

Frieze

A Show in Guangzhou Investigates Late Capitalism in the Global South

With works by 11 artists, 'Study of Things' at Guangdong Times Museum offers regional perspectives on rampant industries

by Alvin Li



Assembling works by 11 artists, nine of which are based in Asia, 'Study of Things: or a Brief Story about Fountain, Brick, Tin, Coin, Stone, Shell, Curtain and Body' is a succinct survey of recent productions informed by new materialist thoughts, with particular attention paid to regional perspectives.

It's impossible to discuss the conditions of the Global South without addressing the asymmetrical effects of late capitalism and environmental destruction, which several artists in the exhibition tackle head on. Four works from Vietnamese artist Tuan Mami's series 'In One's Breath: Nothing Stands Still' (2018) reflect on the constant flux of matter and energy that are integral to the animist cosmology of the country's native Muong people, whose way of life is increasingly threatened by rampant capitalist extractivism. Explosion, for instance, a kinetic installation, spasmodically pumps rock dust atop an engine into the air, simulating a fundamental dynamism of matter while also warning of the respiratory damage being caused by intensive lime mining in the artist's native region of Hà Nam. In a similar vein, Riar Rizaldi's *Kasiterit* (2019), filmed in Bangka Island in the Indonesian archipelago – the supplier of one third of global tin – traces the metal's movement from the deep layers of the island to an ever-expanding global network: from coins, tools and ritual ornaments to electronic devices and, ultimately, a solar-powered A.I. narrator, which ponders its own mineralogical origin.

Other works in the exhibition examine the architectonics of the built environment. Nabuqi's *Fountain: Night Garden* (2020), which greets visitors at the entrance, is a new commission informed by the history of fountains. Incorporated into urban infrastructure by the Greeks and the Romans in ancient times, fountains didn't receive prominence in Asian cities until well into the modern era. Since then, they have for the most part lost their practical function, becoming pure spectacles evocative of statecraft, capital, and the human mastery of nature. Here in the museum, Nabuqi wraps her installation anachronistically in a tarp colour-blocked with a modernist palette reminiscent of De Stijl, evoking a state of charged suspension.

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Tan Jing's *Shell-less: the Vanished Nymph* (2020), another new commission, reflects on human exploitation of animals in myths and as collectibles. Transforming a museum staircase into a viscous snail shell, this whimsical installation draws from the Chinese folk tale of *The Snail Fairy*, but converts its patriarchal narrative (about a male protagonist taking possession of a snail shell, and marrying the fairy living inside it) to give voice to the female, non-human other instead. Descending Tan's dimly lit snail spiral, where liquid drips from ceiling to floor, I forget momentarily that I'm inside the museum and let my mind drift, empathizing with the snail.

On the museum's terrace is a piece of rock from Wang Sishun's series '*Apocalypse*' (2016–ongoing). Like other rocks from Sishun's collection, acquired during his travels across Asia and Europe, the piece is completely untreated. With the ovular bump protruding from its surface recalling a human eye, it overlooks the construction site across the street. I felt humbled, in front of this humanoid rock, as I pondered how it has endured for millennia. The rock cycle undermines the notion of progress, and the anthropocentric view of time as always a linear movement forward. At one point in Rizaldi's video, the A.I. narrator observes: 'A new philosophy of time is much needed to reconfigure the past, present and future.' One way of achieving this, as '*Study of Things*' proposes, is to look through the eyes of objects and to re-evaluate our position as but a single cog in the endless cycle of material, energy and information. The world lies in more than just our hands.