

# Smack Mellon

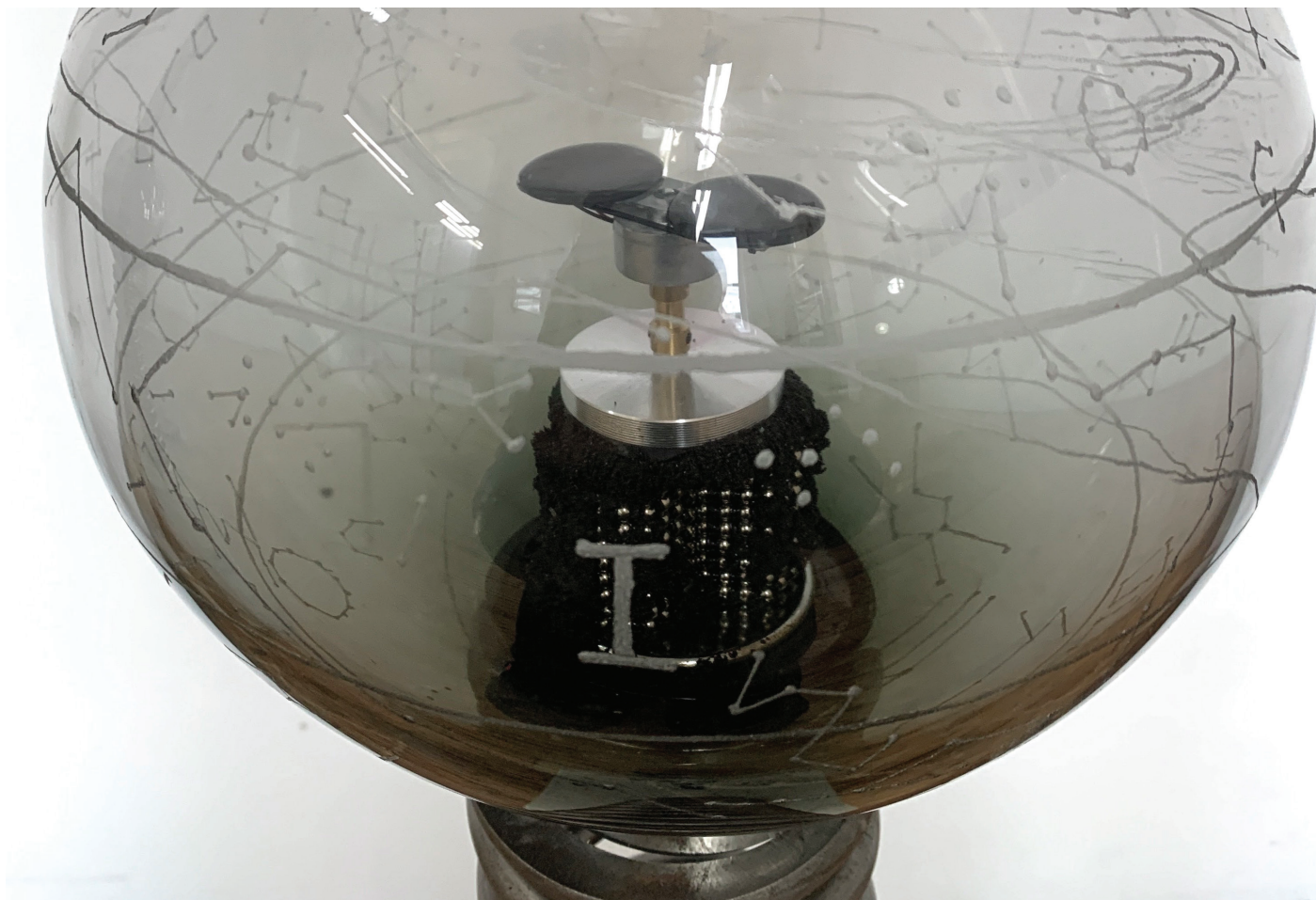
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## Mo Kong, *Swift Island Chain*

[Gallery One]

February 10-April 14, 2024

Opening Reception: Sat. February 10, 6-8PM



Smack Mellon presents a solo exhibition by Mo Kong exploring racial melancholia and the information gaps experienced by Asian immigrants through disjunctures in contextual communication. *Swift Island Chain* unfolds between Smack Mellon's center columns through a series of modular post-pandemic office environments and work aesthetics that are presented in various states of completion. Corian® interior architectural panels, TômTex® lab-grown leather, AI feedback mechanisms, and an alienating melody composed by sound artist Lemon Guo give texture to the installation, creating a foreboding and anxious atmosphere.

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Central to this project is the multivalent reference to swifts, which the artist draws upon as symbols for new immigrants. Although they are migratory birds, swifts often build nests in fixed places, allowing them to move between two geographic points. In Chinese literature, swifts are often compared to wanderers who have difficulty finding a sense of cultural identity in a new environment. For this project the artist worked with engineer Menyu Chen to develop and train artificial intelligence to translate verses from classical Chinese poetry into English, which appear as cut-outs in the panels. Encapsulating the

AI's three learning stages—a direct translation, a contextual version, and one preserving the original rhyme scheme—this translation process highlights the elements that disappear while transitioning between cultures. Kong has incorporated a feedback mechanism to test the sentimental value and to determine the accuracy of the translations, raising the question of whether cultural malaise can be inherited by the machines that humans create.

The foldable workstations, or “islands,” mirror the empty nests of swifts, which have historically been used in Chinese cooking to make bird’s nest soup. Three groups of freestanding sculptures function as apocalyptic compasses through magnetic fluid and astrological maps charting the past, present, and future, revealing the secret of swifts’ return home. Heavy-duty springs and glass domes on top of the sculptures ensure the sensitivity and precision of the equipment. Each base is made of a self-healing bio-tech cement that contains guano and bacteria, developed with biologist Ross McBee to convert potential erosion into architectures’ healing fertilizer. Throughout the gallery, the swifts’ cry intensifies as viewers approach the “islands,” blending with the soundtrack created by Guo. The inter-island tension between alienation and belonging reflects the impact of this epidemic on our daily lives and refracts the erratic Asian American ennui.

## BIO

Mo Kong is a multidisciplinary artist, researcher. They are currently residing in NYC. They received an MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design. Their work is always deeply impacted by social events, coded by the “educational information system” to post questions about the current political environment. Their research-led process usually takes the form of large-scale installations involving scientific research and multiple journalism perspectives in which they challenge key issues of the day using complex narratives that synthesize the past with the present. The systems they build merge multiple environmental crises and social political issues, through scientific research and social investigation, they find the similarity between two systems and bring them to one narrative storyline.

They have been the subject of solo exhibitions at Queens Museum (New York), CUE Art Foundation (New York), Cuchifritos Gallery (New York), Artericambi Gallery (Verona), Gertrude Gallery (Stockbridge), Chashama (New York). Their work has been included in the RISD Museum, SFMOMA, Children’s Museum of Arts, Mana Contemporary, Noguchi Museum, Spring Break, ARTISSIMA, Make Room Gallery, Hesse Flatow Gallery, and Island Gallery. They also received fellowships and residencies from Macdowell Colony, Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture, Triangle Art Association, The Drawing Center, City Artists Crops Grant, Mass Moca Studio, Vermont Studio Center, Lighthouse Works, and Artists Alliance LES Studio Program. They have been finalists of Artadia, NYFA fellowship (Architecture/Design), and Van Lier fellowship. Their work is mentioned in Hyperallergic, Artforum, Art in America, Cultured Magazine, Artnet BOMB Magazine, Artpaper, CoBo Social, Wall Street International, SFMoMA Public Knowledge, and others.

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Mo Kong, *Swift Island Chain* is made possible through funding provided by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of the Office of the Governor and the New York State Legislature, CAFÉ ROYAL CULTURAL FOUNDATION, and the NYFA: Queens Arts Fund. The exhibition is supported, in part, by a Foundation for Contemporary Arts Emergency Grant. Production support was provided by Powerhouse Arts. In-kind support by The Knotts Company, Inc.

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