

Kim Farkas: *Total Internal Reflection*

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We step off the small cobblestoned street of London's oldest district and into what looks like a futuristic garage. Suspended in the gallery are two iridescent oblong forms. Their sleek, ridged exoskeletons, a combination of reflective champagne and transparent amber panels, piece together like biomechanical cocoons. Art Nouveau-inflected sci-fi aesthetics (think H.R. Giger's work on *Alien* (1979) or steampunk architecture) are frequently cited in reference to Kim Farkas' sculptures, though he maintains this is incidental; his aperture of influences is wide open, after all. Farkas' broad interests, among them deep-sea diving, football, or the social mechanics of larping – each worlds of their own, with their attendant ritualised behaviours and codes – all manage to find their way into his work, which ultimately always comes back to themes of cultural transmission and (self-)preservation. It is common for those who grew up between two different cultures, countries, or languages, to feel at home everywhere and nowhere at once. As a French-born national to an American father of Hungarian-Jewish descent and a Peranakan¹ mother, Farkas is no exception. Sometimes it seems that the more attenuated we are from our ancestral lands, tongues, tastes, and smells, the deeper we harbour them, or their absences. I like the way the philosopher Byung-Chul Han defines rituals as “symbolic techniques of making oneself at home in the world²” They are to time what homes are to space, in that they render time habitable. The ambulant, diasporic body, and the rituals it enacts, thus replaces the land as a vessel of cultural transmission across generations. It is quite literally extra-terrestrial.

In physics, the term ‘total internal reflection’ denotes a phenomenon in which the waves arriving at the boundary between one medium to another are not refracted into the second (“external”) medium, but completely reflected back into the first (“internal”) one. For example, an underwater ray of light moving at a certain angle will not shine through the meniscus into the air, but double back upon itself. Along the spine of the sculptures, magma-coloured vertebrae reminiscent of tail lights emit a soft red glow, leaving us to wonder what inner light/life force may be gestating within them. In Indonesian and Malay, the word ‘Peranakan’, bears two meanings: ‘descendants of’, but also uterus, or womb³.

I discovered that one of the signature motifs of the Art Nouveau – those winding arabesques reminiscent of vines and flowers – are known as ‘whiplash’ lines. Whiplash: a sudden back and forth movement, which I picture rendered in comic-book style – as a character's head surrounded by parenthetical strokes suggesting rapid oscillation, his facial features replaced by a blur. That blurred face of whiplash is like the torn space between places, cultures, and languages, but also between realms and dimensions, that Farkas' works manifestly inhabit.

This liminal medium, and the question of how symbols of intangible heritage are exported and consumed within it, is further explored in the suite of aluminium-mounted photomontages that take joss papers, or ‘spirit money’ (objects used in Southeast Asian ancestral worship practices) as their point of departure. These sheets and papier mâché objects take the form of material comforts – gold ingots,

printed bills, cars, watches, and all other sorts of modern luxury commodities – for the living to transfer, like care packages, to the dead through a process of incineration. Some of Farkas’ earlier sculptures featured joss papers concealed in their cavities – blocking them in transit, so to speak – though the artist stopped this practice after family members reproached him for courting bad luck. Still, interested in the way that lay objects can also be endowed with spiritual value and ritualistic purpose, Farkas began collecting and photographing modern joss papers instead, using their imagery as the basis for the digital collages, which subsequently came to also include images of Asian alimentary exports such as noodles, sauces, but also food packaging, etc. found in Chinatowns the world over. Fixed under glistening, oil-slick pigmented coats of resin, these once-objects of agency and experience appear encapsulated in a sort of perpetual combustion. Preserved, maybe, but also obscured: caught at the meniscus between the there and here in a total internal refraction.

Text by Melanie Scheiner

About the Artist

Kim Farkas (b. 1988 in Paris, FR) lives and works in Paris, France. The artist received his BA in Graphic Design from Olivier de Serres, Paris, in 2009, his BFA from Beaux-Arts de Paris in 2012, and his MFA from Beaux-Arts de Paris in 2014. Selected exhibitions include: “Solstice,” Galerie Crèvecoeur, Paris, FR (2024); “To breathe to walk,” Murmus, Los Angeles, US (2024); “The Blue Hour,” Union Pacific, London, UK (2024); “Master stock,” Tara Downs, US (2024); MAC VAL, Vitry-sur-Seine, FR (2023); “We’re still here,” All Stars, Lausanne, CH (2023); Paris + par Art Basel | Sites, Paris, FR, presented by Tara Downs (2022); “Comfort Dreams,” Campoli Presti, Paris, FR (2022); “Atlas of Affinities,” HUA International, Berlin, DE (2022); Tara Downs, New York, US (2021); “Étoile Distante,” FRAC Pays de la Loire, Nantes, FR (2021); “T01 700d,” Galerie des Filles du Calvaire, Paris, FR (2021); “Your friends and neighbors,” High Art, Paris, FR (2020); “From the xmas tree of lucy bull,” Los Angeles, US (2020); “Orange Rouge,” Bétonsalon, Paris, FR (2019); “Group Show,” Tonus, Paris, FR (2019); “Helmut,” Doc, Paris, FR (2018); “Le bien commun (LAMO A DS#3),” Commonwealth & Council, Los Angeles, US (2017); “Shanaynay fundraiser,” Shanaynay, Paris, FR (2016); and “Plus jamais seul,” Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Centre Pompidou, Paris, FR (2014). Farkas is a recipient of the CNAP Grant and Prix des amis des Beaux-Arts and is a founding publisher of Holoholo Books. The artist’s work is included in the permanent collection of Le Centre national des arts plastiques, Paris.

1. The Peranakan Chinese are a small ethnic minority who settled in the Malay archipelago as maritime merchants and traders beginning around the 14th century.

2. Byung-Chul Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020).

3. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, *Kamus Melayu-Inggeris Dewan* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2012), 47.