

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Really Large Numbers: *The Observatory*
Cecile Chong: *_other Nature*

January 18–February 23, 2020

Opening Reception: January 18, 6–8 PM

Artist Talk: February 23, 3–4:30 PM

Media contact Jessica Holburn: jholburn@smackmellon.org

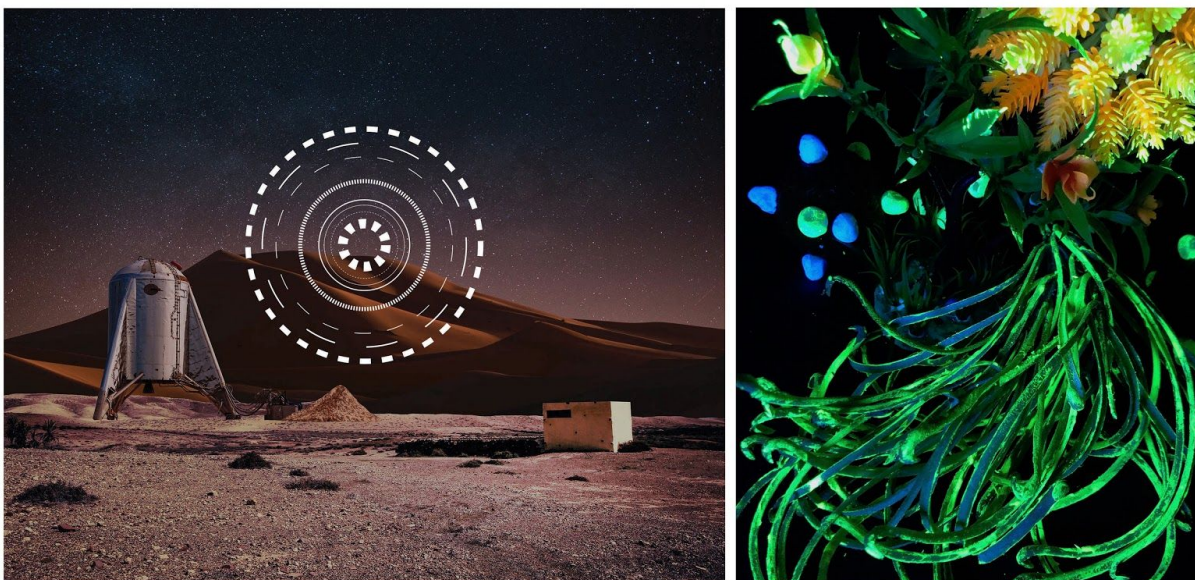


Image left: Really Large Numbers, *The Silent Earth*, 2019, dye-infused aluminum print, 8 x 10 inches. Courtesy of the artists. Image right: Cecile Chong, *_other Nature* (detail), 2020, installation with steel fence, artificial flora, plaster and encaustic sculptures, blacklight, video projection, and audio track. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

Smack Mellon is pleased to announce the start of its 2020 exhibition season with two solo exhibitions, **Really Large Numbers: *The Observatory*** and **Cecile Chong: *_other Nature***, opening concurrently on Saturday, January 18, 2020. In both exhibitions, the artists depict the effects of traumatic events on the landscape, contemplating humanity and our relationship to the earth and nature. **Really Large Numbers** (Julia Oldham and Chad Stayrook) imagine the earth after it has been ravaged by climate change and foresee an uncertain future for its human and non-human inhabitants. In her project, **Cecile Chong** ruminates on the intricate connections between nature and culture, searching for ways to transcend barriers through commonalities in our ties to the natural world.

Really Large Numbers

The Observatory

Really Large Numbers (Julia Oldham and Chad Stayrook) create immersive installations/laboratories, which resemble science-fiction experiments that imagine speculative future worlds. Integrating both in-depth scientific research and fantastical invention, they build playful narratives that are at the heart of their multimedia environments, which are represented through video and performative actions that take place in built spaces. The two artists work remotely for most of the year, exchanging blueprints, scripts, and sketches, and they come together to realize projects in person in residencies and art spaces.

The Observatory, Really Large Numbers' multimedia installation at Smack Mellon, envisions a post-climate change, post-apocalyptic future. Inside an imposing sculptural observatory is a video monitor showing the daily routines of Stayrook, the last remaining human. A three-channel video projection on the large gallery wall depicts earth as a deserted wasteland with a female artificial intelligence (AI) system, performed by Oldham, who acts as both companion and guide to the human, teaching him how to navigate the harsh environment, but also as her own independent character, exploring the world without bodily limitations. Flipping gender-typical roles, the male human is a captive and limited stargazer searching through a telescope for something unknown in the heavens, while the female AI character has absolute agency. *The Observatory* reflects on the human desire for immortality in the face of ecological collapse, while taking into account the inevitability of great change.

Really Large Numbers is the art/laboratory collaboration between Eugene, Oregon-based new media artist Julia Oldham and Brooklyn-based sculptor and installation artist Chad Stayrook. The origin story of Really Large Numbers begins in early 2011, when the two artists, who were acquaintances at the time, spontaneously began to dream about each other as characters in mythical dream adventures. The development of this dreamworld connection led them to friendship and ultimately into a collaborative relationship called Really Large Numbers. Projects by Really Large Numbers have been exhibited at 125 Maiden Lane in New York, NY; Hudson Valley MOCA in Peekskill, NY; Emerson Dorsch Gallery in Miami, FL; VisArts in Rockville, MD; and in the SPRING/BREAK Art Show in New York. Their work has been supported by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, Artists Alliance Inc., Residency Unlimited, and the Oregon Arts Commission. Oldham earned an MFA from the University of Chicago and a BA in art history from Saint Mary's College of Maryland. Stayrook earned an MFA from San Francisco Art Institute and a BFA from Ohio University.

Cecile Chong

_other Nature

Cecile Chong's work addresses ideas of cultural interaction and interpretation, as well as the commonalities humans share in our relationship to nature and to each other. She layers materials, identities, and histories through her mixed media work in painting, sculpture, and installation. Inspired by materials as signifiers, she is interested in how we acquire and share cultural heritage, and how world cultures continue to overlap and interact in increasingly complex ways. With uncertainty looming in everything from politics to the economy to global climate patterns, Chong is concerned with the fragility of our civilization despite the universality of its cultural underpinnings. Through her work she looks at traditional artifacts and imagines what tangible relics we might leave for future generations and what these descendants might learn about who we were and how we lived.

Chong's multimedia installation at Smack Mellon, titled *_other Nature*, explores the deep-seated links between nature and culture and the damage caused by the imposition of social, political and physical barriers. As Chong puts it, "When we alienate ourselves from nature and brutalize its delicate balance, we cut ourselves off from our common cultural roots." Her immersive, glow-in-the-dark installation evokes danger, fear, and risk in an environment that is simultaneously beautiful, disorienting, and haunting. Bisected by an imposing sculptural fence, the darkened space recalls a lush, thriving scene on one side and a ravaged, contaminated landscape on the other. The audio and video pieces playing in the background create a tense, foreboding presence. Chong's "guagua" sculptures populate the installation, like swaddled babies that represent humanity in an unsullied, but vulnerable state.

Born in Ecuador to Chinese parents, Chong lives and works in New York and is currently part of the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts Studio Program. Her solo exhibitions have been presented at Kenise Barnes Fine Art, Selena Gallery, BRIC House, Emerson Gallery Berlin, Honey Ramka, Figureworks, Praxis New York, Rush Corridor Gallery and ArtSPACE. Her work has been featured in group exhibitions at El Museo del Barrio, Nevada Museum of Art, The Bronx Museum of the Arts, Hunterdon Museum, CUE Art Foundation, Wave Hill, Sue Scott Gallery in New York, and Cynthia Corbett Gallery in London. Chong has received numerous fellowships and residencies, including The Block Gallery/AIM Artist Hub, BRIC Media Arts, the Joan Mitchell Center, Wave Hill Winter Workspace, the Lower East Side Printshop, MASS MoCA Studios, Jerome Foundation Travel and Study Grant, The Center for Book Arts, Socrates Sculpture Park Emerging Artist Fellowship, Artist in the Marketplace (AIM) at the Bronx Museum, Urban Artist Initiative NYC, and Aljira Emerge. Her public art installation *EL DORADO - The New Forty Niners* has been installed in the Bronx, Queens, and Brooklyn. Chong earned an MFA from Parsons The New School for Design, an MA in education from Hunter College, and a BA in studio art from Queens College.

S m a c k M e l l o n

These exhibitions are supported, in part, by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council, New York City Council Member Stephen Levin, and the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew M. Cuomo and the New York State Legislature, and with generous support from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Robert Lehman Foundation, Iorio Charitable Foundation, Select Equity Group Foundation, many individuals and Smack Mellon's Members.

Smack Mellon's programs are also made possible with public funds from the National Endowment for the Arts and with generous support from The Edward and Sally Van Lier Fund of The New York Community Trust, The Roy and Niuta Titus Foundation, Jerome Foundation, Milton and Sally Avery Arts Foundation Inc., and Exploring The Arts. In-kind donations are provided by Materials for the Arts, NYC Department of Cultural Affairs/NYC Department of Sanitation/NYC Department of Education.

Space for Smack Mellon's programs is generously provided by the Walentas family and Two Trees Management.

Really Large Numbers, The Observatory, is funded in part by the Oregon Arts Commission and the Ford Family Foundation.



**Cultural
Affairs**



**Council on
the Arts**

