

Unlife: Part II

5 January–10 February, 2024
6 Minerva Street, London

Sophie Friedman-Pappas

Jasmine Gregory

Brook Hsu

Sarah Pucci

Jennifer Shear

Martin Wong

Curated by Maren Karlson

This exhibition takes as its starting point Guercino's painting *Et in Arcadia Ego* (1618–1622), also known as *The Arcadian Shepherds*. "Arcadia" originally described a secluded, untouched part of a rural landscape and later became a term more broadly used to describe paradise. In this particular depiction of an idyllic scene, the melancholic faces of two young shepherds reveal their yearning for a pure, uncontaminated utopia. A carefully rendered skull in the foreground of the painting captures their attention, beneath it an inscription reads "ET IN ARCADIA EGO," which translates to "EVEN IN PARADISE, THERE I AM." A typical allegory for the mortality of humankind, the painting reminds the viewer that the closer we come to death, the stronger the yearning for Arcadia manifests.

If the pathological fear of aging can be understood as the fear of dying, we work hard to distance ourselves from mortality by cultivating eternal youth. Amidst the ever-presence of death, yearning for flawlessness — just as Guercino's shepherds pine after Arcadia — offers a survival strategy. Never allowing patina to accumulate on anything material or immaterial, we invent rituals to forget death, sealing our bodies off from an imagined outside to keep them pure. Maintaining the boundaries between interior and exterior in this way, similarly allows a separation between the self and other. The illusion of immortality is thus sustained by the spectacle of the individual.

Soft Opening,

Unlife is concerned with the simultaneous construction and destruction of perfection and purity by revealing the permeability between an object and its surroundings. No object, no artwork — and therefore no single idea or concept — can ever stay pure, whole or isolated from its context. By this logic, an object becomes indistinguishable from its surroundings. The works in this exhibition assemble and disassemble materials, images and thoughts out of detritus and refuse, to generate a continuum of body, machine and landscape. Painting, for example, undoes attempts to keep things clean, unsoiled, sealed and in a perfect “original” state. Rather than surrendering to the unattainable fantasy of an uncorrupted Arcadia, together, via processes of mutation and collapse, the works in *Unlife* consider how we can live with the unstable, the flawed, the ruin. How can we endure the melancholia of entropy, just as the shepherds encounter the skull in Guercino’s painting?

Main Gallery (L–R)

Brook Hsu
The Flute Player, 2023
Oil on wood
8.9 × 14 cm

Jasmine Gregory
Own Nothing and Own Nothing, 2023
Painting (puzzles, epoxy, oil and linen), hanger, plastic, palette, metal, ribbon
200 × 50 cm

Jennifer Shear
Fire Sign, 2023
Collage on paper
77.5 × 55 cm

Sarah Pucci
Untitled, 1980s
Beads, sequins, pins, foam
6 × 29 cm diameter

Sarah Pucci
Untitled, 1980s
Beads, sequins, pins, foam
12 × 24 cm diameter

Martin Wong
Untitled (Arcata Town Plaza), c. 1975
Oil on canvas
30 × 60 cm

Sophie Friedman-Pappas
Kiln Building Quilting Button 1 (top), 2023
Mixed media
41 × 33 × 10 cm

“When the ground rises to the surface, the human face decomposes in this mirror in which both determinations and the indeterminate combine in a single determination which ‘makes’ the difference... At this point, in such a mirror, faces are distorted.” — Gilles Deleuze

Let’s consider the following scenario staged by Guercino. There are two shepherds staring at a skull placed on a cippus with the words engraved, “ET IN ARCADIA EGO,” the titular text of this Italian Baroque painting that roughly translates to “ALSO IN PARADISE I AM.”

One interpretation of the scenario could be that the skull is an object of death in-itself, death as an identity of absolute being. Death independent from any observation or experience becomes death in totality, which essentially can not be known. The organic representation appears as it is perceived and simply announces the gaze of the subject. Hence, the exercise of looking becomes a mere affliction of scopophilia. In the division between essences and appearances, eternity and judgment, who can claim to be the closest to Death? To the king’s shepherd of man, to God? The claimants measure themselves in order of elective participation—height, length, character, integrity, and oath; every imaginable appraisal. They isolate the one who lays claim to everything without proper: the sophist; and then honor the one who possesses the pastoral care of men: the statesman. This is one version of Arcadia, the paradise of judgment by being in nature because nature is in being.

The second interpretation could be that this scene is a repetition of the eternal return. Negation of life—the preordained subject (shepherd) and the inexorable future (skull)—does not constitute an essence of absolute being. Nor does apophatic time—the reminiscent past (skull) and the reducible present (shepherd)—present itself as pure form. The skull is not nonlife because there is a subject of life; nor is the subject the ground in which the skull becomes the negation of life. This paradoxical entity of “with-without”, “life-nonlife” is not an exposition of negation: it is an affirmation of the spectral gaze that allows the experience of ungrounding, the simulacrum that interiorizes the conditions of its own repetitions. The skull is the sublime image of an eternally decentered circle. The specter comes to seize the disparity and dissimilitude, the catastrophic sight of multiple, asymmetrical movements: time out of joint and subjects out of body. The “I” fractured and faces distorted.

—TJ Shin

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