

Underwater, on Fire

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Exhibition Period:

2025.7.5 – 2025.10.12

Location:

Gallery 1 and Gallery 2

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UCCA Clay presents “Underwater, on Fire” from July 5, 2025, to October 12, 2025, a two-person exhibition by Shuyi Cao and Candice Lin featuring new and recent works, including site-specific commissions by UCCA Center for Contemporary Art. Bringing together works in an immersive setting that extends the narrative potential of ceramics beyond an object-based approach of presentation and creation, this exhibition explores the artists’ shared concerns with the entanglements of humanity and the environment, as investigated through themes of transformation—through matter, time, and myth.

YIXING, China—From July 5, 2025, to October 12, 2025, UCCA Clay presents “Underwater, on Fire,” a two-artist exhibition featuring recent and new works by Shuyi Cao (b. 1990, Guangzhou) and Candice Lin (b. 1979, Concord, Massachusetts), including site-specific commissions by UCCA Center for Contemporary Art. In a dynamic dialogue between the two artists, this exhibition showcases the artists’ engagement with the ancient medium of ceramics and their shared interest in materials and processes to explore themes of the transformation of matter, time, and myth. Through sculpture, installation, and video, Lin and Cao’s works evoke both ancient mythologies and futuristic visions, inviting viewers to contemplate the complex relationships between humanity, extractive technologies, and the environment. This exhibition is curated by UCCA Curator Luan Shixuan.

Previously connected at a residency program, Cao and Lin both create art that concerns material circulation and experiences of trauma driven by the human desire for accumulation. While Cao focuses on the links between the biological and the geological, investigating sites of scientific development and environmental degradation, Lin’s practice is rooted in the historical traumas born out of colonial trade and diasporic experiences. In two interrelated environments that make up the exhibition, Lin and Cao explore how the process of sculpting and firing clay can transform the five traditional Chinese elements, while tying together disparate activities driven by the human desire for accumulation—from archaeology to mining, irrigation, and metallurgy—before ultimately arriving at bold speculation on the formation of legends and mythical imagery.

Press material available at

ucca.org.cn/en/press

Lin's recent projects have examined how various materials have shaped historical and contemporary trade patterns, labor practices, and geopolitical dynamics. Commissioned specially by UCCA for this exhibition, Lin's monumental sculpture installation *Soul of the World (Iron Ouroboros)* (2025) delves into elemental motifs of iron and fire. Crafted from fired and unfired Yixing clay (*zisha*) that appears in a unique reddish-purple tint given by its rich iron content, the work merges the elongated, sloping form of Yixing's traditional "dragon kilns" with the ancient symbol of the ouroboros—a serpent consuming its own tail, or a gesture towards time that may exist in a cyclical, rather than linear manner. The form recalls the city's commercial history as a manufacturing hub for the colonially coveted *zisha*, while iron is used as a symbol of willpower and the mineral's presence in human bodies—as Lin cites "the iron in the blood" of young activists in Langston Hughes' 1938 poem "Kids Who Die" as an inspiration—draws the piece towards more universal themes. Smaller clay elements appear as offerings to an iron demon and imbues the work with a sense of sacrifice.

Hanging above the installation are two textile works *Terror/Terroir* (2025) and *Mater/Desire* (2025), featuring woven texts that allude to humanity's seemingly unquenchable lust for natural resources. The Latin and French words in their titles refer to notions of mothering, womb, violence, and land. Both sheets are dyed with indigo, once a highly sought-after commodity, which speaks to Lin's fascination with how desire for materials has continued to drive human history in a way that often creates conflict and upheaval. Minerals like cobalt and lithium, long used in the making of ceramics and are now essential to modern electronics, continue this pattern, driving widespread tension and unrest.

Placed next to a window, *Solar Time* (2022) echoes aspects of a sound installation Lin created a decade ago, *Meditations on Last Philosophy (in which the possibilities of a coevolutionary, spontaneously generated, parasitic future are demonstrated)*. While the earlier work discusses how connections with other species might lead humans to rethink our own bodies, *Solar Time* features multiple clock-like or sundial-adjacent rotating copper disks and their reflections to further decenter the human by exploring larger scales of time—geological, cosmological, and mythological. Symbols of these temporal frameworks—such as the capitalist time of global trade networks, and ancient timekeeping devices or star charts that had been abandoned in the name of progress—can be traced in the depictions of mythological animals and archaic symbols etched into the copper disks.

Some of the etchings incorporate Lin's automatic drawing-like creative process.

Throughout Gallery 1, Cao constructs installations of a fictional underwater temple based on her study of archaeological practices and the water deities of different cultures, creating an environment suspended between an undefined archaeological site and the underwater crystal palace in Chinese mythology that recalls both pre-modern religious rituals with a distinctly futuristic sensibility. Commissioned by UCCA for this exhibition, the Tiffany stained glass works *Institute of the Sun #1* (2025) and *Institute of the Sun #2* (2025) respond to Cao's visit to Institute of the Sun, the world's second-largest solar-powered furnace, located outside Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Drawing parallels between two different entities that both process solar energy—solar furnaces and green algae—the works explore the themes of grandiose engineering projects and primitive life-forms. They reflect a fascination with the contrast between a vanished superpower's technological ambitions and the fragility of glass as a material. In turn, the stained glass discs encased in metal lattices are inspired by 19th-century naturalist Ernst Haeckel's scientific illustrations of a species of green algae significant to evolutionary history.

At the center of Gallery 2 on the second floor are a group of works that speaks to Cao's longstanding interest in archaeology as a portal of resonance across time and space. Five ringed purple clay sculptures—*Thalacora* (2025), *Ammonora* (2025), *Xurthra* (2025), *Siphonura* (2025), and *Gorgospina* (2025)—are finished with various glazes to emulate earthy matters. The hybridized subjects are inspired by the forms of aquatic microorganisms, prehistoric animal fossils, and mythological totems from different cultures. Scattered around the sculptures is *Land of Discontinuity* (2025), a set of 12 clay tablets; the patterns shown in relief ambiguously suggest both magnified views of microorganism and small sections of much larger lifeforms. With no determinant function, the work is reminiscent of an architectural ruin, where one may ponder whether advances in science and technology might be paving the way towards a future increasingly devoid of wonder, imagination, and the unknown.

Interwoven throughout the exhibition space across two floors, a series of skeletal high-fire stoneware sculptures, the "pabulites" (2022–2023) were made by deconstructing and recombining elements of various ancient creatures. The lack of distinctive anatomical forms suggests an absence of boundaries between self and other. During her research, Cao had

come across a paleontology paper and became inspired by the phenomenon of fossilized remains of various organisms, once captured by predators yet left undigested. The fictional fossilization of these sculptures are presented as the artist's attempt to "preserve the violent, yet intimate, relationships between different species."

Returning to the site of *Institute of the Sun #1 and #2* at the beginning of Cao's pseudo-archaeological investigations of energy resources, the exhibition concludes with the experimental documentary *She from the Sky* (2025). Filmed in Uzbekistan, *She from the Sky* is structured around a fractured dialogue conducted alternatively in English and Russian by its protagonists—an archeologist, an ecologist, and an economist encountered by the artist during her site visit to the vanished Aral Sea in Uzbekistan. Re-staged and edited based on real interviews, the topics of these conversations range from the USSR's Khorezmian Archaeological-Ethnographic Expedition from 1931 to 1991, the disappearance of the Aral Sea, efforts to reverse desertification, ancient water deities, and the myths our own era might leave behind. Over footage of the eerie arid landscapes in Central Asia and fragmented, yellowing artefacts, these conversational threads become interlinked to create a narrative underscoring the conflicting outcomes that emerge from the human quest for scientific intervention and how the human desire to catalogue and control nature may lead to our undoing.

In this immersive environment that weaves together ancient ritual, scientific inquiry, and technological innovation, the works on view present Lin and Cao's distinct yet complementary approaches to the materials. Together, they move beyond traditional paradigms of ceramic making and display—which often center around individual objects—to embrace a more holistic approach to draw out the medium's rich narrative potential.

About the Artists

Shuyi Cao

Shuyi Cao (b. 1990, Guangzhou; lives and works in New York) received her LLB and MPA from Fudan University in 2013 and 2016, respectively, and her MFA from Parsons School of Design in 2018. She currently serves as a Visiting Assistant Professor at Pratt Institute and the founder of Transmaterial Lab.

Cao's practice centers on sculpture, engaging alchemical approaches to material, matter, and knowledge osmosis. Drawing on archeological speculation and ecological fiction, she explores porous entanglements between the sciences, technocultures, and cosmologies. The scale of her multi-medium installations range from microscopic to the enormous, incorporating the more/less/other-than-human worlds made by natural and synthetic processes that include ceramics and glassmaking with wild clay, sand, minerals, and other earth elements, to digital fabrication such as 3D printing, and virtual environments. By combining hand-crafted objects, technological artifacts, and moving images, she creates paradoxical "fossils"—at once physical and intangible—that act as portals into geotrauma, transcorporeal ecology, and prehistoric futurity.

Her recent solo exhibitions include "Winding without Shore" (Gathering, London, 2025); "And when the sea was open" (Island, New York, 2024); "Ardor for Unconformity" (the 11th National Biennale of Contemporary Sculpture, Quebec, 2024); "Undercurrent Softness" (Hive Center for Contemporary Art, Shanghai, 2023). Her duo exhibitions include "Strange Stranger" (Para Site, Hong Kong, 2023). Select group exhibitions include "Unearthed" (Orange County Museum of Art, Costa Mesa, 2025); "Tales of the South" (He Art Museum, Foshan, 2023); "How Far How Close" (Aranya Art Centre, Beidaihe, 2023); "Metamorphic Ecosphere" (Hyundai Motorstudio, Beijing, 2023); "Do Not Black Out" (Ming Contemporary Art Museum, Shanghai, 2021); "Reshape" (Today Art Museum, Beijing, 2021); "Utterance" (NARS Foundation, New York, 2021). She has held residencies at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art; NEW INC at New Museum, New York; Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity; Guangdong Times Museum; and the Power Station of Art, Shanghai.

Candice Lin

Candice Lin (b. 1979, Concord, Massachusetts; lives and works in Los Angeles, California) obtained her BA from Brown University in 2001 and her MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute in 2004. She is currently an Associate Professor of Art at the University of California, Los Angeles.

An interdisciplinary artist, Lin works across installation, drawing, and video in addition to living materials and processes such as mold, mushrooms, bacteria, fermentation, and stains. Her practice explores and examines the politics of representation and histories of colonialism and diaspora, addressing issues of race, gender, and sexuality.

Her recent solo exhibitions include “The Animal Husband” (Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh, 2024); “Lithium Sex Demons in the Factory” (Canal Projects, New York, 2023); “Seeping, Rotting, Resting, Weeping” (Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2021), which traveled to Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University (Cambridge, 2021) and Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive (Berkeley, 2022); “Pigs and Poison” (Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, 2020), later presented at the Guangdong Times Museum (Guangzhou, 2021) and Spike Island (Bristol, 2022). Select group exhibitions include “The Milk of Dreams” (59th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia, 2022); “Yesterday We Said Tomorrow” (Prospect.5 Triennial, New Orleans, 2021); “soft and weak like water” (14th Gwangju Biennale, 2023); “Minds Rising, Spirits Tuning” (13th Gwangju Biennale, 2021). Lin has received numerous awards, including the 2024 Ruth Award, the 2023 Arnaldo Pomodoro Sculpture Prize, a 2022 Gold Art Prize, and a 2019 Joan Mitchell Foundation Award. Her work is held in the collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum; and the Walker Art Center.

Support and Sponsorship

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Public Programs

On the opening day of the exhibition, curator Luan Shixuan will lead a special guided tour, offering visitors an in-depth introduction to the exhibition and the artworks created by the participating artists in response to the unique UCCA Clay space. Later in the day, UCCA Clay will host an artist talk featuring Shuyi Cao and Candice Lin. Grounded in their individual practices surrounding the flow of matter and their shared affinity for ceramics, the two artists will reflect on their creative journeys and join the curator in a conversation about materiality, mythology, and imagination.

Throughout the exhibition period, UCCA Clay will also present a series of workshops exploring mythological narratives, material concepts, and artistic practice, inviting visitors

to take part in hands-on activities. For the latest event details, please visit UCCA's official website and social media, such as the official UCCA WeChat account.

About UCCA

UCCA Center for Contemporary Art is China's premier museum of modern and contemporary art. Committed to the belief that art can deepen lives and transcend boundaries, UCCA presents a wide range of exhibitions, public programs, and educational initiatives across four architecturally and programmatically distinct locations. Owned by a group of committed patrons, it is funded by donations, sponsorship, ticketing, and proceeds from the commercial activities of UCCA Lab. UCCA has presented more than 200 exhibitions and welcomed more than ten million visitors since its founding in Beijing in 2007 as the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art.

About UCCA Clay

UCCA Clay is a museum situated at the intersection of ceramics and contemporary art. Located in Yixing, Jiangsu province—China's "City of Ceramics"—it anchors the city's reimagined Creative and Cultural Ceramic Avenue district. Designed by Kengo Kuma and Associates, the 2,400-square-meter building is the Japanese architect's first built work to employ clay as a primary material. Featuring a remarkable façade made of hand-fired terracotta tiles, the building showcases Yixing's renowned purple clay ("zisha") that began to be used in pottery during the Song Dynasty. UCCA Clay's program takes inspiration from the region's unique cultural heritage, drawing together Yixing's thousand-year ceramic history with UCCA's global artistic vision. The museum's exhibitions center contemporary work in the medium of ceramics by Chinese and international artists, while also offering further context and facilitating exchange and dialogue with the wider world. Opened in 2024, it is the first contemporary art institution in Yixing.

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