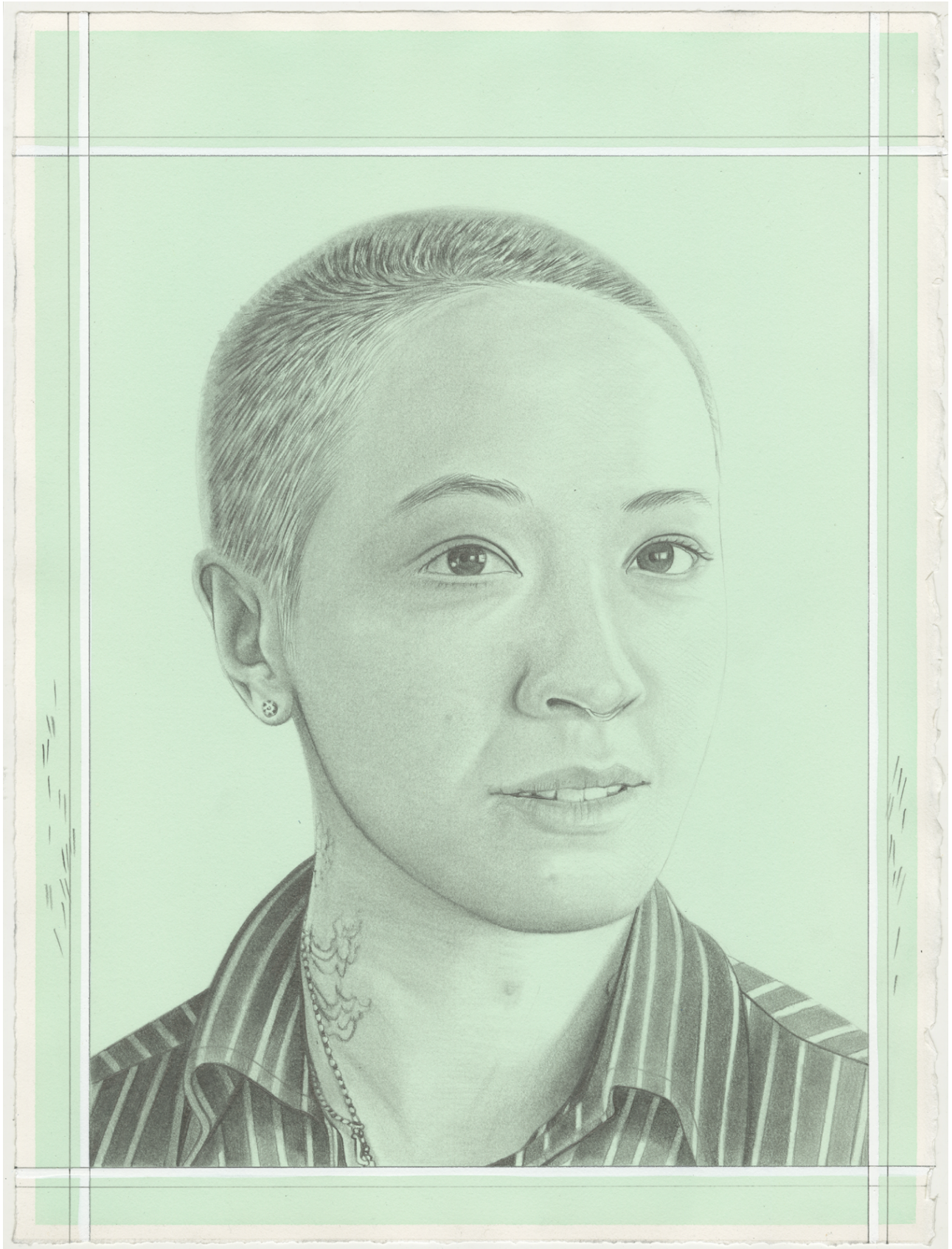


THE BROOKLYN RAIL



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Portrait of Sin Wai Kin, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

SIN WAI KIN with McKenzie Wark

Sin Wai Kin brings fantasy to life through storytelling and moving image, performance and writing. Their work realizes alternate worlds to describe lived experiences of desire, identification, and consciousness. Sin's film, *A Dream of Wholeness in Parts* (2021) was nominated for the 2022 Turner Prize, as well as screened at the British Film Institute's 65th London Film Festival. Their work has been featured in solo and group exhibitions internationally. In mid-February Sin joined McKenzie Wark on the *New Social Environment* (Episode 1160) to discuss their new exhibition, *The End Time!*. The conversation that follows touches on concepts of narrative and storytelling, how Sin uses characters to explore different social constructs, and what it means to be making art in a time when artifice is no longer the antonym of authenticity.

The End Time!
Canal Projects
January 31–March 29, 2025
New York

McKenzie Wark (RAIL): Wai Kin. How are you? It's a pleasure to meet you, at least virtually. This work is really lovely and interesting to me. The show itself is called *The End Time!*, and one of the works within the show is a two-channel video called *The Time of Our Lives* (2024). Can you just tell us a little bit about how the show is installed?

Sin Wai Kin (S.W.K.): Yeah, absolutely. The heart of the show is a two-channel video installation, which is a kind of expanded science-fiction sitcom that uses the idea of relative time to think about how reality is also relative and not absolute. So it's a two-channel installation where you have one channel that's the sitcom, and there are actors performing in an open set. The second channel is the live audience watching the sitcom. As a viewer, you sit between the two screens, and you decide where you position yourself in that relationship.

There's another work in the exhibition called *Essence* (2024), which is an advertisement for a conceptual men's cologne. The campaign features one of the characters in my practice called Wai King, who is a drag king character. He's on this hero's journey to find what is intrinsic to his

nature. The slogan of the campaign is "Your true self awaits." There are also props from both works in the exhibition. So you have the wigs which the characters wear on busts, as well as the flowers which appear in the center of the sitcom set. There are bottles of the Essence cologne. They're actually filled with perfumers' alcohol rather than a smell. I started working with a nose to try to develop a scent, but I realized what made the most sense for this object was for it to really be a prop. For it to be symbolically empty, there should be no smell at all. If we're thinking about, you know, what is intrinsic to our nature.

There's a few ideas that I pull from broadly, like theories of general relativity and quantum mechanics to play with the idea of time. There are references to creation stories and to different cultural mythologies. I'm really thinking about the act of storytelling and how storytelling exists in different ways, how we're immersed, through advertising, in popular media—how it not only represents but also creates reality.

RAIL I guess the first thing I want to ask you about is character design, and then designing a world that those characters will populate. Can you tell me a little bit about the process of character design, if that's how you think of it?

S.W.K. In my practice I probably have something like ten characters, because some characters are two-in-one, or one character split into two, depending on how you look at it. But every character in my practice is looking at a different binary that I'm trying to undo or have a closer look at, or a different area of research or a different kind of concept. So for example, in *The Time of Our Lives*, there's a character called The Storyteller who keeps on popping up to deliver these news bulletins and generally interrupt the narrative. And The Storyteller is—like all my characters—a character that reappears in different works, in different guises, but often as a news presenter. He's a character I use to think about the act of storytelling, what the possibilities and the realities are in terms of the power of storytelling.

RAIL Do you think of all your works as occupying the same universe?

S.W.K. I think they're in parallel universes. By combining these characters in different relationships in different contexts I'm able to look at a problem or whatever I'm thinking about from different perspectives. I think that it inevitably ends up that every work is like another window into this universe that's expanding in my practice.

RAIL I'm intrigued by the doubling or splitting of characters, because that seems like an instant way to sort of start creating a narrative line through it.

S.W.K. Yeah. There is a character in my practice called The Construct, whose face is partially inspired by the face of the Dan role in Cantonese and Peking opera, which is often the lead female role—usually a romantic interest of the lead male role. And I've created two faces for that character, to represent this internalized false dichotomy of good and evil, or victim and villain, especially as it relates to representations of femininity. They appear in *A Dream of Wholeness in Parts*, moving through scenes. In different scenes, they appear with a different face.

RAIL I wanted to ask you about makeup. The art of drag seems to be one of the sources of creating the looks. Can you tell me a little bit about creating the visual appearances of these characters?

S.W.K. My first character is the feminine character that appears in *The Time of Our Lives*. That character appeared in 2013 and definitely has a very drag influence, very Western drag. This is a character that I used to think about my relationship with Western femininity. So it's about parodying, exploding and holding a magnifying glass to femininity as it's constructed and conditioned within Western and European context. It's looking at how femininity is intrinsically linked to whiteness in these contexts.

There are other characters that come from the influence of, as I mentioned, Cantonese and Peking opera. There are characters whose makeup comes from a story that I illustrated, and then I put onto a face. There's lots of different costuming practices that I'm drawing on to create these characters.

It is important for me to think about the context that the characters are in as much as the characters. I find that there is a tendency to focus on the construction of characters. And I think this



reflects how we are conditioned to focus on individuals. There's also the construction of this whole sitcom world in this work, which was informed by watching a lot of sitcoms and looking at the relationships that make up the visual language of the sets, the language of the edit, the language of the graphic design of the title sequence. And using all these tools to create this specific relationship of the characters to their contexts, and so to set up all the expected relationships that come with the context of the sitcom. So you immediately understand that there are certain tropes you're going to see played out between these characters when you have a feminine and a masculine character opposite each other in this open set.

RAIL It's one of the classic sitcom scenes: the male character enters and says, "Honey, I'm home!" to the female character who is already in the domestic space—and all the ways that's coded. But then we never quite move on to the

narrative arc that a sitcom would have, and we end up in a different space. And so, what happens if this is not the time and space of the narrative of television?

S.W.K. So within the work there are two clocks on the wall of the open set. One is a doomsday clock, which is a prop that I had made that is replicating the doomsday clock, which is a clock that was created in 1947. The time is set by a group of scientists to indicate how close we are to the end of the world, if midnight is the end of the world. Right now, we're eighty-nine seconds away from midnight. It's the closest we've been yet.

And on the other wall there is a clock that indicates whether we're in the past, the present, or the future. Time jumps around, but the narrative structure is actually cyclical. I'm trying to present this binary impression of cyclical vs linear time as a reflection of the structure of narratives.

The characters keep on talking about the hero narrative and that's a way of thinking about different models of narratives that are possible, like Joseph Campbell and hero narrative, or Ursula Le Guin's book *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, and the way that she describes the structure of narratives. Hero narratives tend to happen along one line and have a beginning and an ending. There's usually one character who conquers something, violence is often connected to some sort of realization, and then it ends, and there's a clear moral element. This is opposed to the carrier bag narrative, which is a story that can hold many things together at once. It might not completely make sense, and it might have conflicting ideas that are somehow held together. But it's a narrative that will immerse you and will hold you within it, and you can make up your own mind about what's meaningful.

RAIL I think in the United States at the moment we're living with people who feel like they are the hero of a hero narrative. It's a little terrifying to even contemplate. I'm reminded of a famous Sun Ra line, which is, "It's after the end of the world. Don't you know it yet?" And there's a sense in which this piece sort of stages that moment. I think it's probably a consensus among anybody who's paying attention that a certain world, a particular world, is indeed ending. And how does one make narrative art if that's the case?

S.W.K. I think it's important to be making stories now for worlds that we want to be a part of. I think storytelling—especially fantasy and science fiction—can do many things. They can create an escapist context where you can leave your current context and be immersed in a different world. What I realized when I started to get back into science fiction as an adult, was that there was not just escapism there. From that other perspective, you can leave your current context and have another perspective. It allows you to look back at your everyday situation and realize how it could be different. That's something that I thought about again when I started to see people interacting with the installation. You have these two screens that are setting up this binary relationship of a performer and an audience, or performance and authenticity, which I'm trying to undo. In order to see the entire installation, in order to see both screens at once, people started to stand outside of the installation. It makes me think how you have to be outside of something in order to completely see it.

RAIL I haven't seen the installation. I saw it on my screen with the two channels in parallel, which I guess is a viewing experience you can't have in person. But yeah, tell me a little bit about including the image of the audience, and then also the flashing sign that we see in reverse, that's facing the audience and gives them prompts for the affects like laughter, sadness—

S.W.K. That choice to include the audience goes back to an idea in quantum entanglement, the idea that reality is not something that we can uncover or discover. There's no objective reality to be discovered. Reality is something that happens as we agree as to what it is.



Sin Wai Kin, *The Time of Our Lives*, 2024. Initiated by Accelerator and co-produced with Kunsthall Trondheim, Canal Projects, and Blindsport Gallery, supported by Vince Guo. Courtesy the artist.

As somebody who has done a lot of performance, I'm aware of the unspoken social contracts that come with certain situations. When you're interacting with somebody, there is an agreement that whatever reality you're performing is true. That relationship became clear to me when I started to perform this first character, which was about my relationship with Western femininity. And what I noticed was that when I looked completely different, when I was this character, then I was treated completely different, and then I acted completely different. I was mostly performing in bars and clubs, queer contexts at the time, but, even there, as soon as I didn't look like myself, I was treated differently, and I was able to see how people perceived me in my everyday embodiment. I think about this act of costuming, and this act of drag as a kind of embodied speculative fiction, so that you can kind of have this view from elsewhere. How do I experience the world if I look like this, how does that change things?

RAIL In a way, drag is science fiction.

S.W.K. Definitely. I made a lot of realizations that still ground my practice through that process. Seeing this relationship of becoming together constantly with our context, with everybody who is perceiving you at every moment. So there's that element of the audience watching the performers, but really everybody is acting. I mean literally, the audience is made up of twenty-five actors. It's another way that I'm trying to undo the binary position of performance and authenticity, acting and perceiving.

On the screen there is a mirror image of the cues that a live audience watching a sitcom would see. You mentioned laughter. I also added sympathy and arousal. It's mirrored because, you're not necessarily part of the audience—you know you're seeing the back of those cues. You know that you are in this in-between space of the performer and

the audience, and you have to think about your positionality in that space.

RAIL What happened to authenticity in twenty-first century culture? It's no longer the antonym of artifice. Something can now be authentic and artificial at the same time.

S.W.K. Yeah, absolutely. I mean, it's ironic that we're living in a time where politicians are TV personalities. Performance and politics are completely intertwined—

RAIL Which makes me think of the other work, *Essence*, that appears in the show. It is an advertisement for men's cologne. I was curious what the perfume was, but that it has no essence strikes me as kind of apropos here.

S.W.K. Yeah, so the cologne ends up being a prop for the cologne advertisement, which advertises the prop, which is a prop for the advertisement—there's a circularity there that exists in a lot in my work. The advertisement for the prop is also trying to point towards the fact that there is no such thing as truth in who you are. You know, the truth is exactly what we agree that it is—there is no original to hearken back to, no truth of embodiment, of what it is to be a person. Humans are animals that completely construct the environment that our brains and our bodies are shaped and grow in. So, there is no such thing as natural or unnatural. It's whatever we decide that it is. And the narratives that we put out, whether in popular media, advertising—even in science—create that reality.

RAIL The fragrance in the commercials is a fragrance for men. And I'm kind of curious: is there a kind of futility to the search for the essence of masculinity, as a thing that's going on in the culture?

S.W.K. Absolutely, yeah. Futility is a word I would use to describe the feeling of a lot of aspects of

this exhibition. I think it's also why I use humor so much, because you just have to laugh.

RAIL And in the *Essence* commercial, your character is riding a horse. So we get these horse close-ups, like big-tough-beast-staring-at-the-horizon kind of stuff that reminds me of old Marlboro ads.

S.W.K. Well, I watched a lot of cologne advertisements in preparation and tried to reproduce as many tropes as I could.

RAIL I should correct myself: what it actually reminds me of is Richard Prince's images that were taken from Marlboro ads. So there's mediation in between.

S.W.K. I try to use these visual languages that we're so used to consuming to kind of lull you into that expected relationship, and then complicate it.

RAIL The thing is, everything about the makeup and costume and set design is just so stylistically consistent and finished. I'm kind of astonished by the level of sheer virtuosity around all of those things. And I'm curious about your relation with all of those mediums.

S.W.K. I think filmmaking is rarely a solitary medium, especially for something that has a production level that *The Time of Our Lives* has. It took a lot of collaborators to make this work happen. I collaborated with set designers, stylists, a cinematographer; I had an assistant director for the shoot. Then there's a whole production crew—it's an incredibly collaborative medium, and I really like that about filmmaking. But then sometimes it is solitary. When I am back in my studio after the shoot, and I'm starting to edit it, starting to piece it together. But then more people come on board for the post-production to do the VFX backgrounds, and composite everything together. I work with an incredible colorist, Andi

Chu, who's done a lot of my projects. Every aspect helps to create the world that you are immersed in.

RAIL We're talking about ends and beginnings. So what's the beginning? Are you someone who sketches initially? What's your working method, if we go right back to the beginning of a work like this?

S.W.K. The beginning is usually writing, and even before that, researching. I spent about six months gathering my sources before I started to write this work. And the sources are very broad, from the inner chapters of the *Zhuangzi* to *A Brief History of Time* to *Black Quantum Futurism: Theory & Practice* to my dream diary and journal entries. There's a lot of personal material in this script too. Some of it is more disguised than other parts, but if you see the work, then I think you can understand that there is a lot of very personal material there. Another binary that I often come back to in my work is something that I saw on a note card in Octavia Butler's archive: "the more personal, the more universal." And so I often start from a personal place, and then use a lens of fantasy or science fiction, and draw on lots of other references to abstract the personal into something that other people can project their own experience onto.

RAIL The beauty of it for me is—given the infinite source material from which you could draw, just sitting at your laptop—how you create something that has form and style and makes disparate elements hold together in a world of infinite noise.

S.W.K. You know that meme of the guy with a whiteboard behind him, full of all kinds of notes? That's how my writing process starts. I print out lots of different notes and cut them up with recurring things highlighted; I put them next to each other, tape them together, and try to find the through line and see how all these things connect.

Once I have organized the chaos on my large bulletin board, then I start to look at it again, and I start to write what eventually will become a much more cohesive piece of writing, which then becomes a script, which becomes a shot list. There's lots of storyboarding. I was lucky with this script. It was initiated by Accelerator in Stockholm, which is attached to Stockholm University, a school well known for its physics department. So I worked with an astrophysicist who read over my script to help ensure my science was as accurate as possible.

RAIL You're making me wonder how, in the twenty-first century, an artist can give someone a glimpse of a totality, or wholeness, through the somewhat counterintuitive selection of so many disparate materials, but then somehow make connections that enable you to orient yourself to reality? Because it seems like the main difficulty at the moment is to orient ourselves—collectively—to a potential reality through some kind of aesthetic involvement in the world.

S.W.K. I think this goes back to the act of storytelling, or the importance of fantasy. To play and be imaginative is incredibly important. I think it was Walidah Imarishah and Adrienne Maree Brown who said, you have to be able to imagine something in order to move towards it. I think

about that a lot, but I also think about the fact that Octavia Butler literally predicted in the eighties a president who would come to power in kind of a puppet government run by an oligarchy with the slogan, "Help Us Make America Great Again." And set in 2025, you know?

RAIL Yeah, that one was on the money. J. G. Ballard's *Hello America* is sort of astonishing in that regard as well, but Ballard places the unhinged president in Las Vegas rather than Florida. But it's like, whoa.

S.W.K. We are also living in George Orwell's *1984*.

RAIL It's that meme of the Venn diagram of all the dystopias at once! It's like, oh God, they all got a piece of it right! But you're offering something a little different, which is very welcome. There's a sort of lightness to it, even though it doesn't necessarily go well for the characters in the story—no spoilers. There's a light touch on some serious material.

S.W.K. I think the characters are wrestling with themselves and each other throughout the work, trying to figure out whether they're awake or dreaming or whose reality they're in. And, you know, I think that's what it feels like right now.

RAIL It's an astonishing scene where it sort of glitches on what the life event is. Is it a graduation? Is it a wedding? Is it a death? And we're not sure. There's a way that we get a structural approach to narrative, where each one's on top of the other.

S.W.K. It's kind of asking, what is the narrative?

RAIL So, a recurring word when you sort of talk about your work is the word binary. And I just want to unpack that a little bit. What role does that play in conceptualizing these things?

S.W.K. I think that a lot of the binaries are almost synonyms for the same thing—reality and fantasy, performance and authenticity, waking and dreaming, objective and subjective knowledge. I think these things are intrinsically linked. One story I often come back to, and which has really informed the way I think about binaries, is an allegory from the inner chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, the dream of the butterfly. It's the story of a philosopher who falls asleep and has a dream that he's a butterfly. And the dream is so vivid that when he wakes up, he's no longer sure if he's a man dreaming he's a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he's a man. And I think that this is a beautiful illustration of how multiple things can be true at once.

RAIL I'm someone who forgets dreams very quickly on waking. If I don't make a note immediately, it's gone immediately. I sometimes wonder if, actually I didn't forget, and this is the dream. So the forgetting is the dream, and I'm in it. It's kind of a version of the same parable.

S.W.K. There's an incredible essay that Barbara Fornssler wrote about the sex-gender matrix that we exist in. But, yeah, I think I'm continually trying to wake up from the dream. But it's hard to see the thing when you're inside of it—like with my work. I'm trying to almost uncover the layers and layers of cultural conditioning and socialization.

RAIL I think that's the looming dream. It's like, something is ending here. So what becomes of art when there isn't the same relation to the future?

S.W.K. Yeah, this is ultimately a dream we will wake up from.

RAIL I think that's something this work does so elegantly, but in ways that are incredibly depressing to think about—that a certain kind of temporality doesn't exist anymore. It's not conceivable. But I gotta pause—the sex-gender binary is itself already a binary, and maybe one that doesn't work. Maybe those things are not opposable, or are collapsible, or two terms when we need five.

S.W.K. It's a false binary, like so many binaries, and the fact that we have been conditioned to believe in this false dichotomy and this polarization—I think the sex-gender matrix is another prison for our minds. And I don't know if I've woken up yet, but I'm certainly trying to.

RAIL I don't know, would one want to wake up? Dreams can be good places too.

S.W.K. Definitely. I guess I'm hoping to reach the kind of conscious dreaming where I can decide the course of the dream.

RAIL They call that lucid dreaming. I'm wondering what the opposite would be? The root of "lucid" is light, so would the other direction be dark-dreaming?

S.W.K. I think we're currently descending further into the nightmare. Like I said, Octavia Butler was asking, what if things don't change? That's the world that we're in now.

RAIL And she was not the most pessimistic of the science fiction writers of that era either.

S.W.K. She was hopeful. She believed in the power of storytelling. There was another note card in her archive that always sticks with me: make people touch and taste and know. Make people feel! She wanted to change people.

RAIL It seems we're in more of a Philip K. Dick kind of universe, which is sort of psychotic, delusional, and authoritarian. Yeah—good times. [Laughter] The thing about binaries in this work is there always seem to be multiple sets at the same time, such that we're not playing on one. There's several that play on each other.

S.W.K. It's kind of everything and nothing. Taoism has also influenced my thinking about binaries—that there is no such thing. Language comes into this as well. Every kind of opinion or position or name is just a temporary lodging place in the flow of things that is constantly changing and transforming. So in a sense, any attempt to categorize is an attempt to hold something still that is not—and never can be—still.

RAIL You give a very distinctive and original palette of materials to that thought, that's really striking to bring those things together.

S.W.K. Thank you.

RAIL I want to go back to the research part of your process. Is there a particular way you seek out materials?

Sin Wai Kin, *The Time of Our Lives*, 2024. Initiated by Accelerator and co-produced with Kunsthall Trondheim, Canal Projects, and Blindspot Gallery, supported by Vince Guo. Courtesy the artist.



S.W.K. There's usually something that triggers an interest in a particular thing. It often happens kind of iteratively. I might have a new set of characters in a work thinking about a particular thing and/or a new character that's introduced who is thinking about an area of research. And there's not ever an answer to the question. There's only ever more, maybe even better questions. And so I often kind of follow that direction.

I had this article from a scientific journal on quantum entanglement, and I was just so enraptured by the ways that it reflected my thinking about objectivity and truth. The universe is not deterministic. The universe is fundamentally unknowable. But there was a point in history, during the Enlightenment, when we thought not only that we were the center of the universe, but that we would eventually be able to know everything, and then be able to predict the future. I think some people are still living in that narrative.

RAIL I guess we never really recovered from where physics went in the early twentieth century. The rabbit hole just got deeper. From the Copenhagen interpretation on it's like: oh, okay. Unless you have a practice that stabilizes temporarily some piece of the world, that's all there is. And then those stabilized pieces never quite align properly anyway, so you have, at best, temporary holding patterns in the flow.

S.W.K. The only constant that exists, actually, is change. I have a character called Change that I created to try to embody, to know in an embodied sense that change is the only constant.

RAIL How soon does a character show up in the creative process? Does it start with a character and then you sort of figure out that character's theme, or the other way around?

S.W.K. It happens in different ways. For example, Change was a drawing that I did that I held on to for a long time, knowing that it would be

important, but I just hadn't figured it out yet. At the same time, I was doing a lot of reading and scripting and it came together at some point. There's no set formula for how and when characters appear or manifest in a work.

RAIL The characters seem to embody questions or concepts rather than personalities.

S.W.K. I think that's true, the characters' personalities also change in different works. Before this year, the character I was working with the most was The Storyteller, and that character would completely change from one work to another. There's a work called *Dreaming the End* (2023), where The Storyteller appears as this kind of authoritative figure in this internal world, saying everything and saying nothing, just repeating the word "name" over and over again, pretending to be making sense, and the character Change is kind of eating a meal across from them, trying to grasp what they're saying. Then later there's an alternate external world, a fantastical garden that the characters reappear in looking and acting completely different. Within that world, you have the character of The Storyteller being born. You witness them being born and starting to use language for the first time, locating themselves in language as they start to use it, as they start to use names, and becomes themselves within—

RAIL Like an origin story for your universe?

S.W.K. There are a few origin stories.

RAIL Of course, we can have more than one.

S.W.K. There's another work featuring Change and The Storyteller, which includes six news presenters broadcasting from parallel universes. Each character appears three times in completely different guises with totally different personalities. And this is also to think about the fact that we are a reflection of the context that we exist in, just as language is a reflection of the context it's produced in and so reproduces again. And with that

understanding you can say, there's no such thing as an individual. Individual and context is another binary I'm thinking about in my work. And it can definitely be collapsed: we are our context. Every tool we have to express ourselves reproduces the narratives we exist in, but I also believe that there is agency there in the process of becoming conscious of that.

McKenzie Wark is the author, among other things, of *Reverse Cowgirl* (Semiotexte), *Raving* (Duke) and *Love and Money, Sex and Death* (Verso). She teaches at the New School in New York City.