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## Future re/collection

Wenting Li

Essay by Kendra Yee

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### An abridge conversation with Wenting Li - February 22nd, 2023

Wenting Li's installation "future re/collection" gathers an assortment of otherworldly objects to ask; what are the possibilities of collecting for the unknown? Radiant green milk crates serve as homes to reinventions. Polypropylene entities, Polyvinyl Chloride specimens, and Polyethylene 'things' exist in tandem with organic matter to capture time<sup>1</sup>. These objects are products of the Anthropocene<sup>2</sup>, tools to structure alternative futures. In our shared studio, Wenting and I exchanged stories over a table filled with snacks as the start of a winter storm could be heard rattling against the brick walls that enclose us.

**Kendra:** Your installation brings together both identifiable and uncanny objects. You're decorating a space with seeds, plastics, porcelain and found materials. Physically

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<sup>1</sup> Polypropylene (PP), Polyvinyl Chloride (PVC), and Polyethylene (PE), are the names of the most commonly used types of plastics.

<sup>2</sup> "Anthropocene Epoch is an unofficial unit of geologic time, used to describe the most recent period in Earth's history when human activity started to have a significant impact on the planet's climate and ecosystems" cited from "Anthropocene." National Geographic Society. 20th, May, 2022, <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/anthropocene/>.

recognizable objects are contrasted by temporal items that have less definitive usages. How does this collection interact with time?

**Wenting:** I'm interested in bringing feelings of difference to the familiarity. There are so many possibilities with collecting for the future, it's full of potential if we can shift objects or resources that are in our current possession. How can this process lead to different manifestations of the future, rather than continuing in the direction our society is heading towards? A lot of everyday objects, such as plastic containers, have the capacity to exist in interesting configurations, yet we categorize them as mundane. Maybe when left alone, they are just mundane, but can we reimagine the objects and transform them into portals?

**Kendra:** Yes, we take the mundane for granted. If an object appears familiar, we automatically assign the value or purpose, it becomes a tool rather than something of curiosity or play.

**Wenting:** It's interesting to play with these pre-existing objects found in my life or by those around me. Milk crates, fish bones, clamshells packages, clay, and hard to recycle objects. We are consuming these things while also consuming many different ideas of how the future can play out. There is a future that we are expecting, and there are futures that we are hoping to have. Reading manifestos and then fiddling with objects has an interesting effect on how my mind thinks, it helps me imagine new concepts. Everything in the installation draws from the materiality of pre-existing objects, taking what's available and seeing the possibilities of makeshift assembly.

**Kendra:** Objects have intentions and are created to serve a purposeful task. Milk crates hold milk, fruit baskets hold fruit and many products are made out of ceramics. Would you consider your objects functional? If so, how is the form or structure impacted by the object's role?

**Wenting:** Oooh, the question of 'what is functional' is so open. Practically, they are not functional, but I have different expectations of their functions. They act as prompts for a passerby to ask, "what kind of function do these objects serve, what purpose could they have?" When you see objects you don't understand, that leaves room to provoke a sense of play, curiosity and interest. With the bottoms cut out, the milk crates will never serve the same purpose. Other items once considered "trash" are offered for different merits in this collection.

**Kendra:** This ties back to your idea about material exploration against the apocalypse; perhaps with this assortment of assemblages, you're trying to form a shield used in battle. For me, there is a soft quality to a lot of these objects, holding sensitivities that can easily be overlooked. Many of the things go unnoticed, the value is gifted by spending time with the objects. The items displayed share many dualities; you're not really sure what's machine or handmade. I'm curious to know the connection between the imagined and the industrial quality to the objects?

**Wenting:** I don't think 'objects against the apocalypse' necessarily means creating monuments that withstand the end of time. We are facing so many imminent global disasters, and the answer is not about building a capsule filled for preservation. How can we live if we are so focused on the idea of timelessness or viewing the bleakness of the future? I think the way we live against apocalypse is being softer, open to fragility, and approaching alternative ways to viewing time.

**Kendra:** Is this collection a preservation? Can preservation be trusted? I think preservation is an interesting word, it's both an action and static state. It's holding on to an idea of the past, but also you have to go through great lengths of maintenance and care in order to protect.

**Wenting:** Some of the objects will decompose because they are made of biodegradable materials, whereas others are made out of trash and will live on. You and I have both been

reading this book, *The Material Kinship Reader*, and one of the essays discusses the idea of 'petro-time,' as in plastics will live forever.<sup>3</sup> Maybe a 'forever' lifespan shows the potential for other stories. This collection isn't the preservation of the current timespan, it's a starting point for different futures.

**Kendra:** Perhaps we can discuss the importance of the milk crates, they seem like a foundation to the installation

**Wenting:** The milk crates explore how an established space can be altered, they act as units. I've edited their original function by cutting plastics, weaving threads and adding modular features. Each dairy producer will have different designs for the boxes. Their forms have been changed over time for both function and 'theft' prevention because they are such timeless storage containers.

**Kendra:** Milk crates have huge practical purposes, and are aesthetically present in popular culture, both in city and rural settings.

**Wenting:** It's an object of life, and represents the continuity of plastics. Milk crates are made of a very valuable and seemingly endless material. They last so long due to their quality and durability, compared to other disposable plastics that exist in our lives.

**Kendra:** Is the actual plastic itself more valuable?

**Wenting:** The plastic that milk crates are made out of has a higher resale value, it can be ground down into finer particles and made into new objects. That's why milk crates have the "do not steal" slogan written on the side. They are valuable objects that circulate with repurposed usages; if they 'disappear' from your collection, there's acceptance that this object never was a personal belonging.

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<sup>3</sup> "Heather Davis in Conversation with Kris Dittel and Clementine Edwards." *The Material Kinship Reader*, edited by Clementine Edwards and Kris Dittel, First ed., Onomatopoeie, Eindhoven, Netherlands, 2022, pp. 260–262.

**Kendra:** We associate objects as 'unremarkable' because we already understand the function, as we look closer at the crates, you understand that there is a different purpose. The milk crates are solid but there are windows to peer through. I think this creates an inviting, yet sheltered space.

**Wenting:** Yeah, the crates offer a space in which 'things' can occupy or pass through, but ultimately they belong to the dairy and to the continuum of time. The objects within are presented equally, there's no hierarchy within storage.

**Kendra:** A container, the milk crates are looking for something to hold.

**Wenting:** Collectable objects!

**Kendra:** When we throw something away it is declared as useless waste; objects are saved by desirability, or considering it a "keepsake." How did you choose to value the materials (some found, some pre-existing), and what impact did this have on creating new "pieces?"

**Wenting:** I guess everything is like a new piece in this installation. The ceramics are what people would more readily call a new artwork, because they're made of a material that we hold to a higher worth. They're all made through reuse, either with stuff I've already owned, or stuff that was given to me.

**Kendra:** It really took a community to gather this installation.

**Wenting:** I think so. This is built in collaboration with other people; whether it was asking questions on how to deal with new materials or receiving help transporting stuff from the side of the road. It's made of contributions from waste production, it's important that all the materials have been found or collected.

**Kendra:** The present feels fixed, however it is contrasted by the past and future which feel ephemeral. How does the installation speak to uncertainty?

**Wenting:** The present feels fixed because we live our lives day after day. How can we understand that things are changing? You only witness it over long periods of time, some situations feel more real, or immediate, the reality is shaped by perception.

**Kendra:** When you're experiencing something of the moment it is true, when you try and reflect upon the memory, that's when uncertainty filters in.

**Wenting:** You can't live by only asking questions, but neither should you live by accepting reality as finalized. I think when you look at objects that share the feelings of the familiar and unfamiliar, they represent a shift. I find this is interesting with material artwork, I can almost identify what something is made out of, but what it's made into is completely unknown to me. Things are not fixed, they're just unraveling.

**Kendra:** Do you have a favourite object from the collection? Or one that perhaps holds more meanings, histories or secrets?

**Wenting:** Hmm... ok I can actually answer this question very easily. There is a certain rock — it's small, speckled blue and white from the Leslie Street Spit. It's a pebble that's been tossed into a larger rock made out of construction waste. This rock is a marriage between living processes, the tides throwing it against the land, with trash that's synthetically made. It's something human that's been introduced to the forces of change, making it a beautiful object. Now, the rock sits in this collection.

**Kendra:** The object has stumbled upon its future.

**Wenting:** An infinite amount of atoms that happened to come together for this human made rock. It's my favourite object.



## Wenting's Readings

Edwards, Clementine, and Kris Dittel. *The Material Kinship Reader: Material beyond Extraction and Kinship beyond the Nuclear Family*. 1st ed., Onomatopoe 208, 2022.

Machado de Oliveira, Vanessa. *Hospicing Modernity: Facing Humanity's Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism*. North Atlantic Books, 2021.

Russell, Legacy. *Glitch Feminism*. Verso, 2020.