THE VEGETARIAN
TJ Shin

July 22 – September 9, 2022
The Bows
Mohkínstsis (Calgary), Alberta
Exhibition Checklist

Mourning Portrait    1, 2, & 3    2022
Preserved transfected mugwort with artist's DNA, etched plaque, wood

Untitled (Self-Portrait 1, 2 & 3)    2022
Digital print from microscope scans

Untitled (100 days of solemnity)    2022
Transfected mugwort, cinchona, makko, oak, wild cherry, sandalwood, ash, diatomaceous earth, wood

Anthropology of a Phytomorphist    2021–2022
Video, 14:00 (Sound co-produced by Shannon Lee)

Untitled (Microscope Slide)    2022
DNA-coated particles, plastic rupture discs, petridish, wood, LED lights

The exhibition's title is borrowed from Han Kang's 2007 novel The Vegetarian, whose protagonist becomes a tree.
**The Vegetarian**  
TJ Shin

In *The Vegetarian*, TJ Shin transfects their DNA into mugwort plant. While in residence at the University at Buffalo in 2021, Shin induced changes to the plant’s genome by blasting their DNA particles onto foraged mugwort using a gene gun commonly used for agricultural engineering.

Tracing material histories of mugwort—in various contexts, an “invasive species,” a cure for malaria, a tool of colonial medicine, an accelerant in the Vietnamese-American War, a traditional medicine, the active agent in moxibustion, a hallucinogen, a bedrock of shamanic practices, and indeed a mythological catalyst in the birth of the human species—*The Vegetarian* imagines through biochemistry a way of being in the world outside of extractive, human-centred settler-colonialism. The artist calls this “vegetated” life.

The multisensory exhibition features herbarium collages, digital prints, and a video installation. All of this work emerges from the point of view of fluorescent microscope scans documenting the genealogy of Shin’s plant transformation. Pursuing states of being outside of the logics of human/animal, animal/plant, living/dead, and material/spirit, as well as the horticultural binary of native/invasive, the microscope becomes a speculative portal to new ecologies.

At the exhibition’s centre is a large-scale sculptural scentscape: a vascular system made from the transfected mugwort, to be burned as incense at regular intervals throughout the exhibition in a practice inspired by Korean shamanistic ritual.

In drawing out the social lives of mugwort, *The Vegetarian* engages the mobilities of people and plants, and in colonial contexts also the immobilization of people. Expanding on the philosophy and critical theory of pharmakon, which triangulates the epidemiology of remedy, poison, and scapegoat, *The Vegetarian* unpacks how medicine, botany, and science coalesce through the administration of landscapes, plants, and animals. In turn, Shin considers how pestiferous or “malarial” subjects come to constitute the biopolitical networks of “disease ecologies” and the racialized regimes of health and disease management, revealing colonialism to be the source of, rather than the solution to, disease epidemics.

In light of all of this, *The Vegetarian* invites us to imagine the speculative upshot of a “vegetated” life.

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TJ Shin is a Korean-Canadian interdisciplinary artist based in Los Angeles. Inspired by decentralized ecologies and queer sociality, they create living installations and imagine an ever-expanding self that exists beyond the boundaries of one’s skin. Shin was a 2020 New York Community Trust Van Lier Fellow and 2020 Visiting Artist Fellow at UrbanGlass in Brooklyn. Shin has exhibited internationally at the Queens Museum, Lewis Center for the Arts, Wave Hill, Recess, Doosan Gallery, Klaus Von Nichtssagend Gallery, Cuchifritos Gallery, Knockdown Center, and Cody Dock, London.
Becoming Mugwort: Death and De-Humanization

A long time ago, in the beginning of time, there was a Bear and a Tiger. They prayed to Dagun god and asked for legs and arms and flesh.

So begins the subtitled narrative of TJ Shin’s video essay Anthropology of a Phytomorphist. Sounds of wet soil bubbling into clay, echoing in a cave, emanate from increasingly magnified microscope scans of a leaf and its darkened veins. The creation of the universe is here narrated through the mythology of a bear that transforms into the first human, a woman, after eating garlic and divine mugwort in a cave for one hundred days. The frame cuts to a large harvest of mugwort plant propped against a laboratory wall, then again to a view of the artist alongside a scientist preparing extraction apparatuses for various test tubes. The video unfolds as a narrative of entangled lives—human-animal and plant—including Shin’s own, via their DNA transfected into the mugwort. In pursuing a kind of “vegetated” life, Shin suggests how we might think beyond biopolitical and temporal binaries of life and afterlife.

Though short-lived in its biological manipulation of organic material, Shin’s extensive research on mugwort’s fraught material histories and realities suggests metaphorical modes of being with, and also becoming with non-human life forms, which further transcend anthropocentric binaries. Anthropology of a Phytomorphist thus presents an inversion of the creation stories in which the genesis of humanity grants a new ontological layer to non-human, typically non-living, forms. In Shin’s proposal, creation—and life itself—are perpetually shaped by histories of death, which entails an annihilation of the distinct “human” self by becoming one with others. What emerges from Shin’s labwork is a chimera, a form of alterlife, or what transdisciplinary scholar Mel Y. Chen might call a kind of “tranimality,” or “trans becomings”: when beings are altered and enriched by interspecies exchanges.

As traced through the artist’s research, mugwort has a complex social history in its classifications as both an endemic and invasive species (regarded in North America as a “pest” from Northeast Asia), and as both a traditional remedy (transplanted from Asia to Africa) and a global biopharmaceutical treatment for viral diseases such as malaria—“An Asiatic cure or an Asiatic pest, depending on one’s allegiance,” as Shin puts it in the video essay. The continued racialized dimension of contagion and species invasion as Asian in origin also becomes a rooted layer of biopolitical life wrought by colonialism. To control vast numbers of bodies across distant lands at the biological level, colonial rule would root itself through the management of “health” by diagnosing certain bodies and entire geographies as unmanageably “diseased.” It was then that a “cure” could be executed and sustained. As artist Carolyn Lazard writes of these necropolitics: “There is a cure, and in the absence of a cure there is death and management. There is nothing else.” In Anthropology of a Phytomorphist, Shin takes this logic a step further: “To cure something is to make it dead.” Under strict lab protocols rooted in a fear of the invasive mugwort species, ripe with the effects of mutagenesis, proliferating within and beyond the laboratory walls, Shin was instructed to kill off their human-infected mugwort samples by drying them out.

The successively zoomed-in microscope images of Shin’s mutant mugwort appear at first glance to be telescopic captures of a warping cosmic space-time. However, what we see in the deep shimmering amber are actually numerous insertions of Shin’s DNA into the mugwort. Each creates a cluster of black holes through the plant’s metabolization of the artist’s genetic material. It might seem strange—
even horrifying—to make this invasive weed, this Asiatic pest, “more diseased” or “other” with one’s own human fragments. However, as the artist demonstrates through a speculative fiction of the microscopic image, it is through alterity—or the radical otherness found in biodiversity—that we might think about life and alterlife beyond the binaries that render bodies as diseased and invasive. Horror and the uncanny here also allow us to re-envision the limits and potentialities of an altered, not-quite-human body. It is therefore out of the very burning ruptures of Shin’s human-infused plant flesh that portals for different cosmologies of being seem to emerge.

In its conclusion, *Anthropology of a Phytomorphist* invokes the protagonist of Han Kang’s 2008 novel *The Vegetarian*, Kim Yeong-hye, a seemingly average homemaker who is haunted by dreams about brutal animal slaughter. Yeong-hye gradually renounces all sustenance in an attempt to disavow the human part of her being—including the human construction of sexuality as gender—to become “plant-like.” In seriously considering “vegetated” life as a mode of being with and yielding agency to other forms of de-humanized life (rather than as a medical term used to signify a less-than-human state of comatosis), Shin endeavors in this work to transgress the colonial dichotomies of poison and cure, human and non-human, endemic and invasive, physical and spiritual, self and other, life and death. Yeong-hye acts as a mentor, lover, and mother-like figure who guides the artist toward imagining possibilities around annihilating the possessive self, a gateway into other ways of living and being.

A dream encounter with Yeong-hye brings the video essay to a close: “I go back with her into the cave. As a bear, into mugwort, until there is no organ, into the quietest whisper before time.” While the bear eating mugwort birthed human life, Shin’s retelling is ultimately a reversal of this cosmogony and considers what it means to return to plant-like, “vegetated” being: to “de-humanize” oneself, one might say. After all, the body has always been “a loose bag for its bacterial, fungal, microbial, and viral inhabitants,” as the artist has noted in another context. For Shin, living is interwoven with dying, an ecologically-embedded journey that is inevitably shaped by our current biopolitical and necropolitical moment: of ongoing environmental exploitation, chemical contamination, ever-emerging diseases, pharmacological control—and of awaiting a biotechnological miracle cure to arrive from the future. We are reminded through Shin’s work that just as there is deadly matter teeming with life and vice versa, life and death are co-constituted in a cycle, embodied and disembodied, human and inhuman. The beginning is the end. It is in the afterlife that alterlife endlessly emerges and persists.

**Danni Shen** is a curator and writer. She is currently the Curatorial & Public Programs Assistant at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts (CCVA) at Harvard University. Previous curatorial roles include at The Kitchen, Empty Gallery, and Wave Hill in New York. She was also Visiting Critic at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) and Curator-in-Residence at Residency Unlimited. Recent exhibitions include *Beast, Chimera, Kin* at the Hessel Museum of Art (2022) and *Collaborative Survival* at 601Artspace (2021). Shen is a contributor to various publications including *BOMB Magazine, Art in America, Heichi Magazine, The Brooklyn Rail, Hyperallergic, Rhizome*, and *onscreentoday* | 介面, among others, and is also a recipient of the Art Writing Workshop and the Art Critic Mentoring Program in collaboration with CUE Art Foundation x the International Association of Art Critics (AICA-USA). She holds an MA from the Center for Curatorial Studies (CCS), Bard College.
**Curator’s Statement | Microscopic Regimes of Modernity | Godfre Leung**

*Mal aria*—a condition of bad air. In many places around the world, the burning of incense is practiced as an offering to the spirits. In many East Asian traditions, the streak of incense smoke is intended to guide the spirit of one’s ancestors back to the corporeal world. A flipside to this is the superstition of leaving one’s chopsticks upright in a bowl of rice, which in its visual similarity to lit sticks of incense is said to risk attracting unwanted spirits.

In *Malaria, an essay on the production and propagation of this poison, and on the nature and localities of the places by which it is produced etc*, the 1827 treatise by Scottish geologist John MacCulloch that introduced the word malaria to the English language, the disease is introduced as an “unseen, and still unknown, poison” and is later described as “invisible” and “insensible and imponderable.”

The indetectable, airborne nature of the disease came, in the course of colonial medicine, to act as a technology to manage territories, through the management of bodies. That’s a somewhat misleading way to put it, as techniques of managing bodies aren’t a tool to solidify territorial boundaries, per se, nor is the inverse totally true. Bodies and space are mutually co-constitutive. Conceived epidemiologically as a figure for the delineation between healthy and diseased bodies, air became a grey area to be exploited, and malaria its tool. Race, a taxonomy invented during the process of colonialism, was a kind of magical thinking rooted in the porousness of shared air.

In her 2015 essay “Bodies with New Organs,” Jasbir K. Puar describes biopolitics as “the process by which humans become a species (and in fact specimens) to join all other biological species.” The human, she explains, “is thus rearticulated as an exceptional form of animality.” Modernity, which we have come to understand as the constellation of human-centred discourses that justified settler-colonialism, ethnic cleansing, non-reciprocal resource extraction, and unchecked technocracy, can thus be understood as continuous with the epistemology of the specimen—a microscopic regime. This modernity was not the discovery of all the things that now could be analyzed microscopically—such as the viral droplets that our collective behaviour suggests magically no longer exist—but rather the mere *possibility* of seeing the risk floating in this grey area between bodies and space through the prosthetic of the scientific scope.

Against this scientific regime, which the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss might have considered magical thinking, *The Vegetarian* deploys the microscopic gaze as an act of magic. This is how I read the concrete biochemical process of TJ Shin’s transfection of their DNA into mugwort plant. Following Mel Y. Chen’s multivalent articulation of the prefix trans- in their 2012 book *Animacies*, which destabilizes the categories that undergird gender, race, (dis)ability, species, and taxonomy (animal/plant) to, in Puar’s gloss, “potentially change what [these discourses] are, proliferate their intensive, singular forms, reorganize their registers of significance and signifies, and reterritorialize and multiply their capacitation, their presence, their mutability,” we might call Shin’s enterprise a *trans-ing*.

In *The Vegetarian*, the audience *breathes* the artist. At biochemical modernity’s elemental level, DNA, Shin trans-es their self. Left to dry out and die, the transfected mugwort plant that is now also them passes through the air as smoke—in an act of transubstantiation, it becomes one with air. This is a relationship between bodies (and spirits) that transcodes science as shamanry. As shared air has become the central concern of our time, *The Vegetarian* effects a transmission that, rather than in-fecting the audience’s bodies, imagines *trans-fec*tion as a social relation.
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notes from the essays


