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An archaeological impulse shapes Kei Imazu's rich research and artistic practice. The archaeological, in its interests in the recovery and reconstruction of human lifeworlds from material cultures, structures *unearth*, the artist's 2<sup>nd</sup> solo exhibition presented by ROH. In this exhibition, the aspect of earth is animated by different agencies: excavating, consolidating, cultivating. These agencies shape the ways Imazu's works for this exhibition allude to how simultaneously earth carries with it history and mythology and creates conditions of life and survival at the same time that it has been the site of colonial violence and object of colonial exploitation.

In this exhibition, this archaeological impulse begins with ground breaking and unearthing: the body of a female mythical figure; remains of ancestral species; coveted petroleum in a time of colonial conquest for resources. Imazu assembles these narrative and material remnants to cultivate a contemporary disposition that through artistic practice and archival intervention allows us to re-animate elements that have been fossilized or petrified in colonial narrations. Within this framework, the artist presents how the very same technologies that sustained the colonial enterprise: archaeology, anthropology, the archive, are themselves the very techniques of its undoing.

One of the main thematic layers explored in the exhibition is the story of Hainuwele, a woman born from a coconut and who has the power to produce fineries of foreign lands through her own excrement. Men initially found her powers useful until its undeniable mystique disturbed them. Fazed by this mysterious woman and her power,

they buried her alive, stomping on the ground until loose dirt became dense earth. Ameta, Hainuwele's mother figure, learned about Hainuwele's fate and found her dead body through an oracle. Ameta exhumed her remains, cut the body, and buried different parts of it across the village lands. Hainuwele's remains transformed into tuberous crops, sustaining the village and the islands of Banda.

Imazu's effort to reconsider the myth of Hainuwele constitutes a feminist exhumation not only of the mythical figure's body, but her story as well. The artist mines stories that have been cultivated on this earth—a site of violence and loss, but also emergence and thriving life—to foreground poetics of transformation and metamorphosis. Layer upon layer, Imazu builds on a landscape where myth and history merge and become a method that assembles works and materials that are as varied as the contentious stories to which they allude: a painting that congeals iconographies that have shaped the history of the islands of Banda; a metal reworking of a mythical gate that judges men's fate, transforming them into fauna or phantasm depending on their life's worth; polymer-printed skeletal forms that render the diminutive *Homo floresiensis* gigantic ancestors; archival materials overlaid with specters of colonial paraphernalia and speculation.

Imazu's aesthetic idiom itself is informed by this archaeological impulse. In one of the largest paintings in the exhibition titled after Hainuwele, human limbs, bones, and viscera, as well as wood carvings, root vegetables and other plant life, appear to slowly swirl in a suspended matrix. Against the vivid emerald ground evoking depth, swatches of thick paint suggest motion and in their foregrounding, surface. Iconographically, the objects presented in this painting reference aspects of the other works. What is most interesting in this composition, however, is the way the assemblage of objects and references make them appear as if they are in different layers, as if we are looking at a cross section of land, where soil becomes invisible as air. It is the painterly procedure that makes this effect palpable and it is through this wonderful work that we intuit the kinds of relation between human and nonhuman elements, kinship among species, and meshwork of material that shape this exhibition.

This is not to say that this image then exhausts the stories that can be shared within the framework of this exhibition. Elements of this particular iconographic

composition are actually made more compelling by the different materials and processes that the artist uses or deploys to materialize their presence in the exhibition. What is present as a soil-stained skull in the left part of the image, appearing as a freshly unearthed archaeological object, becomes a swollen, smoothed, and plastic-sheen porcelain-white spectacle. The skull is of the *Homo floresiensis*, a hominin species discovered in 2003 in Flores island located in the Banda Arc in eastern Indonesia (hence the species name). While the species is known for their diminutive stature (3 feet max), the polymer specimen stands at 5 feet tall. Alongside it is a gigantic femur (at 7 feet across) of the *Pithecanthropus erectus*, also called the Java Man, because of its discovery in the island of Java in 1891. Both specimens are 3D printed using polymer filaments. The synthetic presence of both objects afford them the capacity to foreground the artist's fictive and fabulous intervention in the discourses that surround these objects, particularly in ideas around human prehistory and the primitive. Presented in this space of fabulation where myth and history interweave, these are pieces of ersatz sculptures manufactured to speak to the logics of archeological artifactuality, from questions of authenticity and preservation.

The same material and process is used to create planters out of what are supposed to be Hainuwele's internal organs. From the colon to the liver, the bladder and the kidneys, and the multicolored hearts, viscera transforms into vessels for different plants—a performative translation of the mythological source text. The series not only translates the mythical narrative into its literal counterpart (plants growing out of Hainuwele's organs) but also emphasizes a particular relationship to objects achieved through 3D printing. The synthetic facture of these objects converse with the discourse of discovery that inheres in the archaeological framework. The artist does not discover these artifacts inasmuch as she wills—out of thin air (and plastic and contemporary technology)—materializations of the stories that have shaped the human condition in the context of this exhibition. This aspect of Imazu's artistic practice is perhaps the most potent in this exhibition. In this exhibition, to “unearth” is not merely to mine, uncover, or excavate as if the burden lies in people to find and discover these mythical and historical allusions. In this exhibition, to “unearth” is to take these narratives out of the earth, out of the contested temporality and spatiality of discovery and artifactuality, and

embed them into the vitality of material presences that insist themselves in encounters in the contemporary world.

The archaeological impulse in *unearth* then becomes a method to rework our relationship with a vast array of materials that glean as vast an array of peculiar lifeworlds. Across a series of smaller works based on a selection of archival images compiled from museum collections and the public domain, Imazu extends this to the archival and further into a personal meditation of her place in these histories as a Japanese woman artist whose work and family is based in Bandung, Indonesia.

In 1895, the Dutch East Indies discovered crude oil in Bula in Seram Island in the Banda Arc. Seram Island is characterized by how several different strata are exposed in its geological makeup, creating a very viable site for oil extraction. During this time, crude oil was shipped from Bula to Borneo for refining. The contest for the coveted crude oil and the infrastructures of its refining shaped the lifeworld of Seram. Before withdrawing from Japanese takeover at the start of World War II, the Dutch destroyed all oil-extraction infrastructure in the island. The Japanese settled in 1942 and rebuilt the rigs and tanks and remained in control of the oil field until the end of the war.

In this history, we see the entanglement of nature and politics, extraction and war, natural resources, and its monopolization and control. Imazu takes these considerations as vital points in her inquiry into the mythical and historical contexts of the Banda Arc, an overarching geohistorical frame that has shaped the exhibition. Interrogating the ways in which her Japanese lineage interfaces with the place of the Japanese in the colonial history of Indonesia in general, the exhibition is also the artist's way to unearth these more insidious connections, however remote they are in relation to her life as a Japanese artist bringing up her own family in contemporary Indonesia. In unearthing these entanglements, the artist hopes to cultivate a more critical relationship to both her Japanese roots and her present life in Bandung.

It is in the series of oil on printed canvas works that these considerations are played out persuasively, particularly in the way material cultivates and leans onto the very complexity of Imazu's positionality. In each work archival images relating to the Bula oil field are printed on canvas which Imazu then paints over using iconographic allusions to the Dutch colonial era and pictorial archive (as in *Fruits of Seram*),

the Hainuwele myth (as in *Girl's Waste*) or Imazu's reconsideration of it (as in *Waving Strata* or *Isle Digger*), or Dutch anti-Japanese propaganda materials during the contest for the Bula oil field [as in *Madako* (魔ダコ)]. From the initial explorations and the discovery of crude oil in the land of Seram to the air raids led by the Allied Forces against the Japanese occupation of the island during World War II, each archival image transforms through this intervention. The new layer of images presents themselves as an almost gossamer surface that provides a spectral film to the documentary images. In some works, the new layer merges with the archival document creating an image where the archival image and artistic intervention both maintain their integrity while presenting a new image as in the work *The Rain of Bullets*. In *Fruits of Seram*, this integrity remains but the artistic intervention remains on the surface, not quite blending in with the archival image. Notice how the pieces of clove and nutmeg float on top of the image without any attempt to make such overlaying seamless. In some works, such as in *Girl's Waste* and *Blue Roots*, while the new layer obscures much of the archival image, paint drips and spreads just thinly enough to discern outlines of figures or details of place from the source photographic reproduction.

The tendencies discussed above all obtain from Imazu's use of materials and her deployment of the painterly idiom. Each canvas print is primed with polyurethane which allows paint to sit on the surface. We see this technique's most compelling use in the work *Lush Terrain*, where the artistic intervention presents fossilized ammonite shell and the skull of an ichthyosaur, a Jurassic relic discovered in Seram in 1888, on top of the work, and tendrils of petals at the bottom left corner and trailing from the bottom towards the center part of the canvas. Behind the skull and the shell are seeming human limbs which with a seeming vigorous swipe transformed into an agitated stroke exposing the layers and gradations of color in each painterly application—heavily obscuring the top part of the archival image. The archaeological finds its counterpoint in this treatment: the archival image does not ask us to delve deeper or find a fuller, more complex image in our encounter with the work. The archival image becomes unrecognizable except perhaps as part of a set of images selected using a common criteria (archival photographs from colonial collections and the public domain) or as belonging to a series of works that undergoes a similar or comparable artistic intervention (paint over

polyurethane-primed printed canvas).

In *Lush Terrain*, Imazu's artistic intervention conspicuously stays and settles on the surface of the image. Together with fossilized forms typically trapped within the layers of compacted soil or stone, the painterly idiom creates not just a new image but, more importantly, a new surface—allowing us to breach the fixity of the archival image and to speak to or resist its contemporary condition as a mediated image. This mediation refers to both its collection in a museological context (the source image is from the Leiden University Library collections in the Netherlands) and Imazu's use of it in the structure of this series of new works for the exhibition. In *Lush Terrain*, this mediation allows us to come up with a new constellation: an account of colonial natural history that through a geologic detour also coincides with a history of petroleum and colonial extraction, the ornamental motif of plant life that surreptitiously takes over historical stability of the archival image, the exposure of paint layers that performatively mimics and troubles the archaeological logic. The archival image in itself becomes an archaeological site as it is mere surface that the artist paints on and over.

Within this framework, Imazu may contain the images in their historical context, recast the images and reorient their bearings vis-a-vis other constellations of myth and history, or else create a new surface where new meanings may attach anew. It is in these ways that the artist allows us to discern ways into layers of dense material that require not only their unearthing and unraveling but an agitation that incites tectonic shiftings—where images and things (human organs, budding tubers, bones, coconuts, limbs, and cultivated land) open to new layers of kinship, to ways of breaching and breaking through and uncovering stories that lie dormant under apparent petrification.

B. 1980, Yamaguchi, Japan  
Lives and works in Bandung, Indonesia

Kei Imazu utilizes everyday contemporary internet environment in collecting all sorts of artworks and objects that exist in and beyond the form of an image. After thoroughly going through her great volume of collected data, she distorts, reconstructs, and sketches them digitally. With the sketch she has created, Imazu traces it onto the canvas using oil paint, a method she currently employs to create her artworks.

Imazu has several solo exhibitions including *Sowed Them to the Earth* (2023) at Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco, USA; *Mapping the Land/Body/Stories of its Past* (2021) at ANOMALY, Tokyo, Japan; *Anda disini / You are here* (2019), Museum Haus Kasuya, Kanagawa, Japan; *Measuring Invisible Distance* (2018), Yamamoto Gendai, Tokyo, Japan; and *Overgrown* (2018), ROH Projects, Jakarta, Indonesia. Her group exhibitions include *Frieze Seoul* (2022), COEX Mall, Seoul, South Korea; *WAGIWAGI* at documenta fifteen (2022), Hübner areal, Kassel, Germany; *Declaring Distance: Bandung — Leiden* (2022), Selasar Sunaryo Art Space, Bandung, Indonesia; *AAAAHHH!!! Paris Internationale* (2018), Paris, France, all featuring her collaborative work with Bagus Pandega; *1*, ROH, Jakarta, Indonesia (2022); *We Paint!*, Palais de Beaux-Arts, Paris, France (2022), *Last Words* (2021), ROH, Jakarta, Indonesia; *We Are Here*, Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco, USA (2021); *Tiger Orchid* (2020), Art Basel OVR: Miami Beach, ROH Projects; *Roppongi Crossing: Connexion* (2019), Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan; *Meet the Collection - 30th Anniversary of the Yokohama Museum of Art* (2019), Yokohama Museum of Art, Kanagawa, Japan, *Tand aming Y/Our Passion* (2019), Aichi Triennale, Nagoya, Japan; Kei Imazu is the finalist of Prix Jean-François Prat in 2020.

B. 1989, Manila, Philippines  
Lives and works in Manila, Philippines

Carlos Quijon, Jr. is an art historian, critic, and curator based in Manila. He was a fellow of the research platform Modern Art Histories in and across Africa, South and Southeast Asia (MAHASSA), convened by the Getty Foundation's Connecting Art Histories project. He writes exhibition reviews for Artforum.

His essays are part of the books *Writing Presently* (2019) Philippine Contemporary Art Network, Manila; and *From a History of Exhibitions Towards a Future of Exhibition-Making: China and Southeast Asia* (2019), Sternberg Press, Berlin; and *SEA: Contemporary Art in Southeast Asia* (2022), Weiss Publications, Berlin. He has published in *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art* (Singapore), *Frieze* (United Kingdom), *Afro-Asian Visions* (United Kingdom), *MoMA's post* (United States), *Queer Southeast Asia*, *ArtReview Asia* (Singapore), *Art Monthly* (United Kingdom), *Asia Art Archive's Ideas* (Hong Kong), and *Trans Asia Photography Review* (United States), among others. In 2017, he was a research resident in MMCA Seoul and a fellow of the Transcuratorial Academy both in Berlin and Mumbai. He is an upcoming resident at the International Studio and Curatorial Program in New York (funded by the Asian Cultural Council) in 2023 and the Singapore Art Museum in 2024. He curated *Courses of Action* in Hong Kong in 2019, curated *a will for prolific disclosures* in Manila, co-curated *Minor Infelicities* in Seoul in 2020 and *Afro-Southeast Asia: Pragmatics and Geopoetics of Art during a Cold War* in Singapore (2021), Manila (2021-2022), and Busan (2022). He is the curator of the research, publication, and exhibition platform *Archipelagic Futurisms* (2022-ongoing). He is the curator of the Philippine Pavilion at the 60th Venice Biennale in 2024.

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