

No culture without Agriculture, no sensitivity without cultivation; reflecting of Meng-Chan Yu's fellowship in Athens

Introduction

The Art-Futures Fellowship Program is in its second year of presence in Athens. Following a highly successful inauguration in the summer of 2023 and the annual meeting of Critical Friends in the autumn, Taiwanese artist Meng-Chan Yu arrived in Athens for the second iteration of the fellowship. This report reflects on her work during her residency at [SiC] Space for International Cooperation, focusing on career development, impact, and sustainability.



The report also explores the relationship between the resident and the host, examining the dynamics with mentors, the [SiC] space where Meng-Chan lived and worked, as well as collaborations with other institutions such as the Athens School of Fine Arts and the Agricultural University of Athens. These collaborations played a crucial role in shaping the project's development as well as for the overall presence of ArtFutures in Athens.

Meng-Chan Yu's residency culminated in the exhibition *A Silvery Leaf Touches the Soil* at [SiC], combining ceramics and material research with land art and eco-criticism. Her works offered a subtle yet profound intervention in the discourse surrounding our relationship with the environment.

This report aims to provide an overview of the outcomes of Yu's residency, the challenges she faced, and the contributions the fellowship made to her artistic practice. Additionally, we invite readers to reflect critically on the significance of the Art-Futures Fellowship Program in Athens, its relevance to contemporary artistic practice, focusing on the question of sustainability.



Career Development, Innovation and Context

Meng-Chan Yu has gained recognition for her innovative work in ceramics based on material research focused on soil. The aim of her practice is to explore the connections between nature and culture, thematizing human interaction with the environment at its most fundamental level. Material research has been an important

part of Meng-Chan's practice, who is continuously experimenting with soil as a unique form of artistic expression. Soil is collected from different locations and used to produce color. The varying consistencies of the collected material result in distinct colors and individual textures, providing the artist with a palette of unlimited expressive possibilities.



During her residency at [SiC], she developed the project, *A Silvery Leaf Touches the Soil*, where she used soil sourced from areas surrounding Athens to explore themes of environmental sustainability and the cyclical processes of life and death that define nature. The project invited audiences to reflect on soil as both a nurturing force for life and a reminder of death, embodying the cyclical nature of existence by drawing on the symbolic and literal connections between humans and the earth. The exhibition marked a significant step in Meng-Chan's development as an artist, combining her deepening interest in eco-criticism with her background in material research. After her visit in the Agricultural University, the artist decided to experiment with recycled material she acquired there and used it in an installation, symbolizing the cycle of eternal recurrence between birth and death, and integrating humans and their technology into this cycle.

Athens provided a fertile yet challenging ground for Meng-Chan's work. The ongoing socio-political and economic tensions, posed challenges for audience engagement. The abstract nature of Meng-Chan's themes, especially the cultural and social significance of soil, did not easily align with the immediate concerns on inflation, gentrification, and war that dominate the discourse in the city. This dissonance highlighted a gap between her perspective and the specific cultural and social dynamics of Athens, but also made her contribution even more urgent and important. In a city that is already facing the first signs of an environmental crisis with drought, rising temperatures, and declining agricultural production, already happening ecological concerns may soon overshadow current social and political problems. *A Silvery Leaf Touches the Soil* is a silent call to respect the rhythms of nature, abandon our anthropocentric perspective and its accompanying sense of entitlement, and seek a deeper connection to the environment based on sensitivity and humility.



The residency offered Meng-Chan the chance to engage with the local culture and environment, though there was room for stronger social engagement. Time constraints and her busy program of collecting material, conducting research, and

preparing her show, limited her ability to conduct and develop strategies for public engagement, such as organizing workshops or educational programs that could have

enriched the experience for the local communities where she collected soil or for her neighbors of Thission, where she worked and exhibited. Fortunately, Meng-Chan will have more time to pursue these activities during the second part of her residency in Zutphen, where workshops with the local community are already planned.

Meng-Chan Yu's residency in Athens has proved significant in the development of her practice, allowing her time and space for material explorations while offering valuable insights into the challenges of integrating her aesthetic within a different cultural context. Her exhibition at [SiC] made her more visible in the local cultural scene, enabling her to establish connections with institutions such as the Athens School of Fine Arts, the Agricultural University of Athens, and the Onassis Foundation that may prove beneficial in the future.

Reflection on the Process and Outcomes

Meng-Chan Yu's fellowship was the second iteration of the ArtFutures program in Athens, building upon the highly successful inauguration of the fellowship by Tami Izko and Federico Clavarino with their project *The Crab's House*, which had been presented in two other cities prior to Athens. In many ways, Meng-Chan developed her work upon infrastructures already established by the previous residents, but because her project and practice were so distinct, she also had to contend with expectations and procedures that did not necessarily suit her work. In this section, I will avoid making comparisons, but I will refer to *The Crab's House* in a few instances.



Meng-Chan Yu's fellowship in Athens was prepared and programmed before her arrival, in collaboration with ArtFutures research fellow Georgios Papadopoulos, who is also the author of this report. The exhibition dates were set in advance, along with planned visits to the Athens School of Fine Arts, the Agricultural University, and several galleries, museums, and artist-run spaces. Upon her arrival, a dinner was organized with Michael Defuster, the artistic director of [SiC] Space for International Collaboration. Another dinner was planned midway through the residency, bringing together local curators to increase Meng-Chan's visibility in the local cultural scene and to prepare for the final exhibition by expanding the audience base and gathering feedback on her work. Unlike *The Crab's House*, where similar dinners were integrated into the artistic process and contributed directly to the exhibition, these events were not part of Meng-Chan's creative process. In addition to the support provided by [SiC] and the ArtFutures research fellow, Meng-Chan discussed her project with two mentors in the Critical Friends network. The mentors offered constructive feedback, particularly in helping Meng-Chan in embedding her work within the local cultural context of Athens.

The outcome of Meng-Chan's residency was an exhibition at [SiC] titled *A Silvery Leaf Touches the Soil* that consisted of two installations and a video, all of which were representative of Meng-Chan's artistic practice. Having worked for over fifteen years in ceramics, she has perfected a technique for creating a spectrum of colors from different kinds of soil, capturing the essence of the places from which they were sourced. In this exhibition, she used materials gathered from locations in greater Athens and used this as the primary medium to explore and represent our connection to the natural world, following the journey of a silvery leaf that fell from an olive tree to the ground. The silvery leaf, understanding that cyclicity is essential to both human and non-human existence, fearlessly abandoned the tree to touch the soil, embodying the continuous cycle of life and death. Through this metaphor, Meng-Chan invited the audience to reconsider their relationships with non-human life forms and natural processes, while reflecting on the cyclical nature of organic matter. Soil, as both life-giving and death-absorbing, told the story of regional characteristics and the essence of life itself, silently facilitating the circulation of matter and energy.

The number of visitors was lower than in the case of *The Crab's House*, which was unfortunate, as those who did attend were captivated by Meng-Chan's work. The audience consisted of a mix of the regular public from [SiC] and other international artists who became familiar with Meng-Chan's work through various communication channels used by [SiC], including the mailing list and Instagram account. Given the efforts made to connect with the local public and build an audience base following the first iteration of the fellowship, one might have expected a higher turnout for this second edition. A possible explanation is that the series of dinners organized by Tami and Federico for *The Crab's House*, combined with the novelty of the space and the fellowship program, created a more inviting atmosphere and a sense of curiosity to the local art-community in Athens.

In conclusion, while Meng-Chan Yu's fellowship effectively showcased her artistic practice and expanded her professional network, the engagement with the local community could have been stronger. Moving forward, the ArtFutures program may benefit from further elaborating an audience development strategy and

strengthening its channels of communication and networking, to enhance its local connections and increase the visibility for future artists-in-residence.

Sustainability and future perspectives

Both of the fellowship projects provided material for reflection in relation to the overall endeavor to build a fellowship program in Athens. While *The Crab's House* addressed directly the very format of the residency, the care economy that surrounds it as well as the dynamic of guest and host, the *silvery leaf* created a conceptual and aesthetic space where questions of locality, rhythm, and culture could be discussed. In that sense ArtFutures has done an excellent job supporting a discourse about participating and producing in culture, which is both relevant and sensitive to the challenges that Athens and the world have to face.

Reflecting on the outcomes of Meng-Chan Yu's residency in Athens, sponsored by ArtFutures, it is clear that sustainability—both in terms of artistic practice and the residency program itself—emerges as a critical theme for consideration. Meng-Chan's work, deeply rooted in eco-criticism and environmental consciousness, embodies a sustainability to an art practice that directly engages with natural processes. The *silvery leaf* offered a moving meditation on the cyclical nature of life and death, and it subtly highlighted the interconnectedness of human life with the environment. A focus on natural cycles, particularly in the context of climate change and environmental degradation, points to the pressing need for the arts to address sustainability not only as a subject matter but also as a practice.

From the perspective of the ArtFutures program, sustainability must also be



understood in terms of the long-term viability and impact of its residencies. While the residency successfully provided a platform for Meng-Chan to develop her work, there are key areas where the program can grow to ensure its sustained relevance and impact. One of the main challenges identified was the limited engagement with different communities, an issue that has implications for both the visibility of the artists and the overall success of the program in Athens. Building

on its ties to local institutions, especially with the Athens School of Fine Arts and the OnassisAir, both of which have been contributing to the fellowship program with infrastructure, feedback and audience, remains important. Expanding further its outreach efforts, and creating more opportunities for interaction between the artist-in-residence and communities should also be a priority so as to build the audience base that is necessary to enhance the impact of future residencies.

The economic sustainability of the project is of equal importance. There is a pressing need to look for more funds, in order to ensure its continuation in the future. Unfortunately funding for contemporary art in Greece is very limited, making the process of applying for support very competitive. Such efforts can benefit from the support of a wide network, including ArtFutures, Critical Friends and [SiC]. Moreover,

given the growing focus on environmental themes in contemporary art, the fellowship program has an opportunity to position itself as an institution that is fostering sustainable practices within the art world, which can offer a comparative advantage both in attracting prospective fellows and in successfully competing for funding. The integration of workshops, educational programs, and participatory events that are necessary to build stronger connections with local communities both for the fellowship program and the hosting institution can further increase and ensure that the environmental messages of the discourse that is hosted by ArtFutures in Athens resonate more deeply with the public.

In conclusion, Meng-Chan Yu's residency has demonstrated the potential for ArtFutures to engage with critical contemporary issues such as sustainability and eco-criticism. To ensure the future success of the program, it will be important to continue the work in building strategies for local engagement, and encouraging artistic practices that contribute to both its cultural, economic and environmental sustainability. By strengthening its connections with the local public and expanding its support for artists working on urgent and relevant projects, the ArtFutures Fellowship Program can continue to evolve as a significant platform for innovative and relevant art.

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