



Kenneth Tam  
**STANDING IN SOFT  
FORMATION**

## *Kenneth Tam: Standing in Soft Formation*

Through his choreographed video, photography, and sculpture, Kenneth Tam has long explored the myths and performative culture that uphold conventional American expectations of masculinity and identity. *Standing in Soft Formation* features the artist's most recent projects, *Silent Spikes* (2021) and *The Founding of the World* (2023). Shown in dialogue for the first time, they explore historical and present-day tropes of Anglo-American masculinity and their impact on Asian American identities: first through the invisible migrant labor that fueled the nineteenth-century dream of the American West, and then through the fraught rituals of the college fraternity.

Centered around video installations that feature non-actor participants, the two projects layer the rigidity and harshness of these male-centric worlds with a focus on creating intimacies and shared vulnerabilities. Together, the installations complicate and counter prevailing sociocultural constructs of American manhood—its heteronormativity, machismo, and white privilege—and the expectations we bring as viewers to such imagery.



## *Silent Spikes*

The first section of the gallery features sculptures, photography, and a two-channel video—*Silent Spikes*—in which the artist weaves together movement, theatrical staging, and historical narratives to question existing ideas about the performance of masculinity, and the ways in which this normative performance becomes mythologized in such figures as the cowboy.

In the video and sculptures, Tam also evokes the unrecorded lives of nameless Chinese laborers, who toiled under arduous conditions in the late 1800s to build the transcontinental railroad system that made U.S. expansion possible. Sculptural versions of enlarged Imperial-era coins (often carried by Chinese labor migrants as tokens of good luck) are embedded with perishable foodstuffs, while wall sculptures built from altered Western saddles hold assorted bits of refuse, jewelry, and broken crockery—some recovered from the former sites of migrant work camps. These objects make visible the workers' presence through the material traces they left behind, while also acknowledging the fierce racism that Chinese laborers faced in the United States during their lifetimes.

*The two-channel video, Silent Spikes (2021), was commissioned by the Queens Museum with support from the Asian Art Circle of the Guggenheim Museum. The related sculptures were commissioned by Ballroom Marfa in 2023 for the exhibition Tender is the hand which holds the stone of memory.*





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## *The Founding of the World*

The exhibition's second installation of video and sculpture features Tam's newest work, *The Founding of the World*. Centered on the probate—a choreographed ritual in certain Asian American college fraternities meant to herald the induction of new members—this video features a group of young men of Asian descent performing ritualized gestures, both real and imagined, accompanied with a composition by vocalist yuniya edi kwon. The performers' movements toggle between tender and aggressive, engaging in activities inspired in part by actual fraternity exercises. Installed in the gallery space are sculptures of suspended alcohol and cologne bottles. They suggest ways these items may take on ritualistic value when consumed by young men as part of their passage into adulthood, invoking images of excess and bodies on display.

The installation borrows its title from the religious scholar and philosopher Mircea Eliade, who wrote about the relationship between the sacred and the everyday, and how the performance of rituals is an act of worldmaking. Here, Tam returns to his earlier research into the history and ceremonial practices of Asian American fraternities, begun during a 2020 residency at The Kitchen in New York City. In these stylized and structured public ceremonies, synchronized choreographies tell a brotherhood's



history, and use performance to forge a coherent and stable group identity, these initiation rites have received public scrutiny in recent years for their use of hazing and other coercive acts. Tam's interest lies in unpacking how these ritualized constructions of belonging and identification end up undermining those very bonds, and how the contradictions embed themselves in the lives of young Asian American men.

Tam's research for the video focused on the ceremonial traditions of Pi Delta Psi, whose chapter at Baruch College in New York City was banned following the death of freshman initiate Michael Deng in 2013. The video makes reference to these publicly staged probates, interweaving computer-generated aerial footage of Washington Square Park arch, where some of these performances are regularly held. The gallery housing the installation similarly demarcates a private and ritual-focused experience of sacred space, through the invocation of a quasi-memorial. Empty liquor and cologne bottles, objects that an adolescent male might keep in his bedroom as trophies, hover above the gallery floor on pipes affixed to the ceiling and illuminated from below by tactical flashlights. Their presentation reminds us how these glass vessels, and the liquids contained within, serve ritualistic functions that mark a rite of passage for their users.



Tam's wall sculptures are cast in sculpting resin from molded arrangements of hoodies and varsity jackets, common articles of dress for probates. Their dark and spectral formations—resembling coats of arms, ritual tablets, and other heraldic symbols—might bring to mind an image of clothes haphazardly thrown on the floor of a young man's bedroom. Yet this intertwined and writhing mass of bodies could also suggest something more aggressive, and even violent. Together, they stand in as emblems through which fraternities assert their presence and dominion in public space.

These wall sculptures also feature embedded accessories, including metal watch bands, imitation gold chains, razor blades, handcuff keys, dog tags, and Chinese coins. They speak to the displays of excess, cultural syncretization, and violence associated with the probate and more generally the many other tropes of normative Western masculinity.



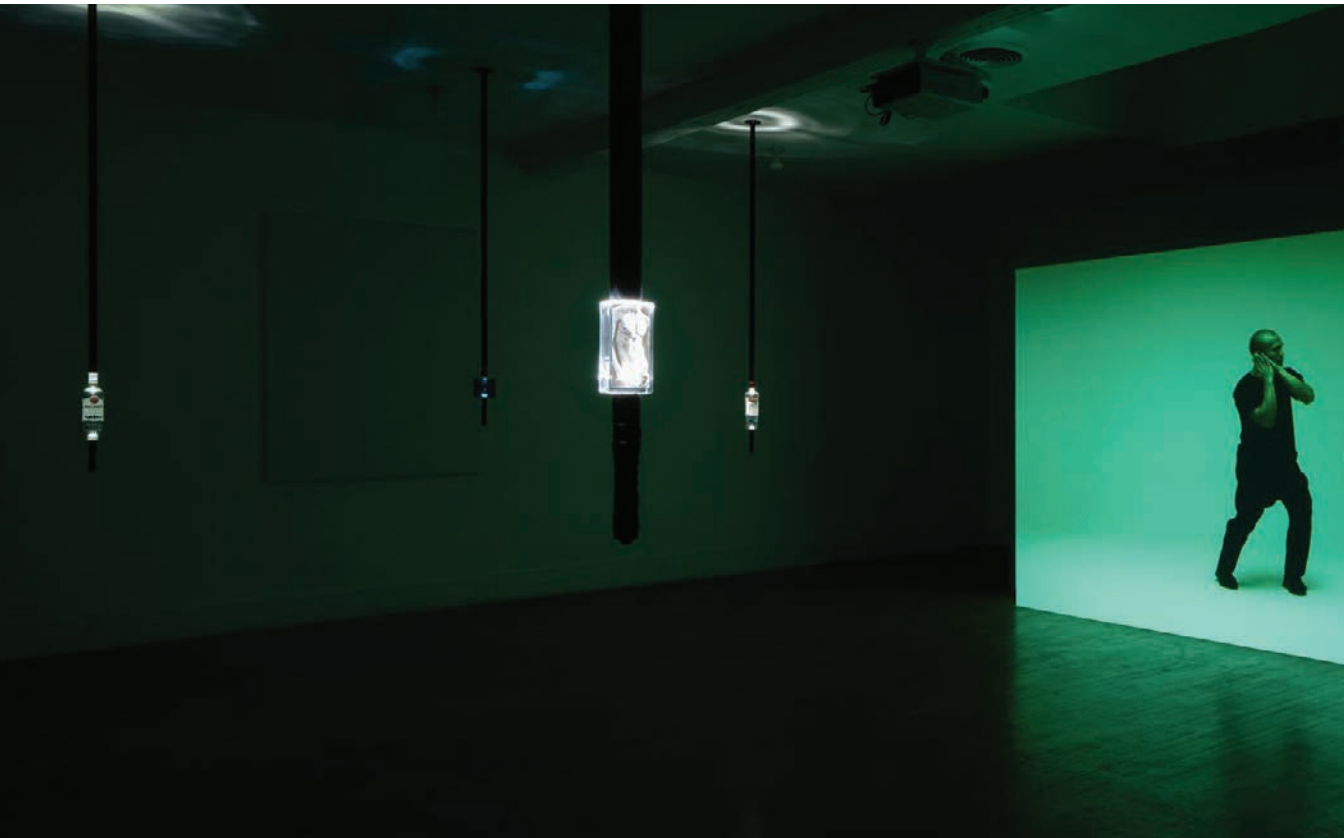


## *About the Artist*

Kenneth Tam (b. 1982) is based in Houston, TX and Queens, NY. He works across video, sculpture, performance, movement, installation and photography, and makes work about the performance of masculinity, spaces of physical intimacy, and the transformative potential of private ritual. Tam received his BFA from the Cooper Union and his MFA in 2010.

He has had solo exhibitions at Ballroom Marfa, TX; MoCA Tucson, AZ; Queens Museum, NY; Minneapolis Institute of Art, MN; MIT List Center for Visual Arts, MA; the Visual Arts Center at UT Austin, TX; Commonwealth and Council, CA; and ICA LA, CA. Tam has participated in group shows at the Hammer Museum, CA; SculptureCenter, NY; and at The Shed, NY.

Tam is currently an Assistant Professor at Rice University and faculty at The Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts at Bard College. He is represented by Commonwealth & Council in Los Angeles, Mexico City.



# Images

Cover: *The Rider*, 2022. Archival pigment print, lacquer frame. Image courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles, Mexico City. Copyright Kenneth Tam, photo of framed artwork by Ian Byers-Gamber.

1. *Virgo*, 2022. Archival pigment print, lacquer frame. Image courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles, Mexico City. Copyright Kenneth Tam, photo of framed artwork by Ian Byers-Gamber.

2. Video still from *Silent Spikes*, 2021. Two-channel HD video, sound, 20:29 minutes. Commissioned by Queens Museum, with support from the Asian Art Circle at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles, Mexico City. Photos by Jason Mandella.

3. *He does not know the custom*, 2022. Epoxy resin, dirt, sand, dried mushrooms, dried seaweed, dried bamboo shoots, steel. Image courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles, Mexico City.

4. Video still from *The Founding of the World*, 2023. Single-channel 4K video, color, sound, 14 min 19 sec, butterfly knife. Edition of 5, 2AP. Courtesy of the artist.

5. *Rites of Passage (Polo Blue, Smirnoff)*, 2023. Steel, glass cologne bottle, glass liquor bottle, tactical flashlights, batteries, magnets, 3D printed resin, paint. Courtesy of the artist.

6. *Traditions*, 2023. Aqua-Resin, metal watch bands, butterfly training knives, painted MDF, metal bracket. Image courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles, Mexico City.

7. Installation view, *The Founding of the World*, 2023. Single-channel 4K video, color, sound, 14 min 19 sec, butterfly knife. Edition of 5, 2AP. Courtesy of the artist.



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