

MATRIX 281

KENNETH TAM

THE FOUNDING OF THE WORLD



On the morning of December 6, 2013, Michael Deng, a college freshman, died of traumatic head injuries he sustained while pledging the Asian American fraternity Pi Delta Psi. Deng died while he was participating in the “glass ceiling,” a hazing ceremony during which pledges are repeatedly tackled to the ground and pummeled with racist slurs by fraternity brothers. Miming the surmounting of racial and cultural barriers, pledges are expected to get back onto their feet and shake off the abuse. But Deng never made it back up.

The tragedy of Deng's death guides many of artist Kenneth Tam's recent explorations of the lengths to which some young men of Asian descent in the United States go in order to find belonging among the pressures of prescriptive masculinity and racism. In Tam's early works (e.g., *Breakfast in Bed*, 2016), he gathered groups of participants in exercises designed to induce moments of emotional intimacy rarely afforded to men. In his video *Silent Spikes* (2021), Tam trained his inquiry on Asian American masculinities, addressing the often-forgotten legacy of Chinese migrant railroad workers in North America and interrogating visions of the American West that are absent of historical Asian figures. Throughout his practice, Tam rewrites the scripts used to perform identity, allowing other possibilities for social structures to emerge.

The Founding of the World (2023), Tam's latest video installation, marks a new articulation of his sustained engagement with constructions of identity and questions of how intimacies are created between men. Since his live performance work *The Crossing* (2020), Tam has investigated the performances of gender and race that take place within the Asian American fraternity probate. In contrast to the secrecy under which hazing is conducted, probates are public rituals in which pledges are formally inducted into their fraternity or sorority in front of friends, family, and community members. Established by Black Greek letter organizations in the early twentieth century, and drawing on extensively rehearsed and choreographed performances, probates celebrate the rebirth of pledges as newly admitted members of a sacred order. The exhibition's title takes inspiration from religious historian Mircea Eliade's writing on how communities' origin myths are often contingent on contradiction; Tam's work meditates on the complicated ways in which Asian American fraternities use ritualized forms of violence and live performance to manufacture connection.

The Founding of the World unfolds over three overlapping and interwoven acts—each with its own formal elements featuring different groups of performers. The video opens with a shot of college-age men lined up against a wall—the dimly lit, wood-paneled room reminiscent of many fraternity basements—staring solemnly into the camera. Dressed in matching red and black, they could well be fraternity pledges. They perform exaggerated versions of movements that ambiguously toggle between acts of affection and violence, alternately embracing and pushing against, building up and breaking down one another.

By contrast, a lone male dancer dressed in loose black clothes performs in a softly illuminated, indeterminate space. His measured gestures are markedly different from the awkward,



amateurish movements of the pledges. He dances with intentional, intuitive fluidity, directing an almost otherworldly flow of energy in and around his body with composed focus. His incorporation of such props as a handheld fan or a Japanese *oni* (demon) mask allude to the empty signifiers Asian American fraternities adopt in the name of forging collective identity, flattening cultural difference in the process.

The third set of figures is a group of three dancers who, with eyes often locked on the viewer, perform artistic interpretations of movements seen in probates indebted to Black forms of dance. Wearing headdresses that evoke religious garments, they function almost like a Greek chorus, dramatizing the promised transformation of the group of uncoordinated pledges. Their highly stylized moves are carried out with confident synchronicity, the non-individualized dancers moving as one fluid body.

These sections are woven together alongside an original score by composer and performer eddy kwon, its austere and ritualistic tones carrying a dark sense of disquiet. This sense of foreboding suggests that the fraternities' public performances and ceremonies are in fact moored by an underlying sense of violence. Illuminated alcohol and cologne bottles appear to float in the installation space, at once trophies and haunting specters of the culturally prescribed rites of passage into adulthood. In slowly unraveling the rituals of Asian American fraternities, Tam asks us to consider the ways in which the idea of Asian America is unfixed—as much the product of lived realities as of willful imagination.

Kimberly Yu

PhD student in History of Art at UC Berkeley

Exhibition Credit

MATRIX 281 / Kenneth Tam: The Founding of the World is curated by Phyllis C. Wattis Senior Curator Victoria Sung.

The exhibition is part of BAMPFA's ongoing MATRIX program of contemporary art. Founded in 1978, MATRIX provides artists with an experimental platform to make and show new work.

The MATRIX program is made possible by a generous endowment gift from Phyllis C. Wattis. Additional support was provided by Daeil Kim.

Works in the Exhibition

Kenneth Tam

United States, born 1982

Rites of Passage (Eros, Bacardi, Fierce, Jack Daniels)

2023

Steel tubing, steel flanges, glass cologne bottles, glass liquor bottles, tactical

flashlights, batteries, magnets, 3D printed resin, paint

Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles, Mexico City

Kenneth Tam

United States, born 1982

Rites of Passage (Polo Blue, Smirnoff)

2023

Steel tubing, steel flanges, glass cologne bottles, glass liquor bottles, tactical flashlights, batteries, magnets, 3D printed resin, paint

Courtesy of J. Patrick Collins, Dallas

Kenneth Tam

United States, born 1982

The Founding of the World

2023

Single-channel HD video (color, sound, 16:58 min), butterfly knife

Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles, Mexico City

Production Credits

New York

Director of Photography: Christian Carroll, Shu Hirayama

Gaffer: Jeongwon Lee

Choreographer: Juri Onuki

Performers: David Cartahena Lee, Hsiao-Ning Liao, Annika Wong, Huiwang Zhang

Houston

Director of Photography: Tyler Swanner

Gaffer: Esteban Caicedo

Production Assistant: Dylan Scardino

Location Scout: Chris Lacher

Performers: Zane Ali, Daniel Bacuyag, William Chao, Jeffrey Huang, Stephen Hunt, Alan Kim, Alex Kim, Steven Luu

Composer and Vocalist: eddy kwon

Digital Animation: Taylor Shields

Costume Design: Curie Choi

Colorist: Huephoric

Fabricators: Shisanwu LLC

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