

New York Exhibition

THEATER OF ENERGIES

Curated by gaoyuan

June 7 – August 24, 2024



Nicolas Baier, *Saut*, 2022, Ed. 2/3, Inkjet print 42 1/8 x 63 in (107 x 160cm)

Arsenal Contemporary is pleased to present the summer group exhibition *Theater of Energies*, an experimental mise-en-scène exploring the manifestation and interanimation of energy in space. Curated by gaoyuan, the exhibition features over thirty recent sculptures, paintings, photographs, videos, and site-specific installations by ten artists of diverse backgrounds. The exhibition invites the visitor on an immersive journey of poetic encounters that offers glimpses of the energetic flow animated by art. The exhibition unfolds in three Acts—Streams, Obsessions, Continuums—each corresponding to energetic states of equilibrium, fixity, and release. In each Act, the focus is on the scene of impact and exchange of energies, liberating art from representation and interpretation to embrace the poetic resonance of the unknown.

Why Energy?

The idea of the vital energy that permeates appearances and actions in this world has gained various transcultural iterations. In the Chinese philosophical tradition of the *qi*, for example, it finds a particularly strong manifestation. Conceived as “dragon’s breath,” *qi* is the vital force that makes up the cosmos and is crucially linked to the well-being of all things under heaven. Understanding the work of this vital energy leads to further awakening to the Dao, or the Way, the One, the Divine, the Order, the Supreme Cause...choose your metaphor. These realms can be tapped into by using certain apparatuses or mediations. What we call contemporary art, with its infinite arsenal of materials and techniques, has the potential to serve as a conduit toward further cosmic revelations of The Way.

A Letting-Go

Echoing French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, the theater of energy is an apparatus of coexistent actions, a constellation of flickering intensities in transition. The premise of the show is to abandon the idea of artworks as representations within assigned interpretative frameworks, or coded systems of significance. Instead, the artistic mise-en-scène is conceived as a fluid field of experiences and possibilities. The artworks “put on stage” give rise to various forms of energy that transcend immediate sensory responses, bringing forth a mediated environment that foregrounds atmosphere and transference.

A Proposition

Instead of an argument, the show is a proposition, a test site for alternatives to the tyranny of representation. Two ideas are essential. The first is the notion of poiesis, which points towards a creative re-constitution of relations through various techné in a seductive revelation. Secondly, the idea of the milieu, surveyed by philosopher Georges Canguilhem, indicates a state of embodied becoming and a field of epistemological fluidity. Based on these notions, this exhibition calls for a reimagination of the exhibition space as a mediated ecology of

energy, an instance of spatial poetry, instead of the conventional essayistic and taxonomic format. Departing from Michael Fried's derogatory sense of theatricality, the *Theater of Energies* celebrates the shared spacetime continuum by highlighting the open energetic exchanges among artworks and visitors, while proposing that the medium of art may well be, energy. This show is one small step towards that vision.

An Experience ✨

The show traces an itinerary of energy in three milieux, each with a distinct phenomenological configuration.

Act I, Streams, explores the energetic flow and fluidity of matter in equilibrium. In this monochromatic space, streams of energy manifest in a mediated ecology of metal, wood, water, fire, and earth. An ode to the latent poetics of the flow.

Act II, Obsessions, zooms in on what happens when the energetic flow becomes fixated, creating great intensities. Here, colors pulsate and light breathes into exuberant silhouettes. In the gore and glory, tension and pleasure intertwine on sensual surfaces and within systems of effervescence and evanescence.

Act III, Continuums, concludes the journey with alternative imaginaries of worldbuilding, where energy matriculates, morphs, and mutates. It takes you through a tunnel to reach the final cave which, rather than enclose, opens up to alternative possibilities.

The exhibition brings together works by **Nicolas Baier** (Montreal, b. 1967), **Bingyi** (Beijing, b. 1972), **Michelle Bui** (Montreal, b. 1987), **Patrick Coutu** (Montreal, b. 1975), **Cui Fei** (New York, b. 1970), **Nicolas Lachance** (Montreal, b. 1981), **Amy Hui Li** (London, b. 1997), **Leah Ying Lin** (New York, b. 1994), **Motohiro Takeda** (New York, b. 1982), **Julian Zehnder** (New York, b. 1995).

The opening night will be marked by an immersive performance by **Leah Ying Lin** and **Kennie Zhou** with original live music by **MIZU**. It will also feature a phygital séance by **Kevin Heisner**, *Spukhafte Fernwirkungen* ("spooky actions at a distance"), joining quantum entanglement with contemporary psychedelia.

The exhibition is complemented by a **special zine** *3 A.M. Provocations: In Lieu of A Curatorial Statement*, which provides a more intimate narrative of the exhibition's genesis in the form of a mindrift.

The space will undergo **olfactory activation** on occasion with scents designed especially for the exhibition.

Arsenal Contemporary is a private art center and cultural initiative founded by patrons Pierre and Anne-Marie Trahan. Opened in 2011 in Montreal, it has since expanded to Toronto (2013) and New York (2017). This project directly reflects the unique character of Arsenal Contemporary, an exhibition space that transcends traditional institutional categories to support local and international talent, with an emphasis on Canadian artists, across various stages of their careers.

gaoyuan 高媛 (b. Beijing) is a curator based in New York and Canada. She holds an MA in Modern and Contemporary Art: Critical and Curatorial Studies from Columbia University and an Hons. BA in History of Art and Cinema Studies (High Distinction) from the University of Toronto. She was a University of Toronto International Scholar with a full scholarship, and the recipient of the Casa Muraro Summer Fellowship in Venice, Mary Coyne Rowell Jackman Graduate Scholarship, Columbia MODA Thesis Award, Moriyama Gold Medal, Scholar-in-Residence Award at Jackman Humanities Institute, Lawrence and Sharon Ho International Scholarship, and President's Scholar of Excellence. She was on the curatorial teams of Guggenheim Abu Dhabi and M Woods Museums Beijing, and was a panelist at the 2022 Harvard East Asia Society Conference.

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