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YOLK

**Miao Xuan Liu**

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Essay by Jessica Félicité Kasiama

Chinese mythology tells us the story of Pan Gu, a primordial figure who emerged from chaos in the form of the cosmic egg. Upon realizing that he was trapped inside the egg, he swung his ax and broke the vessel open, separating yin from yang. Variants of the story say that Pan Gu soon died and fragments of his body became the earth. He gave his breath to the wind. His voice to the thunder. His eyes to the sun and the moon.

Our fragments become ~~the work~~ the earth.



Artist Miao Liu first told me about the legend of Pan Gu when we met via Zoom in late August. They are interested in the creation myth as a form, reflecting on how it “[p]oses an alternative comprehension around how worlds begin,”<sup>1</sup> especially for those that have been written into the margins of history. They continue, recalling a dream they had in which they laid an egg of their own. In their retelling of the dream, Liu emphasized the physicality and

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<sup>1</sup> Miao Liu in conversation with Jessica Kasiama

labor of the process. They liken the sensation of expelling the egg from the body to the process of defecating.

Dreams can function as mirrors; a subconscious poetry that can reveal our innermost desires and fears. This dream reflects Liu's fascination with the idea of primordial chaos, as well as speculating about the limits of the body.

During our video call, Liu turned the camera and showed me their latest work, *Yolk*. I was met with the fuzzy image of an approximately four-foot-tall sculpture of an egg made largely out of blue foam, cardboard, and joint compound. They turned the oval halves around so that I could observe the manipulated rods that make up its skeleton, holding it together. Liu has brought the cosmic egg from myth to dream to life.

Liu had considered including a figure to accompany the egg but ultimately, decided that the key symbol was the egg on its own. Even in its absence, Liu notes that the body remains represented through suggestion. I think of Pan Gu and the egg spawning from nothingness, and I contemplate the processes of invisible labor.<sup>2</sup>

I asked Liu about the physicality of the creation process: "How does *your* body feel?"

"Tired but exhilarated," they shared, recounting their experiences lugging the two halves of the sculpture from place to place, biking heavy material through the city, and summoning manual dexterity in order to engineer a form. Their awareness around nourishment – eating, sleeping, and drinking water – heightened throughout the process, making care an essential aspect of the work. "My artist body is at the center of this project."

Western belief systems often cast the body off, privileging the capabilities of the mind. To interrogate this divide, Liu turns to Daoism, an ancient Chinese religious and philosophical

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'invisible labor' is used to gesture towards processes of labor, or making, that are unseen or unrecognized.

tradition, as a source of guidance within their work. Daoism looks at the mind and the body as interdependent, challenging the impulse to arrange these parts of the self into a hierarchy. Following this more holistic approach, *Yolk* gestures towards the sacred intelligence of the body, framing it as both a knowledge system and a porous site of remembrance, refusing to position the mind as superior or separate. Their artist body continues to infuse itself into the work through ongoing acts of performance. What is unseen is as much a part of the work as what is seen.

I think about my own body and how it moves through the city. To think about the body is to think about how it breathes. To think about the city is to think about the many ongoing crises and how the breath attempts to transmute them: in silent meditation, while dancing, or in moments of attempted survival. This past summer has been a summer of compromised breath. So much hung in the air: sickness, smoke, and uncertainty.<sup>3</sup> Lingering coughs and recurring nightmares stemming from eco-anxiety and climate crisis remind me that even as the seasons shift, the body remembers it all.

I text Liu about a nightmare and they respond: “The nightmare dream space. That’s definitely one of the places where the invisible archive [of the body] emerges.”



In the spirit of strategizing other ways to live, Liu references the French philosopher Édouard Glissant who first defined the concept of the “right to opacity” (le droit à l'opacité) in his seminal text, *Poetics of Relation* (1990). Glissant presents the idea of opacity as a framework for being, especially for marginalized bodies: “We clamor for the right to opacity for everyone.”<sup>4</sup> He identified the tyrannical impulse to surveil the lives of those who are deemed inherently suspicious solely on the basis of identity. To be known can mean to be

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<sup>3</sup> A reference to recent events, including the ongoing pandemic and worsening air quality as a result of air pollution and wildfire crisis.

<sup>4</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (The University of Michigan Press, 1990), p. 194.

contained. Liu notes that “[c]omprehension can be a violent thing,”<sup>5</sup> especially when the oppressor’s objective is to only produce a superficial understanding of one’s identity. The flesh is neglected if the goal is to see through the body.

Opacity offers a strategy for preserving the preciousness of one’s own life while practicing discernment when determining where to break open, where to spill, and where to truly be oneself. In my fluctuating interpretation, it paves the way for a more holistic life when living in a body that is constantly being framed as untrustworthy, especially when considering how the voices of marginalized peoples are much too often disregarded or viewed as threatening.

Although you cannot see through the egg, Liu allows the viewer access to its contents through a process of symbolic inversion. Images produced with red oil pastel and pencil crayon are drawn onto the sculpture’s surface as if to offer glimpses of the universe within. The mundane and the mythological are patchworked in proximity, producing a geography of fragmentation that allows for both generosity and unknowability. A drawing of a hand marked with acupuncture pressure points is nestled into the long, curved neck of a swan. This juxtaposition reminds the viewer of the importance of multiplicity and of resisting the urge to reduce the body to a singular narrative or expression.



“This is the oppressor’s language / yet I need it to talk to you.” — Adrienne Rich<sup>6</sup>

Liu and I have been living and working alongside each other for years, across various iterations of our lives. It is a cherished friendship, largely shaped by our mutual desire for something outside of a language that so often feels oppressive. In writing this essay, I realize that many of our conversations have oriented around conspiring against

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<sup>5</sup> Miao Liu in conversation with Jessica Kasiama

<sup>6</sup> Adrienne Rich, *The Burning of Paper Instead of Children* (1968).

intelligibility, trying to find ways to throw off stories that have been inscribed onto our skin since birth. A mutual agreement to rewrite ourselves, or uncover the stories underneath the muck, by any means necessary.

Through *Yolk*, Liu has engaged with the loaded symbology of the egg, creating a visual language that challenges violent processes of knowability that are enacted onto politicized bodies.



As our conversation came to its end, Liu playfully speculated: What if my dream were possible? The laying of the egg? Indulging, I silently wonder what it would take to bring this labor of impossibility into existence? Specific breathing techniques? Determination? Focus? Faith? We laugh but I catch something honest in the air.

With no desired result in mind, *Yolk* asks the viewer to suspend disbelief and look to the body as a potential site for the impossible. And for diasporic bodies, similar to Liu's and my own, the notion of impossibility offers redemption: a symbolic way out of pre-determined narratives that exist solely to limit the bodies of those who do not reflect the ideal.

*Yolk* tells us a different kind of story, offering an alternative strategy for living. The egg, in its wholeness, is a sight to behold. In its grandness, I hear whispers of a nascent universe: a place in between what is real and what is imagined. A place in which other things — beautiful and terrifying things — shift from impossibility to possibility through the unification of the fragmented mind and body.

- Jessica Félicité Kasiama