



Rachel Eng  
To Displace  
Something

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## To Displace Something

February 6 - March 5, 2020

Essay by Sarah Fritchey

Flecker Gallery  
Suffolk County Community College  
Ammerman Campus, Selden, NY

Director's Foreword:

Flecker Gallery is delighted to host this solo exhibition of a site-specific installation by Rachel Eng. Her artistic practice crosses boundaries, employing clay, video, various found/recycled objects, and other mixed media. According to the artist: "The temporary lifespan of the unfired clay installations and site-specific interventions that I build comment on life cycles and the impact of the elements as well as humans on our environment. The forms draw from lichen and fungi, organisms that contribute to breaking down and recycling matter. They are foreign yet familiar, as many organisms that carry out these processes are looked over or too small to see with the naked eye. These pieces continuously change throughout their exhibition, as a once lush landscape becomes brittle and fragile as it dries out. Cracked surfaces are reminiscent of sun-bathed parched grounds. Clay when unfired can be recycled infinitely. The life of the material evolves, being re-constructed into a new piece or other times becoming part of the earth again, through its dispersal in the landscape."

Ephemeral artworks live in as near a state to a pure idea as is possible in art. They are in fact ideas that move through a phase of physical being, and then move into memory and document. The physical matter of this installation deteriorates, and the images - as video - remain in flux; the catalog and images are what will remain. The sound element of chimes and the isolation of the work in the partitioned gallery space create an immersive, contemplative space. These conceptual approaches eschew notions of either precious objects or permanence. Change and decay are central content to artworks in which the subject matter is the natural world and our strained relationship to it. Eng's work and this installation are an elegant synthesis of the artists critical voice and poetic sensibilities.

For this exhibition, Eng has spent a week in the gallery installing components that she has been preparing in her studio for months. We will witness its decay and upon conclusion, the clay will be recycled into new artworks by local students and artists, and the cycles of growth, decay, and regeneration that is the subject matter of the work will continue in the life of the material and extend into the community.

Sarah Fritchey, emerging curator at Artspace in New Haven, CT, has worked with Eng previously and brings her experience and connection to the artist to the exhibition through her essay: *Seeing from the Inside*. Here Fritchey lays out an insightful reflection on Eng's ideas and artworks, their connection to natural phenomena, science, critical theory, and the artist's particular experience of the world.

I sincerely hope you thoroughly enjoy the catalog and this innovative and meditative exhibition.

Matthew Neil Gehring  
Director

Rachel Eng: Seeing from the Inside

By Sarah Fritchey

Every year, between the 15th and 18th day of the eighth month on the Chinese lunar calendar, a giant wave reverses the flow of water in the Qiantang River. Nicknamed the Silver Dragon, this famous tidal bore has reached up to 30 feet in height and 25 miles per hour in speed, and is one of a few that occurs naturally in the world. The roar of the wave can be heard for hours before it is seen, and the tide behind the wave makes the water rise for hours after it passes. This natural phenomenon has been celebrated for centuries, and draws thousands of people to unite along the river's shores.

As the water bends backwards, the ordinary is cast in reverse, distorting and recalibrating what we have come to expect from the landscape, place, and time. This action, water reversing directions, is the zeitgeist of Rachel's Eng's newest multimedia work. Conceived during a summer residency in Itoshima, a rural region in the south of Japan. The work features an assemblage of three parts: an 8 x 8 foot bed of unfired clay that resembles a fungi blanket, a projected video of a looping waterfall, and the sound of chimes. They combine to tell the story of Itoshima, a place defined by the interactivity of its parts.

The ghosts of Itoshima percolate all parts of the installation, it's recycled clay and sacred chimes. But the most jarring specter resides in the video of its waterfall, flowing in reverse. Eng captured this footage on a hike to a nearby waterfall, later editing the footage so that the water would change directions half way through its 30-second loop. The water cascades, and then reverses, displacing itself, again and again. When the water moves forward, we inhabit what feels like real time. When the water recedes, we are pulled into the past, into an imaginary virtual time before we reached the waterfall...or maybe into a more distant past before the waterfall existed. Captive to this cycle, we encounter a different sort of phenomenon that hits us with the force of a tidal bore, or a momentary turn in gravity. The water in reverse is a warning sign, a reminder of the power that humans have to disturb water's flow.

In her artist statement, Eng describes her practice as an exercise in heightened observation. She writes, "A raindrop, a grain of sand, and a microscopic bacterium may go unnoticed, along with a feral cat, a person in prayer or a protestor when they are a single unit. But when gathered together they can possess a monumentality." Her way of thinking suggests that we are living in what Michael Foucault has termed "an epoch of simultaneity," an era that conceives of space as being made up of networks of places that open onto one another, and are unable to be reduced, or superimposed. He writes, this new epoch is "one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites," which are "defined by relations of proximity between points or elements". Foucault's concept replaces two notions of space that came before it. In medieval times, people understood space to be a matter of extension, space was an ensemble of hierarchal parts that built up off of one another. Galileo changed this concept of space after proving that the Earth rotates around the Sun. His discovery reoriented space as something that is infinite and never ending, and sites as localized points in this movement. In our new epoch, Foucault repaints the paradigm again, arguing that we experience the contemporary world as "a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein," rather than a singular "long life developing through time."

Like all of Eng's work, *To Displace Something* has evolved out of a process of personal research, collection, and discovery. She began this piece on one of many hikes, collecting data that complemented her ongoing research into fungi, water, and trees. Passing by rice paddies and tree farms, she entered a wooded trail dotted by small streams, climbing to the top to find the main source of water. She returned the next day with a camera to capture the footage featured in the installation – a fury of white lacey beads cascading down eroded rocks.

Her journeys around Itoshima added personal details to things she was learning about forest ecosystems in books, including Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees*. Wohlleben writes, "trees are the essential carriers of water from the ocean to coastal regions and thousands of miles inland." They do this in two ways, by "intercepting rainfall in their canopies and allowing it to immediately evaporate again," and by "releasing water into the air through transpiration...a process which creates new clouds." From Wohlleben, she had also learned that forests would not exist in their magnitude or strength without the support of underground webs of fungi. He writes, "Over centuries, a single fungus can cover many square miles and network an entire forest. The fungal connections transmit signals from one tree to the next, helping the trees exchange news about insects, drought, and other dangers."

Eng's installation visualizes a world-system that blends Wohlleben's scientific research with her own to poetically articulate what Foucault describes as a web of divergent spaces. The work takes inspiration in the blueprints of forest and city architectures, which share many qualities. The clay section, for example, is made up of 144 small tiles that can be scaled up or down, depending on the size and needs of its host, much like a stretch of fungi growing underground. The soundtrack is a tapestry of chimes, which resemble the bells in Itoshima's temples and shrines, mechanisms for communicating in a universal language understood by multiple species. The video of the waterfall plays horizontally on the ground, recalling the methods by which civic engineers have designed mechanisms for bringing water into cities.

The first time I met Rachel, I experienced her keen sensitivity towards being in a new place, and being a part of a community. She arrived in a small car filled with tidy buckets of clay hydrating in water. One by one, she carried the buckets into the gallery and began building. The next day she worked outside, tucking small bits of clay into the corners of our storefront, at the base of planted trees and cracks in the sidewalks. Another artist might have been stopped by city officials, but the regularity of her quiet work blended into the



"Silver Dragon" tidal bore, Qiantang River, Hangzhou, China, ChinaFotoPress/ChinaFotoPress via Getty Images

cityscape, as did she, working on all fours. When she finished, she stayed an extra day to help the other artists in the show build their work, quietly nourishing their contributions, knowing that this system would eventually care for her in return.

Eng credits the Land Art movement of the 1960s as sources of inspiration, specifically those who used their bodies to explore ephemerality, permanence and presence vis a vis the notions of landscape, sculpture and architecture. The light footedness of Richard Long's *A Line Made by Walking* has made an especially significant impact on her thinking in its recognition that humans are the accomplices in all that happens around us. I would argue that Eng's practice is also rooted in the affective turn that has impacted humanities scholarship over the past three decades, and thinks about the subject as an open system worked on by outside forces. Her work also joins the ranks of scientists and artists who grapple with immense topics, such as climate change, and land use/development, by paying close attention to a small aspect of the system, revealing the whole through an analysis of its parts.



Eng at work in the studio.

I suspect that Eng's relationship to ceramics is inseparable from her relationship to place. As Lucy Lippard defines it, place is "a portion of land/town/cityscape seen from the inside, the resonance of a specific location that is known and familiar...entwined with personal memory...marks made in the land that provoke and evoke...latitudinal and longitudinal within the map of a person's life...about connections, what surrounds it, what formed it, what happened there, what will happen there." As I witness this new piece, I can feel Eng's willingness to share her intimate experience of Itoshima with me, painting a multisensorial picture of what happened there, what it was like to look around, to make a memory, to get lost in the woods, to be of latitude, and to explore the unknown.

Sarah Fritchey is the Curator and Gallery Director at Artspace in New Haven, Connecticut and is a contributor to ArtForum.com, Hyperallergic, Art New England Magazine, and Big Red and Shiny.

Works Cited: Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias: Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité*. October, 1984. Print. Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*. New York: New Press, 1998. Print. Peter Wohlleben, *Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate*. GREYSTONE Books, 2018. Print. <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/tidal-bore/>. Online. <https://www.racheljeng.com/words.html>. Online.



"Stay on the Path" (detail),  
2013, unfired clay, digital pro-  
jection, 96 x 60 x 4 inches



"Stay on the Path," 2013, unfired clay, digital projection, 96 x 60 x 4 inches



"Rehydrate," 2017, unfired clay, watering system, fire brick, cardboard box, 60 x 42 x 48 inches

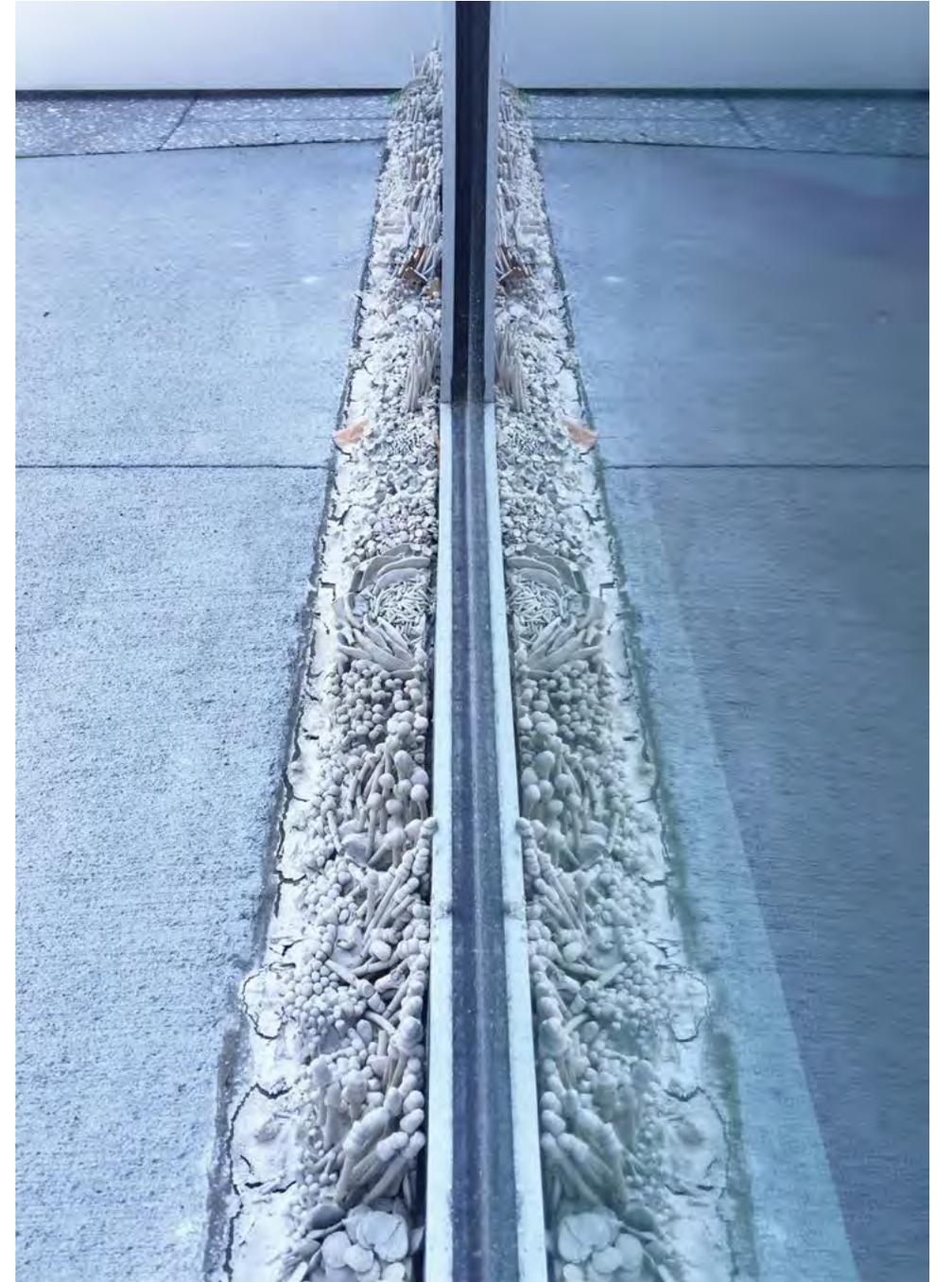


"Seek & Search," 2018, found objects, ceramic, plexi-glass, wooden display, 48 x 28 x 6 inches  
(detail at right), Photos: Holly Veenis





"Growth II", 2016, unfired clay,  
108 x 4 x 4 inches  
Photos: Elizabeth Plakidas



"Even Out," 2018, ceramic, paint, turgrass,  
144 x 78 x 50 inches, (detail at right)  
Photos: Holly Veenis





"Disasters Not Covered," 2017, porcelain, plexi-glass, digital projection, 60 x 78 x 4 inches (detail at right)

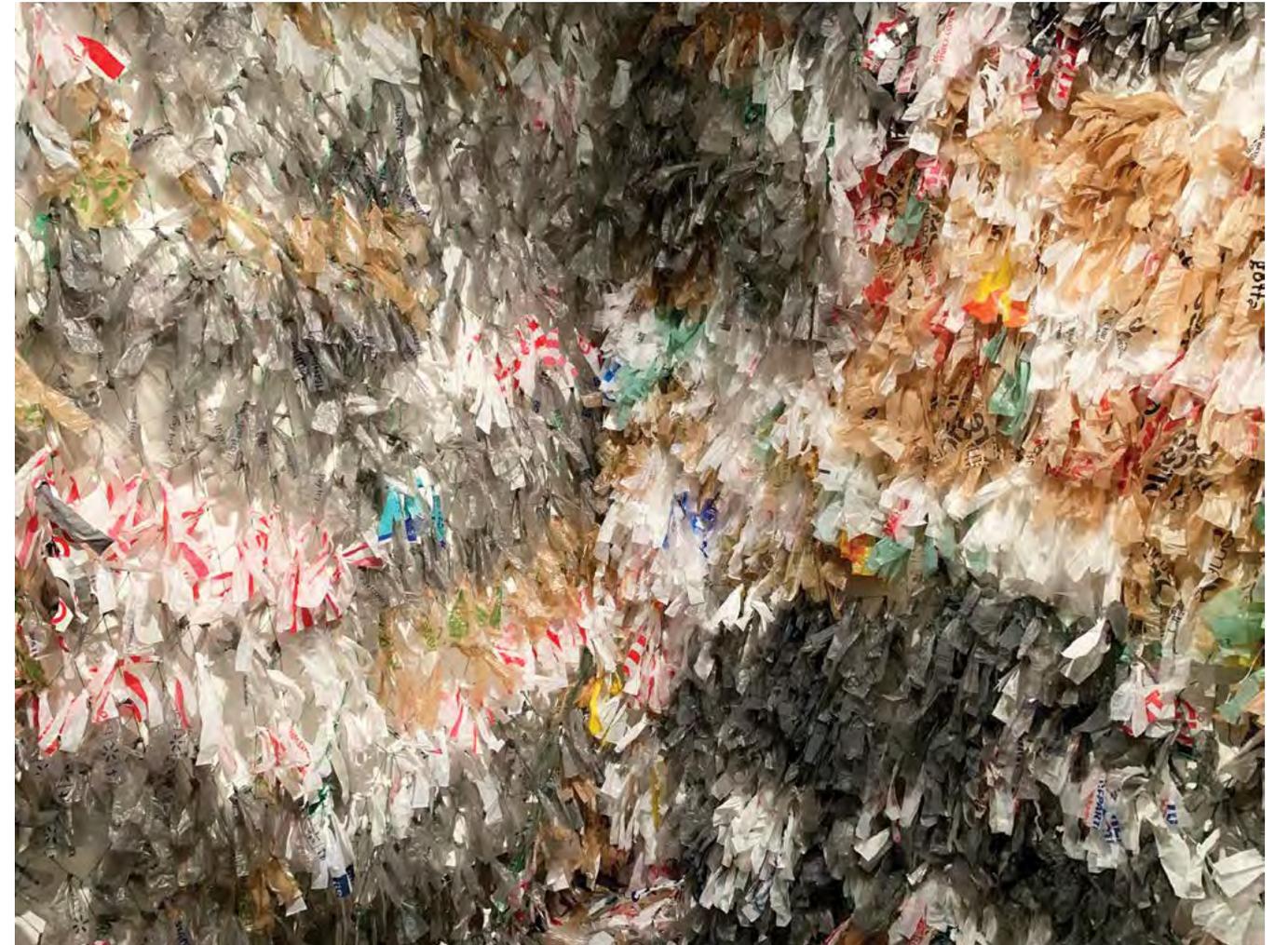




"Growth III" (details above and left), 2017, unfired clay, 180 x 4 x 4 inches



"Re-orienting", 2019, plastic bags, nylon cord, turfgrass, lawn chairs, 168 x 192 x 108 inches (detail at right)





Rachel Eng grew up exploring the deciduous forests of Rochester, New York. Her work questions human perceptions of the natural world through the use of ephemeral and permanent materials including clay, plastic, paper, and found objects. Eng received her B.F.A. from the Pennsylvania State University and her M.F.A. from the University of Colorado at Boulder. In 2017 she was selected as a NCECA Emerging Artist and in 2018 was awarded a grant through the Curatorial Opportunity Program at the New Art Center in Boston to curate a group exhibition of artists questioning how our creative capacity is impacted by our environment. In 2019 she was selected as a guest artist to collaborate on a permanent artwork with the Mead Art Museum and science center at Amherst College. She has been an artist in residence at NES Residency in Iceland, ArtFarm in Nebraska, Mudflat in Massachusetts, Watershed Center for the Ceramics Arts in Maine, and most recently at Studio Kura in Itoshima, Japan. Recent solo exhibitions include: Sykes Gallery at Millersville University, Schmucker Gallery at Gettysburg College, Trout Gallery at Dickinson College, and Woskob Gallery at Penn State University. Select group exhibitions include Heaven Gallery (Chicago), Little Berlin (Philadelphia), Rochester Contemporary (Rochester), and Artspace (New Haven). Eng currently lives and works in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where she is an Assistant Professor of Art at Dickinson College.

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Gallery Director and Curator: Matthew Neil Gehring

Essay by Sarah Fritchey

Catalog Design: Ena-Meghan Lefebber and Matthew Neil Gehring

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Works of art by Rachel Eng © 2020 Rachel Eng.

Photography for Rachel Eng by Holly Veenis, Elizabeth Plakidas, and Rachel Eng.

Unless indicated, photos appear courtesy of the artist.

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