



Amy Lien & Enzo Camacho

羽化 (*wings becoming*)

April 15–May 21, 2022

Jolted in flight, a flock of fire-bodied butterflies, like the color behind eyelids, flicker across the black screen. They overwhelm the darkness as they gather, pile, and separate. As ambering whispers explode into glistening, a single butterfly rendered in its inverted form—fibrous, occupying air—pauses, allowing itself to be admired after transporting us into the waking world. Not insects, but handcrafted beings become drawings of organic matter ever-animate, the butterflies slowly congregate again in this familiar, but unrecognizable realm, the garden they occupy. So opens 羽化 (*wings becoming*), the title of Amy Lien & Enzo Camacho's film, also the title of their fourth solo exhibition at 47 Canal.

A cosmological system is presented here through 16mm film, five handmade paper drawings, a light installation made of onion skins, and “tangle works” (nests, kindling, intertwining demonic in their thick opacity). The film loops on and a ritual of fire ensues, as a small barrel lined with joss paper is lit seemingly with the touch of flesh. One by one, butterflies are fed to flame, becoming fire-bodied, then flaking into their presumed disappearance. Undying, they flit again from the film into the gallery, resting still in/on flames, somewhere between figures becoming one with and emerging from the ground.

When we are momentarily led away from the flame, it becomes evident that the earth on which this ritual takes place is a slender stretch alongside the FDR that has been turned into a community plot by rogue means. Just walking distance from the gallery, the humble plot was self-initiated and is cared for by local Chinese residents wanting to garden in their neighborhood, shifting what has been deemed deadspace by its architects into a site of folk (agri)cultural production, serving their own needs and interests. Lien & Camacho’s investment in this plot in the form of deep witnessing and fire ritual, centralizes its localness—a community addresses their specific needs, unseen and unsupported by the infrastructure they live within, and in fact undergirded by the infrastructure and its cruel management—while pointing to differing but certainly connected practices and conditions elsewhere.

The collaborative duo’s immersive and multivalent research-based practice builds study and politic into form, as their communal integration, with the Philippines at its center, crisscrosses carefully outward to address localized iterations of labor and capital under post-colonial damages. Their latest body of work illustrates direct diasporic and gestural resonances between this unlikely roadside garden and the bungkalan of Negros, a certainly distinct but not unconnected terror of the “sugar bowl of the Phillipines,” and the reclamation of autonomy exercised at these sites.

Bungkalan is a protest practice in which groups of Filipino peasants and agrarian workers correct the long broken promise of land redistribution by occupying plots of land on large plantation properties and cultivating food crops instead of cash crops like sugarcane. They do this in open secret and under the threat of disruption and violence. This form of protest stems

from the much longer folk practice of workers growing their own food in unused pockets of plantation land in order to survive the several month-long period between planting and harvesting known as tiempo muerto, or “dead time”—the only time possible under the plantation-present—during which sugarcane is left largely unattended, leaving many without work and wages. Here as elsewhere, sugarcane, ever the cash crop that changed the world over, has taken precedence over feeding the island’s people.

For Lien & Camacho, bungkalan is ‘part of an alternative history of the plantation, one that suggests links to other stories, other contexts, and one that punctures through the overwhelming sense of extinction that pervades the plantation to gesture towards an alternative future.’ From a non-European center, the land remains the earth, even under plantation logic. Operating outside of it is an effort resolute foremost in care. Bungkalan emplaces what Jamaican theorist, Dr. Sylvia Wynter, has described as a “profound peasant sense of justice... based on the needs of the people who form the community.” The FDR highway gardeners, whose plot at this very moment is at the threat of closure and may be gone by the time you read this, and the farmers of the bungkalan share common stakes in group autonomy and earthen practice on land that dispossesses them, while rendering them necessary and other at once.

The transitory state of the butterfly Lien & Camacho present and reflect emerges from its antipodal symbolic positioning. “The Butterfly Dream” of the 莊子 (*Zhuangzi*), the ancient Daoist text, presents the ‘Transformation of Things.’ In the parable, 莊周 (*Zhuang Zhou*) is both narrator and character, telling of a dream of being a butterfly, then awakening into the uncertainty of boundary between state of being: was it he who dreamt, or is it the butterfly’s dreambody he now occupies? 羽化 (*yuhua*, literally, “wings” “becoming”) is an old Chinese term meaning both “becoming a butterfly” and “dying.” Both processes and lifestates remain unfixed and loop into one another; the cocoon presupposes the butterfly’s emergence, just as dying is not yet dead; the parable echoes this fluid state.

The duo prioritize this cyclicity even at the level of material, creating paper from a mix of kitchen compost: stringy cilantro and tulip stems, leeks and onion skins, pepper seeds and banana

peels and other organic matter otherwise regarded as waste to create the butterflies, flames, calaveras, rebuilding the ground beneath them. Even the light installation, a stained glass of onion skins, washes the wall like the translucent butterfly wings of the film, echoing this collapse. Fertilizing entities, the butterflies, flames, and skulls burn into one another throughout the drawings, creating visceral layers of perspective wholly enmeshed, halfway in, halfway out. The calaveras, spirit of the ground, lie bundled in their fecund possibility, expressionless and somehow coolly laughing, surrounded by congregate winging, rooted and lifted. The butterflies of the film oscillate from photograms into moving photograph, from fire to open air, unbounded to either. The butterfly, the spirit messenger fluttering between worlds and time itself, “unfolding according to its own plan, it will henceforth walk along together with other bodies, and doing so, will re-create the world,” quoting Achille Mbembe.

From ashes, new flight.

In making these connections across the plantation-present, the duo name a ‘logic of survival that has somehow managed to take root in these dead soils,’ to use their words. Inherently a logic of life and living. As they carry us from Negros to New York, Lien & Camacho, too, becoming wings, transiting life spheres as they seek to honor life.

—S*an D. Henry-Smith, April 2022

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In loving memory of Fabrizio Fantoni (1976-2020).

Amy Lien (b. 1987, US) and **Enzo Camacho** (b. 1985, PH) are currently participating in the 2021 Asia Pacific Triennial in South Brisbane, Australia, and recently in the 2021 New Museum Triennial in New York. Their work has also been presented at the 39th EVA International Biennial in Limerick, Ireland (2021); Manifesta 13 in Marseilles, France (2020); the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art in Singapore (2019); Kunstverein Freiburg in Germany (2018); the Hessel Museum of Art at Bard College in Annadale-on-Hudson, New York (2018); the Jim Thompson Art Center in Bangkok (2017); and the UCCA Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing (2017), among others.