

not yet

Laila Majid and Louis Blue Newby

4 February – 19 March 2022

Private view: Thursday 3 February, 6–8pm

Utopian performativity is often fuelled by the past. The past, or at least narratives of the past, enable utopian imaginings of another time and place that is not yet here but nonetheless functions as a doing for futurity, a conjuring of both future and past to critique presentness.

– Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then And There of Queer Futurity*, 2009

*Through him, I sprawl with the swamp, sopping, steaming, dragonflies stitching neon threads through the damp air surrounding me...
Beyond him, I wrestle the planet, sunk in loam to my elbows as it arches beneath me, tumbling endlessly through endless ink.*

– Alan Moore, *Swamp Thing Vol 2 #34*, 1985

San Mei Gallery is pleased to present a new body of moving image and print-based works by Laila Majid and Louis Blue Newby.

Their collaborative practice seeks to unlock a slippery and unbounded visual language, one that attempts to defy categorisation. The peripheral bodies and slimy liminal spaces present within their work signifies a rejection of the here and now and points towards the reimagined potential of the not yet.

At the core of this work is a reimagining of the comic hero Swamp Thing, here read as a vessel for envisaging new and radical modes of collectivity. The artists interest in this character stems from the notion that its physical form is rendered fluid— enmeshed within the biologically diverse space of the swamp. The exhibition explores this atypical and interconnected body as a site of potential transformation, echoing the themes of connection that are held at the core of Majid and Newby's collective practice.

The moving image work south florida sky presents two distinct yet connected sequences. The first animated sequence, produced alongside illustrator Alice Bloomfield, breathes life into a found comic frame. Whilst an homage to the hand-drawn context of the comic strip, this new rendering provides a queered unravelling of the character, and can be recognised as an act of disidentification, opening up the swamp as a queered site of interconnectivity.

The second sequence, which uses GAN generated imagery produced in collaboration with Elliot Elder, envisages a new space, one in a constant state of relation. Produced by feeding a neural network hundreds of images of the Swamp Thing, swamps and fluid organic structures such as slime moulds and fungus, the software then constructs its own images in response to this dataset.

San Mei Gallery

Both these sequences, produced initially by digital means, were then captured using a 16mm camera with the aim being to embody José Esteban Muñoz's call for utopian performativity, 'a conjuring of both future and past to critique presentness.' The interplay between the textures of these digital and analogue processes allows access to a new and unrecognisable visual language. The sound design, produced by musician Jennifer Walton, adopts a similar structure, using both digital and analogue forms of sound manipulation to create a soundscape for the visuals. The script, appearing as subtitles in the work, is formed by found phrases, reconfigured by the artists to construct a new narrative that pushes the notions of desire, collectivity and transformation. In keeping with the potentiality of the 'not yet', the video sequences exhibited here are due to become part of a larger moving image project later this year.

Through the inclusion of a variety of artists, performers and practitioners, Majid and Newby seek to construct an exciting network of queered collectivity. For the artists, the expanding legacy of an outward-reaching practice carries the conceptual interests of the work, reinforcing the sense of collectivity that the video treatments and characters attempt to portray.

The themes and processes prevalent throughout the moving image can equally be seen across the print-based work within the gallery space. Using mostly found imagery, Majid and Newby's prints open up the murky and unbounded space that exists between images. Combining the rich textures of high-quality scans with the smoothness of low-quality images mined from the internet, the work often takes on a shifting and challenging surface. A similar tension arises when considering the different peripheral spaces in which the artists find their images from fetish and erotic subcultures, cult cinema, online forums, to zoological journals, comics and speculative fiction.

This exhibition is kindly supported by the Elephant Trust and Omni Colour.

Recent solo shows in **Laila Majid and Louis Blue Newby's** collaborative practice include *healthy pink* (2020), *springseason*, London, and *hold my hand by the tail* (2019), *Transition Two*, London. Their work has also been featured in group exhibitions including *Sour Persimmons Chasm* (2019), *Ex Baldessarre*, curated by Andy Holden, and *Hydrangea* (2019), *Underground Flower*, Nakhon Ratchasima. Upcoming exhibitions include a solo presentation at *Xxijra Hii*, London in March 2022. In 2020, they were awarded funding for an ongoing video and prints project by the Elephant Trust, and recently received the Omni Colour Artists Award (2021).

Laila Majid has also recently shown work as part of group shows *Nude*, at Fotografiska in Stockholm (2021) and *THEN OUTSIDE FROM NOW INSIDE* (2018) at Chaos Magic Space in Nottingham. This year, she was selected for *Bloomberg New Contemporaries*, in which she exhibited work at Firstsite, Colchester and South London Gallery. She graduated from her MA at the Slade School of Fine Art earlier this year, and is currently studying towards an MSt in Film Aesthetics at the University of Oxford.

Louis Blue Newby has also exhibited video work in the Hastings Coastal Currents Festival (2018), selected by Becky Beasley, as well as exhibiting at Lewisham Art House where he was shortlisted for their Graduate Studio Award in 2018. In 2019 he was selected for *Bloomberg New Contemporaries*, where he exhibited at Leeds Art Gallery and South London Gallery. Last year he exhibited as part of the *Shape Open 2021: All Bound Together*. He is currently in the second year of his MA at the Slade School of Fine Art.

San Mei Gallery is an independent space for contemporary art in South London, committed to research-led, educational and collaborative exchanges. Operating with an artist-led approach, we support artists and curators to experiment with new ideas.

San Mei Gallery

39a Loughborough Road, London, SW9 7TB

sanmeigallery.co.uk @sanmeigallery info@sanmeigallery.co.uk