

PARABLE OF THE PLAINES

PROTOCINEMA



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This edition of **PROTOZINE** is published on the occasion of *Parable of the Planes*, a group exhibition with **Aiza Ahmed, Jaimie An, Ashley Bergner, Suiyuan Jin, Christine Jung, Da eun Lee, Elena Bulet i Llopis, Julia Helen Murray, Lorena Park,** and **Shori Sims**, curated by **Tamara Khasanova** for the 2024 Protocinema Emerging Curator Series, presented by Protocinema, in partnership with Rhode Island School of Design Sculpture Department.

Launched in 2015, **Protocinema Emerging Curator Series** (PECS) is a mentorship program that provides professional training, first-hand experience, network building, and camaraderie utilizing the exhibition-making process as a teaching tool. Protocinema Emerging Curator for 2024, Tamara Khasanova, was mentored by **Natasha Ginwala**, Artistic Director of Colomboscope, Sri Lanka, and co-visionary of the Sharjah Biennial 16; **Ajay Kurian**, artist and founder of New Crits, New York, and **Mari Spirito**, Executive Director and Curator, Protocinema, Istanbul, New York.

You sometimes find yourself on a plane that isn't
the one you meant to go to.
Changing Planes, Ursula K. Le Guin

O astonishing immateriality of distances!
Sea and Fog, Etel Adnan

I think of a day in the future when I will be able to board a plane. Any plane. I think about a day in the future when I will be able to change a plane. Any plane. But maybe it will be a train that will take me there, or a car, or a bike. Or I'll just walk and see how far I can get. Eventually my feet will touch the sand and I will reach the ocean. And maybe I will enter it and see how much further I can push. Perhaps I will continue walking until the top of my head disappears in the waves, or maybe I will swim until my arms can't hold me anymore. The cold water will carry me further and guide me to reach my destination.

Oh sweet fantasy.

I stand at the threshold of the first plane; There's a lot of silence here and so much void that it all feels sticky. It latches, it lingers, it doesn't want to leave. But how can an absence be sticky and clingy like that when its sole purpose is to be reduced to nothingness, to not exist? Let me be clear: I am not here to pretend that I know about loss. Perhaps I know about some of it, but certainly not all. Yet I am also not here to deny that I don't think about loss constantly. It's a prolonged moment, a pause, before the inexorable split. One truly learns and understands loss and pain only through the act of living and so much of our learning about this is intertwined with the experience of those around us who undergo loss. What becomes of the silent witness to the suffering of a loved one who is torn between the desire for solitude and the scrutiny of society?

Adjusting my gaze to the negative space sculpted by the patches of neon pink. Pink pigment here is both the light and the air, persistently and flawlessly filling every little gap and crevice. At once, it's the void and the building ground of more. Against its backdrop, the ocean-blue car appears to be complete. Yet give it another look, and its outlines blur and fade before your eyes, part of its carcass suspended midway. This inanimate subject is central to the tension of the composition. Its fragmented nature is so full of movement, pulsating with time and change ten times harder than the bustling crowd next to it. Seemingly chatting and saluting amidst the unidentified scene, people form a point-less cluster.

Ashley Bergner's most recent body of work departs from the familial. The series of three paintings emerged from Bergner's need to address the conflicting emotional state shaped by the moments, memories, and course of her household. *More than this* (2024) is the painting from the series that chooses to withhold the direct portrayal of Bergner's familial environment. Instead, it resorts to framing the incongruous bond by using a still from *Steel Magnolias*—a cult classic film that the generation of Bergner's female part of the family grew up watching together—as its main point of reference. The still is taken after the character Shelby gets married, marking a moment of explosive and dramatic change for the unsuspecting protagonist. The precariousness of fantasy spills into real life.

How do you confront the evidence left from a loss, again and again? Here and now, one observes the inexorable of the past untangle repeatedly in the present. Do you take a breath, gently pause before exhalation? Does this repetition bring you a sense of relief, does it ease the pain? Will it ever? I kneel to get closer. The cold surface of the metal supports a glass-blown sphere shaped like a sequestered cloud. Inches away, a compact projector casts a video. The soft shapes assume the outlines of bodies, forever distorted. Being both a container and a surface, the orb is illuminated with an inexorable trace.

Julia Helen Murray's practice confronts the inevitable pain that comes with remembrance and rumination, tapping into the space of acceptance. The act of acceptance, however, doesn't mean letting go. Rather it proposes the need for regular revision and rescaling. Murray's piece *Staying home* (2022) offers a window into the memory of a last moment between the artist and her mother before her mother's passing when Murray was 14. This video was only digitized 21 years later. Constantly questioning the role of pain, illness, and trauma in the formation and essence of memories, Murray engages with sculptural forms and material processes to textually respond in places where language is insufficient and falls flat. The deconstruction of the video footage only furthers these attempts, highlighting the distortions and mutations intrinsic to the act of remembrance.

There's no shortage of pain, as there's no shortage of splinters. The sharp ache following the lingering presence of a splinter beneath one's skin can be among the most exasperating pains. More often than not, one barely notices when a splinter penetrates their flesh. The prolonged presence of the foreign intruder often results in inflamed and damaged tissues; the body recognizes the object's alien nature, and attempts to expel it. The body's resistance at its simplest. Pain, irritation, and soreness serve as indicators of the unwelcome intruder. As a child, picking out splinters with bare hands felt like an extreme accomplishment. While my mom would carefully sanitize and prepare a needle before removing the splinter from my skin, my sole satisfaction was diving straight in without any precaution. I was fascinated by the hollowness left after the foreign object was successfully eliminated, small yet large enough to feel. So as I enter this plane, I am marked by splinter cavities; their endless number renders my body foreign to itself. Like splinters, existing power structures leave cavities again and again until one reaches a level of detachment. Until one doesn't belong to themselves.

In a vortex of memories and information ensues a never-ending battle between witnessing through firsthand and secondhand sources. Akin to the orderly sentences of history books, the apparatus longs to deceive us into believing in linear progress. This disciplined continuity is a construct designed to make one submit to the hands of power.

In an attempt to comprehend the entwined relationship between the history of their family, the ever-looming signs of a not-so-long-ago ended dictatorship, and present-day Spain, Elena Bulet i Llopis departs from the 46-foot tall billboard of a bull, "El toro de Osborne," commonly encountered atop hilltops and roadways throughout Spain. Initially designed to advertise brandy, the billboard became associated with Spanish nationalism, to the extent that any time the structure of a bull is damaged, it is restored and returned to its original condition. In *El peñon de Almayate* (Almayate's crag) (2024), Llopis deconstructs the symbol of the bull by carving out sculptural elements to signify its body. The shapes of the bull, fabricated from visibly tarnished sheets of metal, are scattered in the space, evoking the site of a ruin. Similarly, in Llopis's installation, the photographs of the bull never depict it in its entirety, but only allude to its structure, concealing the full picture. Here, what usually stands for celebration is instead scattered and abstracted, exposing the powerlessness of the symbol in the face of change.

I'm not sure if I paid much attention to road signs growing up. As a child there wasn't really a necessity for it, nor were there many in the place I grew up anyway. People always had a hard time finding the street of my house. But of course, we are bound to notice them—adults make sure you do. It's part of the game, learning how to navigate the controlled environments of urban spaces. Otherwise you'll either get lost, hit by a car, or run into whatever else is lurking around the corner. Signs of any kind are peculiar objects: their semantics, colors, and shapes vary from country to country, yet they stand for the language of universalism, or better to say globalism, which in itself is not a language of innocent convenience and ascetic goodness.

Standing next to the corner, Da eun Lee's *The Red Hill* (2024) is a signifier of questionable (perhaps unwelcome) change and solidified complacency. Hiding in the seemingly gentle yet unsettlingly pale and raw textures and colors, the piece almost vanishes before my eyes but leaves an indelible impression on my retina. The delicate pink hue is achieved through the mixing of spam with concrete and resin, preserving the spam indefinitely and thwarting its decay. The typical verticality of a street sign is disturbed—instead, the top of the sign is inverted, with figures of a parent and child turned on their heads, drifting into an unknown direction. What about the school crossing sign, whose sole purpose is to stand for protection, could be violent? It loses its innocence as soon as you find out that the sign is taken from Osan Air Base in Pyeongtaek, Korea, where Lee spent most of her childhood. A place stained by the US military presence since the base's establishment in 1951. Uninterrupted, the base's existence and its subsequent impact on the daily lives of the local inhabitants seep into the crevices of erasures. One such erasure operates through the replacement of local names with those of the geography of the United States, revealing the material imprint of colonization.

Sand has a way of getting all over one's body. One feels each single grain despite its incredibly small size. Alone, a grain is barely discernible; take many, and they become a dune, a desert, or a coastline. Ripples on the surface of the sand are molded by the external forces, indicating movement and direction—subtle markers of time. And sand is impossible to tame: One moment you leave an imprint with your hand or foot, and moments later it can vanish without a trace.

In recent years, Suiyuan Jin has nurtured her own relationship to sand and its ways by developing a sand-casting technique that blends sand with polyurethane and epoxy clay. For Jin, the practice of sand-casting is an extremely engaging process. In *Fountain & Chessboard* (2023), her experimentation and curiosity not only extend to the choice of material but also imbue the sculpture with distinctive formal and interactive qualities. Comprising two distinct parts—the chessboard and eight individual lizards—the artwork draws inspiration from Ana Mendieta's *Untitled* (from the *Siluetas* series) (1976). Reflecting on geological reports suggesting that humanity's first creative gestures were pattern-markings on sand, dating back more than one hundred thirty thousand years, as opposed to cave drawings, coupled with the activity of making sandcastles on the beach, Jin explores the tension created by the absence of a body, a negative space.¹

¹ Charles Helm, of the African Centre for Coastal Paleoscience in Gqeberha, suggests that sand drawings should be classified as a fifth type of paleoart, along with pictographs, petroglyphs, dendroglyphs, and geoglyphs. See "These ancient sand drawings could be a fifth type of palaeoart," *New Scientist*, May 29, 2019, <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg25934530-200-these-ancient-sand-drawings-could-be-a-fifth-type-of-palaeoart/>.

You want to imagine that you're outside of it, but you must face that this is your personal delusion. You consume, you discard, you fixate. You resist repeating it, yet still fall into the same cycle. It's daily, it's weekly, yearly. It coincides with your birthday or a birthday of your loved one. Maybe a funeral if you're less lucky. Something darker, something heavier. Devoid of joy, or a decoy of joy. The luster of status and prestige, of upward mobility, exceptionality, or being better. There's a plane that contains all of that, and it's our reality. We don't even have to go anywhere to imagine it because we live in it. We are the ones who maintain its alluringly putrid carcass. So then, what's left is to wade through piles of bones, flesh, and tendons. This is the quality of the third plane: twisted abundance, trickery, and curses of time.

Welcome to a vanity banquet abundant with foods unfit for consumption. The readymade table bristles with a stack of silver platters and multi-tiered serving stands replete with gelatin cakes of all colors and shapes, extravagant desserts, and found objects. The surface exudes burgeoning anarchy, a sardonic defiance of a flashy conceit. Lorena Park's *Beggar's Banquet* (2023) ridicules our political and economic systems and the social norms responsible for perpetuating class division and exacerbating the conditions of life. The title derives from the eponymous studio album by the Rolling Stones. In the opening song, "Sympathy for the Devil," the band sings, "pleased to meet you, hope you'll guess my name / But what's confusing you is just the nature of my game." It's not a novelty that the lowest of the lowest are antagonized and framed as a threat. Park's brazen and suggestive composition complicates the dichotomy between evil and good, excess and deficit, high and low. Pronounced with chaos, resisting order, *Beggar's Banquet* walks a thin line between alluring and repulsive, poking at the uncomfortable truth of socioeconomic disparities.

Upon hearing the first notes in Billie Holiday's "Solitude," it always sounds deceptively hopeful, even slightly optimistic. But as soon as she hits the first line, that facade drops. The first line, "In my solitude / You haunt me overflows with despair," evokes the impossibility of breaking from the loop of memories, forever remaining in the in-between being and non-being.

Shori Sim's short-video piece *Two Story Home* (2023) uses Holiday's "Solitude" in the background to guide the viewer through a collaged house populated with three figures. The characters are drawn from Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, with Sims portraying all three—Sethe, Denver, and Beloved. The animating use of clip art overlaps with archival images of the houses associated with the Radical Reconstruction, a period of US history following the Civil War of 1861-1865. While Denver and Sethe remain in the frame, absorbed in repetitive, mundane activities within the house walls, the ghostly presence of Beloved wanders across the screen, softly drifting away, leaving the others undisturbed. Within a few minutes, we witness the day-to-day of three characters perpetually on loop, unable to break the code.

What does revenge look like, and how does it manifest in the face of destruction and global power imbalances? In one corner, there is a half circle constructed from fired-clay bricks. In the middle, the structure is filled with soil, giving it the appearance of an archeological site. Presumably, hidden under the dirt are numerous curse tablets, forever keeping the secrets and wishes of their creators. A cooling shelter of primordial silence guarded by the spirits. Skillfully evoking the feeling of ancient ruins, Christine Jung's piece, *May justice redouble the crime* (2024) departs from the history surrounding the Bath curse table discovered in Bath, UK. These tablets, used by the Celts before and around the time the Roman Empire conquered the land, were inscribed with appeals to the goddess Sulis, who was recognized as a deity of sacred springs and healing in pre-Roman mythology and folklore.² The inscriptions often sought to reinstate justice, demanding revenge after something was stolen. According to the ritual, the tablets would be thrown into local springs or wells to be found and read by Sulis and forever hidden from the eyes of mortals.

In "A Glossary of Haunting," Eve Tuck and C. Ree write "revenge requires symmetry with the crime."³ Jung takes this statement further, asserting that establishing justice has never been a symmetrical act. The documented Bath curse tablets suggest intense asymmetrical vengeance from the wronged subjects. Contemplating the feelings of powerlessness in the face of violence, Jung creates their own series of curse tablets submersed in the earth. Through them, Jung conjures the goddess in hopes that this present-day appeal to her entity will reach her, despite their being millennia apart.

² Fahimeh Rahrvan, "Roman Curse Tablets from the Baths: Manuscripts for Magic, Ritual, and Religion," *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity* 13, No. 1, (February 2023): 6-12.

³ Eve Tuck and C. Ree, "A Glossary of Haunting," in *Handbook of Autoethnography*, ed. Stacy Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams, and Carolyn Ellis (Routledge, 2013), 639-658.

The final and fourth plane in this exhibition appears the most distant and elusive—it delves into dimensions beyond our immediate comprehension and, therefore, can ultimately be harder to grasp. To enter this plane is to labor through the fear of the unknown and undetectable, to overcome the limits of our own imagination that measures this world by the standards of what is known to humankind. To travel with light that surpasses everything around us; its perseverance evident even in the face of walls, deep voids, and secluded corners.

As soon as you become acquainted with the practice of Jaimie An, it's impossible to escape the expansiveness of her thought, which attempts to close the divide between earthly and cosmic territories. When discussing her piece in the exhibition, she would speak about her preoccupation with the limits of perception. Her work on view, *The Aleph* (2024), titled after Jorge Luis Borges's 1945 story of the same name, is one of her daring experiments in attempting to make the indiscernible visible.

Made from acrylic, the piece takes the form of a cube filled with sand. At times, the cube is illuminated with glimpses of light that resemble miniature stars at the moment when they reach their peak luminosity before fading away and dying. An explains that these flashes symbolize fundamental subatomic particles—muons—generated when high-energy cosmic rays collide with particles in our atmosphere. Muons possess the unique ability to traverse any substance and penetrate beneath the Earth's surface. This speaks of their quality to seamlessly touch our mundane existence.

In the second story of Ursula Le Guin's *Changing Planes*, "Porridge on Islac," the narrator describes a plane where humans achieved such enormous technological progress that it resulted in the normalization of DNA strands by their blending with those of plants and other forms of life. Initially celebrated, this advancement eventually spiraled out of control, and all kinds of species, from humans to crops to butterflies, began losing their features. The government of Islac imposed laws banning further experimentation and restricting jobs in the professions and government to those tested 99.44% human, unless otherwise approved.

Aiza Ahmed characterizes her practice as "a stage where fact meets fiction," and this sentiment is vividly reflected in her use of scale and materials. *Special Visitors* (2023) takes us a step further into a future that balances between recognizable earthly profiles and forms that could be attributed to extraterrestrial creatures. Letting go and leaning into deep ocean hues; crawling under the rippling surface of night that blankets everything after dusk. In the foreground, eight nebulous figures of various shapes and colors—shades of pink, corn yellow, red, and the green of dark cucumber skin—form a crowd. Faded, diluted outlines of the cityscape softly tower behind.

"Everyone has their own picture of the world." My mother has lived with the same three humans in one apartment for the past ten years, but having a familial relationship and sharing a consistent routine doesn't guarantee the mutual understanding that we all crave throughout our lives. I grapple with the question of why we so stubbornly hold on to our set beliefs and ideas of the world. As we feel our planes of existence confine and close in upon us, the ability to change planes, relate to a story that is not immediately our own, and resist retreating into the isolation of set beliefs is what allows us to endure the forces of life alongside one another.



1 Christine Jung, *May justice redouble the crime*, 2024. Courtesy of the artist.
2 Julia Helen Murray, *Staying home*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.



3 Lorena Park, *Beggar's Banquet*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist.
4 Shori Sims, *Two Story Home*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist.



5 Elena Bulet i Llopis, *El peñon de Almayate* (Almayate's crag), 2024. Courtesy of the artist.

6 Aiza Ahmed, *Special Visitors*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist.



7 Da eun Lee, *The Red Hill*, 2024. Courtesy of the artist.

8 Jaimie An, *The Aleph* (in progress), 2024. Courtesy of the artist.





9 Suiyuan Jin, *Fountain & Chessboard*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist.
 10 Ashley Bergner, *More than this*, 2024. Courtesy of the artist

Checklist:

Aiza Ahmed

Special Visitors, 2023
 Oil on canvas
 48 x 60 in

Jaimie An

The Aleph, 2024
 Wood, plexiglass, sand, antique picture frames,
 led lights, muon detector
 20 x 20 x 20 in

Ashley Bergner

More than this, 2024
 Acrylic on canvas
 5 x 7 feet

Vickie's Wedding, 2024
 Watercolor monotype
 8.5 x 12 inches

Suiyuan Jin

Fountain & Chessboard, 2023
 Sand, polyurethane, epoxy clay, pigment
 59 x 83 and 17.3 x 14 in

Christine Jung

May justice redouble the crime, 2024
 Stoneware, lead, copper, and tin glazes, wood ash, dirt, tarp, mild steel,
 oct-1-en-3-one, water.
 Dimensions variable

Da eun Lee

Jeok Bong Ri Project - Texas Rd, 2021
 Set of 3 color photographs
 2 x 2 ft

The Red Hill, 2024

Concrete, mortar, cement, homemade spam, spam can, soil, resin,
 rubber tube
 4 x 3 x 5 ft

Elena Bulet i Llopis

El peñon de Almayate (Almayate's crag), 2024
 Archival inkjet prints, spray paint, fingered mirrored glass, 3 bullets
 from Almayate's quarry in Spain, Home Depot thyme, Whole Foods
 thyme, grow lights, steel. Technical assistance with glass: RISD Glass
 Dimensions variable

Elena Bulet i Llopis

Untitled from the series *La balsa*, 2023
Archival inkjet print
Dimensions variable

Julia Helen Murray

Staying home, 2022
Glass, water, video from 1997, projector, steel, copper
3 x 3 x 3 in
1 min loop

Moving plate, 2024
Video, color
3:00 min

Lorena Park

Beggar's Banquet, 2023
Thrift store table, my mother's aluminum serving dishes, gelatin, glyc-
erine, found objects, pig's heads, lamps and bulbs, windshield wiper
motor, threaded rod
6 x 5 x 5 ft

Shori Sims

Two Story Home, 2023
HD, color, sound, 02:11 min.

PAIN (How a Star is Born), 2023
HD, color, sound, 22:06 min.

Artists' and curator biographies

Rhode Island School of Design Sculpture MFA Program's AfterSchool Special is a course divided into 2 six week sections taught by a visiting artist and visiting curator. Through these differing and connected perspectives, students develop a deeper understanding into the ways that art is viewed, contextualized and experienced. The course explores the many roles that the artist plays in society in addition to elaborating the ways that visual art influences contemporary thought through the history of curation and exhibition-making.

Protocinema is an itinerant cross-cultural art organization that commissions and presents site-aware art around the world. Our purpose is to support dialogue between cultures on equal footing and create opportunities for creative expression. Protocinema works towards an understanding of difference across regions through its exhibitions, commissions, public programs, screening tours, mentorship and Protodispatch, a monthly digital publication edited with Laura Raicovich. Protocinema was founded in 2011 by Mari Spirito. Protocinema.org

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