

EXHIBITION ESSAY

Shades of Daphne

By Stephanie Cristello

KASMIN

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Shades of Daphne

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Shivers of moonlight passed through the silhouette of leaves shaped like marquise diamonds.

Barbara Kasten

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When the dew collecting on the blades of grass at her feet grew too heavy, it fell in crystalline teardrops.

Theodora Allen

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As the sun rose, she glittered in the gold Mediterranean dawn like a statue.

Ana Pellicer

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Yes, the tree shrank away from his touch that night. No, it was not the wind that made her bow.

Diana Al-Hadid

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He cut you and wore you as a crown. Other men did too.

Brendan Fernandes

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A hum escaped the lips of the chef while harvesting your foliage, plucking leaf by leaf.

Lap-See Lam

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Lovers inscribed their initials into the skin of your bark, tender marks (at first) that hardened over time.

Sif Itona Westerberg

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All of this from when he tried to reach for you—whole forests seeded from your escape.

Zoë Paul

Before Daphne's hands turned into slender branches, her limbs were entwined with that of the laurel tree. Leaves formed at the tips of each finger, the waves of her hair performing how they should behave in the wind. Calves slowly encased by brittle bark. Among the coming stillness, roots blindly searched into the damp earth of the forest floor among the traces of her footprints as she ran. From the chamber of her chest, a heart held inside the trunk beat there.

This hybrid body, neither yet flora nor still human, traced the blueprint of an escape—another way of passing into being that held a different future. Myth provides the plans; culture builds its architecture. If every woman that sought freedom of pursuit was transformed into a tree, whole forests would be seeded by now. Others fully matured, remnants of ancient ferns and moss supported by their canopy. But myth does not spread, it deepens. Like rings of wood, concentric circles amass from each event that holds relevance, expanding the diameter of the base until the overstory casts its ever-widening shadow upon history.

Do not confound the beauty of the image this myth imparts with some idea of romance: to pass through the threshold is a revolt.

*Shivers of moonlight passed through the silhouette
of leaves shaped like marquise diamonds.*



Barbara Kasten, *6. Amphora-Aegean, 5th Century BC*, 1996.

In the mid-1960s, deep-sea divers off the Southern Aegean coast found the remnants of a shipwreck. From the hull of the boat, Ancient Roman amphorae—vessels once used for oil, wine, and grain, or as grave markers—were excavated and acquired by the Museum of Underwater Archaeology in Bodrum. Participating in a residency there from 1995–96, artist Barbara Kasten encountered these objects and made cyanotypes of their silhouettes by moonlight in the courtyards of the neighboring temples. In the diptych *Amphora (Rhodes)* (1996), a gestalt effect triggers recognizable forms, materializing like a fragment of portraiture, a body, or a bomb. Across each of Kasten’s *Amphora*, the imprint of the vessels’ elongated shadows brought into being via the cyanotype process impart a softened understanding of their form. Once used as objects of containment, both ceremonial and utilitarian, Kasten’s exposures return to their origin of discovery through abstraction. The edges between the outline of the amphora and the negative space of the ground dissolve

into one another as if underwater, like glimmers upon an ocean floor. Decades later, Kasten returned to images in blue in the *SHIELDS* series (2021–ongoing)—this time using constructions of industrial metal grids typically used as concrete facing for buildings and structures. Once lit, the mesh casts a shadow on the cyanotype, creating a temporary photogram atop a fixed one. The image passes through the barrier in an undulating moiré communicated through the grid. Through this gesture of deconstruction, Kasten presents a vision of space that is turned inside out. The skeleton is the body, nothing more is needed to complete the building of the image.

*When the dew collecting on the blades of grass at her feet
grew heavy, it fell in crystalline teardrops.*



Theodora Allen, *Death Mask II*, 2022.

Not all portals require crossing—sometimes, they are passages to peer into. When driving in the rain, the whole of the landscape and the horizon is condensed and inverted into the sphere of the raindrop. The barrier of glass between the passenger and the outside atmosphere makes multiple worlds possible in each droplet. In Theodora Allen’s *Death Mask* series (2022), various windows that appear to be cut through a sheet of metal open to reveal a night sky—a depth of glimmering stars, of clouds veiling a crescent moon, visible past the steely surface. The geometry and position of these portals, shaped like teardrops and eyes, imparts a simplified portrait. In reference to the cast of a person’s face before their final burial, the practice of death masks from the Middle Ages

through the nineteenth century was in service of providing artists with a ‘true portrait’ for future sculptures. In Allen’s translation, the conventional markers of facial features are removed—hers is a portrait made of allusions, filled in by the ascription of emotional qualities to emotionless architecture. She sculpts from pigment, slowly lifting paint from the ground of the canvas, to impart the illusion of surface and distance upon a single plane. The gestalt that results from this abstraction is similar how we name the constellations. Allen’s portraits are composed of the same legible symbols centuries of civilizations have given meaning—a trace of longing in our desire to see ourselves reflected in the patterns of nature that surrounds us.

*As the sun rose, she glittered in the gold
Mediterranean dawn like a statue.*



Ana Pellicer, *Purépecha Rattlesnake*, 1995.

When Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi's sculpture arrived on the shores of New York City, the accessories of the Statue of Liberty consisted of a crown, a torch, and a tablet. In 1978, an artisan and jeweler in Michoacán began to hammer adornments for the monument in traditional Mexican designs—towering compositions of copper to the scale of its intended host. A brooch the size of a small car, earrings fit to top park fountains, chains the length of a king cobra. In Ana Pellicer's emblazoned surfaces, not yet touched by verdigris from exposure to time and water, the intricacies of hammered copper techniques adopted from different regions across her native Mexico operate as both functional and propositional costume. Pellicer's *Purépecha Rattlesnake* (1995) depicts a signet of the rattlesnake upon its charm. Fashioned at Santa Clara del Cobre, a compound for artists and craftsmen founded alongside her late husband and collaborator James

Metcalf, a spiral encircles the bell-like geometry of the amulet. Artifacts suggest that the first metallurgy that developed in Western Mexico before Spanish invasion was used for objects made to emit sound. For the rattlesnake, the sound of its tail is a death knell. In the cosmogonies of pre-Columbian Mexico, the color of metal held ritualistic power—golden hues forged for solar deities, silver for lunar forces. For the Purépechans, an indigenous people centered in the northwestern region of Michoacán, and in contemporary symbolism alike, the rattlesnake is an animal that lives at the border between worlds. The pattern of its survival, passing above and below ground to either hunt or hibernate, is united by opposites. Possessing knowledge of the real and the 'other' realm, the creature moves fluidly between the two. Around the pale green neck of the lady, an inflection upon the idol, we can imagine another conception of liberty extending from its talisman.

Yes, the tree shrunk away from his touch that night.
No, it was not the wind that made her bow.



Diana Al-Hadid, *The Long Defeat*, 2017–2023.

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the weaver Arachne is transfigured after burying depictions of Zeus' abuses toward mortal women into her tapestries of maps. The limbs of the naiad Daphne, while attempting to escape the pursuit of Apollo, became the laurel tree. In this history, the species that compose the natural world are ascribed to the faulted flees of women. The Flemish primitive painter Hans Memling's *Allegory of Chastity* (c. 1475) pictures the bodice of a female figure, her head bowed, hands interlaced at the waist, surrounded by entrance of a volcanic mountain. What remains ambiguous is the action of the scene—a figure in process of emerging from or being entrapped by an enclosure of stone, the pair of lions in the foreground guarding for either protection or imprisonment. Given the reliance of Christian theology on the suppression of women's desire, we can guess the latter. Diana Al-Hadid's first interpretation of the painting culminated in

the monumental sculpture *Citadel* (2017–18), a hollowed silhouette of a woman whose face is vacant of features. Likewise delineated in *Allegory by a Thread* (2020) by two severe lines, such as those one would find in the initial sketch of a portrait artist, Al-Hadid indicates that her gaze remains lowered. In contrast to the demure painting, the scale of the work allows for her downcast eyes to stare straight into those of the viewer below. In *Shades of Daphne*, the work appears to swell from the ground as if falling or being engulfed in flames. Across each sculptural reprise of the painting, Al-Hadid reforges the conception of virtue in Memling's portrait—from the feminized guise of purity (as a woman frozen and entrapped by nature) toward a faith in substance (the malleability and mutability of earth's terrain and our place within it).

He cut you and wore you as a crown. Other men did too.



Brendan Fernandes, *Stand Taller I*, 2023.

The fabric worn by the Maasai warriors, an ethnic group whose tribes inhabit Kenya, is patterned with a bright crimson and indigo tartan—the bold and deeply saturated intersecting grids made starker by their arid surroundings. Once a marker of imported ‘culture,’ the plaid was brought to the African continent during British colonial rule before being assimilated and reclaimed by native populations. Aesthetic traces of design holds this history of ownership—its impositions, its shifts in power. Of whom declares what belongs to whom. When he could no longer possess her, Apollo severed the branches of the laurel tree and wore them as a wreath—today, it remains a symbol of victory and achievement. Held in vitrines throughout the grand halls of Western museums, African masks and fetish objects once used in ceremonial rituals and dance are propped coldly behind tempered glass. In *Stand Taller II* (2022) by artist Brendan Fernandes, the museological mounts that support these sacred objects are isolated and

enlarged into bent iron sculptures. Reminiscent of dancing figures, the clandestine stands that sustain the display of these artifacts—many stolen—stand on their own. Activated by performers, whose choreography is informed by expressions of protest and queer liberation, the gesture of removal is returned to movement, to celebration, to the body that can still perform. Forging new textiles that adopt the Maasai blue and red plaid against passages of high key geometric abstractions of ‘razzle-dazzle’ pattern, developed by the British Royal Navy and painted on the exterior of war ships as marine camouflage during WWI and II, Fernandes’ compositions are aggressive and optically challenging. In place of invisibility, the purpose of razzle-dazzle was not to conceal the vessels at sea, but rather disrupt calculations of range, velocity, and heading. Flashes and confusions of red and blue have come to mean other things—the lights of police cars, like those swarming peaceful protests, the aftermath of another shooting in a gay club.

*A hum escaped the lips of the chef while
harvesting your foliage, plucking leaf by leaf.*



Lap-See Lam, *Dreamers' Quay (Singing Chef Suits)*, 2022.

By the late nineteenth century, the decorative-arts style known as chinoiserie was a pan-European phenomenon. Continents once separated by divides evolved differently; Western antiquity belonged to the Greeks and Romans, while ancient civilizations in the East developed for more than four thousand years. They were strangers to one another until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, via colonies and mercantile trade routes (an imperial impulse of the West). In Europe, the mania surrounding these 'exotic' goods was described in terms of hunger, craving, something to devour. An insatiable desire to conquer, if not land and people, cultural symbols. Divorced from history, the veneer became the object. In the work of artist Lap-See Lam, remnants of the style that developed following the opening of channels between Canton and her native Sweden in the 1700s are approached through 'consumption' and 'taste'—terms invoked to describe the aesthetics of chinoiserie as well as the sensory experience of cuisine. Lam, the daughter of a family who owned and operated a Chinese restaurant, has chronicled

the aesthetics of establishments whose interior design and architecture (in Sweden as well as throughout Europe and the Americas) was influenced by the fantasies of chinoiserie. In *Dreamers' Quay* (2021), a 360-degree projection of a shadow play—a type of theater that originated in Central Asia and took root in eighteenth century France as *ombres chinoises*—unfolds across three locations influenced by the sea trade. First, the Chinese Pavilion at Drottningholm in the year of 1753, second a Dragon Ship docked in Gothenburg from 1991–2018, and lastly an East India Company vessel at sea in 1786. The protagonist, introduced as The Singing Chef, is embodied in a series of suspended sculptures—pristinely folded origami suits that are each fitted with gold pendants of dragon scales. The mention of various goods in the script of the film—porcelain figurines, enameled vases, room-dividing screens—are not pictured. Instead, we imagine them. Imagination is, after all, how the aesthetic of chinoiserie took root in European production. Décor is not always trivial; in Lam's vision, chinoiserie manifests as critique.

Lovers inscribed their initials into the skin of your bark, tender marks (at first) that hardened over time.



Sif Itona Westerberg, *grip, break, pine*, 2022.

In his book *Gestures*, Vilém Flusser describes: “Writing does not mean bringing material to a surface but scratching at a surface, and the Greek verb *graphein* proves it.”¹ Across Sif Itona Westerberg’s intricately hand-carved friezes of aerated concrete, the artist’s shallow reliefs compose a type of image-based writing to create a language hybrid forms—between the animal, the plant, the body. Engraved upon aerated concrete, slowly scratched into the surface of panels and freestanding floor works, compositions of primordial plants illustrate the transformation of ancient species melding into the next stage of their evolution. Across highly stylized variations of orchids and carnivorous flowers, the sexual organs of plants, natural history is guided by the artist’s hand. Within this restrained but sinister garden, the bronze figure of a woman whose limbs have partially dissolved into waves occupies

the center of the installation. The earliest forms of writing were made by carving—the cuneiform alphabets of the dead sea scrolls, biblical marble tablets. Instead of hands, Itona Westerberg’s figures often have wings, claws, or tentacles—appendages that also carve (into air, earth, and water). In the Christian tradition of illuminated medieval manuscripts, text was considered holy (the word of God), while monsters could live in the margins. Hybrid bodies of beasts decorated the edges, a fantasy that allowed for the imagination of the artist. Centuries later, genes are now spliced, grown, and manufactured in laboratories. Itona Westerberg imagines a history that has left us with fragments of post-human future. As scientific advances progress, the promise of hybridity—playing with the ‘hand of God’—seems not only possible, but imminent.

1. Vilém Flusser, *Gestures*, trans. Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991): 19.

A heart held inside the trunk still beat there.



Ali Banisadr, *Weighing of the Heart*, 2023.

On judgement day, the ancient Egyptians believed your heart was weighed against a feather. If the scales balanced, you were worthy of paradise. The results were witnessed by the jackal-headed god Anubis, and recorded by Thoth, whose body was part ibis. In Ali Banisadr's newest painting, *The Weighing of the Heart* (2023), hybrid bodies compose a cacophony of the soul in limbo. Densely populated scenes of chimeric beings are woven together by brazen strokes of color that fracture the picture plane. Challenging what belongs to depth versus frontality, the action of Banisadr's work is defined through a cubist logic that coalesces both figure and ground through perspectival shifts. Across the backdrop of the image, passages of geometric abstraction unite the composition—a practice the artist has returned to for this piece for the first time since 2008. Certain recognizable elements provide visual anchors

for the viewer's eye to navigate. A serpent intertwines across the left side of the painting while a white horse occupies the upper right corner of the canvas, its skin dissolving into a series of playing cards that hold an ace of diamonds upon the face. The pattern, like a harlequin dress, is echoed near the center of the composition in the figure of a jester that holds the scales. To his left, a vermillion orb (the heart) awaits its placement. Contrary to the funerary custom that provides the basis of the depiction, gravity does not apply in Banisadr's fictive world. Quilting together moments in time and narrative, the painting appears weightless and buoyant. Here, figures rise and fall according to an alternate system of ritual that divorces from religious judgement and passes into the language of something more fluid—of dreams and visions of an afterlife.

The cicadas once nested under foot emerged in summer symphony.



Naama Tsabar, *Untitled*, 2018.

Flanking both sides of the exhibition space, Naama Tsabar's ongoing investigations into site-specific interventions with architecture and sound. On the left wall, photographic prints of Tsabar's body depict her limbs reaching into and out of voids cut into crisp white dry wall. From afar, the artist's limbs appear to have the ability to pass through the solid barrier—up close, the tactile texture of bare skin as it presses into the still visible gaps discloses the illusion. In *Inversion #4* (2021), two holes permeate the right wall. Melding distinct elements from various string instruments—guitars, harps, banjos, and violins—Tsabar creates a sound piece that relies on contortion and penetration. Across each iteration within the series, composed in arrangements of different geometries,

architecture is made porous. Upon each activation, a part of the body disappears from the realm of the white cube as it moves into the space of the wall. What is often a static structure to hold art—the gallery space—is transformed into a dynamic participant of the work. In *Shades of Daphne*, the sonic element of the work features the voice of Wolf Weston and the sound of Brood X cicadas, possessing the effect of a Levantine chant over a score of tymbal that is habitually heard but rarely seen. In relation to the wall, the work alludes to ancient structures for gathering and mourning—a type of collaborative Wailing Wall that subsists on the individual's will to interact with the work.

In the distance, too, you could hear a swan sing.



Bianca Bondi, *The Antechamber (Myths of descent and return)*, 2022.

*The white tundra swan was in the hospital for
four years
And now she is in a reservoir
The white tundra swan that took me on her back
From the chamber of feathers and sailed the
black heavens
For ten thousand meters, from the North Pole
to the South overnight
Is now by those waters*

–Kim Hyesoon, *Tundra Swan*

While they are mute throughout their lives, swans sing before they die. The utterance of their music marks a gateway that occupies a space that is neither here nor there: between the end of life and the beginning of death. The metaphor derived from this phenomenon signifies a finale, a last gesture or act. Commissioned as part of the Busan Biennale 2020, the Korean poet Kim Hyesoon was invited as one of several fiction authors and poets to compose an ode to the city, which would provide the framework for the participating artists. Her poem, *Tundra Swan*, provided the basis of South African Paris-based artist Bianca Bondi’s monumental installation [*The Antechamber (Tundra Swan)*]. A reprise of the work

[*The Antechamber (Thai Crane)*] took place at the Thailand Biennial in 2021. As part of *Shades of Daphne*, this third iteration [*The Antechamber (Myths of Descent and Return)*] occupies a single clinically lit gallery space built into Kasmin’s existing architecture.

The two primary figurative objects within each version of *The Antechamber* are a bed, whose mattress holds a circular pond in place of where one would sleep, and a dresser, above which a large round mirror reflects the space as well as the circumference of the water. It is a space of dreams and of cycles, “the bed is where you come into being and where you take your last breath,” says Bondi. Surrounded by the white sheets of the bedding, flora erupts from the interior of the artificial pond: plastic cattails, gooseneck loosestrife, and clematis vines of violet and blue. Amid the salt, sparse dried branches foraged from the native prairie landscape on the roof of the Kasmin Sculpture Garden rise from the fragile white blanket as if after a snowfall. Oxidized brass vases are strewn at the foot of the dresser and upon the bed, silver tipped arrows and a porcelain swan vase occupy the surface above the open drawers which spills with sea vegetation.

An antechamber is a room meant for passage—like the bird’s song, it signals an entrance into another realm. It is also a space to lie in wait, observing in anticipation of what may come.

*All of this from when he tried to reach for you—
whole forests seeded from your escape.*



Zoë Paul, *Untitled (Terracotta Man)*, *Untitled (Terracotta Woman)*, 2019.

Across the Mediterranean, what delineates private and public space within domestic interiors is often not a door. They close too severely, limit views too opaquely, and would stale the air if shut. Instead, preference is placed on curtains of beads—the sound of their swaying strings as one passes from room to room is characteristic of both the function and climate of architectures used for dwelling. In the large-scale installations of Zoë Paul, the form of these dividers provide the basis of her compositions—images suspended in space that derive highly-stylized figurations from hand-fired ceramic beads. Here, exposure to the temperature of the flame directly inflects how Paul’s representations take shape—different heats and lengths of time lead to the different hues of the artist’s terracotta clay, which are arranged according to color before being used to portray light and shadow. In *Untitled (terracotta*

man) (2019) and *Untitled (terracotta woman)* (2019), the glinting apparition of two figures that arise from the assembly of pixel-like color afforded by Paul’s process materialize in full scale portraits. A male figure, akin to the type one would find painted on the exterior of an ancient Greek vase, and that of a woman, similar to a votive goddess such as Venus of Willendorf, face each other. Their gazes do not meet. Yet, they remain connected—the end of one figure’s arm, as it passes out of view from the limits of the curtain, appears to reach (or become) the others. In this exchange, neither is limited to the confines of their support. Within the context of *Shades of Daphne*, the mural proposes an alternate possibility for Apollo’s actions: as he reaches toward Daphne, he too is transformed.

Shades of Daphne

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