



Mary
Laube

Songs
for the
Sun and
Moon

Mary Laube: Songs for the Sun and Moon

1. *Headrest*, 2019
Acrylic on panel
12 x 14"
2. *Perfume*, 2018-21
Acrylic on panel
12 x 9.5"
3. *The Attendant*,
2019
Acrylic on panel
12 x 12"
4. *Excavation*, 2019
Acrylic on panel
11 x 14"
5. *Back to the Heavens*,
2021
Acrylic on panel
24 x 18"
6. *Ceremonial*, 2021
Acrylic on panel
24 x 18"
7. *A Kite for the
Underworld*, 2021
Acrylic on panel
20 x 16"
8. *Origin of the
Celestial King*,
2021
Acrylic on panel
20 x 16"
9. *Constellation*, 2021
Acrylic on panel
16 x 20"
10. *Inkstone*, 2019-21
Acrylic on panel
12 x 12"
11. *Container for
Seven Stars of
the North*, 2021
Acrylic on panel
16 x 16"
12. *Dreamsong*, 2021
Acrylic on panel
12' x 12"



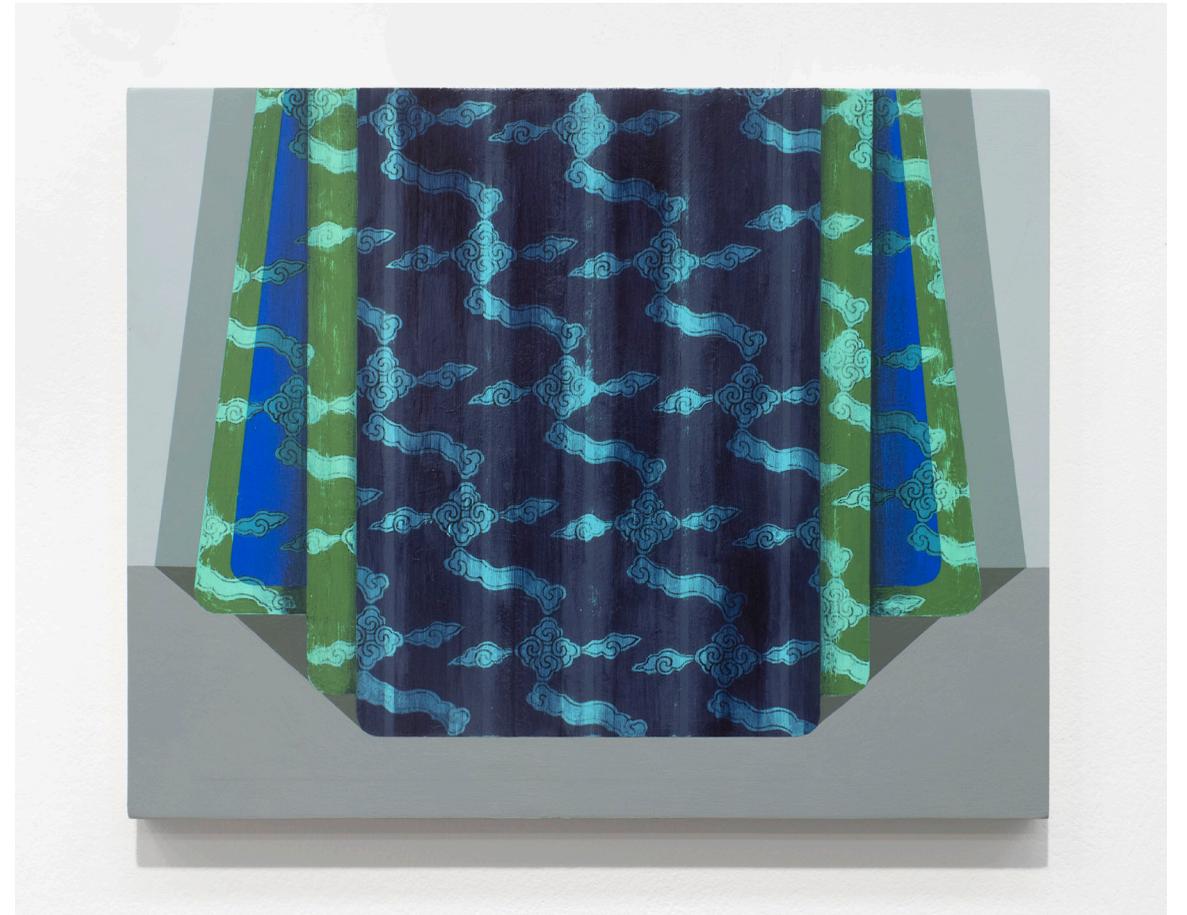
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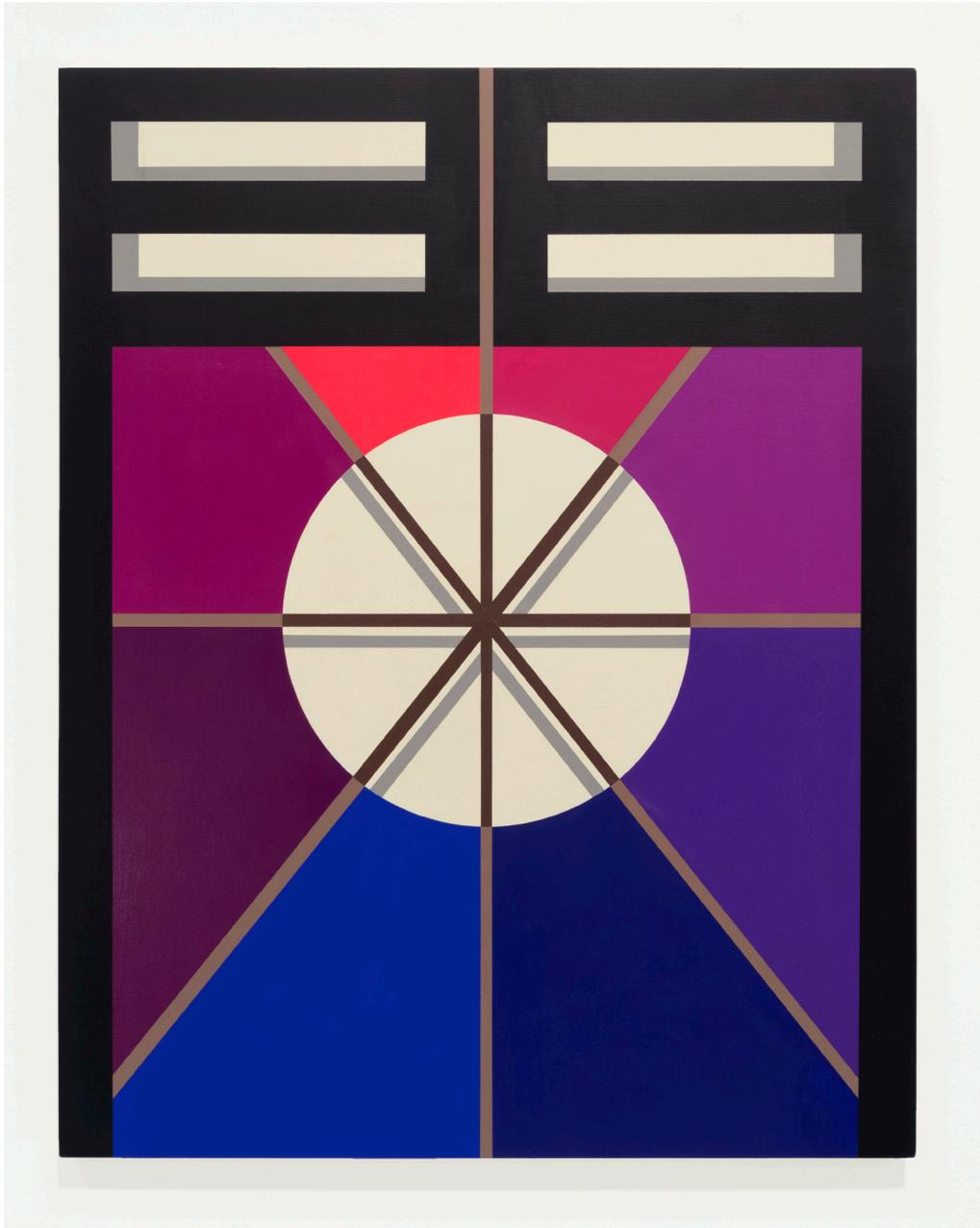
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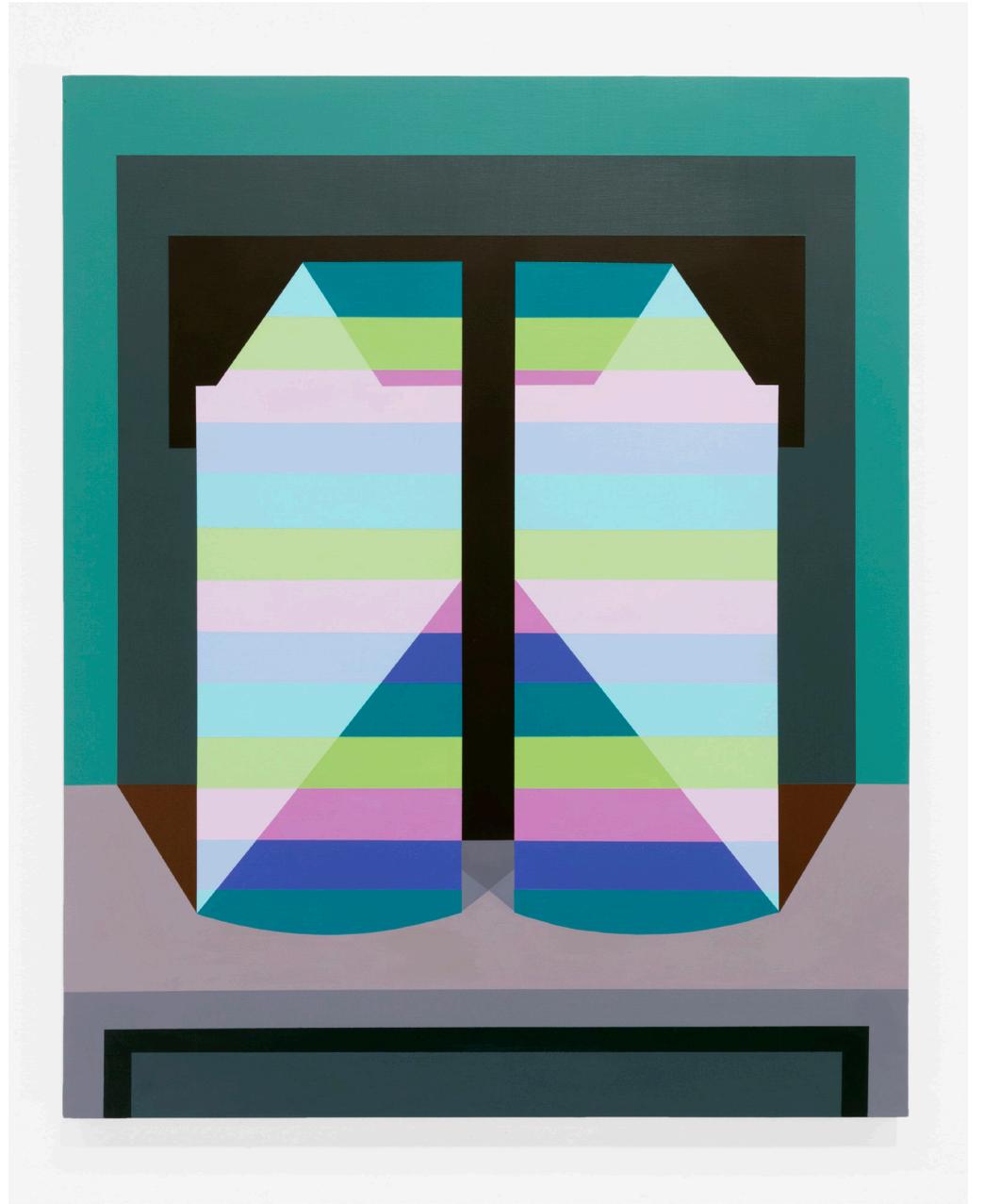
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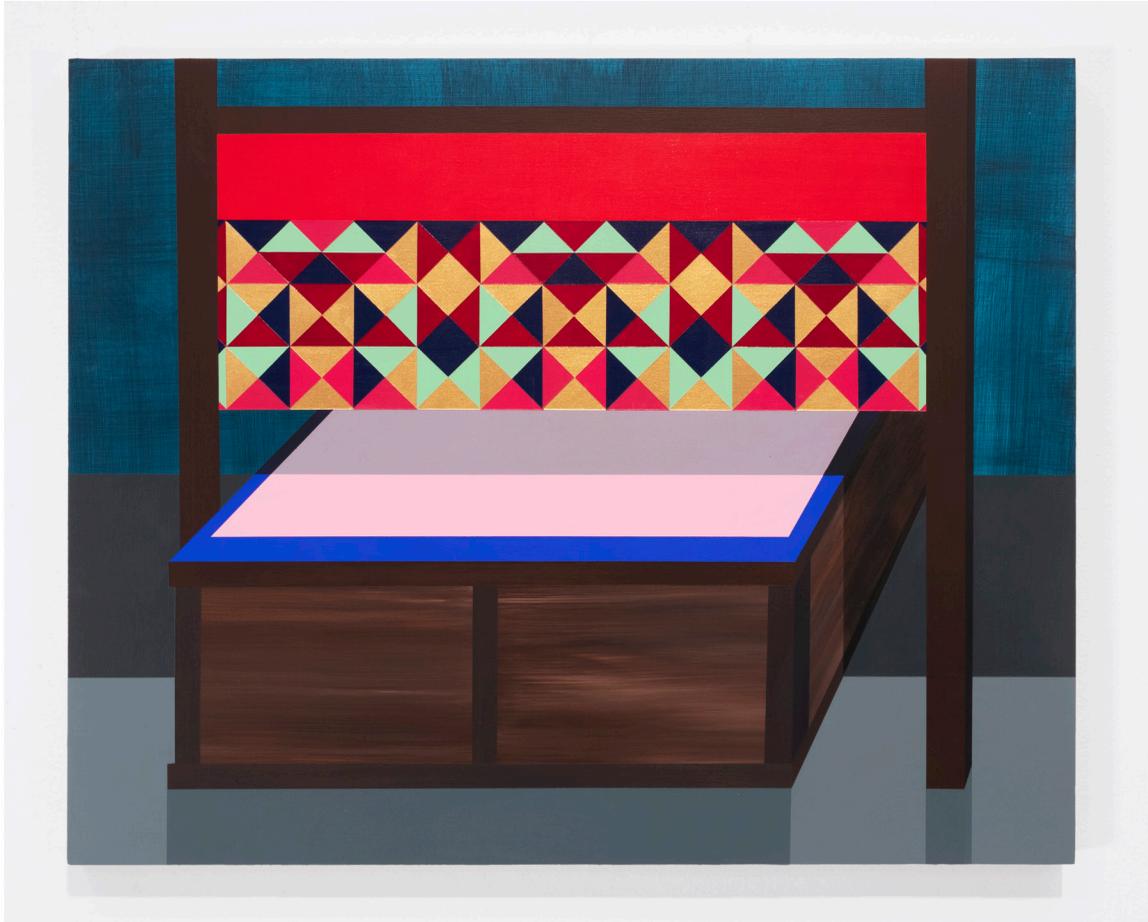
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Sitting with Ghosts

An essay to accompany the exhibition
*Mary Laube: Songs
for the Sun and Moon*
By Sarah Fritchey

“Either I am nobody or I am a nation.”
—Derek Walcott, excerpt from *The
Schooner Flight*

Two months before her passing, Katherine Laube presented her daughter Mary with a folder of documents detailing the circumstances of her birth and legal adoption. Mary was in college at the time and despite her parents’ willingness to accept her Korean roots, she had maintained an intellectual and emotional distance from the complexities of her Korean identity. Up to this point, Mary’s sense of self had resided in a narrative she had constructed over the course of her childhood with the aid of outside influences. Since her adoption at the age of two, she had grown up amid the care and culture of a white middle-class family in the suburbs of Chicago. She attended progressive public schools, played sports, and was raised by a feminist mother who taught her to be strong and defiant in the face of patriarchy. When her mother died, Mary experienced what she describes as a “cosmic moment,” an existential “cracking” that brought her to life’s simplest questions— *Who*

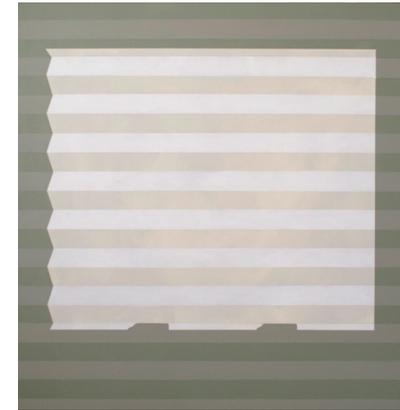
am I? and *Where am I, when the one who I originated from doesn’t exist?* In the weeks that followed, Mary began to feel distance between the person she was and the person she was becoming, finding new capacity for connecting with the unexamined parts of her Korean ancestry.

In the decade that followed, Laube used drawing and painting as tools for exploring the way memories are made, lost, and saved over time. Navigating these issues through the logic of abstraction, her earlier works are void of referents that endow the image with a clear sense of place, though they carry the sensation of time passing. Shadows suspend and ground objects in atmospheric voids and generic spaces, providing information about her subjects’ weights, densities, and entrance points. Most all of her works from this period have the quiet sense of waiting, hiding, or being alone. Their psychological interiors are distant, domestic, and strange. As paintings, they feel maximally considered, their details so obsessively attended to that no trace of the artist’s hand remains.

In 2018, Laube’s work took an autobiographical turn that centered her journey towards self-discovery and reclamation inside the work. Spurred by a six-week research trip to Korea, where she returned for the first time since her adoption, Laube spent her days in the archive at the National Museum of Korea

as they relate to the power dynamics of the museum. Researching and sketching artifacts pulled from the collection of over 310,000 objects, spanning 2.5 million years, Laube found herself gravitating towards objects that related to life, death, and rebirth. As a result, funeral urns, coats of armor, headrests, hanboks, and kites are among the objects we see fragments of in this new series. As she examined the objects separate from their interpretive labels, questions of migration, trade, and identity flooded in. These questions could be asked of the objects, but also of people, including Laube herself. *How do (objects/people) change and accrue meaning as they cross borders? How do (objects/people) from around the globe end up in Korea? How do (a museum’s interpretative labels/government-issued identification papers) fall short of telling (an object’s/a person’s) full story? And what meaning might we hold onto in this loss?*

While the identities of some of Laube’s object-portraits are familiar, many evade recognition. This knowledge gap is especially true for viewers coming to these works with limited lived or learned experience of Korean history and culture. The painting *Inkstone*, for example, depicts an object that resembles a three-foot-tall coffee table or stool. But it’s actually a painting of a three-inch stone slab used to mix ink and water in preparation for painting and calligraphy. Laube takes great pleasure in knocking the sense out of this picture, allowing the object’s form



Mary Laube, *Pause*, 2015,
24 x 24 inches, Acrylic on panel



Mary Laube, *Last Skin*,
2017, 12 x 9.5 inches,
Acrylic on panel



Mary Laube, *Inkstone*,
2019-21, 12 x 12 inches,
Acrylic on panel

to take center stage. Following her lead, we might abandon our impulse to know the object fully, and instead indulge in the pleasure of observation. We might admire the square shapes that reverberate in its base where four triangles meet, the pattern on its walls and the purple-grey frame that runs around the rim.

If we had the opportunity to visit the National Museum of Korea, we might even feel this twinning effect within the building itself. Founded in 1945, the year Korea gained its independence from Japanese rule, and renovated in 2005, the National Museum of Korea is the eighth largest museum in the world. Its monumental steel frame, reinforced concrete structure, and granite exterior is designed to last. Shaped like a park bench, the building pays homage to the passing of time. Its massive left wing symbolizes the past, its right wing symbolizes the future and the vacant middle represents the present. Just like *Inkstone*, the building is composed of stark horizontal and vertical lines, the middle contains a dramatic rectangular void that functions as its entrance, and square details repeat across its façade, interiors and walkways. In the modesty of this shared detail, which maps relations through a square, we see Laube's system of formal relations at play. By working outwardly from a single form, Laube builds an inclusive constellation of inheritance between herself, her Korean ancestors, and the legacy of Korean design. She connects

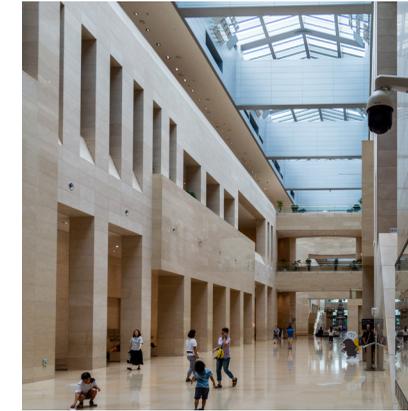
herself to the architect Chang-Il Kim, the maker of the inkstone and the language of Korean symbolism and patterns.

Similarly, we might take great pleasure in spotting the triangles replete in the painting *Ceremonial*. The central form is a neon triangle flanked by two triangular shadows, which spawn triangles of their own. A tiny black triangle peeps out of top of the cone, and inverted triangles emerge from the painting's shadowy negative space. In *The Shape of Time*, George Kubler describes this way of slowly looking at an artwork as a method of reading its internal "system of formal relations" to find meaning.¹ As we read through the formal details of Laube's works, we notice a twinning effect throughout—parts appear in twos, threes or more. We get tongue-tied when our eye bounces around these trippy compositions, which appear straightforward at first, but are abuzz with the ghosts of reproduction.

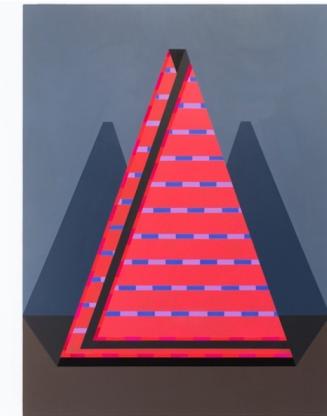
So much of Laube's work is about the pleasure of freeing a museum artifact from its interpretative context and seeing the way in which its potential grows. The release we experience is bound to the limitations of institutional interpretation, which imagine the curator as an objective storyteller operating in a neutral space. Laube wrestles museum artifacts away from this ideological frame, re-rendering them through her explicitly subjective and painterly treatment. When we look at her work, we are not under the impression that we are able to fully

know or consume the object on display; its peculiar mysteries are abstracted. Her practice exercises what the poet, writer and theoretician Édouard Glissant termed the "right to opacity," or, the right to deny interpretive aid to individuals seeking full insight into the nuances of a minor culture that is not their own. Glissant designed this right as a defensive strategy that individuals could use to ward off advances from dominant cultures seeking to colonize, gentrify, and co-opt their traditions.² In its simplest terms, Glissant writes, "That which protects the Diverse...we call opacity."³

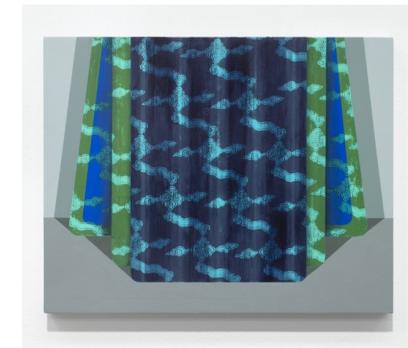
By reading Laube through Glissant, we see the politics of Laube's work emerge. The paper-thin crannies, reflective surfaces, elaborate folds and ornamentations that dominate her imagery function as hideouts for personal memories that imbue the object with multiple meanings. When we look at *Excavation*, we are prompted to ask intimate questions of the cloth: *Whose body did it adorn? Who was it passed down to? But also, Were its wearers happy?* Laube's frustration and desire for something other than the here-and-now hides in plain sight, manifesting in the sober passages of museum-grey that backdrop many of the objects. The grey walls and tabletop surfaces represent a global standard for museum display, whereby grey is a stand in for neutral ground. But Laube pokes holes in this system, re-rendering the grey as artificial and embalming. As Laube spars with museum structures, yearning for a reality



Main hall of the National Museum of Korea



Mary Laube, *Ceremonial*, 2021, 24 x 18 inches, Acrylic on panel



Mary Laube, *Excavation*, 2019, 11 x 14 inches, Acrylic on panel

that is more nurturing and “inclusive of multiple realities,” she aligns herself within the tradition of artists who have taken up the mantle of institutional critique, entering through the back door unnoticed.⁴

We can only imagine what it was like for Laube to create these works, spending hours in the dimly lit archive with ancestors she never met, sitting with ghosts and learning about her cultural inheritance through the process of observing and tracking forms with her eyes and hand, redrawing the lines, studying her notes, building up color, again and again. Since returning from Korea, Laube has continued to add to this series, working from the museum’s digital archive from her studio in Tennessee, and making plans to take a second longer trip. She exercises the “right to opacity” each time she makes another work, repeating this exercise in self-determination, which Glissant argues must be repeated to be repeatedly achieved.

We would be ill advised to end this this essay without a discussion of the ancestral voices that do appear in Laube’s work, especially because they illuminate the realities of her artistic assimilation into Western European traditions, disciplines, and practice. In Laube’s hard edged lines, color field passages, and indulgent symbolism, we encounter the legacies of mid-century Modernists, Minimalists, and Surrealists. We read Ellsworth Kelly in the rainbow

sleeve of the shadowy chest-plate in *Armor*, Richard Artschwager in the pink tablecloth in *Constellation*, Sophie Taeuber-Arp in the flattened perspective of *A Kite for the Underworld*, Tomma Abts in the optical play of *Ceremonial*, and John Dilg in the anthropomorphic black mass in *Perfume*. We also meet lesser known female artists—Toba Khedoori in the passages of nothingness in *Sparrows*, and Julia Fish in the deceptively simple shapes in *Armor*. Within this dense constellation of human influence, we feel Laube’s collective identity emerge, at least known parts, intimately lodged in the network of her artistic community.

Laube told me the first time she felt related to another person came with the birth of her son. “In his features, I saw myself reflected back for the first time,” she said. This moment of seeing oneself in the other, a self that is always part unknown, is an essential humanizing experience. It’s the reason we wage wars, establish shared systems of belief, risk death to give birth, and adopt people into our lives who become kin. To belong to something bigger than ourselves gives us meaning, connects us to our past and makes sense of the unknown. In the lonelier moments of Laube’s works, we linger in this sense of being lost. We might personally relate to this feeling or enter into it through the story of another, such as the narrator in Derek Walcott’s poem *The Schooner Flight*.⁵ Meditating on his Dutch, African, and English mixed inheritance, he muses

“either I am nobody, or I am a nation.” Both major and minor, alone and part of a community, he searches for belonging and acceptance by individuals who might celebrate his multitudes. The windows in *Sparrows* remind us of his mood. They are gently adorned with floral inlays, but are greyed out. We wonder, what we might find if we could look inside—Solace? Utopia? Splayed guts? Or the wild streams of ancestral memories Laube is searching for?

1. George, Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*. (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2008.)
2. Édouard, Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, translated by Betsy Wing. (The University of Michigan Press, 2010) Originally published in French by Gallimard, 1990.
3. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 62.
4. Mary, Laube, interview by Sarah Fritchey, August 18, 2021.
5. Derek, Walcott. *Collected Poems: 1948-1984*. (New York: The Noonday Press, 1996.)



Richard Artschwager, *Description of Table*, 1964, 26 1/8 x 31 7/8 x 31 7/8 inches, Melamine laminate on plywood



Mary Laube, *Constellation*, 2021, 16 x 20 inches, Acrylic on panel



Mary Laube, *Sparrows*, 2019, 12 x 9, Colored pencil on paper

It is my pleasure to curate *Songs for the Sun and Moon*, a solo exhibition of paintings by Mary Laube at Ortega y Gasset Projects.

The quiet power of Mary Laube's paintings resonates through the din of contemporary life. In a sea of images that are trying hard to grab our attention, Laube's paintings stand out because they face in a different direction. Their introspective nature asks us to slow down and contemplate the mystery of that which we can not fully understand. Her paintings show us how an artist can create an oasis of meaning in this world, so full of disconnect and fragmentation.

The mission of Ortega y Gasset Projects is to create opportunities for emerging artists and to support under-represented voices. We are especially pleased to offer this solo exhibition to an artist of Asian descent who is so thoughtfully investigating her heritage, and so courageously sharing her discoveries. We are impressed with the depth of her research, and her willingness to use a relatively small scale to carry her vision. This takes a special confidence that shines forth in this exhibition.

Thank you to my fellow Ortega y Gasset Projects Co-Directors: Eleanna Anagnos, Clare Britt, Leeza Meksin, Nickola Pottinger, Adam Liam Rose, Tiffany Smith, Zahar Vaks, and Lauren Whearty.

Eric Hibit
Co-Director
Ortega y Gasset Projects

This book is published on the occasion of the exhibition

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