

AFTER SIMULTANEOUSLY GRADUATING from both Columbia University's MFA program and New York University's Interactive Telecommunications Program in 2003, Alexander Lee worked as Matthew Barney's studio manager, overseeing Barney's museum installations all over the world, as well as a production manager on *De Lama Lamina* and *Drawing Restraint 9*. One year ago Lee left the Barney studio to concentrate on his own sculpture-making.

Cast in black sand and epoxy resin and encapsulated in an installation titled *The Departure of the Fish* (2006), the sculptures are the first installment in a series of works based on his upbringing in the islands of French Polynesia (Tahiti), and are meant as a reflection on the body as an element of a larger life cycle. *The Departure of the Fish* alludes to an underwater sanctuary teeming with fish and coral, arms and legs—all in dark, glistening volcanic sand.

Exploring the interplay between mythology and history, souvenir and relic, Lee's ambitious installation takes its title from a creation myth of his

has recurred throughout Lee's work—disembodied arms and legs with protruding coral growths mimic the aquatic environment of Tahiti's coral gardens. "It's sort of a mini biosphere," notes Lee. "You can see the ecology in the sculpture, and I think that's part of the salvation of it. It's a limb, but you can see

The Art Dealers: Alexander Lee's *The Departure of the Fish* premiered in Los Angeles from November 4 to December 16, 2006, at Kinkead Contemporary, 6029 Washington Blvd., Culver City CA 90232 (T: 310 490 9322). Kinkead Contemporary is a new gallery owned and operated by John Kinkead, who, in addition to his gallery duties and passionate art collecting, is an active member of the Junior Councils of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA), LA County Museum (LACMA), and Hammer Museum. *The Departure of the Fish* is on view in Chelsea through May 26 at



## NEW ARTIST ALEXANDER LEE

BY SIMON WATSON

native Tahiti. The legend tells of a volcanic island that transformed into a fish, swam from the mythical land *Havai'i* to the South Pacific, and then became land again; hence its name, *Tahiti*, which means "transplanted." For Lee this creation myth of the sea has combined with a more recent local event: the tragic crash of a Pan Am airplane bound for Los Angeles, whose victims were never found—save for the occasional limb pulled out of a shark's belly by a fisherman. These stories left their mark on the artist, who spent his boyhood snorkeling off the black-sand beach of Tahiti's Matavai Bay, famous for the events that took place there historically, and memorialized in the 1962 film *Mutiny on the Bounty*, starring Marlon Brando.

Lee cast dozens of body parts, fish, shells, and pieces of coral in a glittering amalgam of black sand and resin, creating artifacts that reference both the geological formation of Tahiti and the people who have crossed its shores: the tourists, the colonists, the nuclear scientists, the environmentalists, the victims of disasters, and even Lee's own ancestors, who were part of a tribe of Chinese gypsies, the Hakka. Like punk couture, the feet cast in black sand also allude to the expression  *pied noir*, or "black foot"—used to describe a French citizen born in one of France's African colonies.

Arrayed on a stage of baby blue identical to Pan Am's trademark color—a hue that



the life cycle in it." Equally, one can find allusions to classical sculpture tradition from the ancient Greeks to the Yoruba. Touching on human tragedy and hopes for redemption, Lee has created a narrative of mythic and transformative beauty.



Clementine Gallery, 623 West 27th Street, New York NY 10001 (T: 212 243 5937). Clementine is owned and operated by Elizabeth Burke and Abby Messitte. In addition to being gallerists and founding members of NADA (the New Art Dealers Alliance), Burke and Messitte are also independent art curators who created the sensation Art Rock at Rockefeller Plaza, hosted by power real estate magnate and sculpture collector Jerry Speyer's company Tishman Speyer.

All images  
Alexander Lee

*Departure of the Fish*  
2006  
Installation view  
and detail

Photo by Robert Wedemeyer  
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