

04.05.21 / EXHIBITIONS Neha Choksi, Cammie Staros

## Relics from a Future

*Thoughts of posthuman existence usually conjure scenes of calamitous upheavals and nature overrunning ruins. In contrast, Cammie Staros's exhibition, [What Will Have Being](#), on view at Shulamit Nazarian in Los Angeles from January 16–March 6, 2021, implied the slow transformation of a still-standing museological space, where fishes swam around Grecian ceramics in made-to-fit vitrines, solitary amphorae turned into ingenious conches, and neon light fixtures appeared to drip onto the floor, forming precise glass puddles. Neha Choksi met Staros at the gallery to discuss the journey that unfolded into a succession of three color-calibrated rooms—from amber to aquamarine to beatific pink—engulfing the viewer in its speculation.*



*What Will Have Being*, installation view, Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles, January 16–March 6, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Shulamit Nazarian. Photo: Morgan Waltz.

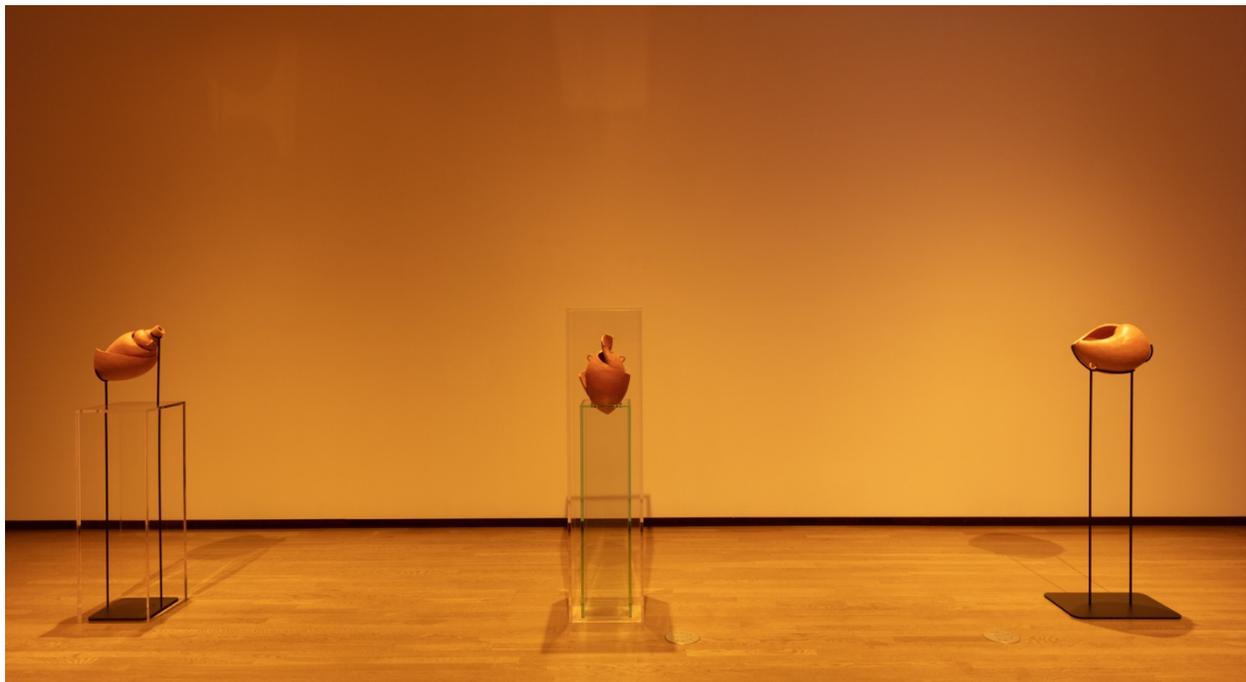
NEHA CHOKSI: I find the syntax in the title, “What Will Have Being,” confounding. I think of “being” as fully present, even alive, animate—but both these freestanding ceramics and those

placed in the aquariums feel very still, almost like stilled lives if not for the fishes swimming around in the vitrines.

**CAMMIE STAROS:** The title riffs on the idea of cyclical history, that “what has been will be again.” The twist of the future imperfect tense appealed to me. I had ideas about an exhibition that had been abandoned by humans and reclaimed by nature, with ceramics that evoke static artifacts while also seeming to evolve and change form. I wanted the suggestion of an imperfect future, but I also wanted to allow that alive, animate meaning of “being” into the title as well.

**NC:** The show looks pristine. Not at all like the foreboding ruin typically conjured by the idea of nature reclaiming a posthuman, abandoned site. These waters are unpolluted and the ceramic shapes are crafted perfectly, even when you’ve cut into these smaller amphorae to curve them into shells, as in *Mutatio naturalis* (2021). I found myself thinking about human control, even artistic control, rather than nature reclaiming.

**CS:** This work is largely about human control. The works are all titled using a taxonomic structure; they are made of the materials used to display objects in museums; they build on these frames in which we see art and history and animals. I considered much messier versions of the installation, but I wanted to avoid getting overly narrative or too theatrical. I try to make work about these ideas without enacting them. As for the shell pots, I started making them the way I would start making any other vessel, then cut into them and used that rupture to twist them into themselves, to form vases in the act of growing or unwinding into shells. I’m working with the border between the natural and the manmade, making a cross-species analogy of things we creatures leave behind.



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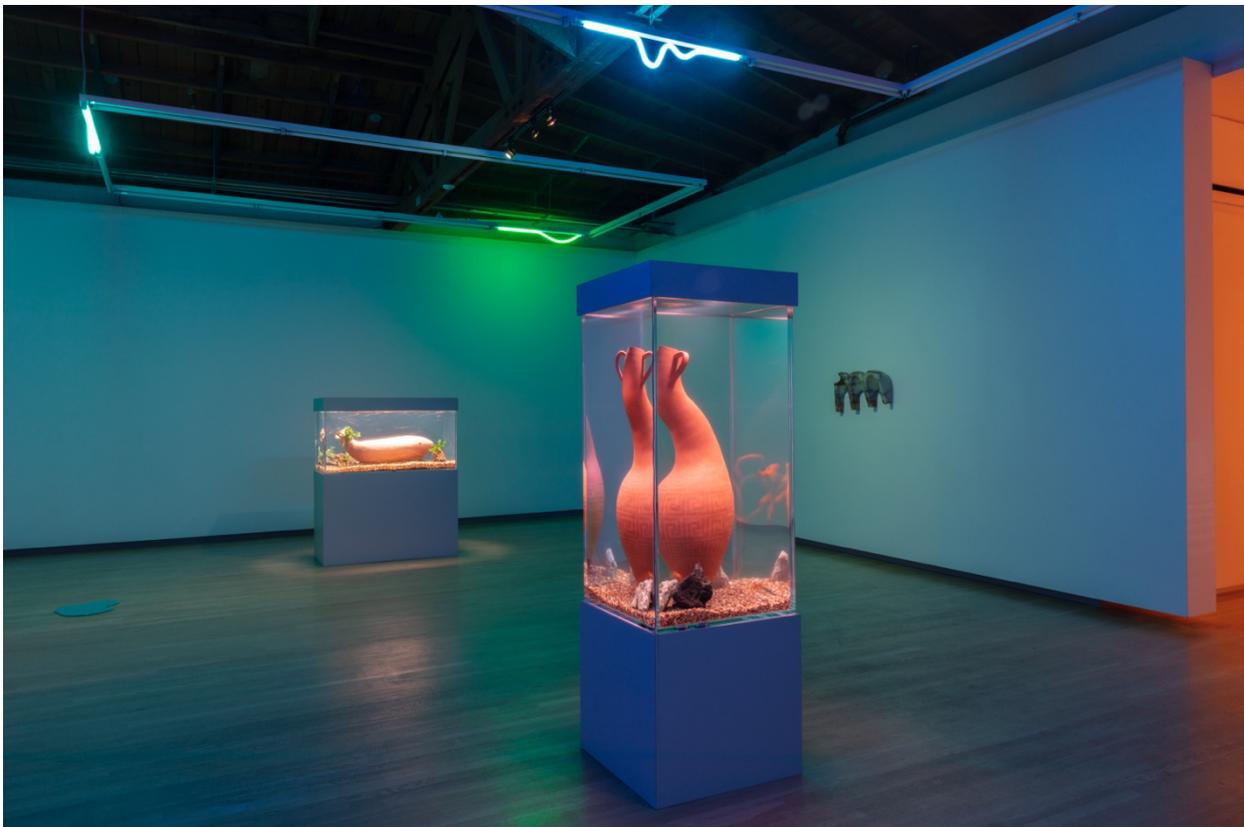
**NC:** That’s lovely. The marine allusion of these shell-shaped amphora displayed in the first room works as an introduction to the watery space beyond, where ceramic vessels in their vitrines

have become part of living aquariums. Looking through this first aquarium (*Figlinum aquaticum*, 2021), inset into the wall, you can see into the next room.

CS: With regards to the ceramics in the aquariums, I wanted to transform the traditional vessel shapes to feel like the ceramics had adapted to their new watery habitats. There's a feminine aspect to *Futurum fluidum* (2021), but the vessel is also stretched and wavy as if tossed in a gentle current. In *Sculptura liquifacta* (2021), the wine vessel slumps to the bottom of the tank, taking the shape of a shark or catfish with the handles as tailfins. It feels at home on the lakebed.

NC: There is also something about their solitariness that reads, not as tragic, really, and not only—as you wanted it to read—as museological, but also hopeless in some way, like they're encased alone.

CS: Well, they are encased alone and intact to invoke classical ceramics and the ways in which they are displayed. There's some sadness and some impending doom here, but I don't think it's pessimistic, exactly. They're moving on without us. But I aim to address that history in a language of contemporary sculpture, rather than trying to make recreations of artifacts. I don't typically show fragmented or aged pieces, nor do I paint them following all the historic conventions. This one is covered in a traditional Greek key pattern, but they would never have covered a whole vase or followed the bulges and curves this way.

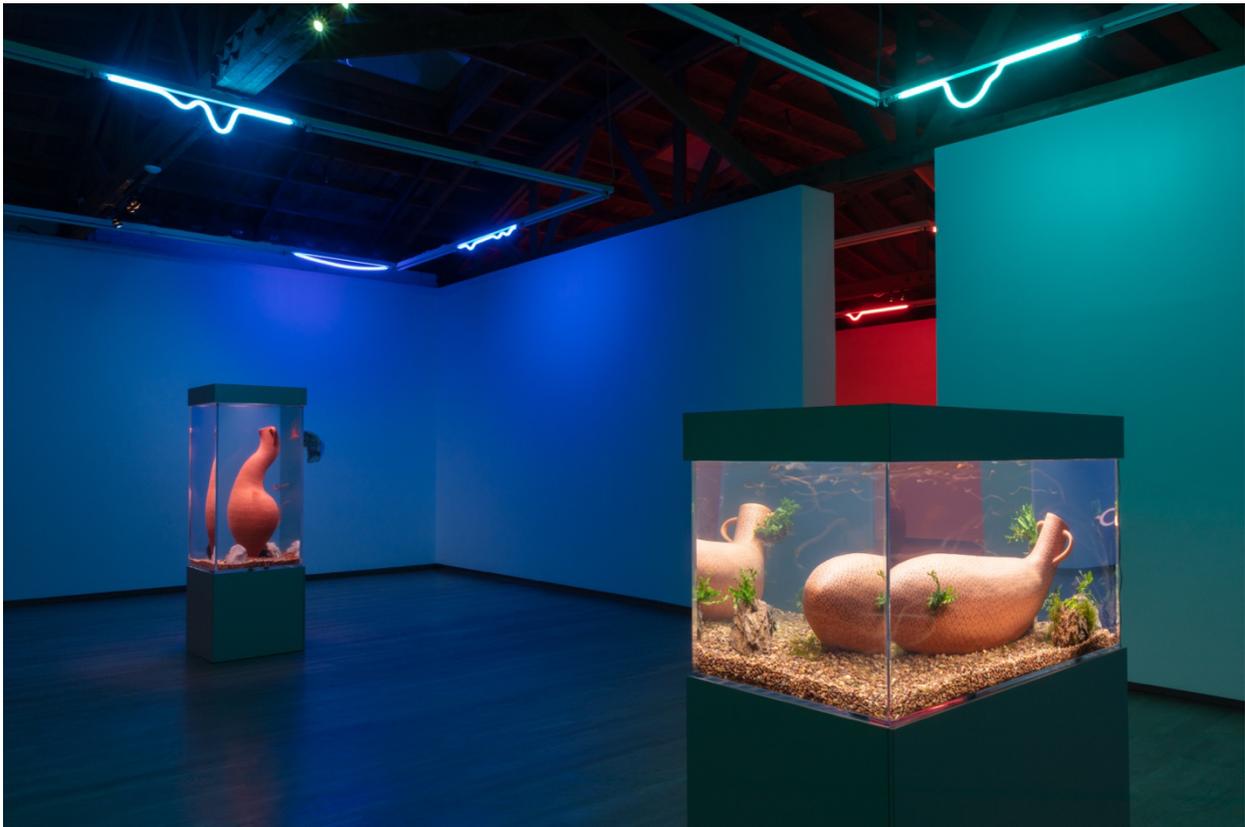


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NC: You've spoken about Greek art as the origin story of Western art history. Are we to take that at face value? Isn't this exhibition reinforcing that?

CS: I don't think I'm the first person to posit this origin story. So-called encyclopedic museums have historically been organized around a linear history beginning in ancient Greece. One hall leads to another hall through European history, and art from places outside of that central story, are in rooms off to the side. I'm trying to point to that outdated linear narrative rather than reiterate it. There is an aspect of complicity there, but that's part of the inherent complexity of my relationship to it.

In addition to those factors, I'm hoping to use references to antiquity and its institutionalization to flatten historical time, referencing the ancient past, later underwater discoveries, current museological display, and a potential future of today's objects. The idea of an object triggering the simultaneous image of an unknowable past and future is closely related to the conception of ruins and relics from the classical era. In this show, I'm using the past to question how our current moment will be remembered.



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NC: I like the idea of relics a lot because I am not sure I see ruins in the aquariums and ceramics, but I do see relics, interpreted as a valuable object or fragment freighted with history.

CS: For me, the onyx pieces (*Onyx arcus* and *Onches fornices*, both 2020) get at ruins more precisely. I wanted to work in stone because stones can have a beautiful manmade-natural relationship. They are records of a geologic moment as well as architectural ruins of civilizations. The green onyx that I chose has these veins and soft spots, already seeming to crumble at the edges. Carving a form that was fairly rigid and architectural felt like a way to acknowledge ruins and their appeal without making a cartoon of decay.

NC: That's well put. From my current vantage I see the aquarium, the neon, the drip, and the stone—and the smoothness and rotundity of the vase in *Futurum fluidum* alongside the flatness of the puddle, as if the neon fixture dripped next to the rigid stone (in *Onyx arcus*), is an eerie juxtaposition. The objects are so contained, so held together, and then there's this perfected glass puddle, this neon ooze that exceeds. A contemporary nod to ruin, perhaps?

CS: Yes, precisely, and the neon puddles *are* cartoons.

NC: I'm intrigued that the drooping neon bulbs and the accompanying puddles are not listed works.

CS: They're installation elements. They'll become discrete objects later, but it was important to me to install the neons within the gallery's existing lighting grid.

NC: It does alter the space. The light suffusing the space pushes the gallery into a theatrical setting where suddenly we're the players, like fish darting around the art.

CS: I also wanted the very structure of the space to feel like it was changing in the absence of human caretakers. I wanted the lights to seem like they were discoloring and dripping out of their sockets. I wanted this room to invoke a watery space, as if looking at these vitrines-turned-aquariums from inside an aquarium.



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NC: Entering the red-lit room after this underwater mise en abyme makes a very strong impression. *Concha clavata* (2021) has the largest footprint of any work in the show. The two dishes inside echo the fused wine cups in the first aquarium (*Figlinum aquaticum*), but the piece resembles something crawling and very inward-oriented, like a creature inside a conch.

CS: All true. It's a reference to the teats of the she-wolf suckling Romulus and Remus in the famous Capitoline Etruscan statue. There is also reference to Louise Bourgeois's explicit and implicit teat forms, which I think feel like crawling creatures, as you mention. When I added the porcelain points, I was thinking more about sea anemones or coral, and their relationship between singular organisms and a colony structure. I related that to the titular aspect of this form as well; it's a fragment of a body, a conjoined network of vessels, and a whole entity all in one.

NC: And returning back through the exhibition, this stone piece, *Onyches fornices* (2021), also feels patterned, like a colony of arches.

CS: I wanted to put these arches on the wall facing this doorway so that you see them again after leaving the pink room. The arches are an architectural version of the organic form of *Concha clavata*. I think a lot about how works affect each other, and, in that vein, I was playing with formal echoes, reflections, and viewpoints. Each doorway is a fresh opportunity to frame the viewer's experience.

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Cammie Staros is an artist living and working in Los Angeles. She is a current Guggenheim Fellow.