

# Art in America

## PAPER AND POLITICS: AMY LIEN AND ENZO CAMACHO AT 47 CANAL

By [Hyunjee Nicole Kim](#), July 7, 2022



Amy Lien & Enzo Camacho, 羽化 (*wings becoming*) (still), 2022, 16 mm film, color, silent, 6 minutes 20 seconds.  
COURTESY THE ARTISTS AND 47 CANAL, NEW YORK

The titular video work 羽化 (*wings becoming*), 2022, in [Amy Lien](#) and [Enzo Camacho](#)'s recent solo presentation at [47 Canal](#) invigorated the New York gallery with the whirring of 16mm film, the heat of the projector, and the shifting light of the images in the viewing room. The short piece features a stop-motion animation of paper butterflies fluttering on a lightbox as well as a scene in which their bodies burn over a flickering flame. Lending the film's diaphanous qualities to the main gallery space, *Study for Compost Light* (2022), an overhead sculpture comprising magnifying glasses and onion-skin paper, threw amplified shadows on an expansive wall.

*Study for Compost Light*—which, in Lien's words, "almost anticipates a film"—was inspired in part by Stan Brakhage's experimental, camera-less film *Mothlight* (1963), for which Brakhage collaged insect wings, leaves, and other raw materials to create his own film stock. The moth's fellow gossamer arthropod, the butterfly, figures prominently in the artist duo's exhibition, alongside such loaded art historical symbols as skulls and fire that call up cyclical themes of

death and regeneration. These motifs emerged from their research, begun five years ago, into Filipino American Alfonso Ossorio's 1950 *Angry Christ* mural on the island of Negros, which depicts Jesus with his heart aflame in a modernist social realist style that dominated postwar Philippine painting for decades following. Lien and Camacho have written about the still active sugar plantation, run by Ossorio's family, that commissioned the mural, which sprawls across a wall in the St. Joseph the Worker Chapel. This led to the artists' **larger exploration** of the *bungkalan* (derived from the Tagalog verb "to till") land reform campaign (in which peasant farmers collectively occupy and till idle land to grow subsistence crops) and of plantation economies in the Philippines. Lien and Camacho are interested in these structures as part of the snarled networks of global capitalism.

However, the artists' investigations don't immediately reveal themselves in the works exhibited here; indeed, while the duo's past projects have been informed by intensive field research, this presentation marks a turn in their practice toward more do-it-yourself material explorations. While confined during the pandemic, the duo began using their own food waste and found detritus to make paper and wall pieces they term "tangle works," woven nests encased in birch shadowboxes.

Having previously attended papermaking workshops on research trips to Negros, Lien and Camacho made the five handmade paper works on view during the lockdown in New York. The materials lists seem to describe heaps of compost, including everything from allium skins and flower petals to mica. The laborious pulping process is evident in the bulges that appear across each irregular sheet, some of which are shaped like glowing flames, and center on the image of a skull. Painted, handmade paper butterflies rest on their surfaces.

If this background makes the works sound innocuous or devoid of political implications, the titles and components hint at the artists' deeper research interests. The title *Tiempo Muerto* (2022) brings the hierarchy of the hacienda into the gallery; translated from Spanish, "dead time" is the period between planting and harvesting when laborers are unable to work and collect wages, and so left to starve. (In recent years, scores of *bungkalan* farmers have also been subject to violent



Amy Lien and Enzo Camacho, *New Bones*, 2022, paper made from abaca, vegetable stems, bellium blossoms, onion skins, garlic skins, tulip petals, carnation petals, pepper seeds, and mica, 19 by 17 inches. PHOTO JOERG LOHSE/COURTESY THE ARTISTS AND 47 CANAL, NEW YORK

extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances for their efforts to survive on contested land.) In that work and *Decomposition* (2022), the organic matter is thickly bordered and held together by bagasse, a byproduct of sugarcane extraction that is now used for contemporary biofuels. Here, the bagasse is from Victorias Milling Company, the largest sugar refinery in the Philippines, once owned by Ossorio's family. The lively colors in these works recall the hot hues of Ossorio's mural, which was intended to elevate the status of the worker in the neo-feudalist system that determines social relations in plantation economies. Lien and Camacho thus recast their sociopolitical observations with a more considered approach to materials and processes.

The butterflies and flames in 羽化 (*wings becoming*) were filmed early in the winter of 2022 at a small unauthorized garden plot near FDR Drive maintained by local elders in Chinatown in New York. Lien stumbled across the reappropriated dead space while on a neighborhood run during the lockdown, and viewed its tending as a local instance of *bungkalan*. The related tangle works on view, *Demonic Model (1)* and *Demonic Model (2)*, both 2022, are dense clusters of personal refuse as well as materials found in the Chinatown garden: pine needles, loops of zucchini vine, and plastic twine. The shadowboxes were lined with handmade paper pulp, then brushed with soft watercolor hues, and though the tightly packed masses of synthetic and natural materials appear to float, a grid of bamboo mounts in the back securely holds the "tangles" in place.

By the time this show opened, that fertile plot had been torn up to make way for the controversial [East Side Coastal Resiliency Project](#). While they were making work about it for this exhibition, the artists were unaware that it was to be removed. The "tangle works" now serve as unintended tributes to the garden and its autonomous guardians—and likewise gently resound with the struggles and endeavors of communities, such as the *bungkalan* farmers, who continually labor toward a future outside capitalism's ceaseless extraction and destruction. Lien and Camacho symbolically register cycles of death and regeneration, celebration and mourning, undoing and becoming.