

Large Text

If A Turtle Could Talk

Curated by Yuluo Wei

Works by Ed Pien, An'Xiong Qiu,
Xiaojing Yan

October 28–November 21, 2020

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Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

Art
Museum

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Exhibition Essay

Imagine you wake up in a foggy forest one night, and find a tiny creature—neither human nor animal—knocking at your door. How would you react?

The German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein famously wrote: “If a lion could talk, we would not understand him.”¹ In an age where the human world is well analyzed and excessively explained, we continue to (re)imagine. From clan ancestors to messengers of God, and from legendary heroes to hunted demon beings, narratives of mythical creatures are constantly reinterpreted and reappear in the contemporary context. If we could understand these creatures’ languages, what would they say? With this question as a departure point, *If a Turtle Could Talk* features large-scale works by three artists who share an interest in mythical creatures as a way of understanding

ourselves and the world we live in today, differently.

Entering the exhibition, we step into Ed Pien's garden. The artist immigrated to Canada at age eleven, and his works embrace the hybridity of his geographic and ethnic self. Encircling the viewer with a series of ink drawings on suspended paper walls, *Earthy Delights* (2001-2004) evokes Hieronymus Bosch's triptych panel *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. While Bosch's work implicates visitors in its *mise-en-scène* with manifold creatures flowing left-to-right as representatives of Eden, the garden of earthly delights, and hell, Pien makes use of a 360-degree panorama to envelop visitors in three floating, circular rooms that flutter in response to movement. In this playground, lying down or stooping low, interactivity is encouraged in the form of pressing on semi-transparent walls that conjure spectres, and faraway otherworldly beings can be glimpsed down cavernous tunnels. Inside we switch constantly between movement and sensation, experiencing the depths of delight, peace, sorrow, anxiety, and rage.

Emerging from the tunnels, we come upon China-based artist An'Xiong Qiu's projected series of

animations *New Book of Mountains and Seas III* (2017). Originally painted in acrylic, the artist has taken inspiration for his animations from the ancient classic 山海经 (*Shan Hai Jing; Guideways of Mountains and Seas*), a famous compilation of mythical texts dating back to the second century BCE.² Featuring eighteen volumes of fantastical creatures, plants, medicines, and geography, the ancient stories serve as the basis of Chinese mythology. Depicting modern civilization from an ancient perspective, the artist's dystopian world is overrun by strange creatures that assume the shapes of modern technologies and are manipulated to appear mythical. By incorporating the expressiveness of an acrylic language that imitates ink into hand-drawn animation, Qiu's work expresses critical attitudes towards our current living situation.

Xiaojing Yan, Canada-based for more than a decade, has been planting seeds of art in different media and plays with strong physical forms and materials that emanate religious, mythological, and cultural connotations. *Skyline* (2019) envelops visitors with a bio-electrical audio recording documenting the growth of lingzhi mushrooms, while *Mountains of Pines* (2017–2018) takes inspiration from traditional Chinese landscape

painting while adopting materials that evoke both the landscape depicted and its symbolic associations. *Far from where you divined* (2017) is a sculptural showcase depicting a young girl, a deer, and a group of moon rabbits. Fashioned from lingzhi mushrooms rooted in woodchip forms, the sculptures represent symbols of longevity, echoing themes in traditional Chinese myth where deer are believed to be holy keepers or skilled hunters of sacred mushrooms deep in the mountains, and moon rabbits can create mysterious elixirs of immortality using mortar and pestle. This installation brings an imaginary world into existence, alluding to an unspeakable relationship between human and nature and to the circle of life and death.

The exhibition is accompanied by the story of Papa Turtle, a Star Postman who inadvertently travels from his mossy forest home to the human world, and sends letters back to Little Turtle, questioning their connection to nature, their understanding of time, history, knowledge, assimilation, and even their own existence.

Art is a way to make us think. An exhibition, as expansive and pliable as art itself, encourages viewers to think in ways that are wilder and more

undomesticated. Adapting figures and images from ancient Asian history and contemporary Western culture, both the exhibition and story create a confluence of intuitive, poetic, and visual narratives that blur the distinctions between reality and fiction, exploring absence and presence through a fascination with strangeness and a sense of displacement.

Encompassing works in a diversity of media including drawing, video, sculpture, and installation, *If a Turtle Could Talk* produces a spellbinding and playful environment where visitors are invited to delve into the richness of imaginary world(s) that resonate with us on a visceral, emotional, and evocative level, regardless of audience worldview.

—Yuluo Wei

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 223.

² Contemporary scholars generally believe that this book is the result of a collective effort, with major stories based on oral legends accumulated by different authors over time. *Shan Hai Jing*, ed. Zongyi Rao, trans. Zhengqian Huang (Beijing: CITIC Press, 2015).

Curator's Acknowledgements

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To the artists and the Art Museum team: thank you all for making this exhibition possible amidst unpredictable times. Additionally, I would like to express my very great appreciation to Penglai Guo for his generous gift that enabled me to turn my full vision into reality. Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Kennan. His voice was the inspiration for this turtle story.

Exhibition Programs

Artist Talk: Ed Pien, An'xiong Qiu, and Xiaojing Yan

Tuesday, November 10, 7:30pm - 8:30pm

Online on Zoom

Register on artmuseum.utoronto.ca

One Story at Twilight Time: *If a Turtle Could Talk*

Saturday, November 21, 5:15pm - 5:30pm

Online on artmuseum.utoronto.ca

Visiting the Art Museum

Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

7 Hart House Circle

Toronto, Ontario M5S 3H3

416-978-8398

University of Toronto Art Centre

15 King's College Circle

Toronto, Ontario M5S 3H7

416-978-1838

Our hours have temporarily changed:

Tuesday Noon–5pm

Wednesday Noon–7pm

Thursday Noon–5pm

Friday Noon–5pm

Saturday Noon–5pm

Sunday Closed

Monday Closed

Closed on statutory holidays. Admission is FREE.

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