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Tending One's Own Garden: Interview with Maline Yim





Portrait of Maline Yim. Image courtesy of the artist and Richard Koh Fine Art.

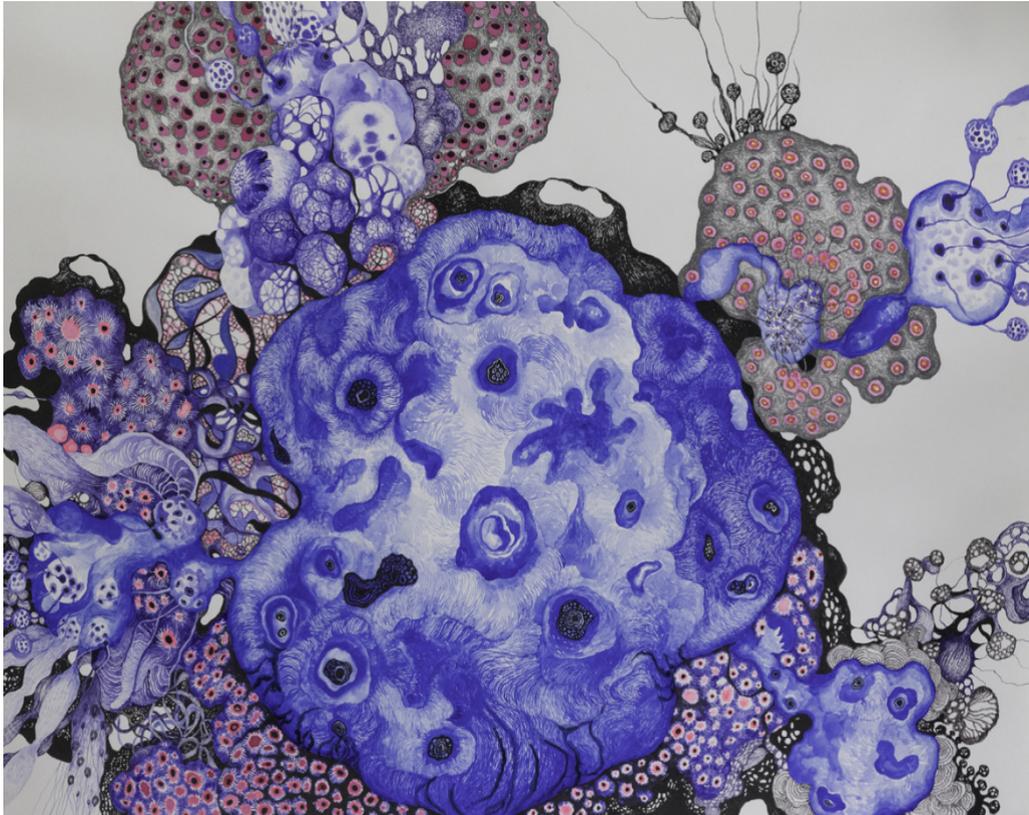


Maline Yim, *Colorful Decomposition 2*, 2018, mixed media on paper, 78 x 108.5 cm. Photo credit Roun Ry. Image courtesy of Richard Koh Fine Art.





Maline Yim, Colorful Decomposition 3, 2017, mixed media on paper, 78 x 108.5 cm. Photo credit Roun Ry. Image courtesy of Richard Koh Fine Art.



Maline Yim, Colorful Decomposition 8, 2017, mixed media on paper, 59.5 x 84 cm. Photo credit Roun Ry. Image courtesy of Richard Koh Fine Art.

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Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written...

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To Cambodian artist Maline Yim, representing nature means unveiling its beauty, as well as tackling environmental concerns head on.

TEXT: Naima Morelli

IMAGES: Courtesy of Richard Koh Fine Art

The house and studio of Battambang-born artist Maline Yim is a 20 minute *tuk tuk* (auto rickshaw) ride away from Siem Reap’s city center. As you leave the city—crowded with tourists on their way to Angkor Wat—you enter a different dimension. Here the streets have no name, and you begin to tune in to the gentle rhythm of the countryside. Yim lives in a house surrounded by a garden, which the artist personally tends to. The flower and plants are protected from the outside by a wall, representing a boundary that likewise allows safety for a life shaped by her gift for art-making. Here, Yim can be the nurturer—of her plants, her family and her art practice.



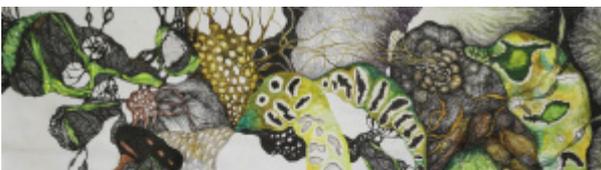


Portrait of Maline Yim. Image courtesy of the artist and Richard Koh Fine Art.

Not surprisingly, nature pervades her work. Plants, grasses, trees are the constant subject, and a point of departure for her abstract art. Her paintings, sculptures and video works are reminiscent of the greenery of the Cambodian landscape. While on the one hand celebrating the beauty of nature, her art speaks of the ecological destruction associated with rapid changes, excessive urbanization and a general lack of respect for nature; issues that are as much a threat in Cambodia as it is everywhere in the world. Indeed, after years of residencies and travel to research diverse ecosystems on four continents, Maline cultivated a deeper consciousness around the state of the global environment. In her exhibitions we can see it compared to the one of her country.

In “The Shadow of Change,” her solo exhibition earlier this year at Richard Koh Fine Art in Singapore, 12 mixed media works on paper represented the fruits of her most recent research emerged exploring the life cycle, including birth, the movements through time, emotions and the fragility of life. In this series, the feelings of precariousness associated with her lived history as a witness of civil war are evidently reflected in her portrayal of our fragile natural environments.

As we sat in her studio, on the second floor of her home, she started telling me about her childhood in Battambang: “I’d say that my art practice really started with the exploration of my childhood memories,” she recounted. “When I was a kid, living during the time of the civil war, I had a constant sense of precariousness. On one hand the natural environment was our primary resource for everything. On the other hand, it was also a dangerous space; we couldn’t venture into it freely because there were landmines everywhere.”





Maline Yim, Colorful Decomposition 2, 2018, mixed media on paper, 78 x 108.5 cm. Photo credit Roun Ry. Image courtesy of Richard Koh Fine Art.



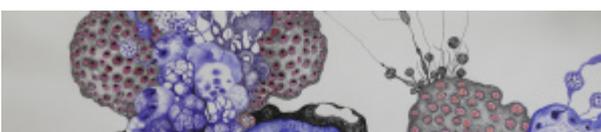
Maline Yim, Colorful Decomposition 3, 2017, mixed media on paper, 78 x 108.5 cm. Photo credit Roun Ry. Image courtesy of Richard Koh Fine Art.

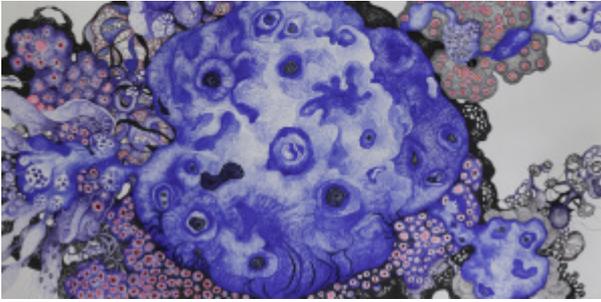
I can see how in this scenario you would turn to drawing and making objects.

Yes. When I was young I really enjoyed making drawings, even if my family didn't like it at all. They wanted me to spend my time making money, to buy rice and food. Everything we did needed to be for survival so I had to keep my drawings secret. I couldn't show what I was doing to my family. I also used to make my own toys using clay, tree branches and banana leaves. That's where I first learned to experiment with the different materials I had on hand. All of this has transferred into my art today.

So, in your life you have always lived in close contact to nature. How did your relationship with the environment evolve over time?

Gardening has always been a part of me, an everyday activity. When I was around 12 years old, I really liked growing plants and vegetables, and I used to bring water to it every day, carrying it on my shoulders. I have a garden also here in this house, because it makes me so happy to see the different colors and the smell of the flowers. Nature shows us how the world is in constant change; we can appreciate morphing shapes and nuances every day. I often ask my kids to help out, to participate and see the value of growing something for themselves. My interest in nature also makes travelling very interesting, as I can appreciate the landscapes of different countries.





Maline Yim, *Colorful Decomposition 8*, 2017, mixed media on paper, 59.5 x 84 cm. Photo credit Roun Ry. Image courtesy of Richard Koh Fine Art.

How did you bring this appreciation for nature into your artwork?

I think our contemporary cultures live indoor a little too much. The way I try to bring people outside is by bringing work reminiscent of nature to the inside. I want to bring my own inner forest into the exhibition space. And often there is also some sadness to it. Like the work I made during the big art event in New York City a few years ago. I really wanted to say something about nature in the US, and I took some time to hike a mountain. It was springtime then. I took in the landscape and later I compared it to what we have in Cambodia.

So, the way you conceive art is very physical, it's not just a mental process but is based on actual experience. Can you tell me a bit more about your process for creating the actual artworks?

My process changes all the time. Sometimes I make sketches; sometimes I start with a drawing and realize that's already a finished work. Some of my works are more abstract, but really, for me they all stem from the same exploration and source. After all, if you zoom on some parts of nature, what you get is an abstraction. A leaf can be seen as figurative and abstract at the same time.

In your works we can also find strong environmental concerns, where does it come from for you?

Living in Cambodia, environmental destruction can't help being a subject near and dear to my heart. Here we see forest fires and constant, methodic depletion of natural resources. The problem in Cambodia is that because we are a poor country, because of the civil war we had, we think we are stuck, and nature is not a priority. Of course, people here just try to get by, making some money, meet basic needs like buying some rice and meat. But we need to understand that preserving nature means preserving humanity. Everyone needs to tend to their own garden.

About the artist Maline Yim was born in 1982 in Battambang, Cambodia, and is a graduate of Phare Ponleu Selpak art school (1995–2003) and received her BFA from École Supérieure des Beaux-arts de Caen la Mer, France (2010). She is represented by SA SA BASSAC gallery in Phnom Pehn, Cambodia.

Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written for ArtsHub, Art Monthly Australia, Art to Part of Culture and Escape Magazine, among others, and she is the author of “Arte Contemporanea in Indonesia, un’introduzione” a book focused on the development of contemporary art in Indonesia. As a curator, her practice revolves around creating meaningful connections between Asia, Europe and Australia.

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