

2018—, a single building towers over the landscape like a silent sentinel. Evocative of granaries, barns, or even wartime bunkers fallen into disuse, these structures, presented from low-angle views, are eerie, almost ominous. The artist, who draws parallels between them and Foucault's panopticon, accentuates their character as mechanisms of surveillance by drawing upon his earlier experience as an architectural draftsman.

But it was above all his deft handling of chiaroscuro and a somber palette that helped convey a mood of alienation and dystopia. In *Untitled*, 2019, a building is theatrically lit from below with blue rays of light, which lend the structure an otherworldly air. In *Poet Unknown 2*, 2019, an incandescent glow emanates from a security cabin as fairy lights twinkle nearby in a dark canopy of trees. A consummate colorist, Sujith often applies sixteen to eighteen washes of watercolor in a process of application and erasure. The first of these layers is invariably rusty red, and he works out areas of illumination well in advance to intensify their luminescence. Recognizing the immediacy and quicksilver nature of watercolors, he works with speed, emphasizing that one needs to “have a cat's reflexes” and “to keep listening to the surface.”

Caravaggio's dramatic use of lighting has been an inspiration for many of Sujith's works; one of the “Prelude” works on view here, rendered in swaths of inky blue and darkish red, recalled Mark Rothko. In the large-scale watercolor *Se(a)e*, 2019, dark-blue waters are juxtaposed against a bright-red sky with a crescent moon and a smattering of glowing stars. In another, also *Se(a)e*, 2019, shades of blue dominate both the moonlit waters and the firmament, while a band of crimson running across the Arches paper turns the moon a shade of luminescent red. But it was *Seer-Seen*, 2019, the inspiration for the show's title, that forcefully brought home the catastrophic times we live in. Drenched in a pomegranate red, its denuded rocky landscape might be the surface of Mars were it not for the shrubs that dot it. But the scene is equally evocative of the red haze created by bushfires that ravaged so much of Australia's forest cover this past January. Sujith's works suggest that the apocalypse is now.

—Meera Menezes

HONG KONG

Lo Lai Lai Natalie

TOMORROW MAYBE

“Stories usually end tragically,” according to the narrator of Lo Lai Lai Natalie's ten-minute video *Cold Fire*, 2019–20. A majestic stream-of-consciousness disquisition on the subject of fermentation, the piece moves through stories about the cartoon protagonists in airplane-safety instruction manuals to shots of hands kneading sticky bread dough. We look down onto an expanse of fluffy white clouds, as if viewing them from the heavens—or from a plane window. Tranquil footage of glassware used in the fermentation process transitions to a scene of black-shirted protesters shining their cell-phone lights into the night: one of the many recent mass demonstrations in Hong Kong that mobilized as many as two million people. In Lo's exhibition “Give no words but mum,” *Cold Fire* was shown with jars of decorative (and largely inedible) fermenting beetroot, kimchi, sauerkraut, and other foodstuffs stocked in an illuminated mini wine fridge and placed atop a bespoke curved plinth painted two shades of blue.

A photographic print of a book open to a Chinese translation of Haruki Murakami's short story “TV People” (1990) greeted visitors at the entrance to the exhibition. To its right was a makeshift living room: A few chairs scattered at random, an assortment of dying plants, and a multiprojection installation all re-create the banal setting for the familiar act of flipping through channels. *Slow-so TV III: Give no*



words but mum, 2020, featured a main program with three secondary works that viewers could access by touching pieces of tinfoil folded around the leaves of potted plants wired to electronic breadboards. The main program, on a loop, showed romantic pastoral scenes shot in the New Territories, forgotten farmland distinct from the iconic Hong Kong skyline. In *Weather girl II*—by far the strongest of the three supplementary works in *Slow-so TV III*—a handheld camera kept close to the ground follows a long mass of white netting of the type used to cover crops. Cornstalks waver in the wind near sunset. Water from a hose sprays against the bright-blue sky. A Cantonese voice-over gives a weather report and instructs you to put your ear to the ground: “Everything is under investigation.” Such forensics were likewise applied in another of the inserted programs, *Like a stone, Vain Hope*, in which potted plants filmed in front of a black backdrop are interrogated by an off-screen speaker and informed of their legal rights before having their identities questioned and their alibis dissected.

In 2009 and 2010, Lo was involved with the anti-Hong Kong Express Rail Link (Anti-XRL) movement. Anti-XRL was ultimately unsuccessful; the railway began construction in 2010 and commenced operations in 2018. Disenchanted after the movement's failure, Lo and her friends turned to local farming as a way to seize control of the means of production. Lo came to realize that farming was hard, requiring a different way of living than what she was used to. Her engagement with local agriculture continues now with Sangwoodgoon, a farming project in Yuen Long district that includes a children's program. Forged in accordance with activist principles, the undertaking has the express purpose of showing that “organic farming is critical to social movements and overthrowing mediocre government.”

In *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (2013), philosopher Michael Marder acknowledges that the pursuit of an equal relationship with plants eventually runs into the problem of voice. Likewise, Lo's struggle to find agency in her plants is rooted in the larger problem of the articulation of agency itself. Many of the works feel still in process. In *Talking Plant*, 2019, Lo asks: Can I remain silent, like you? In this research-based work, Lo assembles, among other footage, videos of musicians playing music to their plants and of a woman teaching her cactus Japanese. Lo seems to propose that talking to a plant is enough; one need not ask it to speak. In meditating on vegetation and metaphor, the works oscillate between metaphor and performing the thing itself. The real work exists outside the exhibition space, in a timeline impossible to reproduce in a sunless chamber that would yield the same weather report day after day.

—Hera Chan

Lo Lai Lai Natalie, *Talking Plant*, 2019, HD video, color, sound, 3 minutes 23 seconds.