

EQUINOX GALLERY
3642 Commercial Street
Vancouver, BC V5N 4G2

604.736.2405 t
info@equinoxgallery.com e
www.equinoxgallery.com w

Gwenessa Lam: *Before Present*

November 18th to December 16th, 2023

Reception for the artist: Saturday November 18th, 2 to 4pm

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Equinox Gallery is pleased to present Gwenessa Lam: *Before Present*. Throughout her practice, Gwenessa Lam investigates how belief systems come into being through an exploration of historical or archeological objects and the speculative theories they generate. As a second-generation Chinese Canadian, Lam is interested in these objects as they offer insight into her family's history and her broader familial ancestry. Her search for a subject often starts from a series of questions, in this case: what is the relationship between ancient forms of divination and current technologies used in prediction or machine learning? Could they be linked through an ongoing desire to predict and forecast the future?

In this exhibition, Gwenessa Lam draws upon the history of bronze magic mirrors (202 BC – 9 AD, 25-220 AD) to explore relationships between ancient forms of divination or story-telling and current predictive technologies, such as artificial intelligence. Bronze mirrors performed several functions in ancient China. They were used for their practical purpose as mirrors but they were also frequently used as cosmological, spiritual and even magical objects. When rays of light would hit the surface of the polished bronze, the light would refract and reflect in such a way that the back of the mirror would appear on the wall like a projection. This “magical” element often gave the bearer or owner of such a mirror an aura of power. The works in the exhibition explore questions around the human desire to try to predict the future using remains of the past.

The works in this exhibition include phosphorescent paintings which reveal themselves under UV light, as well as paintings that incorporate chroma key blue and green backdrop colours used in digital film and editing. The use of chroma key green and blue signifies simultaneously a space of potential and erasure in the digital medium as it is the space where information is digitally added and changed. The phosphorescent paint was selected for its fugitiveness and the conditional parameters required for visibility. The image being most visible under specific conditions suggests that the subject matter itself is not always stable, consistent, or visible to some. The artist explains:

“I am interested in phosphorescence and its relationship to scientific applications as a means of measurement and detection. Archaeologists frequently employ some element of light detection to determine the origins or composition of a historical object. For instance, thermoluminescent technologies record the surface patterns and mineral compositions that help identify a time period, or location. By using phosphorescence and relief, I am experimenting with different levels of visibility, or ‘detection’ in order to question our interpretation of these artifacts. Not all points of view will clarify comprehension as the visibility of the image fluctuates. My aim is to create a space for speculation where competing narratives can exist simultaneously.”

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The cast bronze fragments were created to introduce a spatial element to the exhibition, as they hold distinct presence as objects in the world. Lam approached the making of the fragment through the sensation of touch, prepping and shaping them through extensive sanding and polishing. As the two-dimensional works act as representations or indexes of existing three dimensional objects, the bronzes are realized re-enactments that concretize the two-dimensional forms.

Together, the works in this exhibition weave calculation and precision with uncertainty and chance, mirroring both ancient tools of fortune-telling and the data-driven predictive technologies of our current moment. The connections prioritize a coming-together of broken structures that seek new joints, rather than returning to predictable patterns or forms. These reconfigurations have the potential to set up new visual pathways and reveal links between different cultural regions and geologic eras. Gwenessa Lam's *Before Present* offers insight into how the remains of the past may help to better understand the future.

Gwenessa Lam received her BFA from the University of British Columbia and MFA from New York University. She has taught at New York University, the University of British Columbia, and the Alberta University of the Arts. She has attended residencies at Skowhegan, MacDowell Colony, Yaddo, and the Banff Centre. Her work has been exhibited at the Bronx Museum of Art and the Queens Museum of Art in New York. Gwenessa Lam lives and works in Vancouver, BC and is currently Associate Professor at Emily Carr University of Art and Design.