

Steph HUANG

Tate etc,
Ship to Shore
September 2024



TATE ETC.

Autumn 2024
Issue 63



£9.50

9771743850563



STEPH HUANG
AT TATE BRITAIN

Ship to Shore

BY RUBY TANDOH

Steph Huang's new Art Now commission is an invitation to pay close attention to the offshore food industry

Photography by Sophie Stafford

© Sophie Stafford

YOU KNOW THE SILHOUETTE OF A SCALLOP BY heart. It's the shell that children draw before they even know what a scallop is – almost an emoji-worthy form – and the pedestal for Botticelli's Venus. For hundreds of years, it has figured on heraldry; today it's the logo of oil behemoth Shell. In *Stalking the Blue-Eyed Scallop*, Euell Gibbons's 1964 book about foraging at sea, he describes the archetype: 'the rounded, fan-shaped shells with their radiating ribs, waved edges, and two winglike projections at the hinge. It's a beautiful thing', Gibbons writes. 'Artists through the ages have incorporated the scallop shell in a thousand designs.'

Steph Huang's *See, See, Sea*, the film centrepiece of her new exhibition at Tate Britain, continues this lineage. In a fishing boat off the coast of Devon, the scallop diver Frazer Pugh starts by wetting his goggles, attaching his flippers and strapping an oxygen tank to his back. The camera rocks with the waves. Slipping off the deck and into the water, he makes the 27-metre commute to the seabed, hitching a few black net bags to a line about halfway down. He moves over the rocks with the slow, vacillating movement of a hammerhead shark. The scallops are hard to see. Pugh looks for a thin white line, an almost imperceptible aura, around the edge of the shell. He reaches into the jumble of blue-grey rock and the silt rises, then it falls, and he slips a scallop into his bag. Once he's collected all he can, he reroutes the air from his tank into a long, orange balloon. The balloon – and bags of scallops – shoot upward to the light.

See, See, Sea is the result of Huang's extensive travels around Britain's ports and fishing towns, from Hastings to Great Yarmouth and Brixham in Devon, home to one of England's largest remaining commercial fishing fleets. Fishing communities are tight ecosystems – the fifth-generation willow lobster pot maker, the trawlerman, the scallop diver. Huang took to the boats and started documenting the aquatic arts of small-scale fishing. It took her a while to get her sea legs. 'I just kept on vomiting,' she said, 'and filming'.

Huang, who was born in Taiwan and works in London, often gravitates towards food systems in her art. For her 2019 work, *Everything About Prawns*, she looked at the huge fishing halls of Taiwan – purpose-built spaces where people could fish their own prawns. These ponds are a conceptual bridge, more important now than ever, between what people eat and where that food comes from. In her 2022 solo exhibition, *A Great Increase In Business Is On Its Way*, at Goldsmiths CCA, she documented the urban ecologies of London's food markets, from Ridley Road to Deptford. For this newest show at Tate Britain, the focus is Britain's uneasy relationship to the sea that surrounds it.

The dissonance is clearest when it comes to food. When cooked à la British, prawns – ten-legged sea aliens, with thin, articulated carapaces and a lineage stretching back to the Triassic period – are reduced to small, tight Cs, and crooked over a cocktail

glass of Marie Rose sauce. They're often the result of exploitative labour thousands of miles away, but then we don't seem to make the most of the fish stock surrounding the British Isles. 'How come 74% of [British] seafood is exported to other countries?' Huang asks. Brits seem to like fish and seafood most when it resembles neither – only fillets, and clean, muscular cuts. We're also not good at connecting that food with the systems that produced it. Huang wants to re-complicate things.

The resulting show translates the synaesthesia of the ocean to the gallery. Glass orbs, gently distorted like a diver's rising bubbles, are suspended from the ceiling. Walk through them and you enter into the sonic channel of a speaker playing the percussive clank of the trawler chains. Commercial fishing – rather than being some distant, abstract node in our food production system – is lovingly rendered in textures of bronze and stained wood. There's the mellifluous sound of the deep water. In the film, Huang documents the skill of Dave French, a fifth-generation lobster pot maker who dips willow rods into the salt water to soften before weaving them – with the deft fingers of a prog rock guitarist – into cloche-like cages.

Steph Huang
Frankfurt in Brine 2024
Glass jar, hand-blown
glass, mild steel
and copper

Sunday Shopping
List 2024
Supermarket
trolley and bronze

Previous spread
and opposite:
Steph Huang in
The Fryer's Delight,
London, July 2024.
Photo by Sophie Stafford,
styled by Emma Kasyan,
make up by Liz Daxauer



Compared to some of the gloomier vistas in the Tate collection – Vanessa Bell's melancholy *Studland Beach* c.1912 and pretty much any Turner seascape – this sea feels intimate. For Huang, the ocean can be dangerous, but humans even more so. When big boats trawl for scallops, they rake the seabed with implacable metal teeth; plastic lobster pots, swept out on a strong tide, can end up haunting the deep water for several hundred years.

Huang's work branches along a couple of paths. Sometimes she follows the finest tendril of our food root system to the very end – to figures such as Pugh, who supplies just six restaurants with his hand-picked scallops. When she goes in the other direction, towards how our food is eventually consumed, she takes a zoomed-out view onto supermarkets, factories and waste. These are two parts of one troubled dialectic. Just across the room from Pugh's black rope scallop bags, is a crushed supermarket trolley, the basket reduced to a net-like warp. Huang often sees trolleys that have been left on pavements or thrown into canals on her drifts through the city. She found this one abandoned in Glasgow. Recontextualised in the gallery, it becomes an easy shorthand for consumption culture gone too far. In another sculpture, Huang has placed glass pickled eggs and glass

frankfurters into glass jars, a reminder of the brittle efficiency of industrial food.

In spite of the love and fear that thread the work, Huang isn't alarmist. Even though she agrees with the message, she didn't vibe with the sensationalism of *Seaspiracy*, a popular 2021 documentary about how commercial fishing is destroying the oceans. Huang tends to be more dumbfounded than doom-mongering. 'I don't understand people,' she often says, but she does see the inherent silliness, which is also the charm, of the British approach to food. In one work, a whole flameworked glass prawn – like a memento you'd bring back from a mid-tier seaside trip – sits on a plate against a gingham tablecloth.

Huang has also worked as a chef. 'Cooking and making sculptures – it's all the same method.' Sometimes she wakes in the hollow hours between 2am and 4am and goes to Billingsgate market, the largest inland fish market in the UK. She can get a scallop breakfast roll from the onsite café and then return to the market floor to buy several kilos of silvery, ice-packed prawns, which she cooks with olive oil and garlic, letting the shellfish be itself. Back in the gallery, surrounding the crushed trolley, are cast bronze figs inspired by the unlikely harvest of London's fruit trees. Huang's favourite is a fig tree on a Bermondsey backstreet, with plump fruit and deeply scented leaves, hidden in plain sight.

More than anything else, Huang's work is an incitement to look – to connect the dots of a fragmented food system. At the entrance to the gallery, Huang has placed a Japanese screen door, carved with cursive Hokusai-style waves. In it is a peephole – just like the £1-per-go binoculars that look out over the British coastal flats, like portholes, like periscopes. *See, See, Sea*, as we're reminded. In one scene in the film, fisherman Darren Ready catches mackerel using a traditional handline method. He sits at the edge of the boat, moving with the energy and precision of an orchestra conductor. The sea talks, but he and Huang are quiet, as one by one the mackerel race towards the dancing thread. This isn't commercial fishing, Huang reminds us, but the value of the process is in the attention paid to the sea and the creatures in it. 'People from there know better than us,' Huang told me. 'They understand the environment. He knows that from this way or that way, the fish will come.'

TATE BRITAIN

Art Now: Steph Huang, until 5 January 2025.

Ruby Tandoh is a food and culture writer who lives in London. She is currently working on a book about modern food. Turn to page 112 to read Steph Huang's recipe 'Fold Your Hands with Chilli Oil'.

Supported by the Art Now Exhibition Supporters Circle and Tate Americas Foundation. Curated by Amy Emmerson Martin, Assistant Curator, Contemporary British Art with Isabel Tovey, Assistant Curator Apprenticeship, Curatorial.

'Brits seem to like fish and seafood most when it resembles neither – only fillets, and clean, muscular cuts'





Paul Reas
Hand of Pork, Newport
South Wales c. 1987
Chromogenic print
on paper
40.1 x 50.6 cm

Fold Your Hands with Chilli Oil

It feels morally wrong to write a recipe that is not vegan-friendly nowadays, but pork was a staple in the Taiwanese diet. I remember going to the massive, Western-style supermarket in the car when I was little, looking out curiously through the rear window. If I was lucky, I would spot an open-air pig truck, with pigs standing next to each other, sticking their noses, ears, and tails out between the rails.

When we cook at home, we never bother to measure to the gram or get the right spoon but trust our instincts. I've taken this approach here too. The laborious work to be done by hand is my protest to a society that pursues convenience and efficiency. Beautiful things take time.

In a large bowl, mix your **mince** (pork is traditional, but chicken, chopped prawn or crushed tofu will do, too) with a few pinches of **salt**, feeling it get sticky, then leave for ten minutes. Add some **light soy sauce** and a dash of **rice wine** or **gin** and leave

for another ten minutes. In the meantime, squeeze a few **spring onions** and some thinly sliced **ginger** in a small bowl of warm water until fragrant. Reserve liquid.

To the mince mixture, add a few drops of **fish sauce** and **sesame oil**, chopped spring onion and grated ginger (or you can reuse the ones in the water), **garlic**, **white pepper** and **crispy fried shallots**. Then, stir in one **egg white** and a spoonful of **corn starch**. Finally, beat in the spring onion and ginger liquid. At this point, you can fry a small amount of the mix to check the seasoning. Freeze for two hours.

Next, make the sauce. Grind **Sichuan peppercorns** and set aside. Take a handful of **chilli flakes**, plus a small pinch of **coriander seeds**, **cumin seeds**, **star anise** and **white peppercorns** and grind together. In a small, deep pan, fry the spices, except the Sichuan pepper, in a generous amount of **oil**. Drop a **bay leaf** and some **sesame seeds** into the pan and fry over a medium heat for three minutes, stirring constantly. Turn off the heat, add chopped garlic, enjoying the sizzling sound, then the Sichuan pepper. Whisk in light soy sauce and **rice wine vinegar**.

To make the wrappers, mix **plain flour** with a pinch of salt, and add enough **water** to form a medium-hard dough. Rest for 30 minutes. Knead it to form a smooth dough, and rest for another half an hour. Roll into paper-thin layers, and pat with corn starch to prevent sticking. Stack and cut into square-ish sheets.

Form the parcels by scooping a spoonful of filling into a wrapper. Wet the edges and close them casually.

Boil water in a deep pan and drop in a few parcels. Cover and bring back to a boil over high heat. Pour in a cup of cold water and bring back to a boil. Repeat two more times before pouring through a strainer. Drizzle some sauce on top and serve.

●
TATE BRITAIN
Steph Huang is Taiwanese art practitioner based in London. *Art Now: Steph Huang* is open until 5 January 2025.

Hand of Pork is included in *The 80s: Photographing Britain*, 21 November 2024 – 5 May 2025.

THE
NATIONAL
GALLERY

Poets
& Lovers
Van Gogh

Book
now

Exhibition supported by
Lead Philanthropic Supporter
Kenneth C. Griffin
GRIFFIN
CATALYST
CHRISTIE'S
WHITE & CASE
David and Molly Lowell Borthwick

14 September 2024 –
19 January 2025
Members go free

Vincent van Gogh, *Sunflowers* (detail), 1889. © Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pennsylvania