

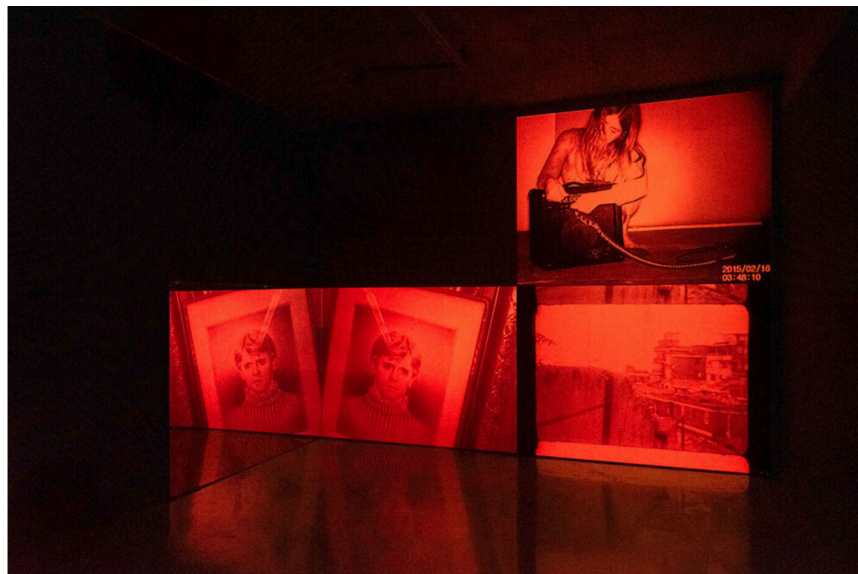
# BOMB

Na Mira Interviewed by Katie Kirkland

*Writing and video installations that channel spirits and history.*

Na Mira grins as she holds my tarot card up to the camera: the devil. She is pulling from a deck painted by Leonora Carrington. In Carrington’s devil I see balance instead of disorder, mirroring instead of mastery; Na tells me that the devil brings with it a different worldview—an ability to see from many sides, entangling pain and pleasure, death and rebirth. Na’s card was the hanged man, another guide to navigating the underworld. An interpretation she loves is that the hanged man teaches us to see with our hearts over our heads, a fitting card for an artist who channels the sacred and unknown. During one of Na’s ritual performances, a transmission of voices and song began spontaneously arriving on a homemade microphone soaked in mugwort. It has been playing ever since over her glitching infrared projections and holographic, multi-screen installations, which prompt us to witness history anew—to remember, as Na tells me, that “even in moments that seem like an ending, there is still something burning.”

—Katie Kirkland



Installation view of *Na Mira: Subrosa*, 2023. Museum of Contemporary Art Tucson. Photo by Maya Hawk. © MOCATucson, 2023.

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Katie Kirkland

You've been working with Theresa Hak Kyung Cha a lot in your recent work, and, particularly, with her unfinished film project, *White Dust From Mongolia*, which is very close to my heart too. How did you come to Cha's work, and what about it has been so magnetic for you?

Na Mira

Twenty years ago I was working at an anarchist bookstore, and this zine made by another Korean teenager showed up. The cover was a photocopy from *Dictée*—the image with the Korean writing on the cave wall. I immediately went out and got the book. Reading it I felt it was so radical in the way that it dismantled the grammars of society through form.

I didn't understand *Dictée*. And there was a lot I didn't understand about my own life, so I felt an intimacy with the work and a turning point. I didn't see Cha's art for many years because it was hard to find, but I developed a practice working with language and time. Then in 2020, I was invited by The Kitchen in New York City to reflect on the connections between her work and mine. There was a series of signs that followed that invitation.

Automatic writing is a foundation for a lot of my work; I write with my nondominant hand, asking questions. I asked, "How do I perform the shaman's ritual?" And the answer that I received was in Korean, "I am the second person going." I didn't know what that meant, but the next day I was looking in Cha's archives, and I found *White Dust From Mongolia*. It had this emotional resonance because she was working on the film and book at the time that she was murdered, and this is part of why it's unfinished; but it also kept changing as she questioned displacement through materials, and it changes for me as well. Cha describes two characters: one is in the past, and she's lost her memory; the second character is in the present, and she's collecting those memories until the two narratives meet at one point in time. I thought, "This is the second person. This is where I'm going." I took it as a direction.

It felt related to work I'd been doing already around my Korean shaman lineage as a quantum engagement with time and entering the past through glitch and ritual. The texture of *White Dust* felt sci-fi, a new chapter of what Cha wanted her work to do; its subtle premise of time travel seemed like a real way to approach historical trauma and the possibilities of transmuting it. This resonated for me in your essay,

Katie, "In Search of Lost Time," where you discuss her revisitation of charged sites and the political potential of presencing. Cha said the screen was permeable and memory was dimensional. So I began trying to meet her there.

KK

That's really beautiful! *White Dust* feels like a place where Cha's idea of the function of the artist as a medium, as a conduit for collective experience and memory, is most fully developed. There is a way that you embody this ethos in your own work because you don't restage her project as it is written, but instead find ways—through multiple projection, mirrors, performance, and holographic installation—to realize its superimposition of time differently or to summon different parts of that experience. I find that so moving.

I want to turn now to another transmutation of your practice. Your recent book, *The Book of Na*, contains the scripts for your projects as well as original writing, images, and diagrams that cut across time. What animates this work?

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NM

I sent the book to my mother, Nayop, and she called and said, “I found this red book. I’m not really reading it, but I like how every page is its own color. Every page feels like it has a different energy I can sit with.” I love that there’s a way that only she could come to it. She said something similar about my piece at the Whitney Biennial (*Night Vision [Red as Never Been]* [2022]): “I can imagine my own story in here.”

KK

*The Book of Na* feels like that too. In it, you talk about using books as objects of divination, and it could perhaps itself be used that way. It’s not didactic; there’s an openness to it. How did you think about the process of making the book?

NM

I love that it could go out into the world and be used as divination! Or to not know what the life of it is. The scripts from my projects in the first half of the book came from my automatic writing, and I wanted to trace how synchronicities that originally were cryptic to me became links over several years. Then while working on the “Time Stamps” in the second half, both my shoulders froze and my writing changed. Words became short, unfamiliar. The pain taught me. The only ways that doctors have to describe pain are numbers. And at first I felt like that was a limit of language. But I realized the pain is ineffable, abstract; my memory tries to bury it so that I can continue. I came to respect the pain. In not allowing itself to become data or algorithm, its masquerade deformed them. I began to imbue numbers with different symbolism through the hexagrams of the I Ching, pagination, the dates of a diary. Writers are always saying that “the book shows itself to you,” and I never understood that before. But very organically, my recollection went out of order. I saw I could feng shui my life; all of these points in time could be rearranged to make different frequencies.

I create works that are often opaque—even if literally transparent—and they don’t begin with an idea, as is the convention of conceptualism. So I wanted to tend to a methodology of research and making with eros, and then it happened on its own terms.

KK

I love this idea that with the book, like your art practice, you’re in collaboration with the unknown.

NM

A lot of my practice is also a collaboration with my mother. I could not and would not represent Nayop in the book, but I wanted to be nearby. I’ve been in this role of her caregiver for a long time, and I’m often called to play Nayop herself, to translate her into different systems, like healthcare or history. My failures highlight the apparatus we’re moving through and what animisms are there. It leads to something more like transmission. Nayop said my real art is to make a new color, and I felt like this could be an afterimage. Later, I learned red is the first color to disappear from sight, and that’s why the darkroom and the cinema are red, and infrared is invisible. In the Orientalist project of knowledge, the Cartesian cut between the knower and the known, Nayop created another world. The pages ride toward that negative space.

In the final days, several parts of the book were rearranged with the designer and editor for material and visual reasons. So it wasn’t until it was published that I could sense what it does. One of these shifts moved my question about staging Cha’s final scene next to a photo of the glitch on Nayop’s ID. I hadn’t thought about this conjunction. Now I read it as the meeting of both projects:

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performing *White Dust* as the entanglement of many people's memories is also Nayop becoming Na and me becoming her too. The question is the same color as the paper; my vision barely surfaces the words. The book showed itself to me and then disappeared.

Na Mira: *Subrosa* is currently on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tucson in Tucson, Arizona; *The Book of Na* is available from Wendy's Subway.

*Katie Kirkland* is a writer based in New York City. She is completing a PhD in Film Studies and Comparative Literature at Yale, where she researches reenactment and experimental documentary.