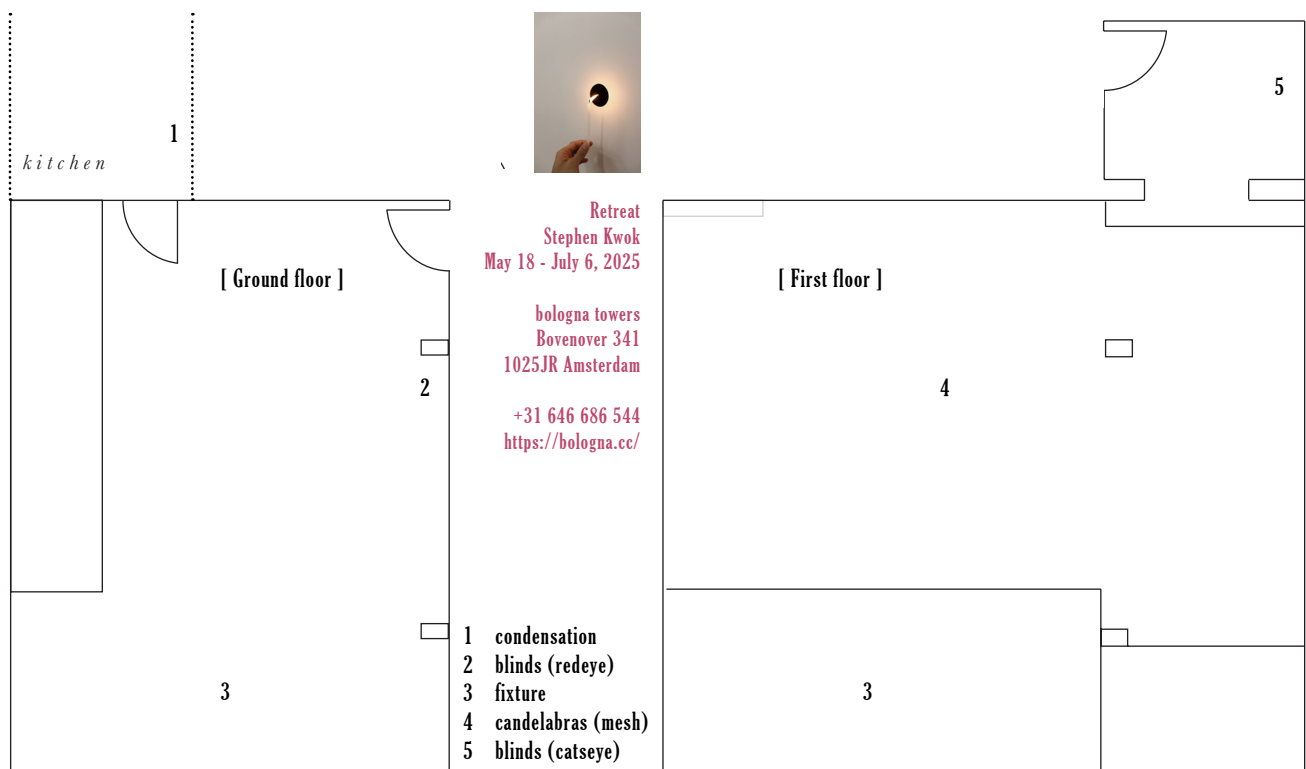




Stephen Kwok adapts readily available materials into the first receivers of an imaginative mind. Possibility gets grafted onto what is immediately around. Utility is pushed towards something more playful. Emerging from a wish for agency, Kwok proposes a mode of relating in which a visitor, as though on a holiday of perception, is asked to detach objects first from their function, and then categorical and hierarchical thinking.

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In his early twenties, Stephen Kwok drove five hours from New Orleans towards his mother's house in Houston. Arriving, he found she had cut up chains of coloured beads and sorted them into clear vessels that showcased their colours; shades beyond the traditional three that represent justice, faith, power. It struck him; magenta in a curvy beer glass, green inside a vase, to this day he still has not asked her about her choice to dessicate these Mardi Gras throws that he had collected from the street of the city where he lived alone and brought back as a souvenir. But it's phrased in his mind as an artwork of his mother's, though he clarifies that he doesn't think it's that for her.

Stephen has been developing *Retreat* as a constellation of works for bologna towers since we met last June. Introduced by a friend, Vivian, we met under the auspices of his work trip. He was meeting different educational models

and public programmes in the Netherlands. We got to talking, then had an improvised dinner, which apparently induced his willingness to write to me the next day: *also thinking about our convo last night and although i know you are anti therapy if you ever want to talk about the family and gay ness stuff i can lend an ear. it's a really specific intersection that i think has so much depth to explore.* Perhaps this is a basis for our communion. Stephen growing up in suburban Texas, me in Sydney. He tells me it was so hot where he grew up, he had to stay in during the summer. His family was not one to really leave. It was very *keep your head straight, going forward*, he remarks.

I think about this in relation to his exhibition title, which for me was most directly a militaristic going backwards; a strategic manner after which one can find another way to move forward. He reminds me of another definition—the corporate practice of vacations for productivity or team building—the alteration of environment is an opportunity for optimisation. And breaking 're-treat' into syllables, allows it to be a simplistic referent to how he's approached composing the show.

In the course of our conversations, he's always referred to the work as site specific, which fascinated me. As far as I register, writing before it's installed, Stephen's work is proposed in relation to the basic architectural properties of the exhibition space - a fan with reflective blades dropped surprisingly (unfathomably?) low from the ceiling, a wall hook with a wet drop, a displacement of vertical blinds studded with glass marbles, and a candelabra made of a constellation of co-axial cables. Ambivalently office-core or domestic, it's all available from a hardware store. Light, heat, circulation and elements; natural forces executed by achievable or accessible means. But where do we locate the site specific in this?

In a zoom technical meeting, Stephen first meets Wiebe Bouwsema, my friend and artist in the Netherlands who will help with the install at bologna towers. We are joined by Stephen's assistant, Aidan Ling, who has been preparing the work with Stephen in his studio. Preoccupied with the logistics of the ceiling fan piece, they report that their familiarity means they're desensitised to the idea of danger in the work. They don't hold it to the expectations of a sinister *Final Destination* style rogue blade that amputates limbs as cosmic justice. The functional domestic object; the fan turbine that you avoid body impact with, has become the site of an auratic illusion. We discuss whether shifting to another mirrored material will alter how light reflects and gets bisected by the vane of the material. We discuss preparing such a long shaft with US standard measurements rather than NL dimensions, and contingencies for wobbling. I'm thrown off when I consider what constitutes a displacement of technological means, and where a readymade crumples away from its tether of original use, and into materials wielded by a plastician. How is the site specific restaged or adapted elsewhere? What resources do we need to refashion the sizes and standards of another place, while hosted in another, and when this is not defined as central to the work? Through our conversations, we nudge up against differences in standards. We use different corporate platforms (zoom, google meets, whatsapp, facetime) to facilitate our talks. We talk about our other jobs, finding aspects that resonate and not. I find myself repeating the catchphrase or soundbyte that 'we only need work to the protocols of the work, not of our imagination of an exhibition'. I worry that I have old ideas of exhibition space while not having enough control over the space I have to host sufficiently. Stephen doesn't want to crowd the works \ I feel worried about what my space is supposed to offer, what it's coded to, then remember the gap between experience and its mediation/circulation in pictures. As with holiday photos, exhibition photos have protocols. This is comforting, and makes sense.

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Retreat comprises a series of objects, placed at various levels of a perimeter. These all articulate boundaries, along the way of travel that is going to an interior. This interior might be that of the artist, of the physical space, or a capital I *Interior*. The works that are past the interior are what feels like they're the most wrong. Reflecting on his work, Kwok wrote about the idea of entering a chamber, where the chamber has a different set of logics, and this is becoming the place where agency becomes exigent.

Logic curdles. Time, space, and physics work differently. In any restlessness of being inside, there's the sense that an outside exists, no matter what. Some works speak to a puncture point, a transmission, an attempt to reach the outside that is defunct/discarded/used already. There are these objects being placed as articulations of boundaries or reinforcements, and there's the desire to ultimately get to a place of interiority. There's something contradictory about this space; as such as it is buried, distant, private, it's also kind of free, open. Like an empty room discovered at the centre of a space. Yet, so much that is *material* needs to be traversed to get there. And all this material puts pressure on this empty room. That's what the danger is. The work wants to know itself. The works want to feel outside of time, like they've always been there. But they're all in a perpetual tension; elongated, unable to be resolved. The possibility of a resolution has been so elongated that it's been modified into another form. The drop will never drop, it's something else?

Imagine immersing yourself in a bath; as the body is swallowed by a different density, the point of exit changes. The threshold of the exit has changed. There's a different exit inside the space.

Whether he is describing a *condition* or *his* condition is something that he cannot parse. He is thinking about the tension between the private self and the actual ability to be private. Whether privacy is a prerequisite for interiority. In the constant state of being public. Is this a condition of the commons? Then the idea of always existing within the commons and not being able to unsubscribe for a non-commons space. And maybe there's a sense of apprehension around the cost of this withdrawal. How fucked up will you be if you're not tethering yourself to being constantly public?

Retreat as a movement rather than a judgment. Saying no as a response to something is as powerful as saying yes. Being able to protect one's interiority is not inherently evil, but isn't without evil either. Is withdrawal the ability to escape the contemporary condition? That's fraught. So the withdrawal is restless. But an endless engagement with the commons, and the need to defend oneself or philosophy of political beliefs in a public arena are many different things. Maybe it's an impediment to being able to reach a part of oneself that one can envision something else. Retreat can occur only upon an acknowledgement of foreignness, performable wherever one manages to define oneself or a limit. To present oneself as foreign to site specificity, and envision a retreat within that. Stephen's work might then function as a flipped escape; a foreign place that distorts use-value into a pleasure proposition.

(Ivan Cheng)

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