



Simone Leigh, *Brick House*, 2019, bronze. Installation view, Arsenale, Venice, 2022. From "The Milk of Dreams." Photo: Roberto Marossi.

VENICE

Chimerical Romance

CHLOE WYMA ON “THE MILK OF DREAMS”

VENICE 2022

IT'S NO EXAGGERATION to say that the 127-year-old Venice Biennale is the standard against which every major international art exhibition is judged. So when the fifty-ninth edition finally arrived in April, its opening delayed a year by Covid-19, all eyes turned to the ancient City of Masks to see what kind of future the pandemic might engender.

Curator Cecilia Alemani's “The Milk of Dreams,” the event's polestar, forcefully yet subtly engages canonical prejudices. In the pages that follow, *Artforum* associate editor **CHLOE WYMA** and contributing editor **DANIEL BIRNBAUM** reckon with Alemani's phantasmagoric show, while artist **KEN OKIISHI** reflects on another of the city's touchstones: Udo Kittelmann and Taryn Simon's coyly cerebral “Human Brains: It Begins with an Idea” at the Fondazione Prada's Venetian headquarters.

The Fifty-Ninth Venice Biennale and “Human Brains: It Begins with an Idea” are on view through November 27.

*Humbert was the most beautiful boy in the town.
He had blue eyes and golden curls.
He was very beautiful, but he was nasty.
He liked putting rats in the beds of his sisters.
The little girls cried.
One day, Rose, his sister, put a crocodile in his bed.
“AI” yelled Humbert, “I’m afraid there’s a crocodile in my bed!”
But Humbert was so beautiful the crocodile gave him an agreeable smile.
Humbert and the crocodile had become friends.
The child was even nastier than he was before because he could go everywhere with the crocodile.*

—Leonora Carrington

PAINTED IN THE 1950S on the walls of her sons' bedroom and later collected in a children's book called *The Milk of Dreams*, Leonora Carrington's wicked fairy tales inspired the title and tenor of the Fifty-Ninth Venice Biennale. Filled with disobedient children, deviant friendships, orphaned monsters, evil crones, sentient meat, hungry furniture, misplaced heads, scatological warfare, and pharmacological magic, Carrington's stories struck curator Cecilia Alemani for their construction of what she describes as “a world free of hierarchies, where everyone can become something else.” Alemani endeavored to create something like this world in her beautiful and perturbing exhibition, and to a great degree she has succeeded.

In the rotunda entrance to the Arsenale, Golden Lion winner Simone Leigh's sightless *Brick House*, 2019, part female figure, part architectural envelope, is encircled by the gorgonizing black-and-white collagraphs of the late Cuban printmaker Belkis Ayón. A self-described atheist, Ayón devoted her oeuvre to interpreting the mysteries and rituals of Abakuá, an Afro-Cuban initiatory fraternity whose core legend concerns a woman who, much like Ayón herself, appropriated and redistributed patriarchal knowledge. While collecting river water, the princess Sikán captured in her vessel a sacred talking fish that revealed to her ancestral wisdom reserved for men. In defiance of her father, she disclosed these secrets to her lover, said to be the prince of a rival kingdom. Her Promethean crime was punished by death. (Ayón's own story also ends tragically, with the artist's mysterious 1999 suicide.)

Sikán appears in a number of Ayón's collagraphs, sometimes as a black figure, sometimes white, often armored in fish scales. She cradles a sacrificial goat in the icon-like *Sin título (Sikán con chivo)* (Untitled [Sikán with Goat]), 1993, her big bright eyes meeting our gaze. The print, the wall text tells us, was a gift to the ceramicist Stellana Favaro Poletti, who hosted Ayón in Italy when she exhibited at the 1993 Biennale; its back is inscribed with a dedication: *To Stellana with much love and gratitude*. The work presages much of what's to come in “The Milk of Dreams”: a reevaluation of Indigenous and syncretic cosmologies over Enlightenment paradigms of knowledge production; a recursive treatment of art history (especially in the five thematic “time capsule” rooms scattered through the Giardini and the Arsenale); a pluralistic and affirmative feminist politics reflective of the show's unprecedented demographics (with more than 90 percent of the included artists identifying as female or nonbinary); an aesthetic embrace of Surrealism and magic befitting Silvia Federici's call for a “re-enchantment of the world” against the spiritual privations of capitalism; and an ethos of “symbiosis, solidarity, and sisterhood” across national, identitarian, and species divisions. Key touchstones in this regard are Rosi Braidotti's posthuman critical theory and Donna Haraway's “Cyborg” (1985) and “Companion Species” (2003) manifestos. Concluding the former text, Haraway wrote, “Though both are bound in the spiral dance, I would



Left: Belkis Ayón, *Sin título (Sikán con chivo)* (Untitled [Sikán with Goat]), 1993, collagraph on paper, 34 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 27 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". From "The Milk of Dreams."

Above: Jane Graverol, *L'école de la vanité (The School of Vanity)*, 1967, oil and collage on cardboard, 27 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 41 $\frac{1}{8}$ ". From "The Witch's Cradle."

Below: Remedios Varo, *Armonía (Autorretrato sugerente)* (Harmony [Suggestive Self Portrait]), 1956, oil on Masonite, 29 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 36 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". From "The Witch's Cradle."

Opposite page, top: Mary Ellen Solt, *Forsythia*, 1966, ink on paper, 11 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ ". From "Corps Orbité."

Opposite page, bottom: View of "A Leaf a Gourd a Shell a Net a Bag a Sling a Sack a Bottle a Pot a Box a Container," 2022, Arsenale, Venice. Foreground: Works by Ruth Asawa, ca. 1951–62. Background: Felipe Baeza, *Don't draw attention to yourself you're already . . .*, 2022. Photo: Roberto Marossi.

rather be a cyborg than a goddess." "The Milk of Dreams" dances both parts, sublating primordialist and constructivist imaginaries and enjoining us to entertain the decentering, hybridizing possibilities of "becoming-animal," "becoming-machine," and "becoming-earth."

Early on in the Giardini, we encounter "The Witch's Cradle." The first of the time capsules, and distinguished by Alemani as the fulcrum of her exhibition, the gallery is devoted to women artists who "adopt themes of metamorphosis, ambiguity, and fragmentation to contrast the myth of the Cartesian unitary." Female Surrealist production predominates, from the room's namesake 1943 film by Maya Deren, which weaves an ensorcelling web through the Correalist environs of Peggy Guggenheim's gallery, to Jane Graverol's *L'école de la vanité* (The School of Vanity), 1967, a collaged-and-painted cyborg Sphinx that emblemizes, more manifestly than any other work on view, the Harawayan assemblage of animal, human, and machine that is the show's polestar. Carrington is represented here (though with fewer works, and less spectacular ones, than might be expected of an exhibition flying her flag). So is her friend and partner in witchcraft Remedios Varo, whose 1956 painting *Armonía (Autorretrato sugerente)* (Harmony [Suggestive Self-Portrait]) glows like a cabochon behind museum glass, its central figure skewering various curios—seashells, crystals, a turnip, a scrap of paper bearing the number pi—on the lines of a musical staff.

A principled effort is made to reflect Surrealism's international and often anti-imperialist trajectories. See, for example, the vibrant





Nanda Vigo, the syncopated rule-based abstractions of Lucia di Luciano, and the protodigital kaleidoscopic screens of Grazia Varisco seem like vestiges of a bygone technopositivism. They leave me a bit cold, but their cybernetic imagery and computational logics bleed into the truly enchanting art of the adjoining rooms, host to the drunken deductive structures of Vera Molnar (an early adopter of algorithm-generated art) and to Ulla Wiggen's precisionist gouaches of circuit boards and archaic computer innards. A scrolling diagram by Agnes Denes chronicles the *longue durée* of man-made tools and machines, a friendly reminder that we have always been cyborgs.

The show's final capsule, in fact, proposes a lineage of cyborgian art—from the dumpster-diving genderfuckery of the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven to the robot ectoplasms of Kiki Kogelnik—that anticipates Haraway's figuration of the cyborg as an avatar of "transgressed boundaries" and "potent fusions" between nature and artifice, body and mind. The room, titled "Seduction of the

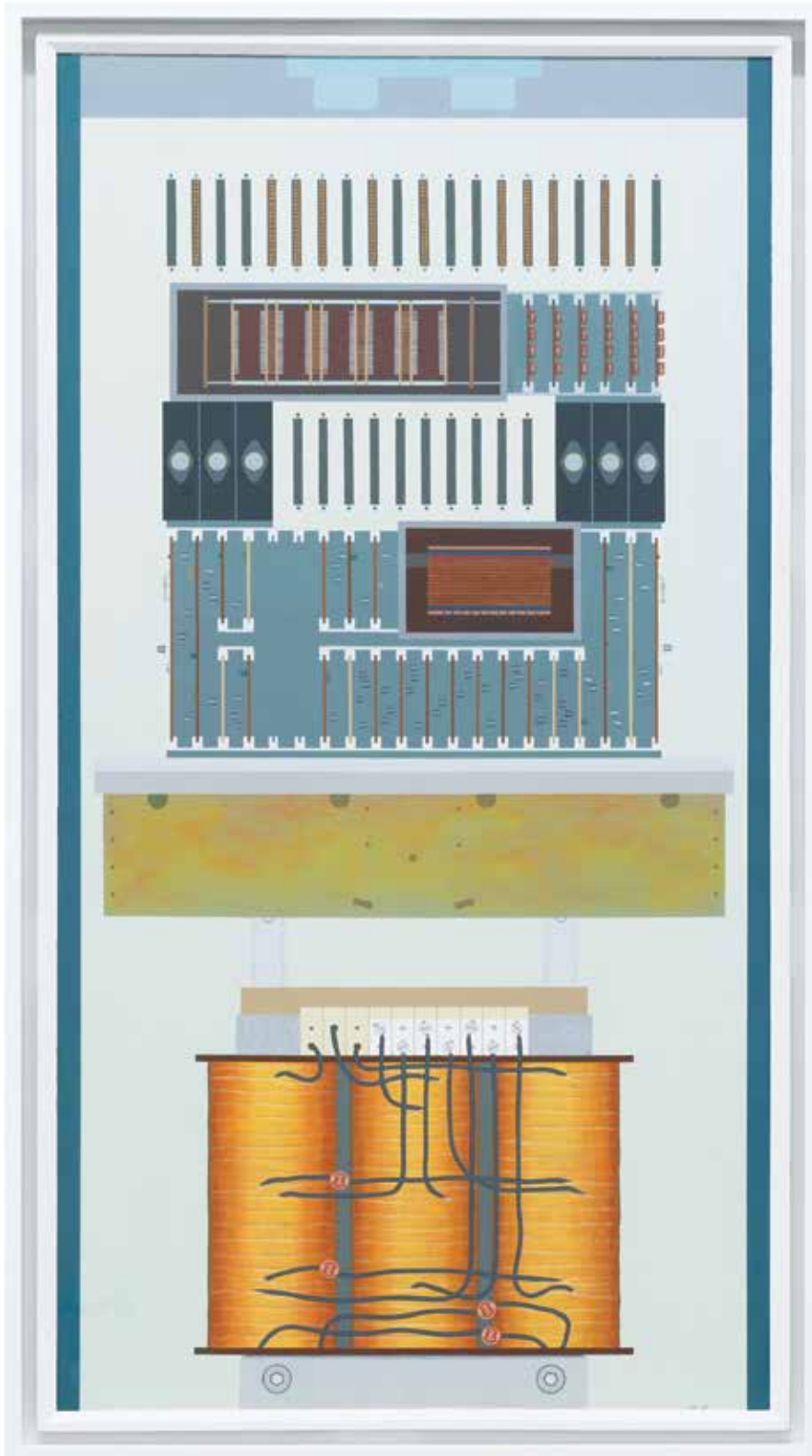


Above: View of "Seduction of the Cyborg," 2022, Arsenale, Venice. Foreground: Lavinia Schulz and Walter Holdt's costumes, 1924/2005–2006. Photo: Roberto Marossi.

Left: View of "Technologies of Enchantment," 2022, Arsenale, Venice. Photo: Marco Cappelletti.

Opposite page: Ulla Wiggen, *Trask*, 1967, acrylic on wooden panel, 59 x 31½". From "The Milk of Dreams."

“The Milk of Dreams” enjoins us to renounce our “species supremacy” and embrace the decentering, hybridizing processes of “becoming-animal,” “becoming-machine,” and “becoming-earth.”

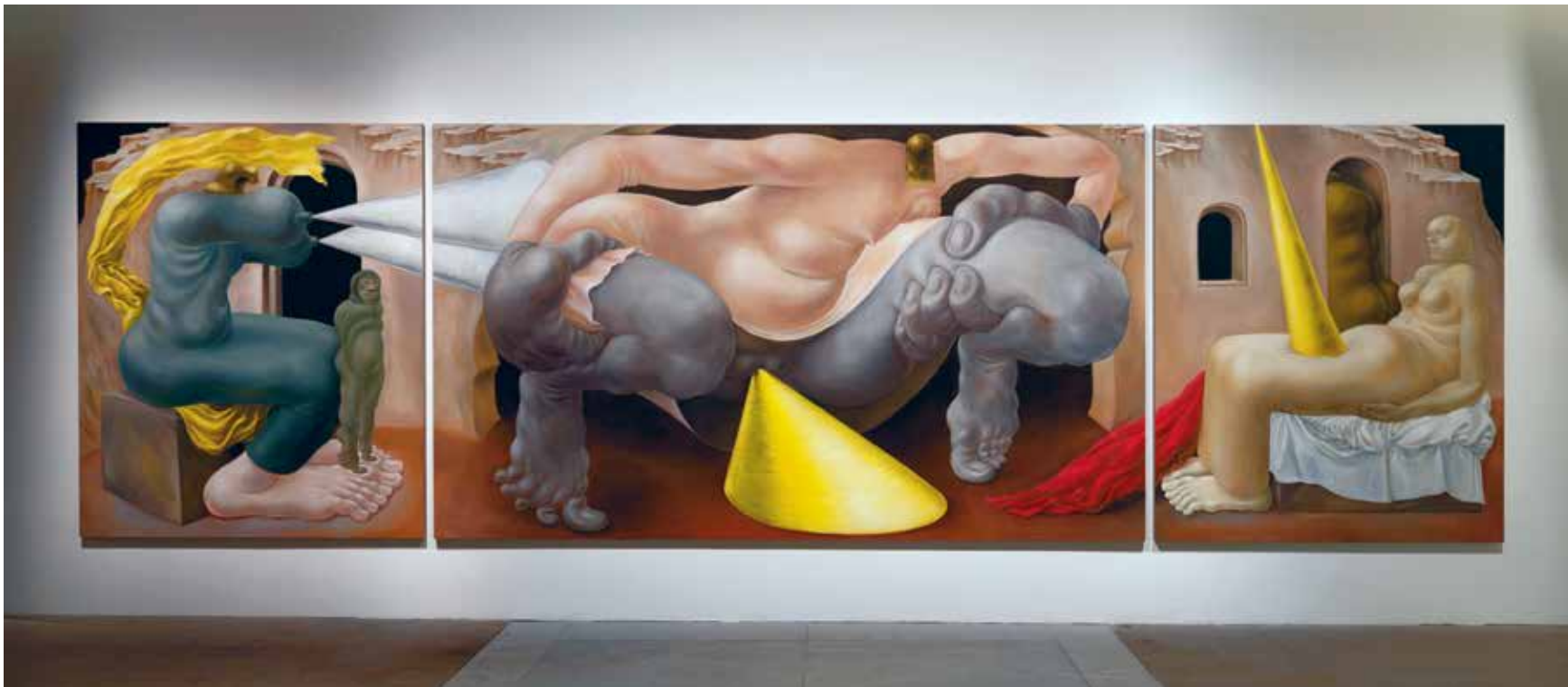


Cyborg” in homage to a 1994 work by Biennale artist and special mention recipient Lynn Hershman Leeson, is host to many bionic marvels and extraordinary automatons. See, for example, the cyberpunk *trouvé* of neo-classical sculptor Anna Coleman Ladd’s delicate prostheses for disfigured World War I veterans; the mechanomorphic elegance of Alexandra Exter’s costume designs for the 1924 Soviet sci-fi picture *Aelita, the Queen of Mars*; the slow-moving bachelor machine of Rebecca Horn’s *Kiss of the Rhinoceros*, 1989. But what I’ll probably remember most is a sextet of wacky and wonderful Expressionist costumes by Hamburg dancer Lavinia Schulz and her partner, Walter Holdt, which hold down the center of the cavernous gallery. By all accounts, the duo were absolutely dedicated to their theatrical art as a higher calling. “Spirit and money are two antagonistic poles,” Schulz once wrote, “and if you sell spiritual ideas for money, you sold the spirit to the money and lost the spirit.” The lovable, Muppet-like costumes here hail from 1924—the same year that, in desperate financial straits, Schulz shot Holdt and then herself, four days before her twenty-eighth birthday. Their fate, unremarked in the gallery, is a harsh lesson that the transformative power of the imagination has its limits when ranged against economic reality.

“The Milk of Dreams” teems with iconographies of metamorphism—animal, vegetable, and mineral—from Shuvinai Ashoona’s platypus- and walrus-headed chimeras (which earned the jury’s second special mention) to Felipe Baeza and Rosana Paulino’s germinating dryads to Silver Lion winner Ali Cherri’s film *Of Men and Gods and Mud*, 2022, which overlays footage of brickmakers in Sudan with telluric creation myths from different world cultures. Myrlande Constant brings forth Vodou mermaids from intricate tambour beadwork; Ambra Castagnetti furbelows an Amazonian breastplate with ceramic calamari; Frantz Zéphirin transmogrifies Atlantic enslavers into snouted beasts. The mononymous Overtaci conjures lost Babylons populated by bipedal felines in paintings made during her fifty-six-year confinement in a Danish psychiatric hospital. (In 1957, she persuaded the doctors there to allow her gender-affirming surgery.)

As the fabulous menagerie assembled in “The Milk of Dreams” attests, multispecies intermingling is fertile territory for art, but hybridity as such isn’t ontologically innocent or virtuous. (Remember Carrington’s little Humbert and how he ended up “even nastier” after his encounter with the crocodile?) As Braidotti cautions in the exhibition’s catalogue, “We cannot naively take the posthuman as an intrinsically subversive or liberatory category,” and the show stumbles when its posthumanist topoi begin to feel panacean or programmatic. Take Eglė Budvytytė’s *Songs from the Compost: mutating bodies, imploding stars*, 2020, shot in a lichen forest in Lithuania. The film features indolent, fashion-y takes of attractive young performers idling, frolicking, and sprouting umbilical cords and fungal excrescences as a soporific voice-over guides the audience through “a process of mineralization” (a process that involves “learning from the stone community” and “implementing stone values”) before enticing us to enter the “moist wet slippery complex” of the bacterial kingdom. Despite the posthumanist critique of such binary oppositions as *bios/zoe* and nature/culture, a kind of neo-Rousseauian primitivism reemerges here, with the image of the “noble savage” supplanted by that of a feminized nature (“bacteria . . . she will take care of you”).

Marianna Simnett’s porcine sexploitation fable *The Severed Tail*, 2022, is more Carringtonian in its excesses and edges, embracing horror, obscenity, and grotesque humor. Ditto Raphaela Vogel’s *Können und Müssen* (Ability and Necessity), 2022, installed near Simnett’s work in the Arsenale. A supersize model of the male anatomy, labeled in German with various maladies and disorders and hitched to a cortege of skeletal giraffes, Vogel’s



Left: Candice Lin, *Xternesta*, 2022, mixed media. Installation view, Arsenale, Venice. From "The Milk of Dreams." Photo: Roberto Marossi.

Above: Louise Bonnet, *Pisser Triptych*, 2021–22, oil on linen. Installation view, Arsenale, Venice, 2022. From "The Milk of Dreams." Photo: Roberto Marossi.

Opposite page: Precious Okoyomon, *To See the Earth Before the End of the World*, 2022, raw wool, yarn, dirt, blood, kudzu plants, sugarcane fields, butterflies, Moog synthesizers, electronics, percussion. Installation view, Arsenale, Venice. From "The Milk of Dreams." Photo: Roberto Marossi.



bizzarrie parades past the grand *Pisser Triptych*, 2021–22, by Louise Bonnet, whose microcephalic giantesses discharge formidable sprays of urine and breast milk. Resembling elfin fountains, Jes Fan's cantilevered structures contain puddles of pearly goop laced with the hormone prolactin (an endocrinological riff on "The Milk of Dreams"?), while Mire Lee's kinetic architecture of pumps and wiggling tubes secretes Bataillean surpluses of liquid clay.

Thirty-seven years ago, Haraway envisioned "building a political form that actually manages to hold together witches, engineers, elders, perverts, Christians, mothers, and Leninists long enough to disarm the state"—a speculative alliance that comes close to capturing the carnivalesque, if not quite state-dismantling, hybridity on view in "The Milk of Dreams." In her catalogue contribution, Braidotti proposes another coalitional politics: "an assemblage between women and LGBTQ+ as the others of 'Man,' and the other 'others' in the form of non-whites (postcolonial, Black, Jewish, Indigenous, and hybrid subjects), non-anthropomorphic organisms (animals, insects, plants, trees, viruses and bacteria), and so forth—a colossal hybridisation of species." It remains to be seen what power this imagined community—comprising, I suppose, all sentient and nonsentient matter excluding straight white shkotzim—might flex in the electoral sphere, at the point of production, or in the



streets. But if one takes even a quarter-step outside the art world's magic circle, one can grasp how such rhetoric might serve a revanchist Right that is building terrifying momentum off its own folk demons: in this case, a loony Left elite that has more to say about making common cause with mushrooms than about the rise of rural "deaths of despair." Alemani has characterized the exhibition's posthumanism as a response, in part, to "the looming threat of environmental disaster," but framing this threat in idealist terms—as a consequence of anthropocentrism, Enlightenment rationality, or the *Weltanschauung* of "species supremacy"—can't help but obscure its material cause. "Global warming," as environmental historian Jason W. Moore reminds us, "is not the accomplishment of an abstract humanity, the *Anthropos*. Global warming is capital's crowning achievement."

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That's not to say I have no use for thinking with and through the plants. Consider Candice Lin's *Xternesta*, 2022. Half pagan altar, half mad scientist's laboratory, the installation traces cosmopolitan enmeshments of nature and culture, magic and medicine, witchcraft and racecraft across late modernity. Various potions and tinctures ("clairvoyant testosterone," "fermented face") are displayed on pedestals crowded with taxidermied reptiles, talismans, and chemistry sets, as well as in niches lodged in the bodies of polyhedral ceramic idols. The stories Lin tells with her assembled materials are too complex to recount in full here, but they are fantastic and real, from the rake's progress of eighteenth-century charlatan George Psalmanazar—who duped London society with his claim that he was the first indigene of Formosa (now Taiwan) to travel to Europe—to the establishment, by fugitive Filipino slaves, of Saint Malo, Louisiana, believed to be the first Asian settlement in the United States.

A jar filled with a viscous, honey-like substance contains "fermented tea, sugar, dried shrimp, and clay" from the swampy remnants of this lost fishing village, swept away more than a century ago by a hurricane. Nearby, Lin presents ceramic frogs fired from this muck—a tribute to a community she imagines as "a multi-racial space across time, where Filipino and African enslaved and indentured workers escaped and were later joined by nineteenth-century Chinese and Indian indentured laborers fleeing debt-peonage conditions." Another display features a container of kudzu root and bioplastics made from its starches. Traditionally used in Chinese medicine, kudzu was introduced to the United States in the decade after the Civil War, when it was championed as a remedy to the soil depletion wreaked by plantation agriculture. The plant's westward migration, Lin notes, parallels that of Chinese laborers, who were "brought to the US as a transition from and 'solution' to slave labor. Later, both the plant and the indentured workers were seen as invasive, perverse, and an unstoppable scourge."

The same invasive species runs wild in Precious Okoyomon's Southern Gothic garden *To See the Earth Before the End of the World*, 2022. An elegiac coda to the exhibition inside the Arsenale, this overgrown crepuscular environment concludes a roulade of installations portending civilizational extinction, from Sandra Mujinga's Ozymandian effigies to Robert Grosvenor's rusted husk of a corrugated-iron shed. Here, a meandering trail is superintended by female figures made from raw wool, yarn, dirt, and blood, their morphologies calling back to Leigh's monumental sculpture at the show's entrance, their materials to a paradisaical Earthwork by Colombian artist Delcy Morelos at its heart. But it's the shared symbolism of the kudzu, in Lin's altar and Okoyomon's garden, that captures my imagination, because it suggests links between different historical origins and itineraries, and maybe even the possibility of a common human path through the weeds. □

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