

Cole Lu

Amnesia

25th April – 2nd June 2024

The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite, perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries... From any hexagon one can see the floors above and below – one after another, endlessly... Through this space, too, there passes a spiral staircase, which winds upward and downward into the remotest distance.

– Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Library of Babel', 1941

Herald St is delighted to announce *Amnesia*, an exhibition of new works by Cole Lu taking place in the gallery's East London premises. Featuring burnt linen and birch panels alongside large-scale sculptures incised in minute detail, the presentation questions language, contexts, and dogmas of historicisation. Lu exposes humanity's 'collective amnesia', looking back to an existence before socially-imposed beliefs and rituals and yearning for an unadulterated state of being. He references an amalgamation of sources, widely ranging from prehistoric cave markings, Greek mythology, canonical twentieth century art and literature, and popular sci-fi cinema, steeping their events and characters with his own lived experience.

On entering the gallery we encounter (*Hypnos*), a towering sculpture with an archetypal bust of Apollo, blindfolded and placed upon a model of Leonardo da Vinci's odometer. The titular god of sleep is one of two protagonists in Lu's wider oeuvre, alongside Geryon, one of Hercules's twelve labours. By covering his eyes, the figure is rendered physically blind but, following mythological axioms, endowed with the power to see the truth. On the lower part of the sculpture, a viewfinder looks onto a copper surface etched with a scene of hypnosis. The artist has modelled this tablet on NASA's Pioneer Plaques, conceived by Carl Sagan and designed with 'their time and place of origin for the benefit of any other spacefarers that might find them in the distant future'. Lu's own representation of civilisation is left ambiguous: does it show a scene of coercion into societal pressure and the loss of original instinct, or, is the blindfolded character finding his inner truth? Situating this enigmatic sculpture alongside a linen self-portrait and wood panel of planetary explosions, Lu has transformed the entrance room into a portal, a trope repeated in his work through whirring vortexes, interstellar vehicles, and beaming wounds. Here, we enter the initial stage of the dream space, where fiction and reality fuse in our minds and we gaze at our received knowledge.

The second gallery immerses us in the artist's vision of an infinite library, modelled on Jorge Luis Borges's Library of Babel and the Memory Warehouse in the 2003 film *Dreamcatcher*, both of which feature winding staircases continuing forever upward and downward. His references are universal and personal: his father is a librarian for two universities and Lu was raised among and by books, finding within them the language to make sense of who he was. Growing up in Taiwan, he spoke Taiwanese, Mandarin, English, Hakka, and Japanese with different family members and friends in varying levels of fluency and disruption, gaining and losing nuances. In a linen diptych, Lu formulates his own semiotic alphabet composed of symbols for his thoughts, moving beyond extant systems of spoken and written language. The room receives a haze of natural light from two arched windows, cutting through the walls like a pair of eyes. One is engraved with Hypnos as a blindfolded child, a return to the formative stage of life; childhood also appears in a scene with a rocking horse, taken from a photographic portrait of Max Ernst. Central to Lu's notion of human amnesia is our lost connection with animals, with whom we once hunted alongside and shared an equal place in the world. He harks back to this moment through markings from the caves of Lascaux, verdant landscapes with roaming deer, and the two-headed dog Orthos, a companion whom he likens to his own two cats. Like prehistoric cave dwellers, the artist paints with fire, compressing hierarchies formed over millennia and returning to the origins of our externalisation of internal thought and memories.

Coded in the ancient and contemporary legends of Lu's tableaux are passages of inflammation: erupting volcanoes, bleeding cuts, wide eyes peering through tears, and holes scorched through the fabric. The spiral staircase finds a corporeal analogy as the helix of DNA, the information centre of the body. The artist increasingly uses supports made of linen, a material he associates with blindfolds and gauzes – swathes which heal our wounds and cover our eyes so we can confront our truths. From visceral scars to fantastical machines, Lu's microcosms, macrocosms, and myths unearth our innermost thoughts and conjurings, rendering them universal.

Text by Émilie Streiff

Herald St

Front space

(Anti-clockwise)

Here he was, the one who waited. The night is the night; it begins with the morning; on a chair and two dictionaries, eye voices read themselves wounded.

(Here he was)

2024

Burnt linen

50.8 x 40.6 x 3.8 cm / 20 x 16 x 1.5 in

HS20-CL8608P

If it were simple, would he have traveled here? Hugging the shade at the river's edge, the landscape of his youth, three language planes, and the other voices he owns.

(Hypnos)

2024

Aqua resin, fiberglass, copper, lenticular stereoscope, burnt birch, reclaimed barn wood, clockwork, cast iron

198.1 x 91.4 x 58.4 cm / 78 x 36 x 23 in

HS19-CL8594S

In a room full of books in the world of stories, he couldn't recall one. Which one carries the distance from the trachea to the alveoli out of many beginnings? A dust precisely measured; a logical equation.

(Amnesia)

2024

Burnt birch

40.6 x 50.8 x 3.8 cm / 16 x 20 x 1.5 in

HS20-CL8609P

Back space

(Anti-clockwise)

The first time someone sent him to the drawing room — tick tock, tick tock — he fell in love with this back-and-forth movement. Later, he learned it was called the withdrawing room; tongue gives the mind a thunder strike, his pulse racing as horses galloping home.

(Withdrawing room)

2024

Burnt birch

61 x 45.7 x 3.8 cm / 24 x 18 x 1.5 in

HS20-CL8607P

How many tongues does he have? The water drives a wedge of iron through the edge of his vein. The sun stopped in the sky. The window of the night was sewn to his eyes.

(Hypnos)

2024

Engraved Optium acrylic, reclaimed barn wood

2 parts, each: 76.8 x 42.5 x 4.4 cm / 30.2 x 16.7 x 1.7 in

HS19-CL8595S

Fiction is the sunlight in the yellow plaque; here you are before the vanishing floor.

(Apollo)

2024

Burnt pine, steel conduits

333.5 x 135 x 135 cm / 131.3 x 53.1 x 53.1 in

HS19-CL8593S

Suddenly, we were going. Above him were drapes of burning vines and branches of torched pines. They lit up the sky and rained incessantly. Throughout the long night, rain, rain, rain, rain, without letting up for an instant. The hard rain fell through the night, rain, rain, rain, rain, the rain falls and falls, more rain and then more rain and then more rain.

(Amnesia)

2024

Burnt birch

2 parts, each: 152.4 x 122 x 3.8 cm / 60 x 48 x 1.5 in

Overall: 152.4 x 244 x 3.8 cm / 60 x 96.1 x 1.5 in

HS20-CL8610P

Inside him now the landscape is empty with everything, his hair waves between summer and autumn, silent through the woods.

(Amnesia)

2024

Burnt linen

87.6 x 50.8 x 7.6 cm / 34.5 x 20 x 3 in

HS19-CL8538P

His chest was no longer soft, and his lungs were no longer hollow. In those years of stillness, he made letters with topographic sketches; each became a space, and space became a variable. (Oh time your pyramids)

2024

Burnt linen

2 parts, each: 76.2 x 61 x 3.8 cm / 30 x 24 x 1.5 in

Overall: 76.2 x 122 x 3.8 cm / 30 x 48 x 1.5 in

HS20-CL8612P

"Before the law stands a doorkeeper," his mother makes sure he firmly memorizes this—the mechanism of existence, the linguistic life of a single person. Each night, he marches on a long journey outside the language so that the garden from the history house remains alive.

(Amnesia)

2024

Burnt birch

152.4 x 91.4 x 3.8 cm / 60 x 36 x 1.5 in

HS20-CL8611P

Cole Lu (b.1984, Taipei; lives and works in Brooklyn) completed his MFA at Washington University in St. Louis. His work has been exhibited at Akademie Der Kuriste, Berlin; Auto Italia, London; Plank Road, New York; the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia; and the Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis. The first monograph on Lu's work, *First Pylon*, was recently published by Inpatient Press, and later this year he will have a solo exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Maine College of Art & Design, Portland.