

# 金 (*Metal*)

Kien Situ 司徒建

AUSTRALIAN CENTRE ON CHINA  
IN THE WORLD GALLERY

28 JULY–14 NOVEMBER 2025

In 金 (*Metal*), artist Kien Situ transforms the CIW Gallery into an architectonic field of rupture and reincarnation. Through artworks composed of Chinese ink, concrete, titanium, and incense ash sourced from Taoist temple censers across New South Wales — alongside reconstituted fragments of previous works — the installation conjures a suspended scene of material polarities.

金 (*Metal*) continues Situ's research into dislocated material narratives, developing what the artist describes as 'multi-dimensional matter.' Juxtaposing geological substances that span ancient, modern, and metaphysical realms, the artist explores the new relationships of time and space that emerge when seemingly disparate materials converge in harmonic tension. Incorporating previously-used materials and fragments (itself a kind of material reincarnation) 金 (*Metal*) interrogates the volatile relationships that animate interactions among raw materials and technology, history and identity.

The exhibition draws its title from the classical Chinese cosmological theory of the Five Elements (五行, also translated as "Five Phases"), according to which the world — both material and abstract — is comprised of Wood (木), Fire (火), Earth (土), Metal (金), and Water (水), with each element corresponding to a cardinal orientation: North, South, East, West, and Centre. In this system, metal is associated with the West (the horizontal or x-and y-axes, suggesting lateral movement), while Earth is associated with verticality (the vertical or z-axis, suggesting emergence and excavation).

In 金 (*Metal*), titanium features prominently, simultaneously evoking the material's key role in aerospace, robotics, and surgical technologies, as well as its use in the composition of the whitest pigment in painting, often used for blending and reflecting light. The presence of titanium also invokes the geological origins and complex geopolitics of its extraction and production.

Chinese ink, by contrast (the word for "ink" being 墨, which is composed of the characters for black 黑 and earth 土) — perhaps the darkest substance in Eastern aesthetics — remains rooted in the cosmology of ritual and soil. Elusive, formless, and abstract, ink communicates spatially through line and void in both calligraphy and traditional *shanshui* (山水) landscape painting.

While both metal and ink originate in the earth, then, in 金 (*Metal*) they occupy opposite ends of material, cosmological, and color spectrums. The space between metal and ink becomes charged.

In conversation with ink, concrete, and incense ash, metal in this exhibit thus refers not only to the raw substance, but to the philosophical element that orients space and time in Chinese cosmologies. And it becomes a cipher: a material through which world-making, soft power, and technological sovereignty are refracted.

Across the gallery, titanium needles and planes puncture the void — echoes of acupuncture, extraction. Ink drifts across painted surfaces. Titanium refracts faint light. Cast ink sculptures — long a signature of the artist's work — appear toppled, shattered, pierced. These are not stable forms, but mercurial states: collapsed, recomposed, and framed within a larger sequence of wilful destruction and reincarnation.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Kien Situ (b.1990) is an architectonic artist whose practice spans sculpture and space. Informed by his diasporic heritage at the juncture of contemporary global cultural theory with ancient Sinospheric philosophy, he explores matter, ruin, distance, numerology, and time in relation to cultural dislocation.

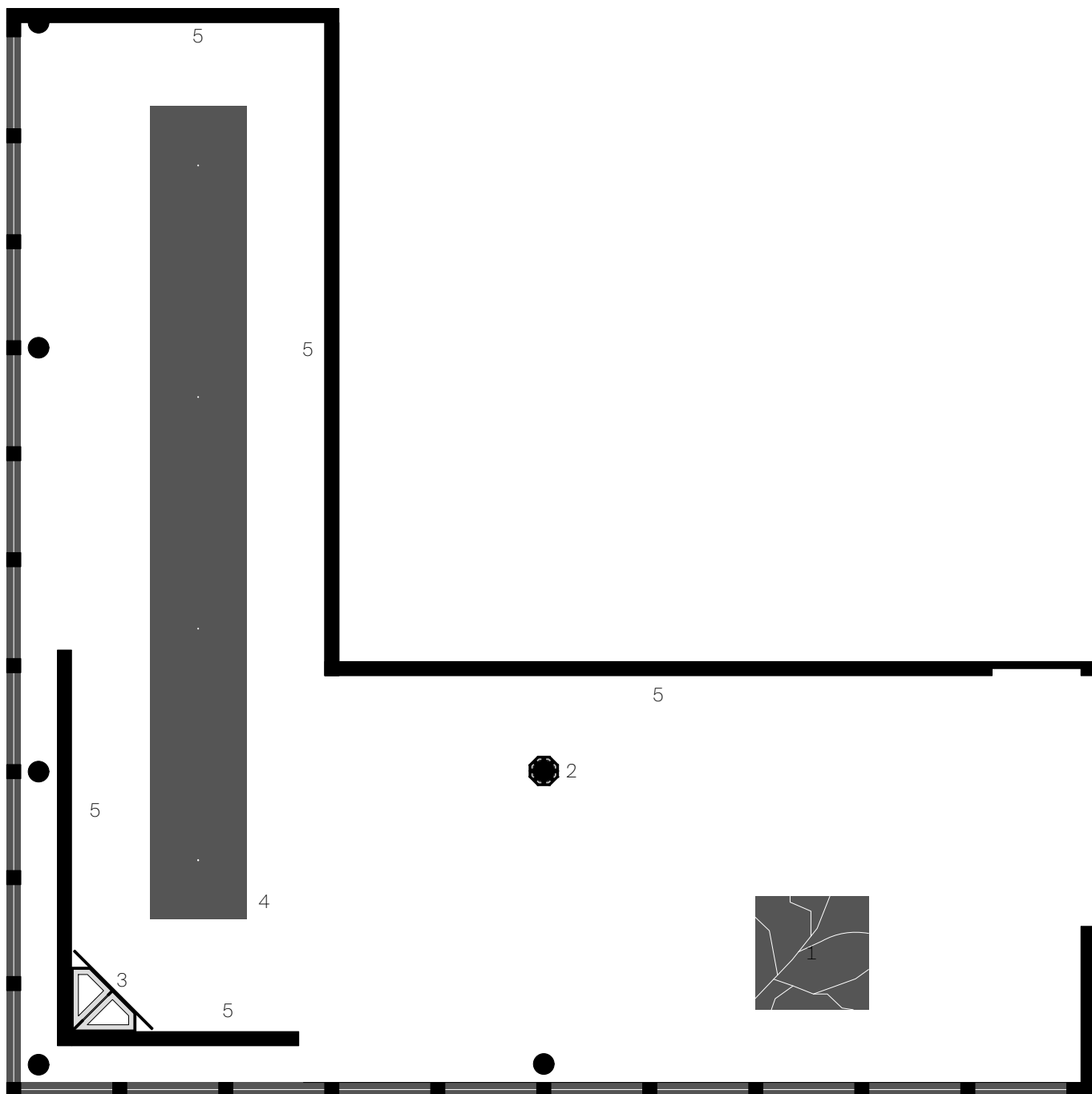
Situ reconfigures structures and space through encounters formed by destabilisation, tension, and hybridity. Drawing from deconstructivist, minimalist, and brutalist spatial methodologies, his work merges ancestral materials with modern techniques. Chinese Mò ink is central to his practice, altered through architectural materials. By displacing and reorienting these elements - while 'reincarnating' old works into new forms - he examines the destructive relationality between matter and identity, envisaging the cartography of his practice as an 'endless, formless ruin.'

Situ has exhibited at Artspace, 4A, Passage, The University of Sydney amongst other local institutions. In 2025, he will be showing at the Australian National University, Bankstown Arts Centre, Nasha Gallery, and undertaking an artist residency at Bundanon. His work belongs to Deloitte's Corporate Art Collection and various private collections. Alongside this, he has designed numerous exhibitions at AGNSW. In 2024, he was shortlisted for Create NSW's Artspace Visual Arts Fellowship and Lee Ufan Arles x Maison Guerlain Prix Art & Environment. In 2025, he will be presenting an artwork for the Venice Architecture Biennale 2025: Intelligens for HOME at the Australian Pavilion.

He holds a Bachelor of Architecture (UNSW, 2016) and a Masters of Architecture (USYD, 2025).

## LIST OF WORKS

- 1 *Elegy/Rhizome*, 2025  
Glass, Shattered Mirror  
1600 x 1600 x 16
- 2 *Titan*, 2025  
Titanium  
Site-specific  
2640 x 408DIA
- 3 *Mercury*, 2025  
Glass, Mirror  
Site-specific  
1600 x 1600
- 4 *Shanshui (The Book of Changes)*, 2025  
Hand-shattered Landscape Plates  
corresponding to 1-64 I-Ching  
Hexagrams, Chinese Mo Ink, Gypsum  
Cement, Titanium  
Site-specific  
Size Variable
- 5 *Necrologue*, 2025  
Chinese Mo Ink hand-painted on Wall  
Site-Specific  
Size Variable



## OPENING REMARKS

DR. GEOFF ISAAC  
31 JULY 2025

Metal, the name given to this exhibition, is taken from the fifth element in Chinese cosmology. In the Western tradition going back to ancient Greek philosophy we have earth, air, fire and water whereas the Chinese system lists: wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. In the Western tradition we originally believed the four elements were components that could be combined to create all matter. Today we are more likely to consider them as separate entities. While the Chinese system is a dynamic process - Wood feeds Fire; Fire creates Earth (ash); Earth bears Metal; Metal enriches Water; Water nourishes Wood. A circular process. As we struggle to navigate our way from our linear society of take, make, waste to a more circular economy, where waste is treated as a resource, this distinction is worth contemplating.

Indeed, related themes are explored in the works in this exhibition. The most obvious is reuse and recycling. Kien told me that his parents are architects and his father demonstrated a healthy respect for materials, reclaiming and reusing structural materials to contain costs and reduce waste. This background has inspired Kien not only to reuse materials but to reuse his own works, forcing the viewer to reinterpret works as they are transformed and presented in new forms. And we see that most obviously here where Kien has collected ash from Taoist temples and used it as an ingredient to make concrete.

Kien burns incense regularly and began to collect the ashes he accumulated at home. He has since expanded his collection points to include Taoist temples in Sydney. As he points out, the burning of incense was historically used to keep track of time, when clocks and watches were scarce. Burning a standardized length of incense allowed monks or scholars to track time by watching how much had burned. The ash collected then represents the artist's personal time and the Taoist community's time. So while the ash is embedded in the concrete time itself is embodied in the very same substance.

Ash might seem a strange ingredient for concrete but there is precedent for using ash in this way. Production of concrete accounts for about 8% of our global CO2 emissions. There is plenty of pressure on the industry to tackle its carbon footprint. One way to reduce these emissions is by using fly ash to replace Portland cement.

Fly ash is a byproduct of coal combustion in power stations. Each tonne of fly ash used in concrete can reduce emissions by nearly 1 tonne of CO2. By using it in concrete you can improve the strength and durability of concrete, and reduce water and energy consumption. Fly ash is text book example of industrial symbiosis, where the waste from one process becomes a resource for another – a step toward a circular economy.

But, as a perverse outcome of our efforts to combat climate change, the industry is increasingly facing shortages of fly ash, as more coal fired power stations are being shut down. In Australia, the industry is on the hunt for replacements, using slag from iron and steel blast furnaces, limestone clay and a range of other materials. Getting the volume of material needed to the right place while avoiding significant environmental impacts caused by bulk transportation remains a challenge.

This work made me reflect on the complexities of adapting our systems to find more circular solutions – we change one part of the system and this causes unforeseen knock-on effects often not directly related to the changes implemented in good faith.

The other ingredient used to make the concrete featured in this exhibition is Chinese ink, the darkest substance in Eastern aesthetics. If you stack the Chinese characters for black and earth they become ink. Kien's practice has often incorporated this material, first mixing it with plaster and now cement and adorning the textured walls of the gallery for this exhibition. Examples of ancient

ancestral materials being reimagined as modern architectural inputs.

The other material featured in this exhibition that caught my interest is titanium. To the artist titanium represents the future viewed through a technocratic lens due to the material's critical role in aerospace, robotics, and surgical technologies.

We are familiar with titanium as a metal, known for its strength, lightness, and corrosion resistance. Here you can see bars or needles of titanium suspended over the broken concrete installation, threatening to probe, penetrate or extract the material beneath. and, most spectacularly, you will see titanium encasing a pillar as you enter the exhibition. You will note the pillar has 8 sides – with 4 and 8 a recurrent theme in Kien's work. 8 is traditionally associated with luck, balance, and completeness, all relevant and important attributes for a weight bearing column.

As the room sheet states titanium is also used to enhance white paint. Interestingly in the Chinese cosmological theory of the Five Elements metal is associated with the colour white.

Titanium is also used to enhance the opacity and brightness of other colours as well – of course most paint these days is acrylic. Although I work on plastics, I was unaware that titanium is also used as a colour enhancer for many plastic products – both white and coloured. In addition, titanium additives also provide protection against UV – keeping colours brighter for longer.

To transform solid titanium into the white powder additive for use as a colour enhancer you need to treat the metal with sulfuric acid or chlorine gas. So, the metal is transformed to fine powder and eventually solidifies again in paint or plastic products, challenging our understanding of what defines metal.

While Australia is the largest producer of titanium we don't process much of it here – it is transported to China and then shipped back to us, often in finished product form. The geopolitics of mining and trade are highlighted and reflected in this work.

As you enter the exhibition space your eye is likely to be drawn to the corner, a significant space in Chinese cosmology – where a mirror has been placed – enabling the entire exhibition to be viewed from one place. There is another mirror on the floor as you enter, shattered by one of the titanium needles, it stands ready waiting to be redefined and renewed. I look forward to seeing how this might be reincarnated in future works.

Kien tells me that he had the opportunity to study under Glen Murcutt and this heightened his understanding of the importance of developing site-specific spaces and the significance of creating an emotional experience. I think you will agree Kien has achieved this with this exhibition.