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“Phillip Lai’s Materials Keep the Score”

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Phillip Lai’s Materials Keep the Score

At Spike Island in Bristol, the artist’s meticulous works are neither copies nor, despite the odd found object, simple readymades



BY AMIE CORRY IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS | 05 FEB 26



With ‘RAIN / RUIN’, a large exhibition of predominantly new work, Phillip Lai makes clear that his interest in the singularity of objects does not preclude a study of enmeshment.

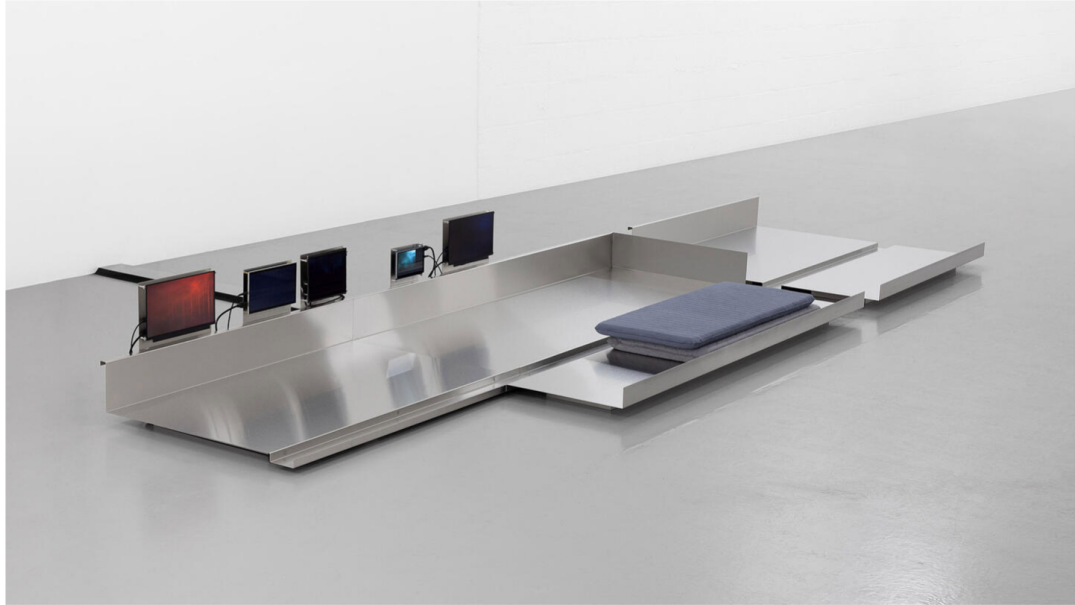
Spike Island’s soaring central gallery is anchored by two sculptures: a tea tray bearing the remnants of a meal – coffee cup, milk, sugar, jelly – hermetically sealed within the gallery wall (all works *Untitled*, 2026, unless stated); and a mesh cage suspended high above the head, containing what appears to be an insidious little surveillance device. From somewhere in or around the cage, an insistent, flickering alarm sounds at prolonged intervals. The noise penetrates the U-shaped perimeter gallery, which hosts more sculptures, typically floor-based and organized along horizontal planes.



Phillip Lai, 'RAIN / RUIN', 2026, installation view. Courtesy: © the artist and Modern Art

Each element is exactly placed, but there are nods to the absurd, and to failure. Lai picks over previous works, for example including oblique footage of pyrotechnics set off for a 2009 video work, *Introduction*. The footage – occasional bursts of smoke and light, and plenty of nothing – is shown across tiny screens extracted from their cases, drowning any trace of bombast. Lai's own body, necessary to trigger each action, is redacted. A test film for another piece, which hasn't made it into the exhibition, shows the inflation and deflation of a black bin bag via a plastic tube. Here, the monitor is framed by a metal panel about the size of a torso.

In fact, the body is everywhere, if nowhere, in 'RAIN / RUIN'. It is summoned by the abandoned tea tray, the surveillance device and the breath inflating the bin bag. Elsewhere, its actions are implied in piles of harvested, then incinerated, wheat, and in hand-spun aluminium platters, reliant on human weight for their perfect forms, although indistinguishable from their mass-produced siblings (*Untitled*, 2021).



Phillip Lai, *Untitled*, 2026, stainless steel, LCD screens, dyed and sewn fabrics, HDV transferred to HD, 42 × 124 × 45 cm. Courtesy: © the artist and Modern Art

Just as the body is both implicated and estranged, so too are the objects galvanized by proximity and distance. They do not imagine themselves as self-sufficient or autonomous. They aren't quite copies and, despite the odd found material, neither are they readymades. Time, energy, weight, history, patience, trial, error and change are all parts of this process. The conical recesses in a floor-based wax sculpture are informed by gold panning trays. Gold panning is an ancient technique, reliant on the simple fact that high-density objects sink in water. The trays speak – as do many of Lai's works – to process, but also to labour practices, alchemical magic and transformation. Similarly to the sugar cubes hand-moulded by Lai for the tea tray scene, ideas of labour are circled attentively, acknowledged to be central to every aspect of life, without becoming a more dogmatic 'theme'. Instead, we have complex, relational webs.

Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) comes to mind. Bodies are 'shaped by contact with objects', she writes: 'What gets near is [...] shaped by what bodies do, which in turn affects what bodies can do.' Lai's sculptures invite you to bend and crouch, to peer behind and above. There are literal attempts to breach material distance, as in a work combining wax and concrete, which results in two pale platters. It is a quietly beautiful offering, the soft wax gamely playing at simulating the denser material's properties.



Phillip Lai, *Untitled* (detail), 2026, cast epoxy resin, cast pewter, found and sewn fabrics, metal spoon, sugar, inset wall enclosure, 35 × 76 × 50 cm.
 Courtesy: © the artist and Modern Art

Throughout 'RAIN / RUIN', explicit messaging is withheld, while the alarm ensures the surveillance device retains its grip. We exist, Lai reminds us, in an ultra-observed, technocratic world that conceals its mechanics yet insists on disclosure. Retracing my steps towards the sonic event at the exhibition's centre, I find myself subsumed in the shock of the sound, a body caught between the surveillance device and the tea tray, one freighted with menace, the other with melancholy. It is one of the more startling, affective encounters with art I've had in some time.

Phillip Lai's 'RAIN / RUIN' is at Spike Island, Bristol, until 10 May

Phillip Lai, Untitled, 2026, cast epoxy resin, cast pewter, found and sewn fabrics, metal spoon, sugar, inset wall enclosure, 35 × 76 × 50 cm. Courtesy: © the artist and Modern Art