

PLASTIC POSEIDON

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ABSTRACT

Plastic Poseidon is a struggle between industrialized human society and the forces of nature. In the mythology, Poseidon was the god of the sea and water, whose power rivaled the inexhaustible vitality of the earth and the flood. Today we wrap the sea god up in plastic and worship this plastic idol – to find a way of coexistence between us mortals and the natural forces beyond human limitations.

METHOD

The concept of the project is to see nature from the perspective of an urban person and discuss the relation of love and fear in humanity. In contemporary education, we are consistently taught about this idea, even though I come from a metropolis with almost no access to the natural environment, which leads me to have no sense of belonging to nature like many urban people. The land, sky, and ocean have no connection and no common between us. National Geographic's natural scenery pictures cannot touch me; they were just a pile of data or a thin piece of paper. The concept of nature is like "heaven," idealized, blue sky, and eye – satisfying landscape, A high degree of saturation of everything; it is almost as "pretty" as commercials. However, nature does not need a commercial, tourism needs; for a long time, I had no concrete imagination about it. After moving to Norway, I was struck by the accessibility of the natural landscape, which led to my concern for environmental issues. My contact with the natural environment is brief but intense, unlike the artists who were born and raised in Norway. I hope to show the love and fear, strangeness, and intimacy of urban people towards nature. My identity is first as a natural person, an individual standing on the ground, and secondly as an artist. I try to find a way to visualize emotions and myths, poetically, and romantically.

The graduation project is based on the performance project I did in 2019 "...and yet not a touch", in the film I was using plastic as a costume to show that human in a plastic shell but still try to interact even try to love the earth. For the final project, I will sew two plastic wedding dresses and do another performance both in winter and summer. As I see, marriage is the most mightily way to engage two individuals together on the social level. What if I "marry" myself to the exceptional nature, what if I ignore its will like every human being is trying to do, I insist, to have a grand wedding ceremony with nature. The gallery space will be decorated into a ceremony site and host weddings.

This thesis is discussing the transformation of my artistic practice, from the history of how I develop this theme, how it process, how it fully grows into a complete project. And the research of plastic as a symbol, human and nature, the cultural reason behind the performance.

In this unique time duration of the coronavirus outbreak in Norway, March to May 2020, due to the cancellation of the graduation show. The final result will be shown in a 3D model format. With the possible setting in a model of the space, I supposed to have in TKM Gråmølne. This project will be submitted as a proposal in the near future.

Unfortunately, the scheduled performance in the opening will be postponed until there is a live performance opportunity – through some research and observation, I realized not everything can go digital, especially with a performance that needs a physical and concrete actual space and interaction with the audience.

CHAPTER 1

SHANGHAI

To my beloved partner,

I am standing here; I am in my confined home, Pan Yu Road 290, sub Lane 10, Block 6, Room 503 – my childhood home, it is a 40 m² apartment. I used to live here all my life before I have grown up. My parents and I lived in this old building since 1994, we never moved. This micro-apartment locate in the centrum of Shanghai, with a typical architectural design in the 80s that no one care anything else rather than the practical usage. It is slowly decaying; I can smell it. I am here again, and things became slightly smaller after I am used to the furniture size in Norway. I grew up in this scene, a narrow, stressful, crowded neighborhood.

The window in my room has a view of the roof of the next block, the very same building, both grey. If I pay attention, it is close enough to see what people were doing in their room. The sky is always light grey-ish blue, with trees downstairs. We have around four tresses there; they were the only trees I know quite well. In the mid-2000s, there was construction work going on with the housing estate; the authority cut them off. They end up with annual rings exposing on the notch – like being naked, dead, and naked. The other half of their bodies were lying on the ground for weeks because it was problematic to treat those giant "trashies." Leaves did not know they were dead yet; they looked vivid still.

I lost some trees I knew, but I did not feel anything because I did not care. In the summer of 2005, it was vacation time for our family. We went to Shengsi, a county consisting of archipelago islands. That was the first time I saw the sea. It was in the heavily polluted period China; the sea was yellow. Ideally, it supposed to be blue. But I never see a blue ocean before, I lived in Centrum Shanghai, I know where to find luxury shops, but the natural landscape, no, never. I thought this is what the ocean looks like. Pictures from the Geography textbook was a lie. I was young and naive, and I thought that was the only nature I can have. As a human, as an animal, that supposed to be the aesthetic I could enjoy. Unfortunately, even my instinct did not like it.



Shengsi, 2004

But what was wrong with the yellow sea? Several years after, when I was looking at the yellow water gushing out of the tap in this small town called Qingyuan from Jiangxi, I did not feel right either. Yellow for water means polluted, impurity, transparent is better, blue is fantastic. But why – why the ocean in my childhood was impure, why I did not want to get close, to have intimate time with it? A scientific article told me: Because the coastal area of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Shanghai is within the radiation range of the Yangtze River's estuary, this is the result of a large amount of sediment carried by the water of the Yangtze River to the seawater. But most of the sediment around Lianyungang (north Jiangsu) comes from the Yellow River.

You will not believe it; a current sea lover like me, use to be so indifferent. I did not care about nature because it was not "beautiful" enough. These years I was always thinking, who gave me the power, as a human, to define the yellow sea was beautiful or not; The aesthetic value was so significant that it was the only reason to arouse my awareness. The warning was very pale. I have heard global warming for ages; I thought it would never affect me, I was, as countless Chinese people, we were not political, we are the political apathy. I lived in this bubble of fake happiness.

CHAPTER 2

TRONDHEIM

If you ever see the Norwegian sea, the dark, endless ocean, flow from nowhere to here, to your feet. Dark as the night sky, transparent as millions of diamond shards. It can swallow me, the breathtaking beauty – I wonder whether the concept of aesthetics exists in nature. If a tree knows, if the water knows, if a bird can tell. From the day, the birth of the earth, about 4.6 billion years ago, this very new star would breed a notion names beauty. And being developed after billions of years by humankind, we tried to define it by language, we wanted to name it like we have to name a color called blue. Therefore, the adjective of nature is "beautiful," it contains the angle of Matterhorn; it describes the breeze in the summer fjord, it presents the softness of the surface of an Amazon forest... This is how I felt when I first saw nature, in an authentic extent. I never felt small towards those high buildings in Shanghai. Even stand by the Shanghai Tower – which is the second-highest building in the world; I never felt this small and weak, never felt that fascinated. I was driven by the greatness of an unknown force, it attacked me, and all my believes collapsed at that very moment. In that second I abruptly realized my identity as a human, a part of nature, the tacit truth that nature always was and always will overpower me, I am certainly included in it, not "destroying" or "rebellious" it in any context.

Trondheim – I arrived in Trondheim, Norway, on 7th of August 2018, it was a gloomy day. I did not acknowledge my life, and my value was about to change. I heard about Norwegians loving nature, I wondered why.

This small city, located in central Norway, with its very accessible nature, changed my whole view towards environmental "protection," earth, and climate change. I started caring – I used to think everything was a service to humankind, literally. I was arrogant and ignoring; I thought it was by default that we can use, drain, eat, drink, and extort anything from nature because we can. Now I am making this sincere confession, but I still wonder if I never shocked by the natural aesthetics in someday in 2018, will I still live in a terrible lifestyle and believe in some ridiculous arrogant principle because I am an urban born and raised human? What if I am not an artist, what if I am full of apathy, what if I never connect with it? Luckily, I and nature saved me. I cannot think of another way to have intimacy with it; I want to marry it humanly. Our culture has a format to bring two people together bureaucratically – marriage. It is an agreement, and I would like to have this with you, my beloved partner, if I may call you that.

Marriage is frightening – it comes with responsibility, love, and devotion, everything I am afraid to commit to. Even there is this fearful path for me, and I still want to have a relationship with the earth, the water, the air, leaves in the forests, moonlight at clear nights, with you. That is the only way – a mortal way to show my love. Plastic wedding dress is my helplessness, I am a bride with flaws, I am harmful, but I still love you. I see nature as an eternal genderless existence. "Bride," on the other hand, is a very feminine symbol, at least in the Mandarin language. I realize I will never be able to be authentic neutral. Rather than trying hard to get rid of linguistic sex differentiation, I would like to embrace the possibility of female identity affection to you.

I can not wait to see you soon, feel you with my bare feet, standing, walking, on you, with you. Breath you, be surrounded by you. Save me, heal me, love me.

Yours,
Qianhui

RED



Plastic Poseidon, Trondheim, 2020

In a traditional Chinese wedding, people wear red. I would like to use color to represent my heritage. I want to create a melancholic vibe in the video, the aesthetic I refer is the Mono no aware (物の哀れ) from Japan. "Mono-no aware: the ephemeral nature of beauty — the quietly elated, bittersweet feeling of having been witness to the dazzling circus of life — knowing that none of it can last. It's basically about being both saddened and appreciative of transience — and also about the relationship between life and death."

The Chinese obsession with red can be traced back to the worship of the sun god in ancient times. This is a color that means something significant in Chinese culture. People choose it as a mandatory wedding color because it symbolizes happiness, success, luck, loyalty, and prosperity. The bride always wears a red wedding dress with a red veil. In this project, I will present the character in a natural snow scene, cold, white, icy blue nature with a red moving image, red as fire and desire, as a metaphor of life, with the contrast of bleak, endless coast.

Mono no aware's aesthetic proposition can be understood as the impermanence of sadness of life reflected in the description of nature and the change of seasons. An example from Jorge Luis Borges's comments on *The Tale of Genji*: In the *Quixote*, Cervantes limits himself to distinguishing day from the night, Murasaki (*The Bridge of Dreams*, chapter X) notes in a window "the blurred stars behind the falling snow." In the previous paragraph, she mentions a long bridge, damp in the mist, "that seems much farther away." Perhaps the first detail is implausible; the two together are strangely effective. I have mentioned two visual details; now, I would like to note a psychological one. A woman, behind a curtain, sees a man enter. Murasaki writes: "Instinctively, although she knew quite well that he couldn't see her, she smoothed her hair with her hand."

Comparing with western classical aesthetics, Asian aesthetics can be very delicate and specific. Japanese and Chinese ancient cultures have a profound origin; both have the characteristics of implicit oriental beauty. The fragility in literature like *The Tale of Genji*, as if it is going to be broken anytime; I want to bring the same melancholic into the visual material, to create a space with a certain sadness, a sorrow which lost translation. But — Mono no aware is different from grief; the level of Mono no aware is broader than sorrow; it also includes sympathy, magnificent feeling, and so many other emotions. I want to express when people get attached to the unfamiliar nature and the unspeakable deep feelings.

2. Macdonald, Fiona. (2019). Seven words that can help us be a little calmer". [bbc.com](https://www.bbc.com).
3. Borges, J. L. (1999). *Selected non-fictions* (Vol. 3). Penguin Group USA.

WHITE

The white plastic bag is a symbol of pollution in the contemporary context. As a person who lives in 2020, I can hardly live without it. It is everywhere; it is random and pale, dull, and inanimate. The cover of National Geographic in June 2018, was a white plastic bag in the shape of the glacier. Instead of that, my plastic bag will be in the shape of a human. They have the same metaphor that this daily object can not be neglected. The existence of plastic supposes to raise awareness to some extent.

Are we really winning the game between humans and plastic bags? Is paper bag hypocritical environmental protection? Urban people feel ease by reducing the use of plastic, but we have fallen into a whirlpool of ecological ethics. Plastic bags are bad, paper bags make us feel morally superior, "However, the paper industry is a heavily polluting industry. In the production process, paper bags consume 10% more energy than plastic bags, and water consumption is four times more than plastic bags. The greenhouse gas emissions caused by plastic bags are 3.3 times that of plastic bags. The atmospheric acidification and air quality deterioration caused by paper bags are 1.9 times and 1.3 times that of plastic bags, respectively. In terms of eutrophication of water bodies, the possible pollution of paper bags is plastic bags 14 times. After the end of the use cycle, paper bags will cause 2.7 times more solid waste than plastic bags."

I try not to romanticize plastic in nature – maybe slightly, yes. A wedding dress is romantic, combine with very feminine energy. The aesthetic can be very litesome. According to the white wedding dress's metaphor: innocent and virtue even it is outdated somehow in the contemporary context. Thinking of the contrast of purification and pollution, the tender of love, and the horrible truth that plastic is hurting and eating covered this planet. However, even white is a very traditional choice of a wedding dress. I still want to support the rebel against gender politics by using untraditional texture in the design.



Plastic Poseidon, Trondheim, 2020

OVERALL

In a casual chat, I talked with a friend who works in the tourism industry about urban people and nature. She is one of the few nature-loving city people I know. When asked about the reason, she told me that the intensive life in Shanghai made her feel exhausted, and she needed a place to relax, which nature was a good choice. "So, to this extent, nature exists to serve your needs, right?" I asked. "That's true," she replied. "it's very difficult to live in a city."

Unfortunately, for most of us, people lack respect for nature because the existence of humankind is so merited. We take advantage for granted. If the Coronavirus is not happening right now, people still did not realize that Coronavirus (as a natural zoonotic production) is taking over the dominating power from humans, forcing us to change lifestyles and be aware of the air, the environment. It leads us to think about how we should respect the capability of nature, how we protect our kind and coexist with a global health crisis.

"If we fail to understand and take care of the natural world, it can cause a breakdown of these systems and come back to haunt us in ways we know little about. A critical example is a developing model of infectious disease that shows that most epidemics — AIDS, Ebola, West Nile, SARS, Lyme disease, and hundreds more that have occurred over the last several decades — don't just happen. They are a result of things people do to nature.

Disease, it turns out, is largely an environmental issue. Sixty percent of emerging infectious diseases that affect humans are zoonotic — they originate in animals. And more than two-thirds of those originate in wildlife."

On this level, I tend to think that nature has its consciousness as an entirety. From the Stone Age, the Iron Age to the Machine Age, humans have transformed nature more and more intensely; from the awe of earth to overpower nature, nature has tardily become a tool from a god in the eyes of humankind. Three hundred years of industrial civilization is the civilization of humankind conquering nature, social productivity is advancing, and humankind is demanding nature unprecedentedly. Still, people gradually forget: nature is not an object; natural life is closely linked with the presence of human society. In a sense, the earth is priming an immune response to humans. It began to respond to parasites, and the human infestation seemed like a bad infection. Europe, Japan, and the United States are like cancer foci, teeming with replicating primates, and the human community is expanding and spreading in ways that could lead to extinction.

It is almost a sin that I was born this way. I born as a tiny version of a plastic user, a nature destroyer, adults around me were bad examples; the environmental topic was not as popular as nowadays in Shanghai back in the 90s. I was not awake until the facts hit my face. Unfortunately, there are billions of people just like the old me on this planet. They can be individuals, collectives, companies, institutes. The only thing I am constantly trying in my practice is to bring up the awareness from people like me, to create a new method, a better environment, in an ideal universe.

Plastic Poseidon is a metaphor, not a solution.

The timeline of my artistic practice history, is pretty much a story from an artist only has access to urban life, a civilization with an only human society, to a variety of elements including nature, politics, and humankind as a species, instead of a human-centered vision of life. The practice itself is a strong reflection on the process of transforming, introspection of a natural human in an urban-based life finding engagement with nature in general.

I choose intermedia installation as the media of the work, is based on the fact that I have been working with this format in the past two years. I have a bachelor in fine art which was oil painting orientated. However, when two-dimensional visual material cannot fulfill the needs of the concept, I started my journey of digital format, with sounds, moving images. Two big screens with projection will be placed in the gallery space, with self glowing seats on the floor. In this case, nothing can be more romantic than the feeling of walking with the bride through the eye of a lens, unstable image, and the plastic sounds like ocean waves.

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