

small gods

Desire, Devotion, and the Making of Power

October 31 – December 13, 2026

Opening Reception: Saturday, October 31, 4–8 PM

Curated by Ann Shi | a poco art, Los Angeles

Featuring: Trevor Coopersmith, Debra Disman, Nancy Evans, Lenny Gerard, Heng Yi, Tom Knechtel, Jenn Lima, Sandeep Mukherjee, Renée Pepion, and Julie Yeo.

LOS ANGELES, CA — Opening on Halloween, *small gods* brings together ten artists who challenge the boundaries between human and animal, divine and demonic, sacred and profane. Through hybrid bodies, unruly idols, playful monsters, and intimate shrines, the exhibition explores how desire, belief, and imagination transform ordinary beings into objects of worship or fear. Here, gods are imperfect, monsters are strangely sympathetic, and appearances are never quite what they seem.

At the heart of *small gods* is the Buddhist concept of 相, meaning form, appearance, or the characteristics through which we perceive and distinguish things. In the *Diamond Sutra*, appearances are understood as provisional rather than permanent realities. The text introduces 一合相, the apparent unity of composite phenomena: what seems to be a coherent whole is, in fact, a contingent gathering of interdependent parts. Even this unity, the sutra reminds us, must not be mistaken for an absolute truth.

Extending this proposition into the visual and material realm, *small gods* imagines the body itself as a composite being—part human, animal, ghost, god, and something yet unnamed. Its hybrid creatures do not merely blur categories; they expose the instability of the categories themselves. An animal can become a deity, a toy an object of worship, a monster an intimate self-portrait. What we call divine or demonic may reveal less about the being before us than about our own fears, desires, and systems of belief.

The exhibition questions the moral binaries through which religious and cultural traditions have shaped our understanding of good and evil, the sacred and the profane. Christian and Catholic iconography, Buddhist cosmology, Asian diasporic memory, queer fantasy, and popular mythology intersect, revealing how images of saints, demons, salvation, temptation, and enlightenment acquire cultural and spiritual authority. Yet these distinctions become unstable when holiness is mistaken for an image, goodness for an appearance, or spiritual attainment for an identity. The Buddhist concept of 著相, attachment to form and appearances, offers a particularly compelling paradox: even the pursuit of enlightenment can become another form of attachment when awakening is treated as something to possess, achieve, or embody. Rather than rejecting religion, *small gods* questions our impulse to impose fixed identities and moral

hierarchies upon experiences that are inherently fluid, contradictory, and beyond our complete control.

These tensions unfold through the artists' distinct approaches to the body. Jenn Lima, Julie Yeo, and Renée Peipion give form to creatures and bodily configurations that resist conventional distinctions between beauty and grotesquerie, vulnerability and power. Lenny Gerard's *Barbie* works reveal the unsettling underside of idealized femininity, while Tom Knechtel's queer, anthropomorphic hares transform animal imagery into a theater of desire, identification, and erotic fantasy. The body is neither a stable biological fact nor a pure spiritual vessel, but a mutable site where social expectations, private longings, and mythological projections converge.



Renée Peipion, *Pobrecita (The Little Fish)*, 2025

Elsewhere, animals become vessels for human desire, fear, and spiritual projection. Nancy Evans's *Phoenix / Rooster* transforms a familiar animal into a mythological presence. Evoking the phoenix's associations with death and rebirth, the sculpture moves between earthly existence and spiritual transcendence. Its hybrid identity invites reflection on mortality and humanity's enduring desire to imagine life beyond its physical limits. What could be more sacred than confronting mortality itself?

Spirituality also emerges through abstraction and material transformation. Heng Yi's Buddhist pilgrimage imagery invokes traditions of devotion and transcendence, while Sandeep Mukherjee's *Body Diagram* dissolves the body's apparent boundaries into a continuous relationship with landscape, matter, and the cosmos. Moving between figuration and abstraction, their works propose that the self is not a sealed entity but an assemblage of shifting relationships, perceptions, and energies.



Nancy Evans, *Phoenix / Rooster*, 2016

Extending beyond individual artworks, Debra Disman's intimate *Womb* shrine creates a space for psychological refuge and contemplation, immediately after visitors enter through a narrow passage. Trevor Coopersmith's site-specific *Mushrooms* installation transforms an opening in the attic into an altar, inviting visitors to experience the architecture itself as passage, encounters, and the light at the end of the tunnel.

Although Buddhist thought provides a conceptual point of departure, *small gods* refuses to confine spirituality—or Asia itself—to a single geography, religion, or visual tradition. Across Buddhist cosmology, Christian iconography, queer mythology, diasporic experience, and contemporary popular culture, the exhibition considers cultural identity as something continually assembled and transformed. Just as the body resists fixed boundaries, so too does *the idea of Asia*: not a region-defined exotic aesthetic, but an evolving network of encounters, migrations, and exchanges. Its cross-cultural and cross-media conversations resist the expectation that Asian art must be recognizable through particular symbols, materials, or traditions.

Humor is essential to this inquiry. On Halloween, when the living dress as the dead and monsters walk among us, appearances become a communal game. *small gods* embraces this spirit of masquerade, absurdity, and transformation, allowing us to collectively question why some images inspire reverence while others provoke fear or ridicule. What happens when the monster looks familiar, the saint becomes vain, or the idol turns out to be a toy?



Trevor Coopersmith, *Mushrooms*, 2026. Site-specific installation for *small gods*.

small gods suggests that divinity does not have to be transcendent, but transformative, something continually made and remade through the act of believing. Our gods are small not because they are insignificant, but because they are intimately human: flawed, desirous, vulnerable, contradictory, and perpetually becoming.

Perhaps liberation begins not in becoming a god, but in relinquishing the need to be one.



Renée Pepion, *"The Altar"*

About the Curator & a poco art

Founded in 2024, *a poco art* is a Los Angeles–based curatorial platform founded by Ann Shi, an independent curator, writer, art appraiser, and advisor. Working across exhibitions, research, archives, and artist collaborations, the platform explores contemporary artistic practices through cross-cultural exchange, diasporic experience, mythology, ritual, material transformation, and embodied ways of knowing.

Shi has organized exhibitions and artist projects across Los Angeles, Houston, New York, and Asia, including *Ritual to the Sun*, *Nüwa's Garden*, *Borders of Paradise*, and *Sanzen Daisen Sekai*.

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