

## Yeni Mao | *Innumerable Fires*

August 24 – October 19, 2024

Campeche 130, Roma Sur

**Opening: Saturday, August 24, 12 - 4 PM**

Campeche is pleased to present *Innumerable Fires*, the second solo exhibition at the gallery by artist **Yeni Mao** (b. 1971)

*Innumerable Fires* by Yeni Mao at Campeche problematizes notions of danger and safety in relation to the architectures we inhabit, be that public or private spaces. On a physical and symbolic level, the first is usually conceptualized in relation to threat and the second to protection. In contrast, Mao rearticulates the various dynamic interactions that constitute both spaces and the bodies that occupy them. The exhibition's title alludes to the material interrelations of the human (body and soul) with the mineral and natural world and can also be read in relation to the diverse forms fire (from the Latin *focus*) can take: as the center of domestic warmth, combustion when interacting with other materials, or the state of physical change that its presence implies. The latter is in fact one of the main concerns present in the artist's practice, seen as a passage from one state, concept or space to another.

All the works on show were created by way of antagonistic processes and an unexpected mixture of materials, becoming one and many things all at the same time. Sustained in a semi-figurative and semi-abstract latency they allow for a constant reconfiguration. The wood structure can be seen as a membrane –a permeable border– that unites these spaces through division, and yet also encloses one place within another place (the gallery). Mao employs this structure, the cave or first shelter –which was presented in mythology as a transitional space for transcendental experiences and access to the underground– to imply protection over the fragility of human bodies, and as an “opulent box” where all our precious objects and memories are stored. Inspired by the artist's own studio, this house keeps and displays various pieces that allude to human, animal, vegetable or mineral bodies that interact with each other through a translucent and minimal aesthetic.

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Hanging on the wall and central to the exhibition is a large sculpture that seems to be a kind of body-hive-mother wearing armor. Its central position reminds us of forms of social or spatial organization typical of the domestic or religious realms, while evoking a futuristic aesthetic by way of two recognizable materials: steel and animal leather. Although both elements tend to be thought of in terms of great firmness and resistance, for Yeni Mao these elements can also easily wear out, rust or break. In the collective imaginary both materials appear as tools that evoke a presence of control, whether due to the need for protection (armor), the illusory desire to apprehend uncertainty or, on the contrary, control as a gift in the face of trust between peers in BDSM practices (leather).

The artist's process sits at the intersection of various historical and scientific references, as well as rational and meditative states, an encounter between the industrial and the artisanal, the machine and the hand. Making different worlds converge also translates onto the collapse of time, creating a kind of future past that redeploys elements from tribal traditions and countercultures to articulate a flexible and ever-changing configuration of identities. The present cyberpunk and dystopian aesthetic comes from sci-fi films of the 80's, where said cinematographic genre produced, through speculation and science, scenarios of upcoming social decay on the verge of destruction. Unlike industry representations, Yeni Mao's works and installations pursue the creation of his own material and discursive present, far from the hegemonic narratives that tend to dominate our lives and bodies. Both his condition of cultural and territorial displacement, as well as his dispossession of heteronormativity, have forced and encouraged the artist to pursue a type of self-construction that explores his own history and current place in the world. Meaning, the artist's idea of identity and culture is not formed through nationalist impositions and the territories demarcated by the State, but rather by a collection of experiences, social interactions and decisions carried out by desire. The references to specific cultures in the Mao's practice –including narratives and events from China and Mexico, indigenous traditions, obscure queer history, and many others– appear filtered by atypical readings and mechanisms of encounter. His work then, can be read as the production of microhistories that in turn negotiate and complete the larger History.

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Culture is not merely an object, but what produces and affects said object in its collision with material and discursive reality. In this sense, it is instituted in the words of Homi Bhabha as *a space for confrontation and negotiation that allows the emergence of new zones of existence and translation between groups that strive to achieve a place of visibility and empowerment in the face of hegemonic logics of segregation and social erasure*.<sup>1</sup> For Bhabha, the present operates as a place of transit where space and time intersect to produce complex figures based on difference. *A present time "beyond", which is governed by disorientation, an incessant exploratory movement*.<sup>2</sup> The configuration of identities happens adrift, under the interaction and performativity of the members of society, their personal baggage and the global information that pressures them. This implies a major shift, through which peripheral societies are constituted by a power and a right to give meaning and value despite existing hegemonies and rampant capitalism, thus maintaining cultural differences without a scheme based on values or hierarchies.

Invention is thus presented as an alternative to the reconstruction of culture and History in Yeni Mao's works, where he introduces elements from different origins within a dialogue of controlled disruption. In the *fig 36.4- 36.7 skinwalker* pieces, rails of steel lined with snakeskin or "organisms" that lay between the industrial and the artisanal, act as tools or as a support for humans, evoking mythical and fearsome snakes, and representing entities that have the capacity to change shape at will thus awakening haptic desire and fear. The word "organism" comes from the idea of a system of living organs. In the 17th century, the separation of soul and body led to the standardization of labor as a method of production as well as to its scientific study (medicine).<sup>3</sup> As such, the "system of living organs" left the "living" aside, to turn the organism into a mechanical, autonomous entity, where rationality, productivity and utility were the standard.<sup>4</sup> In the encounter of man and nature, José Luis Barrios implies that language must yield to generate a possible dialogue that promotes a reconfiguration of the bond. The exchange then must happen "before language", in the space of articulation of the murmur or scream, where emotion dictates beyond meaning.<sup>5</sup> Art and poetry live in this category, as a language that is between the legible and the illegible. Such demarcations of the word oppose the foundational relationship of nature or animals with human beings and their possible links, as can be seen in the *skinwalker* series.

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1 Bhabha, H. (1994) *El lugar de la cultura*. Buenos Aires: Manantial. Traducción de la autora.

2 *Ibidem*

3 Federici, S. (2004). *Calibán y la bruja. Mujeres, cuerpo y acumulación originaria*. Madrid: Traficante de sueños.

4 *Ibidem*

5 Barrios, JL. (2016). *Lengua herida y crítica del presente*. Ciudad de México: Universidad Iberoamericana, Orbilibros Ediciones, Revista Fractal.

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In relation to human dynamics and sensitive apparatus, we could say that experiences of pain always evoke the tangible or rational, taking us to a place of wanting to ground ourselves. While on the contrary, moments of absolute joy bring us closer to experiences that transcend the senses, as if we escaped from our body for a moment. And yet various tribal, indigenous, and countercultures have shown us the opposite: it is possible to go beyond mere experience through pain and letting go. Finding spirituality through events where we voluntarily surrender to danger or suffering implies taking agency, and in some cases even grants the other absolute trust over our body. Among these practices we can find tattoos and body modifications that various communities have practiced for thousands of years. These actions, which occur in counter response to certain dominant discourses dictated as a desire for what is pristine and neat, provide an outlet and the possibility of transcendental experiences beyond the norm. The presence of elements that allude to these spaces of resistance are a constant in Mao's works, and in their occurrence they activate a tension between attraction and rejection.

The change or metamorphosis of bodies is also present in the works *fig 44.1 - 44.5 you and me both*, where two elements –rocks and bronze– meet through the process of melting and changing the state of matter: from solid to liquid and back again, but under radically different times and functions. The rock through geological times and its transformation as a result of rain and wind, and the bronze created via the mixing of minerals, subject to productive temporalities such as technology. For the artist, the production of these pieces operates alchemically, like an experimentation of the dialogue between chemistry, the material and the visual aspects of the elements.

Outside, behind the wooden structure, and hanging on the walls of the gallery are etchings titled *fig 43.1-43.6 black star* that depict wolves wandering like ghosts in the open field or public space. The buildings that operate as a background stage are actually the Monumento a la Revolución in Mexico City, and the minimal architectural perspective is inspired by Mies van der Rohe's collages. The superposition of these two references combines the function

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and use of State narratives through public architecture and sculpture, with van der Rohe's desire to dissolve the boundaries between interior and exterior. The other side of the domestic border implies a risk, an encounter with the unknown that entails danger. Wolves, under the human gaze, have been represented by mythologies that categorize them as strong, fast, predatory, and above all wild and fearsome. However, these animals gather in communities where they accompany and care for each other, and their violent actions always occur in terms of survival. Their descendants, dogs, are the animals closest and dearest to humans.

This ambiguity of categorization is taken as a condition in the work of Mao, where it is proposed that our relationships with others always constitutes a risk due to difference, but they also produce a coming together and the possibility of intimacy. For the artist, citing the phrase "raised by wolves" implies the magical encounter of a human being who surrenders to animal life and therefore becomes subordinate to the laws of this dominant society. Yeni Mao proposes relocating the category of home and world towards a language of the present, which is desirably contaminated and plural, thus promoting a real problematization of context.

- Laura Orozco

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## About the artist

**Yeni Mao** (b. 1971) is a Chinese-American sculptor based in Mexico City whose practice engages in issues of fragmentation through a series of assemblages and architectonic arrangements. The works imply abstracted, unraveled bodies; cyborg constructions of sculpted, fabricated, or found components. Mao evokes and examines a sense of otherness, seeing fetishization, control and deviance as the basis for his multivalent practice.

He received a BFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and subsequently trained in the construction and architectural industries of New York. Amongst numerous international exhibitions, Mao has exhibited in group exhibitions at Museo Tamayo, Museo Anahuacalli, Museo de Arte Zapopan, Dallas Contemporary, and the IX Visual Art Biennale of Nicaragua. Additionally, his work is included in the collection of the Kadist Foundation, the CC Foundation, and he is a 2021 recipient of the Pollock-Krasner grant.