

Xin Liu

The Permanent and the Insatiable

03.05—04.13.2025

Management is pleased to present *The Permanent and the Insatiable*, Xin Liu's first exhibition with a gallery in New York. A text by Valerie Mindlin accompanies the exhibition.

"Nature, in her most dazzling aspects or stupendous parts, is but the background and theater of the tragedy of man," John Morley writes in 1871, the year The Equitable Life Building, one of Lower Manhattan's first skyscrapers, rises up, supported by steel beams meant to keep it standing forever, indifferent to fires, floods, and natural forces; two years after the first synthetic polymer, the original industrial plastic, is invented as an entry in a New York business's \$10,000-prize open call for a cheap replacement for ivory.

Xin Liu's *The Permanent and the Insatiable: New York* lays bare the tortured antinomy of immortality and destruction unfolding just behind the stage curtain of Too-Late Capitalism's theater. This piece surfaces the notions of materiality, permanence, and anthropocentrism—and prompts its visitors to follow suit. In this installation, both the viewer and the work itself are left by Liu to think their way through an improbable yet completely real scenario whose ultimate outcome one can only surmise and speculate on.

- 1907: Leo Bakeland invents Bakelite, marking the beginning of an era in which industrial plastics will become an inextricable part of nearly all worldwide manufacturing. Bakelite's hired hype man John Mumford writes a few years later that the material has "a solidity that mocks at the disintegrating forces of heat and cold, time and tide, acid and solvent."
- 2016: Japanese scientists make a surprising discovery: buried in the dirt outside a recycling facility in Sakai City, Osaka, a bacterium they dubbed *Ideonella sakaiensis* is quietly secreting enzymes that are deconstructing old plastic beverage bottles scattered about.
- 2022: A team of scientists from the National Renewable Energy Laboratory assesses and reports the entire life cycle impacts for an enzymatic PET recycling system in the near future.

These are the three facts that prompted the creation of *The Permanent and the Insatiable: New York*. The work is composed of a custom-made bioreactor tank inside of which an enzymatic reaction will, over the course of the exhibition's run, attempt to slowly degrade a scrupulously faithful replica of Lower Manhattan's architectural landscape constructed from woven strips of post-consumer PET.¹

Placed within the context of art's history, the readiest visual cognate *The Permanent and the Insatiable* brings to mind Mike Kelley's *Kandors*, created between 2005 and 2009. Unlike Liu's, Kelley's series of

¹ Xin Liu's first experiment in this series is currently on view at the Moody Center for the Arts, opened on Jan 24th, 2025. In it, the cityscape of downtown Houston and the Rice University campus shares the same fate as its New York counterpart. As of the end of February, the museum staff have spotted colorful residues in the reaction tank. However, the PET sculpture largely remains intact.

sculptures placed delicate, elegantly crafted miniature skyscraper landscapes inside glass enclosures. Representing a shrunken image of Superman's home planet, Kelley himself referred to these as "metaphors for the alienated relationship to the planet he [Superman] now occupies"—an "outdated image of the future" once aspired to. That all sounds like a pretty accurate description of the work on view as well, doesn't it?

Xin Liu is a rare artist: one whose scientific knowledge and technical expertise wound their way toward allegorical realism that is as formally considered as it is aesthetically striking. While both the biological scenario and the sculpted landscape of *The Permanent and the Insatiable: New York* are entirely accurate and thoroughly loyal to reality in their representation, the resulting work reflects a much wider social and cultural contextual framework—our collective reality out of which it was born.

The World-For-Us, The World-In-Itself, and The World-Without-Us—or simply The World, The Earth, and The Planet: the philosopher Eugene Thacker has delineated these concepts as three distinct levels of understanding the environment in which we live. In this schema, The World is defined as the environment in relation to humans and their interaction with it, our primary way of comprehending everything around us. The Earth is defined as the environment's life and existence that is separate from humans—the one you see in nature shows, the one subject to our study and exploration: it's the animals, and geology, and bacteria that don't make art and are uninterested in culture—yet are still unavoidably subject to our influence. The Planet, in turn, is The Earth imagined after the disappearance of The World—The Earth so fully divorced from the human's concerns and his very existence that it isn't even hostile—it is simply indifferent.

What you're looking at when you look at Xin Liu's work, then, is the extraordinary and the unimaginable: The Earth reclaiming The World to become The Planet.

Architecture and plastics are the perfect epitomes of humanity's hubristic myopia, the dream of permanence that turns away from the Earth to insist that there is only the World. Is there a better symbol of that myopia than Lower Manhattan? Take your time to look closer at the landscape inside the tank—there are subtle color gradations among the intricate little copies of these iconic buildings. Do these colors look familiar? You may recognize the emerald of Graza olive oil and the ochre of Aesop soap (fancy!) among other threads of scavenged plastic. It's too bad the enzymes that are slowly consuming them can't tell the difference—to them, we're but a background to nature's tragedies...

— Valerie Mindlin

Xin Liu was born in 1991 in Xinjiang, China, and currently lives and works between New York and London. Liu received a BA and BEng from Tsinghua University in Beijing, China, in 2013, an MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design in 2015, and an MS from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2017. She is an artist-in-residence at SETI Institute, a Visiting Fellow at Cornell Tech (2024-25), an advisor for LACMA Art+Tech Lab, and the founding Arts Curator in the Space Exploration Initiative at MIT Media Lab.

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