

GB11 Curatorial QA – Between Molecules and Cosmos

Conversation between Binna Choi and Alma Heikkilä

Binna Choi: A recent scientific finding tells us about the existence of microbes across the world's oceans, and their incredible function in absorbing carbon dioxide, making oxygen, breaking down wastes, nourishing other creatures, etc. Apparently, temperature is the most important environmental factor in determining the composition of these communities, and the rapid climate change we're experiencing now must have a huge impact on them and their functions. Here, I come to think of our capacity to imagine a smallest thing being implicated in a biggest one, and vice versa. So my first question: what are the smallest things you have imagined in the making of your latest work, titled *THINGS THAT ARE MASSIVELY DISTRIBUTED IN TIME AND SPACE*, which you are presenting in GB11, that seem to deal with the question of scale? I will share a related inspiring quote from the source of my knowledge above, too!

A lot of what we didn't really ever see before in the ocean are predators and parasites, zombies and vampires that are floating through this incredible set of diversity, battling it out, Dr. Palumbi said. All these tiny little critters add up to something that is really a part of the way our planet operates.

- a quote from "Scientists Sample the Ocean and Find Tiny Additions to the Tree of Life," by Karen Weintraub in the *New York Times*, May 21, 2015

Alma Heikkilä: The work is constructed in six parts—Climate, Petroleum, Network, I, Biosphere, and Sun—as well as the shifts between the parts. Many topics refer to entities so large in time and space that they are impossible for me to understand or experience as a whole. I have not tried to present the whole "hyperobject," as Timothy Morton calls it—a contemporary ontological base in a time of climate change. Rather, I have selected smaller areas, kind of a surface that can continue way beyond the edges of the painting. I think that the massive size of those parts comes closer to our mind when looking at the smaller parts. Still, the human mind is not making the right scale for these images; for example, the surface of the sun is still much larger than we can imagine. The funny thing with scales is that you will always need to compare something

to something else. When even trying to imagine a thing as massive as climate, the outcome is always something smaller than what it is, or just a glimpse of it. When making work, I want to cooperate with the materials and try to capture some part of the things referred to as hyperobjects, even when it is a kind of paradox, trying to depict something that is too massive to experience wholly. Here are some thoughts that rise around some of the paintings:

Climate: The human body is constantly breathing: we can survive for only two minutes without these inhale/exhale movements. Climate research deals with huge masses of data, organic uncountable movements of unseen masses.

Petroleum: The name *petroleum* covers both naturally occurring, unprocessed crude oil and petroleum products that are made of refined oil. Plastic has made its way into everything in the biosphere. It is inside many living organisms, in our body and blood, as well as inside of fish, where it is shattered into micro-sized pieces. Our current culture is very largely dependent on the energy input we get from fossil fuels. The usage of energy is difficult to sense: it's twisted around our culture and thinking. A plastic water bottle's lifespan can be 450 years. The primary decomposers of litter in many ecosystems are fungi. Unlike bacteria, which are unicellular organisms, most saprotrophic fungi grow as a branching network of hyphae. Some mushrooms can decompose plastic and hazardous waste, some can even live out from pure radiance.

Biosphere: On the other side, there is a diagram of terrestrial biomass. It shows the balance between wild animals, domesticated animals, and humans. On top, there are fields of paint that form mycelium-like patterns. In front of it, there are scientific books about different fungi species and some plaster sculptures. I'm very attracted by the life forms that are almost impossible for a human to see and to imagine. Often, this information is shared in books with text and small images. On the other side of the panel, in the background, there are Aspen Spruce and small-leaved lime and Norway Spruce trees. They are trees that can inhabit and contain vast ecosystems. A forest is full of all sorts of life; even the air is filled with microbiota, insects, spores, etc.

Sun: In the end, all life on planet Earth is dependent on the energy of the sun.

BC: In that regard, I think it's also interesting to see your paintings from a non-human perspective, as much as we as humans can imagine. Looking at your paintings presented me with the experience of making sense of materiality, in particular, pigments —not just making meaning, interpreting, or coding and decoding of figures and shapes. Or, rather, it was enabling to fuse sensing and coding, which in turn generates quite liberating forms of imaginaries. You swim, devour, think, become thrilled, stop, pause, dance, turn, and so on... I wonder how it works on the other side, namely, the artist's own imagining and creating.

AH: In many cases, the images form in a way that I can't imagine in my mind before they're made. It's constant co-work with the materials, tools, etc. I see the image form in a way similar to that of the entities that they are named after (climate, biosphere, etc.) are partly formed, too. To make these images, it is a lot about trying to think or to be something else; for example, like the movements of water. I've worked together with pigments, spray bottles, etc. It's the essence of liquids' small moving particles and the endless ways of mixing them.

BC: Gayatri Spivak argues for replacing, or, in her words, “displacing,” the notion of globalization with the planetary. In the way you put it, she describes the planetary as an “impossible figure,” or something uncanny. She did so while talking about the limitation of area study, post-colonialism, identity politics, and so on, and in *Death of a Discipline* (2003) says that this historical moment we are in now calls for “teleopoesis rather than istoria.” The work we are talking about now presents two different types of images of the globe. One of the large-scale canvas paintings hung from ceiling paints a brightly lit blue planet Earth in our hands, figuring a style of early nineteenth-century theosophical painting, and hence a certain harmoniousness, whereas the smaller one on the ground, parasite to the above big canvas, shows a rather wrecked Earth, whereby fungi starts growing. In a way, it feels like you let a planetary image emerge out of the negation of these two familiar images of Earth. I don't know what this third image of the planet is yet, but suggestions might come from the other canvas that pulls us between two poles, the reality of the system on the one hand, and the “cosmic” on the other, the latter of which is well materialized in the work, with pigments enticing another, non-human, perspective as mentioned above, some of the large canvases that create amorphous, abstract fields. How do you relate these imaginings of Earth, e.g. from the figurative to the abstract or materialist, and vice versa, to the idea of the planetary? I think it's also comparable to

the notion of the hyperobject.

AH: I found images showing (usually white) human hands holding the planet in their palms, where Earth is small enough to be shown in one image with hands. They are revealing. The great human hands float in space without any attachment to the planet yet. they attempt to hold the planet in place. It might also look like a way of nurturing. Often, these kinds of images can also include text like "Let's save it," etc. These "well meaning" images show very clearly the weird thinking of Western culture—like our actions and culture would be helping the planet and the ecosystems more from the outside rather than being totally part of it, surrounded by it, and convoluted by other species, etc. The large image is also painted in a different way from the other ones. Not so much in co-work with tools and materials, though—the figures are formed more by my planning and calculating and the movements by my own hands. In fact, I've been thinking (of avoiding) usage of perspective. The history of using perspective has been linked to placing the viewer (human) in the center and above the other. I think of using the image of a planet seen from space as a small, round item, for example. It's one way of culminating this urge to be able to see our surroundings as separate from us. I find it funny that even in this flat, plastic, painted surface, there is much more life included that I'm unable to see, experience, and control. I may paint a very simple image with simple meaning, but it will be filled with all sorts of microbiotic life that I have quite limited access to anyway.

BC: This ecological stance you have in your artistic work is also applied in your practice in a broader scope—let's say in your daily practice. You set a personal rule of not taking flights more than once a year (if my memory is correct). This kind of daily practice is micro-politics; how do you do it? As much as it's frustrating that micro-political practice often goes unnoticed and is undervalued, if not overtaken, by macro-political importance, its importance becomes assured from our knowledge that for any change to be sustainable, it should take part in a molecular level, as biopolitics does. So, it's empowering to learn, and witness the persistence of such practice.

AH: I actually have not flown in six years now :) My personal "rule" is to try to fly only every fifth year (or less), and not at all inside Europe or for leisure. I'm very experienced with traveling by train and boat around the world. In general, I try to work and live in a way that would be the future way of living and working. I'm more concerned with the

heating system of my studio rather than the materials actually used in the artworks, since that is where the most fossil fuels are used. I also see my ways of living as part of the thinking we have around Mustarinda. Living, thinking, and working are ways of testing and experiencing better ways. I think it is very important to try to bring different theories, technical solutions, and other practical things together. In that way, I don't see how the micro- and macro-political levels can be separate. Funnily, it seems this argument goes together nicely with the thing I've been trying to show in the work *THINGS THAT ARE MASSIVELY DISTRIBUTED IN TIME AND SPACE*. I'm interacting with humans and non-human objects all the time. I just need to try to evaluate the meaning and impacts of these interactions. Since we live in such over dependence on fossil fuels, our culture has made us behave in very certain way. To get out of this fossil fog, we must all learn new skills and be in a way "uneducated".

BC: It's a good time to ask you how you see the relation between your painting work and collective work in Mustarinda, the association run by a group of practitioners from diverse fields—art and science—concerning ecological and cultural diversity. You also co-manage a residency place which is run entirely on social energy, in a remote forest area.

AH: With Mustarinda, I feel I have wider possibilities to work with theory, science, practical solutions, workshops, etc., that can more easily be tied in with the topics that we find the most crucial and timely. Having discussions, doing practical yet experimental work, like working on the house's energy systems, or Mustarinda, affects strongly my thinking and working. It's affecting and shaping my worldviews, which no doubt are the basis of my work outside of the Mustarinda group. At the same time, I feel a certain freedom around my own practice, in which I don't need to include all the things that I find very important in my works. I can in a way be more uncertain and undefined with the painterly work. To rely less on words, to test and feel the things discussed with materials and tools.