

Life On The Grid: 'Emerald City' at K11 Art Foundation, Hong Kong

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In L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), visitors to the Emerald City are required to wear green-tinted lenses. It's a ruse by the Wizard, who claims that the glasses offer protection from the city's brightness, though, in reality, it isn't green at all. At the heart of Baum's metropolis – especially when reading its glinting green tint through early 20th-century American anxieties over 'greenback' paper currency and the skyscraper boom – is the fear of living a shared illusion.

'Emerald City' – a group show curated by Venus Lau at Hong Kong's K11 Art Foundation – aspires to scrape away this invisible ordering of our vision. The exhibition commands an international set of artists to confront the geometric grids and cells of our exterior and interior lives. Nik Kosmas's *Stall Bars* (2018) reproduces the eponymous exercise equipment, its bright orange frame reminding us of the tools we use to regiment asymmetric human movement; there's a creepy, cartoonish terror to Ajay Kurian's *Tall Toys, No Noise (Fear)* (2016) – an ominous black vending machine filled with amber light, apparently inspired by the personified emotions of the 2015 Pixar blockbuster *Inside Out*; and Oscar Chan Yik Long's *Since All Is Void II* (2018) replicates the blue bathroom tiles of the artist's Hong Kong home – or, more precisely, the monstrous shapes within them that Chan daydreams into existence.



Alice Wang, *Untitled*, 2016, 24K gold gilded on crinoid fossils, dimensions variable. Courtesy: the artist and Capsule, Shanghai

The installation *Autosave: Redoubt* (2017), created by Andrew Luk, Alexis Mailles and Peter Nelson, offers an insight into what happens when we play video games against their grain. Split across two gaming rooms, the piece uses the first-person-shooter Counter-Strike for a very different purpose: as a platform within which to construct a historic bunker used by the British military during the 1941 Battle of Hong Kong. Playing the modified game, you enter tunnels filled with newsreel and musical samples from the era. Are shoot-em-up games ‘a strange reflection of our own vision, our own technology, and the violence we already make in the world?’, the artists wonder.

Nevertheless, beyond troubling our sense of perspective, it is hard to glean a sense of deeper conversation triggered by the 40 plus artworks included in ‘Emerald City’. I pass from Trevor Yeung’s *White Acanthus* (2017) which bathes white porcelain leaves in a wash of soothing green light, through to Oscar Murillo’s *Collected Amalgam* (2015–16) where a heavy drape of latex-covered linen dominates the room, hanging abattoir-style from an industrial scale, and then back to the neo-geo artist Peter Halley’s strangely insubstantial *Prisons* (2018), a day-glo mural of prison window grids.



Clarissa Tossin, *Ch'u Mayaa*, 2017, production still, performer: Crystal Sepúlveda, cinematography: Jeremy Glaholt, originally commissioned by the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs. Courtesy: the artist

There are gestures to a longer global art-historical context, with the inclusion of Carl F. Cheng’s ‘Erosion Machines’ from the 1960s, in which rocks daubed in fluorescent paint are pummelled by waterjets, contained within small boxes like portable ecosystems, and Keiichi Tanaami’s hallucinatory, toy-town sculpture *The House in Ascension_A* (1986) featuring the Japanese pop artist’s pine tree motifs. The show’s curatorial conceit is that notions of geometry are not only markers of differentiation, but can also shed ‘light on the possibility of cultural coexistence amid globalization’, as Lau writes in her catalogue notes. But as for how we might break past the illusory restrictions of the Emerald City, the meandering scope of the artworks and discursive nature of the exhibition never clarify.

In the shadow of the floor-to-ceiling tiled columns of Zhang Ruyi's *Architectural Fittings 3* (2018), which dissolves the bland textures of the public washroom into the gallery, perhaps I've found what I've been looking for. Clarissa Tossin's *Ch'u Mayaa* (2017) is titled after a Mayan pigment, known for its endurance over time. Her film considers the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Hollyhock House in Los Angeles, responding to the overlooked influence of seventh-century Mayan temple design on the building. A dancer in a spotted cat-suit carves across the house's exterior, pausing to recreate poses from Mayan ceramics against its facades: modernist and ancient combined in an entrancing whole. It's a subtle performance that suggests immense, cosmic spaces resonating beyond the confines of Wright's architecture.

Emerald City runs at K11 Art Foundation, Hong Kong, until 22 April.

Main image: Trevor Yeung, Garden Acanthus (Balkan), 2017, (detail), archival inkjet print, 1.1 × 1.1 m. Courtesy: the artist and Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong