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(conversation)
Phillip Lai

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I am early to visit the sculptor Phillip Lai at his studio in Essex, just outside of London. It's hidden somewhere behind the Royal Opera House's production workshop, so I steal a partial view. Huge illusion-making is in progress; a six-foot tall fibreglass dome is elevated off the ground on stilts, one half of a spherical capsule, a colossal eyeball in the works. I round a corner and find some opera house production assistants doing yoga in the carpark, smoothly shifting into downward dog as I walk past. Real life is in a *mode* today: strange procedures are in force. In Lai's studio too.

Lai's assemblages are often bewildering and comprise a hard-to-parse materiality, it makes one want to idle in their company. It is their gift, slowed time. Lai's first major UK institutional show, *RAIN/RUIN*, is currently on view at Spike Island in Bristol. It happens to be the first exhibition he's delivered from this studio. I wanted to speak to Lai after seeing *RAIN/RUIN*, perhaps to prolong this moment of bewilderment, to render it more dimensional.

Hugo Hagger

Phillip Lai: When I start on an idea, I'll just open a folder.

Around the edge of Phillip's studio are work-stations. I can see evidence of bygone material processes: layered MDF off-cuts, sections of loose fabric, and folded stainless-steel panels. The finished work at the centre of these mysterious processes is elsewhere. I see the multi-coloured folders that Lai is talking about everywhere in his studio, mostly stacked in clear storage boxes above his desk. Each folder represents an artwork, he tells me, either extant or not yet made. Ideas and data are freely shared between the folders, between works. Lai's process is by no means paratactic.

PL: As I'm working on things. I get kind of quite a lot of crossover or, you know, sometimes things cycle out of my interest or they get confirmed by another idea – you realise, in a way, you're making the same work. So there's a sort of open kind of constellation of things.

Using casting processes and curing materials like pewter, wax, and resin, Lai re-makes discrete or everyday objects like tubs, machine parts, or light fittings – objects he deems notionally underrepresented. He situates these cast objects in sophisticated relationships with other entities; un-fixed volumes of expended food matter, interloping found objects, and the exhibition space itself.

Estranged from their use-function and contingent on an entirely novel, unknown set of ontological rules, he turns these objects of dailiness fugitive and weird. It is as if his artworks belong to a second world of signification – nearly, but not quite calibrated to ours.

PL: I often work from images.

Lai opens a shallow cardboard box, and begins flipping through low-res, A4 image printouts; an interior climbing wall, a metal cash register tray, vending machines, a close-up of a stretcher in a man's ear, a still from a Pasolini film. We stop on an image of a mini-van.

PL: I took this in Armenia. They've got this form of public transport called a *Masbrutka*. You can get, like, eight to ten people in the back and what they do is they open the door, but they won't stop completely, so you sort of get into a moving vehicle.

I think I'm drawn to images that seem operational in some way, the materials in them are usually functioning. I think that broadly speaks to why I'm interested in objects – there's an aspirational thing to do with objects and their expectant function; that they can perform a function, that they can serve well, serve us well. It's quite well known in ideas around the commodity, this desirous displacement into the material object. In some of the early talks I used to do, I spoke about Alexander Rodchenko, the Russian Constructivist. I think his quote is something like *seeing objects as comrades*. I was thinking of objects not as providing a service, but like a –

HH: Like a fellowship.

PL: Yeah. Right.



Phillip Lai, *Untitled*, 2026. Cast epoxy resin, cast pewter, found and sewn fabrics, metal spoon, sugar, wall enclosure. Installation view, *RAIN/RUIN*, Spike Island, Bristol. Photo by Rob Harris.

HH: Perhaps we should talk about the tray work that's on show at Spike Island? It's a moment of real connotative difference in the show – it is more immediately attributable to a source image.

At first glance, *Untitled* (2026) is a straightforward reconstruction of a used hotel breakfast tray set into an illuminated wall enclosure. However, Lai's *Untitled* work becomes extreme in the materials list. The glassware, chinaware, milk, jelly, and the breakfast tray itself are all made, it turns out, of cast epoxy resin. The knife is cast pewter, and the sugar cubes, the curator discloses to me, Lai has formed by hand, out of sugar. These studio-made facsimiles interact with ready-made objects; a metal spoon, and found fabric napkins. It is a complex material grammar that slips in and out of credibility.

PL: I've been mulling over that work for probably a couple of years. I had the source image for a long time. There's a particular configuration of that where the tray refers to an interior, which is the domestic interior. Something to do with the serving architecture suggests being safe and secure. But the reference image actually has this tray architecture in an exterior location. Because it's residual, it exists after consumption – it's exited the secure space. I started to think about the nature of the secure space as more of a sealed space, hence the decision to seal it in the wall. I wanted it to still suggest some – maybe it's an overstated word – some sort of incarceration. You know, it is imprisoned. And that is also a kind of solace, potentially.

HH: I wonder if it's worth bringing up another illuminated annexe work in conjunction with this one. An untitled work from 2009. It's a kind of restaging of the items you'd seen in a truck bed, set similarly into the wall, though this work involved mostly found objects.

PL: This older work has the sort of emptying, evacuative aspect that is present in a lot of my other works. It's this idea of the space of nothing, you know. I can somewhat see it in relation to the tray work because the tray work is a kind of synthetic construction, or reconstruction – and in that sense, it's kind of *empty* of its origin.

HH: The behaviour or character of certain materials in these works act as analogues for social forces or psychological conditions. I was wondering if you'd talk a bit about transparency.

PL: When I was making the tray work, there were options for it that would be more emphatically to do with transparency. I was thinking about blariness. Cast epoxy resin doesn't come out fully transparent, it's a process of polishing it to a degree where you can see through it. You'd always have to put some elbow grease into it. That includes the tumblers, all the 'glass' things that were originally glassware in the tray work. They'd have this sort of bleary quality, which I guess is metaphorical, but I do associate it with a slightly groggy state, or like a slightly delirious state, actually.

There's also the idea that you might be able to see through several layers of glass, to see the internal workings of an item – there's a sort of decorative glamour to that, you know, it's almost like a shiny surface. So, there is also something to do with its seduction. And the transparent thing may show you everything, but it's not really showing you what *it* is.

HH: It's tempting invisibility.

PL: Yeah. When I'm trying to make objects, I'm often drawing cross-sections. When making moulds, I'm drawing cross-sections to understand how it's going to layer up. There's the idea of the schematic as being a way to kind of control a form, to have mastery over the item with several hidden parts. So the idea of the schematic is tangled up in there too.

HH: Can I ask about the sugar cubes on the tray? They are actual sugar you made into cubes?

PL: I think for me they are, in part, extracted from the narrative, perhaps more so than the other objects because they suggest the pleasure of the activity – of consuming from that system, the hotel breakfast tray.

HH: I was thinking about them in terms of the idea of ruin. Compared with the other objects which are cast resin or pewter, they are perhaps a more suspenseful element in that sculpture, because they threaten to more readily degrade, or perish.

PL: I think of the sugar cube as kind of medium stable. I still see it as a sort of constituted material, you know; like the pewter knife that's next to it, it is a constituted alloy that's been cast. If things get hot enough, that will become a liquid. It will change state. I mostly see the sugar-cube as different because it is more orientated towards being consumed. It is on the edge of being consumed.

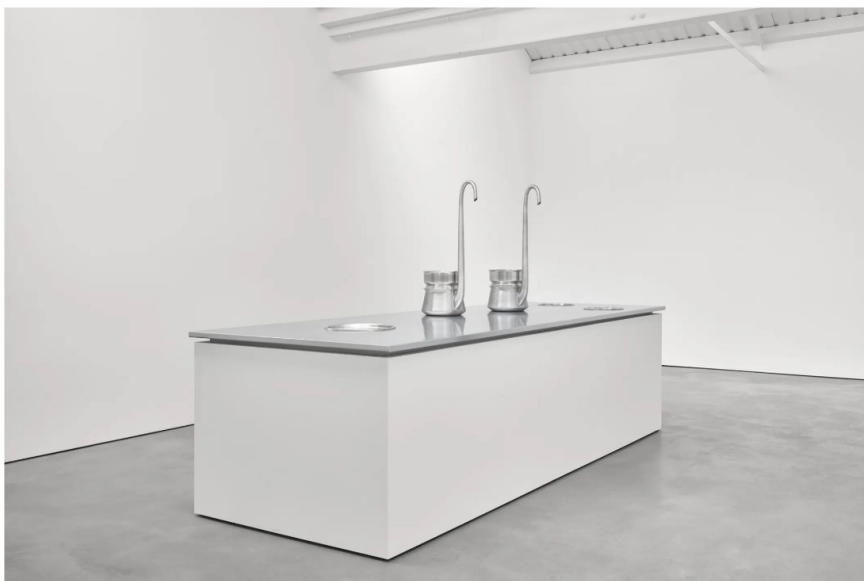


Phillip Lai, *RAIN/RUIN*, 2026. Installation view, Spike Island, Bristol. Photo by Rob Harris.

HH: This idea of consumption makes me think about the vessels in your work. I feel there is a reciprocity in the empty receptacles that populate the sculptures; perhaps it's also linked to the reversibility in the transparent threshold. I'm thinking about your untitled work, involving resin basins from 2017, and the new untitled work in *RAIN/RUIN* with the clear, nested container on the tarp. I wonder what, if anything, you are inviting in that encounter with the open, empty vessel?

PL: It's been a while since I've thought about how a viewer might be a user in this kind of reciprocal relationship you are speaking of. We tried the breakfast tray work at various heights and I put it very low down because I didn't want it to be at a height where you could stand in front of it and thereby feel like you might be in a position to use it. But your question brings to mind a work from 2016, which is kind of quite a flamboyant work.

Lai opens his 2022 monograph onto an image of the sculpture, *Guest Loves Host in Way Like No Other* (2016).



Phillip Lai, *Guest loves host in a way like no other*, 2016. Aluminium,
87.5 × 330 × 120 cm.

I'm thinking about the directionality of this object. As a whole unit there's a kind of lack of transparency: it's unclear where a flowing out from this object would go, nor does it show you where the flow in or a supply might come from. It's called *Guest Love's Host in a Way like No Other*, and there's a lot of emphasis on that idea of reciprocity or hospitality. Part of the work is also very loosely based on a tobacco pipe.

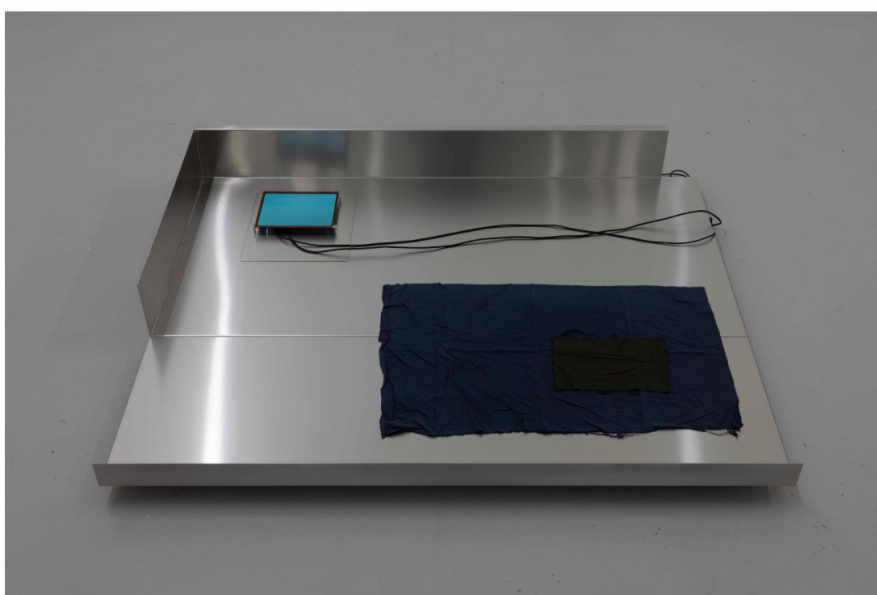
Apparently one of the etymologies of spout is 'spit', which must have something to do with the shape of your mouth when you say that word. It's like you almost spit when you say it. So, there's a sort of play on whether or not this is a confrontational invitation. Like, what is this unyielding, but seductive machine? It is kind of ludicrous, but also maybe threatening. I haven't fully absorbed what these moments are.

A lot of the objects in my work do generally imitate objects that we don't pay much attention to; you know, quite banal objects, even though in material terms they become strange through my reworkings, or reconstitutions of them. But occasionally there are these quite ridiculous objects that come into the mix.

HH: I wanted to talk about these reworkings; the process of re-making some of these objects is presumably laborious.

PL: I do work with found objects, but I think it's probably more difficult to work with a found object than it is to make one. Because it can happen in 30 seconds. And so the things you have to put in place and the things you have to know about that object, the familiarity you have to have with that object before you can use – it is much more elaborate. When you're really labouring on something, there's a different sort of closeness to it, but you can never get close enough. The making is the by-product of a methodology that is needed to really work through something that's become curious, I think.

HH: Off the back of this, I wanted to draw attention to a re-purposive process you used in a floor-based sculpture, currently on show at Spike Island. In *Untitled* (2026); you repurposed the original footage belonging to an older video work from 2009, *Introduction*. It involved you igniting pyrotechnics. In this 2026 work, the footage is left unedited; the spectacular combustive event is made rare; sidelined by long interstitial periods between tests, when the camera was passively left running. I found this really puzzling, but really satisfying as an idea, that you recovered the original footage from 2009 and treated this immaterial object (video) as having these fixed material properties.



Phillip Lai, *Untitled*, 2026. Stainless steel, LCD screen, dyed fabrics.
Installation view, *RAIN/RUIN*, Spike Island, Bristol. Photo by Rob Harris.

PL: It's almost very similar to how you work in any kind of physical way, in the studio. You might do a test of some kind and then, sometime later, you come back to that test and it holds a curiosity that is equal to whatever resulted from that test, because there was a sort of seminal moment about it or there's a realistic logic to how it's put together. It's still contrived in one way or another, but it's got an integral form. All of the footage cycles through all of the screens. So they're all showing the same footage, but at different times. It's actually quite a lot of footage going through, you know. I think it is quite material in that way. There's a sort of quantity to it.

HH: An untitled, floor-based sculpture on show at Spike Island involves dispersals of burnt wheat on a woven cane mat. Previously you have used coffee, I wonder about the appeal of using this loose particulate food-matter?

PL: I mean, quite straightforwardly, if you use loose material, you've got to work out how to control it. The burnt wheat was incinerated to the point where it may not diminish anymore as an organic material. But it is an organic material to begin with. That ephemerality is also present in this idea of it being a non-stable form.

A few months prior to a show at Modern Art in 2007, *Free to meet for coffee sometime soon*, I began collecting all the dregs of ground coffee that I drank. In that sense it was already expended material and I reused it in a video work *Untitled, Coffee Display* (2007). It involved a kind of monitoring view of this material being rolled around on this black latex sheet. I would introduce some water now and again, which would sort of rejuvenate it or rehydrate it. I suppose that was kind of one way to enact its function, but also its looseness as a material, you know, to demonstrate it in flux. The video was shown alongside an installation of work that contained these dregs as well, but within a sort of tenting material that I sewed together, so they existed as sort of deposits. Again, I'm looking at the specific conditions of that loose material, its ability to take a shape.

HH: The single unit, the grain of wheat, to me suggests the work of a singular digestive system, but en-masse these materials seem to point to something much larger, like a global distribution system. I think that this oscillation between the human and the post-human scale is how I structure my encounters with your work.



Phillip Lai, *Untitled*, 2026. Burnt wheat, aluminium, woven cane.
Installation view, *RAIN/RUIN*, Spike Island, Bristol. Photo by Rob Harris.

PL: I think that in the case of the work at Spike Island the wheat had been burnt; it was already rendered inedible. It was no longer a viable resource. But I do seem to have quite a lot of interest in something that might go in the body. But it's also, in a way, like the kind of inside-out of the body. There's an important idea about how we might be resident in the things around us in some way. This idea of the material that might be ingested, being actually out of the body, seems to suggest that the body is turned inside out.

People have been trying to use just a few words to summarise my work, and they use these ideas around sustaining the body or sustaining life in relation to all of these motifs to do with eating etc. And I think there's quite a base reality about existing in the world, a very stark baseline – that what might sustain us is everything that's outside of us.