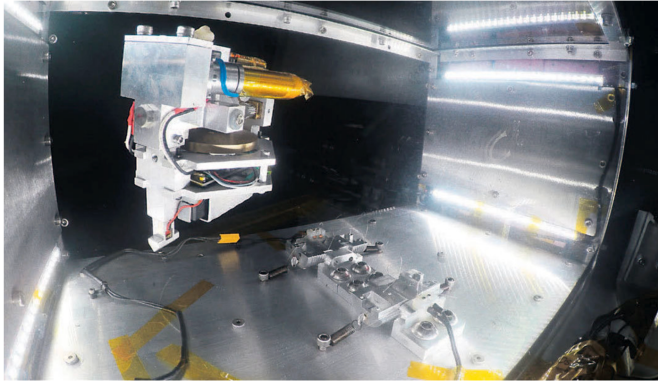


LOS ANGELES



Xin Liu, *Living Distance—two-channel video*, 2019, two-channel HD video, color, sound, 10 minutes 49 seconds.

Xin Liu

MAKE ROOM

In 1957, the Soviets loaded a dog named Laika onto the *Sputnik 2* spacecraft. Laika was a stray, probably part Samoyed and part terrier. She had a little spotted face with intelligent eyes and a white stripe streaking down to her soft, dark nose. Much international fanfare accompanied Laika's flight into earth's orbit, some two thousand miles above her home. She died a day or two after the launch, possibly from overheating.

Xin Liu's new show at Make Room, "*Living/Distance*," did not at first hit the observer with the pathos of that Cold War space flight, but the results of the artist's own extraterrestrial experiments did elicit an unexpected cognitive dissonance between a Promethean wanderlust and a plangent fear of death. In 2018, Xin began working with the Space Exploration Initiative at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab. The collaboration culminated in Xin sending a small robot outfitted with one of her wisdom teeth into space as part of a payload riding in one of Jeff Bezos's Blue Origin rockets, called New Shepard, in May 2019. Xin, an artist and engineer, had constructed the small bot out of aluminum, brass, glass, steel, polycarbonate, and a custom electronic and mechanical system that took almost a year to develop. She named it *EBIFA* (Everything Beautiful Is Far Away), 2019. Her lower wisdom tooth was affixed to the robot in honor of a Chinese tradition of tossing one's bottom molars "to the ceiling." The tooth rode with *EBIFA* in one of the compartments of the rocket's capsule, a part that reenters the atmosphere. Tiny explosives attached to the robot were programmed to detonate once the vessel reached outer space, setting *EBIFA* free to float within the compartment in zero gravity and eventually fall apart. A camera inside the rocket captured footage of Xin's creation wobbling free, clanking into the walls, and thunking into the ceiling, the tooth glinting on its top like a stowaway with ill-advised travel plans. At the end of the rocket's flight, the capsule plummeted back to earth. Xin collected the disassembled parts to display in the gallery and created several objects out of other materials collected from New Shepard. The rocket's film was incorporated into *Living Distance—two-channel video*, 2019, a poetic rendition of the dental orbit.

Two of Xin's sculptures are titled *falling*, 2019. Both are renderings of Xin's open mouth made with resin and supported by aluminum brackets of the same type that were used for the capsule's camera mounts. Small glass teeth and steel chains hang from the maws, whose open lips seem to utter soundless words. And then, in a move that initially felt unrelated, Xin also presented a 3-D-printed ceramic object modeled after a burst tumor, bedecked with more chains and teeth (*Teratoma*, 2019).

Teratoma introduced the stale odor of death into the room, and once sensed, it could be seen everywhere: in the fractured components of *EBIFA*, in the silver-gray mouths, the defunct teeth, the horrid tumor. We were reminded that great journeys into the unknown have always exacted an immense toll; the unknown is never unpopulated, and many explorers have died on their way out. Xin never references these deaths, nor does she make specific mention of Laika, but her melancholy casting of her DNA into the all-powerful heavens highlights the weight of our mortality and the cost of our ambition.

Xin's gesture additionally offered several grace notes within its broody theater of space: Sending a robot and a tooth to rattle around in the cosmos is sad but also funny. As Bezos and Elon Musk struggle to make themselves masters not only of the earth but also of the universe, she backs away from making a Kubrickian epic, with its flat, heroic, and orchestral drama. Instead, she reminds us that we are all being tossed among the stars, and as we bang around and cling to our fragmenting shelters, we can only try to soften our fall.

— *Yxta Maya Murray*