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## **Mo Kong: *Swift Island Chain***

*APRIL 2024*

*By Caitlin Anklam*



Installation view: *Mo Kong: Swift Island Chain*, Smack Mellon, Brooklyn, 2024. Courtesy Smack Mellon. Photo: Etienne Frossard.

On View

## **Smack Mellon**

*Swift Island Chain*

February 10–April 14, 2024

Brooklyn

In the introduction to their foundational book on racial melancholia, authors David L. Eng and Shinhee Han quote Freud describing the melancholic as someone who “knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost.”<sup>1</sup> The description comes from Freud’s 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” in which he characterizes mourning as an explainable process that follows a distinct and graspable loss. In contrast, he defined melancholia as the act of grieving without a known object; it extends indefinitely, becoming “a mourning without end.” In Eng and Han’s text on the social and psychic lives of Asian Americans, they reframe and de-pathologize Freud’s definition, describing racial melancholia as a “structure of feeling” that stems from the systemic effects of immigration, assimilation, and racialization rather than from an individual’s psyche. Racial melancholia accompanies separation from family or language or country, the fragmentation of a self, divided by a continent or an ocean.

Mo Kong’s exhibition *Swift Island Chain* is informed by racial melancholia and guided by the central motif of migratory swifts, which were, in ancient Chinese literature, often used to symbolize the wanderer. Throughout the gallery, the swifts’ birdsong echoes in a bespoke composition by sound artist Lemon Guo. The foci of *Swift Island Chain* span artificial intelligence, human and computational translation, apocalyptic realities, and post-pandemic corporate dystopia. Kong probes at the gaps that result from geographic, emotional, and psychic distances, and manifest in mistranslations and misunderstandings.



Mo Kong, *Swift Island Chain Calendar*, 2023–24. 42 drawings, fountain pen ink, graphite, ocean water on stationary, dimensions variable.

The show centers on three modular, post-pandemic office environments that appear to be covered in bird shit and coated in dust, the outlines of office ephemera (a pair of scissors, the ring of a monitor stand) still visible. Within these cubicle installations, inset cauldrons bubble white vapor and reveal a radioactive-yellow liquid that spills onto the desk and floor. Cobwebs

cover the clip-on desk lights and the bases of power cords which extend to the ceiling, drawing attention to the cavernous space of the gallery. The desks are in shadow below, their lamps creating the specific eeriness of being alone on a floor of cubicles otherwise dark because it's after hours or because everyone's working from home. Adjacent to each workstation are free-standing sculptures, "compasses" of hand-blown glass etched with celestial maps, which stand on bases of concrete and cobwebbed metal springs. On the gallery's walls, the days of the week are calligraphed across letter-sized works—a reminder of the monotony of the work week—and superimposed onto Kong's tediously handwritten translations of Asian American histories.

The intersection of migration, capital, and climate change in *Swift Island Chain* has been iterated across Kong's recent exhibitions. For their 2021–22 Queens Museum show *Personal Ark*, Kong introduced the fictional Asian immigrant-owned consulting firm *New Yorkool*®, which addresses the problems arising from ecological collapse—like how to navigate food systems during New York's hottest winter on record—identifying systemic failings through fictive scenarios. In a smaller iteration of *New Yorkool*® at Cuchifritos Gallery + Project Space, the work focused on the near future, transforming into a fortune teller's home for *Lounge of a Prophet* (2022).



Installation view: *Mo Kong: Swift Island Chain*, Smack Mellon, Brooklyn, 2024. Courtesy Smack Mellon. Photo: Etienne Frossard.

At Smack Mellon, *Swift Island Chain* considers the future not just in content but in form. The show's listed materials include edible swift nests, Rehmannia root extract powder, nonfood algae-based energy bars, artificial orchid scent, guano, the bacteria *Sporosarcina ureae* and *Sporosarcina pasteurii*. The materials are chosen for their connotations and symbolic potential; salt water stands in for the oceanic divide between the United States and Asia, "as well as the sweat and tears that allude to the labor of the Asian immigrant population and depression caused by cultural misunderstanding." Biomaterials feature prominently throughout the show: the sculptures' bases are made from self-healing biotech concrete; the cubicle walls are partially constructed of TômTex® lab-grown leather, which is made from organic matter and contains no plastic or petrochemicals. Throughout *Swift Island Chain*, AI is actively incorporated into the work's materials and operation. The Corian® cubicles are laser cut with AI-translated traditional Chinese verse that references swifts, and the sculptures contain AI mechanisms that calculate and project a slowly changing number, an "emotional score" generated from combing a series of online communities and immigrant forums.

Below the sculpture's listed materials, the wall text for *Swift Island Chain* mentions Liu Cixin's 2008 science fiction novel *The Three-Body Problem*. With this reference the show rearranged itself around me into a series of triads: three bodies of work, three cubicles, three sculptures, that, like the novel, speculatively consider the past, present, and future. By incorporating literature and varied personal accounts the work looks to the past, examining lineages to the present and future in current and emergent apocalypses. Across these temporalities, *Swift Island Chain* attempts to quantify the melancholic, recounting histories and employing mechanisms that track and keep score, eventually exemplifying that what's lost cannot be fully articulated through documentation or metric or algorithm, but that it is ungraspable, atmospheric.

1. David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 3.

## **Contributor**

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