

VISUAL ART

Candice Lin turns survival, solitude, and loss into art

By **Cate McQuaid** Globe Correspondent, Updated March 30, 2022, 2:46 p.m.



Installation view of "Candice Lin: Sleeping, Rotting, Resting, Weeping" at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts. JULIA FEATHERINGILL

Artist Candice Lin spent the COVID-19 lockdown sleeping, rotting, resting, and weeping. But then, didn't we all?

The Los Angeles-based artist grows indigo, and ferments it into a dye in a kiddie pool in her

backyard. Seeping, rotting, resting, and weeping are part of that process. At home alone with her cat Roger in the early days of the pandemic, she dyed textiles, made ceramic cats, and let her imagination percolate in fearful and fruitful ways. “Candice Lin: Seeping, Rotting, Resting, Weeping” at Harvard University’s Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts springs from that time.

The central installation, an indigo-blue tent, invites viewers to crawl inside and lie down. Guarded by ceramic cat demons (or deities), the piece is at once cosmic, comforting, and unhinged. Summoning us back to the animal qualities of living in the body, Lin detaches from structures of knowing we humans have used to put ourselves at the top of the power ladder.

Lin, who was born in Concord and got her undergraduate degree at Brown, is best known for rigorously researched takedowns of colonialist power systems. Her installations make use of colonial commodities once prized by Europeans for their exoticism, such as indigo and porcelain. In her works, she uses such materials as metaphors for desire, domination, and racial fear.

In a series of installations titled [“A Hard White Body,”](#) she used unfired porcelain, which was unstable enough before she drowned it in a solution made partly from distilled urine. “I didn’t want it to feel authoritative,” [she told](#) writer Catherine Wagley in 2019 of texts about botany and colonization she’d immersed in another urine solution. “I wanted it to feel fragile and always changing.”





A view of the exhibit "Candice Lin: Seeping, Rotting, Resting, Weeping" at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts. JULIA FEATHERINGILL
Then came that destabilizing year, 2020, and Lin was stuck alone at home with Roger. This show was already on the books, co-curated by Carpenter Center director Dan Byers and Victoria Sung, associate curator of visual arts at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, to be presented by both institutions. Byers flew to Los Angeles to visit Lin that February. His seatmate on the flight out, he writes in his catalogue essay, was already equipped with mask and hand sanitizer.

If Lin's work up to this point has been about tearing down hoary structures that hold privilege in place, now it was also about survival, solitude, and loss. COVID tore down structures, too — about safety and a social life based on proximity to others.

She turned to what sustained her: Making art. Keeping a journal. Research is a constant, and many elements here are grounded in history. The human-animal hybrid ceramic guardians holding the tent up in "Seeping, Rotting, Resting, Weeping" reference Tang Dynasty tomb guardians; the patterns and inscriptions in the indigo likewise have chimeric figures, which [Lin has said](#) link to trade, colonialism, and confrontations with the other.

ADVERTISING



"Seeping, Rotting, Resting, Weeping" also arises from rumination, from Lin trusting the wildness

of her hands and her imagination. Dyeing fabric and working with clay, she sank into the life of her body. The tent installation and touchable sculptures invite us to do the same.

Not that it's all cozy. Neither is living in a body. On a boxy little video monitor inside the tent, an animated cat tells a story about ingesting fermented indigo that's both scatological and eschatological. Indeed, a frenzied feeling of doom pervades the show. In a darkly comic video, "Millifree Work Weary™ Free Video (Qi Gong)," an animated cat demon offers viewers a qi gong lesson, but it's a gaudy capitalist nightmare with flirty spam bots peddling links to wellness videos. Is it possible, really, to find wellness online?

The cats, cocky and self-possessed, take up more imaginative room throughout the show than viewers. We are merely visitors in their weird world. The installation is a temple to a feline religion, and the artist's animism is an extension of her penchant for decentering the powerful – in this case, all humans.

"Lin's alternate universe draws upon the emergent field of animal studies' starting assumption that 'the human is an animal,'" writes co-curator Sung in her catalogue essay.

Lying on the floor and resting one's head on a ceramic cat in the social space of a gallery prods a viewer away from safe intellectual moorings, into a world animals know better than we do – one where knowing arises from touch, sensation, instinct, and a way of moving through the world untethered to rationalism.

It is no less violent than the one humans have ruled, but safety, as we learn again and again, is in many ways an illusion. Loss and death are imminent in "Seeping, Rotting, Resting, Weeping," but the life of the body Lin describes is also one of deep comfort and mystical possibility.

CANDICE LIN: SEEPING, ROTTING, RESTING, WEEPING

At Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, 24 Quincy St., Cambridge, through April 10. <https://carpenter.center/>

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