, a timeless solace. But myths are changeable and elastic: together, the artists synthesize, fabulate, draw from their own experiences, and reassemble. As with Cantonese opera, where elaborate and vibrant costumes play a crucial role in character portrayal, Hawash's work responds to Lam's story and brings its characters to life.

Libretto

The Altersea Opera is a multi-modal installation that incorporates video, music, sculpture, and textile. Lap-See Lam's libretto serves as the central axis of this collaborative undertaking. At the heart of the story is the mythological creature Lo Ting, half fish and half man. In Lam's story, Lo Ting exists in several time periods at once, and we are initially introduced to *Past Lo Ting* when he is in a state of despair. Throughout the story, the audience is guided by *Future Lo Ting*, who tries to shepherd this past version of himself in the hope of altering his course and thus his destiny. Performing as *Future Lo Ting* is artist Ivan Cheng (Amsterdam), who also co-wrote the part; pop singer Bruno Hibombo (Stockholm) plays *Past Lo Ting*.

Past Lo Ting is far from the sea where he believes that he belongs. He feels deprived of his culture and history and yearns to speak his language: a deep longing for his former life tugs at him. When *Past Lo Ting* turns to the *Sea Mother*, Ma-Zhou, for help, he accidentally summons a dragon ship and embarks on a journey with his sights set on his former home, Fragrant Harbor. The ship has no sails, but it soon becomes apparent that it is propelled forward with the aid of memories and stories. Imagination is the only thing that can move *Past Lo Ting* onward. This journey takes him beyond time and space, through whipping winds and stormy seas, where the ship eventually sinks to the ocean floor – *Past Lo Ting's* subconscious. He encounters *Eel*, who signifies his sense of abandonment, and *Dragon*, who embodies his ongoing transformation. A shoal of swimming Lo Ting-ghosts can be spied in the sea, and above the surface appears a mirage of a singing chef. The dragon ship approaches Fragrant Harbor, which proves to be transformed beyond recognition. The ship changes direction and *Past Lo Ting* continues his journey.

Music

The score for the opera was written by Tze Yeung Ho during three intensive weeks at Leveld Kunstnartun, an artist's residency in Hallingdal, Norway. The piece was then recorded at Elektron-musikstudion in Stockholm, together with an international ensemble of instrumentalists and

vocalists, including the experimental singer and improviser Sofia Jernberg (Stockholm) playing *Dragon*, countertenor Steve Katona (Berlin) playing *Eel*, and Denmark-based Icelandic trio KÍMI ensemble.

Glass bottles were used as wind instruments in the recording of the piece, and during the opening days in Venice, there is a live staging of the opera where jade-green glass sculptures take their place. Designed by Lap-See Lam to mimic bamboo roots, these sculptures have been produced by skilled artisan glass blowers at the Berengo Studio in Venice.

For the lyrics, Ho interpreted a series of verses, songs, and chants, including “Üle vee”, a poem about a small boat that disappears into the distance, written by the 19th century Estonian poet Juhan Liiv and wailed by the singer Iris Oja (Tallinn). This form of singing invokes the mourners (*Itkuvirsi*), or weepers, a tradition that recurs in many cultures, including the Karelian, where collective grief is expressed as a way to ease the pain of funeral mourners. The work also features the Icelandic lullaby “Bium Boom Bambalo”, performed by Þórgunnur Anna Örnólfsdóttir (Copenhagen).

The project’s interpreter, Maya Abdullah, was asked to sing the folkloric lullaby “Yalla tnam Rima”, popularized by the iconic Lebanese singer Fairuz and sung countless times by Abdullah to her daughter. When the dragon boat reaches the ocean floor, the mood changes and we step into the world of Lo Ting’s subconscious. For this sequence, the music duo The Gong Strikes One (Hong Kong) has been invited to compose an original piece that has been incorporated into Ho’s score. Here, a type of gong that usually sets the tone for tense moments, such as battle scenes, is deployed. The brief vocal passage is performed in a traditional Cantonese narrative singing style, *naamyam*. The lyrics are a reworking of a scene from a classical drama of the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), depicting an underwater battle. In the opera’s final scene, the mirage of the singing chef—Lap-See Lam’s father, Ping-Kwan Lam—sings stanzas from the song “The Years Flow like Water” by Hong Kong superstar Anita Mui, pop icon of the 1980s and ‘90s. Here, the chef appears as a living memory of Fragrant Harbour.

Costumes

In *The Altersea Opera*, Kholod Hawash’s work becomes both a sculptural installation in the pavilion as well as costumes worn by the ensemble in the film and the performance. The costumes infuse life and form into the story and its characters. Hawash works with contrasting colours and materials: shimmering fabrics and pearls meet simple cotton. Line by line, she embroiders contours around fabric appliquéés, and motifs gradually appear to a three-dimensional effect.

These motifs are in dialogue with Lam’s narrative and feature elements from folktales and myths retold to Hawash as a child. Her background as a children’s book illustrator can be sensed in the imaginatively naïve style, highlighting underwater creatures and plants, fish, turtles, and seaweed. Hawash has drawn upon the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh (approx. 2000 BCE), which revolves around the adventures of the Sumerian prince Gilgamesh.

During his journey, Gilgamesh searches for eternal life and confronts gods and mythological creatures in a story whose central themes are immortality, friendship, and impermanence. Oannes, the fish man who in Mesopotamian mythology represents wisdom, is the role model for *Lo Ting*, and the dragons of the bright blue Ishtar Gate—associated with Marduk, the god of heaven and earth in Babylonian and Assyrian mythology—are reborn in *The Altersea Opera*’s character *Dragon*. Another piece by Hawash illustrates the metamorphosis of the enigmatic *Eel*, whose mother has chopped off her son’s head, whereupon eight heads grow in its place and slither around in a boiling pot. Hawash learned the quilting and embroidery techniques from her mother, and she buys used textiles and clothing to create her pieces. She usually works at home, but for this project she also set up a studio in Helsinki, for the first time working with assistants to whom she has carefully transferred her methods.

Dragon Ship

Inspiration for Lap-See Lam’s fantastical ship comes from The Floating Restaurant Sea Palace, an actual three-story ship that businessman Johan Wang had commissioned, and which travelled from Shanghai

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to Gothenburg in 1991. The ship was crowned by an enormous golden dragon's head, and attached to the stern was an equally shiny tail, both drawn by the Chinese artist Lu Guangzheng. The floating restaurant is featured in many of Lam's previous artworks. In *The Altersea Opera*, this ship becomes the central figure when its silhouette is outlined by a full-scale bamboo grid. The dragon's magnificent head and tail, which have grown weathered and green over time, were transported from Stockholm to Venice for the Biennale and mark the beginning and end of the ship.

Since its creation, Wang's dragon ship has lived many troubled lives, time and again transformed and resurrected in new guises. After years of financial challenges with restaurant operations at various European ports, the ship found a temporary home at Gullbergskajen, also called The Quay of Dreams, in Gothenburg. It is said that the storied dragon ship is adorned with 8,888 dragons in varying forms. The mythical creature appears in gilded interior ornamentation, hides in beautiful wood carvings on the wall panels, and decorates shiny textiles on the dining-room ceiling. When the ship was subsequently transported to Stockholm and served as a ghostly haunted house at the Gröna Lund amusement park, Wang, in consultation with his mother, chose to separate the body from the head and tail. The Chinese dragon, *Long*, is in fact a kind-hearted creature who protects the sea with power over storms, rivers, lakes, and streams. Now the dragon attains new life through *The Altersea Opera*.

As part of the installation, Lam has made a video work depicting the opera performed aboard the actual dragon ship, against the backdrop of a snowy winter landscape, capturing its metamorphosis. Past and Future Lo Ting appear aboard the vessel in two of its incarnations: first, when it served as a haunted house, featuring a labyrinthine structure with ghosts, skeletons, and pirates; and second, after it has been restored and returned to its resting place in the Stockholm archipelago. Despite the restoration, traces of the haunted house linger, evident in blood stains and imprints of the former walls on the floor and ceiling. Thus, we witness the ship's passage, how its journey into the pavilion blurs the lines between reality and illusion.

Languages

In working with the exhibition, journalist Maya Abdullah has served as an invaluable colleague and resource in her translation and interpretation between Arabic, English, and Swedish. She has been on several trips, via link and in endless chat conversations – a witness but also co-creator in her role as mediator. This catalogue includes a transcribed conversation between Lap-See Lam, Tze Yeung Ho, and Kholod Hawash, moderated and simultaneously interpreted by Maya Abdullah. Lam's uncle, Tanny Lam, has also played a crucial role as interpreter in meetings between the project team and the master bamboo worker Ho Yeung Chan, who constructed the pavilion's spectral dragon ship out of bamboo.

Many of the central questions of *The Altersea Opera* engage with the disparate yet intertwined histories and experiences of those of us who have participated in its making. Like many others, we share experiences of losing our culture, language, and context, and at the same time being transformed by new encounters. Those of us who have been involved in this project have lived and worked across geographical distances, mobilizing divergent life experiences, artistic methods, and languages, including Swedish, Cantonese, Arabic, Finnish and Norwegian. Raised in a home of interpreters, I know well the implications of translation and interpretation – the constant need to reassess or recalibrate, and the lingering desire to have what was said restated. But also to accept ambiguity: to fumble, laugh, and embrace the tenderness that arises in those attempts to make oneself understood, the bonds forged in that by necessity collaborative process.

The Altersea Opera gives space to the fantastical and the theatrical, the profound and the visceral, while it moves across transmutations of time and space. Like a portal opening up onto the transcendental, the work invokes heartbreaking beauty and mourning, but also something far richer: two poles are depicted here – the desire to stay and the need to move on. The space between them holds an epic search for the self in fragments of a distant past.