



VISUAL ARTS

By Koon Yee-wan

Between forgetting and remembering 都忘記得起

Spectral Evidence at 1a Space

We live in an age of forgetting. We forget each other's birthdays, barely remember what we had for dinner three nights ago, and names of people we met two hours ago (a common problem that often involves urgent whispering to friends you hope might help, but never can). Forgetting is the flipside of remembering, and we all know that memories can be maddeningly inconstant. In contrast, forgetting conjures up a blanket of nothingness. It should be reassuringly simple, but looking at a past of nothingness, more often than not, generates fear.

Last year, Karim Nader, a young scientist, radically proposed that long-term memories are not fixed (the common conception is that once

a long-term memory is filed in your brain, it stays there). Instead, Nader proposed that when a memory is recalled, it is unstable, and in its recall, it gets altered before being stored again. The original memory is therefore lost – he compared it to water and ice – same mass, but different states of being. I have always been struck by this image that our brains are like broken (temperamental) freezers – we never quite know when we open that door whether we have water or ice.

The malleability of memories is a common trope of storytelling in books and films. The director Christopher Nolan has made a career out of depicting the obsessive drive of trying to recover memories, and in so doing tells us that memories

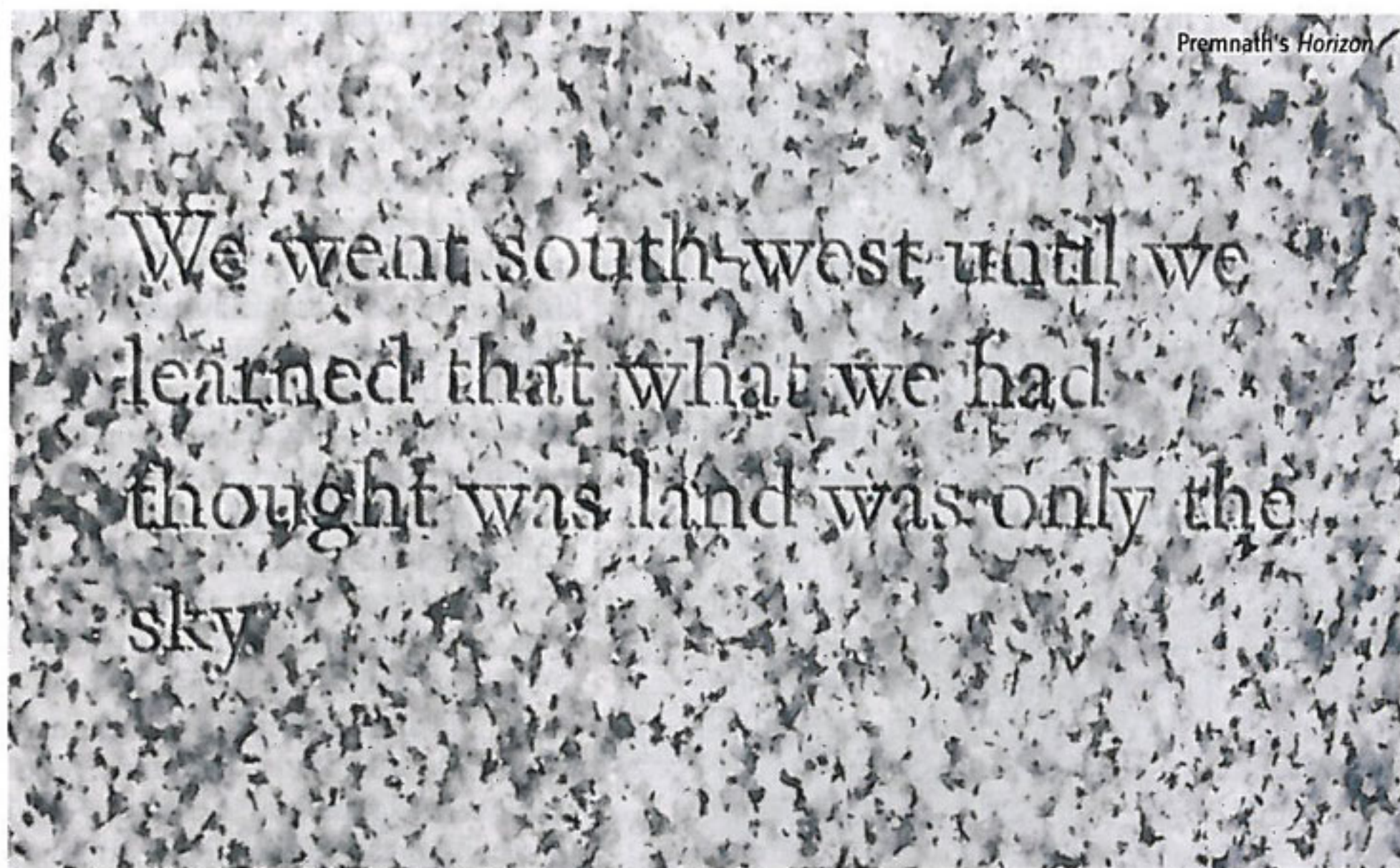
are important to the core of our identities as individuals and as part of a larger community, and the fears and anxieties we may have if we ever forget. As we increasingly rely on computers and technology to generate information, our abilities to have our intake of information “stick” becomes increasingly fragile. Broken freezers.

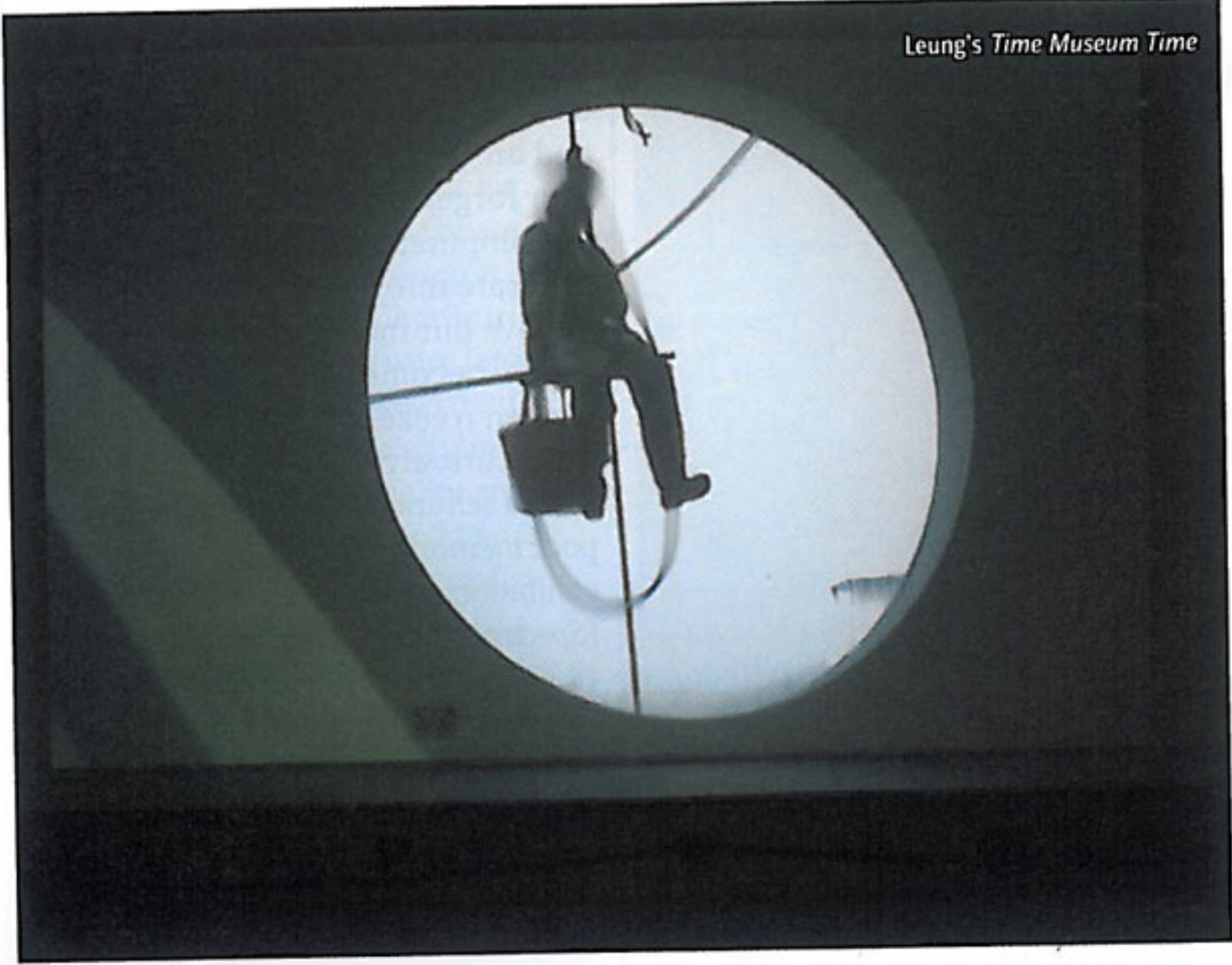
My curiosity about forgetting – apart from a self-interest based on having a poor memory – was prompted by an exhibition at 1a Space, 《幽靈證據》 (*Spectral Evidence*), curated by 林司律 (Steven Lam), an artist and curator based in New York, and winner of the inaugural curator residency programme. Lam has offered a way of thinking about the lapses that fall between forgetting and remembering. He has selected US-based artists Sreshta Rit Premnath, 梁碩恩 (Simon Leung) and Lin + Lam who examine how traces of the past exist in the present.

Before I begin, I should qualify this essay by announcing that I have not seen the show at the time of writing (being in New York at the moment). But this is not a review of the show so much as a mulling of the abstract ideas behind this exhibition. I have seen many of the works, some in earlier incarnations, and some as digital files. But I was interested to

follow this “review” through, because the ambitiousness of the theme runs counter to the usual type of exhibitions we have in Hong Kong.

I caught up with Lam in New York shortly after he returned from Asia. Full of praise and excitement for what he had seen and the people he had met, Lam's boyish enthusiasm was a welcome surprise. Unlike the grand doyennes of curator-stardom who throw on large-scale shows that bedazzle their viewers, Lam was chasing after





something different – small intense glimpses of social issues that make viewers think about much larger, sometimes global, themes. It is the type of approach that works well in a Hong Kong art world, where the lack of studio space means that artists make smaller works, and where art is a crucial voice in independent political and social circles.

The phrase “Spectral Evidence” traces back to the 17th century Salem Witch Trials in Massachusetts. The haunting trauma of these early beginnings reflect some of the ideas that Lam wanted to explore – how past traumatic events may shape the present. The title suggests shadowy remnants, and it is the possibility or impossibility of trace as evidence that is being questioned. Like many “legal” trials, there is an investigative dimension behind the chosen artworks and all the artists examine their ideas in different contexts (such as different countries), offering a sense of shared experiences that cross space and time.

Sreshta Rit Premnath uses old photographs or scenes of public spaces and erases the ubiquitous monuments to famous figures who narrate a type of collective history such as Columbus in the US. Closer to our home, Premnath

used images of Queen Victoria in Hong Kong, including the large sculpture that used to sit in Statue Square, which was removed during WWII. In his manipulated photographs, the erasing of images is a form of iconoclasm, but I am struck not by its removal, but how the absences – the blanks – work. They make it difficult to recall what was there. Premnath continues to fuse the image so that it recalls a number of different times in history creating intersections of image, histories and memories. I am struck by the violence of the intersections – the willful compression that distorts the linearity of history and time, which helps us make sense of the past. The works force us to think about why visual memories are simultaneously so potent and so evasive. Memories are formed through repeated looking (or thinking), but they also embody the ice and water states that neuroscientists Nader talked about – there is no such thing as an original memory, only reconstructions that evolve.

Lin + Lam offer a different historical trauma – the Vietnamese refugee camps in Malaysia and Hong Kong. There is an odd documentary-like feel to some of their works, which look at how quickly former camps have been transformed into golf courses

(in Hong Kong) or nature reserves (in Malaysia). The transformation of sites – again for me – looks at how quickly we forget, but also how these sites can be used as a form of tourism that peddles historical memories. When I first saw these images, I recalled the public announcement “*Bat dau tu nai*,” the opening words of a government statement discussing the changes in policies that were repeatedly announced by RTHK in the late 1980s. But I could not remember what it was about or where the sites were.

Simon Leung’s work is based on squatting. I shall resist analyzing his video, because I feel I need to see it face to face in the space where it is set up. More than the other artists, Leung’s works demand some sort of site anchoring – similar to his chosen motif – squatting. Leung has been working on the squatting figure for a while, and I have seen earlier renditions in Brooklyn many years ago. I am looking forward to seeing Leung’s work again at 1a space, if only to see what I have forgotten.

Hong Kong has, recently, been active in restoration, conservation, heritage and other memory projects. In this sense, *Spectral Evidence* finds familiar company. But the many Hong Kong projects are never about the fear of forgetting. Indeed it is the opposite – we are always told what should be remembered, and boast of our own memories as being more truthful than those of others. Our approach has always been a competition as to who remembers the best, whose is the most authentic reality. The heritage issues are in part responses to a different kind of fear – the fear of becoming a homogenous region of high-rises, of capitalist bureaucracy, and the fear of losing individuality. The response is therefore to preserve, and forgetting is used as a cautionary tale, our own didactic self-admonition. *Spectral Evidence* offers a look from the opposite side of the scale – the traces of what we have forgotten, and the emotional and cerebral nature of our fears when we do.

It is telling that Lam is based in the US, and New York specifically.

人的回憶，是他最大的精神資本。但當日之苦，日後果真能回甘嗎？

There, he is not alone in wanting to handle these emotionally and intellectually challenging ideas – it is part of the post-9/11 state as artists and curators tackle, at different levels and with different intensities, aspects of a post-trauma world. There are numerous works at both popular and more obscure levels. It is a growing field of study in academia. In generalized terms, trauma looks at how extraordinary experiences can shape how we remember or forget the past, and the reorganization process needed to redefine identities that have splintered from a former reality. It is commonly regarded as unspeakable, and it is in art where expressions of trauma are more readily found, often incomplete, and perhaps used to heal.

I am not attempting to undermine the magnitude of 9/11, or the integrity of the artists by suggesting that trauma is the simple thread that links all artists. But I do believe that the experiences of that fateful day have seeped into the public psyche and have generated a form of cultural trauma that impinges on the lives of many in the US-based community. My point for now is this: the ambition of this show is the emphatic vision of the artists that allows viewers a moment, however incomplete, to glimpse the way memories, the keys to our sense of reality, can be painful, violent, transformative and abstract. There is nothing noble or didactic about the shape of these histories.

If reality is something that is always in a state of flux between forgetting and remembering, does it then follow that stability can only be found in fantasy? In New York – itself a semi-fantasy world of art wonderland – at the Museum of Art and Design, I came across one of the more interesting shows in the city entitled *Dead or Alive*. Artists in this show look at another pair of abstract concepts.

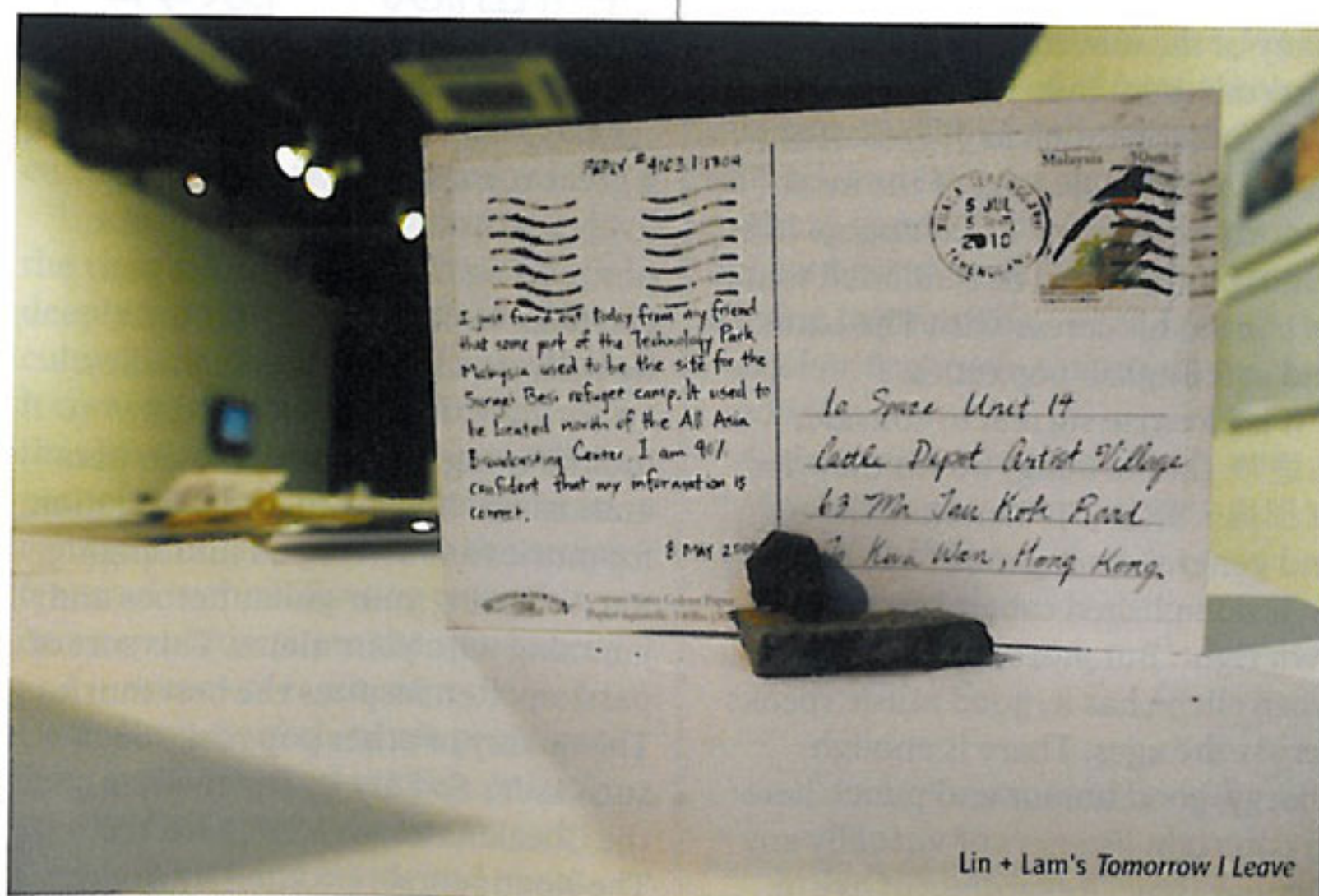
Participating artists include 徐冰 (Xu Bing), the internationally renowned artist known for his playful approach to hybridity.

Despite the ominous title, *Dead or Alive* is not a macabre exhibit; it is more a fantasy land created by dead things. There is a display of skulls made up of different herbs and spices by Helen Altman. Xu Bing has recreated a Ming dynasty painting by the famous artist 董其昌 (Dong Qichang). Xu used dead plants, pieces of wood, feathers and anything else that one might find in a landscape, and placed them behind a light box (now used as the “canvas”) using shadows of the found items to recreate Dong’s ink traces. In another room, there is *Discharge*, by the British artist Kate McGwire. It is a giant horn-like sculpture made of pigeon feathers, and it is another example of how physical remains can evoke beauty. The grey feathers overlap and twist to create a tubular force out of the body parts of what are usually referred to as flying rodents.

There is something almost twee about the show – a return to Victorian gothic but with the horror removed. Why should we fear death, even if it

comes in the shape of skeletons and other dead parts? I think it is because what we fear about death is not the physicality of the process (aging, perhaps, but the state of death, no). We fear leaving this world forgotten, or to never have the memories of living again. British novelist Julian Barnes wrote a meditative memoir about death and dying and recalls a conversation with his brother, a philosopher, who had little patience with the fanciful nature of recollections. Barnes, being a writer, embraced memories with great affection. He spoke to his brother about the food they used to eat as children, and his brother mentioned porridge, bacon etc., but ended his musings with “At least, that’s how things stand in my memory. But you no doubt remember them differently, and I do not think much of memory as a guide to the past.” Water and ice. ■

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Lin + Lam's *Tomorrow I Leave*