

DISTANCE IS A BLADE

Akil Ahamat, Olyvia Hong, Yumoi Zheng

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Curated by Amy Weng

Unknowable: a response by Lucinda Bennett

The stories you tell yourself deliver you into this present

and I guess the ones we tell each other deliver us into the future

The first stories given to us are often about animals, but not animals as they are. We are told stories of animals as humans dream them to be. Unable to fathom their intrinsic difference, to immerse ourselves in their otherness, we instead expend enormous creative energy in imagining that when they are out of our sight, they become just like us, bunnies serving blackberries and milk in their burrows, toads driving recklessly through the countryside.

There is hubris in these stories, but there is also love and longing, a desire for connection and kinship with the other creatures on this earth. In her description of intimacy, that slippery thing, Lauren Berlant wrote that alongside the qualities of “eloquence and brevity” (if you aren’t sure what this means, remember when someone last gave you a look and you knew precisely what they meant) “... intimacy also involves an aspiration for a narrative and something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out a particular way.”¹ When we make up stories in which animals act just like us, it’s a clumsy attempt to draw them closer, to align us with one another despite everything, hopeful that the story might turn out to have a happy ending.

Distance is a blade swirls around not-quite-animals, each artist conjuring or communing with a non-human creature: a snail, an oyster, a kumiho. With the

1 Lauren Berlant, “Intimacy: A Special Issue” in *Critical Inquiry: Intimacy* 24, no. 2 (1998): 281. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344169>

exception of the snail, who is presented as an equal participant in a heavy conversation with the artist who is also their lover, the creatures we meet in this gallery are strange and unknowable. Oysters famously do not have a centralised nervous system yet can respond to changes in their environment such as light and touch, but little else—a quality they usually share with snails. Meanwhile, kumiho, the nine-tailed, yellow-eyed foxes of Korean and east Asian folklore are spirits and shapeshifters, clever beyond human understanding although they are able to assume our form, or rather, the form of a beautiful young woman.

Ask me again how the story should go.

What is the story of these three creatures, how did they end up sharing a gallery together? It seems as though this trio of artists have flipped the narrative or entered from the other side, drawn to creatures whose unknowability is absolute, their very systems of knowledge decentralised, engineered towards lives that barely resemble ours. Maybe I am reaching, feeling for the thread of a narrative I can pull tight, but there is a feeling of dislocation here, of stepping into a new element, dirt or saltwater or the spirit realm, leaning into the feeling of being misunderstood, finding kinship with that which cannot be understood, slipping away from humanity and its ills, its hurt, from mothers who won't acknowledge daughters as daughters, lovers who cease loving, the scratch and sting of loss.

In the gallery, these creatures become symbols, stories, non-human bodies to which we can ascribe meaning. Take the oyster: luxury, aphrodisiac, fertility, genitalia, transformation. So much of the symbolism around oysters stems from their ability to turn something gritty and undesirable into something beautiful, and yet most oysters are cultivated not for pearls but for their meat. Yumoi Zheng's seaside hometown is famous for its seafood. A YouTube video tells me that if I haven't tried charcoal grilled oysters, I haven't been to Zhanjiang. I watch as a woman transports plump pearly oyster meat to her mouth with chopsticks, biting into its milkiness, brine dripping back onto her plate. The camera pans out to show her nodding and smiling as she chews. A group of chefs gather to discuss the best way to cook oysters and begin laying them on hot riverstones. Huge and pale, these oysters are unlike any I've seen in Aotearoa, hanging from chopsticks they look almost like poached eggs except muscular, their pendulous bellies swollen with sweet cream.

Indispensable instinct, oyster and whore

Uttered together, they aren't so different. *Oyster and whore, oyster and whore*. Prise open the shell and it's splayed out for all to see, every glistening part. They're an acquired texture more than taste, what is soft and sensual for some is slimy and

sickening to others. But oysters are more than their market products, they may also symbolise protection and resilience. Amy tells me a story, that when Zheng returned to Zhanjiang in 2023, she would walk along the coast to see the oysters clinging to their beds. In the swells of her own family storm, she came to admire the oysters' ability to hold on, withstanding all manner of environmental forces. But there is sweet cream in this story too; Amy tells me that the oysters also reminded Yumoi of the way her family would appear on screen during a facetime call, their faces clustered together like oysters on a rock, separate entities pressed up against each other, jostling to see and be seen.

In the gallery, a giant oyster half shell sits alone. Its interior is porcelain white, so clean you could eat your dinner off it, crags smoothed over so it resembles crockery, the kind cast in a wobbly mould to mimic the organic look of hand thrown ceramics. A perfect circle is carved out where the muscular hinge would be, a white pearl-like orb tucked inside, a long plait of dark hair snuggled around it, snaking across the shell and onto the floor, entangled with dark green beads like kelp, a bird kite dropped at the end. Inked in the shell is a supplication, a spell, a prayer: *plz, bless your most hopeless faggot xxx*. Arranged on the floor, there is an aura of ritual and magic. I think of my foray into high school witchery, writing my crush's name on a slip of red paper and setting it aflame, or the Chinese tradition of *bàishén*, a ritual of deity and ancestor worship accompanied by incense, wine, food, cloth and jade. I hope the ritual works, I hope Zheng's wishes come true.

*None of the stories you tell ever go anywhere
everything compressed into a shimmering unison*

I reread Amy's exhibition essay where she describes Akil Ahamat's video sitting atop a bed of fragrant peat. I ask ChatGPT, *what is peat? what does it smell like?* They tell me so much more than I needed to know, dipping their ladle into the pool of the internet, filling my cup with waterlogged soil, decomposing moss, cool damp peat that has formed over thousands of years, dredged up from its deep slumber below to fill bags of potting mix. *Peat*, they tell me, *can have a distinctive earthy smell, often described as musky, musty, or slightly sweet... Some people may also detect hints of woodiness or smokiness in the aroma of peat. Overall, the smell of peat can evoke a sense of being in a natural, marshy environment.* I think of the perfume I sampled the other day that smelled like that scene in *Melancholia* where Kirsten Dunst moonbathes nude on the mossy bank of the creek. I think I know how peat smells now, but I'm not sure how it will smell while *Dawn of a day too dark to call tomorrow* (2021) plays and so I drive to Bunnings and walk around the garden centre, placing my hand on taut bags of compost, feeling the deep, organic heat held within while listening to the Ahamat's whispers and the crackling of the snail answering. In the glare of the sun, I can barely see Ahamat and their snail lover, but

their voices have never been more intimate than through my AirPods. I feel self-conscious, set apart from the shoppers around me, like I'm holding a secret.

Later, Amy tells me that the material they used in the gallery is actually peat coir, a natural fibre extracted from the husk of coconut. I've used peat coir in my garden before, it comes in big dry blocks that become soft and fibrous when water is added. From memory, the scent is gentle and earthy, like wet earth after rain, nothing like a marsh at all. It is a far more hopeful scent than the ancient musk of peat dredged up out of time.

Ask me again how the story should go...

how much hunger I had to devour to get the sweetness I wanted from it

This story I am weaving is imperfect, the artworks won't fit neatly in the box. Lately, I have been teaching children about the surrealists, how they worked in the crevasse between dreams and words, painting and sculpting as a way of showing feelings that couldn't be parsed into language. Sometimes, as someone who writes about art, I feel like I have one foot on either side of the crevasse, sweating and straining as I plant my feet and push the two sides together. One day, I noticed grooves in the rock, deep scratches I could wedge my fingers and feet into. I ceased my straining and began climbing gingerly down into the crevasse, a feeling of anticipation bubbling, building as I descended into darkness, certain someone was waiting for me.

Ask me again how the story should go

I have seen Olyvia Hong's *Kumiho* (2020) before, although never in the flesh. Last time I saw it was on the screen of my old laptop, the one I had for almost a decade. In all that time, I probably only cleaned the screen a handful of times, everything appearing beneath a flutter of greasy thumbprints. *Kumiho* was first shown in a digitally rendered indoor pebble garden in the virtual building where May Fair was held during lockdown. It was on the floor, propped up by the pebbles, the curls of wax flaking from the sides appearing like leaves, like delicate shells. In the gallery, the curls are stark against solid dark walls, creamy and opaque under the warm lights, somehow fleshy like ears or sea creatures. There are striations across the canvas, scratches that align with the kumiho clawing at a tree just like my cat against the side of the sofa, like there is some eerie act of transmutation occurring in which the scratches we can see the kumiho making are forming on the canvas before us. Although it is only a painting, and I am only viewing it on a screen, there is something unsettling in the kumiho's gaze, the way she seems to be looking straight at me, like we've met somewhere before.

Ask me again how the story should go

How does the story turn out? Has our aspiration been met, our desire for something shared? Will we walk away hand in hand (shell in hand, paw in hand) narratives intertwining into the sunset? Or do we all end up alone, exiting this world as lonely as we came? I've never understood this sentiment because most of us humans arrive to a room full of people, hands cradling us as we move from the soft cave of our mother's bodies to nestle against warm flesh, our arrival met with wonder and comfort. We might descend into loneliness, find it hard to claw our way out of, but we are not born into it. There will always be someone waiting to meet you. Perhaps there is no end to this story, no confirmation of intimacy but no evidence to the contrary, simply a story that continues being told in a whisper, in the dark, in your ear, going nowhere, going anywhere.

This piece makes use of lines from Yumoi Zheng's Intangible (飘飘渺渺) (2024), Akil Ahamat's Dawn of a day too dark to call tomorrow (2021) and the poem In the Animal Garden of My Body by Marci Calabretta Cancio-Bello, from which this exhibition drew its title. It also draws heavily from Amy Weng's brilliant exhibition essay, and from conversations with Amy.

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