



VALMONT

presents

# ULYSSES

## We are all Heroes

GAYLE CHONG KWAN - STEPHANIE BLAKE - ISAO - DIDIER GUILLON

20.04.24 - 23.02.25



THE INTIMATE MUSEUM

PALAZZO BONVICINI

CALLE AGNELLO, 2161/A, VENICE

FREE ADMISSION

OPEN EVERY DAY 10AM - 6PM

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## ONE OF A KIND AND PART OF A WHOLE: ULYSSES AS THE STARTING POINT OF A MYTHOLOGICAL TRILOGY

*ULYSSES. We are all Heroes* is set to debut at Palazzo Bonvicini on April 20, 2024. The exhibition brings to life the spirit of Homer's epic poem the *Odyssey* in the context of our contemporary world. Four international artists — *Gayle Chong Kwan*, *Stephanie Blake*, *ISAO* and *Didier Guillon* — reinterpret and breathe new life into the classical tale.

The first of a mythological trilogy, *ULYSSES. We are all Heroes* narrates four of the most crucial events of the book, in which Ulysses undergoes a number of remarkable encounters. If Ulysses is the hero of this art exhibition, next year Palazzo Bonvicini will develop its curatorial project on Telemachus, followed by the final chapter of this series on the *Odyssey*, focusing on the figure of Penelope.

Who is the hero the title refers to? Ulysses is the son of Laertes, King of Ithaca. During the ten years of his turbulent journey home, Ulysses encounters new worlds and faces specific challenges, which the artists have re-read and presented in the four rooms of our Renaissance palazzo.

Although very different, these moments of the story share a fundamental element: the cunning of Ulysses, who emerges victorious in every situation: defeating Polyphemus, saving his companions from Circe, escaping the irresistible seductions of the Sirens, and finally saving his homeland from the Suitors. In addition, the spaces, although undoubtedly heterogeneous, form a coherent unit in which the visitor is invited to embark on a multisensory journey. Like Ulysses, the visitor embarks on this voyage through immersive installations, at times like navigating “an ocean at night”<sup>1</sup>, at other times sailing through incredibly vivid and luminous passages. Not really experiencing the *nòstos*<sup>2</sup> like our Homeric hero, the visitor of *ULYSSES. We are all Heroes* embraces a conceptual discovery of wonder and contemplation.

Welcome aboard.

Valentina Secco, Curator and Director Fondation Valmont

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<sup>1</sup> “[...] the boundless open sea across which Ulysses had ventured into the Mediterranean becomes an ocean by night”, in Boitani P., *L’Ombra di Ulisse*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1992, pag. 42.

<sup>2</sup> *Nòstos* is a Greek word that refers to the concept of homecoming or return.

## CYCLOPS<sup>3</sup>

### Gayle Chong Kwan

Room 1 presents the installation by Gayle Chong Kwan, which references the encounter of Ulysses with Polyphemus, who appears as a savage man-eating Giant, a symbol of a restricted vision and mind. Chong Kwan starts from this collision between two opposite worlds – intellectual self-awareness VS physical/intellectual blindness – for developing a multi-part installation. **CYCLOPS** explores visibility and the politics of the gaze through surveillance, art history, and the artist's own severe visual myopia. Chong Kwan elaborates the work through historical and archival research, and as an encounter with Homer's *Odyssey* in relation to her wider art practice of an expanded and embodied approach to visibility.



**CYCLOPS** consists of photography, sculpture, mobile, and painting. A large photographic triptych of a giant head and disembodied hands – part cyclops, gorgon, and medusa – is made of hand-cut collage of historical, contemporary, and AI generated images of ophthalmology, surveillance, photography, and virtual reality. A mobile structure is made of a large wooden tripod with metal branches from which hang painted and printed miniature collages of eyes of women artists from different periods in art history – many of whom remain less well known or unknown, unseen in the artistic canon – each surrounded by an intricate 'frame' made of details of their art. Three wooden frames on stands surround the mobile, that reference eye charts and vision correction, are made

of digitally printed textile and photography, through which talismans, amulets, and totemic images relate to multiple perspectives or approaches to 'seeing'.

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<sup>3</sup>Homer, BOOK IX. THE ADVENTURES OF THE CICONIANS, LOTOPHAGI AND CYCLOPS, *Odyssey*.

## CIRCE<sup>4</sup>

### Stephanie Blake

If Room 1 is filled with static, one-eyed gazes, a pair of women's eyes is literally moving in the scenography of Room 2, conceived by Stephanie Blake. Here, a majestic Circe awaits the visitor, quiet yet solemn, with an attitude of readiness and self-defence. Lying all over the floor are ten doll-pigs, resting harmlessly.

Who is the woman dominating the scene? This goddess, daughter of Helios and Perses, lives alone on the island of Aea, condemned to eternity. Circe is the queen of her own solitary reign, constantly defending herself against the attempts of uninvited sailors. Because of her loneliness, she pre-emptively turns wandering men into pigs to ensure the safety of her home.

Unlike his companions, Ulysses is someone Circe can trust, and therefore someone she can show mercy to. Though potentially dangerous, Circe represents all that a peaceful domestic scene can offer – a sort of alternative Penelope on an alternative island, where Ulysses could become the undisputed king.



The installation CIRCE embodies the duplicity of this pivotal figure in the *Odyssey*, encapsulating a complex portrayal of a powerful woman standing above tamed men-pigs, still adorned with traces of mud, all quietly resting yet fearful. Circe is the epitome of a multifaceted identity in which opposing qualities coexist seamlessly; at once a cruel sorceress and a loyal companion, she represents the way in which self-love can manifest as the most formidable form of self-defence.

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<sup>4</sup> Homer, BOOK X. ADVENTURES WITH ÆOLUS, THE LAESTRYGONS, AND CIRCE, *Odyssey*.

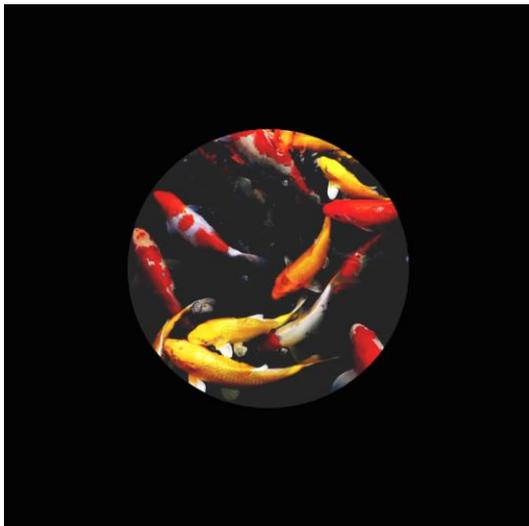
## THE SIRENS<sup>5</sup>

### ISAO

Despite the favourable conditions that prevailed for a year on the island of Aeaea, Ulysses' thirst for adventure prevails, inevitably setting the stage for another historic encounter. In **room 3**, **ISAO** is tasked with bringing this mythical chapter to life. Initially, sound is used as a weapon of seduction: the visitor, drawn to uncover the secrets of this mysterious chant, ventures into the darkness. The lure whispered by the Sirens cannot but hide the unexpected.

Half woman, half bird, the charming yet ruthless Sirens embody both sensuality and extreme destruction. Luring wandering men with their song, inviting them to hear otherwise inaccessible knowledge, they lead their victims down a path from which they will never return. Inspiring, among others, the early examples of courtly literature of the XII century, which recount the tribulations of fairies like Morgana, the Sirens represent enchanting horizons, employing the chant as the ultimate form of seduction.

What this chant is about, nobody knows. Not even Ulysses: Homer doesn't reveal the content of what the hero learns as his companions row incessantly with wax in their ears. The **SIRENS** are thus the enigma, the unsolved mystery, and for this reason the experience is only possible through entering into the darkness of a perfect cube, where to discover what lies behind the ceaselessly echoing melody that lingers throughout the palazzo. The cube is a reference to the *black box*, the only element and witness that would remain if Ulysses and his crew were to suffer a shipwreck. The visitor entering in this space becomes part of the installation: the experience begins with the spectator looking at the round projection on the floor, like a pond full of "Kois",



the sacred Japanese fish, symbol of prosperity and good luck. The interaction shifts from passive to active as the visitor gradually becomes engulfed by the projection itself, which from its initial round surface expands until metaphorically it floods the entire floor.

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<sup>5</sup> Homer, BOOK XII. THE SIRENS, SCYLLA, AND CHARYBDIS, *Odyssey*.

## DEATH OF THE SUITORS<sup>6</sup>

### Didier Guillon

The visitor's amazement continues in **room 4**, where Penelope, seemingly defenceless, endures the psychological blows of the suitors. Upon returning to Ithaca, Ulysses finds his homeland endangered, his safe port under severe threat. The suitors, exact opposites of the hero, represent the final challenge Ulysses must face before completing his *nòstos*.

As previously mentioned, Ulysses' homeland, his sanctuary, faces peril. Penelope is indeed *his* safe place, the harbour where the ship finds refuge after navigating for so long. Universally recognized as the symbol of supreme faith, Penelope awaits Ulysses, avoiding direct conflict with the suitors while smartly outwitting them to resist their will.



Didier Guillon's installation bridges the ancient narrative with contemporary issues, portraying the dangerous suitors as threats to Democracy, struggling to withstand mounting challenges yet always remaining resilient. **DEATH OF THE SUITORS** serves as a manifesto of our era, prompting visitors to engage actively and contemplate the profound impact of current events on our future.

The visitor concludes the journey of *ULYSSES*. *We are all Heroes* in an immersive visual bombardment of the present. What shall we do to protect the monumentally majestic figure of Penelope? There she stands, our Democracy, potentially disintegrating like fragile cardboard, yet still remaining, metaphorically indestructible, hopefully for eternity.

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<sup>6</sup> Homer, BOOK XXII. DEATH OF THE SUITORS, *Odyssey*.

## THE ARTISTS

### GAYLE CHONG KWAN



Gayle Chong Kwan is an award-winning multidisciplinary artist and academic whose work is exhibited internationally in galleries and the public realm. Her large-scale photographic works, immersive installations, and sensory ritual events operate within and against histories of oppression and positions the viewer as one element in a cosmology of the political, social and ecological. Exhibitions include: 'The Taotie', Compton Verney, UK (2024); 'A Pocket Full of Sand', John Hansard Gallery, UK (2024); 'Waste Archipelago', Venice (2021); 'Wastescape', Auckland, New Zealand (2019); 'The People's Forest', William Morris Gallery (2018); 'Anthropo-scene', Bloomberg Space, UK (2015); 'Wastescape', Southbank Centre, UK (2012); 'The Obsidian Isle', New Forest Pavilion, 54th Venice Biennale (2011); 'Cockaigne', Tales from the New World, 10th Havana Biennial, Cuba (2009). Artist Fellowship, Sloane Lab and the British Museum, UK (2023); Artist in Residence in Photography at the V&A (2019–2021); Artist Fellowship, Ca' Foscari University Venice (2020-21), as winner of the Sustainable Art Prize (2019). She has a PhD in Fine Art on 'Imaginal Travel' from the Royal College of Art, UK (2023).

## STEPHANIE BLAKE



American Stephanie Blake lives in Paris and is an illustrator and author of children's books. In 2002 she created Simon Super Rabbit, which was published by l'École des Loisirs and translated into numerous languages before being adapted into a cartoon in 2016. Since 2018, Stephanie Blake has been creating clay sculptures that she immortalizes in bronze, Indian ink sketches on Japanese paper, and large coloured canvases. Beneath their crude, naive and spontaneous exteriors, Stephanie Blake's works paradoxically reveal a delicate, poetic... even obvious side. A polyvalent and versatile artist, her practice includes sculptures in ceramics and bronze, small- and large-scale paintings and jewellery. As per the writing, Stephanie is not only author of children's books, but she also recently embraced narratives for adults with a novel that will be officially released in January 2025.



ISAO, born Isao Llorens Ishikawa, is a Catalan artist living in Spain. After studying in Paris, Isao left for Japan in a bid to connect with his motherly roots. It was during this Japanese stay, indeed, that he perfected his calligraphic and paper studies, which give his work a very particular pictorial profile. Upon his return to Paris, and his later move to Barcelona, ISAO explores, through the lens of a kaleidoscope, the many perceptions of the same concept. Paintings, sculptures, illustrations, designs, animations and films... between figuration and abstraction, under a reductionism that borders on the limits of simplification, ISAO combines saturated colours and minimalist forms in order to study serially kaleidoscopic views and perceptions of the same concept. ISAO treats with ingenuity and dexterity the nature and all those creatures cohabiting in it. This well-travelled artist, who constantly strives for regeneration, has launched several projects that are stamped with his touch and personality. ISAO is currently the Director of the Fundació J. Llorens Artigas based in Gallifa (Barcelona), a rural artists' centre with studios built in honour of his grandfather Llorens Artigas, the ceramist who worked very closely with Joan Miró on many of his projects.

## DIDIER GUILLON



Didier Guillon is the descendant of illustrious ancestors, including the sculptor Alphonse Lamy and the collector and art dealer Charles Sedelmeyer. Creating is an irresistible impulse, spurred by his inextinguishable curiosity. He muses through many mediums, such as serigraphy, illustration, cardboard-made or glass sculptures, with a particular fondness for mixed-media installations. Guillon's installations show a commitment to sustainability: made from environmentally friendly materials, much of his artwork is destroyed for recycling after traveling around the world for solo shows. A Venetian resident for more than a year, Guillon loves his city through and through. A complete care which emerges, among other things, in his desire to work with local artisans. Since 2013, the artist has been deeply fascinated by the precious traditions that make up the identity of Murano glassmaking; he has been producing works of art in collaboration with renowned local master glassmakers ever since. Not only glass: Guillon's latest creations are produced together with local craftsmen. Bronze and brass are the materials which recently brought his research to imagine new shapes, now part of the artist's well-known repertoire. New experiments, then, always faithful to the heritage of Donald Judd and the American Minimalists so dear to Guillon, leading the artist to conceive imposing yet delicate cubist metamorphosis.

## FONDATION VALMONT



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Fondation Valmont has a very precise mission: **promoting art in all its forms**, in accordance with the values and opportunities offered by Valmont – its parent company: **quality, aesthetics, generosity** and **sustainability**. Valmont Chairman Didier Guillon has always refused to remain trapped in the universe of cosmetics alone and has therefore built bridges with the artistic sector. His efforts were crowned with success in 2015, when the rich depth and scope of the projects brought about by him led to the birth of Fondation Valmont. In 2019, this international institution made Venice its permanent home, in a Renaissance palace built in the purest 16th century style: **Palazzo Bonvicini**. Alongside the international art events that take place in Venice, Fondation Valmont offers a rich programme of travelling exhibitions presented worldwide, from Hydra to New York.

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Fondation Valmont – Palazzo Bonvicini, Venice

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