

Spike Island

PHILLIP LAI
RAIN / RUIN

31 January to 10 May 2026



Phillip Lai, *Untitled* (2021). Image courtesy the artist and Modern Art.

RAIN / RUIN brings together a body of sculptural commissions by Phillip Lai (b.1969, Kuala Lumpur) that continues the artist's exploration of the material world around us. Lai's sculptures combine everyday objects with his own intensive re-makings of them to create a parallel imprint of the real world.

At Spike Island, Lai envisions transfers and retentions of energy within sculptures that suggest the support of basic daily functions. These flows of energy are also reflected in Lai's processes, which often incorporate expenditures of kinetic and thermal energy, from metal spinning to bringing materials such as pewter and wax to a molten state in the casting process.

Within this interplay of forms, ideas around the materiality of time, of the proximal and the remote, and of surplus, excess and destruction are quietly held in tension. Made using varied materials such as wax, stainless steel, concrete, resin and burnt wheat, Lai's sculptures are the result of many slow, attentive processes. He isolates moments of sculptural potential within everyday objects, often by intervening into the industrial processes used to make them. These interventions effect a transformation in the object – a shift, a turn, a slippage – that erodes the logic of its material grammar and leaves you wondering what, exactly, you are looking at.

The exhibition is generously supported by the Art Fund, Henry Moore Foundation, Modern Art, Kiang Malingue and the Phillip Lai Commissioning Circle.

Breaks, Precipitates

Alex Bennett

'[...] it began to rain. What a notion it is, after all—these small shapes! I would get lost counting them. Who first thought of it? How did he describe it to the others?'¹

'a word's a precious vase to sip from, an illicit verb.'²

So, we sip. This place is spilled with space, with lacunae, with descriptions of capacity. You take it in. Your porosity absorbs the respiring empty centre of that black bag, breathing with it; the fusion or fission of wax within wax; the resinous pressures of burnt wheat, all into a circuitry of slowed physicality and particularised reception that allows you to – what – to dwell, to drift. To enter material relations as they are cast and recast in barest, basest form – a bowl, a basin, a tray – whose absence they hold within them, then offer to you.

You think of them as offerings because the liquid rhythms of their material states are so often syncopated by recesses and receptacles. Yet even the remotest dimensions are somehow regularised. You consider that modularity of folded stainless steel, studded with screens, as a tracking of interspersing temporalities. Reintroducing footage from a past work, here the materiality of time purls in the inherent transiency of its content. Segmented linearity projects recorded material of billowing vapours, its speeds behaving less for viewing than for functioning as its bracketed area defines its time. In this non-site of sheer release, anonymous and edgeless, fumes store and stream their own duration. Delicately exposed cables tenderly relay the electrical energy. Those warm, slender tethers are channelling dissolvable and dissipative pyrotechnic smokes, flowing out, asynchronised, as blinking and moving images. Trailing the air, smokes rebegin from a picked-out spark.

There: a fulsomely flashing matt screen. Pure chroma, creasing. There's a density to it, a deepening. An arrhythmic node of grammar, or, stronger, a seam that organises all else that is strayed, is smoked. A vial and a fixture. Where else does this effect transmit, with difference? There: that backdropped acoustic, blossomed out from a glitched remnant. A curl of sonic swarf, it was once internalised as a fault that glimmered in the amplitude of a low volume source from a previous work. Now, stretched and toned, it externalises a peculiar industrial drawl from its capsule up above. You feel exposed or held – you cannot tell. The metallic pulse, it gels with your awareness of dilatory alarm since it accents an elevated cage reminiscent of the structures of tipper trucks that collect the city's refuse. Less inward container than outward releaser, the cage's faulty confines can but sieve the sound, whose reverberant whirr diffuses, unbound.

Where else? The pewter that curdled by harnessing its thermal reactions. Magmatic, these lumps are inlaid with the kinetic silkiness of aluminium-spun dishes as if in adherence to some self-organising intensity. Their solidities weigh down folded tarpaulins whose provisional textures advance vulnerability while the interposed metals convene a sense of rite, request or replenishment. All this readied, lightly equipped lowness bears attributes of

portable lodgings, whose roughened care is employed with quicksilvered haste. Folded, thickened, refined, the diversely temporalised materials impress one another, expanding the tensions of time between intimacy and isolation. Such material dependencies, along with the psychic conditions they embody, probe how a place might be resituated and inhabited by an itinerant body. Sketching an alimentary schema with the restive logics of sharing and sustenance, they also focalise the grain of survival. Through tenors of giving you are reminded, too, of simply *what it takes*.

Yes, things are latently familiar here, yet not quite copy, cognate, or twin. Despite a plain facticity about certain forms, what is *there* still leverages an unsettled 'elsewhere' that is enabled by the parallels and equivalencies inherent to casting, revisiting and redescribing. It all results from careful siphoning, an exploratory process of 'diffused rigour'³ that, like the rain, is 'as precise as it is chancy'.⁴ Slicked by traces of industrial manufacture yet divested of clues as to their handmade source, the works escape certainty in favour of resuming and redistributing potential in the volumes between interior and exterior, proximity and distance, retention and release. Extracted from daily life, these energies reimpress the very concreteness of abstraction since 'to abstract' stems from the Latin verb *trahere*, meaning to draw something essential out from the totality of which it is a part. As fabulation leaks out from fact, you ask yourself: what is the real, really? You feel without a reference point but it's within this seeming deficit that exists its own dimension, that is the real.

This getting to the *heart of things* – that's the heated effect, the red shimmer, you are seeking. Something acutely experiential but whose vantage points untether by displacement, displacing things into the real. There: a brilliant metal-spun cylinder upon a woven ratan mat, the two loaded by a dune of incinerated wheat. A slag heap of cheap jewels and their forgotten settings, these charred kernels imply an ashy wastage whose lyrical extraction has borne an absolute result, an exertional ore. Something in this cindery mass summons a surplus energy that, in its defacement, releases a sacrificial quality. Defacements are revealments that make the energy in a system visible and active.⁵ And so, this wheat's despoiling reenchants us. With looseness, these materials synthesise valences of energy transfers whose activities are elaborated by the fummy expenditures of our own wonderment: How is a cavity transformed once its desirous resource is mined? Where does loss or gain gather as a result? Might these remainders bear embers of relief, of *unburden*?

Then: like that sound but in reverse – not substrate but supplement. Upon a third tarpaulin: a sequence of transparent and interlocking cylinders entrapping a core of concrete powder. Why does this pulverous essence slake your attention so? Is it secreted or is it preserved? Powder is here a prefix that bespeaks solidity as sign. Latency is centralised as a container of pure promise. Allured, you pause. Lapsed by this succession of orderly siloes, its dormant properties are transfigured into something sporal, floral: a desiderate bloom.

Residuality, then, as it is (dis)continuous with what surrounds it. It's the *kind* of contact, the consistency or the substance of that connection. How it behaves. You

dwell on these behaviours when peering into a niche that hosts a tray of tableware and comestible substances. Set alongside readymade items, the original glassware, ceramic crockery and metal cutlery are variously cast in resin and pewter, each form stroked by nuances of opacity and translucency. Obscurities and clarities are at once obvious and secretive. You learn that this display arose from a film still of a used breakfast tray put out on a doorstep. Different, now: the thin dish, the sugar cube, the knife *just so* — their substitutions of usage and decomposition assume a vague consciousness through the ambient sharpness of casting, as though the tray models, or displays, associative thinking via the expressive matters of material relations themselves. What sort of domestic scenario would depend on such a tray, anyway? To capture or to cosset? Some illicit verbs, surely. You regard how all these asymmetries and counterflows are activated by expressly expended vessels and their dregs. As if dust were a container. As if a sugar cube were steeping in rainwater. Though committed to interiority, the work leverages outwardness as a mediator, an interzone, a memorial to a passage. This disarrayed display of counter-imaged elements releases the morphological intelligence of handled objects, allowing shadow-forms to grasp at semi-permanence. In this 'semi-' is the ripple of ambivalence — it's what these vessels hold out.

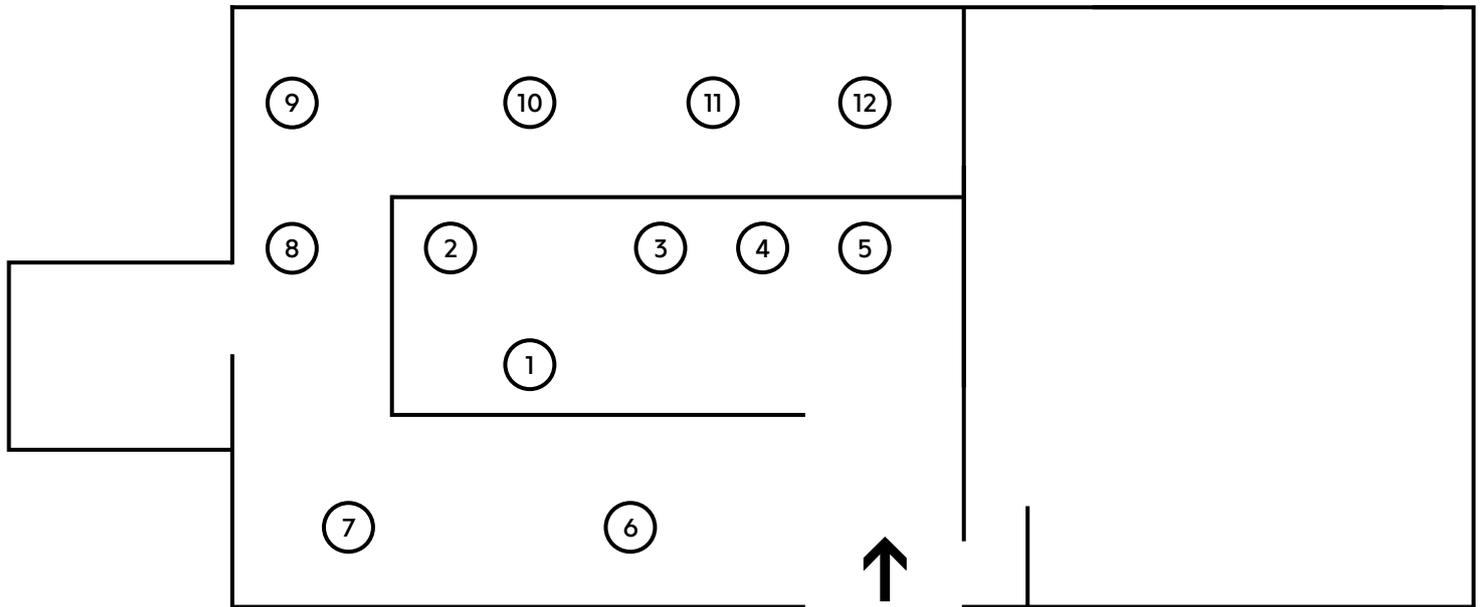
What else might these sculptures *hold out* to you? A hand, *almost*. A pair of shallow trays, cast in white concrete and wax, are contoured by pale luminance. Its shape draws out a circular inspection of some fresh quarry within you, silhouetting a need, a thirst, a wish. Circumscribing

availability, the trays lip the cusp of purpose. You find similar senses within a whorled ground comprising repeat wax castings of gold panning vessels. Fatiguing and imprinting the positive and negative space of the containers, here process has stressed the tolerances of casting itself. Your attention renews and reinscribes its carefully writ rings, they draw you in, as if your very thoughts might sift a glistened epiphany. Its roving radiality occasions a votive attendance from you as you orbit it. Arriving like a skipping stone with its dispersive physics, you take its hollows in.

The sky, it breaks. A relief, a raindrop. You don't know what yields and evaporates, what rises and falls, with the discontinuities of downpours and the infra-ordinary chaos of all their shapes and all their contacts. Still, you want to trace it, now — to enter it, to chance it.

- 1 Anne Carson, *Plainwater* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 39.
- 2 Lisa Robertson, *Magenta Soul Whip* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2009), 18.
- 3 Phillip Lai, 'Between Desire and Dependency', interview by Jacob Charles Wilson, *ArtAsiaPacific*, 6 November 2018.
- 4 Francis Ponge, 'Rain', in *Unfinished Ode to Mud*, trans. Beverley Bie Brahic (London: CB editions, 2008), 3.
- 5 Following Phillip Lai's insight, I am referencing Michael Taussig's ethnographic theory: Michael Taussig, *Defacement* (California: Stanford University Press, 1999), 2–3.

Alex Bennett is a writer and critic based in London. He is a contributing editor at *Flash Art* and his writing has been published in *Artforum*, *Mousse*, *Spike*, and *Texte zur Kunst*, among others.



All works courtesy the artist and Modern Art

1 *Untitled* (2026)
Galvanised steel and steel mesh, stainless steel, cast epoxy resin, 3D-printed nylon, electronics, sound

2 *Untitled* (2026)
Cast epoxy resin, cast pewter, found and sewn fabrics, metal spoon, sugar, wall enclosure

3 and 4 *Untitled* (2021) and *Untitled* (2021)
Cast pewter, aluminium, polypropylene fabric

5 *Untitled* (2026)
Cast epoxy resin, cement powder, polypropylene rubble sacks

6 *Untitled* (2026)
Cast pigmented concrete, cast pigmented wax

7 *Untitled* (2026)
Cast epoxy resin, dyed water, stainless steel

8 *Untitled* (2026)
Stainless steel, LCD screens, dyed and sewn fabrics, HDV transferred to HD

9 *Untitled* (2026)
Stainless steel, LCD screen, dyed fabrics

10 *RAIN / RUIN* (2026)
Cast pigmented concrete and wax, rainwater

11 *Untitled* (2026)
LCD screen, DV video transferred to digital, stainless steel

12 *Untitled* (2026)
Burnt wheat, aluminium, woven cane

EVENTS

SPOTLIGHT TOURS

Every Friday and Saturday, 3pm

RELAXED EXHIBITION HOURS

Last Sunday of each month, 12–2pm

DIASPORAS NOW

Performances by Hannan Jones, Emma Korantema and Hongxi Li
Thursday 26 February, 6–10pm

BSL EXHIBITION TOUR

Saturday 7 March, 2–3pm

BEHIND THE SCENES

Building tour and studio visits with Harriet Bowman and Max Naylor
Saturday 21 March, 11am–12.30pm

VERSIONING THE CITY

Live audio essay by Ashley Holmes
Saturday 28 March, 12–1pm

PHILLIP LAI: ARTIST TALK

Wednesday 1 April, 6–7pm

OLUKEMI LIJADU: *FEEDBACK*

Performance as part of Bristol New Music
Thursday 23 April, 7–8pm

CREATIVE WORKSHOPS

DREAM AND MAKE: MATERIAL PLAY

With Laura Phillimore
Workshop (5–11 years old and carers)
Tuesday 17 February, 10.30am–12pm

I AM A STRANGE LOOP

With Kathy Hinde
Workshop (all ages)
Saturday 21 February, 11am–1pm

I AM MAKING ART

With Plenderleith Scantlebury
Workshop (all ages)
Saturday 18 April, 11am–1pm

Visit our website for more information on the events programme

INFORMATION

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Tuesday and Sunday, 10am–4pm
Wednesday to Saturday 10am–5pm

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