

PRESS RELEASE

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Yan Wang Preston: Three Easier Pieces

24 April – 25 May 2024

Messums London



After 'Olympia, 1863', 2023. Archival inkjet print, 150x190cm.

In her second solo exhibition at Messums London, the Chinese-British photographer Yan Wang Preston presents new works that explore the complexities of cultural migration by restaging iconic artworks in different geopolitical and cultural contexts. The series includes the photographic and performative restaging of artworks such as 'To Add a Metre to an Anonymous Mountain, 1995', 'Wanderer above the Sea of Fog, 1817', and 'Olympia, 1863', the latter featuring the first decolonial study of the botanical details in Manet's painting. Already three years in the making, *Three Easier Pieces* is the debut appearance of the works. The exhibition will feature a selection of large, collectable prints as well as a 'Making Room' sharing behind the scenes materials such as letters for volunteers, snapshots, and films.

The first piece in the series, *After 'To Add a Metre to an Anonymous Mountain, 1995'* was made in August 2021. The original work saw ten young Chinese artists piling their naked bodies on top of each other in the suburb of Beijing as a solidary protest against the societal expulsion that they suffered. Facing the ever-present gender, cultural and racial segregations within our societies, Wang Preston decided to restage the work by deliberately inviting people from diverse backgrounds. Nine local volunteers performed with her, nakedly, with skin-to-skin contact. Together they formed a new conglomerate body on a post-industrial moorland in Lancashire, UK. In doing so, she not only re-considers traditionally influential artworks from the lens of eco-feminism and interculturalism, but also celebrates Britain's multicultural

society with its politically aware citizens, suggesting a possible future when integration and empathy transcend boundaries between peoples, cultures, and countries.



After 'To Add a Metre to an Anonymous Mountain, 1995', 2021. Archival inkjet print, 150x190cm.

Wang Preston continues her exploration in landscape representation, gender, the gaze, and western colonialism in the next work. Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1817) was selected for its highly problematic iconisation of (western) men. In order to disrupt and de-centralise, Wang Preston, together with friends, performed the painting nude, standing on a rock forming a comparable composition for as long as they could endure. She describes, "It scrutinised our exposed bodies mercilessly while sharing our vulnerabilities with the viewers. Such discomfort continues when I face so many reclining female nudes in western history of art."



After 'Wanderer above the Sea of Fog, 1818', 2022. Archival inkjet print, 95x75cm.



After 'Olympia, 1863', 2023. Archival inkjet print, 150x190cm.



After 'Olympia, 1863', 2023. Archival inkjet print, 150x190cm.

The third work in the series restages of Manet's *Olympia* (1863). To overturn the painting's hidden power hierarchy, Wang Preston first replaced the white prostitute with a white man. She then took the place of the prostitute herself as a non-white woman and a performing photographer, not to endure, but to return the gaze. Further studies explored the details of the painting, including the splendid bouquet, and subsequently identified the main flower as a white peony. Such discovery further places Manet's modernity within western colonialism due to the introduction of peonies to the UK from China in the eighteenth century. A 'pictorial reclaim' of such botanical origin is suggested with three black and white photographs, re-visualising Manet's bouquet with traditional Chinese flower and bird painting aesthetics.



After 'Olympia, 1863' (Delphinium), 2023.
Silver gelatin print, 97x76cm.



After 'Olympia, 1863' (Hibiscus), 2023.
Silver gelatin print, 95x76cm.



After 'Olympia, 1863' (Peony), 2023.
Silver gelatin print, 95x76cm.

Wang Preston comments, "One needs a community to make change. All three pieces were made with multi-ethnic volunteers who were fully aware of the works' critical intentions. To re-photograph is to have a conversation with history. To re-stage with such naked bodies is to have an intimate, personal, and transcultural encounter with history. With this extreme sense of vulnerability, dis-placement and re-placement, a set of new understandings towards the past, the present and the self may emerge. This is what *Three Easier Pieces* are finding out."

ABOUT

Yan Wang Preston (b.1976) is a visual artist interested in landscape representation, identity, migration, and the environment. With photography as her primary medium, her solo, collaborative, and participatory projects employ still and moving images, sound, performance, installation, and the artist book to explore complex ideas from multiple angles.

Wang Preston's practice is characterised by rigorous research processes led by her committed embodiment within the land to gain first-hand, skin-to-skin-like understanding. Her projects are demanding physically, intellectually, and emotionally. For her first major project, *Mother River* (2010–2014), she photographed the entire 6,211 km Yangtze River in China at precise 100 km intervals on a large-format plate camera. Such a monumental undertaking enabled her to provide a multi-layered, vernacular view of contemporary China while subverting the existing hierarchies within the photographic representation of the Yangtze River since 1842. Her second project, *Forest* (2010–2017), investigated the complexities, hopes, and failures of constructed urban nature in China by following the adaptation journeys of transplanted old trees. Since 2020, Wang Preston has shifted her gaze from China to the UK, where she currently resides. *With Love. From an Invader* (2020–2021) saw her opening her research by walking to and photographing the same rhododendron bush on the South Pennine Moors every other day for an entire year. The project produced a four-panel audio-visual installation with a 38-minute soundtrack written by her collaborator, Monty Adkins, presenting visual and sonic 'data' in defence of the rhododendron habitat as part of Britain's recombinant and cosmopolitan ecologies.

Wang Preston's projects are internationally and critically acclaimed. She was the recipient of the inaugural RPS Award for Environmental Responsibility in 2023. She won First Prize in Professional Landscape, Sony World Photography Awards (2019); First Prize in Professional Commission, Syngenta Photography Prize (2017); and the Shiseido Photographer Prize at the Three Shadows Photography Annual Award in Beijing, China (2016). She was one of the Hundred Heroines awarded by the Royal Photographic Society in 2018.

Her solo exhibitions have been presented at leading public institutions such as the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, UK (2022); LOOK Photo Biennale, Liverpool, UK (2019); Xposure Photography Festival, UAE (2018); Photo Museum Ireland (2017); Chongqing China Three Gorges Museum (2015); and the Swatch Pavilion, 56th Venice Biennale (2015). Her work has been featured in numerous group exhibitions, including *Energy: Sparks from the Collection* at the Victoria & Albert Museum (2023–2024); *The Time is Right*, Jeddah Photo 2022; *Ten by Ten* at FotoFest, Houston, USA (2020); Sony World Photography Awards Touring Exhibition (2019); *Forty Years of Contemporary Chinese Photography*, OCAT Shenzhen, China (2018); and Dubai Photo (2016). Her first solo exhibition in London, *Yan Wang Preston: With Love*, was presented at Messums London in 2022.

Wang Preston has published two monographs: *Mother River* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2018) and *Forest* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2018). Her photographs and writing have been published in numerous newspapers and journals, such as The Guardian, Irish Times, Architecture Review, Asian Review, De Correspondent, Granta, and the Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art.

Her work is in numerous collections, including the Victoria & Albert Museum, London; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, USA; National Trust Collections, UK; Wuhan Art Museum, China; Syngenta AG; and Swatch Art Peace Hotel, Shanghai and is held by private collectors worldwide. Her UK print sales are represented by Messums Org.

Wang Preston was born in Henan Province in China in 1976, to a family of medical doctors. She gained her BSc in Clinical Medicine at Fudan University, Shanghai, in 1999 and subsequently qualified as a practising anaesthetist. She emigrated to the UK in 2005 and changed her career to photography. In 2009 she gained an MA in Visual Arts from Leeds Beckett University. In 2018 she was awarded a PhD in Photography by the University of Plymouth. Alongside her artistic career, she lectures at the University of Huddersfield. She lives in West Yorkshire, UK, with her husband and daughter.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

23 April, 10:30am: V&A Curators Tour, Messums London

23 April, 6-8pm: Exhibition Preview, Messums London

24 April, 10:30am: VIP Tour, Messums London

1 May, 6:30-8pm (arrival from 6pm): Art and law: acts of imagination for better futures

The Photographers' Gallery, 16-18 Ramillies St, London W1F 7LW. Ticketed event.

Join award-winning artist Yan Wang Preston and ClientEarth for a special conversation exploring how art and law can work together to change the world. ClientEarth is a global non-profit organisation that uses the law to create systemic change that protects the Earth for – and with – its inhabitants. Can lawyers and artists join forces to drive lasting change? As ClientEarth's trustee and acclaimed artist Brian Eno put it: "Once something becomes law, it becomes actionable and enforceable. Shortly afterwards, it becomes 'common sense'". But how can the arts help the cultural shifts without which nothing can happen? How can artists help unleash civic imagination?

Yan Wang Preston will be joined on stage by Adam Weiss, Programme Director for Europe at ClientEarth, for a conversation moderated by Dr. Apolline Roger, Head of ClientEarth's Innovation Lab. Taking inspiration from some of Yan's work, they will discuss these questions and try to shed light on the role of the artist in creating a bright future for nature and for people. After the discussion guests will be welcome to stay on for drinks and canapés and meet the speakers.

PRESS

For further information and press images, please contact: press@messums.org

ABOUT MESSUMS – MESSUMS WEST, MESSUMS LONDON AND MESSUMS ORG

MESSUMS WEST: Established as Messums Wiltshire in 2016 by Johnny Messum, Messums West is a leading multi-purpose gallery and arts centre set inside a restored thirteenth-century tithe barn with surrounding buildings, exhibition space, sculpture garden and restaurant.

MESSUMS LONDON is a 2,000 sq ft exhibition space on Cork Street behind the Royal Academy. It hosts a rolling programmed of exhibitions for our contemporary artists.

Under the umbrella **MESSUMS ORG**, the business continues to evolve the role of the gallery from presentational space to one that offers multiple ways to access, experience, understand and engage with the creative process and its outcomes. This has included establishing a network of venues and arts communities in the West and East of England – as well as connecting with our historic London gallery space, **MESSUMS LONDON**.

Our core specialisms are represented in the breadth of the arts we engage in as part of the programme of exhibitions and events at our venues. This encompasses painting, sculpture, ceramic, photography, and performance as well as film, architecture, textiles and more. Together with our exhibitions and events, we offer international artist residencies, contemporary dance premiers, symposia, and workshops. Underpinning all of this is an appreciation and respect for nature to which most artists and individuals would readily identify, and a belief that innovation like creativity itself runs at the vanguard of our thoughts.