

artasiapacific



Listening to the Past

How can we communicate, and commune, with our ancestors whose lives and cultures are long lost to time and geography? And what can we learn from the way they survived, and thrived, as communities? At a moment when the Earth and its peoples are facing fiery catastrophes brought on by the climate crisis, mass extinctions of different species, and waves of displacement, the contemporary world is endeavoring to unlock knowledge of our past more than ever before.

In our cover feature, artist Zadie Xa peels back the leaves on her creative ventures in which she stages quasi-mythical rituals and environments populated by shamans and creatures of the natural world, from seagulls to orcas, octopuses, and sea urchins. As Xa explains to managing editor Chloe Chu in their conversation, she draws on her diasporic upbringing, the 1990s street culture of the Canadian west coast, and the shape-shifting practices of shamans, who she finds intriguing for “their ability to cross between worlds and act as mediators between the living and the dead.”

In our second feature, London-based contributor Cleo Roberts-Komireddi caught up with Gala Porras-Kim following the Los Angeles-based artist's residency at Delfina Foundation. The two of them spoke about Porras-Kim's long-running engagements with cultural artifacts and the institutions in which they are kept and displayed. While in London, Porras-Kim had scrutinized the collection of the British Museum amid debates about the colonial institution's repatriation of art objects and historical relics from around the world. As the artist explains to Roberts-Komireddi, she takes on a mediator role in order to help museums talk about the problems they are facing today, motivated by her love of institutions and desire to “make them better.”

Rounding out the Features is *Up Close*, where *AAP's* editors shine a spotlight on the satirical, ultra-saccharine manga paintings of Liu Yin; Shuruq Harb's ruminative video on bodily movement in a Palestinian context, *The Jump* (2020); and Pinar Öğrenci's video installation *A New Year's Eve* (2021), which is based on the artist's arrest by Turkish anti-terrorism police during protests in the Kurdish-majority city of Diyarbakır. Inside Burger Collection focuses on the legendary artist Lee Ufan, who, curator Jean-Marie Gallais fondly recalls, gave his guest an energetic tour around his adopted home in Kamakura, Japan. Lee Ufan also shared excerpts from his new reflections on time and existence in the pandemic era.

The trio of artists portrayed in this issue's Profiles work in a range of styles, from the delicately crafted meditations on Asian and queer identity in the works of Kang Seung Lee, who reprises and transforms past artists' works, to the enigmatic sculptures of Nabuqi, whose installations play with our perceptions and sense of physicality. Operating at

the opposite end of the aesthetic spectrum is the Hong Kong experimental noise musician and artist known as Xper.Xr. His recent exhibition at Hong Kong's Empty Gallery surveyed his many activities, which have consistently ground against the societal grain since the 1980s.

This issue's Essay is penned by Susan Htoo, the winner of the 2021 Young Writers Contest, and looks at the virtual exhibitions and social-media activities of artists from Myanmar speculating about the future and responding to the February 1 military coup d'état. The survival of these efforts evident in these artworks in online spaces testifies to the endurance of a resistant spirit emanating from a country once again under heavy repression.

Elsewhere in the magazine, we hear from contributors on the post-pandemic world. In *The Point*, Yi Cao, the director of curatorial administration for the Arts of Asia collection at the Art Institute of Chicago, discusses the ways in which museums need to make themselves relevant to their communities in the wake of social-justice movements. In *Dispatch*, Seattle-based artist and educator Robert Rhee reflects on the Pacific northwest city's stuttering efforts to get back to “normal” and how institutions have realigned themselves for the future.

In *Fine Print*, art lawyers Yayoi Shionoiri and Ryan Su discuss the practical legal issues that NFT creators face, and offer a sample contract for artists and collectors to use. Looking back at a formative moment in his life, Mark Salvatus, in *One on One*, describes how installation artists Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan inspired his future practice.

Finally, for *Where I Work*, associate editor Ophelia Lai visited the studio of Hong Kong artist Leelee Chan, who imbues found materials with biomorphic qualities. As Lai explains, the artist operates like a scavenger, gathering components such as sea glass, pebbles, and shells from beaches; pieces of an old tennis court; and plastic shipping pallets that she turned into an installation at Art Basel Hong Kong in May. In a world that produces more and more objects every day, often with the goal of increasing efficiency, Chan seeks out moments of material beauty in discarded remnants. Like Xa, Porras-Kim, and many others, Chan offers a model for learning to adapt to the conditions of our new world, just as our ancestors did before us.



ELAINE W. NG

See our website for the Chinese version of this article.
欲閱讀此文章的中文版本請登陸我們的網站

WHAT HISTORY CALLS FOR



09 west Mexico ceramics from the LACMA collection: Colima Index, 2017, paintings, graphite, color pencil, and ink on paper, 186.7×339×7.6 cm. Photo by Laura Cherry. Courtesy Museum Associates, Los Angeles.



AN INTERVIEW WITH

GALA PORRAS-KIM

BY CLEO ROBERTS-KOMIREDDI

Driven by a fascination with ancient knowledge, Bogotá-born, Los Angeles-based artist Gala Porras-Kim pursues her interests through a range of approaches, from conversations with living communities and institutions to shamanic communions with the dead. Throughout her research-driven process, Porras-Kim also tests the contemporary structures—such as museum classification systems—that organize and determine our relationships with historical lore and the material remnants of cultures. She manifests the results of her investigations in varying forms, including written exchanges, installations, books, paintings, and sculptures.

Porras-Kim's longest running series, *The Mute Object and Ancient Stories of Today* (2012–), homes in on the dozens of Zapotec languages that were passed down orally from the Indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica in what is now southern Mexico. Starting in the 16th century, the Oaxacan people translated some of the words in the tonal dialects into whistles in order to evade the understanding of Spanish colonizers. After painstakingly learning Zapotec herself, the artist used sound bites cut from YouTube videos—thus bypassing the limits of the muscles in human mouths—to fully reinterpret recordings of spoken Zapotec narratives as whistles, creating the vinyl LP *Whistling and Language Transfiguration* (2012). At a 2013 show at the Los Angeles gallery Commonwealth and Council, she also invited audiences to make rubbings from replicas of stone artifacts bearing examples of Zapotec glyphs, the meanings of which have been lost, and asked viewers to decode the signs, thus reviving fragments of a now-inscrutable, pre-colonial past with new meanings.

In subsequent projects, Porras-Kim turned to how language can be used in the critique of art institutions and other social structures—questions that were inspired by conceptual artists Charles Gaines and Michael Asher, whom she encountered while a graduate student at the California Institute of the Arts in 2007–09. For the 13th Gwangju Biennale, “Minds Rising, Spirits Tuning” (2021), for example, her project questioned the ethics of holding human remains as artifacts in museum collections, and with the aid of a shaman, she contacted spirits whose bodies are in the collection of the Gwangju National Museum to ask where they would actually like their final resting place to be. Later, writing to the Museum's director, Porras-Kim described the act as an “attempt to honor the voice and personhood of the dead.”

Across these many interests and geographies, an ethics of genuine care suffuses her practice. When we spoke in July, Porras-Kim had just finished a residency at Delfina Foundation in London. Many of the city's major museums are the results of colonialism, built to showcase and preserve the British Empire's archeological and anthropological exotica for public consumption. We spoke about the continuity of this colonial approach that undergirds cultural repositories today and how often the conceptual essences of objects are sacrificed for the maintenance of their physical forms. The artist also shared her experiences with examining the infrastructures of institutions and their governing contracts, and working with curators and conservators to find where problems around classification, display, conservation, and interpretation are in need of re-examination and debates. It is in this context that Porras-Kim proposes alternative protocols that call on the imagination to understand what objects really want.



Installation view of *Whistling and Language Transfiguration*, 2012, LP album and cyanotype print, 30.5 x 30.5 cm, at “Whistling and Language Transfiguration,” Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles, 2012. Courtesy the artist and Commonwealth and Council.



Whistling Score, 2012, wood, paper, and ink, 50 x 34 x 6.4 cm. Courtesy the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles.

Your residency with Delfina Foundation was part of its “Collecting as Practice” program, a diverse series that has facilitated access to London’s public and private collections for artistic research. What direction did you take with your residency?

I have been working with collections for the past couple of years; during my residency, I continued with this research in preparation for my Gasworks show, planned for January 2022. My inquiries extended from my interest in a specific subset of artifacts where the items’ original functions never stop, like a burial object that goes with a person to the afterlife, or a gift offered to a god who lives forever.

First, I browsed the British Museum’s displays. It was great to look at the exhibited objects, but I am considering making a work based on the storage. What is on view is a very small percentage of what the museum actually owns. What’s interesting about the storage is that it isn’t driven by audiences—the displayed items might be shown in a certain way because there’s a responsibility to visitors, but when an exhibit is in storage, there is only a duty of care to the object. The British Museum is moving its offsite storage in Blythe House, West London, to Shinfield in Berkshire, so it might be interesting to try and intervene in the way that the objects will be re-shelved in their new home. I wonder, for example, if an object has certain guidelines about its display in the museum, and is supposed to be facing a specific direction, would it make sense to ask that it is placed in that same configuration while in storage to limit the interference of the object’s relocation?

Entering institutional spaces as an artist must come with some freedom and, equally, with restrictions. How do you navigate these places with your critical perspective?

The museum feels like an old institution, but it’s really all about the people who work there today. Typically, they have great intentions but are caught in a conundrum where they are aware of the colonial histories of institutions and want to do something about them; at the same time, they’re stuck in methods of the past. As an artist, I’m not going to get fired or get in trouble, so, in many instances, I have approached the institution’s workers and said, tell me what issues you think are here, and people have just told me. The museum needs a mediator because it’s difficult to talk about the problems of an institution and work in it at the same time.

However, most of the projects that I have proposed to institutions have made them defensive. I’m not a very confrontational person, but they think I’m questioning their ability to care for things. The problem is the public’s expectations for how a museum does and should care for its collection are unrealistic. There is no way that an institution can actually maintain an unchanging historical record because, even with optimum conservation, objects are going to decay. The best that can be done is to slow down an inevitable process.

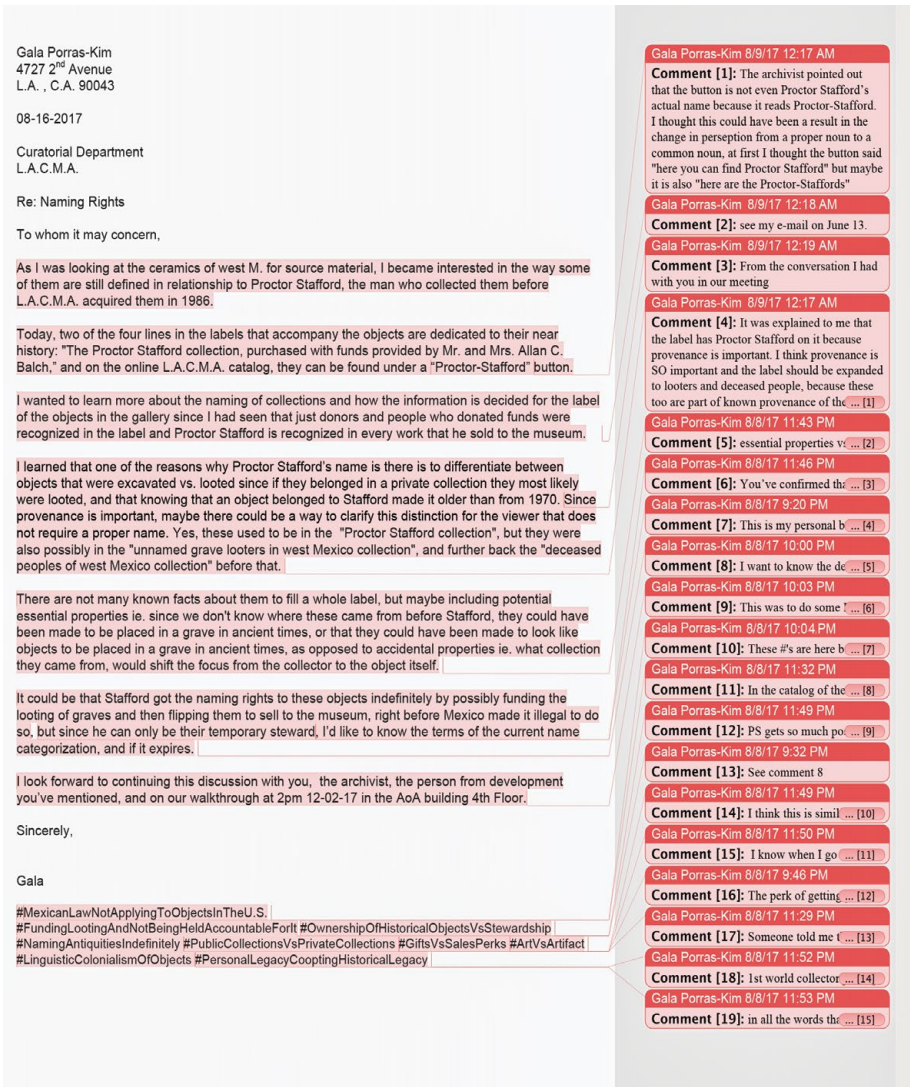
I love the institution. I have lived within various institutions for most of my life. My parents are both academics, and I love history and would like to be in school forever. My concern is what I can do such that institutions do not make me feel bad. Basically, it’s very self-interested. I just don’t want to feel guilty about belonging to institutions—and I can’t complain about them unless I try to make them better.



Installation view of “The Mute Object and Ancient Stories of Today” at Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles, 2013. Photo by Heather Rasmussen. Courtesy the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles.



Stone CCA-t5-16, transfer stone, 2013, sandstone, mahogany, graphite on newsprint 20×24×24 cm. Photo by Heather Rasmussen. Courtesy the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles.



Naming Rights, 2017, annotated Microsoft Word document, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Labor, Mexico City.

One of your tactics has been to dig into the legal contracts that govern the objects in collections. *Naming Rights* (2017), for instance, is a letter that you penned and addressed to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. In the text and its annotations, you request to know the legal terms that dictate which donors are credited on exhibit labels and for how long. What do legal devices offer you?

The law is much like conceptual or performance art. Conceptual art lays ground rules, such as, “this cup, if it is rotated this way, is now a sculpture,” thus propelling abstract ideas within a framework. It’s the same with laws, which are agreements about how things should work, and which arrange a series of claims to present an overarching idea. The performative aspect of law, or the way it is “displayed,” unfolds in courts and litigation—these are rituals that manifest positions.

I like to throw things into the machinery of legal contracts just to see if there are any absurdities. Specifically, with the British Museum, I was curious because the collection is supposed to belong to the British public. So, how can one British person influence the collection? Can I get a British citizen to petition to rotate an object because it technically belongs to them? I wanted to see what actions an individual can take, who they can talk to, and how they might navigate the infrastructure to make change happen.

Are you advocating for the rights of the public or objects in your work?

With each new project, I think about how far an institution can stretch and how the work can help it think through an issue it might be having. I am now contemplating how an institution might have higher stakes in my projects. For example, would it be willing to deaccession 25 percent of its collection for a project?

Deaccession strikes a nerve. Recently, there have been public debates about the repatriation of the Benin Bronzes—most of them looted by British troops in the 19th century—found across collections in Europe, including at the British Museum. With regards to the British Museum’s holdings of these artifacts, are you concerned with comprehensive restitution?

We cannot just put everything back because an object’s origin is like a vacuum seal; once you rip it, you can never replace it. In terms of moving the conversation about restitution forward, it’s great to be discussing the Benin Bronzes, but it also feels very singular. The objects in the museum are all circumstantially different, that’s why this process takes so much work. In his book *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (2020), curator Dan Hicks advocates for the



Interior of the king's compound burnt during the siege of Benin City (present-day Nigeria) in 1897, with bronze plaques in the foreground and three British soldiers of the Benin Punitive Expedition. Photo by Reginald Granville. Courtesy Wikimedia.

repatriation of the titular artifacts but emphasizes that each item has its own context, so you can't just make one rule and apply it throughout a collection. It is a matter of making the effort to catalogue and research each individual object, to see what the item needs beyond its physical conservation. And we can't just say that because they're all pots, they demand the same conditions.

That could be considered a denial of each object's cultural life. It makes me think of anthropologist Dan Miller's book *Stuff* (2010), where he argues that we make objects as much as they make us. How do you attune to this relationship and determine the various needs of objects when sifting through artifacts?

As I mentioned earlier, I'm interested in objects that have an infinitely ongoing function. I'm curious to see whether that purpose can shine through the item's status as a historical artifact in a collection. How do institutions deal with one object having two functions at the same time? It's a negotiation. One problem is that the idea of conserving the physical shape of an object often overshadows its conceptual function. My project concerning the artifacts dredged from the Cenote Sagrado at Chichén Itzá in Mexico—and now housed at the Peabody Museum at Harvard University—thinks through the idea of care, not only for these objects' physical integrity. The physical form is only a container for a more important quality that actually needs more attention. The devotional objects found in this pit were religious offerings for Chaac, the Mayan rain god, so, in my view, to care for them would be to immerse them in water. This is exactly what I propose—to have water sprinkled onto the artifacts so that Chaac, who is in every liquid, can reabsorb them. A part of this project is working through the convergence of institutional representation and care, and conflicting perspectives on conservation. Ultimately, I am hoping to reconnect these objects with their sacrificial purpose.

I think about the ancient Egyptians, who planned so well for their afterlives—now, some of them are stuck in a vitrine. You can imagine them asking, "Why are you not paying attention to all these directions I have left?" Of course, we want to learn about the past through them but there might also be a way of doing that while taking into account the fact that inside the sarcophagi are people.



Top: *11 Mesoamerican Multiple Perspectives*, 2019, graphite, color pencil, and ink on paper mounted on canvas, 152 × 122 × 5 cm. Photo by Ruben Diaz. Courtesy the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles.

Bottom: *17 International Magic Objects*, 2019, graphite, color pencil, and ink on paper mounted on canvas, 152 × 122 × 5 cm. Photo by Ruben Diaz. Courtesy the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles.

Do you consider your own work's afterlife?

Of course! Many of my questions come from wondering what's going to happen with my own work. In the 2019 show that I curated at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, titled "Open House," I worked with the museum's contemporary art collection and presented installations by artists like Felix Gonzalez-Torres alongside the emails and documentation that outline how the artworks should be manifest. I was working through the same queries that I examine with antiquities, such as how much agency the original author has once they're not around anymore. The only difference between ethnographic museums and contemporary ones is time; the objects in the former are older, but eventually the contemporary will become part of the ancient.

Working with ancient objects really helps in planning for my own work and understanding the many conflicts between an author or an object's original function and the institutional priorities of the time. I actually don't have a side because they both have good points. When institutions have acquired my work, they have sent conservation forms, which are hard to fill out because the questions just become so philosophical. In a sense, it comes down to just trusting the people of future institutions to know what I want, which is impossible.

And yet your practice reveals the fault lines of institutions when it comes to the care of objects. Will your contribution to the 2021 São Paulo Biennial explore this quandary?

For São Paulo, I will show a three-part project about the Cenote Sagrado—the ritual offering pit for Chaac. I'm working with copal, which is the main material that the sacrificial objects are cast in. I plan on forming copal into a slab with the same volume as all of Chaac's gifts in the Peabody Museum, and covering it with dust from the museum's storage.

In letters that were exchanged between the director of the Peabody and Edward H. Thompson, the archaeologist who dredged the cenote, there are conservation directions on how to inject a binding agent to hold the artifacts together because they fall apart on contact with air. Basically, the objects are now held in their shapes with glue. Collecting dust that was in the Peabody's storage is a way that the material objects can "escape" the institution. Each time my work with copal and dust gets shown, the institution where it is being exhibited is tasked with figuring a way to get "rain" onto it. I can't determine the way that water gets put on it because the institution has to somehow be compelled to facilitate the reunion between Chaac and the object. And that way, there will be a different type of reunion every time it gets shown. The drawing part



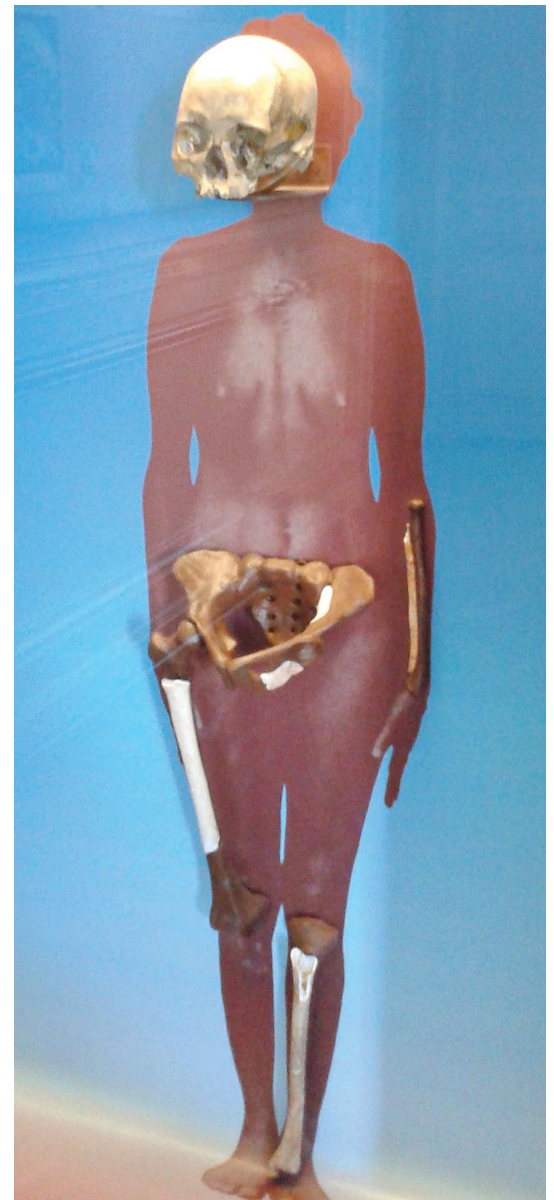
Installation view of "Open House: Gala Porrás-Kim" at the Museum of Contemporary Art Grand Avenue, Los Angeles, 2019–20. Photo by Jeff McLane. Courtesy the Museum of Contemporary Art.



is an index of the objects that were taken from the cenote, so you can see them in their “dry” form next to the copal slab. The third part is a legal mediation between the rain god and the institution that explores reconciliation in terms of the law.

I will also have a work that is about “Luzia,” the oldest mummy in the Americas. She was stored in Rio de Janeiro, in the National Museum of Brazil, which caught on fire a couple of years ago. Twenty percent of her body was burned and now conservators are trying to restore the rest. I collected some of the dust from the ashes of that fire because that’s how Luzia’s body “escaped” the institution— through cremation. My working idea for the project revolves around how, beside the existing process of deaccessioning, objects or people might be able to escape their institutional confines.

In London, for the show in January at Gasworks, I was also thinking about conjuring the spirit of the mummy so it can leave the museum, but I don’t know the mechanics of the afterlife and I’m not sure how to contact anyone on the other side. Another idea focuses on an ancient Egyptian artifact in the British Museum—according to folk tales, the object is someone’s reincarnation. Now it’s stuck in a vitrine. That is one of the worst-case scenarios, so I’m designing a replacement display case with beautiful landscapes of Egypt for that person to look out at. Then I’m hoping to donate it to the British Museum.



Top left: Photo documentation of the dredging of the Cenote Sagrado at Chichén Itzá, c. 1904–10. Courtesy the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University, Cambridge.

Top right: *1 dry idol with arm, bark with copal, six idol limbs, 2020*, graphite and acrylic ink on paper, 63 × 48 × 5 cm. Photo by Paul Salveson. Courtesy the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles.

Bottom right: The remains of “Luzia,” which are held by the National Museum of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro. Courtesy Wikicommons.