

Kongkee: Warring States Cyberpunk

A Luminous Electronic Art Installation Combining Ancient Poetry and Modern Anime
–Equal Parts Comic Book, Motion Picture, and Meditation on History–
Presented as a Futurist Fantasy at Wrightwood 659 in Chicago

April 14 – July 15, 2023



(CHICAGO, IL, February 15, 2023)– On view from April 14 to July 15, 2023, ***Kongkee: Warring States Cyberpunk*** features the work of London-based Chinese artist and animation director Kong Khongchang, known as Kongkee. Through multi-screen videos, wall projections, neon installations, vibrant graphic works, narrative texts, and ancient Chinese objects, the exhibition tells the story of legendary poet Qu Yuan, who lived during the Warring States Period (c. 481-221 BCE), as his soul journeys from the ancient Chu Kingdom to a retro-futuristic Asia where he is reborn as an android in a psychedelic cyberpunk landscape. Originally conceived by Kongkee as a comic series in 2013, the exhibition transports viewers into an imaginary world where past and future collide.

This exhibition is presented by Alphawood Exhibitions at Wrightwood 659.

Kongkee: Warring States Cyberpunk is organized by the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco and curated by Abby Chen, Senior Associate Curator of Contemporary Art at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

"Kongkee starts his creative process by researching and allegorizing the historical figures of the Warring States period," explains Curator Abby Chen. "He brilliantly draws ancient artworks into his own dazzling vision, revealing how the past haunts the present and helping us imagine what a

vibrant strain of 'Asian Futurism' can look and feel like: one full of energy, music, and color that creatively entwines the enigma of the past with caution toward cutting-edge technologies yet to be discovered."



Installed on the third and fourth floors of Wrightwood 659, the exhibition traces the life of Qu Yuan (c. 339 - 278 BCE), one of ancient China's most revered poets. As the legend tells, Qu Yuan had been a trusted advisor of King Huai of Chu, ruler of one of the Warring States from 328 to 299 BCE, until the poet was banished. Left in despair, Qu Yuan eventually drowned himself in the Miluo River, a tributary of the Yangtze. Qu Yuan's legacy is so

important he is celebrated every year in Chinese communities around the world in the famous Dragon Boat Festivals—which originated as a search for the poet's body.

In the immersive world of *Warring States Cyberpunk*, Kongkee resurrects the poet's soul, transforming him into an android who struggles with implanted memories from his past life. The android ponders the duality of death and immortality, the body and the soul, and what it is to be human—or machine.

Kongkee notes, "Like the Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, 'No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.' I asked myself, what happens when a soul emerges after 2,000 years from underwater—does it seek out something new? Does it return to familiar places? Qu Yuan's poetry has a psychedelic, wandering quality that I tried to reflect in my art, but I also wanted him to reflect the disorientation, as well as the hope, of our era."

Throughout the exhibition, recurring images of waves immerse the viewer in the android Qu Yuan's quest to recover his soul. Kongkee invites visitors to follow along as Qu Yuan rises to become a pop icon with the help of other androids and reconciles with the reincarnated King Huai of Chu. In the background lurks the dark specter of Emperor Qin Shi Huang, whose conquest of Qu Yuan's homeland led to the poet's suicide.

"The Warring States period was a time of political strife, but also a moment of profound artistic exuberance when many of the most enduring and potent motifs became embedded across 'Chinese' culture: snake-like dragons, all-over geometric patterns, spirit guides to aide your pursuit of longevity—even immortality," said Jay Xu, the Barbara Bass Bakar Director and CEO of the Asian Art Museum. "*Kongkee: Warring States Cyberpunk* offers us all a way to connect the past to the present and to value how the digital crafts and digital storytelling of today—animation, video art, even video games—share the same kinds of hard-won techniques, inspiration, and cultural influences as the bronzes, jades, and lacquerwares of old once did."



About Kongkee

Kongkee, aka Kong Khong-chang, (b. 1977, Chinese, born in Malaysia, raised in Hong Kong) is an animation director and visual artist currently based in London. He founded Penguin Lab studio in 2008. His work has been featured in film festivals, and captured the eye of Britpop band Blur, who partnered with Kongkee to create a comic book, *Travel to Hong Kong with Blur*, based on their hit album *The Magic Whip* (2015). In 2012, his comic *Detournements: La littérature de Hong Kong en bande dessinée* (co. Chihoi) was published in French in Europe. Kongkee started developing the comic series *Mi Luo Virtual* in 2013, which became the basis for *Kongkee: Warring States Cyberpunk*. In 2020 a chapter of this comic was animated and transformed into a short film *Dragon's Delusion* that won the grand prize of DigiCon6, the top honor for the category in Asia. His most recent work, *Flower In The Mirror*, an interactive video installation, was commissioned by M+ Museum in Hong Kong.

Also on View at Wrightwood 659

Running concurrently with *Kongkee: Warring States Cyberpunk* are two additional exhibitions: *Shahidul Alam: Singed But Not Burnt* and *Patric McCoy: Take My Picture*.

About Wrightwood 659

Founded in 2018, Wrightwood 659 is a private, non-collecting institution devoted to socially engaged art and architecture. Wrightwood 659 was designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architect

Tadao Ando, who transformed a 1920s residential building with his signature concrete forms and poetic treatment of natural light. Located in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood and acclaimed as "a hidden treasure," Wrightwood 659's soaring and light-filled galleries offer both intimate and monumental experiences as visitors engage with the pressing issues of our time. Exhibitions are presented by Alphawood Exhibitions at Wrightwood 659. For additional information:

<https://wrightwood659.org>.

About Alphawood Exhibitions

Alphawood Exhibitions is an affiliate of Alphawood Foundation, a Chicago-based, grant-making private foundation working for an equitable, just, and humane society.

New Hours of Operation (Starting April 14, 2023)

Thursdays 1-8 pm; Fridays 12 noon-7 pm; Saturdays 10 am-5 pm

Tickets

Admission for all three exhibitions is \$15 and is available online only at <https://tickets.wrightwood659.org/events>. Tickets go on sale March 16, 2023. Please note, admission is by advance ticket only. Walk-ups are not permitted.

COVID-19 Response

We require all staff and guests to be fully vaccinated and boosted against COVID-19. By entering Wrightwood 659, you warrant to us you are fully vaccinated and boosted against COVID-19. We reserve the right to ask guests to produce evidence of their vaccination.

Masks are required throughout the gallery. <https://wrightwood659.org/terms-and-conditions/health-safety/>.

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Images

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