

In *Step into the Water and You Remember Everything*, artists Tsz Kam and Nat Power investigate themes of fantasy and escape through the framework of queer folk art. The artists seek to preserve the ritual of creating and collecting artifact and animal icons as sentimental figures. Queer folk art is a record of our time that provides a way to speculate alternative futures. In this context, Kam and Power establish a myth reflecting reality by creating fantasy spaces of an imagined past. These spaces are escape for our inner child while also holding answers to possible futures, but only if we are brave enough to go on the quest. In this myth, we are accompanied by animals; often we are the animals ourselves.

BIG CHICKEN & BABY BIRD

Tsz Kam (Big Chicken) was born in colonial Hong Kong and moved to Texas at age 13. Kam's family history of being political refugees of communist China runs parallel to their own escape from Hong Kong culture. As a first generation immigrant, Kam explores the outsider and insider perspectives through the lens of a gender non-binary person, both when observing American culture and looking back at their Sino roots. Kam investigates their own gender and cultural identities through Western consumerist imageries and motifs of Hong Kong folk practices. By using escapism and nostalgia as an expression, Kam reestablishes a sense of belonging through their works.

Nat Power (Baby Bird) was born and raised in Texan suburbia. She relocated to complete her BFA at UT Austin in 2016 and has since continued to work in Austin as a painter and printmaker, as well as recently beginning study as a tattoo apprentice. Power serves as the art director of local DIY wrestling promotion Party World Rasslin', and takes influence from the narrative and formation of character presented in pro wrestling. Her work observes the manifestation of feminine rage and its suppression, depicting characters that stall on the boundary between acceptability and anger.

Kam and Power met while studying at The University of Texas at Austin, where they obtained their BFAs. They formed the collective duo Big Chicken & Baby Bird, and have been collaborating since 2015.

STEP INTO THE WATER AND YOU REMEMBER EVERYTHING

Big Chicken & Baby Bird



"... with a stream running through the middle like a memory. Step into that water and you remember everything, and what you don't remember, you invent."

— Jeanette Winterson, *The Stone Gods*



When I was a child, I lived in a small public housing unit with my grandparents and my uncle in Hong Kong. I shared a room with my grandmother and my uncle. My uncle slept on the upper bunk and I slept on the lower bunk with my grandmother. My grandfather smoked incessantly, so no one wanted to share a room with him. There were a lot of things in our bedroom, plastic bags stacked on top of plastic boxes. There was a window behind it all, I might have climbed up the mountain of stuff to look out of it a few times. The view was just the residential building opposite to ours. The buildings were white and pastel orange and they were all the same, I imagine the people from the other side got the same view when they look out of their windows.

We had more stuff than just what we stacked against the window. We also had other things stored on our beds during daytime. My uncle had an impressive collection of vintage toys and comic books, most of it were these really well designed matchbox cars made in Japan by the famous toymaker Tomy and various McDonald's Happy Meal toys from the Hong Kong line throughout the years. Grandma just had a bunch of clothing from when both of her oldest daughters immigrated to America. They were going to be my hand-me-downs when I fit. Every night around 10, we start moving the boxes from our bunk beds to the dining table. After taking a hot shower and washing off the grime that stuck to my skin due to the humid weather, I'd climb into the lower bunk. If my uncle didn't have too much work (his actual work plus coming up with the perfect combo for his weekend horse betting), he'd read me a bedtime story. He bought me a collection of illustrated Aesop's Fables and other story books with animals as main characters that he'd read from. When grandma was done with her chores in the kitchen, she'd come to bed and pat me as she sang me lullabies.

I slept between the wall and my grandma. There was no space between the wall and the bed, because the bed was custom built in by my second aunt's husband, who is an interior designer and carpenter. The wall was cool, offering relief from the oppressive heat in the long, humid summer. I'd often stretch my leg up against the wall to absorb the chill. During the summer, instead of cotton sheets, we slept on bamboo mats. When I wake up, I'd find ghosts of the crisscross imprints on my skin from the bamboo weave.



Sometimes I'd wake in the middle of the night, needing to go to the bathroom. I'd usually stay in bed for a good while, struggling with the need to pee and not wanting to get up. You see, the pile against the window made strange figures and silhouette in the dark, sometimes flickers of light reflected from somewhere looked like an eye, or I'd imagine a face, or a pile that began to look like a figure moving. When I really couldn't suppress my need to pee, I'd climb over my grandma, being careful not to wake her, and put my warm little feet upon the icy ceramic tile. If it's around 1:30 AM, I'd find a tall,

slender silhouette walking to the bathroom too. It was my grandfather getting out of his room to shower before bed. Grandpa went to bed the latest and woke up later than all of us. I think it's because all his favorite shows from the English channel came on late, and he had to watch it all before he went to sleep. I didn't particularly like the living room at night, because we had an altar. The altar was lit by a few red light bulbs, which made the dark living room quite ominous. The altar also directly faces the front door, which made it look like something was about to come through under this low, red glow. If I wanted to use the bathroom, I had to walk right past the altar. My grandma had always told me the altar is good, we venerated our ancestors, the god of land, and the god of justice; they were there to watch over us and give us good fortune. Every time I walked past the bathroom at night, I'd mutter under my breath a small "excuse me". I didn't want to offend these important figures with my nightly urination. If I was too scared after peeing to make the trip back to my spot between the wall and my grandma, I'd quickly run into my grandpa's room and watch TV with him until I felt brave enough to go into the living room again.



Silence the wolves
to keep from frightening the rabbits.

This is the river crossing puzzle;
I hope there is a solution
allowing softness and anger
to be carried in each arm.



They say that I am plain
But am I plain or just common?
I am part of the most common ethnic group on the planet
But I am supposed to be plain amongst this group too
If Sino people were daisies, I am now a daisy amongst roses
Which makes me special
The roses think that I am special because I don't look like them
It's not because I am truly special
The daisies tell me, even my fellow plain daisies repeat the same
Sometimes the most elegant daisies tell me I am "cute"
Perhaps out of pity

I reject my plainness
I reject "cute"
I am dark

Sensual
Powerful

I was never a daisy
And I am not even a Venus flytrap
I was never any kind of blossom
Though one of my names literally means
A plum blossom in the snow
Which only blooms the reddest in adversity

I am not the imagery which the physical material portrays in an ancient stroke of
minimalism
I am the material
I am the red pigment that stains the thin white paper irreversibly crimson
My hair black and strong like the branches marked down by a brush with split hairs
Carbon ink painting carbon branches that are carbon-soon-to-be again because
everything has always been carbon

My grandfather who gave me this name was a southern man
Though he lived north once, in between the world wars
I am not sure if he's ever even seen the scenery he named me after
Yeiyei smoked a pack a day
I imagine he's seen more ashes than snowflakes

All I know is we are a summer people
We toil in the heat until general Tsao serves up something sweet and sour to bring
some joy to our days
General Tsao was no general
She was a chef
We call the head of the kitchen a general
After all, she endures the most heat and deserves the title
The wok her shield and the spatula her sword
Little did she know, years later we'd use the lid of her wok to put out tear gas in the
streets

I heard a story about the people who came before us
That they were warriors
And that's why we got Bruce Lee and Wing Chun
Before the winter came, we fought
And we never stopped fighting since

Fiction is neat
And this forever fighting warrior of the heat narrative is badass
But real life is not fiction
Though they both rely on each other to be told
By us to ourselves and each other
A tool for figuring out who we are

I said I was never a blossom because I didn't like what that narrative implied about me
That is not the fictional character I wish to be
But I do long to be treated like a blossom
By a tender loving hand and
Admired by a soft warm gaze
Under which I will purr and mew like a kitten.

Purring and mewling in a tonal way, like my mother tongue
We tell novices that our language is tonal and you'd be misspoken when you try making
it lyrical
It's a feat reserved for the master souls
When we sing the song of our people
A history full of glory and bitterness so strong

On the tip of my tongue when I utter my family name as the ending sound carries itself
into the abyss of a complicated reality
Where through the eyes of the kitten we see the dirty alley glittering with neon lights
reflected from the rain puddles
The streets with names of deceased rich British men made the first city of our cyberpunk
imagination

I am not saying J-pop and K-pop are the descendants of Canto-pop
But there was a time when our dialect was considered exotic
We created a fantasy world representation of our politically complicated reality
And everyone else put subtitles on it so they could rent it out in video stores in
Chinatown across the world
So they could admire the beautiful contours of the handsomest ones amongst us
All that was before bit torrent
And I secretly feel lucky our stories are only privy to those of us who know how to purr
this tongue
A fossilized time and space that is only ours to understand completely

Though we've always made ourselves bridges for you
Because the rich British people told us we must
And overtime we find it necessary to our survival
To do this work
So you may give a shit
About our freedom and liberty

I have no resentment for my origin or history as it happened
Only rejection of the labels that were put on by others without our consent
Whiteness hungers for our secret knowledge
And this beast rejects itself as it keeps consuming
It's a harrowing sight to behold
Of one eating and vomiting itself simultaneously and all at once
And the beast extends its many arms and tentacles
To invite me to join in its body orgy of diversity and multiculturalism

Perhaps this stuff of nightmare is just a part of my paranoia
But I wish the beast wouldn't forget who they used to be and what they have become
And the greatest act of rebellion is to embrace our origin and make historical fantasy
the future surreality of our own telling
I was told once by a great storyteller both the act and the result are equally impossible
to imagine
So they ended their story there and left me hanging

The universe doesn't stand between our singularities
I know this when I look into your eyes
When you tell me how much you love the colors I birthed
Even without words explaining to you what it all means
Walk on, put your feet upon the bridges we worked so hard to build
Across to that new place
And shout out to me what you see when you are there


It won't be a place for me to see
I've got my own place
Which I just told you about
I just want to hear about yours
And imagine for myself what it'd be like through your words
So let us build this city
And lay the tracks with steps of the ones who were once forgotten
Let us say their names this time



The declawed and beheaded offer water
as I grip softness and bare teeth

Do I bloom hot or damp?





Puncturing the sweet
while maintaining balanced vessel.

If I let my horns grow
would I know how to use them?





Making surrealist fantasy paintings in the contemporary landscape

Like many young artists who like to draw, we became artists because there is cool looking stuff we love to draw. The irony is that we both went to an art school that places heavy emphasis on conceptualism.

Our work is a response to contemporary art that demands us to be present with the environment created by the material. It isn't that we loathe the installation that relies on the trick of light to create wonder, nor do we reject the painting that asks itself existential questions— we just want to ask questions that don't require us to be *here*. That's because the answers don't seem to be *here*. Not yet.

We aren't always conscious of the things we paint. There isn't a big narrative we are trying to impart. Our paintings are snippets of our lives turned into fantasy spaces. They contain past memories, present emotions, and future hopes. What we wish to impart is the freedom to imagine.

The following excerpt from Ursula K. Le Guin's *Cheek by Jowl* helped us make sense of the work we made for *Step into the Water and You Remember Everything*.

"The monstrous homogenization of our world has now almost destroyed the map, any map, by making every place on it exactly like every other place, and leaving no blanks. No unknown lands. A hamburger joint and a coffee shop in every block, repeated forever. No Others; nothing unfamiliar. As in the Mandelbrot fractal set, the enormously large and the infinitesimally small are exactly the same, and the same leads always to the same again; there is no other; there is no escape, because there is nowhere else.

In reinventing the world of intense, unreproducible, local knowledge, seemingly by a denial or evasion of current reality, fantasists are perhaps trying to assert and explore a larger reality than we now allow ourselves. They are trying to restore the sense— to regain the knowledge— that there is somewhere else, anywhere else, where other people may live another kind of life.

The literature of imagination, even when tragic, is reassuring, not necessarily in the sense of offering nostalgic comfort, but because it offers a world large enough to contain alternatives and therefore offers hope.

The fractal world of endless repetition is appallingly fragile. There is no illusion, even, of safety in it; a human construct, it can be entirely destroyed at any moment by human agency. It is the world of the neutron bomb, the terrorist, and the next plague. It is Man studying Man alone. It is the reality trap. Is it any wonder that people want to look somewhere else? But there is no somewhere else, except in what is not human— and in our imagination."

