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Exhibition 09
HANDFUL OF DUST

02.05.25 - 14.06.25

**Private View:
Thursday 1st May, 6-9pm**

Bo Kim
Carolina Aguirre
Divine Southgate-Smith
Emii Alrai
Li Li Ren
Pia Ortuno
Richard Burton
Unyimeabasi Udoh

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I saw with my own eyes the Sibyl at Cumae hanging in a cage, and when the boys said to her: "Sibyl, what do you want?" she answered: "I want to die."

Epigraph from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

*What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.*

Referencing the famous lines from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, *Handful of Dust* brings together a group of emerging artists who either physically use or metaphorically respond to sand in their practice. Like most aspects of Eliot's poem, the line 'I will show you fear in a handful of dust' has multiple meanings and interpretations. On one hand it can be seen as a biblical reference alluding to the Christian burial tradition ("For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return") and on the other it can be viewed as a classical reference to the story of the Cumaen Sibyl that Eliot cites in the poem's epigraph.



All time compressed, fueled by the infinite. All mine unfolding, with every mouthful, Divine Southgate-Smith, 2024, Glass, ceramic, white glaze, Cassava flour, 38 x 100 x 19 cm



Justice, Pia Ortuno, 2023, Oil, sand, marble dust, salt and nails on wood with rusted steel frame, 43 cm (diameter)

First mentioned in Petronius' *Satyricon*, the Cumaen Sibyl is a character from Greco-Roman mythology who approaches Apollo at Mount Olympus, asking him to grant her as many years of life as grains of sand she holds in her hand. The Sibyl's request is granted but, as she did not also ask for eternal youth, she is cursed to age and decay for eternity. The story likely resonated with Eliot, whose poem looked to situate the spiritual desolation of post-war society within the context of a hopeless, never-ending trudge through a barren cultural landscape; Eliot, heavily influenced by the Romantic poets, viewed contemporary life as something akin to Shelley's description of *Ozmandias*' former-empire where "*Nothing beside remains. Round the decay / Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away.*"

This poetic image of time slipping through our hands like grains of sand frames the exhibition, which also seeks to explore sand's role in art history and the cultural ideas and tropes associated with the material. Sand has been a part of artistic creation for as long as we can ascertain: early humans used naturally pigmented sand to create images on cave walls, while indigenous cultures such as the Navajo in North America have a long tradition of sand painting used in healing ceremonies, and for hundreds of years Buddhist monks have created meticulous, symmetrical mandalas using coloured sand as a form of spiritual practice.

In Greco-Roman art, sand frequently appears in representations of the Titan Cronus (Saturn), the god of time, and in allegorical depictions of the waning sands of time. During the Renaissance, the figure of father time - the physical personification of time - began to

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appear, often holding an hourglass, which would become the quintessential visual and philosophical symbol of mortality and the passing of time. The hourglass then appeared frequently in Vanitas paintings of the 16th and 17th centuries, particularly in the Dutch and Flemish traditions, where artists such as Pieter Claesz and Harmen Steenwijck depicted hourglasses alongside skulls, wilting flowers, and rotting fruit to symbolise the brevity of life.

More recently, in the twentieth century, artists like Salvador Dali looked to solidify this idea of sand as representational matter corresponding to the distortion of time and memory. The arid landscape seen in *The Persistence of Memory* (1931) is festooned with melting clocks, reinforcing the idea that time itself is amorphous, immaterial, slipping away, much like sand through fingers. Forty years later artists such as Robert Smithson and Andy Goldsworthy used sand in large-scale environmental art projects that often highlighted the shifting, granular nature of the material that makes it such an apt symbol for impermanence, fragility, and the passage of time.

In *Handful of Dust* artists are working with or referencing sand in new and intriguing ways. South Korean artist Bo Kim adheres sand to the surface of sheets of traditional Hanji paper which are then layered onto painted canvases, allowing the sand to emphasise the delicate, undulating texture of the paper as it absorbs the acrylic paint. Divine Southgate Smith's work often explores the relationship between heritage and time, taking a particular interest in temporal loops and circuits. Her work in *Handful of Dust* features cassava flour - commonly used in her native Togo - placed in a shell that resembles both an hourglass and the outline of the infinity symbol, placed flat so the flour is in constant stasis. Pia Ortuno's practice is concerned with the earth and our relationship to it. She often goes mudlarking on the Thames, digging up nails and coins from the earth that form part of her compositions. Here she uses dyed sand, applying it to circular sculptural works that resemble clock faces, with an abstract formulation of numbers demarcated by strips of metal.



The muteness of a touch, Li Li Ren, 2024, Glass, volcanic sand, and resin, 8 x 22 x 39 cm

Li Li Ren uses volcanic sand in her casting process, producing sculptures of hands and other limbs that are glazed with resin and interact with amorphous glass shapes that highlight the physical difference in material while striking a similar aesthetic chord. Richard Burton is heavily influenced by Science-fiction, in particular the synthetic environments that cause a kind of emotional disconnect with those experiencing them. He plays with this tension between the natural and synthetic by mixing sand into his oil paints, producing a rich, grainy texture on the canvas. Emii Alrai's work taps into a neolithic aesthetic, using sand-rubbed cardboard cladding as a structural backdrop to a stone installation. Carolina Aguirre uses gofun in her paintings: a white pigment predominantly used in Japanese painting that is the basis of a practice deeply rooted in the natural world, fusing elements of the human body with more abstract natural forms. Unyimeabasi Udoh's installation references the Minimalism of the 1970s, and the notion that the attribution of meaning, within an artistic context or otherwise, is completely contextual. Preferring to play with notions of agency and unearth humour in artistic creation, Udoh likes to view the work in *Handful of Dust* as both a reference to an intellectual art historical tradition, while simultaneously acknowledging the simplistic formal qualities of the work.

Handful of Dust explores the ways in which sand, as both material and metaphor, speaks to the transient nature of time, history, and memory. Just as *The Waste Land* conjures a fractured landscape haunted by the weight of the past, the works in this exhibition evoke the impermanence of existence - shifting, eroding, and reforming like dunes in the wind. Sand holds traces of what came before, yet resists permanence, mirroring the way cultures, identities, and personal histories are continuously shaped and reshaped. Through their varied approaches, the artists engage with the fundamental tension between preservation and loss, endurance and decay. Their works remind us that, much like the grains of sand slipping through the aperture of an hourglass, nothing can remain unchanged. In this way, *Handful of Dust* is both a meditation on ephemerality and a reflection on the beauty and inevitability of transformation.



Sssss, Carolina Aguirre, 2025, Sumi ink, gofun, charcoal on wooden panel, 50 x 80 cm

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About The Artists

Bo Kim (b. 1994, South Korea) is an artist currently based in South Korea, who earned a degree in Painting (BFA) from the Rhode Island School of Design in the United States. Bo utilizes materials from nature such as sand, hanji (traditional Korean paper), and flowers.

Carolina Aguirre (b.1990, Chile) is an Argentinean artist based in London. She has a BA in Graphic Design from Central Saint Martins and an MA from the RCA. She has exhibited at Lismore Castle Arts (Cork), Royal Academy of Arts (London), Palmer Gallery (London) and Thaddaeus Ropac (London).

Divine Southgate-Smith (b. 1995, Togo) received a Post-graduate Diploma from the Royal Academy Schools in 2022 (The Royal Academy of Arts, London). She/they had previously completed undergraduate study in Fine Art at Central Saint Martins (London, 2017). Divine took part in Palmer Gallery's inaugural exhibition.

Emii Alrai (b. 1993, UK) is an artist whose work spans material investigation in relation to memory and the complexity of ruins. Alrai's work is held in collections including the British Museum, London; Leeds Art Gallery, Leeds; the Arts Council Collection, London; the Government Art Collection, and The Hepworth Wakefield.

Li Li Ren (b. 1986, China) lives and works in London, where she gained her BA in Fine Art from Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London, in 2010, and her MA in Sculpture from the Royal College of Art, London, in 2017.

Pía Ortuño (b. 1996, Costa Rica) is an artist currently living and working in London. She received her Painting MA from the Royal College of Art in London (2022) and a BA in Fine Arts from the University of Costa Rica (2019). She apprenticed under Jimenez Deredia in Carrara (Italy) and worked with ancient marble and bronze techniques.

Richard Burton (b.1984, UK) lives and works in London. He studied at the Royal College of Art (2019–21) and Slade School of Fine Art (2004–08). He is the recipient of the Abbey Fellowship in Painting, British School at Rome (2022).

Unyimeabasi Udoh (b. 1996, USA) lives and works in London. Udoh holds an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a BA from Columbia University. Most recently, they were the 2022–23 Starr Fellow at the Royal Academy of Arts. Recent exhibitions include *Withdrawing at Kip*, London (2024); *A Gain at Night Café*, London (2023); *Ave at the Royal Academy of Arts*, London (2023); *Wayfinding at LVL3*, Chicago (2022); and *Lifelinien at Scotty*, Berlin (2022).



In their arms, we bloom, Bo Kim, 2025, Hanji, sand, and acrylic, on canvas, 130 x 90 cm

About Palmer Gallery

Founded by Lucas Giles and Will Hainsworth in 2024, Palmer Gallery is a space dedicated to identifying and developing the strongest emerging artistic talent of today. The gallery programme focuses on cross-disciplinary artists working across painting, sculpture, video, performance, light and sound installation, creating an immersive exhibition space. This multi-sensory approach embraces a holistic view of contemporary art while championing an institutional dedication to framing and contextualising complex artistic practices. Palmer Gallery's core mission is to allow artists to express themselves and thrive in an open, supportive and experimental environment; fostering a culture of creative freedom and connection among the gallery's artists and the wider community. The gallery is situated in London's Lisson Grove, in a 1000 ft² former-factory built in the 1920's by the Palmer Tyre Company, who produced parts for the Spitfire, Hurricane and Lancaster Bombers during The Second World War.

Contact Us

For further press information and high-res images please email: contact@palmergallery.co.uk

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