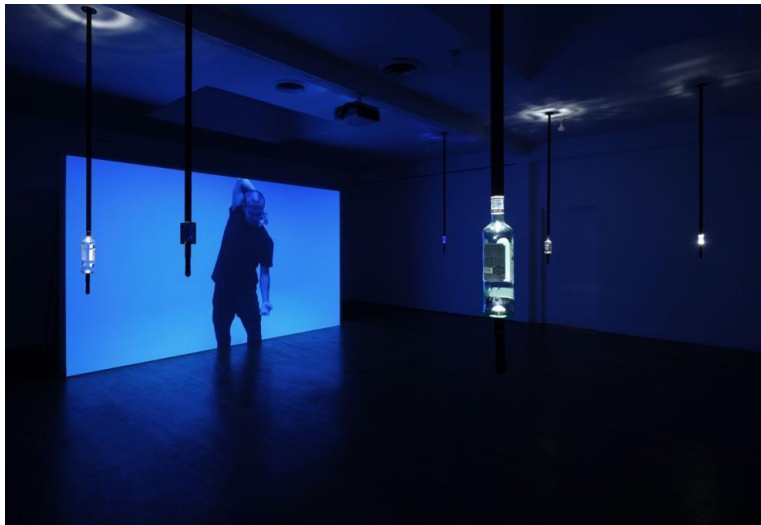


## New Immersive Video and Sculptural Installation by Kenneth Tam Makes Museum Debut at BAMPFA in MATRIX series

*On View August 16 through November 26, 2023*



### Tam's Latest Work Explores Themes of Group Identity, Violence, and Belonging Through Representations of Fraternity Life

*(Berkeley, CA) July 12, 2023*—A new artwork by the acclaimed interdisciplinary artist Kenneth Tam will make its museum debut at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive next month in *Kenneth Tam / MATRIX 281: The Founding of the World*, the latest installment in Tam's ongoing exploration of masculinity, intimacy, and identity. *The Founding of the World*,



Tam's immersive video and sculptural installation, presents a stylized depiction of the probate, a choreographed ritual that is performed in many Asian American fraternities to herald the induction of new members. Along with a concurrent presentation of Tam's work at Stanford's Cantor Arts Center, the exhibition at BAMPFA marks the artist's first major showcase in the Bay Area and the latest installment of the museum's MATRIX Program, a vanguard exhibition series that highlights distinctive and important voices in contemporary art.

Deeply informed by Tam's research into the history and practices of Asian American fraternities, *The Founding of the World* centers on a video of young men engaged in various activities, both real and imagined, associated with these organizations. The choreography onscreen alternates between gestures of tenderness and aggression, contrasting the synchronized movements of a group of men with a single black-clad dancer moving through a dreamlike space. The dancer occasionally appears with a handheld fan or Japanese *oni* (demon) mask, alluding to the often-fraught ways in which these organizations represent—and sometimes exploit—Asian cultural iconography.

Alongside the video work, the exhibition will also include a sculptural installation: empty bottles of liquor and cologne will be suspended from the ceiling, illuminated from below by tactical flashlights. The presentation of these empty vessels alludes to their ritualistic function during rites of passage for young men entering adulthood; they also serve as ominous signifiers of the violence often associated with such moments of transition. In addition, they advance a throughline that has recurred throughout Tam's practice, which investigates how ritualized constructions of belonging and identification often corrode the social bonds they are meant to promote.

Inspired in part by the writings of Romanian philosopher Mircea Eliade (from which the installation takes its name), *The Founding of the World* functions as a companion piece to *The*

*Crossing*, a livestreamed performance artwork that debuted to great acclaim at The Kitchen in New York in 2020. Both works are deeply informed by Tam's research into the controversial traditions and practices of fraternities across the country following the widely publicized deaths of initiates in recent years. *The Founding of the World* references such incidents by interspersing its staged rituals with computer-generated aerial footage of Washington Square Park, a popular site of fraternity probates in New York City.

In conjunction with the exhibition in Berkeley—which was the birthplace of one of the first Asian American fraternities in the United States—BAMPFA will mount a series of public programs, including an original performance made in collaboration with UC Berkeley students on Wednesday, November 8 at 7:30 p.m. Co-created by the students in partnership with Tam and the choreographer Juri Onuki, the performance will explore how themes of identity and belonging have intersected with the history of student activism on the UC Berkeley campus.

“We are thrilled to bring Kenneth Tam’s poignant new work to BAMPFA for its museum debut, where we hope it will further important conversation about culturally prescribed forms of masculinity, Asian American identity, and the search for belonging in an increasingly fragmented cultural landscape,” said Victoria Sung, BAMPFA’s Phyllis C. Wattis Senior Curator, who curated the MATRIX exhibition. “These themes resonate deeply with our communities at UC Berkeley, and we’re especially looking forward to building connections between Kenneth and our student audiences during his time in Berkeley this fall.”

“Kenneth Tam is one of today’s most exciting contemporary artists, who uniquely explores cultural rites of passage and identity formation,” said BAMPFA’s Executive Director Julie Rodrigues Widholm. “As an academic art museum on the campus of a public university—one that has its own history of Asian American fraternity life dating back nearly a century—we look forward to providing a platform for the complex issues raised by Tam’s singular practice.”

### **About Kenneth Tam**

Kenneth Tam is based in Houston, TX and Queens, NY. He works across video, sculpture, performance, movement, installation and photography, and makes work about the performance of masculinity, spaces of physical intimacy and the transformative potential of private ritual. Tam

received his BFA from the Cooper Union and his MFA in 2010.

He has had solo exhibitions at Ballroom Marfa, TX; MoCA Tucson, AZ; Queens Museum, NY; Minneapolis Institute of Art, MN; MIT List Center for Visual Arts, MA; the Visual Arts Center at UT Austin, TX; Commonwealth and Council, CA; and ICA LA, CA. Tam has participated in group shows at the Hammer Museum, CA; SculptureCenter, NY and at The Shed, NY.

Tam is currently an Assistant Professor at Rice University and faculty at The Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts at Bard College. He was previously a Lecturer at Princeton University, Guest Faculty at Sarah Lawrence College, and was a Visiting Lecturer at Harvard University.

### **Image credits**

1. Installation view of Kenneth Tam, *The Founding of The World*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles. Photo by Paul Salveson.
2. Video still from Kenneth Tam, *The Founding of The World*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles.

### **Visitor Information**

#### Hours

Wednesdays through Sundays, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.

#### Tickets

\$14 general admission

\$12 non-UC Berkeley students, disabled, 65+

FREE BAMPFA members; UC Berkeley students, faculty, staff; 18 and under; one adult per child 13 and under; and artists in the BAMPFA collection/MATRIX

#### Address

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