

This non-human narrator – a human voice altered by digitised reverb – delivers information but, rather than a lecture, it recounts a fable. Like all good fables, the bird's tale contains a moral: 'unfeathered bipeds' have forgotten the originary symbiotic interconnection of planetary life in which natural violence follows a rhythmic balance of give and take rather than operating under the imperial law of domination over lands and peoples and the use of the latter to extract profit from the former.

The film's historical context is the migration across the Afrasian Sea (the western part of the Indian Ocean) of Asian indentured labourers to Mauritius, who were interned on Flat in a British 19th-century quarantine and detention station when 'the plague' (outbreaks of cholera) struck the area. The poetic voice-over refers to nonspecific peoples (labourers and the previously enslaved) who lived in wooden 'nests'. Barely a trace of these huts remain, as opposed to the ruins of the colonial stone-built imperial architecture; the 'nests of basalt' still have a presence regardless of being partially submerged in overgrowth.

For her previous, more meandering film, *De Anima*, 2022, Jo did field research in Myanmar with Smithsonian wildlife veterinarians who were hunting for new strains of coronavirus pre-pandemic. For *Nests of Basalt*, she accompanied a research group from Mauritian Archaeology and Cultural Heritage who were on Flat to excavate bodily remains from unmarked burial grounds, this reclamation being essential to ancestral memory. While both films oscillate between documentary and animation, unlike *De Anima*'s reliance on field recording, in *Nests of Basalt* the oscillation is held together by the 'avian' voice-over and the far greater ratio of animation to documentary footage. Documentary shots of skeletons uncovered in the earth and skulls being processed in a laboratory are not lingered on, while the film's CG animation plunges the viewer into oceanic underworlds littered with sarcophagi, sea creatures and what looks like fossilised brain or intestinal matter, all in luminescent shades of blue and purple and accompanied by a scintillating soundscape. The speed of this digital flow brings into stark relief the continuous cycles of destruction and reclamation that characterise planetary ecosystems. At one point, an oily liquid blackness, suggestive of both the area's volcanic prehistory as well as the pestilence unleashed by the over-extraction of indigenous land and climatic changes, burbles across and suffuses the screen. Flat Island, a low-lying uninhabited islet, is genuinely under threat of being submerged, but in this speculative fiction it reappears and wonderfully promiscuous tendrils repopulate its terrain with vibrant red flowers. However, rather than ending with a utopian fantasy of Gaia returning to health after catastrophe, this non-human paradise is again engulfed by a black cyclonic swell, which the *paille-en-queue*, sensitive to the earth's vibrations, foretells before the blue horizon between sea and sky returns.

Initially premiering at Berlin's Gropius Bau in 2023 in the group exhibition 'Indigo Waves and Other Stories: Re-Navigating the Afrasian Sea and Notions of Diaspora', this UK premiere of *Nests of Basalt* is enhanced by being located in proximity to an actual sea that surrounds an island traversed by new migratory bodies, including viruses, which are deeply feared. In 19th-century Albion, Asian indentured workers and liberated Africans were seen as carriers of pestilence, a discourse that was repeated in the Covid-19 pandemic

in which Asians were again blamed for their supposed species-crossing eating habits. Through its images and sounds, *Nests of Basalt* unhinges viruses from identity and embraces interconnectivity between human and non-human worlds. In the voice-over's script, common origins in primordial volcanism come to the fore: the black streak on the *paille-en-queue*'s white torso is said to have come from volcanic ash, while their 'cousins' acquired their tails' red tip from volcanic fire. This fabulation aligns with geological research: volcanic rocks and minerals are now thought to have played a pivotal role in the formation of human life.

In a recent episode of BBC4's radio show *Desert Island Discs*, volcanologist Clive Oppenheimer's choice of luxury item was a seismometer, which he would use on the island to listen for pleasure to the earth's vibrations. For the regular gallery goer, the visual-sonic machine that is *Nests of Basalt* fabricates an immersion in speculative worlds beyond our ken. This is pleasurable, but it is also a clarion call to listen to the earth's vibrational forewarnings of mutations that might well come from long entombed pasts as much as from future catastrophes.

Maria Walsh is reader in artists' moving image at Chelsea College of Arts and author of *Therapeutic Aesthetics: Performative Encounters in Moving Image Artworks*, Bloomsbury, 2022.



Jane Jin Kaisen, *Halmang*, 2023, video

Jane Jin Kaisen: *Halmang*

esea, Manchester, January 20 to 21 April

Jane Jin Kaisen's exhibition '*Halmang*' at esea contemporary in Manchester might be described as a collective haunting. The ghosts of dead and living women populate the show, their fates entwined by three films that touch on themes of memory, erasure, war and borders. Trauma hangs in the space, largely the result of the geopolitical complexities of Kaisen's birthplace, South Korea, and passed down and absorbed through generations of women. These include 'comfort women', the euphemism for women who were abducted by Japanese occupying forces and forced into sexual slavery for Imperial Army troops, sex workers servicing American military bases, and female deep-sea divers, many of whom were part of the anti-Japanese resistance and among those brutally suppressed for over a year in 1948 in the Jeju island uprisings. A fourth category of women consists of Korean mothers misled by transnational adoption agencies, and the adoptees themselves, both casualties of a state pushing to modernise and reduce its population. Having been sent to Denmark for adoption at the age of three months, Kaisen's own story is embedded with that of these adoptees and other diasporic women who share a sense of cultural non-belonging.

Halmang, 2023, which gives the exhibition its title, is a mesmerising film that portrays elderly women divers known as *haenyeo* on the South Korean island of Jeju, where Kaisen was born. The word *Halmang*, meaning 'grandmother' and 'shamanic goddess' in Korean, is also a respectful form of address for women, and here refers both to the *haenyeo* and the film's location at a site of worship to the wind goddess Yeongdeung Halmang. In the course of the 12-minute film, the *haenyeo* perch on volcanic rocks at the water's edge and rhythmically unfold and knot segments of a white cotton cloth known as *sochang*. A common household object, used for cleaning, swaddling infants and shrouding corpses, this cloth is associated with life and death and with shamanic practice; the *haenyeo* eventually arrange the *sochang* across the jagged terrain in a shell-like, spiral pattern. Custodians of a dying practice, these women wear the hardship of their profession in their stoic expressions: for years they have eked out a meagre living harvesting the sea's fruits in all weathers, demeaned by society as backward and low class. In 2016, however, the *haenyeo* were inscribed in Unesco's Intangible Cultural Heritage List.

Kaisen, whose birth mother and grandmother were *haenyeo*, highlights the tender care with which these women handle the cloth. The camera homes in on the wrinkled, liver-spotted hands and weathered faces of these divers, their slow, purposeful gestures attesting to a kinship born of more than 50 years of diving together and their connection to the natural environment. A soundscape of wind, lapping waves and a song the women used to sing as they headed to the sea accompanies their performance. The final scene shows the site devoid of people, the white cloth drawing a sigil-like mark in this place that, besides being a shrine, has also been a departure point for many of these sea divers.

Halmang is presented within a dark immersive curtained area, while two other films by the artist are displayed on large wooden wedges on the floor. *Of the Sea*, 2013, is just over two minutes and shows the artist walking along the lava shoreline in the footsteps of generations of sea divers, hauling the paraphernalia of their profession – nets, flotation devices, containers – accompanied by a once banned song about these women's tribulations. A small but crucial detail is the book in Kaisen's hand that was written by her grandfather Yeong Seon about the *haenyeo* anti-Japanese resistance movement in the 1930s on Jeju that was sparked by the exploitation and taxation of the women's sea harvests. This allusion opens up a political dimension to the narrative of the *haenyeo*, many of whom carry unhealed wounds from the Japanese occupation and the aftermath of the Jeju April Third Uprising.

This short film thus serves as a kind of pivot between *Halmang* and a third, polyphonic film, *The Woman, The Orphan, and the Tiger*, 2010, which interweaves the voices of once designated 'comfort women', sex workers and female adoptees through oral testimonies, poetry, archival footage and interviews. Kaisen shows us the entangled relations of these women, pawns in a larger game, bound by suffering, shame and marginalisation. If they have not achieved closure, there is some attempt at solace in collectivity. We witness this in the activism of the 'comfort women', who demonstrate every Wednesday outside the Japanese embassy in Seoul, and in the growing community of adoptees who have returned to Korea and discovered a shared sense of displacement and exile. Refusing the glossy, happy

narrative of South Korea's economic miracle, Kaisen compassionately maps the gendered fault lines of continuing social traumas across these three films and creates a space for the sufferers to be acknowledged.

Elizabeth Fullerton is a London-based critic and art writer. She is currently completing a PhD on polyphonic practices in art.

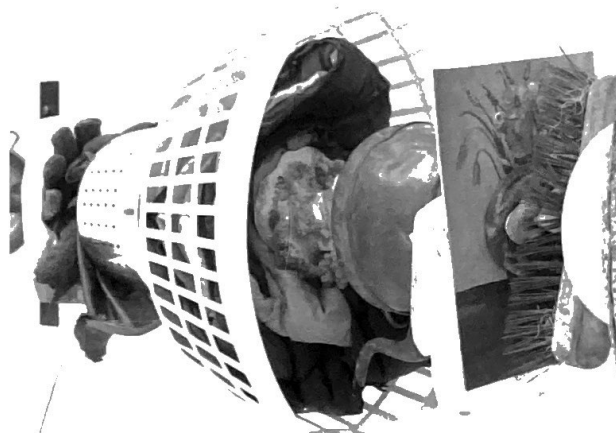
Stuart Middleton: The Human Model

Carlos/Ishikawa, London, 7 March to 20 April

Fear of the unknown continues to compel us; the way one might sit forward when an unexpected sound in a horror film plays. Stuart Middleton's exhibition 'The Human Model' thrives in that strange, uncertain space, at once human and artificial; propulsive and static; frightening and tender.

At the core of this exhibition is *Radial arm maze made from synthetic duvets (15 single, 21 double)*, a maze-like room in the shape of a pentagram with a speaker at head-height at each of the star's points. As the title outlines, the work is constructed by the hanging of duvets over a series of high-tensile steel cable wires in what appears to be a floating den in which to hide or keep warm. Diffused in the intimate glow of light inside the maze and away from the sterility of the white gallery – beams of light creep in from the floor and points where the duvets have been joined with white plastic cable ties – it is easy to become disorientated. This is compounded by the layered, complex sound design, created in collaboration with sound designer Richy Carey, in which hundreds of samples are looped and crashed over one another, a kind of overture to what sounds like industrial chaos. Whenever the maze falls into silence, a sound from a solitary speaker breaks the insulated quiet, and whose source you try to seek out along the pentagram.

The cacophony is in fact the artist attempting to mimetically recreate the sounds of machinery, perhaps in answer to the question posed in an accompanying text: 'why do kids do that brum-brum choo-choo thing?' One wonders if the human model of the exhibition's title might be Middleton himself, constantly pushing



Stuart Middleton, *Personal effects and things that are biographical in amongst material that might be understood as generic without clear separation under compression (Kebab)*, 2024, detail