

Sriwhana Spong
Sep 11 – Nov 27, 2021

 Western Front
303 E 8th Ave
Vancouver BC V5T 1S1
Canada

The Poem is a Temple

Western Front is pleased to present a solo exhibition of work by Sriwhana Spong, a multidisciplinary artist from Aotearoa New Zealand, living in London.

The exhibition brings together two works: a sculpture that is part of an ongoing series of instruments based on the Balinese gamelan, and a single-channel film shot in and around the artist's ancestral home in Bali, Indonesia.

The painter-tailor (2019) constructs a family portrait from 16mm film and HD video footage collected by the artist, her relatives, and the family dog. The hook to which the film repeatedly returns is an untitled painting by Spong's grandfather, the Sanur artist I Gusti Made Rundu (1918–1993). This painting, the intimate surroundings of the family compound, and her father's memories weave a net in which fragments relating to the effects of colonization, invasion, and tourism on image-making in Bali gather.

Presented alongside the film is *Instrument H (Monster Chicken)* (2021), a sculpture made from approximately 50 bronze casts of chicken bones and twigs collected on Spong's daily walk between her house and studio in London during lockdown, which passes two 24-hour fried chicken shops. The work, with its bones sucked clean and discarded by humans and foxes, charts a strange intimacy between city dwellers, while reflecting on human-animal interactions and their ecological impact. It also evokes the

ancient cultural practice of osteomancy, a form of divination performed by throwing bones. Each day at 2:30 p.m., the sculpture will be activated as an instrument, and moved through the space and surrounding neighbourhood before being placed in a new arrangement for possible future telling.

The sculpture is part of an ongoing project commenced by Spong in 2015, and for which she is creating a personal ensemble inspired by the Balinese gamelan—a unique orchestra of mostly percussive instruments whose precise tuning traditionally varies between gamelan—creating what the ethnomusicologist Andrew Clay McGraw describes as a community's "aural watermark." Compelled by the notion of a place and its community having its own unique sound, each of her instruments is named after a friend or collaborator.

Presented at Western Front, Spong's work also resonates with the organization's long history of engagement with the gamelan through the pioneering influence of Western Front co-founder Martin Bartlett (1939–1993). Bartlett founded the Vancouver Community Gamelan in 1986, and commissioned the creation of a new gamelan "Alligator Joy" that was housed and played at Western Front until 2019. To accompany the exhibition, we are also pleased to have commissioned Jade Barget to produce an essay in response to Spong's practice.

HOW BATS NAVIGATE AT NIGHT:

Fragmented Observations on the Work of Sriwhana Spong

Jade Barget

Sriwhana Spong works across moving image, performance, sculpture, and sound. In her installation she brings together this constellation of media, allowing for conversations between works to reverberate. The echoes rebound from the long-lasting interests that charge her works: ways of approaching heritage, the constructive and destructive nature of language, the pervasive nature of coloniality, and embodied ways of knowing and expressing.

What follows are fragmented observations which take Spong's films as a point of departure, before following the streams and currents that irrigate her extended practice.

The Mystic, the Stroller, and the Half-Stranger

The inability of the moving image to capture embodied experience can be its most evocative feature. Sriwhana Spong's films approach the unintelligible experiences of senses broken open, made feral. Her film *having-seen-snake* (2016) expresses foreknowledge of a snake; the animal is brought to the awareness of the strolling artist by intuition, by instinct, by a perception exceeding the five senses. *This Creature* (2016) revives the writing of Margery Kempe, a fourteenth-century female mystic, committing to paper a life led by transcendental experiences. *A hook but no fish* (2017) invokes *Lingua Ignota*, the twelfth-century language received through divine inspiration by mystic Hildegard von Bingen. *The painter-tailor* (2019) evokes the complexity of building intimacy with one's heritage as half a stranger. The mystic, the stroller, and the half-stranger perceive beyond the margins of vision and language, with their entire bodies and minds. Yet how does one capture extrasensory experiences on film?

To Touch, Not Master

Spong's filmmaking resists grasping the event. She resists *capturing*, making it her own, mastering it, and crystallizing it in words, sounds, and images. Instead, Spong's filmmaking draws us near, allowing us only to graze the event, forming multiple points of contact with it. In *having-seen-snake*, for example, Spong offers two points of contact to evoke the prescience of a snake. The first is a series of highly tactile and textured images. In one scene, a strip of paint runs down the film and the sound of a long hiss, like wind blowing, rushes through. We never really see the snake; the film brushes past the experience. We enter into a sensuous, sonorous relationship with the creature; to touch, not to master.¹ Laura U. Marks, via Deleuze and Guattari, speaks of haptic visuality, a sense which is as visual, auditory, and tactile as walking through snow or sand.² Following Marks's thinking, haptic visuality brings touch and closeness to vision, which is too often distant and disembodied in the light of European post-Enlightenment rationality (which itself has bred optic-centric societies). Immersed in scientific speech, the second half of *having-seen-snake* documents a scientist explaining the process of naming a newly found species of snake, of pulling nature into language and, therefore, into culture. This point of contact contrasts with the first one, bringing us out of the sensorial torpor in order to better appreciate it.

Centreless

Spong has extensively researched the writings of medieval female mystics, such as Margery Kempe, Hildegard von Bingen, and Teresa de Ávila. Attempting to express transcendental experiences, female mystics have crafted radical modes of enunciation and subversive forms of writing. The mystic author multiplies forms of expression, varying in genres, styles, and tones. In a text, the fictional and the autobiographical mode can coexist, and can be informed by literary, erotic, and embodied knowledge together. Spong's process of roaming around a subject and multiplying points of contact with it, through various modes of expression, resonates with the method used by these mystics when writing about a spiritual experience. The closeness created by the artist between us and an event—this haptic visuality—echoes with the mystics' embodied ways of knowing. While optical visuality requires distance and a centre, Spong's grazing

means the loss of that distance and centre. Being so close to the subject, our eyes enter into a sensuous relationship with the film, and we react with our entire bodies to the texture, sound, and touch of the images.

Cognitive Dwellings

In *Interior Castle* (1577), Teresa de Ávila describes the soul as a crystal castle where one can meet God. She recommended that her sisters each locate their own crystal castle: an interior realm in which they could expand their spirituality and find a degree of freedom from the strict rules of the church. Influenced by Teresa de Ávila's mental architectures, Spong crafted *Instrument F (Alice)*, a large bell made from seven smaller glass bells. The instrument is part of a larger series based on research into gamelan culture, through which the artist discovered that traditionally each village in Indonesia would tune their instruments to slightly different pitches. Each village, therefore, sounds different—sound is thus inscribed into place, as much as place is inscribed into sound. Drawing from this research, Spong has been producing instruments to form a personal orchestra, *Untitled (orchestra)* (2016–ongoing), inspired by friends or places. The places can be physical, such as the city of London, evoked by *Instrument H (Monster Chicken)* (2021), made of chicken bones commonly found on the ground in the city's streets. Imaginary places can also provide inspiration, such as Teresa de Ávila's crystal castle-inspired *Instrument F (Alice)*. We imagine the artist's personal orchestra, ongoing and scattered, as cardinal points to her own cognitive territory composed of friends and places, accessible by activating their vibrational frequencies.

Unexpected Echoes

Spong's work holds a multitude of unexpected, beautiful echoes. In her film *The painter-tailor*, the artist takes as an object of study a painting made by her grandfather, I Gusti Made Rundu (1918–1993). The painting represents a scene from the *Bhomāntaka*, a twelfth-century epic Javanese poem. The unknown writer intended the poem to be a temple for the God of Love to descend into, and in which readers may gather. From this ambition stems the possibility of creating worlds for one's own flight through language, sound, and rhythm. The *Bhomāntaka*, as well as *Interior Castle*,

speaks of processes of mapping places, of producing geographical imaginaries for collective dreaming, which resonate as emancipation exercises. In the light of both references brought together by Spong's practice, one begins to see the potential of cognitive mapping as a process, as an act of imagination, to build one's own cosmology, and, therefore, as an avenue to disrupt power-knowledge dynamics inscribed in existing architectures and territories and their representations.

Bleeding Frames

In Dutch-occupied Indonesia, settlers documented local specificities such as crops and plants by photographing the object of study in front of a white sheet. The white sheet would separate the object from its environment, removing it from nature and readying it to be scientifically observed. Such images, extracted by Spong from Amsterdam's Tropenmuseum archive, are the visual inspiration for a scene in *The painter-tailor*, in which her family is filmed holding a white cloth behind items in their backyard. The white sheet acts as a frame, a container, evoking the Dutch colonial gaze, detaching the object of study from its environment to place it in a pseudo-neutral territory incarnated by the white of the cloth, seeking to perforate meaning. If Spong re-enacts colonial era documentation practices to create new frames, it is to allow them to bleed. It is in this leakage that we approach the main object of study: her grandfather's painting. As the artist's cameras roam around the work, its frame begins to soften, to become porous. Family lore seeps down its edges, via the artist's father's telling. Life tales, confessions, and reflections on the deeper meaning of existence are released through the painting and beyond it. The father says: "If I didn't keep it, we'd have nothing to talk about, you know?"³

Sriwhana Spong's works are full of unexpected and beautiful resonances. Histories, places, and communities hold their own frequencies, which she allows to resonate and echo throughout her practice. There is a scene in *The painter-tailor* that evokes Spong's methodology. At night, bats fly towards the camera and, in a whirlwind, they find their way in the dark by turning an ear to reverberating sound reflected off objects, a process called echolocation. Spong uses her own rhythmical extensions and listens to the returning echoes to blaze a trail.

1: Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

2: *Ibid.*

3: Sriwhana Spong, *The painter-tailor*, 2019, 18 min, 52 sec.

Sriwhana Spong is an artist from Aotearoa New Zealand, living in London. She engages different mediums, including sculpture, film, and performance, and creates works where experiential knowledge, autobiography, and fiction are entangled with research into relevant materials, processes, and forms. She draws on the writings of female mystics to produce works set in motion by oscillations between distance and intimacy, where separations between genres dissolve, and the binaries of contemplation/action, mind/body, inside/outside collapse.

Jade Barget is a curator based between Paris and London with an interest in screen, moving image, and performance cultures. Her research centres on embodied spectatorship, and the influence of media upon our sense of self, memory, and history. Jade co-runs XING, a curatorial platform championing visual culture from East Asia, Southeast Asia, and its diasporas, informed by decolonial, anti-imperialist, and intersectional feminist thinkings.

List of Works

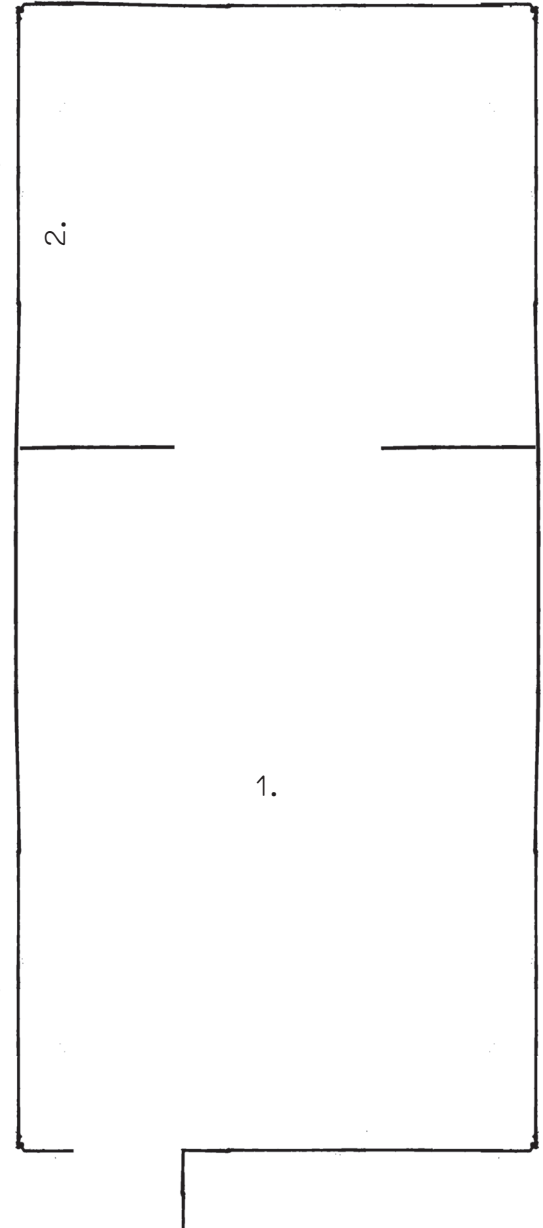
All works by Sriwhana Spong, and courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett.

1. *Instrument H (Monster Chicken)* (2021)
Bronze, nylon cable ties
dimensions variable
2. *The painter-tailor* (2019)
16mm transferred to HD, HD video, 32:10 min.
Sound design: Owen Pratt
Camera: Sriwhana Spong, Angendari,
Wungsu Pinatih, Gusmank, and Alaska

Project Team

Curator: Susan Gibb
Copy Editor: Kate Woolf
Design: Line-Gry Hørup
Technicians: Hannah Rickards and Ben Wilson

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