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Installation view of "Garden of Six Seasons" at Soho House Hong Kong, 16 May – 30 Aug, 2020. Photography by Kitmin Lee. Image courtesy of Para Site.

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Caroline
Ha Thuc
(<https://www.cobosocial.com/>)

Conceived as a Hong Kong preview of the Kathmandu Triennale 2020, Para Site's latest exhibition "Garden of Six Seasons" is curated by Cosmin Costinas together with two Nepalese artists and curators, Hit Man Gurung and Sheelasha Rajbhandari. It takes place across two different venues: Para Site's two floors and Soho House Hong Kong.

TEXT: Caroline Ha Thuc

IMAGES: Courtesy of Para Site and the Kathmandu Triennale

The theme of the garden is here to be understood as a metaphor for relentless human efforts to tame and organise nature and, beyond, for any attempt to reconstruct the world's order on a smaller scale. Featuring artists from various cultural backgrounds and from all over the world, and presenting mainly artworks about medicine, cosmology, and traditions, the exhibition explores the diversity of artistic representations that reflect on this world order. As such, the title might be slightly misleading, as the show is far from being a lush display of abundant organic pieces involving secret paths, or poetic and sensory setups. Despite bright colours on the wall, the space is organised rationally and symmetrically, mirroring the artists' endeavours to reduce and apprehend the universe through the creation of formal languages. The curators' choice seems also to focus on the aesthetic and cultural principles at the origin of these codified languages, rather than on any mystical approach of the beliefs they might transmit.

27
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One of the first artworks of the exhibition, on the ground floor at Para Site, is a very original painting by Komal Purbe entitled *A woman flying a rocket* (2019). It introduces the minority culture of Mithila and points to the current and global revival and transformations of indigenous knowledges, which constitute another thread of the show. The Mithila region overlaps Northern India and Nepal and is known for being the birthplace of Sita, one of the central characters from the Hindu epic Ramayana. Mithila painting is an ancient form of art that has been passed down through generations, mostly by women. Formerly performed on mud walls using homemade paints and dyes such as cow dung, they are now painted on local Nepali handmade paper with acrylic. The exhibition presents several women artists from this region, whose practice epitomizes a form of emancipation from the local patriarchal and religious structures that often involve female seclusion. These naïve paintings reflect these women's vision of the world and how they ideally see themselves, for example piloting a rocket or driving a harvester. Their practice echoes other gendered or minority-oriented artworks dispatched around the show, such as *Timur Merah Project II* (2019) by Balinese artist Citra Sasmita, a large ink drawing on leather depicting an unbridled and naked women roaming in a mythological garden, or Filipino-American artist Pacita Abad's colourful compositions. In particular, *Filipinas in Hong Kong* (1995) represents the migrant domestic workers' community, hidden in the undergrounds of the territory.



(<https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Installation-shot-of-Garden-of-Six-Seasons-at-Soho-House-Hong-Kong.-Courtesy-of-Para-Site.-Photographer-Kitmin-Lee-11-e1591758932502.jpg>)

Installation view of "Garden of Six Seasons" at Soho House Hong Kong, 16 May – 30 Aug, 2020. Photography by Kitmin Lee. Image courtesy of Para Site.

In sharp contrast with these figurative modes of representations, many featured artworks are abstract and propose geometrical or more rational interpretations of the world. American conceptual artist Charles Gaines could epitomize this trend. As such, *Numbers and Trees: Central Park Series II, Tree #7, Laurel* (2016) is a pivotal artwork of the exhibition, on display at Soho House. Above a photograph representing trees from Central Park in New York, the artist added an acrylic sheet that he painted according to a sophisticated system of numbers and colours, which recreates the background landscape from a codified and geometrical perspective. With this use of a grid, Gaines aims at combining a figurative and naturalist approach of nature with its reconstructed and abstract representation. The complexity of nature is broken down and reduced to a more accessible mode of representation, although deprived of its

inner dynamic and mystery. At the same time, the new layer creates new forms of meanings as it unfolds through an original system of signs.

Similarly, many featured artworks represent the human body from diagrammatic perspectives. These geometrical paintings and drawings refer to holistic systems of representation mostly designed for medicinal or sacred purposes. The creative pencil and crayon drawings made on graph paper in the first half of the 20th century by Emma Kunz stand out for their esoteric meaning; the Swiss healer and artist, who was said to have extra-sensory powers, probably used them as part of healing processes while consulting a divining pendulum. They are displayed together with the works of another healer, the shaman Batsa Gopal Vaidya, who also developed geometrical patterns designed as healing amulets, but about fifty years later and in the Kathmandu valley. Vaidya's inspiration originates in his family's long tradition of Ayurvedic medicine, which he has been studying and re-appropriating. In the same room, which is located at the centre of Para Site's main art space, all the artworks and artefacts are designed to reflect on specific cosmologies and their various modes of representation.



(<https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/View-from-opening-reception-for-Garden-of-Six-Seasons-at-Soho-House-in-Hong-Kong.-Courtesy-of-Para-Site.-Photographed-by-Dennis-Wong-8-e1591759723952.jpg>)

Installation view of "Garden of Six Seasons" at Soho House Hong Kong, 16 May – 30 Aug, 2020. Photography by Dennis Wong. Image courtesy of Para Site.



(<https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Installation-shot-of-Garden-of-Six-Seasons-at-Para-Site-Hong-Kong.-Coutesy-of-Para-Site.-Photographer-Kitmin-Lee-5.jpg>)

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What is striking is the feeling of unity that emerges from all these artworks despite their cultural diversity. In fact, this feeling can be extended to the whole exhibition, which seems to invite the viewer to read the works from a structuralist perspective by looking at the various processes of constructing systems of signs and languages that represent specific conceptions of the world. This perspective creates unexpected connections between Yanomami abstract signs, Navajo weaving patterns, Chinese ink landscapes, Russian ethno-futurist dynamics, or Nigerian women's hairstyles. Here, mapping the human body and mapping territories both seem to result from the same desire: to organise and better control nature, while modelling the body and the land. It reflects a common and cross-cultural endeavour to convert the unknown into forms and languages that are more accessible, and thus that can potentially be known.



(<https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Hung-Fai-Vessel-II-2019.-Image->

courtesy-of-the-artist.-Photo-Eddie-Lam-Image-Art-Studio-
e1591760649834.jpg)

Hung Fai, Vessel II, 2019. Photography by Eddie Lam, Image Art Studio. Image
courtesy of the artist.



(<https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/J.D.'Okhai-Ojeikere-Untitled-Onile-Gogoro-Or-Akaba-1975.-Print.-Courtesy-of-Estate-of-J.D.'Okhai-OjeikereFoto-Ojeikere.-e1591760707208.jpg>)

J.D.'Okhai Ojeikere, Untitled (Onile Gogoro Or Akaba), 1975, print. Image courtesy
of Estate of J.D.'Okhai OjeikereFoto Ojeikere.

There is a downside to this achievement. This vision, albeit meaningful because of its universal and inclusive conception, tends to deprive the artworks of their own specificities, and of their inner mystery and spirituality. Gardens may be designed according to secret, implicit texts, and arranged to stimulate the visitors' five senses. Such magical and sensory dimensions are largely absent from the exhibition: this

promising garden of six seasons remains an intellectual garden, despite the few unattractive sculptural planters by Guatemalan artist Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa and the volcanic rock presented by Hong Kong artist Trevor Yeung.

Ultimately, this Hong Kong version of the Kathmandu Triennale is well-rooted in the local context, with seven artists from Hong Kong, both established and emerging. Their artworks dialogue perfectly with the other pieces on display as they also tackle, each one in its own way, the issues of the decolonisation of land and of thoughts, while reviving traditional knowledge transmission. As such, even though these questions have already been much addressed in the art field recently, they contribute to inspiration for renewed visions of the world, informing our common garden of the future.

Garden of Six Seasons (<http://www.parasite.art/exhibitions/garden-of-six-seasons/>)

16 May – 30 Aug 2020

Para Site, Hong Kong

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