



# Project Space



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In Amber

Kyle Mowat & Lina Wu

May 27<sup>th</sup> – July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2022

## Possessions

I want to possess, and I am possessed by wanting. It is this word, possession, which I have found to be a hinge connecting the works of the two artists we find in the exhibition *In Amber*. In playing with and adapting the commodity form, Kyle Mowat draws attention to our possessions and the possession they can have over us. Lina Wu's work shows figures in our world seemingly under the influence of forces outside of it, possessed by a starry and ungovernable wind. But both these artists do more than simply critique the world — they re-enchant it.

Before he began focusing on sculpture, Kyle Mowat was working as an animator. However, drawing for hours on end began to cause him pain and he was eventually diagnosed with Fibromyalgia, a condition that prevented him from drawing in the way he was used to. As a result, he was forced to adapt his artistic practice, developing a method of sculpting in which he slowly applies material over time until the sculpture is finished, an antithesis to the grinding pace of production required in life as an artist under capitalism, the very thing which triggered his condition in the first place. As such, Mowat's practice and process is informed by disability, which can also be seen as a form of possession, the body taken over by unseen forces.

Sometimes, Mowat's sculptures resemble tools, which brings to mind questions of usefulness that are also relevant to the subject of disability. Implicit in the dominant understanding of disability is the idea that the body is useful towards one particular aim, that it is a tool geared towards a normative set of actions and ways of interacting with the world. By subverting the usefulness of the everyday objects which he sometimes adapts into his sculptures, such as a hair-comb, Mowat asks us to question our relationship with usefulness and instrumentality. Just as he was forced to adapt his practice due to disability and strenuous work conditions, Mowat adapted these objects away from their original use and into new modes of being.

Another relationship to objects that is outside of usefulness is that of devotion. Mowat's interest in idols, icons, and devotional objects stems from his family's Irish Catholic background, and in one piece he even adapts a figurine that belonged to his grandmother,

extending an angel's broken wing to cartoonish proportions. When I look at Mowat's sculptures, it often appears as if alien spirits have come to possess these everyday forms, a kind of re-enchantment of the world, to use Max Weber's famous phrase, who described the way that these animistic and magical presences were dispossessed by the forces of scientific rationalism.

Lina Wu's strange and often uncanny pencil drawings for *In Amber* also deal with possession, although in this case it is the figures themselves who appear possessed. In "Drunken Angel", powerful and primal forces are mixed together into one chaotic tableau, the viewer's eye being drawn from one focal point to another in a state of unrest. In the background, a girl sings into a microphone as a crowd cheers her on. A glowing white rectangle is in front of her, and upon further inspection it is clear that she is performing karaoke. At first glance, however, this glowing portal appears as a kind of ethereal emanation, a message from god. And isn't karaoke a form of possession, the channeling of another's spirit through one's own body and voice? Closer to the viewer, and near the centre of the composition, one figure presses another into the floor. Perhaps they are play-fighting, but there is something sinister about this part of the image — the aggressor has a smile on their face, while the other's face is obscured, which calls into question the nature of this violence. When our attention shifts to this part of the image, the crowd no longer seems to be cheering on a karaoke performance, instead becoming the encouraging witnesses of a beat-down. This tension between innocence and violence runs through many of Wu's images in *In Amber*, violent rage being another expression of possession, an unruly force that "rational" society tries to contain but which can at any moment erupt.

Another image that comes to mind when I look at "Drunk Angel" is that of Jacob wrestling the angel, a biblical story which has been represented countless times throughout the history of western art, infusing this everyday scene with a divine aura and significance. In this story, Jacob spends the night alone in the desert, where he encounters a man with whom he wrestles until daybreak. When they part ways, Jacob learns that he has in fact been wrestling not with a man at all but with God, who then blesses him and renames him Israel. The characters in Wu's drawings often seem to be unaware themselves that they may be in the presence of some greater spiritual forces. In "Chapel", two figures kiss, their faces obscured, in front of a glowing chapel door. They cannot see the door, but we can, and we have the sense that these lovers are under the influence of a force to which they are not entirely privy. They are possessed, if nothing else, by desire, and in many of Wu's works, desire seems shaded by an aura of threat, connected perhaps to this loss of control which one feels when eros has possession over us. The framing of the image is in the shape of a star, and stars have long been considered guiding forces in our lives, particularly relevant today with the prominence of astrology. In another image, "Laughing When the Lights Went Out", two figures dance in the rain. One appears to be wearing some sort of parka, perhaps the cheap disposable plastic kind, but in the context of the exhibition and Wu's work as a whole, it appears more as a religious robe of some sort, like a monk's habit. These conjunctions of the everyday and the divine find parallels in Wu's interest in the mixing of high-brow art —images like "The Roving" taking inspiration from Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*— with other forms of art typically seen as low-brow informing her drawing techniques such as Wu's preferred manga which she describes to

me as being “heavy with romance bullshit.”<sup>1</sup> This mixture is also reflected in Mowat’s work, in which everyday objects seem to be possessed and infused with spirits and otherworldly beings.

As I was leaving a rave recently, I had a flash of déjà-vu. Passing by the columns of the Dovercourt House, I suddenly felt as though I was in one of Wu’s drawings, the hyper modern dance music mixing with this setting of usually unnoticed architectural grandeur. A similar feeling struck me in the days after visiting Mowat at his home studio. I began noticing beautifully sinuous lines in bits of plastic refuse on the street, or the visceral mumbles of bubbling pink insulation bursting from a wall, everything appearing sculptural, animated. It was like the experience of reading a great book when I was an adolescent, looking up from the page to find a world that was slightly altered from when I had looked down. I came out of my engagement with Lina and Kyle’s work with my vision renewed, the world around me possessed.

-Yoyo Comay

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<sup>1</sup> In conversation with Lina Wu.