

10 Apr 2026

Sculpture Magazine

“Phillip Lai”

Link: <https://sculpturemagazine.art/phillip-lai/>



Phillip Lai, *Untitled*, 2026. Cast epoxy resin, cast pewter, found and sewn fabrics, metal spoon, sugar, and inset wall enclosure, 34.5 x 75.5 x 50 cm. Photo: Rob Harris, Courtesy the artist and Modern Art

Phillip Lai

April 10, 2026 by Ina Cole

Bristol, U.K.

Spike Island

“Rain/Ruin,” an expansive presentation of Phillip Lai’s work (on view through May 10, 2026), extends his exploration of the physical world and the objects residing within it. Lai combines everyday things with fabricated remakings of them—in wax, steel, pewter, concrete, resin, and aluminum—to create a parallel imprint of reality. Materially rich, yet visually austere, the sculptures are situated at floor level, only just perceptible to the viewer. Sparseness is used as a strategy, and the exhibition unfolds with deliberate restraint. Entering Spike Island, one is struck less by what is present than what is not. It is as if an evacuation has occurred, initiating an atmosphere of bone-chilling impenetrability.

Lai’s quotidian forms—bowls, basins, trays—signify sustenance and care but are emptied of any metaphorical intent. Formally, his low-lying vessels cross-reference one another. Precise and mute, they insist on their own opacity, inhabiting a space somewhere between recognition and dislocation. All were created in 2026, except two cast pewter and aluminum sculptures from 2021, laid out on polypropylene fabric, like remnants of an archaeological dig. In *Rain/Ruin* (2026)—made of cast pigmented concrete and wax, with rainwater—the negotiation between states of preservation and erosion, or containment

and release, is most apparent. This work (the only one with a title) offers one of the few explicit cues in the show; it holds those states in suspension, reinforcing the exhibition's broader condition of deferral.

Individual sculptures are widely spaced, often isolated, sometimes receding into the architecture itself, such as a tray of tableware and consumables set into an alcove. This ensemble glows amid its enclosure; it is a casual shrine to human need and daily existence, in the same way that a work made of burnt wheat alludes to human survival. Wheat tethers Lai's practice to elemental processes beyond industrial fabrication. As an organic material, it often carries a symbolic charge, indicating nourishment, labor, and ritual. Here, however, it becomes less of a gesture than a trace, the residue of a previous happening. Its presentation is so pared back that any association remains speculative. The work neither confirms nor denies symbolic intent, preferring to suspend meaning altogether.

In the central gallery, a wall-mounted mesh cage—redolent of urban monitoring infrastructure and signaling equipment—looms from high on the wall. Large enough to house human occupants, it emits a monotonous, inescapable electronic hum that pervades Spike Island's spaces, as if a kind of torture chamber were summoning its victims. Elsewhere, multiple LCD screens integrated into sculptural contexts produce flickers of red and blue smoke, while a pneumatic black bag breathes like a disemboweled lung on an adjacent screen. Lai's screens and cage allude to systems of control, display, and communication but never resolve into readable messages, rendering the viewer's understanding of them obsolete.

In Lai's practice, conceptual rigor actively suppresses affect, in that opacity, neutrality, and resistance to interpretation are his core strategies. By stripping away the usual routes through which feeling enters sculpture, a cool, almost administrative materiality remains. The exhibition does not offer a narrative arc, climactic encounter, or interpretive release. Instead, it constructs a landscape of controlled invisibility, a space where meaning is not produced but withheld. Lai's sculptures resist being seen as much as they resist being understood.

What ties this heterogeneous assembly together is the artist's attention to process and transformation. Variations in casting, material density, and surface treatment underscore an ongoing exploration into how materials behave under specific conditions. Lai's cast epoxy, pewter, and concrete forms function as conceptual placeholders. The object is what it is, and nothing more is volunteered. In a sense, "Rain/Ruin" is an encounter with absence itself.