

Henry Lee

B. 1981, Singapore



Fruits of the Gods

2022

Charcoal, Pencil and Acrylic on Canvas

H 101.4 x 76.2 cm



Cacao (Theobroma cacao)

A tropical evergreen tree discovered more than 4,000 years ago by Mesoamericans deep in the tropical rainforests, the cacao (food of the gods) is believed to be sacred and connected to the divine for the Maya and Aztec peoples, who prized it for its medicinal value and even used dried cacao beans as currency in trade. The Maya and Aztec origin stories of the cacao are infused into this work: for the Maya, the cacao originated as the first among the fruit trees to grow from the sacrificed body of the Maize God, a world tree that forms part of the original and ancient source of all foods, the Sustenance Mountain. According to the Aztecs, the cacao was gifted to humans by Quetzalcóatl, the feathered serpent god associated with the creation of life. Fuelled by an insatiable global demand for chocolate, the cultivation of cacao trees has expanded beyond its native lands of equatorial Central and South America to Africa, even Asia. With the cacao facing threat from pests and disease, as well as rising temperatures and upheavals in weather patterns due to climate change, research is mainly focused on helping the cacao to adapt to and resist these threats, with findings showing how birds, bats, insects such as ants and also rodents play important roles in its cultivation. Here, Quetzalcóatl can be seen attempting to fend off cocoa pod borer moths, a dreaded pest in Southeast Asia.