

# Floating Signifiers

## LAP-SEE LAM

BY HG MASTERS



LAP-SEE LAM with dragon head made by LU GUANGZHENG. Photo by Mattias Lindbäck/Moderna Museet.

"We were appealing from the Dreamers' Quay: for protection, for our dreams to see the light. I am praying through dawn and night: lead me home through the waters of the maternal ancestor!" implored the performer Ivan Cheng, wearing a blue-and-orange, fish-adorned robe, his face awash in peachy-rose makeup. He then mounted a giant lattice of bamboo scaffolding. The two characters of "we" are Past Lo Ting (played by pop singer Bruno Hibombo) and Future Lo Ting (Cheng), based on the mythical half-human, half-fish creature of Pearl River Delta lore. As Past Lo Ting longs for his sea culture and language lost, the "maternal ancestor" (the Sea Mother, Ma-Zhou) assists him in returning to the Fragrant Harbour (the literal meaning of Hong Kong) on a giant dragon ship. Future Lo Ting hopes to steer his other self away from the tragic temptations of nostalgia.

This scene came amid the second act of *The Altersea Opera* (2024), a live performance and installation with video conceived by artist Lap-See Lam for the Nordic Pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale. Lam's libretto is one of diasporic consciousness, a subject she has been exploring in projects in recent years that culminated in this dramatic, highly eclectic contemporary reinterpretation of a Cantonese opera as an exhibition. The bamboo scaffolding that filled the interior formed the body of the ship—referencing the Red Boat Opera Company that sailed the waterways of southern China beginning in the late Qing dynasty (19th century) and set up temporary theaters built from such structures to perform. In Venice, a massive bronze head and tail of a *loong* (dragon) sat outside on the pebbled walkways of the Giardini forming the two ends. The sails—magically invisible—were said to be stitched from memories; the ship's movement into the future powered by the desire to recover the past.

Lam's massive production was orchestrated with curator Asrin Haidari of the Moderna Museet in Stockholm,

Installation view of LAP-SEE LAM's *The Altersea Opera*, 2024, with KHOLOD HAWASH and TZE YEUNG HO, at the Nordic Countries Pavilion, 60th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale de Venezia, 2024. Photo by Michael Miller/Moderna Museet. Courtesy the artist, Moderna Museet and Galerie Nordenhake.



Live performance of LAP-SEE LAM's *The Altersea Opera*, 2024, with KHOLOD HAWASH and TZE YEUNG HO, at the Nordic Countries Pavilion, 60th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale de Venezia, 2024. Photo by Michael Miller/Moderna Museet. Courtesy the artist, Moderna Museet and Galerie Nordenhake.



and involved numerous collaborators and performers whose own multilingual, diasporic histories were woven into the production. The music was written with Tze Yeung Ho, a composer from Norway, who incorporated elements of Estonian poetry, *Naam-yam* (Cantonese traditional singing), and accordion players. Textile artist Kholod Hawash, who was born in Basra, Iraq, and now lives in Finland, designed the kimono-like costumes using the Arabic styles of *jodaleia* (quilting) and *tareez* (embroidery), mixing aquatic motifs from the Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh with contemporary imagery like figures wearing headphones. The scaffolding was created by Hong Kong bamboo *sifu* (master) Ho Yeung Chan. Lam's own father plays the Singing Chef in the final act, voicing lines from Cantopop star Anita Mui's "The Years Flow like Water." There were myriad languages spoken in the many production processes,

which accords with Lam's interest in the continuous, mutable forms of translation.

Lam's distant "collaborators" extend back in time as well. More than three decades ago, businessman Johan Wang commissioned the three-story Floating Restaurant Sea Palace to be built in Shanghai. It also featured a dragon ship's head and tail, which were originally designed by the artist Lu Guangzheng. After Wang towed it to Europe by sea, it arrived in Gothenburg, Sweden, at the Gullbergskajen, or the "The Quay of Dreams," in 1991. After the restaurant failed, the dragon ship ended up being leased to Stockholm's Gröna Lund amusement park, where it was being used annually as a haunted house. Except, Wang removed its head and tail, as, in the amusement park's orientalist narrative, the dragon was meant to be sinister—which clashed with Chinese idea of the *loong* as an auspicious symbol and the protector of water. Lam spotted

it moored on a city island from her studio window, and gave it a new life as the set for *The Altersea Opera*, while rescuing its massive bronze head and tail.

The idea of the Chinese restaurant as a "dream space frozen in time," with interiors filled with examples of chinoiserie, objects rooted in fantasies of great emperors and distant lands, has been at the heart of Lam's artistic practice to date. So are the realities of the recurring cultural stereotypes and the latent orientalism embodied in these spaces, seemingly no matter where in the world they are encountered. Born in Stockholm in 1990 to a Cantonese family, Lam grew up in the back of a Chinese restaurant that had been established by her grandmother, who had emigrated from Hong Kong. Stepping outside the family business, Lam studied at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm for both her bachelor's and master's degrees. But she has remained fascinated by the quasi-mythical aura of the Chinese restaurant, as a kind of vessel that both preserves and warps time and tradition as it migrates across geographies, and yet ties members of diasporas together.

For all of Lam's interest in the past, technology has been a key component of her practice. In 2017, she launched a collaborative project with Wingyee Wu, titled *Mother's Tongue* (2017–18), about the history of Sweden's Chinese restaurants. Originally formatted as an app that guided visitors through the city, playing videos at these locations, *Mother's Tongue* is set across three moments in time—past (1978), present (2018), and future (2058)—with monologues by three generations of women who speak of their clashes over language, technology, and cultural adaptation faced by diaspora

families. The visuals are based on 3D scans and virtual renderings of interiors, giving an oddly estranged and distant feeling to the original spaces.

Lam's own family ended up selling their restaurant, Bamboo Garden, in Stockholm, prompting her to document the many Chinese restaurants of a certain generation that were being sold or renovated. She learned to make 3D scans of interiors as a means of preservation, but these were always imperfect. The idea of the "glitch" became key to her, representing the digital data loss that occurs in transfers between devices, one generation of technology to the next, and corresponding to her sense of the loss of cultural knowledge that comes from "idiomatic inheritance." Into these gaps, however, comes the twin potentials of imagination.

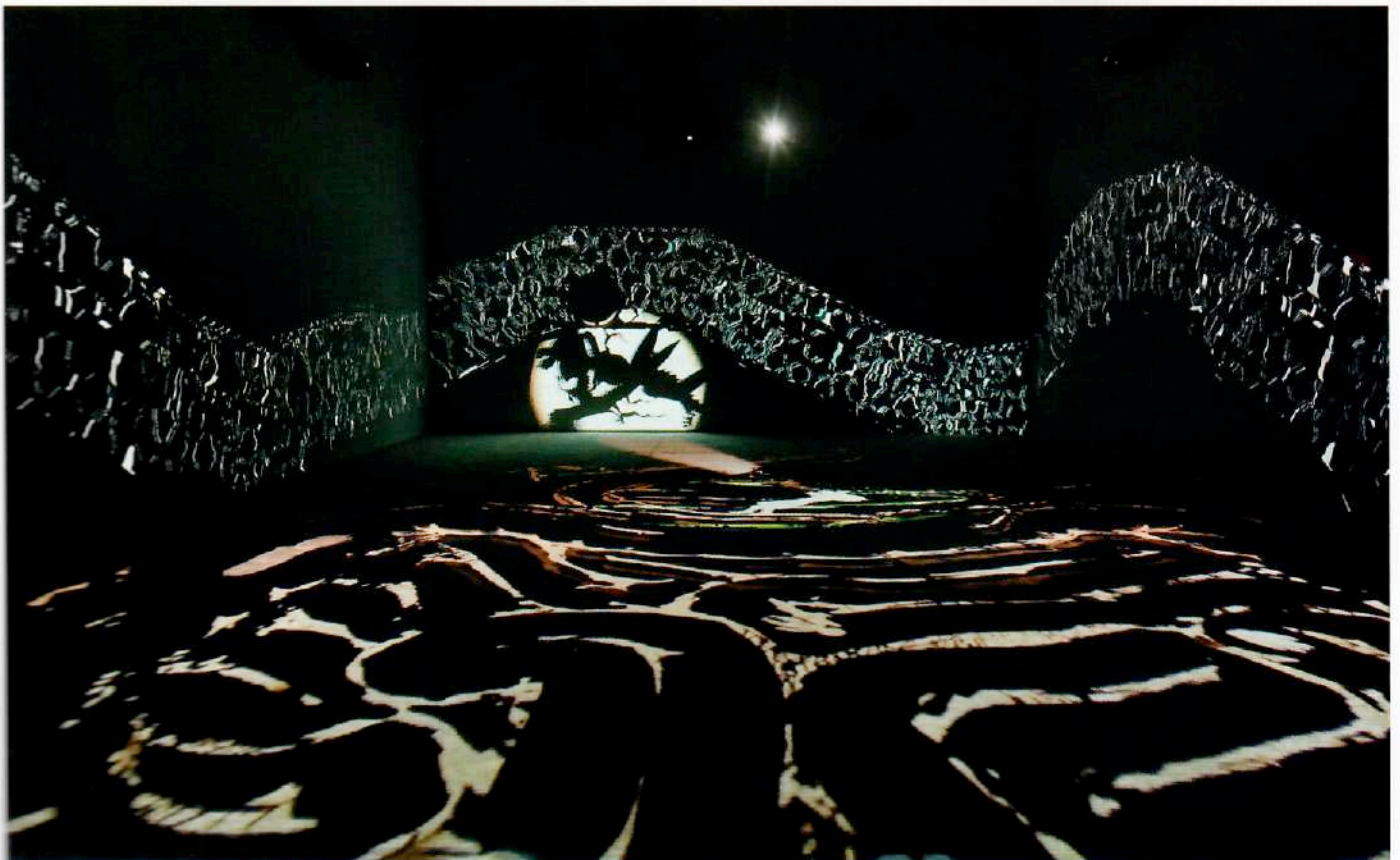
The conception and materialization of otherness is embodied in the history of chinoiserie. In *Dreamers' Quay* (2022), a teenage girl travels from a 1970s Chinese restaurant back to the 18th century when chinoiserie was a prevailing style in Europe, as trade with the Qing Dynasty grew (the Swedish East India Company was established in Gothenburg in 1731). Lam used 3D scans of the Chinese Pavilion in Drottningholm Palace outside of Stockholm that had been decorated with silk, porcelain, and lacquerware imported from China. In this era, shadow puppetry, known as

*ombres chinoises* (Chinese shadows), was also imported to Europe. In the video, the 360-degree projection is rendered like as shadow puppetry as the girl, A'Yan, is thrust into the royal family's service, onto the dragon ship restaurant in Gothenburg, and an 18th century East India Company vessel at sea. *Dreamers' Quay*, shown at Bonniers Konsthall in a show titled "Dreamers' Quay / Dreamers' Key," points to the duality of memory and these spaces. Gaps in knowledge, historically, have been filled by orientalist fantasies.

Other lost places in memory can be actively refilled. This is the story of Lo Ting. On the eve of the 1997 Hong Kong Handover, the curator Oscar Ho opened an exhibition titled "Hong Kong Incarnated: History, Community, Individual" with a section was devoted to the half-fish, half-human mythological creature. Because there was a lack of credible sources, he invited artists and academics to "recreate our ancestral history," adding information and artifacts to embellish the myths that could be "metaphors for Hong Kong's unique cultural history." Subsequently artists including Clara Cheung, Ellen Pau, and Lam Tung Pang have created their own works about the mythical figure; in each version becoming a vessel for a different symbol: an Indigenous culture, a legacy of anti-imperialism or rebellion against the central government, or a reflection of cultural hybridity and fluidity.

As Ho had proposed about the Lo Ting myth: "Truth becomes fiction when fiction is true; the real becomes not-real when the unreal is real."

Lam's engagement with the Lo Ting story came to the fore in *Tales of the Altersea* (2023). As Lam explained, "The 'altersea' is a sea that changes or that changes the way we see things." The eight-channel video installation (with music and soundscape by composers Linus Hillborg and Marlena Salonen, and vocals by Bruno Hibombo), shown at Portikus in Frankfurt in 2023 and later at Swiss Institute in New York, is based on 3D scans of the dragon ship restaurant and again, the dark underwater animation echoes the style of early image-projection devices such as the magic lantern and shadow puppetry. As *Tales of the Altersea* narrates, two girls swim underwater through the sunken Sea Palace, encountering Lo Ting and other figures from Cantonese mythology, such as the Da Peng bird that had once been a Freedom Swimmer (those who fled from mainland China to Hong Kong across the water). They recover the loong's spirit from the depths, yet are transformed in the process, and just as in *The Altersea Opera*, Past Lo Ting sails right by the Fragrant Harbour, which has transformed to such an extent that he can no longer recognize it. The moorings of our memory are treacherous, Lam suggests; better to wander the seas.



Installation view of LAP-SEE LAM's *Tales of the Altersea*, at Portikus, Frankfurt am Main, 2023. Photo by Alwin Lay. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Nordenhake, Stockholm/Berlin/Mexiko City.