

INNER ALCHEMY

root V
2021
gouache on paper
110 x 92 cm

growing tools (<>|><), 2024
bronze, two unique pieces
approx. 40 x 15 x 2.5 cm each

root IX
2022
gouache on paper
110 x 92 cm

*whispering
system 33*
2022/23
galvanised
grass
(copper)
70 x 31
x 2.5 cm

*Classic of Mountains and
Seas - chapter III*, 2014
ebony, wood, inkjet print on
paper, epoxy acrylic, metal
13.5 x 11 x 17.5 cm

*The finest things in
the world - sleet*, 2017
wood, white sand, pencil, metal
26.5 x 26 x 19 cm

*I just wanna take
a break*, 2024
wood, metal, fabric
33 x 25 x 7.5 cm

*Solar/Lunar - chinese
writing brush*, 2008
wood, chinese writing
brush, cotton thread
12 x 12 x 14 cm

Box Mountain, 2020
Wood
29 x 18.5 x 33.5 cm

Ink Globe, 2020
wood, antique wood carving, rice paper,
ink, acrylic paint, wooden base
16 x 15 x 32 cm

*Spherical Mountain
number 1*, 2014
wood, linen,
epoxy acrylic
20 x 20 x 25 cm each

core 3
2024
gouache
on paper
75 x 60 cm

Sky Records, 2020
wood, white sand, glue,
acrylic paint, elastic
band, indigo-dyed linen
15 x 25 x 4 cm each

Hanison Lau
Hok-shing

*Sky
Connection*
2020
wood, metal,
acrylic
paint
20 x 15 x 7
cm each

*into the
blue X*
2022
gouache
on paper
134 x 111 cm

*into the
blue VII*
2022
gouache
on paper
134 x 111 cm

*into the
blue IX*
2022
gouache
on paper
134 x 111 cm

Julia
Steiner

courtyard window:

Beben, 2017
wall projection
video, 15' loop

courtyard above:

cloud hands, 2024
site-specific
intervention



Inner Alchemy

The inner worlds of Hanison Lau Hok-shing and Julia Steiner

Angelika Li, Spring/Summer 2024, Basel

Launched in 2019, the 'Homeland in Transit' series delves into the narratives and imaginations of 'homeland' from Hong Kong perspectives. It intricately examines boundaries, roots, diaspora, cultural identity, colonial ideologies, displacement, and interweaves them with experiences and voices from other parts of the world. By metaphorically venturing into hydrological cycles—water, clouds, and wind—and reflecting on the concepts of disappearance, the series navigates challenging landscapes, contemplating human conditions and resilience.

In response to traumas and catastrophes, many questions arise: What can we do? How can we contribute? What steps can we take? How do we react when faced with states of fear, distress, powerlessness, and vulnerability? Instead of solely focusing on external observations, do we also take a moment to turn inward to our selves, replenishing our essence, reviving our vital energy, and nurturing spiritual qualities? Can we view the alchemists' pursuit of transmutation as a symbol of transforming inner turmoil into strength?

In the 11th chapter, 'Inner Alchemy,' the focus is on introspection towards our well-being and inner selves as a process of healing. Curated by Angelika Li, the exhibition brings together Hong Kong artist Hanison Lau Hok-shing and Swiss artist Julia Steiner to offer insights into the artists' creative processes and their perspectives on inner alchemy as manifested through their artistic expressions.

Hanison Lau Hok-shing

Lau is a celebrated contemporary literatus and artist, born in Hong Kong in 1979 and recently relocated to London. His multidisciplinary practice reflects the Renaissance ideal, spanning poetry composition, painting, antique collection, storytelling, woodcraft, and performance. Deeply rooted in classical Chinese culture, Lau seamlessly integrates antique objects and books into his hand-sculpted wooden forms and installations, evoking a modern interpretation of traditional heritage. His work serves as a poetic meditation on the confluence of humanity and nature. Notably, Lau's sculptures were recently showcased at the Hong Kong Palace Museum and this exhibition marks their debut in Europe.

The essence of Lau's work often evokes memories and emotions tied to objects and places, particularly his homeland, Hong Kong. His enchanting sculptures, created between 2014 and 2024, not only invite viewers to contemplate the essences of classical Chinese paintings – especially the interplay between the core elements mountains and water (山水) – and the symbiotic balance between humans and nature, they also bear witness to many extraordinary changes, including migration waves and a rapidly growing diaspora from his beloved city in the last decade. Lau perceives his sculptures as portable containers or custodians of precious memories, exemplified in the group of three sculptures titled '**Classic of Mountains and Seas – chapter III**' (2014).

Intrigued by the portrayal of these elements in classical Chinese paintings, Lau is fascinated by the idea of how water might appear underneath mountains, as it was believed that the bottom was often the sea – does one have to lift up the mountain to find out the truth? In this group, the mountains are hand-sculpted from discarded wooden crates for wine, resting on a wooden structure. A metal rod can be installed to lift up the mountain, revealing the water element beneath – solidified resin, freezing the moment and movement of the waves in the Victoria Harbour of Hong Kong, which Lau captured with his camera. The familiar 'homescape' can be unveiled upon opening. Similarly, in **'The Finest Things in the World – sleet'** (2017), Lau preserves the fleeting beauty of snow, so dear, so precious, a metaphor for ephemeral experiences and emotions, within the mountain's embrace.

The mountains and water in the three book sculptures **'Sky Records'** (2020) presents a cinematic vision of the artist. Lau transmutes words into tangible sculptures, creating representations of mountains and water that resonate with the ancient scholars' profound reverence for the beauty and tranquillity of nature. This fantastical installation beckons viewers into a realm reminiscent of a scholar's cabinet of curiosities, where miniature landscapes grow in the ancient scriptures. Notably, Lau's unconventional presentation of the scriptures, opening from right to left, subtly nods to Hong Kong's unique cultural identity, blending traditional Chinese heritage with modern Western influences.

Resonating with the cosmological perspective of ancient astronomers, **'Ink Globe'** (2022) captures their astute observation of celestial phenomena, including meteorite impacts. Lau suggests that 'Some things we think have existed for billions of years might disappear into ashes and vanish forever in just one second.' How can we respond under unforeseeable and unavoidable circumstances beyond human control?

Crafted from white poplar wood, **'Spherical Mountain 1'** and **'Spherical Mountain 2'** (2014) – two spheres crowned with mountains – emerge from Lau's philosophical enquiry: is change the only constant? While one may perceive the mountain as stationary, it is, in fact, constantly shifting and evolving, sometimes due to earthquakes. In response to the instability of the world, Lau provides therapeutic comfort to these mountains, in the form of cushions in white and felt mats in blue, amidst the turbulence they endure.

Here and now in 2024, for this exhibition and as part of his residency at PF25, Lau created **'I just wanna take a break'**, speaking about his inner thoughts introspectively. After working relentlessly for over two decades, Lau has had to recently enter a healing phase, necessitating a slower pace and a chance to rest properly. Hence, the silver metal part in the artwork refers to the artist's heavy and burdened mind, longing for rest and the simple comfort of lying down on a blanket. Meanwhile, the wooden part represents a dream bubble, drifting through Lau's mind as he seeks solace in sleep.

Julia Steiner

Working with an intuitive language, Steiner's drawings and sculptures are often guided by her inner landscapes, responsive to the spaces and contexts in which she works. Despite her culturally different background and artistic training from Lau, Steiner embraces ancient Chinese practices in both her daily life and art, including the practices of 'Qi Gong' (氣功) and 'Tai Chi' (太極). These practices have had significant influences on her, emphasising balance, energy cultivation, and healing qualities.

Just as the black and white components of the 'Tai Chi' symbol represent the interplay between complementary forces found in nature and life, the concept of negative 'Yin' (陰) and positive 'Yang' (陽) elements resonates with Steiner's artistic philosophy. When observing an object, she focuses less on the object itself and more on the surrounding space, where the two elements are interconnected, working together to create balance and harmony in the universe. This awareness allows her to visualise the symbiotic relationship between positive and negative elements in her own unique terms. By leaving parts of the surface untouched, she considers the breath of life in her work.

Steiner's artistic process is deeply rooted in grounding energy, as reflected in her '**root V**' (2021) and '**root IX**' (2022), which reveals underground lives. Viewers might perceive a tree growing upside down upon their first impression, yet these are the tree roots sprouting out. The series delves into the transformative nature of organisms and earthly matters, illustrating their growth and evolution in all directions, embodying the perpetual cycle of birth and renewal and humankind as part of the system. Steiner's investigation extends to the intricacies of fragments in her smaller drawings within her new work '**core 3**' (2024). These fragments aim to capture fleeting moments of complex organic manifestation or electric currents, whether viewed from a microscopic perspective or as elements of grand scale. The abstraction of these moments reflects the subtle interplay of vital forces within the natural world.

In her latest work '**growing tools (<>|><)**' (2024), Steiner had two bronze sculptures forged from intricately assembled tree branches, creating a multitude of growing directions. Resembling almost a form of sign, the sculptures branch off in two directions, with two branches in each sculpture before converging into one. This process of casting lost form dissolves the original shape, leaving behind a solid bronze form within the burnt branches. Could it be conceived as a new writing system or a symbolic language? In a similar vein, Steiner sculpted strands of grasses into galvanized forms in her 'whispering system' series. Do we take a moment to listen to the nature, to wonder what messages are encoded in these works?

Naturally, thinking of tools leads one to think of hands. In Steiner's new outdoor intervention, '**cloud hands**' (2024), connecting the house where PF25 is situated with a neighbouring one, she draws a simple line in the sky with a string, with two hands reaching up to the sky. The notion of hands hints at finding balance between giving and taking, fostering connection through gestures like shaking hands or giving hugs. Yet, Steiner's primary focus lies in Tai Chi practice, where the fluid motions of the hands facilitate the circulation of energy between sky and ground. As the artist questions, 'What is the relation between the two hands? Where

is my space? Is it between the two hands, in the core, the heart? Is it somehow connected to the sky and the universe?

At the house connected by the 'cloud hands' installation, viewers can find Steiner's video installation '**Beben**' (2017) during special exhibition events. One might wonder what that mountain-like moving image is in this dark room. Is it a volcano about to erupt? The truth is not far from this, as it was in fact the artist's abdomen during the pregnancy of her son, causing a profound internal shift and greatly impacting Steiner with the new life in her internal world.

In her latest series '**into the blue**' (2022), showcased as numbers VII, IX and X in this exhibition, Steiner immerses viewers in a realm of ultramarine shades, where her fascination with the interplay of light and air takes centre stage. This ethereal space, where the boundaries between water and sky blur, draws its inspiration from Steiner's residency in Ticino in 2023. Engulfed by the unobstructed vistas of the sky blending with the lake, she found herself immersed in contemplation of the transient nature of existence, amidst the currents of time and the philosophical question of being.

As Steiner reflects, "Everything is between the sky and ground, and I am searching for this middle, quiet energy. The feeling of entering this energy flow when making my work is the best experience I can get. It's the moment I lose myself somehow, becoming part of the whole."

About the artists

[Hanison Lau Hok-shing](#) (b. 1979 Hong Kong, lives and works in London)

Lau, a contemporary literatus and sculptor, embodies the essence of a Renaissance man. Deeply rooted in classical Chinese culture, Lau seamlessly integrates antique objects and books into his hand-sculpted wooden forms and installations, offering a modern interpretation of traditional heritage. Inspired by diverse sources such as forgotten verses by Hong Kong poets like Ye Shi (1949–2013), the captivating narratives of Hong Kong Chinese martial arts novelist Jin Yong (1924–2018), and the rich melodies of Cantonese opera, Lau's art reflects both reverence for the past and engagement with contemporary aesthetics and sentiments.

Lau earned his Bachelor of Fine Arts and Master of Fine Arts degrees from RMIT University in 2005 and 2007, respectively. He served as a Lecturer at Hong Kong Baptist University. In 2017, Lau received the Award for Young Artist from the Hong Kong Arts Development. His recent exhibitions include 'Dwelling in Tranquility - Reinventing Traditional Gardens' at the Hong Kong Palace Museum in 2023, 'By the People: Creative Chinese Characters' at the Hong Kong Museum of Art from 2022 to 2023, and 'Charming Tastes and Fragrance: Literature and Visual Arts Exhibition' at the Hong Kong Art Centre in 2019.

[Julia Steiner](#) (b. 1982 Büren zum Hof, Switzerland, lives and works in Basel)

Steiner pursued her studies at the Bern University of the Arts, with a semester at the Berlin University of the Arts. In 2018-19, she held a temporary professorship at the Braunschweig University of Art.

The artist has participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions in Switzerland and abroad at institutions including the Kunsthalle Wilhelmshaven, Museum Pfalzgalerie Kaiserslautern, Marta Herford Museum, He Xiangning Art Museum in Shenzhen, Centre Pasquart in Biel and Galerie Urs Meile in Beijing-Lucerne. In addition to exhibitions, Steiner was commissioned various site-specific works and art-and-architecture projects, such as those at the Abbey Church in Bellelay, the Swiss Jura, and the Basel Berufsfachschule.

Steiner has received several awards, including the Swiss Art Award, Manor Art Prize, and Strabag Art Award. She has also participated in various artist-in-residence programmes in Switzerland, Beijing, London, and Mallorca. Her works are featured in institutional collections in Switzerland, such as the Kunstmuseum Bern, Thun, and Biel, as well as in private collections internationally.

[About the curator](#)

Angelika Li, a Hong Kong curator based in Basel, is committed to engaging with the essence of places and the connections through culture, heritage, and stories. As the co-founder of PF25 cultural projects, a non-profit organisation bridging Basel and Hong Kong, she actively fosters a continuous dialogue between international communities. Her research focuses on diaspora, identities, colonial ideologies, and healing, as explored in the exhibition series 'Homeland in Transit', channels narratives and imaginations of 'homeland' from Hong Kong perspectives and interweaves them with experiences from around the world.

Notable recent projects include Isaac Chong Wai's performance 'Difference/Indifference' (Basler Münster, 2022); the public programme for 'Brice Marden: Inner Space' (Kunstmuseum Basel, 2022); Ellen Pau's Switzerland debut in 'Speculative Generations of Flora Zero' (PF25, 2023); Dorothee Sauter's solo exhibition 'Tumbling through time' (Villa Renata, 2024) and 'Geology, Cooking Heart, Curious and other stories' (Basel, 2021); Hedy Leung's performances including 'Menhir Tapestry 1' (Transbona-Halle, 2023) at Radio X_ARTS Festival opening performance, 'Ethno-Botanic Resonance' (London, 2024) in collaboration with Chelsea Physic Garden and London Metropolitan University, and 'Starlit Ethno-botanical Wonders' in collaboration with Ma Umi Residencies (Ishigaki, 2024). Angelika holds a BA in History of Art and Architecture from the University of Reading and an MA in Cultural Management from the Chinese University in Hong Kong.

[About PF25 cultural projects](#)

PF25 is a Basel-based non-profit organisation which aims to build mutual understanding, to develop an intercultural network and to create active synergies through meaningful, on-the-ground cultural exchanges generated by research with a focus on Hong Kong and Basel - and extending to other regions of Switzerland and Europe - with a view to expanding a wider spectrum of imagination and to exploring more diverse possibilities of living for the future.