

*Becoming Atmosphere: Beatriz Cortez & Kang Seung Lee*. 18th Street Arts Center (Airport Campus), Santa Monica, CA, USA, 26 October 2020–5 February 2021.

In their two-person exhibition, *Becoming Atmosphere*, Los Angeles-based artists Kang Seung Lee (Korea) and Beatriz Cortez (El Salvador) commemorate the erasure of the underrepresented Other through a poetic examination of intergenerational memory and a borderless engagement with shared queer and immigrant histories. With inequality growing under the pandemic, Lee and Cortez embrace humanity to remind us that “becoming atmosphere” involves including societies of the past, present, and future—regardless of orientation or identification—for us to be together in peace, sharing our air.

The audience encounters Lee’s three-channel, colour video installation, *Garden* (2018), which memorializes several gay human rights/AIDS activists in the 18th Street Arts Center’s projection space (fig. 1). The artist connects Korean poet Joon-soo Oh with English film director, writer, and gardener Derek Jarman through time, ritual, and landscape. On screen we see Jarman’s graphite drawings on sheepskin parchment, made at his Prospect Cottage in Dungeness, England. Lee transports the drawings along with pebbles from this location as proxy for Jarman, and delivers them to Namsan and Tapgol Park, places known for gay cruising in Seoul, South Korea. In the same year he filmed the video, Lee presented Oh’s archives at One and J. Gallery in Seoul by way of introducing the poet to Jarman, juxtaposing dried leaves and pebbles from the cottage area while re-presenting himself through clay made with dirt from Tapgol Park and California. Lee overlaps these elements to intertwine the artists’ lives, illuminating the discourse on queerness to the present moment.

*Untitled (Tseng Kwong Chi)* (2019) continues this conversation across time with the late American photographers Tseng Kwong Chi and Peter Hujar. Through a series of linked graphite drawings, Lee depicts the ambiguous ambassador Tseng in his famous self-portraits as a disappearing body at global tourist sites, like an atmospheric soul (fig. 2). The images are displayed alongside Lee’s drawings of the Hudson River, which reference Hujar’s black and white Hudson River photographs, images that suggest powerful currents swirling beneath calm surfaces. Evoking place to cross space and time, the artist situates his position and his connotated queer subjectivities through the reinterpretation of specific histories and images, articulating a multiplicity of minority voices.

Lee collaborates with Cortez in remembrance of these queer artists to envision queer futures in his interactive sculpture, *The Future Perfect* (2020). Both artists asked their friends to consider what a “queer future” might look like beyond the boundaries of gender, sexuality, binary, and hegemony (fig. 3).



FIGURE 1 Kang Seung Lee, *Garden*, 2018. Three channel colour video installation, dimensions variable.

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Upon pressing a button, the audience receives a random response printed in Korean, Spanish, and English that begins, “When the future comes...”. Thus, through a magnanimous gesture, the work invites the audience to encounter words that evoke the power to build a future from divergent perspectives.

*Untitled (Julie Tolentino’s Harvey)* (2019), a drawing of a potted plant installed by the gallery entrance, also looks to the past to shape the future. The drawing references Tolentino’s *Archive in Dirt*, a cactus cultivated from a larger plant originally belonging to Harvey Milk, the first openly gay member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. The artists and gallery staff collectively care for the plant, thereby linking themselves to Milk and inheriting the knowledge, memories, and hope that he and other activists left behind. By nurturing life, the artists and workers also nurture hope; the cactus and Lee’s drawing of it represent how future generations can overcome injustice and work for equality.

Installed by the exhibition exit is Lee’s *Untitled* (2020), a text piece embroidered in Nishijin gold thread on rough hemp to resemble the Korean fibre *Sambe*, used to dress the dead. The text reads:



FIGURE 2 Kang Seung Lee, *Untitled (Tseng Kwong Chi, Los Angeles, California, 1979)*, 2019. Graphite on paper, 8 x 8 inches.

IMAGE PROVIDED BY COMMONWEALTH AND COUNCIL.

THE LITTLE BOY  
 THAT I AM  
 TAKING CARE OF  
 NEVER SPEAKS  
 HE LIKES FOR ME  
 TO HOLD HIM  
 AS MUCH AS  
 POSSIBLE

One can almost hear Lee narrating these sorrowful words, echoed in tone by the heartbreaking utterances of child migrants in US detention centers featured in Beatriz Cortez's *Tombstone* (2020), located on the adjacent wall. To illuminate these words in gold thread, to record them, amplifies the voices of

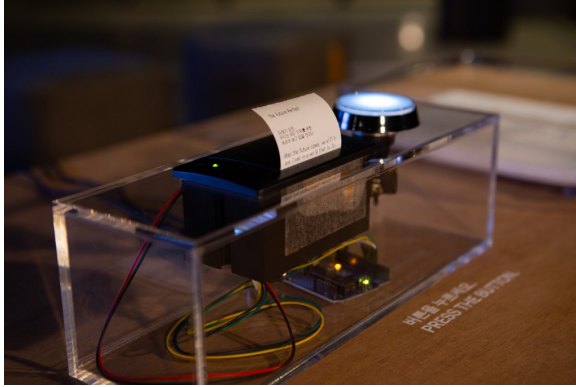


FIGURE 3 Beatriz and Kang Seung Lee, *The Future Perfect*, 2020. Mixed media, 12 x 4 x 4 inches.

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the victimized, rendering them physical and material. Indeed, these two pieces work together to reaffirm the brutal reality of the present.

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### Notes on Contributor

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is a politically driven artist-activist currently pursuing his Ph.D. in the University of California, San Diego's Art History, Theory, and Criticism/Art Practice programme. His social practice projects, installations, and performances examine violence in society and politics. He is the founder and director of Humans in North Korea (HNK), an organization that advocates for North Korean defectors in the United States and for global citizenship.