

UJAH 13

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The team at *UJAH* would like to acknowledge that we work and learn on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Musqueam people.

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Letter from the Co-Editors In Chief

Aja Papp & Tatiana Povoroznyuk

It's tremendously strange and exciting to be able to offer Issue 13 of *UJAH* to our wonderful community of readers. After a year of isolation, fear, and unpredictability, this year has been tempered by emergence from virtual worlds and reconnection with the haptic energy of student and general human life. We've worked to find our footing with a new awareness of ourselves, our impacts on each other, and our position within the meshwork of community. This has influenced how we approached the creation of this issue, and how we imagine the future of *UJAH*. Work that was done in isolation and submitted through online portals has come alive as a vector for conversation through our editorial process, as editors and contributors worked together and forged connections with each other. By publishing this work in print, we hope to provide further room for connection as we timidly and clumsily re-adjust to our new social realities.

The contributors who entrusted us with their brilliance and who provided this issue with so many pages to enjoy have approached art history and visual culture from diverse points of departure. The academic papers included this year traverse mediums, styles, and histories—taking us from surrealist exhibitions to historical feminisms, metallic sculpture to

brick architecture. We are also proud to feature two reviews of local exhibitions, which offer insight into both the contemporary art scene and the historical side of curatorial practice. Finally, without artists in the world we wouldn't have art to write about and review. It is therefore a privilege to have three exceptional artists featured in this issue of *UJAH*, each with powerful and generative perspectives to share with us through their practice and profiles.

We are greatly indebted to the individuals behind the scenes, who made Issue 13 a reality. Most crucially, we thank Greg Gibson for his dedication to *UJAH*, his support, and his advice—without which we would find ourselves completely lost. Our graphic design team—Akari Esaka, Zoe Lin, and Avin Ali—is entirely responsible for the beauty of the artifact you're holding. Their ability to creatively respond to the emerging themes of the issue never failed to blow us away and inspire us. This year's editorial board has been remarkable in the care, flexibility, and affection they've shown this issue and its contents. Their commitment to bringing the best of our collective intentions and ideas to life has been essential to the high quality of Issue 13, and the gratitude we feel towards each of them is overwhelming. The ability to make the journal

freely available to our community has always been a priority for *UJAH*, and we are therefore indebted to those who have made the printing of Issue 13 a possibility. The Department of Art History, Visual Art, and Theory; the Walter H. Gage Memorial Fund; and the Art History Students' Association have provided financial support throughout the years, and their contributions are hugely appreciated. In addition to their generosity, AHSA has also become a close companion of *UJAH* through the orchestration of the Annual Art History Undergraduate Symposium, which has often doubled as an exciting launch opportunity for the journal. Lastly, we are thankful for Dr. Saygin Salgirli, who provided a watchful eye as our faculty advisor.

With Issue 13 finally in the hands of our beloved readers, we want to round out our gratitude to everyone involved and say a final thank you for caring about this student-run publication. By picking up this issue, you are enabling conversations about art and visual culture to not only further our discipline but also provide channels for connection over the subjects we are most passionate about. Additionally, your support allows us to feel excited about the potential of this journal, and to envision the ways *UJAH* might grow in the future.

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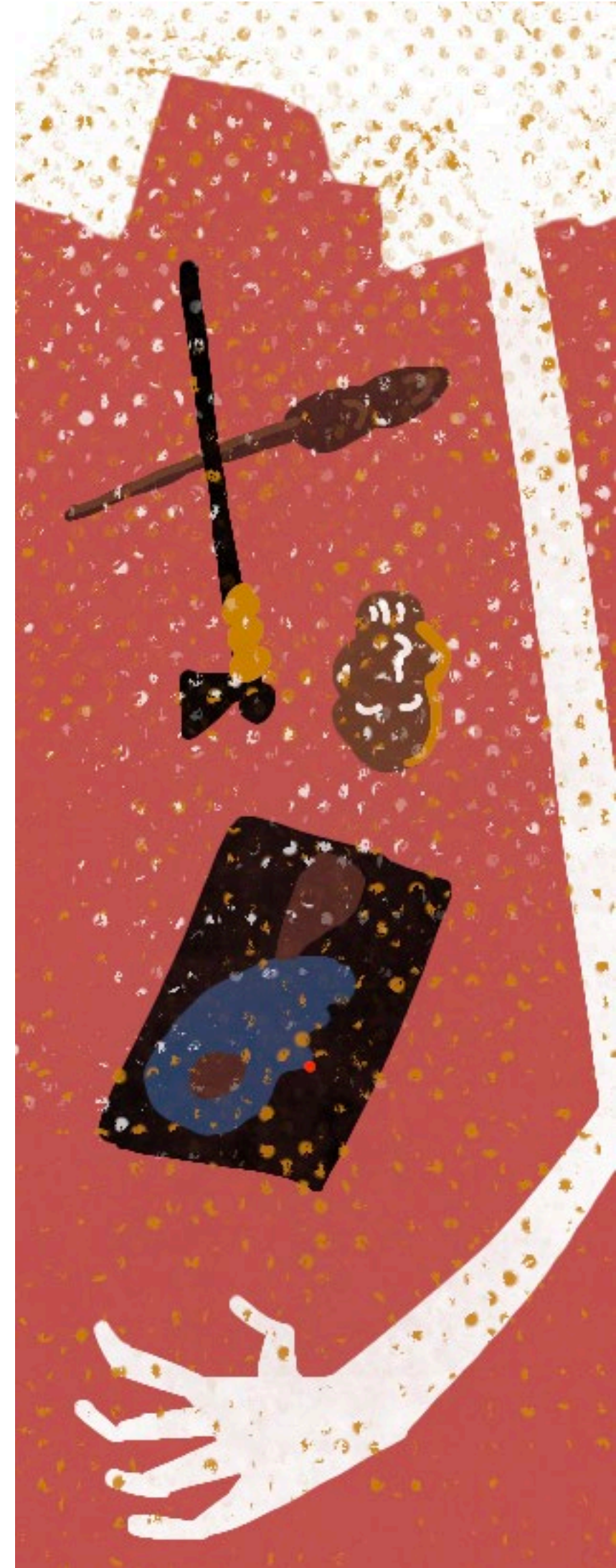
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CYNTHIA MACMILLAN

Surrealism and the Pacific Northwest Coast: The Circulation of Objects



Surrealism is often associated with bizarre, melting clocks and lobster telephones; however, the connection between surrealism and its fascination with Indigenous cultural objects is not negligible. Surrealism, as an artistic movement, simultaneously participated in the shifting of public views regarding European imperialism, while engaging in extensive accumulations of Indigenous property, namely from African, Oceanic, and North American Indigenous cultures.¹ The main point of exploration in this paper is the role of the surrealist movement in the processes of consumption and circulation of Indigenous cultural objects over the course of the twentieth century. Concerning this relationship, I begin by providing a general explanation of the origins of surrealism and the language of the artistic and theoretical movement.² Then I explore the figurehead of surrealism, André Breton, and his collection that contains objects from the Pacific Northwest Coast. The Indigenous cultural contents of his collection reveal how surrealist artistic practices consume not only cultural objects, but also the culture itself, as a subject.³ Finally, I discuss where Breton's collection is situated today and how acts of repatriation are involved in the process of circulation. By drawing upon critically written histories and an



Surrealism and the Pacific
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CYNTHIA MACMILLAN



“Despite the fact that the Surrealists positioned themselves as anti-colonial, their idealized notions of Indigenous people and their cultural objects are reinforced by colonial practices and thought.”

analysis of Breton’s collection, I hope to reveal the infrequently discussed ramifications of surrealist practices by deconstructing their universalizing tendencies regarding Indigenous cultural objects. Surrealism’s language of chance objects, its collection practices, and perhaps its underlying colonialism have led to continuous circulation of Pacific Northwest cultural objects.⁴ Present throughout the twentieth century, surrealism and its origins must be discussed in order to understand its connection to the Northwest Coast. The foundations of surrealism were situated primarily in France, during a time of political and social shifts throughout Europe.⁵ The First World War had just come to an end, a Marxist revolution had taken over Russia, technological developments continued to progress, and commemorations of imperial power manifested through exhibitions.⁶ Artistic and literary movements such as romanticism in the first half of the nineteenth century and Dada in the early twentieth century are known to have inspired André Breton’s *Manifeste du Surréalisme* (1924).⁷ Generally, these movements shared a common avant-gardism that positioned the artist to produce art beyond the conventional.⁸ Dada and surrealism varied greatly in terms of the styles of individual artists and the kinds

of work produced; however, the idea that art could provide viewers with unconventional, multi-sensory, or unconscious experiences were a shared goal between the movements.⁹ André Breton, regarded as the founder of the surrealist movement, explains “automatism” in his 1924 *Manifeste du Surréalisme* (Manifesto of Surrealism) as the singular condition for surrealism: an



immediate attempt to express “the actual functioning of thought.”¹⁰ In other words, Breton’s notion of automatism attempts to describe the swiftness of unconscious thought, which has also been interpreted as a development of Sigmund Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis.¹¹ Surrealists began to understand and appreciate the art and worldviews of “primitive” peoples as intertwined in a world of material objects and immaterial subjects and entities, rather than merely admiring the works for their aesthetic qualities.¹² As mentioned by Marie Mauzé in her article “Surrealists and the

New York Avant-Garde, 1920–60,” the surrealists were responsible for raising “Western sensitivity to Native American art” where members of the movement such as Breton, Paul Éluard, and others signed anti-colonial petitions.¹³ Yet, surrealist practices such as the collection and display of Indigenous cultural objects as “chance objects” seemingly perpetuate colonialism and are key in the discussion of the surrealist connection to the Pacific Northwest Coast.¹⁴

Despite André Breton’s anti-colonialist stance, his private collection of Indigenous objects, including ones from the Northwest Coast, poses a contradiction. The collections of Breton relate to specific surrealist notions of collage and chance objects.¹⁵ In Peter Stockwell’s book *The Language of Surrealism*, he explores the ways in which the surrealists communicate their “visual techniques” through language.¹⁶ The process of collage is to arbitrarily situate oneself in a location at a random time and note what object is most affective to one’s senses.¹⁷ The object that is ultimately determined as the most affective to oneself is an object that is found by chance; thus these “chance objects” are elements that make up collage. The visual technique of collage in a verbal form can be expressed as causing a “dissonant effect of

placing incongruous elements side by side.”¹⁸ Repeating this process twice or multiple times situates two or more objects together by chance—ones that may never have combined to form a collage through rational or conscious thinking.¹⁹ For instance, the utilization of chance in collage is demonstrated in a 1936 surrealist exhibition at the Charles Rattou Gallery in Paris, where Marcel Duchamp’s *Bottlerack* (1914) is displayed alongside “Eskimo masks.”²⁰ The issue with this kind of chance collage is explained in Breton’s own essay “Crisis of the Object,” which accompanied the 1936 Rattou exhibition. In the essay, Breton compares objects with humans, noting that they contain “psychological energies” and placing them in “aesthetic collections” represses their “previous lives.”²¹ However, while Breton’s conceptualization in his essay presents an understanding of the cultural contexts of objects, his practice of collage, effectively stripping an object of its original cultural meaning, shows inconsistency in thought and practice. From a postcolonial perspective, Katharine Conley, in her article “Value and Hidden Cost in André Breton’s Surrealist Collection,” explores this contradiction.²² Breton’s private collection of surrealist objects, also known as *André Breton’s Wall*, included several found and bought Pacific Northwest Coast

“Surrealism is problematic in projecting Western narratives onto Indigenous cultural artifacts and defining these objects based on their relocation to a new aesthetic domain.”

cultural objects, such as a “Pacific Northwest shaman box” and “transformation masks.”²³ Breton’s motivation, according to Conley, was that the collection serve the purpose of conservation, as the objects would otherwise either be destroyed or neglected by their makers, or would eventually be traded on the art market.²⁴ Breton’s private collection was meant to represent a “global aesthetic,” which could transport his mind to various places around the world.²⁵ Even though Breton publicly criticized the Paris Colonial Exposition of 1931, his practices of chance collage and collecting paralleled the exhibition in many ways, unconsciously perpetuating colonialism.

The critical issue with surrealism is its consumption of culture. It has been argued that surrealist collections led to a more open and global perception of art; however, the loss of context for Indigenous cultural objects has

ethical implications, especially in terms of ownership. Alain Badiou’s philosophical discussion of the subject and the creation of orthodoxy in his book *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* reinterprets the figure of Saint Paul by examining the event that initiates and defines him as a subject within Christianity.²⁶ According to Badiou, the historical individual of Saint Paul becomes the concept of Saint Paul in the attempt to establish a Christian truth and to define the Christian person.²⁷ However, in this process of establishing Saint Paul as an originator, the subject of Paul is almost devoid of any context before the event of his conversion.²⁸ This process of redefining a subject mirrors the process of Breton’s collection of Indigenous objects. *André Breton’s Wall* is known as a collection of “surrealist objects.” This causes the subject of cultural objects to shift from an Indigenous context to a surrealist one—for example,



Figure 1. André Breton. *Breton's Studio Wall (Mur de l'atelier d'André Breton)*. © ADAGP, Paris / SOCAN, Montréal (2021). 1922-66.

displaying a transformation mask as a chance object.²⁹ Further, Breton’s definition of surrealism and its related lexicon act as laws determining what belongs to surrealism. According to those criteria, objects found through chance, taken from Indigenous contexts, are now constituted as art belonging to surrealism.³⁰ In her article “Dada, Surrealism, Antropofagia: The Consuming Process of the Avant-gardes,” Virginie Pouzet-Duzer explains this practice of cultural appropriation by the surrealists in terms of consumerism.³¹ Pouzet-Duzer uses

certain events and exhibitions as literal and figurative examples to explain why she considers the relationship between various avant-garde movements as “cannibalism.”³² Each movement relies on an alliance with another movement, but the successor movement acts to absorb the previous.³³ For example, the relationship between surrealism and Dadaism started with a mutually beneficial connection; however, this alliance resulted in the absorption of the older movement by its successor. In this way, surrealism retroactively

claims Dadaism as its own.³⁴ Surrealism consumes the cultures of Indigenous peoples in the same way—removing an object from its specific cultural context and situating it in a universalized realm of unconscious experience. In this regard, surrealism is problematic in projecting Western narratives onto Indigenous cultural artifacts and defining these objects based on their relocation to a new aesthetic domain. Cultural appropriation is one of the many issues that arise from the Breton collection and the relocation of Indigenous objects,

“It is important to explore why these objects circulated in the first place, what kinds of narratives were associated, and ultimately why repatriation is important in this discussion.”

in the way that a new subject overthrows Indigenous meanings.

To further understand the implications of collecting Indigenous objects by non-Indigenous people, we may ask the question: Where is André Breton’s collection now? Some of Breton’s collection was moved from his apartment to the Centre Pompidou for the display *André Breton’s Wall*, while the rest of the collection was auctioned off by his daughter, Aube Breton Elléouët, in 2003.³⁵ As pointed out by Conley, Breton’s vast collection is available to view on a website dedicated to him and his collection, which was created in 2004.³⁶ Many details regarding the origins, purpose, exhibitions, and current location of each object are catalogued on the archive, including items that were sold.³⁷ The price paid for each object at auction and the way in which Breton acquired each object, however, is less explicit. In Breton’s collection, there are two distinct Pacific Northwest Coast objects that took very different paths in terms of relocation. The first of these two objects is thought to be a Tlingit cedar box.³⁸ The box is dark brown with a reddish tinge and carved in low relief. The digital archive notes that the design carved with an assembly of ovoid and *U*-shapes may represent Gonaqadet, a sea-monster spirit in Tlingit mythology.³⁹ How Breton acquired the box is unclear;

however, its presence in the collection in Breton’s apartment is documented in films and photographs.⁴⁰ The box was relocated to the Pompidou for *André Breton’s Wall*. It is not known where the box now resides, since the display was taken down in 2003.⁴¹ The second Northwest coast object is a ceremonial headdress of the Kwakwaka’wakw cultural group.⁴² The headdress is made of wood, abalone, ermine fur, and sea lion whiskers, and is said to have been worn by high-ranking members within the society.⁴³ This mask was acquired initially by the Museum of the American Indian, now known as the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC, in 1926.⁴⁴ Breton acquired the headdress in 1965, a year before his death.⁴⁵ In 2011, the Vancouver Art Gallery held an exhibition titled *The Colour of My Dreams: The Surrealist Revolution in Art*, curated by Dawn Ades.⁴⁶ A week after the opening of the exhibition, Marsha Lederman wrote an article for the *Globe and Mail* describing how Ades obtained works for the exhibition.⁴⁷ In 2003, André Breton’s daughter had auctioned off much of his collection, though in an act of repatriation, she travelled to Alert Bay, British Columbia, to the U’mista Cultural Centre to return the Kwakwaka’wakw headdress.⁴⁸ In 2011, the U’mista Cultural Centre agreed

to loan the headdress to Ades’s surrealist exhibition.⁴⁹ Though the Kwakwaka’wakw ceremonial headdress has made a positive return to its original home, the many other cultural objects in Breton’s collection from the Americas, Oceania, and Africa remain in museums, private collections, or have entered the art market through the auction.⁵⁰

The circulation and movement of Indigenous objects has shown to be extensive, just as in the case of André Breton’s collection. The movement of these objects benefits the interests of ethnographic museums and the surrealists over Indigenous communities and their original owners. Many museums and galleries with collections of Indigenous objects have functioned similarly to the surrealists in the way cultural objects are acquired and exhibited. In recent years, ethnographic museums have become aware of the unethical sourcing of objects and repatriation initiatives have been implemented according to the specificities of the object and circumstances. The repatriation of cultural objects corresponds to recommendations in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), particularly in assisting the revitalization and freedom to practice Indigenous cultural identity. Having said that, it is important to explore why these

objects circulated in the first place, what kinds of narratives were associated, and ultimately why repatriation is important in this discussion. In *Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter from the Late-Nineteenth-Century Northwest Coast*, Paige Raibmon expands our understanding of history by differentiating Western ideologies of Indigenous peoples and Indigenous ideologies of themselves.⁵¹ She discusses the ways in which colonial settlers romanticized the notion of Indigenous people as a dying race, connecting them to ancient Greek civilizations that are now in ruins.⁵² This particular romanticism refers to the West Coast Indigenous hop farmers.⁵³ These hop farmers were not seen as part of modern agricultural development in the nineteenth century, but rather as a tourist attraction to exhibit the “natural wonders” of the Pacific Northwest coast.⁵⁴ Constructed notions including the “authentic,” “rural,” and “natural” were placed on Indigenous peoples through Western rhetoric to frame Indigenous peoples and their cultures as disappearing.⁵⁵ This narrative was carried back to Europe, which influenced anthropologists and of course, the surrealists. Despite the fact that the surrealists positioned themselves as anti-colonial, their idealized notions of Indigenous people and their cultural objects were

reinforced by colonial practices and thought.⁵⁶ The potlatch ban in Canada, which lasted from 1885 to 1951, provided the legal means by which Indigenous objects, regalia, and bodies could be plundered from their original contexts and circulated around the globe.⁵⁷ A century of collecting and circulating, void of Indigenous agency in the process, has led to significant losses in Indigenous communities' connection to their cultural identity and property. The lack of Indigenous agency is extended to the realm of historical narratives of Indigenous people and cultures that have been skewed by Western anthropologists, explorers, and artists.⁵⁸ In an attempt to reverse this damage, repatriation efforts facilitate the return of cultural objects to Indigenous communities. In the case of the Kwakwaka'wakw headdress, this repatriation was particularly ideal. However, the absence of knowledge pertaining to the origins of objects along with a resistance to repatriate items from museums has made this process difficult in many cases. In her article "The Repatriation of the G'psgolox Totem Pole: A Study of Its Context, Process, and Outcome," Stacey Jessiman highlights the complexity, cost, and protracted nature of the repatriation process. She takes into account the experiences of both the Haisla people involved in Kitimaat and the Museum

of Ethnography in Stockholm, who repatriated a totem pole they once acquired from that BC community.⁵⁹ Repatriation often involves the legal systems of different countries where jurisdiction and negotiations can become complicated.⁶⁰ After a decade of flights to and from Kitimaat and Sweden, the original G'psgolox pole was raised in Kitimaat in 2006, with a replica raised in Stockholm.⁶¹ This particular case was successful in large part because the Museum of Ethnography understood its role in colonial history as well as its duty to rectify past mistakes. Thus, repatriation is not distinct, but very much involved in the process of circulation with regards to Indigenous intellectual and material property. When discussing the relationship between Indigenous objects and surrealism, the notion of collage through a method of chance, collecting, and the placement of Indigenous objects within a subject of surrealism has consumed Indigenous culture and property. Surrealism's creation of its own vocabulary that is then applied to objects repositions them in the subject of surrealism. This strips the cultural object of its particular Indigenous context and positions it as a product of automatism. This consumption of culture was, perhaps unknowingly, perpetuating the collection practices of colonialism. Members

of the surrealist movement such as André Breton protested the hegemony of European colonial powers, but at the same time, held contradictory beliefs that the collection of these objects was justified by protective and impassioned reasons.⁶² On the contrary, the repatriation of the Kwakwaka'wakw ceremonial headdress marked an important moment within the circulation of cultural objects in terms of Indigenous agency. Despite this positive and successful finalizing relocation, many of the objects in Breton's collection remain in the art market and museums. The repatriation of the headdress leaves us with further questions as to why other objects, assumingly, were not treated in the same manner. The relationship between the history of surrealism and the Pacific Northwest Coast is complex, and in some ways is on a path of reconciliation through collaboration. The circulation of Indigenous property continues and the precedent for positive repatriations have been set, which leaves action to take its course.

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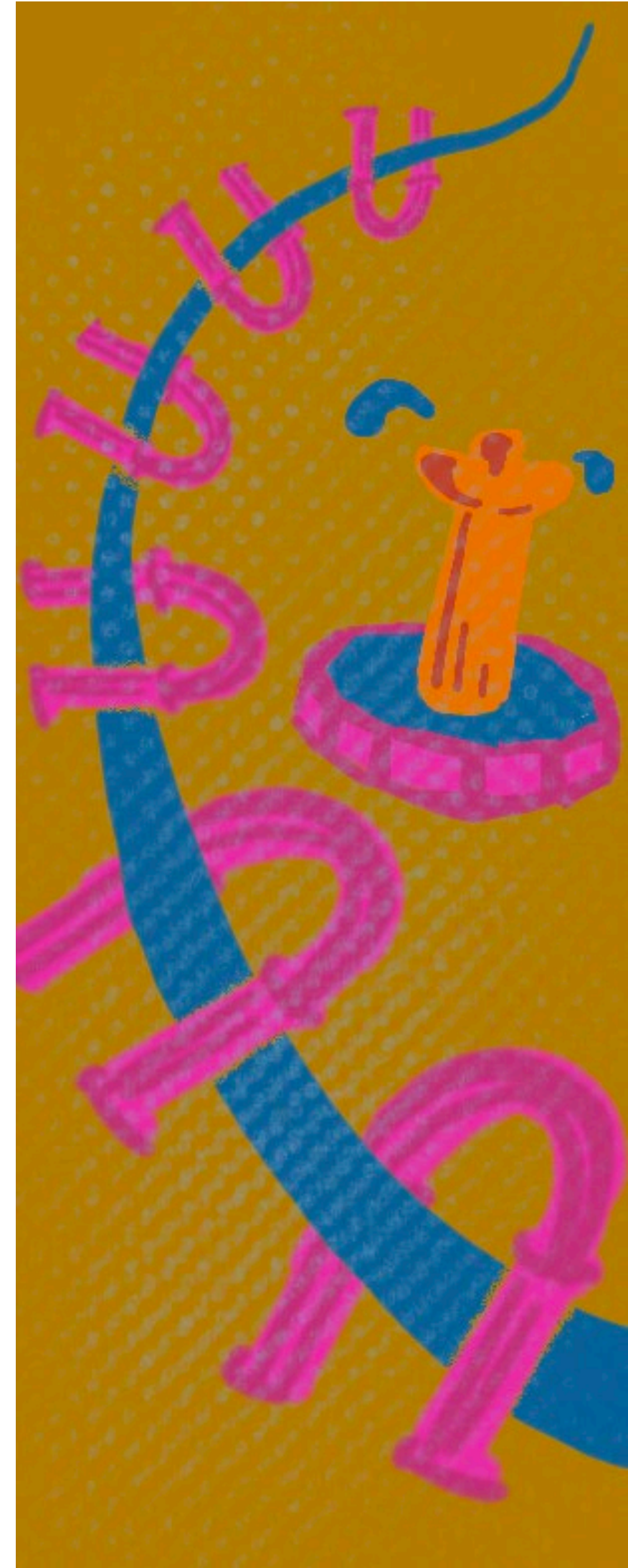
Article II

DORIS FULLER

Un símbolo mestizo: The Chiapaneca Brick Fountain as a Product of the Transcultural Landscape of New Spain



After the fall of Tenochtitlan in 1521 and the foundation of New Spain, mendicant orders such as the Franciscans, Augustinians, and Dominicans made their way to the newly conquered territories to convert the Amerindian population to the Catholic faith.¹ To accomplish this, many church centres, and subsequently towns, were built across New Spain.² The conversion efforts of the friars resulted in a religious and cultural syncretism, where although the Aztec, Mayan, and other Indigenous groups practised the new religion with sufficient understanding of its teachings, they implanted native symbols and religious customs onto it.³ This cultural syncretism does not reflect an amicable relationship between the two cultures. The Spanish were still in fact conquering and colonizing the Indigenous communities of Mexico and were intent



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“By exploring the function and architectural significance of a brick fountain (1562) located in the downtown plaza of Chiapa de Corzo, Mexico, it is possible to begin to understand how colonial architecture served as a stage for the intersection between Mudejar, European, and local Indigenous traditions.”

on replacing Indigenous culture with their own. However, what happened, with or without the knowledge and approval of the Spanish, was a cultural production that integrated elements of Mexico’s pre-Hispanic past with the colonial present. New buildings were meant to reproduce the classical style found in Europe; however, they were constructed using local Indigenous techniques and architectural organization.⁴ This resulted in the emergence of different architectural styles than those in Europe. In fact, unlike the population in Spain, which had centuries of exposure to both Andalusí traditions and symbols of Spanish power, the Indigenous population was experiencing all Iberian visual culture for the first time.⁵ The new context in which colonial architecture was made led to new meanings and interpretations, thus the architecture transformed into a reflection of the contemporary sociopolitical dynamics that were taking place in New Spain.



In order to understand the complexity that colonial structures present, one must explore the multiplicity of functions and symbolism that they held within a newly shifting transcultural landscape. By exploring the function and architectural significance of a brick fountain (1562) located in the downtown plaza of Chiapa de Corzo, Mexico, it is possible to begin to understand how colonial architecture served as a stage for the intersection between Mudejar, European, and local Indigenous traditions. The aim of this paper is to highlight the Indigenous character of the fountain while at the same time demonstrating how the process of transculturation resulted in unique works of art that became symbols of *mestizaje*, a cultural syncretism between Spanish and Mesoamerican culture. Chiapa de Corzo was conquered in 1524 by Luis Marin and later by Diego de Mazariegos in 1528, but it was not until the Dominicans arrived in 1545 that several architectural structures were built across the region as part of a strategy to convert the local Zoque population.⁶ The Dominicans founded Chiapa de Corzo on the very same site as the pre-Hispanic Zoque village as a way of establishing a new religious and social order, as they did with numerous other places across Mexico.⁷ The contemporary documentation that exists for the



fountain in Chiapa de Corzo is limited. Only one source, written by Antonio Remensal fifty years after the fountain's construction, attributes the first half of the work to Rodrigo de Leon from Salamanca and the remainder to an unknown Spaniard.⁸ Previous scholars who have written about the fountain relied only on Remensal's account for the history of the work.⁹ As such, they mostly focused on de Leon's contributions, thus negating an important and influential aspect of the architectural structure, in which the local area and the Zoque community played a role in the fountain's construction.

“Yet, the role the Zoque population played on the function and significance of the fountain has been given little attention by art historians”

The structure follows an octagonal shape and consists of two main parts: the inner tempietto with arched openings and eight columns supporting a Renaissance-inspired cloister vault¹⁰ and the outer ring, consisting of eight pilasters with arched flying buttresses that attach to the tempietto (fig. 1). The dome itself is octagonal, with the sections separated by thin ribs made of brick. Located within the tempietto at the centre is an octagonal basin meant for holding water. While the work looks mostly symmetrical, in one of the vertices of the outer ring extending from an arched buttress is a cylindrical tower with a spiral staircase that leads up to the roof.¹¹ Bricks with projecting diamond-shaped bosses are placed above the arched openings along the upper parts of the wall,¹² while flat polygonal bricks are used for the dome columns, buttresses, and ribs of the dome itself.¹³ In addition, each dome column, pilaster, and buttress has a pinnacle and merlon at the top (fig. 1). The structure is made entirely of red brick and decorated following a design of multi-shaped brick called *aplantillado* (fig. 2)—a characteristic of the Mudejar tradition.¹⁴ Although no exact parallel exists in Europe, this use of stone and geometric decoration can be seen in other architectural structures in Spain. Many sources, either directly or indirectly, influenced the construction of the fountain; for



Figure 1. La Pila Fountain, 1562, Chiapa de Corzo, Chiapas, Mexico. Author photo, 2018

instance, el Claustro de Guadalupe in Cáceres, Spain, made in the Mudejar manner, follows similar geometric designs and red brick handling for its exterior decoration and contains a fountain that rises from an octagonal base. Other similarities can also be seen in el Claustro de los Reyes in Salamanca. Here, one can observe a similar vaulted dome supported by arched columns, all of which are made with brick. By analyzing similar architectural structures in Europe, it is possible to understand how Rodrigo de Leon, being from Salamanca himself, was most likely drawing from his own knowledge and experiences of architecture for the fountain design in Chiapa de Corzo. In addition, for the design of the fountain, Rodrigo de Leon was also likely following Leon Battista

Alberti's architectural treatise—a series of texts that reimagined methods of classical architecture for the Renaissance landscape.¹⁵ During this time, Alberti's treatise was already circulating in Europe, and as religious orders made their way to New Spain, many copies of the treatise became available in the new Spanish colonies.¹⁶ Overall, the dome, the brick decoration, and the polygonal plan are characteristics of Mudejar and Renaissance architecture. The octagonal shape of the fountain also comes to signify the resurrection and eternity of Christ, as well as the renewal and the eternal eighth day after God created the universe. It is through Rodrigo de Leon, the Dominican order, and Alberti's treatise that the fountain becomes a combination of Renaissance, Mudejar, and Christian traditions. Nonetheless, the local influences also played a role in how the fountain was conceived and carried out.

Jeanette Pearson discusses how friars from the mendicant orders relied on the abundant available labour and abilities of Indigenous communities to build churches, cloisters, and civic buildings.¹⁷ Further, Samuel Y. Edgerton points out how while the plans were determined by the friars—“few of whom possessed much more than a smattering of architectural or artistic skill”—most of the construction work was carried out with great autonomy by trained

Indigenous masons.¹⁸ Therefore, one can assume the same was true for the fountain and the overall building program in Chiapa de Corzo. Yet the role the Zoque population played on the function and significance of the fountain has been given little attention by art historians. Instead, most scholars have focused on European influence and how the Spanish taught the local Zoque population new skills. José M. Chávez Gómez and Brooks R. Jeffrey discuss how the Dominican friars must have taught the Zoque population new techniques in architecture and ceramics.¹⁹ Gómez mentions how in pre-conquest times the Zoques were good ceramicists, and for this reason they adopted these new techniques with ease.²⁰ However, it is important to keep in mind that before the arrival of the Spanish,

the Zoque population already had knowledgeable builders, ceramicists, and masons. In fact, the precolonial structures in Chiapa de Corzo were built with adobe blocks and the material used to make the fountain was widely available because the area of Chiapa de Corzo was rich in clay quarries.²¹ This knowledge of architecture and masonry did not disappear but was maintained among the general population. While Rodrigo de Leon designed the plan for the fountain, he relied on Zoque workers with their skills and knowledge to construct it. Thus, the fountain does not symbolize only Spanish, Mudejar, and Renaissance techniques; not just one work or tradition informed the design of the fountain—rather, it was a mix of different styles and traditions.²² Therefore, rather than viewing the architecture of the area just as a result of Spanish teachings and as unidirectional influence, one must consider the pre-existing traditions, techniques, and styles that were part of the distinctive local environment and how these were in fact helping shape the cultural fabric of Chiapas. Although on the surface the fountain structure displays only European Christian traditions, it is through the construction and the spatial arrangement of the building with respect to the central plaza that the work shows the use of precolonial practices. While

Christian conversion was the main element fuelling the cultural production of the mendicant friars, they relied on native techniques and building layouts to do so. Joan García Targa discusses how the colonial layout of town plazas built in southern Mexico mimicked the organizational layout of Mayan centres, given that the Mayan people already had big open civic spaces prior to the arrival of the Spanish.²³ The new colonial town plazas were seen as open civic centres—focal points of community activity just as they were in pre-conquest times.²⁴ Buildings were placed in an open square, where they could become the new centre of the community.²⁵ This parallel can also be seen in Chiapa de Corzo, where the fountain acts as a focal point of everyday activity, as it was meant to supply the population with water.²⁶ Although the fountain was intended as a symbol of Christianity, it was rooted in precolonial practices. This idea is further strengthened by the fact that the town plaza was constructed in the same place as a giant ceiba tree—still standing there today—which was sacred to the local population.

The ceiba was the centre of the quincunx and it sustained the three levels of the cosmos, with its deep roots going to the underworld, the tree trunk in the earthly realm, and its tall branches

“Although the fountain was constructed as a symbol to represent the power of Christianity and the power of the Dominicans, it was rooted within the worldview of the Zoque.”

connecting to the heavens.²⁷ The ceiba tree represented an *axis mundi* and would traditionally be found at the centre of villages.²⁸ The friars of Chiapa then placed the *convento*, or church, in this centre, so that it became the new heart of the village. The layout and position of the fountain in the location reflects the influence and importance of the ceiba tree on the spatial arrangement of the area.²⁹ The significance that these trees had on the local population was advantageous to the Dominicans, as they could assign a theological Christian meaning that was parallel to the Indigenous vision of the cosmos.³⁰ They drew connections to the tree of life and knowledge in the Bible³¹ in order to try to achieve a “seamless” conversion from a pagan belief into a Christian one. The Dominicans adopted the ceiba tree and the native practice of having ceremonies in open spaces for Christian purposes. Chávez Gómez describes how, in

the beginning, the ceiba tree might have been used by Dominican friars as a place to preach.³² Once the structure of the fountain was finished, prayer was done here in a semi-open space, where the dome offered good acoustics.³³ Kelly Wallace discusses how the spirit of these acts of appropriating native symbols into Christian symbols would have been completely understood by Indigenous viewers.³⁴ However, these symbols may have “evoked memories and religious sentiments distinct from what the friars tried to teach.”³⁵ From the Zoque point of view, the retention of the ceiba tree in the town square could have been seen as the preservation of a sacred object. Although the fountain was constructed as a symbol to represent the power of Christianity and the power of the Dominicans, it was rooted within the worldview of the Zoque. It is possible that the Zoque population related to this structure as it was in the open air, brought them together in the

Figure 2. La Pila Fountain, 1562, Chiapa de Corzo, Chiapas, Mexico. Author photo, 2018



square, and was next to the sacred ceiba tree. In this way, the fountain retained a significant meaning and function to the Indigenous viewer.

As a statement of the new religious and social order, mendicant orders constructed churches and town centres following the same architectural styles found in Europe. But unlike Spanish audiences who had centuries of exposure to Iberian visual culture, Amerindians were experiencing these styles for the first time. As a result, friars had to find new ways to transmit Christian messages in a way that the Indigenous population would understand. For this reason, they incorporated native symbols, practices, and traditions into the construction of religious and civic buildings. Furthermore, as most of the construction was done by the Indigenous people, the architectural programs led by the friars resulted in unique creations that had no parallel in Europe, as is the case in the construction of a brick fountain in Chiapa de Corzo. While this structure uses Mudejar and Renaissance elements to represent Christianity, its location at the centre of town connects it to the customs and worldview of the Zoques. Although the fountain was possibly seen as a symbol of the new social and religious order, its function and execution were still dependent on the cultural practices of the Zoque population. The

architectural vocabulary may have been European, but the context and symbolism in connection to the ceiba tree remained Indigenous.

While little has been written about this fountain located in the state of Chiapas, those who have written about it have focused mostly on the contributions of Rodrigo de Leon. Remesal's attribution to de Leon has caused art historians to overlook the influence that local Zoque culture had on the work. The fountain has been studied through a European colonial lens, relegating the impact of local culture to the background. My aim has been to bring forward a discussion on the Indigenous character of the fountain and consider the structure not simply as an example of European styles but rather as a product of the transcultural interactions taking place in sixteenth-century Chiapas. The fountain is one example out of many of how art and architecture during this period came to be seen as a symbol of *mestizaje*.

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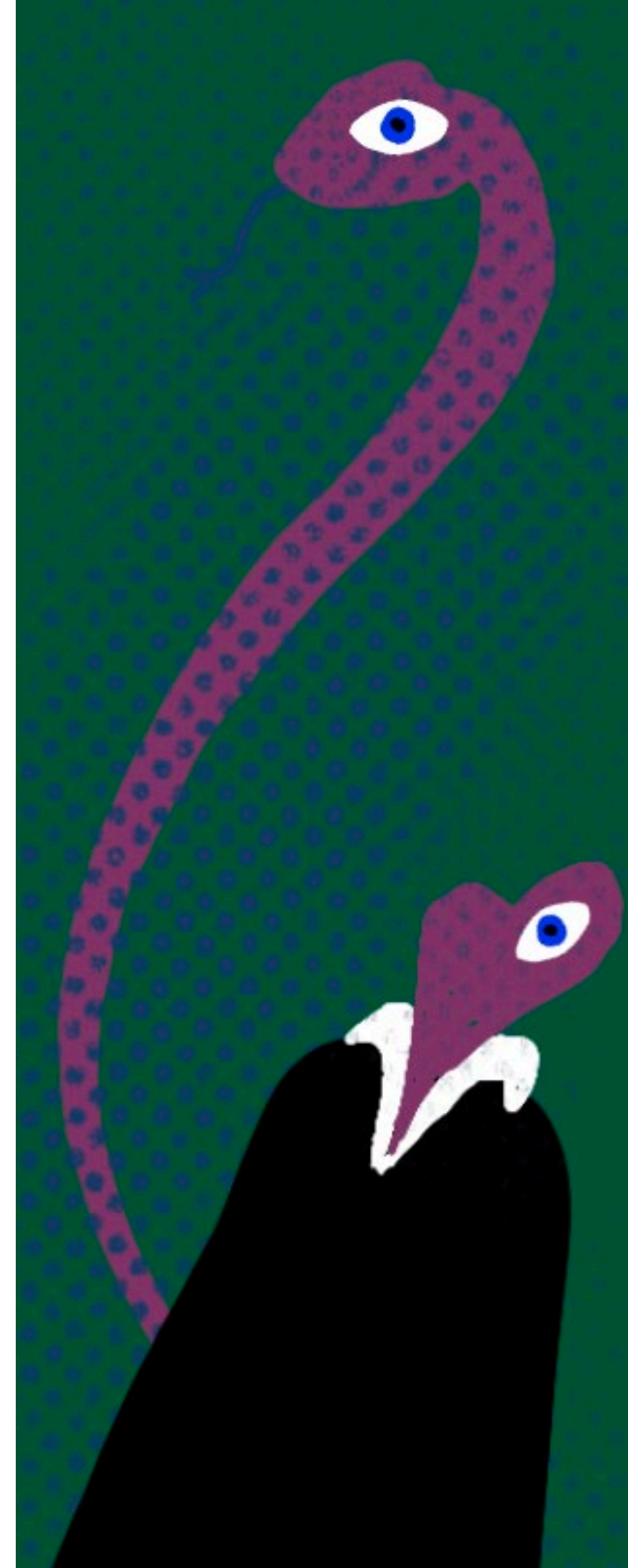
Article III

IVY LI

Unfolding the Overlapping Bodies: An Analysis of Sofonisba Anguissola's Self-Portrait Miniature in Boston as a Feminist Manifesto



Praised both by her contemporaries and scholars today as the most prominent female artist of the Renaissance, Sofonisba Anguissola is no stranger in the history of art. There is much discussion of her works in the critical literature by art historians such as Mary Garrard and Fredrika Jacobs, who offer insights on her uniqueness as a female artist in her time. These scholars provide a fairly comprehensive overview of Anguissola's works and her revolutionary mind, but a self-portrait miniature (in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) seems overlooked (fig. 1). Although it has not received



Unfolding the Overlapping
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Portrait Miniature in Boston
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“Anguissola,
as the artist of
this painting,
plays both
the role of the
subject and
object, the
creator and
the created.”

much scholarly attention— both Garrard and Jacobs mention it only briefly in their studies—it is, nonetheless, an exceptional work, both in terms of the meticulous technique and its abundant symbolic meanings. The miniature portrays Anguissola holding a shield with inscriptions along its outer edge and a complicated monogram made up of interwoven letters in the middle. Wearing the black dress that appears in almost all of her self-portraits, the artist sits against an austere dark-green background, with a determined expression on her face. At first glance, this self-portrait miniature is no different from her other portraits in the sense that it likewise includes her iconic big eyes, sombre dress, and typical modest demeanour—which were everything she needed for a self-portrait as a female artist in the Renaissance era. It would be naïve, however, to consider this work as equivalent to any other simple self-portraits meant to present a mirror reflection of self, as there are many unanswered mysteries behind this miniature. Why is Anguissola carrying a shield? What does the monogram mean? Why did she paint this? Who was the recipient? And most importantly, if it is not a simple self-portrait, what alternative purposes and messages does it carry? To answer these questions, this paper provides an in-depth analysis of this self-portrait miniature and argues that

it is a manifesto of Anguissola's female power in which she attempted to magnify her strength as a revolutionary female artist and to decentre male power at the same time. As portraits are essentially a representation of a body, it is necessary to examine the notion of bodies when deciphering portraiture. In Hans Belting's study on the coat of arms and portraits, he carefully distinguished different

Figure 1. Sofonisba Anguissola, *Self-Portrait Miniature*, 1556, varnished watercolour on parchment, 8.3 x 6.4 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Emma F. Munroe Fund. Photograph © 2022 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



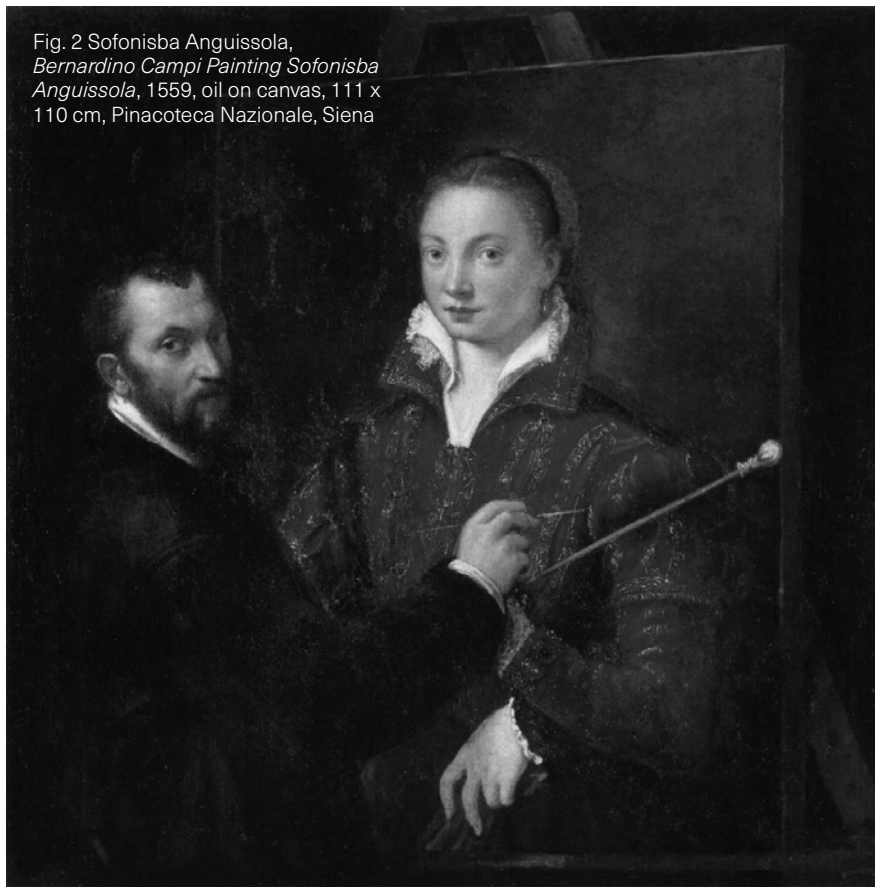


Fig. 2 Sofonisba Anguissola, *Bernardino Campi Painting Sofonisba Anguissola*, 1559, oil on canvas, 111 x 110 cm, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena

notions of bodies—namely the shield body (body sign and heraldic abstraction) and the panel body (body image and physiognomic duplication).¹ It is a rarity to include both the shield body and the panel body within one picture plane, yet I argue that there are four bodies in this miniature. Using Belting's studies as a framework, this paper unfolds those four bodies—both seen and unseen, depicted and implied—overlapping in this miniature, and explains how each body carries its own significance that helped demonstrate Anguissola's power as a proto-feminist artist of her time.²

As a female artist in the *cinquecento* (that is, the sixteenth century), the self-confidence and self-possession in Anguissola was unprecedented and impressive. Starting from the 1500s, there was a significant shift in artists' roles from "drawing tools" with unknown identities to respectable individuals with noteworthy lives. In other words, the perceptions of the artists, both by the public and by the artists themselves, had changed. Vasari's famous *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* itself is a quintessential example of this increasing public recognition

of artists, as it is, in essence, a compilation of artists' biographies.³ Artists, for the first time, were recognized as creators of art, thanks to Vasari's work, which granted them the title of artist. Under such circumstances, a rise in artists' self-awareness and confidence would not be improbable, but it was strictly reserved for male artists. In the Renaissance, the very existence of female artists was already a rarity, not to mention a revolutionary female artist like Anguissola, who was constantly challenging established conventions rather than obeying them. Despite coming from a noble family, Anguissola's lineage did not exempt her from following the rules for women that greatly restricted their rights, identities, and creativities. What her lineage did provide her, however, was the necessary skill and courage to challenge these conventions set up by men and to strive for a gender role reversal in her works in a subtle, discreet, and intelligent manner. She and her sisters enjoyed the rare privilege of neither needing to work for a living nor to marry, thus providing them freedom for artistic creation and experimentation.⁴ From there, Anguissola visually and figuratively decentred male dominance in the art industry in her art works, which she demonstrated to a great extent in the Boston miniature.

Examples of her displacing male power appear in multiple portraits and self-portraits, such as *Bernardino Campi Painting Sofonisba Anguissola* (1559) and *Portrait of Giulio Clovio* (1556–57) (fig. 2, 3). The former is a double portrait in which her teacher, Campi, is painting Anguissola on a canvas bigger than him. No consensus has been reached regarding the reading of this portrait. At first glance, Campi, as a man, is depicted as a subjective art creator, while Anguissola, as a woman, is more of a passive product that is being created by a man. Garrard, author of "Here's Looking at Me: Sofonisba Anguissola and the Problem of the Woman Artist," however, interprets this work as an example of female empowerment. Though she's depicted being painted on the canvas by a man, Anguissola's image is larger in size and more imposing with her penetrating gaze. What is more powerful, however, is that Anguissola, as the artist of this painting, plays both the role of the subject and object, the creator and the created.⁵ Anguissola thus was playing with the unseen, controlling body of the artist outside the canvas—a trick that she had used in her Boston miniature in 1556, which manifested itself over the years and was exemplified in this celebrated double portrait. In the *Portrait of Giulio Clovio*, Anguissola's teacher, Clovio, is

holding a miniature of his female student, Levina, which highlights the gender power dynamic more pointedly than the former work. Garrard argues that this painting portrays women as small and possessable objects of men and illustrates the tragic status quo of female artists existing in the grasp of their male counterparts.⁶ Though the portrait's visual form fits into Garrard's analysis (as Clovio is undeniably holding a small miniature of a female), Anguissola was an active advocate of female power, making it unlikely for her to portray women in such an objectified manner. Therefore, alternatively, this portrait acts as testimony for Clovio's interest in receiving portraits of the female artists he admired, as it depicts a moment where he appreciates such a portrait.⁷ In essence, the message implied is that an image of a woman created by a female artist was capable of gaining admiration from a male viewer. As such, this portrait is equally effective as the portrait of Campi in demonstrating Anguissola's female power.

These two portraits of her teachers serve two purposes. First, Anguissola wished to pay homage to her teachers, as it was difficult for female artists to find teachers who would teach young women. To have access to art as a woman in the Renaissance was almost unheard of, but to study

and produce it was even more unprecedented and even more unacceptable. The very act of commending her teachers is a noble act in and of itself, which is in keeping with Anguissola's noble background. At the same time, Anguissola was making a bold statement to her teachers that she was surpassing them, despite being "inferior" according to the Renaissance definition (as an apprentice and, most emphatically, a woman) through the gender implications shown in both



paintings. As such, it can be said that proclaiming female power in her artworks was consistent for Anguissola, which serves as a precondition that needs to be recognized for my following analysis. Such demonstration of her female empowerment over men is exemplified in the Boston miniature, which, although tiny in size, is powerful because of its layers of overlapping bodies.

1. The Shield Body: The Abstraction

The biggest mystery about this self-portrait miniature is the monogram made up of interwoven letters on the shield. Scholars have attempted to decipher it, with some art historians, such as Ann Sutherland Harris, agreeing that it indicates Anguissola's father's name—Amilcare.⁸ Alternatively, Patrizia Costa, author of "Sofonisba Anguissola's Self-portrait in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts," brings up a different interpretation of the monogram—that the letters are from a Latin phrase that was special to the Anguissola family: "*Anguis sola fecit victoriam*" (the snake alone brought victory), from which the last name Anguissola originated.⁹ The lineage of the Anguissola family was connected to a Byzantine general named Galvano Sordo, who liberated the city of Constantinople in 717. At the end of the war, Sordo held up his shield (which bore the effigy of an asp) while declaring,

"*Anguis sola fecit victoriam*" to announce victory. This resulted in the emperor granting him the last name Anguissola. Taking this family motto in a literal sense, "Anguissola" means "snake alone," who "*fecit victoriam*," indicating the direct connection between their last name and the notion of victory. The inclusion of this family motto in this portrait is particularly significant for Sofonisba Anguissola, as it affirms her noble lineage and, more importantly, proclaims not only her family's victory, but her own (as a member of the Anguissola family and as a "snake alone" in the male-dominated art industry) as a successful female artist.

The very reason why this monogram has been difficult to decipher is that the letters intertwine in a serpentine form, which is yet another piece of visual evidence supporting Costa's interpretation of the monogram related to the concept of a snake. The image of a snake on a shield is certainly a direct reference to the asp on Galvano's shield, in accordance with the family legend; but taking it out of this context, it may read as reminiscent of the myth of Medusa, who had been killed by the reflecting shield of Perseus—on which she sees her own image with serpent hair. The Medusa analogy is also supported by the inscription on the perimeter of the shield, which reads, "The

maiden Sofonisba Anguissola, depicted by her own hand, from a mirror, at Cremona." Although signing artworks had become common practice prior to the mid-sixteenth century, this inscription does more than simply indicate authorship. As indicated, she drew herself from a mirror based on her mirror reflection, and as a result, the reflection was transferred onto the panel. Similarly, in the Medusa myth, a mirror is what protected Perseus from being petrified by Medusa and thus enabled him to decapitate her with Athena's reflective shield. As such, a shield with an image of the serpent-haired Gorgon is the quintessential representation of the Medusa story, which is exactly what seems to have appeared in this self-portrait. The question arises: why did Anguissola incorporate the symbol of snake and, by extension, refer to the Medusa myth? To answer this question, we must bear in mind that, first, Anguissola was from the Renaissance, a time when Greco-Roman traditions were revived and Greek mythology had found its way back into the art arena; second, Anguissola's education would have equipped her with proper knowledge about Greek mythology and thus she would have been well acquainted with Medusa; third, we must also consider the different messages behind the image of Medusa from which Anguissola chose an appropriate one to associate

herself. It is only when these three conditions were present that the Medusa analogy was made possible.

In most versions of the Medusa myth, Medusa is raped by Poseidon in Athena's temple, which enrages Athena. In this sense, Medusa is no more than an innocent victim of Athena's rage, punished for no faults of her own. Hated by others due to the petrifying power granted to her against her will, she is eventually violently killed by the young hero Perseus. That is to say, Medusa, despite possessing fatal power, could still be easily conquered by a man—thus making her death a classic example of male dominance and female oppression. This reading of Medusa, however, is certainly not the one and only interpretation. As Susan Bowers argues, the same image of Medusa that has been used to oppress women can also be used to set women free and grant them power, given that Medusa is a multifaceted character who has the power to literally petrify men or other threats posed to her.¹⁰ In Anguissola's case, she would not align herself with Medusa's tragic facet; but it is reasonable for her to draw a parallel between the petrifying power of Medusa and the petrifying power of her own artworks. In fact, in one of her later self-portraits, done in 1560, she oddly portrays her hair styled in little curls rather than in her

“In this manifesto, she proclaims herself as a rising star in Cremona, as a revolutionary female artist who constantly defied male-imposed restrictions, and as a Medusa-like figure in the Renaissance art repertoire whose art has a petrifying power.”

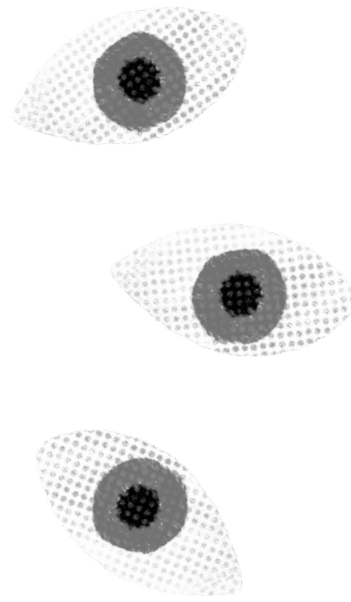
iconic braids parted in the middle (Sofonisba Anguissola, *Self-Portrait*, 1560, oil on canvas, Musée Condé, Chantilly). These serpent-like curls suggest that Anguissola attempted to link herself with Medusa on multiple occasions, as a powerful expression of female subjectivity and creativity.¹¹

We can further understand the relevance of the shield body that appears in this miniature from how imposing it is: its disproportionate size almost overpowers and displaces Anguissola's physical body (which should have been the main subject—because at the end of the day, this is still a self-portrait, not a portrait of the shield). The slightly off proportion reinforces the importance of the shield body and its heraldic messages. One might ask, does it mean, then, that her portrait body is less important? The next part of my analysis will provide an answer to this question through a detailed analysis of the second body, in which I argue that it is not a mere physiognomic duplication by Belting's definition, but a body that is equally important as the shield body.

2. The Panel Body: The Paradoxical Realism

Through her sombre dress, simple hairstyle, and modest demeanour, Anguissola seems to present herself as a noble lady by Baldassare Castiglione's definition

in *Cortegiano*, a popular book in the sixteenth century.¹² However, while following certain rules set for noblewomen, she was at the same time defying conventions for women, primarily through her *odd* self-representation. Firstly, the colour choice of her clothing is more in keeping with that of a man. Indeed, Castiglione described black as the preferred colour to be worn by courtiers, but this advice applied only to men, not women. By constantly wearing black both in life and in art, Anguissola deliberately substituted herself in a man's role.¹³ In his famous treatise of 1542, *Delle bellezze delle donne*, Agnolo Firenzuola set the standard of female beauty, including features such as thick, golden, curly hair; ample, swelling breasts; long slender legs—none of which Anguissola presented in the portrait. Anguissola's lack of jewellery, flamboyancy, and exposure of the bodice points to how the artist avoided the traditional female attributes that were associated with beauty and vanity. To further de-sexualize herself, she covered her upper body—notably her breasts, which are perhaps the most sexualized feature of a female body. Similarly, she also styles her hair in a simple way, with it neatly parted in the middle with no accessories. In an era when beauty was often indicative of virtue, and when women were constantly exposed to the male gaze with a sexualized



lens, Anguissola freed herself from being objectified by eschewing and covering her feminine signifiers. By depicting herself in an almost androgynous way, Anguissola decentred male power by depriving men of their sexual gaze.

By covering the majority of her body and female attributes, Anguissola draws attention to her powerful, penetrating, Medusa-like gaze. In the original context of the Medusa myth, the fatal gaze of Medusa was an antidote to the male gaze, one that protected women from being sexualized and objectified, while encouraging them to “see clearly for themselves, thus reconstructing traditional male images of women.”¹⁴ Anguissola performed a similar act by deliberately directing her “petrifying” gaze, which posed a menace to male viewers, while,

“While following certain rules set for noblewomen, she was at the same time defying conventions for women, primarily through her odd self-representation.”

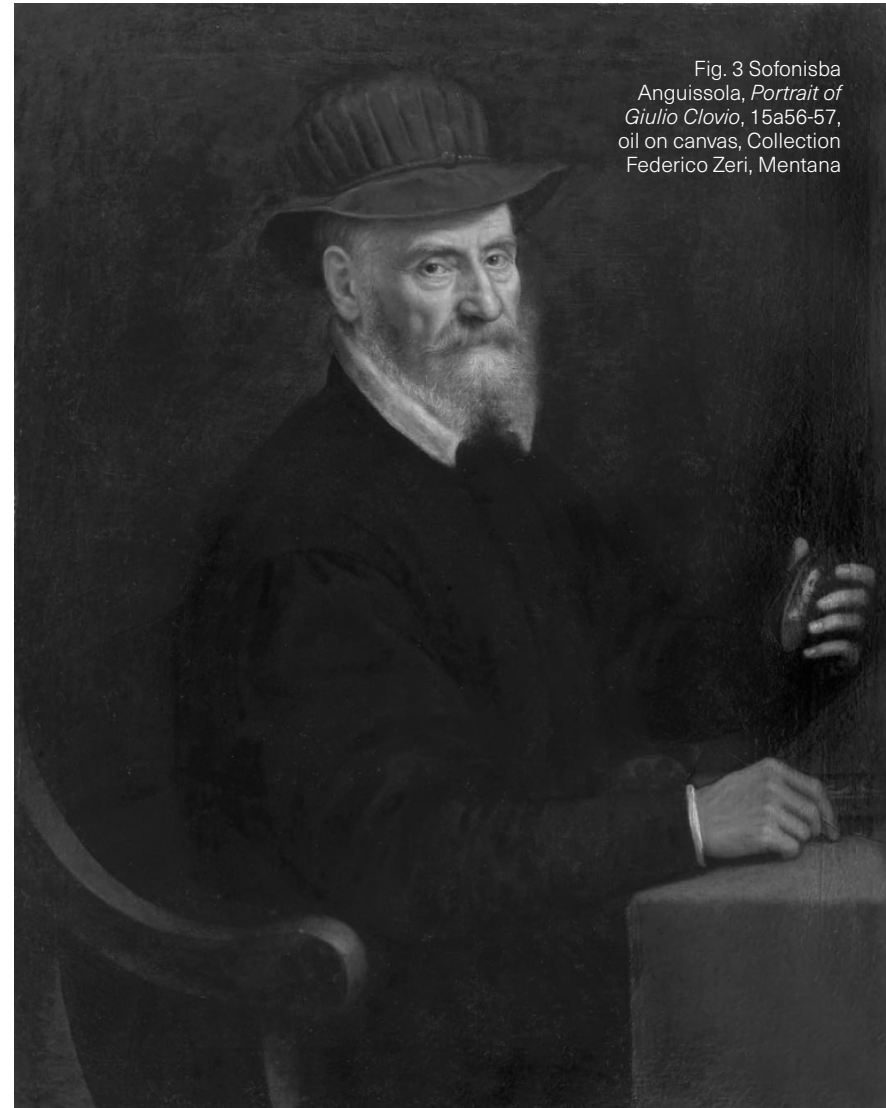
by hiding her feminine signifiers, simultaneously avoided being pinned by the sexualized male gaze. The juxtaposition of the gaze and the avoidance of gaze (as demonstrated in the second body) altogether brought her power as a woman to the paramount. Such is the paradox of the second body—it was supposed to demonstrate her modesty and dignity as a female artist with noble lineage, yet in fact it was an outright challenge to all conventions set by men, while weakening men with her powerful gaze.

3. The Wearer Body: The Embodiment

On the surface, the first and second bodies are the only two that can be seen in this miniature. However, the miniature technically remains a physically disembodied artifact up until this point. It is not until the third body—the body of the wearer—that the miniature literally becomes embodied by actually being worn on a physical body. Although not all miniatures are meant to be worn—for instance, the one that Clovio holds in the portrait of him and Anguissola is merely a painting—this one is likely meant to be worn; the hook on top of the miniature implies that a chain should accompany it. Who, then, is this wearer body that enables the miniature to be embodied? Patrizia Costa suggests two possibilities as the recipient of this miniature: Anguissola's father, Amilcare, and her teacher, Clovio. Although she provides supporting evidence for both, it is unlikely that Amilcare would wear this medallion, as he would most likely send it away to other artists to advertise his daughter's artistic skills. Since Clovio had a predilection for receiving portraits of his female pupils, I interpret this body as Clovio's body. From this conclusion, I argue that Clovio being the wearer is an overt claim of Anguissola's female power in the face of a person that was (at the time) “superior” to her in terms of gender (male) and status

(teacher), as it decentres not just Clovio, but the male figure in general.

One might ask what has led me to this interpretation. Sending a self-portrait miniature to the teacher who helped her to master this field may seem to be a simple act of paying homage; but considering it in the larger Renaissance theoretical context (specifically on the issue of procreation) the message behind it becomes different. After 1500, a revival of Aristotle's theory of the division of procreative responsibilities became popular throughout the Renaissance. According to Aristotle, men and their semen were responsible for creating the soul, whereas women and their uteruses were only supposed to be the material that men would work on. Women were intended to hold what had been created by men, thus making them merely "carriers" of the child.¹⁵ When Clovio wears the medallion and thus becomes the "carrier" of the image, he is playing a passive role of receiving and holding, like how Aristotle defined and labelled women in the procreation process. Anguissola was the creator of this image held by Clovio, which automatically puts her in a male role, as this image was the product of the art-making process, just like children in a procreation process. However, the feminization of Clovio does not necessarily mean



a personal attack, especially with Anguissola being a well-bred noblewoman. Rather, it is more likely to be a part of Anguissola's systematic attempt to strive for a change in the gender power dynamic. Here, by placing Clovio (a male figure) in a "feminine" role, Anguissola is demonstrating that she, and perhaps other female artists, are creators as well. Thus, rather than purposely

choosing Clovio as the target of her "attack," the male wearer body simply happened to be Clovio's by circumstance.

4. The Painter Body: The Omniscient

The fourth body—the unseen body of the painter—is the ultimate declaration of Anguissola's female power and dominance. The aforementioned Aristotelian theory

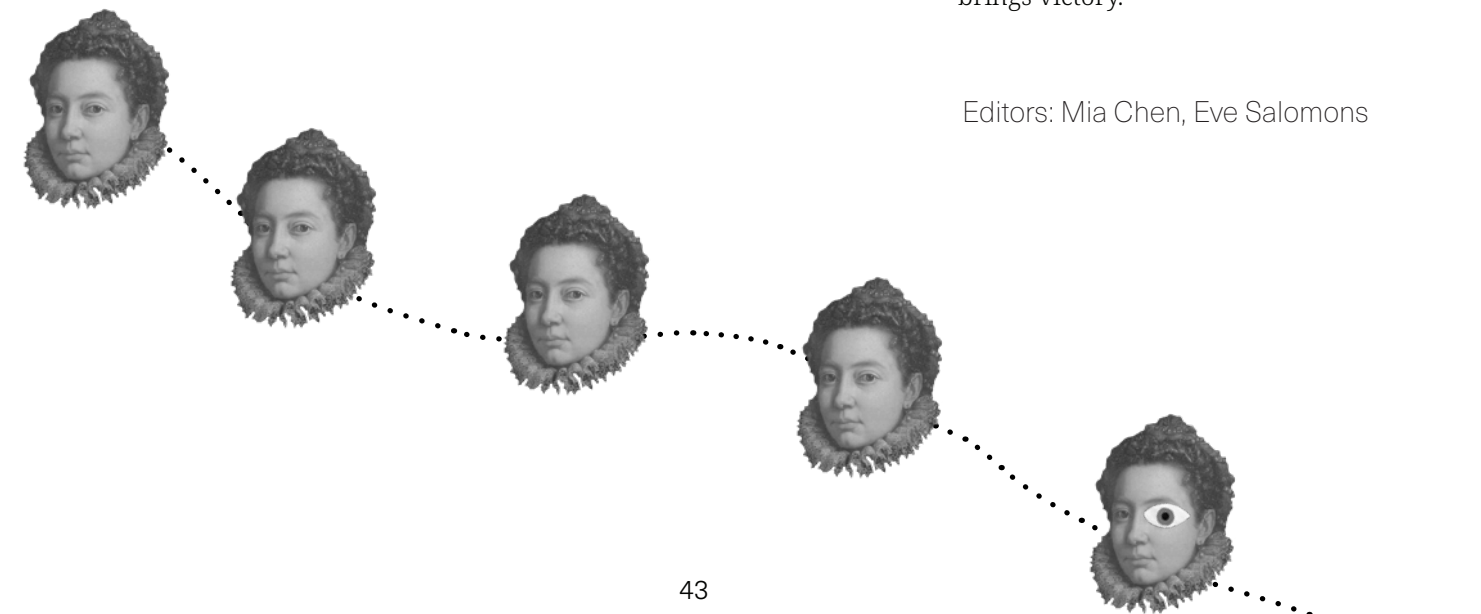
of the procreative responsibilities was also translated into the art-making process. According to Aristotle, it was men who created the soul of the children, and thus also had the creativity and capability to create the soul of the art; while women, as merely the medium on which male artists worked, lacked the creativity to create art, and thus could only imitate and copy their male counterparts.¹⁶ This perception was prevalent throughout the Renaissance. Vasari, for example, praised many female artists, but only for their skills in making copies. The sole exception was Anguissola, as he describes how she "not only succeeded in . . . copying from nature and in making excellent copies of works by other hands, but has also executed by herself alone some very choice and beautiful works of painting."¹⁷ Indeed, taking this self-portrait miniature as example, Anguissola invented a new form of self-representation with the emblem and portrait on the same

plane, which was unprecedented in art history. By actively taking up the tasks of creating and inventing, which were normally reserved for men, Anguissola distinguished herself among her contemporaries, especially in Renaissance society where women were considered "intellectually and spiritually inferior."¹⁸ While being fully aware of what she was doing with her paintbrush, Anguissola consciously observed, created, and dominated the three bodies shown and suggested in this tiny medallion, from an omniscient point of view. Her female wisdom and power thus set her on equal footing with her male counterparts, if not on a higher level. While Anguissola is "the medium" and the subject of this work, she is also the creator of the art's soul—a statement backed by Vasari and contradicting theory that demands a revisit by Aristotle.

By unfolding the four overlapping bodies in this self-portrait miniature, this paper finds that Anguissola demonstrated her

power as a female artist, reversed gender roles, and decentred the dominating male artist's role at the time, using this complex miniature as her instrument. In short, this paper provides a conceptual analysis of this overlooked work of Anguissola's, which in fact deserves a greater amount of attention. In the Renaissance, when art was inaccessible to women (and the very few women who did engage with art generally stuck to the rules imposed on them), Anguissola had the courage to turn this self-portrait miniature into a powerful manifesto of herself as a female artist. In this manifesto, she proclaims herself as a rising star in Cremona, as a revolutionary female artist who constantly defied male-imposed restrictions, and as a Medusa-like figure in the Renaissance art repertoire whose art has a petrifying power. Though this miniature is admittedly tiny in size, Anguissola used it to announce a powerful message: "[Anguissola] fecit victoriam"—Sofonisba Anguissola brings victory.

Editors: Mia Chen, Eve Salomons



NOTES

1. Hans Belting, "The Coat of Arms and the Portrait: Two Media of the Body," in *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 62.
2. Belting, "The Coat of Arms and the Portrait," 62.
3. Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, trans. Gaston du C. de Vere (London: Philip Lee Warner, 1912–14), 127–28.
4. Mary D. Garrard, "Here's Looking at Me: Sofonisba Anguissola and the Problem of the Woman Artist," *Renaissance Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (1994): 616, doi: 10.2307/2863021.
5. Garrard, 560–62.
6. Garrard, 575.
7. Patrizia Costa, "Sofonisba Anguissola's Self-portrait in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts," *Arte Lombarda*, Nuova Serie, no. 125 (1) (1999): 59.
8. Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, *Women Artists, 1550–1950* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1984), 10.
9. Costa, 56.
10. Susan R. Bowers, "Medusa and the Female Gaze," *NWSA Journal* 2, no. 2 (1990): 217.
11. Bowers, 218.
12. Costa, 57.
13. Garrard, 586.
14. Bowers, 218.
15. Frederika H. Jacobs, "Woman's Capacity to Create: The Unusual Case of Sofonisba Anguissola," *Renaissance Quarterly* 47, no.1 (1994): 80, doi: 10.2307/2863112.
16. Jacobs, 80–83.
17. Vasari, 127–28.
18. Jacobs, 92.

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Article IV

SHABNAM SHAHKARAMI

NOTHING: Parviz Tanavoli and Iranian Modernism



Figure 1. Parviz Tanavoli. *Heech Lovers*, 2007. Reproduced by permission of Parviz Tanavoli.

When a word becomes a sculpture, outside of any conventional manner or preceding sculptural practices, the result is a hybrid and collaborative form of artistic expression. Parviz Tanavoli's 2007 sculpture *Heech Lovers* (fig. 1), one of the many pieces from his *Heech* series, does exactly that. *Heech Lovers* is highly conceptual, but at the same time stylistic and proportionate—a novel appropriation of modern calligraphy manifested in three dimensions. Tanavoli's first artistic expression of the Persian word *heech*, meaning “nothingness”, occurred in a painting in the middle of a medallion in 1964.¹ Since then, the artist has created hundreds of sculptural heeches in a variety of mediums, using a wide range of materials from bronze and fibreglass to ceramics.² In Tanavoli's work, the word



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“Modern calligraphy saturated the market to satisfy the thirst of new bourgeois clients, who were looking for modern art to decorate the walls of their offices and homes. In response to such a commercialization of art and calligraphy, Tanavoli decided to make nothing.”



heech acquires a variety of shapes and forms, transforming the simple concept of *nothingness* into a visual expression. The *Heech* series introduces a new artistic language into sculptural practice that fuses tradition with modernity by employing principles of calligraphy and literature in the most transformative manner. The employment of a single word as an independent visual form for artistic expression provides the artist with the opportunity to take advantage of the abstract and figurative qualities of Persian alphabets. As a result, endless visual compositions are created by rendering calligraphy in a modern context.

Heech Lovers comprises two iterations of the word *heech*. The word is composed of three letters: the *h* (هـ) makes up the head of the sculpture; the *e* (ی) serves as the neck connecting the first and third letters; the curvilinear shape of the *ch* (چ) serves as the body. The



Figure 1. Parviz Tanavoli, *Heech Lovers*, 2007. Reproduced by permission of Parviz Tanavoli.

anthropomorphic quality of the two-eyed letter (هـ) symbolizes the weeping eyes of a lover in Persian poetry.³ The middle letter is static and fixed in shape. The last letter contains the most pliability and elasticity, twisting and curving, taking different shapes and forms. Together, these two groups of three letters in Nasta'liq⁴ script swirl and turn into two lovers embracing each other in the most intimate way, as calligraphy turns into a monumental sculpture.

In this exploratory paper, I will discuss Tanavoli's oeuvre, specifically his *Heech* series as a hybrid approach towards sculptural practices, which was innovative and at the same time nourished by the cultural heritage of his homeland. I will first explore the social context that shaped Tanavoli's *Heech* series, and the subsequent mystical and Sufi interpretations that were drawn from his work. Second, I will delve into the importance of calligraphy in Islamic art and architecture and its transformation from traditional practices to a novel artistic expression. After discussing the aesthetic aspects of *Heech Lovers* and its relation to the principles of Islamic art and architecture, I will situate the *Heech* series in its historical context by bringing Hossein Zenderoudi, another Iranian modernist, into the picture. Some of the works introduced here investigate how Iranian artists

“The emergence of nationalism, and the urge for constructing an Iranian identity in the global art scene played a significant role in elevating the status of traditional artistic practices.”

of the early twentieth century proposed a local visual language for artistic expression that could fit into modern conventions, while satisfying the national artistic trajectory.

By introducing modernity to many aspects of Iranian life in the early twentieth century, artists were faced with the dilemma of figuring out how to maintain their Iranian identity while being a part of the global artistic scene.⁵ There were contradictory reactions to modernity and the quest for change and progress in Iranian society in the twentieth century; while some believed in accepting the unconditional hegemony of European civilization, others were opposed to the West altogether. Between 1941 and 1979, the government’s investment in establishing cultural and educational institutions such as the Faculty of Fine Arts in Tehran University in 1940 and the Ministry of Arts and Crafts in 1950 was instrumental in developing a novel approach in art.⁶ In addition, private art workshops and galleries as well

as art journals and publications introduced innovative and avant-garde art movements from the West. At the same time, the emergence of nationalism, and the desire among many to construct an Iranian identity in the global art scene, played a significant role in elevating the status of traditional artistic practices. These nationalist sentiments prompted artists to recognize the potential of local cultural sources as raw materials for Iranian modern art. In order to shape an artistic language to distinguish them from their Western counterparts, Iranian artists drew on their cultural roots on the one hand, while using the forms and techniques that modern concepts provided on the other.⁷ Modern artistic conventions prompted new modes of representation and Iranian artists delved into literature, folk culture, and religious votives as sources of inspiration.⁸

As a graduate of the Tehran Academy of Fine Art, Parviz Tanavoli travelled to Italy in 1960 and worked with famous sculptors such as Marino Marini and Emilio Greco.⁹ As Fereshteh Daftari explains, “He acquired the techniques, but the style and the mannered figuration did not resonate with him.”¹⁰ Alongside other artists of the 1960s and 1970s, Tanavoli’s continuous exploration and innovation resulted in an emergence of

Figure 2a. Parviz Tanavoli, *Poet Turning into Heech*, 2007. Reproduced by permission of Parviz Tanavoli.



new movements which formed an artistic language that could satisfy the quest for a national artistic identity.¹¹ Parviz Tanavoli’s sixty years of artistic creation manifested in different series such as *Heech*, *Walls of Iran*, *Bird and Cage*, *Locks*, and *Poets and Lovers*.¹² They demonstrate a wide range of the intertwined presences of Islamic and pre-Islamic material culture, as well as the negotiation between tradition and modernity. The building blocks of his artistic creation were poetry, architecture, calligraphy, folk culture, and religious motives—and in some cases the combination of one or two can be traced in some of his works. The *Walls of Iran* series captures the artist’s interpretation of ancient monuments in a modern context,¹³ and the *Bird and Cage* series reflects the significant presence of birds in Persian poetry and the metaphoric struggle of the poet’s or artist’s spirit for freedom from the bodily cage.¹⁴

Among the most recognized and iconic works of Parviz Tanavoli, the *Heech* series has received controversial and contradictory interpretations. While many scholars and art historians have charged the artist with nihilism, others relate the work to mystic and philosophical interpretations around the creation of the world.¹⁵ The initial employment of a single word meaning *nothing* was Tanavoli’s response to the extensive use of calligraphy by many artists during 1960s and 1970s, which he saw as problematic—especially after his return from Italy, when he witnessed the commercialization of calligraphy and its dominance over the Iranian art scene.¹⁶ The late twentieth century saw artists copying scripts onto canvas in order to secure their share in the art market. Emerging in the early twentieth century in many Muslim countries, including Iran, calligraphic modernism had a great impact on the development

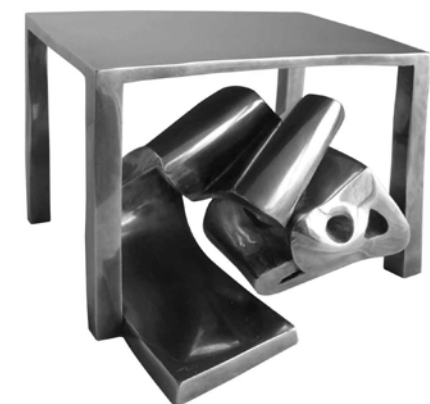


Figure 2b. Parviz Tanavoli, *Heech and Table*, 1998. Reproduced by permission of Parviz Tanavoli.

of a new artistic trajectory which moved beyond tradition and extended the function of calligraphy as a tool for expression in a sociopolitical context.¹⁷ After Tanavoli's return to Iran, the neo-traditional movement, pioneered by Tanavoli and other artists of his time, took a different direction. Numerous galleries opened in the capital city and modern calligraphy saturated the market to satisfy the thirst of new bourgeois clients, who were looking for modern art to decorate the walls of their homes and offices.¹⁸ In response to this commercialization of art and calligraphy, Tanavoli decided to make *nothing*. The idea of nothingness manifested

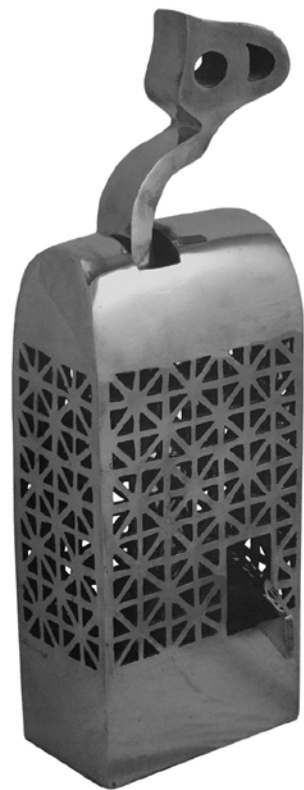


Figure 2c. Parviz Tanavoli, *Heech and Cage*, 2006. Reproduced by permission of Parviz Tanavoli.

in three-dimensional form in a variety of shapes and scales for more than half a century.

The concept of the *Heech* sculptures can shift in meaning and interpretation from one piece to another. From sociopolitical critique to spiritual and Sufi interpretation to manipulating the aesthetic qualities of Persian alphabets, the artist played with the concepts and the physicality of the word *heech*. These alterations became the impetus for Tanavoli's most iconic work. The continuous reinvention of the word *heech* in so many iterations such as *Heech Coming out of the Cage*, *Heech and Table*, *Heech Sitting on the Chair*, *Heech and the Wall*, and *Heech and Its Lover* treat the "word as a being with no gender, a graceful figure with elasticity."¹⁹ It elongates when it leans on the table or twists and turns when it hides under the table. Sometimes it appears as a lover or a beloved in the company of another *Heech*. The *Heech* sometimes demands a new interpretation when it comes out of the cage (fig. 2a, 2b, 2c).

The importance of writing and the adaptation of Arabic as the imperial and cultural language by early Muslim rulers had a great impact on the development of calligraphy, not only as a mode of communication, but also as a sacred medium. A variety of scripts

were developed for different purposes, from copying the Quran and literary texts to decorating the interior and exterior façades of buildings to embellishing luxury objects.²⁰ As a result, varieties of scripts emerged across geographies and histories. For example, Maghribi script was developed in North Africa, while Nasta'liq originated in Iran and Central Asia.²¹ Nasta'liq and its derivatives were mainly used as an elegant and lyrical script in poetry and literary contexts in Iran.²² From pen and paper to painting and sculpture, calligraphers have applied a wide range of scripts in various shapes, colours, and compositions. Calligraphy embodied a variety of forms and styles from vertical and angular to cursive and horizontal, from abstract and illegible to refined and readable.²³ Contemporary artists took advantage of the aesthetic and abstract qualities of calligraphy to transform it into a modern visual expression that could speak to global audiences. For example, Iranian artists used calligraphy both to convey the mystical qualities of Persian poetry, superseding the literary meaning and emphasizing aesthetic possibilities.²⁴ Many artists used the freedom that modern styles and forms provided to break away from the confines of tradition and express their feelings and frustration with social and political oppression.²⁵

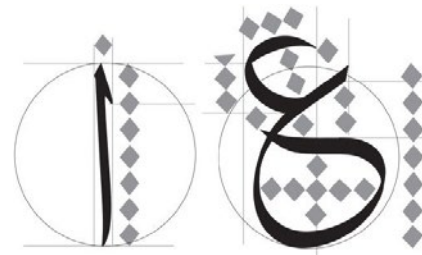


Figure 3. Parviz Tanavoli, *Heech*, 1971. Hamline University, Minnesota. Reproduced by permission of Parviz Tanavoli.

In the *Heech* works, Parviz Tanavoli plays with the ironic interpretation of the word *nothing* to convey multifaceted ideas, while simultaneously revealing the flexibility of Arabic/Persian script. One notable result of Tanavoli's process is the transformation of the concept of nothingness into a freestanding monumental sculpture in 1971 (fig. 3), almost eleven feet tall.²⁶

Later on, the *Heech* sculptures gained a spiritual dimension as well, imbued with mystical interpretations of religion, and the ultimate destiny of human beings to unite with their creator.²⁷ This mystical dimension was inspired by Rumi and Attar, thirteenth-century poets from Iran.²⁸ The mystical aspect of the word *heech* challenges materialistic views of the world (and art) and questions the essence of being. In an interview with scholar and art historian Shiva Balaghi, Parviz Tanavoli explains:

Figure 4. The rhombic dot as a guide to proportions. (www.intechopen.com)



Is there truth in the thing or truth in nothingness—how are they together? Which one is really the one we should become attached to? Rumi says: “Abandon that which looks like something but is nothing. Seek that which looks like nothing but is something.”²⁹

The *Heech* series’ deep spiritual association questions humanity’s biggest fear: non-being, or nothingness. Did God make this world out of nothing? Should we abandon our attachments to reach the state of nothingness in order to surpass the constraints of our world? This ambiguity in meaning transcends the word *nothing* from its immediate meaning to a conceptual expression.

As part of his ascension into the global art sphere, Tanavoli dug into literary and philosophical sources, and moved away from the classical and accepted conventions of sculptural practices. With Iran participating in international art exhibitions, Tanavoli realized that with limited sculptural heritage, his innovation could rejuvenate sculptural practices that had been forsaken for centuries. Tanavoli

explains in his interview with Shiva Balaghi that a sculpture doesn’t have to have human features to be expressive, but the embedded meaning and the hidden story behind it makes it a work of art.³⁰ For example, *Poet Turning into Heech* (fig. 2a), part of the permanent collection at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, starts with the two-eyed *h* while the rest of the word fades into a cylinder. The script on the cylinder reflects the poet turning into nothing, with references to Rumi’s mystical poetry.³¹ The poet turns into nothingness in order to reach spiritual connection and unity.³² The devotional practice of a poet, a Sufi, or an artist has close associations with spirituality.³³ Sufis spend years seeking truth through a spiritual journey by following their master in purifying their soul. The life of Rumi and Attar show that they believed in the human being as a holistic whole whose ultimate destiny is unification with the source of wisdom, not to follow the strict rules of religion.³⁴ As Fariba Enteshari explains in *Rumi’s Poetry*, “A seeker is the one who sees beyond the boundaries of his/

her existence and accepts a wider realm of reality.³⁵ A calligrapher, a Sufi, a poet, and an artist share common qualities of devotion and contemplation in acquiring knowledge and wisdom. This infusion of *heech* with a poet is another symbolic reference to Tanavoli’s multidimensional understanding of cultural heritage represented through his novel approach to sculpture.

Even though the works in the *Heech* series vary by shape and size, one of the distinct features of this series is its monumentality. Elements such as proportion, harmony, and rhythm are among the shared elements between the *Heech* series and Islamic architecture. For example, a proportionate writing system was developed based on two basic elements in the tenth century; a circle with a diameter of the letter *alef*,³⁶ and a rhombic dot created with one stroke of the nib of a reed pen (fig. 4).³⁷

The two Persian letters *alef* and *ayn* demonstrate basic principles of proportion. The six most common proportionate scripts

originated from these geometric foundations.³⁸ The use of the golden mean³⁹ in proportional geometry is the foundation of design in Islamic art and architecture,⁴⁰ and the function of proportional geometry in aesthetic expressions has close associations with spirituality.⁴¹ Geometric measures become tools to understand the harmony and rhythm found in humans, nature, and the Islamic cosmos. Indeed, the fundamental principle of calligraphy lies in the precise science of geometric forms and rhythms,⁴² and the law of proportion used in Islamic architecture shares the same logic with calligraphy.⁴³ *Heech Lovers*, *Heech* in front of the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, and *Big Heech* at Hamline University in Minnesota (fig. 3) are all examples of *Heech* sculptures executed on a monumental scale that share the proportion and harmony of Islamic architecture.

Fereshteh Daftari explains that artists such as Parviz Tanavoli and Hossein Zenderoudi, the pioneers of the neo-traditionalist movement,⁴⁴ travelled to southern Tehran to working-class neighbourhoods, visiting the Grand Bazaar, welders, pottery shops, foundries, blacksmiths, and street vendors to discover an authentic material culture as a source of inspiration that would resonate with Iranian identity.⁴⁵

Twelfth-century Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi depicted Farhad as a pre-Islamic legendary figure who carved a mountain to win the love of Shirin (the beloved of the Sasanian king). His strong hands and his devotion became a source of inspiration for Tanavoli’s *Farhad the Poet* series.⁴⁶ Tanavoli took the legendary figure Farhad as his ancestral sculptor, and searched for inspiration in the poems of Nizami Ganjavi. *Poet and Beloved* (fig. 5), installed outside the Tehran City Theater in 1972, is one example from this series.⁴⁷ The head is in the shape of a lock with grid windows resembling the shrines of Shi’i imams. The arms are bulky and muscular, underlining the tremendous task that Farhad had performed—made possible only by his deep love for Shirin. The lock and the gigantic key in Farhad’s hands are derived from a combination of Saqqakhaneh iconographies⁴⁸ and the literary sources that Tanavoli relied on. Parviz Tanavoli’s fascination with locks and keys (as popular motifs) and their symbolic associations are a strong presence in his works.

The *Birds and Cage* series reflects the significant presence of birds in Persian poetry: the bird as a metaphor for the poet’s spirit imprisoned in his chest, and the cage as the metaphor for the chest.⁴⁹ The nightingale’s love for the rose, a theme continuously

repeated in Persian poetry, and the ubiquitous presence of various love stories in Persian literature (such as *Farhad and Shirin*) had a clear impact on Tanavoli’s works, but the same themes and stories brought forth a strong spiritual-mystical dimension too. The bird often functioned as a metaphor for Tanavoli as a poet and an artist imprisoned in his bodily cage, struggling to free himself and his soul to become one with the creator.⁵⁰

Coming out of this context, his experiments continued with the seven-foot *Heech Tablet* (fig. 6),⁵¹ while other variations included *Heech on a Ring*. However, with the *Heech Tablet*, in the collection of New York University, Tanavoli’s historical references moved beyond the Islamic past of Iran and incorporated cuneiform-like markings.⁵² The locks in the front and the shadow of the word *heech* on the back of the tablet with the end of the letter *ch* sticking out engage the viewer with multiple layers of meaning and references. The markings reference cuneiform scripts from Persepolis, and the monumentality of the tablet reminds us of other ancient works, such as the Hammurabi Stele.⁵³ Together with the hanging locks—in reference to locks of prayers placed on the shrines of the imams—the markings underscore how Islamic and pre-Islamic aspects of Iranian

identity are locked together.⁵⁴ *Heech Tablet* was the beginning of a series of sculptures called *Walls of Iran*, which reflect Tanavoli's admiration for Iranian architecture and ancient monumental remains.

It is difficult to discuss Tanavoli's work in this context without referencing Hossein Zenderoudi. One of Tanavoli's contemporaries, he also had a great influence on the development of Iranian modern visual culture in the early twentieth century.⁵⁵ Zenderoudi is acknowledged for his employment of popular religious art in a highly innovative manner.⁵⁶ His interest in popular culture and Shi'i iconography⁵⁷ took him to neighbourhoods in south Tehran,

Figure 5. Parviz Tanavoli, *Poet and Beloved*, 1972. Reproduced by permission of Parviz Tanavoli.



and the extensive use of popular prints, zodiac signs, talismanic artifacts, amulets, apotropaic charms, astrolabes, and props used in religious mourning became the signatures of his oeuvre.⁵⁸ Zenderoudi was the first Saqqakhaneh artist who divorced calligraphy from its legibility, and furthermore, divorced the word from meaning, emphasizing the aesthetic aspects of the letters themselves.⁵⁹ Zenderoudi graduated from the École des Beaux-Arts in 1960, and continued to live in Paris. He became acquainted with Western artistic movements such as expressionism and lettrism.⁶⁰ His interest in the abstract and geometric qualities of Persian/Arabic letters contributed to the Iranian modernist movement. Undoubtedly, Zenderoudi was an innovator in his own right, moving calligraphy from its traditional medium of ink and paper to oil on canvas, and using bold and expansive brush strokes.⁶¹ His experimentation with letters proposed a new reading in calligraphy. "I am a scholar in calligraphy, but I am not a calligrapher, I use calligraphy to construct my painting, like an architect who uses stone and bricks to construct a building," he explains in an interview with *Canvas* magazine in 2009.⁶²

Along with Tanavoli, Zenderoudi gradually abandoned religious motifs and folk culture

(Saqqakhaneh iconography) and developed modern calligraphy as an independent pictorial representation.⁶³ He expanded the boundaries of calligraphy to universal audiences by transcending it from conventions of categorization and definitions. He disassociated calligraphy from any specific religion, culture, history, or geography by emphasizing the aesthetic aspects of the letters. However, while calligraphy was a dominant aspect of both artists' work, Zenderoudi worked in painting while Tanavoli transformed the Nasta'liq script into three-dimensional sculptures. The rhythmic placement of the same letters as the main structural elements of his paintings makes Zenderoudi one of the first artists to use calligraphy—and specifically letters and words—as the sole elements for his compositions. Similarly, Tanavoli took a radical step, and removed calligraphy from any direct historical or traditional association by transforming words into three-dimensional sculptures, a medium where calligraphy had no historical presence. The two artists' exploration of complex and multilayered relationships between word and image has had long-lasting effects.⁶⁴ Many Iranian and Middle Eastern artists have used modern calligraphy in expressionist and abstract expressionist manners, breaking away from the constraints of



Figure 6. Parviz Tanavoli, *Heech Tablet*, 1973. Reproduced by permission of Parviz Tanavoli.

tradition to find new modes for social and political criticism.⁶⁵

From the first inception of *heech* in painting, its continuous evolution and transformation over sixty years reflects the endless possibilities that this three-letter word provides. Its graceful form combined with ever-changing interpretations provide the perfect ingredients for the artist to be expressive and innovative. The allegorical representation of nothingness recreates itself in each new piece, reconstructing part of the historical past in a modern aptitude. It seems the artist rebuilt part of his own historical being and collective memory of Iran's cultural past in each new configuration. *Heech Lovers* revitalizes the tradition of calligraphy, acknowledges the strong presence of love in Persian poetry, and supersedes the sculptural practices of Tanavoli's time. *Heech* and its amalgamation with *Cage*, *Poet*, *Lovers*, and *Walls* evokes multiple allusions and interpretations that always provide possibilities for further exploration. Tanavoli's emotionally charged series, specifically *Farhad* and *Shirin*, *Bird and Cage*, tell us the story of devotion, sacrifice, and sorrow.

Parviz Tanavoli's art is deeply inspired by the cultural aspects of Islamic and pre-Islamic periods in Iran. He fused this

cultural past with novel modes of representation that could speak to the global audiences of the twentieth century. Architecture, calligraphy as high art, and popular culture such as talismans, seals, metalworks, textiles, zodiac signs, locks, keys, grill-shaped shrines, and everyday objects as popular art have all been sources of inspiration for him. Although, there is no distinction between high and popular art in Iran, it is important to recognize the diversity of sources that Tanavoli relied on in his artistic practice. Whether an everyday object or a royal manuscript, whether a Shi'i shrine or an Achaemenid rock relief, they all amounted to his understanding of Iran: a diverse and multilayered land with an equally diverse visual and architectural histories that could be the inspiration for modern art.

Heech Lovers reflects the reinterpretation and appropriation of calligraphy for such a modern context. The transformation of calligraphy from being a craft and decorative medium into conceptual expression in sculptural form is a novel attitude towards a mode of representation that has long been associated with religion and literature. Tanavoli moved beyond common practices of modern calligraphy and extended calligraphy as a traditional medium into a

sculptural domain. His interest in combining sacred and secular, Islamic and pre-Islamic, has been manifested in the *Heech* series specifically. Islam's view on idolatry has prompted the use of abstraction in artistic expression extensively in different parts of the Muslim world, including Iran. The challenge and innovation lie in dismantling the hegemony of calligraphy as a sacred medium and extending it into the sculptural domain that has been prohibited for a long time.

Editors:
Joe Salmon, Claudine Yip

NOTES

1. Fereshteh Daftari, "Another Modernism: An Iranian Perspective," in *Modernisms: Iranian, Turkish, and Indian Highlights from NYU's Abby Weed Grey Collection*, ed. Lynn Gumpert (Munich: Hirmer Publishers, 2019), 53–55.
2. Fereshteh Daftari, "Tanavoli in Context," in *Persia Reframed: Iranian Visions of Modern and Contemporary Art* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2019), 41–42.
3. There is more than one letter with the "h" sound in Farsi. In teaching this specific *h* to schoolchildren, it is often referred to as *two-eyed h*.
4. Nasta'liq is one of many calligraphy scripts. This script is composed of elongated sweeping diagonals and short ascending strokes.
5. Leyla Diba, "The Formation of Modern Iranian Art," in *Iran Modern*, ed. Fereshteh Daftari and Leyla Diba (New York: Asia Society Museum, in association with Yale University Press, 2013), 54–55.
6. Diba, "The Formation of Modern Iranian Art," 50–51.
7. Wijdan Ali, "Continuity through Calligraphy," in *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 152–60.
8. Keshmirshakan, *Historiography of Modern Iranian Art*, 20.
9. Daftari, "Tanavoli in Context," 44.
10. Daftari, "Tanavoli in Context," 50.
11. Keshmirshakan, "Historiography of Modern Iranian Art," in *Iran Modern*, ed. Fereshteh Daftari and Leyla Diba (New York: Asia Society Museum, in association with Yale University Press, 2013), 18.
12. Daftari, "Tanavoli in Context," 58–60.
13. Daftari, "Tanavoli in Context," 57–58.
14. Parviz Tanavoli, "Oh Nightingale: Parviz Tanavoli," in *Oh Nightingale: Parviz Tanavoli* (West Vancouver: West Vancouver Art Museum, 2019), 11–20.
15. Shiva Balaghi, "Rethinking Modernity," in *Modernisms: Iranian, Turkish, and Indian Highlights from NYU's Abby Weed Grey Collection*, ed. Lynn Gumpert (Munich: Hirmer Publishers, 2019), 37–38.
16. Balaghi, "Rethinking Modernity," 33–35.
17. Ali, "Continuity through Calligraphy," 155.
18. Daftari, "Tanavoli in Context," 45–47.
19. Tanavoli Parviz, "The Memory of Locks and Cages, Poetry and Bones: Parviz Tanavoli's Sixty-Year Artistic Career," interview by Shiva Balaghi in *Parviz Tanavoli* (Wellesley, MA: Davis Museum, 2015): 12–16.
20. Maryam Ekhtiar, *How to Read Islamic Calligraphy* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018), 25–35.
21. Ekhtiar, *How to Read Islamic Calligraphy*, 23.
22. Ekhtiar, *How to Read Islamic Calligraphy*, 31–34.
23. Ekhtiar, *How to Read Islamic Calligraphy*, 40–44.
24. Sheila Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 50–60.
25. Ali, "Continuity through Calligraphy," 157–59.
26. "Heech Sculpture," accessed February 26, 2022, hamline.edu/about/virtual-tour/heech.
27. Tanavoli, "Memory of Locks and Cages, Poetry and Bones," 15–17.
28. Attar and Rumi were both twelfth-century Iranian poets and theatricalians of Sufism; they both had great influence on Persian poetry and the development of the philosophical tradition of Islamic mysticism.
29. Tanavoli, "Memory of Locks and Cages, Poetry and Bones," 20–22.
30. Tanavoli, "Memory of Locks and Cages, Poetry and Bones," 12–14.
31. Daftari, "Tanavoli in Context," 45–48.
32. Daftari, "Tanavoli in Context," 40–43.
33. Ekhtiar, *How to Read Islamic Calligraphy*, 30–34.
34. Fariba Enteshari, "Rumi's Poetry: The Journey toward Meaning and Transformation," (PhD diss., Fielding Graduate University, 2013), 30–35.
35. Enteshari, "Rumi's Poetry," 35–38.
36. Alef is the first letter in Arabic/Persian alphabet.
37. Ekhtiar, *How to Read Islamic Calligraphy*, 40–43.
38. Ekhtiar, *How to Read Islamic Calligraphy*, 43–44.
39. The golden mean (also known as the Fibonacci sequence) is a geometric proportional system which governs the nature of beauty based on the relationship between two elements of *a* and *b*: $a+b/a=1.61803$. This ratio is used in sacred geometrical designs.
40. Loai Dabbour, "Geometric Proportions: The Underlying Structure of Design Process for Islamic Geometric Pattern," *Frontiers of Architectural Research* 1, no. 4 (December 2012): 380–91.
41. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987), 62–66.
42. Dabbour, "Geometric Proportions," 385–87.
43. Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 40–45.
44. Kamran Diba, the architect of Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, later called the movement "spiritual pop art."
45. Daftari, "Another Modernism," 55–58.
46. Nizami Ganjavi (1141–1209) is considered the greatest romantic epic poet in Persian literature, one who brought colloquial and realistic styles to Persian epic poetry. Nizami's main poetic work, for which he is best known, is a set of five long narrative poems known as *Khamsa of Nizami*. The *Khamsa* was a popular subject for lavish manuscripts illustrated with painted miniatures.
47. *Poet and Beloved* was commissioned by the City of Tehran in support of modern art movements. Visit <http://www.parviztanavoli.com/> for complete information about this collection.
48. Saqqakhaneh iconography is a visual vernacular used by modern Iranian artists in the mid-twentieth century, inspired by popular culture and religious votives. The term "Saqqakhaneh" itself refers to a type of religious structure located in the niches of neighbourhoods featuring pictures of Imams referencing the

NOTES

- Battle of Karbala in 680 AD. People place locks and tie rags and light candles for votive reasons. Locks, grid-shaped windows, and the hand of Hazrat Abbas are a few examples of Saqqakhaneh iconography.
49. Tanavoli, "Oh Nightingale," 11–14.
 50. Tanavoli, "Oh Nightingale," 10–14.
 51. Daftari, "Tanavoli in Context," 58–60.
 52. Fereshteh Daftari, "Redefining Modernism," in *Iran Modern*, ed. Fereshteh Daftari and Leyla Diba (New York: Asia Society Museum, in association with Yale University Press, 2013), 30–33.
 53. Daftari, "Redefining Modernism," 33–38.
 54. Hamid Keshmirshakan, "Questions of Identity: Nativism and Nationalism alongside Modernism in Art and Sociopolitical Culture," in *Contemporary Iranian Art: New Perspectives* (London: Saqi Books, 2013), 97–100.
 55. Keshmirshakan, "Questions of Identity," 130–32.
 56. Shi'i iconography is mainly inspired by the Battle of Karbala, when Imam Hossein, the son of Imam Ali, was martyred in 680 AD. Hazrat Abbas was also martyred while bringing water for his family in the dry desert climate of Karbala. His hand has become a symbolic reference to this event. Saqqakhaneh artists looked into this religious symbolism as a source of inspiration.
 57. Keshmirshakan, "Questions of Identity," 96–98.
 58. Keshmirshakan, "Questions of Identity," 94–99.
 59. Keshmirshakan, "Historiography of Modern Iranian Art," 17–18.
 60. Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, "The Letters of a Sonata," interview by Myrna Ayad and James Parry, *Canvas Magazine* 5, no. 5 (September–October 2009).
 61. Keshmirshakan, "Questions of Identity," 135.
 62. Balaghi, "Rethinking Modernity," 34–36.
 63. Ali, "Modern Islamic Art," 165–70.
 64. Keshmirshakan, "Historiography of Modern Iranian Art," 20.
 65. Keshmirshakan, "Historiography of Modern Iranian Art," 22.

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Artist Profile I

Jayden Dreher: Revolutionizing Relationships in Embodied Practices

Artworks and artist photos by Jayden Dreher
Profile by Kiran Dhaliwal



It is important to establish healthy working relationships with the people in our lives, whether at work or school. Is this person reliable? Are my strengths able to compensate for their weaknesses? Do I understand their ins and outs? These are some questions interdisciplinary artist Jayden Dreher may ask of the tools he works with. This care and consideration that he has for something like an old film camera found in a thrift shop comes through in his work, adding a veil of intimacy and authenticity to the documented experience. But there is more to it than just the mutual relationship. Dreher, who is completing a double-major in art history and visual art, describes his practice as being “equal parts theory and content,” crediting art history classes and professors that



Jayden Dreher:
 Revolutionizing
 Relationships in
 Embodied Practices

JAYDEN DREHER &
 KIRAN DHALIWAL

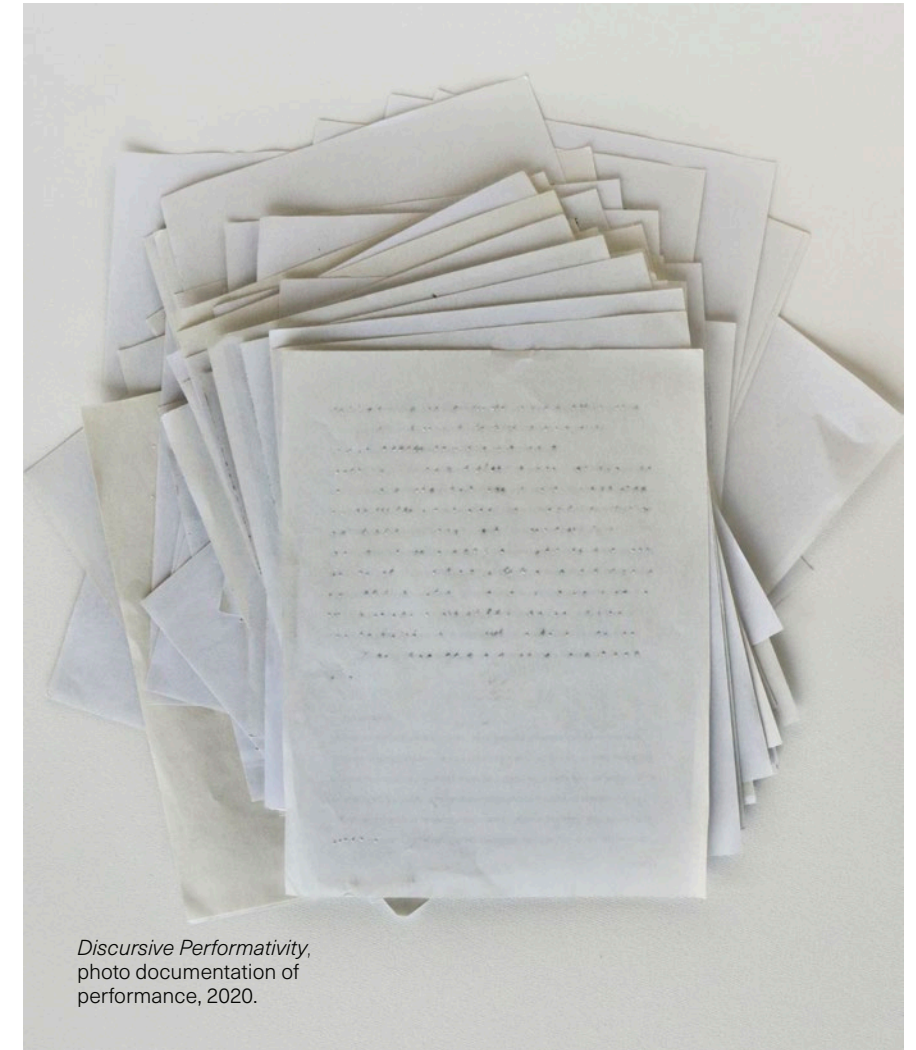


“I really like being in my work ... and not being able to separate my body from my body of work.”

challenged students to theorize and conceptualize their art. This was the part of art history he really enjoyed, saying that “it’s these theoretical and conceptual aspects that bolster the work and make it more meaningful.” Dreher mobilizes these aspects in his own practice and also centres his lived experience in everything he creates. This not only makes his work more meaningful, but also allows him to explore his identity and relationship to the world around him. “I really like being in my work,” he says, “and not being able to separate my body from my body of work.”

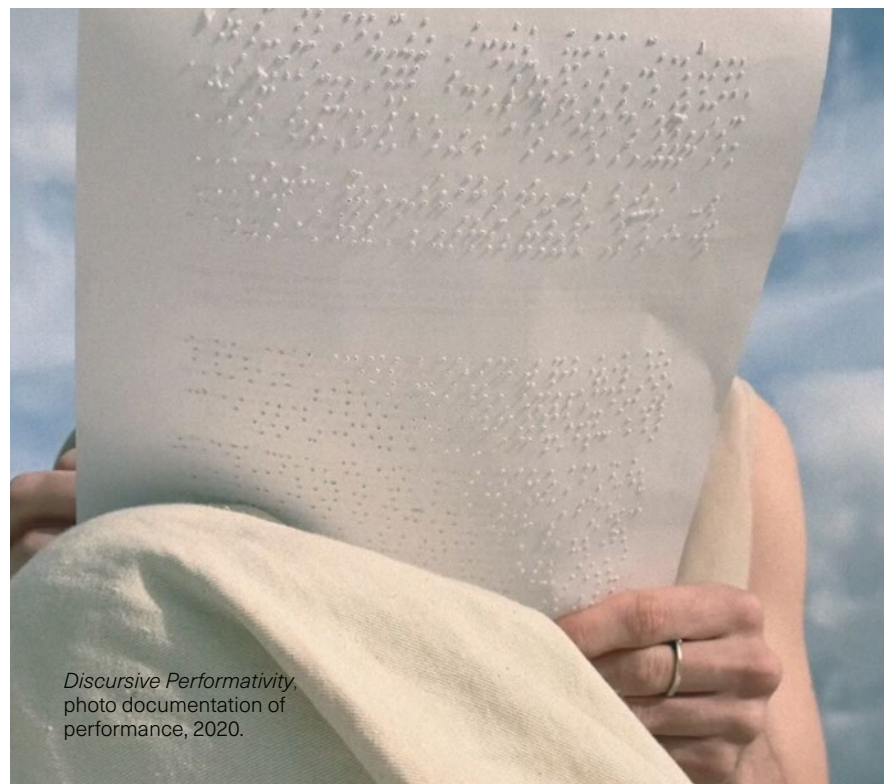
Dreher arrived in Montreal a day or so before he and I met via Zoom for our interview, and was settling in for his month-long stay there. The idea of conducting an interview is nerve-racking as is, but to do it online is a whole other story. I was worried that not meeting Dreher in person and seeing his studio, his sacred creative space, would leave too large a hole in my profile of him. Of course, these circumstances weren’t ideal, and when asked about how he is handling isolation and the pandemic, he admits he is someone who “likes people and interacting with people,” but “I can’t complain—everything has been fine and I’m healthy.” Living through a global pandemic has left a mark on us all as we continue to work, create, and survive through it.

ARTIST PROFILE



Dreher’s *Discursive Performativity* (2020), photo documentation of a performance, was shot just after Vancouver was first shut down, in the spring of 2020. Although it was intended to be performed in person for class, due to COVID-19 protocols and classes transitioning to remote learning, Dreher had to record it as a video instead. The performance itself consisted of the artist printing off every paper he wrote during his time at UBC,

sitting in an empty parking lot, going through the documents line by line, and puncturing a hole into every letter that included a circle. The papers were then disseminated throughout the parking lot by the wind, after which they were collected, compiled, and stacked into an art object. Although still somewhat legible on one side, this final pile of papers was punctured so the opposite side resembled something



Discursive Performativity
photo documentation of
performance, 2020.

like braille by the end. “I didn’t realize it was going to take that long,” he says, “I was in a parking lot by myself doing this frivolous task for the institution, which is essentially what I had been doing with all these papers [written for school] and it felt so pointless. Then it was being spread and no one was reading anything. It was kind of like this wasted object and—” Dreher pauses and hesitates before adding: “not that I’m comparing my degree to this performance, but it is very similar. What am I going to do with all of this stuff?”

Dreher started his artistic journey at UBC interested in more traditional practices such as drawing and painting. His love for film and video was a slow burn and there were a few different factors that contributed to his deep appreciation for these mediums. “Film offers a very intimate but also performative and exposing ability for an artist,” he says, “there’s a lot of layers to my love for film.” Dreher first got involved with older cameras through a print film class, and began to question how he was documenting his work while taking a performance art class. He becomes visibly excited when talking about finding different cameras to capture authentic experiences and the idea of how a particular camera was meant to be used when it first came out. He



Beyond the Frame
(how to care for a
fallen ladder), Super
8 Film, 2021.

references *Beyond the Frame (how to care for a fallen ladder)* (2021), a three-minute short film shot on a Super 8 film camera. The film depicts Dreher attempting to foster a relationship with a ladder. There are shots of him carrying it in and out of the water as well as washing it by hand with a cloth. The entire film is tinted blue, adding a cold atmosphere that counters the warmth the performance exudes as Dreher tends to the ladder. This project speaks to the one-sided relationship many artists have with their tools. No one asks about the conditions of a painter’s brushes, how they’re treated, or whether they are repaid for all they give. Dreher found the Super 8 camera at a thrift store for only two dollars, adding:

I didn’t even know if it would work. The whole thing was my relationship to the ladder, the actual visuals, but then also my relationship with the camera. So there’s a parallel because I need





Untitled and unfinished—work in progress, Stills from camcorder footage, 2021.

the camera to work in order to get the product, but I don't know if it will and that's just what the project is going to be about. The same way the ladder needs me to set it up and stand it up, I need the ladder to get out of the water.

Dreher's most recent project follows a similar process of "finding a camera, trying to establish a working relationship with the camera, and seeing what that collaboration will bring about." *Being in Time (dancing with david)* (2021) is an experimental video montage that explores queer identity, the notion of documentation, and being in a specific time. The maximalist



film consists of personal footage taken from Dreher's daily life and interspersed with the main performance art footage of him dancing and stripping for the camera. Visuals are spliced and laid over one another, accompanied by various sounds and audio clips in a way that makes it all feel like a collection of memories. For this project, Dreher didn't have a singular intention or end goal, instead he remained open and allowed for the film to develop on its own—adjusting and

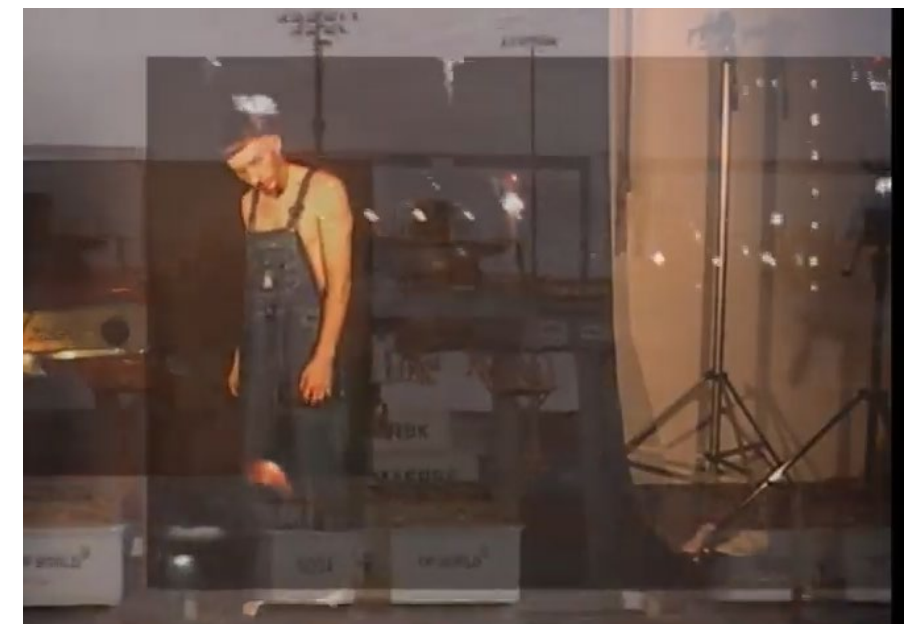


reworking as new footage was added. Dreher shows his ability to curate visuals and footage in a way that centres both him and his experience through film and documentation. As he was about to elaborate on the footage of him dancing, he suddenly stops and asks me: "Do you know David Wojnarowicz?" I shake my head and receive a quick summary. Wojnarowicz was a very prolific, largely self-taught, queer artist who came to prominence in 1980s New York through his photography and film. During the AIDS epidemic, he took a strong activist stand and fought until his tragic death from the illness in the early nineties. Dreher goes on to talk about seeing Wojnarowicz's work two years ago at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery on campus—specifically referencing a monologue that has stuck with him from *Fear of Disclosure: the psycho-social implications of HIV revelation* (1989), a five-minute



film of two dancers. "It's weird, this time that I'm in, and I want to dance with David, but I can't," he says, "so I'm trying to rectify my daily existence and this time that I can't access." So this is *the* David, "it's specifically my relationship with David. But more vaguely, my relationship to that time I have a nostalgia for, I wish I was alive in,

but I don't have access to." In this film, Dreher creates a space where he can insert clips of his life on the same plane as clips of queer artists of the past whom he admires, to be in the same time. Dreher also uses this project to think about his relationship with queer artists that lived and died during the AIDS epidemic, and with their work—



specifically David Wojnarowicz. What stands between him and these artists is time. By researching their body of work, he is, in a way, establishing a relationship with them. This film is therefore both a product of his research and a reconciliation with himself and the inseparability of time and self. He concludes his project statement with: “Through the maximal layering and fragmenting of clips,



I attempted to create a queer video archive of performance and life in order to help understand my time, my place, and my life.”

Being in Time embodies all the ideas that are integral to Dreher’s practice: incorporating theory and concept while also blurring the lines between himself and his project, and building non-exploitative and unconventional relationships with the objects he works with. After over an hour of talking, it was evident that art and creation are such an important part of Dreher’s life. He describes it as an urge, saying, “I’m making art because I have to. It’s all I know. It is the main way for me to understand who I am.” What makes Dreher’s work so distinct is how unique it is to him. The things he creates cannot be replicated or recreated by anyone, including himself. The methods he used to arrange footage were based on what he thought worked well together at a very specific time. Those methods could be completely different now. For Dreher, the process of creating is just as integral to his work as the finished product. The relationships he builds with all aspects of his work not only make him distinctive but allow him to turn his tools into a vehicle to better understand and express himself, giving objects equal power so they meet him where he is.

Artist Profile II

Stories Told by Empty Worlds: Lewis Reid on World-Building as a Philosophical Tool

Artworks by Lewis Reid
Profile and artist photos by H elo ise Auvray



Many groundbreaking and mind-twisting universes have emerged from humanity’s creative power. Some of these parallel worlds are elaborated to the point that they have their own rules, politics, and history books. The planet Arrakis was created to tell the story of *Dune* and the continent of Tamriel hosts the quests of the *Elder Scrolls*, but universes such as these are often built to serve as the background for fantastic plots and charismatic characters. What if these worlds had enough to tell on their own?



Stories Told by Empty
Worlds: Lewis Reid on
World-Building as a
Philosophical Tool
LEWIS REID &
HELOISE AUVRAY

“When domination is exerted over the planet, when Man only look up to Man, there is no need left for myths.”

Fourth-year BFA Visual Art student Lewis Reid has always been attracted to world-building, spending time exploring specialized online forums and gathering inspiration from literature and video games. But when imagining his own universe for the first time, he had no particular ambition to populate it with characters. He was more interested in the geographic and historical contextualization of the universe, how the imaginary climates would have an impact on populations and how they would adapt to it. He focused on details such as flag designs and architecture rather than on how to use his universe for storytelling.

Reid is a history buff, but he has never been interested in studying the prominent figures of our world—the main characters of our history textbooks. Instead, he focuses on how life was and how populations lived, what they believed in, and which items filled their interiors. He believes that the way he studies history led to his interest in worlds and populations as a whole, with no focus on individual narratives. When world-building, he creates items and objects related to the universe and its genesis. Therefore, Reid’s work feels like subject-less art but still bears extensive narratives.

Despite his interest in the past, Reid places his universe in the

future. He wants an equidistant positioning between realism and fantasy, dating his universe far enough for it to be uncanny but close enough so the viewer can understand how we got there. He is fascinated by how our current reality will be remembered and the irony that an age so heavily documented could be forgotten and misunderstood. He jokingly considers his approach to world-building as “social sciences fiction,” focusing on how societies and human behaviour will evolve, rather than on technical advancement such as further exploration of space or development of artificial intelligence.

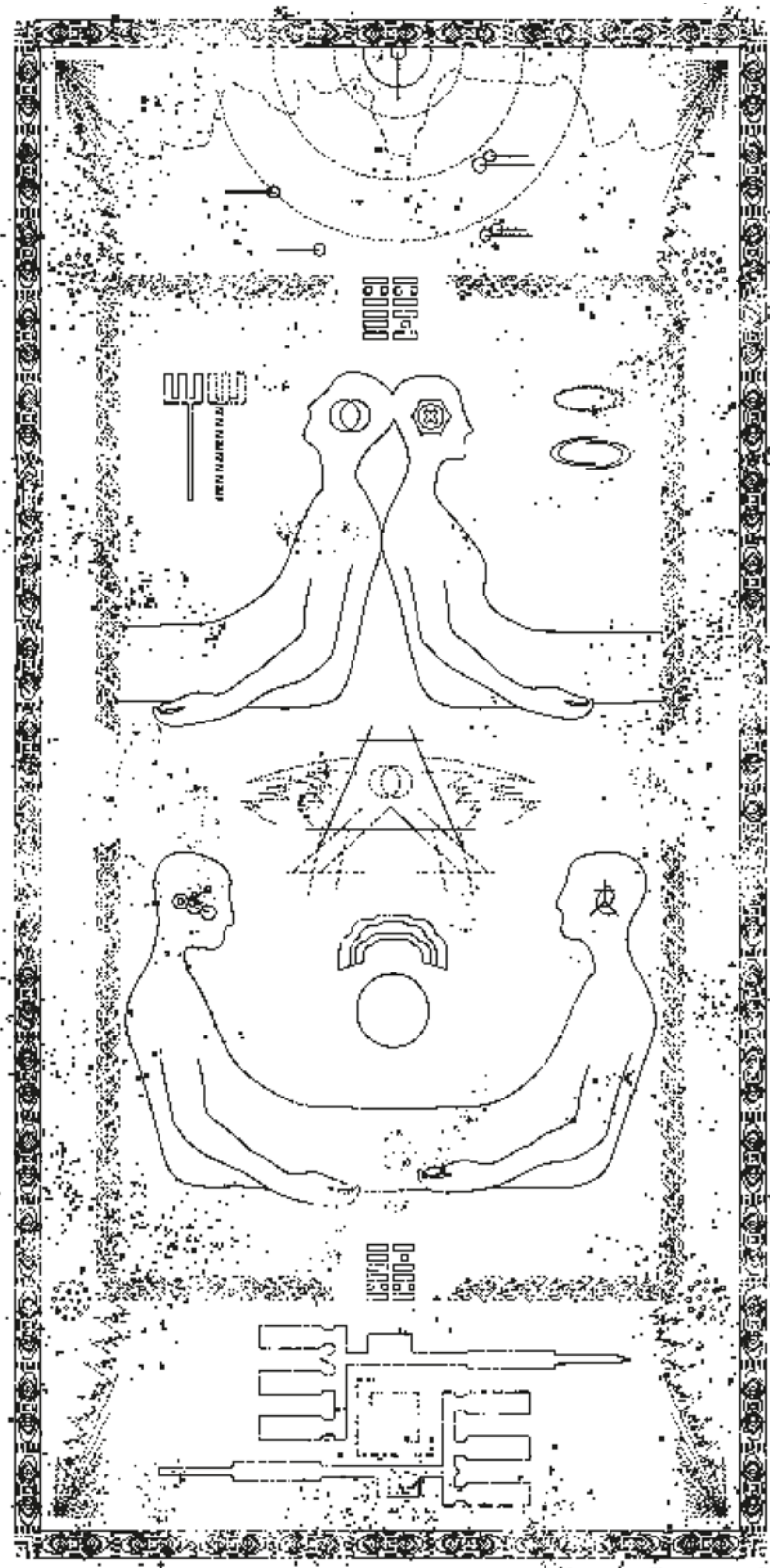
Reid’s body of work investigates our consumption of information, understanding of data, and the domination of humankind over nature. When viewed chronologically, his work tells a story of a possible future that he created by drawing on diverse sources, ranging from philosophical theory to cognitive science. Among his many references, he cites ontological concepts such as Heidegger’s “Dasein.”¹

Photo of me and my friends (2021) is a digital collage representing a stream of consciousness. This work, which is the starting point of Reid’s fictional chronology, is anchored in our reality. All

images are taken from the various, skillfully curated image repositories that Reid has been building over the years. The random assortment of images is combined in Photoshop to create an aesthetic similar to AI-generated visuals, with ethereal light effects and a pastel, yet muddy colour palette. It conveys the feeling of sensory overload that one can feel online. Despite containing visuals ranging from horrifyingly violent to lightly superficial, *Photo of me and my friends* creates an image where nothing stands out. Regarding the origins of the work, Reid cites Adam Curtis’s 2016 *HyperNormalisation*, a documentary that examines our desensitization to shocking images and what led to it. *Photo of me and my friends* subjects us to images that could generate a myriad of strong feelings, yet it is hard to focus on only one part of the collage, with our eyes always fixing onto the bordering shapes. In the middle of all the morphing shapes is a selfie of Reid and his friends, blended and barely recognizable, representing an attempt to draw some attention in the middle of an oversaturated feed.

Photo of me and my friends explores the repercussion of the information age, when too much data exists and when spreading and consuming information has never been as easy. This over-





Mesas, digital,
2021.

abundance causes us to become numb when confronted with horrifying news and to doubt everything we encounter, as it is becoming increasingly complex to spot fake or biased information. Eventually, our systems of information are going to become completely unreliable. According to James Bridle in his book of the same name, we live in a *New Dark Age*², and this larger-than-us way of consuming information and data cannot be without repercussions.

Mesas (2021) is set further into a fictional future, entering Reid's imagined realm. In a post-apocalyptic scenario, billionaires and corporations have fled, leaving behind a ravaged planet. The civilization left on Earth must degrow and return to a subsistence existence that revolves around

needs. *Mesas* is a schematic tapestry depicting an actual event in Reid's fictional lore. In his story, a human sacrifice that allowed the protection of the human species has been reinterpreted as the base of a completely new mythology, elevating the martyrs to idol status. This builds an entirely new spirituality around a real event that is too old to be understood but real enough to be seen.

For Reid, the end of the Anthropocene will allow time for myth and belief. According to him, there has been a loss of oral legends and tales in Western society. Religion and spirituality have been overcome by an age of rationality, objectivity, and data. He does not want to dismiss the importance of science in our society, but rather question what led to the loss of legends and non-human figures to look up to. For him, the Anthropocene, or the domination of the world's climate, ecosystems, and topography by humans, has destroyed any feeling of humility and the need for the sublime. Reid reclaims a comeback to the awe and fear caused by sights and stories greater than humanity and its achievements. When domination is exerted over the planet, when humans look up only to one another, there is no need left for myths.

That is why the fictional universe in which *Mesas* takes place—one

where the quest for progress and exploitation of finite resource has ended—has room for new legends and beliefs that carry gratitude. Humanity's limits have been made visible and its fragility revealed.

Chronologically, *Mantles* (2021) is the furthest in time. It is hard to say if it is from a time when humanity even still exists. Standing nine feet tall, *Mantles* is shaped around a structure made of Styrofoam, chicken wire, and burlap. Hypertufa, a lightweight rock material used for garden sculptures—composed of cement, peat moss, and perlite—has been applied onto the structure and left to dry before growing moss on it. Under the moss, we see carved symbols.

The idea for *Mantles* started with the nuclear waste burial problem, specifically the question of how we can create infrastructure or symbols today that will keep civilizations away from our nuclear waste ten thousand years from now. Questioning the fragility of symbols and their meaning is particularly interesting to Reid. He considers symbols to be what separates us from Nature. A symbol carved on the bark of a tree indicates that a human being is or has been here. Symbols are epistemes, their understanding is rooted within a certain culture and timeframe. So, what does it mean to have symbols with such

fleeting meaning? Reid uses symbols as tools to understand the limits of knowledge and understanding. He creates a world where humanity has slowly died out or has evolved so far from what we are now that symbols have become unreadable and irrelevant. The moss has taken over and this fake rock with lost meaning is absorbed by nature. Ashes to ashes. *Mantles* emulates the mystery around old artefacts that we cannot decipher anymore and transports it into a fictional future, showing that this cycle is ongoing and that everything we are so sure of might never be transmitted to future generations.

Reid's entire body of work revolves heavily around data, the things we know and how we make sense of the things we don't understand. His constructed worlds may not host epic plots, but they tackle philosophical questions such as "What do we know?" and "How do we know that we know?" Reid does not consider himself an artist, preferring the term "designer." He considers his practice to be closer to the design process, as most of his work is entirely digital or relies on a graphic design base such as symbols. His self-declared "lack of skills in fine art" does not prevent him from creating ambitious works of art and complex universes that question our relationship to technology, time, and one another.



Mantles, peat moss, perlite, cement, 2021.



Tecclesiomentist Hood, recycled leather, cotton, 2021.



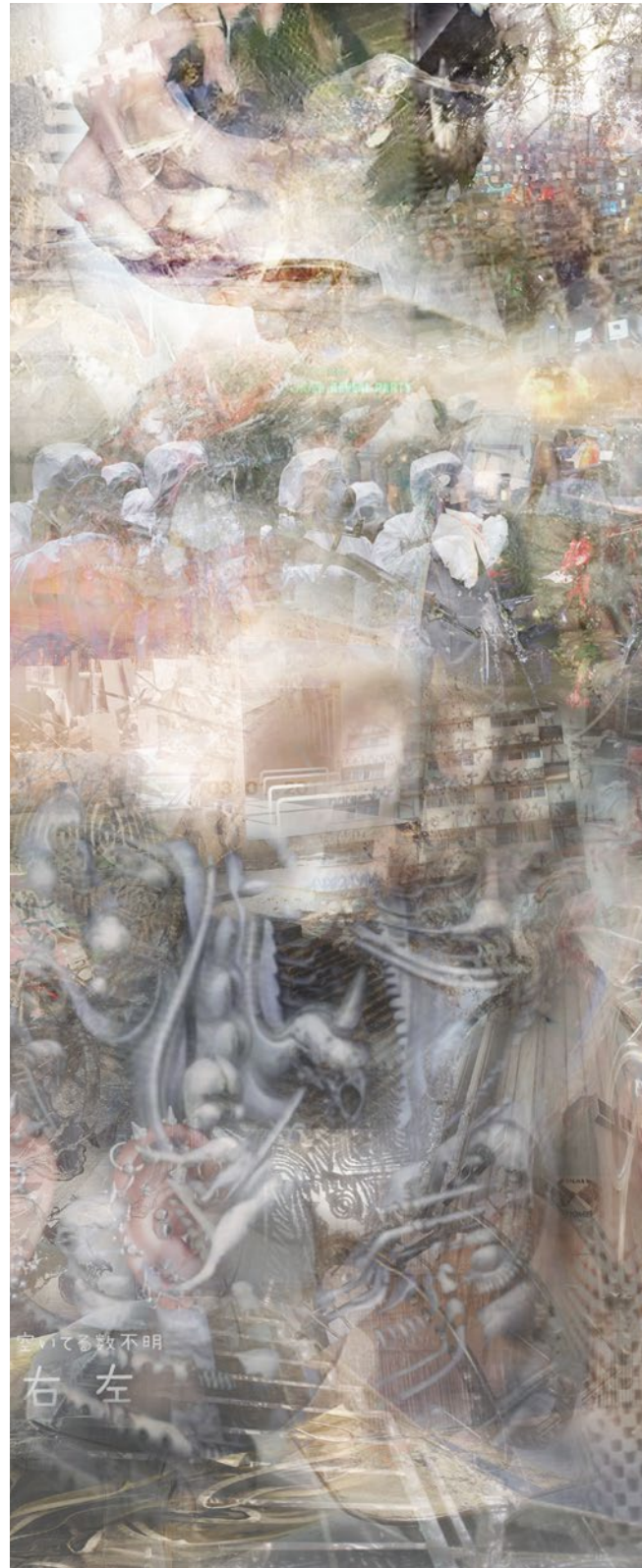


photo of me and my friends, digital, 2021.

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Artist Profile III

Zoë Eshan: Exploring Emotional Attachment Through Materiality

Artworks by Zoë Eshan
Profile by Syed Apanuba Puhama



*Reverse
Readymade:
Landscapes, water
and honeybee
pollen on leaves,
grass, and reeds,
2021.*

My conversation with Zoë Eshan about her art, interestingly, begins with astrophysics. Hailing from North Carolina, she informs me that her journey at UBC began with the subject. While she has always had an intimate relationship with art, it wasn't until after a year of studying astrophysics that she finally decided to explore the field. "Maybe I'll be ready to go back when I'm forty, but not right now," says the artist, who is currently in her third year pursuing a visual art major with a minor in mathematics. Eshan's decision stems from the freedom and vulnerability that art and creativity bring about—something that is immediately apparent when taking in her artwork. Her process of incorporating



Zoë Eshan: Exploring
Emotional Attachment
Through Materiality

ZOË ESHAN &
SYED APANUBA PUHAMA



“Her process of incorporating temperament and intimacy into her art often emerges from her innermost sentiments.”

temperament and intimacy into her art often emerges from her innermost sentiments. Viewing art as “a way of processing and coping with life,” she always finds herself circling back to it as something familiar and personal. Exploring themes of attachment, grief, and gratitude, often coupled with the use of materials and forms that challenge the familiar interpretations associated with these emotions, her pieces frequently embrace the freedom that comes with imagination and creativity in the field of art. Eshan’s early work focused on drawing, watercolours, and photography, as seen in her *Modern Portraits* (2021), *Physical Attempt to Process Grief* (2021), and *Mama’s Ghost* (2003; 2021) series. Recently, however, in *Reverse Readymade: Landscapes* (2021) series, she has slowly shifted towards process-based sculptures and more unconventional mediums as a way of exploring attachment through materiality. When it comes to the process of creation, the final product is not the only thing Eshan values. “Devoting a lot of focus and energy into something and then having something to hold at the end is very meditative for me,” she states. Immersing herself in each aspect of the creative process and enhancing the sense of vulnerability through tender sentiments, Eshan offers up a piece of herself with each artwork.

The artistic labour, often tedious, that goes into her work is emphasized in *Modern Portraits 1–4*. Originally a way of navigating through hard times during the pandemic, the drawings are done using graphite and watercolour on paper and depict the few people she was living and engaging with daily before she began losing track of the faces. “It was just like not seeing anyone except for these blobs going by the screen every day,” says Eshan. Taking comfort in drawing the repetitive lines that make up the background of the portraits, the series became a “meditative and comforting process” for her. Each stroke of the pencil required deliberation, while enhancing the therapeutic aspect of the process. It was this derivation of meaning from the formal and physical elements of her artistic process that ignited her interest in materiality within art, prominent in her later work *Reverse Readymade: Landscapes 1–7*.

Upon embracing the elements of intimacy, tenderness, and vulnerability in artistry, Eshan turned towards unconventional mediums for this work. When she started the piece, it was merely “an attempt to experience something entirely.” She used materials found and grown within proximity of her North Carolina home, such as water and pollen, which she pressed on leaves, reeds, and

grasses to make up different prints and bring out contours. She expands on the gratitude she felt for the land she was on: “I was thinking a lot about the land I was on while I was working on that piece. My mother was a beekeeper, so we always had a bit of land to keep these on. I take care of this land and this land takes care of me. This is what I was thinking. It was just a sense of gratitude for being in one place and being able to personally relate to each part of the process and having it come from my own experiences.” Eshan’s use of hands, feet, and body prints in *Reverse Readymade* leave a strong impression through the establishment of a connection between ourselves and the land that surrounds us. As she affirms, “by working through each piece of the work, you embed a part of yourself into the material.”

Eshan’s decision to use entirely natural materials in *Reverse Readymade* comes from the attempt to “reject the modern privilege of ignoring the making process.” As we are collectively accustomed to finding material comforts readily available for us, it can be easy to distance ourselves from the processes involved in that production and availability. With this work, Eshan acknowledges that even the natural elements she picked up had to complete journeys she had no way to be involved in. “You can’t help but

feel so much gratitude for your surroundings,” she asserts. “I haven’t finished exploring what this means yet, I think,” as she hopes to delve into this feeling of gratitude and privilege further in the future. When asked specifically about the fascinating use of pollen, Eshan attributes this to her desire for experimenting with different materials and the Ziploc bags full of pollen always present in the family freezer thanks to her mother’s beekeeping.

Most of Eshan’s recent pieces, particularly *Mama’s Ghost* and *Physical Attempt to Process Grief: 1–4*, were influenced by the recent unexpected death of her mother. The *Mama’s Ghost* series consists of a collection of self-portrait photographs accidentally double-exposed over childhood pictures of her with her mother. “In opposition to most of my other work, this was completed almost before I even started it. I didn’t even mean to make it—it just sort of happened,” she recalls. The original rolls of film consisted of cherished childhood pictures of Eshan, her mother, and her brother from the early 2000s. In the process of cleaning out her house she found the rolls and believed they were unused, which prompted her to later use them for self-portrait photo shoots documenting her shift towards a state outside the bounds of grief. It wasn’t until she was sitting in

a parking lot after having the photographs developed that she found out what had transpired. Calling it “the closest thing to magic,” she has ever experienced, she reveals her initial reception of this accidental art to be chilling, yet delightful.

Eshan’s process of coping with this grief is further illustrated in the *Physical Attempt to Process Grief: 1–4* series. Completed in a very dark time in her life, the colourful depictions of her state of mind using watercolour, graphite, pen, and coloured pencils, directly contradict the dark and gritty emotions we often associate with grief and loss. “I wanted to depict almost childlike emotions, where you don’t always know what is going on but you’re just sitting in that feeling and going along with it,” she states, “because sadness is not necessarily a bad thing, but more of a neutral state of being where going out in the sun and finding pretty colours to stare at was keeping me going.” The softness of the pieces is deliberate, as the artist emphasizes—“her way of mourning.” She elaborates: “I am not done, but I am closer. I want to give you the space to mourn by looking and offer what little I have learned in the process. I want you to know that it took me twelve new pencils, now stubs, to make these marks and I thought of her the whole way.”

At this point, I wondered the direction her art and passion would take in the coming years. The gradual shift from drawing to sculpture leaves one curious—what more could be in store? With Eshan’s background and experience with mathematics, being frustrating and rewarding at the same time, she has realized that the two fields have more in common than most people realize. Aspiring to incorporate math in art and art in math while further exploring grief and materiality, she has been looking into textiles for her upcoming projects. She discusses the association and integration of the two fields, “there is a lot of science and chemistry that is applicable in textiles that could be used to traverse into an art field. The science of textiles could be an interesting place for me to sit in between the two fields.” With the hope of attaining a greater understanding of people with diverse interests and what unites them, she aspires to integrate different worlds in her art to further explore how materiality shapes and plays into our innermost emotions. The power of the connections we form in the process of expressing ourselves and creating art, going beyond what results we uncover, becomes more and more apparent upon experiencing Eshan’s artistry.

Reverse Readymade: Landscapes, water and honeybee pollen on leaves, grass, and reeds, 2021.



Reverse Readymade: Landscapes, water and honeybee pollen on leaves, grass, and reeds, 2021.

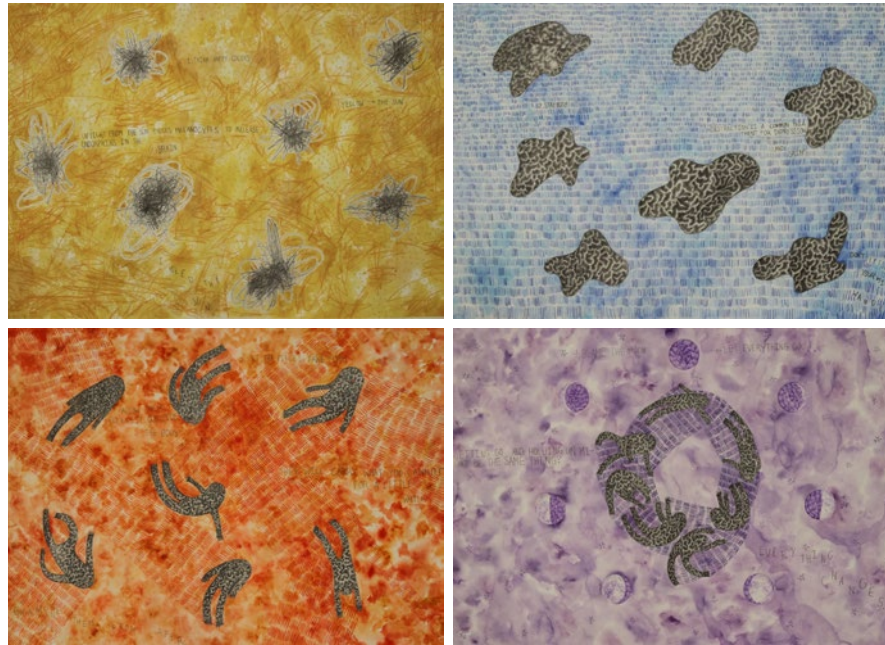


ARTIST PROFILE

Mama's Ghost, 35mm colour film, first exposure circa 2003, then accidentally double exposed March 2021.



Physical Attempt to Process Grief,
watercolor,
graphite, pen, and
coloured pencil on
paper, 2021.



Exhibition Review I



Modern Portraits,
Graphite and
watercolor pencil
on paper, 2021.

“Chinese Canadian history is BC history,” says Grace Wong, the chair of the Chinese Canadian Museum Society of BC.¹ Yet even with over two hundred years of residence and contribution, it can still seem like Chinese Canadians are fighting for their place in the canon. When 2020 brought a sudden spike in discrimination against Asians in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese Canadians were once again at risk

of being seen as outsiders. Luckily, a celebration of cultural pride was already in the works. In 2018, the Province of British Columbia and City of Vancouver pledged their commitment to establishing BC’s first Chinese Canadian museum.² With a collaboration between the Museum of Vancouver and the Initiative for Student Teaching and Research in Chinese Canadian Studies (INSTRCC) at the University of British Columbia, the Chinese

Canadian Museum (CCM) opened its doors in Chinatown’s Hon Hsing Building on August 15, 2020, with the inaugural exhibition: *A Seat at the Table: Chinese Immigration and British Columbia*.³

This highly interactive exhibition uses food and restaurant culture to navigate the history of Chinese migrants and citizens in British Columbia. Chinese restaurants have become long-time staples in

A Seat at the Table

Chinese Canadian Museum
Museum of Vancouver

CCM & MOV

CLAUDINE YIP

the province, since discrimination against Chinese people in the job market forced them to open their own businesses.⁴ Examining BC’s history of Chinese restaurants reveals this racial prejudice, but it also depicts Chinese Canadians’ “ability to resist, organize, seek justice[,] and thrive.”⁵ However, the overarching theme of food by no means limits the vast range of perspectives that the exhibition spans; rather it offers access into other Chinese businesses, migration accounts, and facets of Chinese culture, while offering an opportunity to include some

mouth-watering imagery. On November 19, 2020, the Museum of Vancouver (MOV) mounted a sister exhibition to the one at the Chinese Canadian Museum. The pair will remain on view until January 2023.

Just before Lunar New Year, I took the opportunity to celebrate Chinese history and culture by visiting both exhibition locations. Upon entering the Chinese Canadian Museum on East Pender Street, visitors are greeted with a four-foot wok that hangs on a wooden partition. Within the wok

is a brightly painted scene of a multigenerational family enjoying dim sum—Chinese Canadian artists Stella Zheng and Elisa Yon’s *Family Dim Sum on Sunday* (2020, fig. 1). A sign to the left of the wok and entrance outlines the exhibition’s ethos: “We want this exhibition to be like comfort food—familial and familiar—not because you may already know something about Chinese Canadians in British Columbia, but because their stories are also our stories.”⁶ Like every written piece in the exhibition, the sign is displayed in three languages:

Figure 1. Stella Zheng and Elisa Yon. *Family Dim Sum on Sunday*. 2020. Photo courtesy of the Chinese Canadian Museum.



English, Traditional Chinese, and Simplified Chinese.

Spanning one storey and two rooms, the museum is intimate and casual with checkerboard parquet flooring and an exposed concrete ceiling. Additional partitions divide the four main pillars of the exhibit—food, culture, services, and activism—and more. Since videos are one of the exhibition’s predominant means of conveying information, the museum works within the confines of the smaller interior to provide semi-private listening hubs. Transparent domes with speakers hang in front of each video display, providing visitors beneath them with a clear auditory experience (fig. 2).

Near the beginning of my exploration, a young man outside begins hitting a large drum with a mallet, seemingly demanding the attention of the whole neighbourhood with each beat. Behind him, I catch streaks of yellow, purple, and orange. It’s a lion dance performance, meant to scare off evil spirits that might put the new lunar year in danger. The steady, pulsing beat feels as though I am witnessing Vancouver’s own heartbeat. As I watch the performance, surrounded by stories that have shaped the city’s character with a succession of its legacy just outside the doors, it becomes obvious why this location was chosen for the museum. CCM puts community at the

Figure 2. *A Seat at the Table: Chinese Immigration and British Columbia* at the Chinese Canadian Museum, August 15, 2020 to January 2023. Photo courtesy of the Chinese Canadian Museum.



forefront of its rendition of *A Seat at the Table*. Each of the four main sections highlights several local businesses around BC, with small video screens that play various educational animations, interviews, and documentaries. In the back corner of the main room, a booth with a microphone allows visitors to tell their own stories. On the opposite side, you can listen to the recordings. While some speak in English, even more use Mandarin or Cantonese to share their thoughts. CCM thus offers a space that comfortably embraces all different ways of speaking and storytelling.

Midway down the left-hand wall is another highlight of CCM's exhibit:

the virtual reality film station. A visitor can put on goggles and be transported to the present-day Cantonese villages and the city streets of Hoiping (Kaiping) in southern Guangdong, China. As many Chinese men migrated to Canada in the nineteenth century without their wives and children, the videos offer a look at what they left behind; viewers are brought in front, inside, and even on top of the *diaolou* (watchtowers) that were constructed using the money that the men sent back. *Diaolou* contain a unique integration of nineteenth-century Chinese and European architecture—a sign of the owners' wealth and sense of culture from going abroad. While Kaiping *diaolou* and villages are now deserted of residents, neighbours continue to maintain the land, preserving this unique aspect of Chinese Canadian and Chinese migration history left in China.

Moving from the Chinese Canadian Museum to the Museum of Vancouver, there is a sense of growth—both in terms of physical space and breadth of stories. Where CCM's humble storefront acts as a hidden gem for passersby to stumble upon, the Museum of Vancouver's facade brandishes a red statement banner advertising *A Seat at the Table*. This bold pronouncement matches the museum's interior, where a commitment to restaurant décor and aesthetic immersion



Figure 3. Paul Wong. *Club Cafe*. 1997. Photo courtesy of the Museum of Vancouver.

is an evident distinction from its predecessor. One of the first sights is a corner space transformed into a diner. Almost overwhelmingly turquoise, the furniture and fake wooden wall immediately stand out in the dim lighting. A silkscreen print—*Club Café* (1997) by Chinese Canadian artist Paul Wong—is framed on the wall (fig. 3). Beneath English text and ancient Chinese characters, the print's turquoise background is likely the inspiration for the colour scheme. A recording of restaurant chatter plays from a small speaker, including workers speaking in Mandarin and Cantonese. Instead of a menu, however, a laminated sheet contains a spread of photographs of Chinese Canadians

from as early as the 1920s. The array of individuals—including some of the exhibition's own curators—immediately diversifies the idea of *Chinese Canadian*, challenging the oft-assumed fallacy of a cultural monolith.

To the left of *Club Café*, glowing, neon, display cases outline what seems to be the six pillars of the Museum of Vancouver's installment: aspiration, innovations, diversity, traditions, solidarity, and racism. Turning a few more corners in the maze-like layout brings you to another diner set-up. Lining the left wall is a counter and bar stools, with booklets containing stories of Chinese Canadian business



Figure 4. *A Seat at the Table: Chinese Immigration and British Columbia* at the Museum of Vancouver, November 19, 2020 to January 2023. Photo courtesy of the Museum of Vancouver.

owners (innovations), their ties to other marginalized communities (solidarity), and familial sacrifices made for the next generation (aspiration). Lining the right wall of the room, three sets of booths sit back-to-back against one another, each with a screen on the wall beside them (fig. 4). To my surprise, a video titled *Bubble Tea* leads me to a short documentary about my favourite local bubble tea shop from when I was growing

up: Peanut's Bubble Tea (花生米), in the Richmond Public Market. Recognizing the familiar location and faces onscreen brings me back to my favourite red bean drink—my reward after every haircut I suffered through in the nearby salon. Seeing the owners speak about their family business in their native language, I end up learning about a snippet of my personal history.

A long, cushioned bench—reminiscent of a restaurant waiting area—leads into the final exhibition space, which replicates the interior of a Chinese restaurant. However, a few crucial details break the illusion: instead of being plain white, the tablecloths and chairs are covered in vibrantly coloured fabrics with pages from Chinese newspapers, advertisement posters, and handwritten letters. Instead of food on the tables, nourishment comes in the form of artifacts in transparent cases, booklets, and the stories inside them. Empty and stereotypical Chinese take-out containers hang above, perhaps contrasting surface-level media depictions of Chinese culture with its actual, tangible, and vibrant history. And like the wok greeting visitors with a family meal in CCM, two more painted woks bid visitors farewell in MOV with the messages “出入平安” (“travel safely”) and “Thank you! Come again.”

Regardless of which location a person visits, *A Seat at the Table* marks a victory for BC's Chinese population; it is a claim to their integral presence in the province's communities. While introducing the Chinese Canadian Museum's goals, former City of Vancouver assistant city manager Wendy Au calls the space a “living museum”—able to reflect on the past while looking towards the future.⁷ This notion of growth is

evident in the exhibition's social media efforts. With hashtags such as #SATlocal and #SATmyFamily, visitors can add social media posts reflecting on the exhibit to shared walls. These walls are also projected throughout MOV, allowing visitors to help curate the physical exhibition experience. Perhaps to mimic the mobility of Chinese restaurants, there are also plans to expand *A Seat at the Table* into other regions across the province. Soon, residents from all areas of BC will be able to interact with this facet of their history, and the exhibition will evolve with them as well.⁸

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Exhibition Review II

Am I Ancient or a Human-Made Machine? was a monographic exhibition held at the Or Gallery from August 28 to October 2, 2021. Curated by Paz Guevara, it comprises work by Chilean artist Michelle-Marie Letelier that centres around the topic of salmon aquaculture. Letelier spotlights the profound disconnect between humans and nature, owing to the continued appeal of extractivism: the mining of natural resources

for financial gain. She does so by employing technologies that have become widely accessible and familiar to us—namely, virtual reality and live video streaming. A short corridor leads up to the exhibition entrance, where viewers are first met with the interrogative title and a handful of gallery guides to their left. As a prelude to the main space, it assumes a synoptic role—opening up a space for visitors to gain in-

depth knowledge about Letelier’s work before interacting with it. However, the confinement of all didactics to a space outside of the exhibition space signals, from the outset, a significant deviation from gallery conventions. The equally unusual floor-length drapes at the entryway obstruct any immediate view of the exhibition’s contents, allowing the work on the other side to escape the enveloping grasp of natural

Am I Ancient or a Human-Made Machine? The Or Gallery

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light. The act of passing through the parted drapes, thus, becomes a way for Letelier to subliminally introduce the idea of disconnect to the audience. Crossing the threshold closes viewers off from the outside world and the present moment, prompting them to immerse themselves and quite literally lose sight of anything beyond the confines of the space. As such, we are being invited to go beyond a simple survey of the work and make an effort to establish a genuine relationship with the salmon—unencumbered by the exploitative pursuits that

neocolonial structures promote. The exhibition takes its name from a three-dimensional geometric configuration devised to house and display Letelier’s main digital works and their text-based counterparts. As opposed to traditional exhibitions, the museography of *Am I Ancient or a Human-Made Machine?* is an integral part of the installation. The transcription of the diagram into the physical space of the viewer ties all the elements together via what we have termed an “embodied schematic diagram”: a habitable drawing. This provides

a bridge between the different works and creates a dialogic space within which Letelier enables “multiple agencies” to come forward in a spirit of collectivity. A rope on the ground is shaped into a double loop, similar to a lemniscate or figure-eight, but is interrupted at the centre by a short triangular plinth. Flanked by the diptych *From Now Until Now* (2018), the rope rests lengthways within the rectangular room. Therefore, we might say that the installation visually responds to the architecture’s geometric features and, via the use of



Michelle-Marie Letelier, *Am I Ancient or Human-Made Machine?*, Photo courtesy of Or Gallery.

simple, identifiable shapes, brings a sense of cohesiveness to the work and space. The resulting symmetry achieved by the layout, in conjunction with the arrow-like form of the plinth, ultimately proposes a predetermined and unidirectional trajectory: movement from the front of the room to the back; from entrance to end.

Upon entering the space, the question “*Am I Ancient or Human-Made Machine?*” re-emerges as a sort of signpost—suggesting two main ways of navigating the exhibition. Visitors are welcomed by a stack of cards placed on a plinth, which helps determine their starting point. You are instructed to pick a card before beginning your journey. If it reads “Ancient?,” you begin with *The Bone* (2019–21) at the front, a VR

experience that submerges you into the skin of a salmon and is accompanied by an immersive audio-visual experience. “Human-Made?” directs you to *The Bonding—Live Streaming* (2021) in the back loop, a showing of a Norwegian salmon farm in real time. Each work is supported with written material that takes the format of diary entries, script excerpts, and open letters—not to be confused with descriptive or interpretive texts written by curators and collaborators. These materials are displayed as a pile of distributable handouts on the floor and are structurally imperative to our understanding of Letelier’s time-based works. Three floor cushions and a stool are also placed into each loop for a total of eight seats within the room. This set-up physically reminds viewers of the intimacy and reciprocity that belies the work; we settle onto the floor alone or alongside the group with which we came to essentially sit with our thoughts, the work, and the people around us.

Therefore, access to the “Ancient” is through graphic and written material (innately “human” tools) but it is represented through incredibly advanced technological equipment: the VR set. Access to the “Human” side is mainly through a screen, consistent with current times. Ultimately, this back and forth of old and new

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technology becomes another way that Letelier brings a sense of unity to the exhibited works.

Of course, an exhibition always follows a common theme, whether that is a similar art topic or a time period. The monographic exhibition combines different works to create one cohesive installation. It is a testament to the artist’s constant interest in salmon aquaculture and makes for a multi-faceted work, examining politics and the self-alienation of humans from nature. The show relies on dichotomy—specifically, in using technology and paper as an apparatus or when using VR to immerse us in the body of the salmon (before or) after seeing these sentient beings from a distance via live stream. Creating these superficial bonds pushes the possibility of long-term emotional bonds and encounters between the free human and its captive prey; it urges us to regain empathy and kinship lost to alienation of industrialization. Nonetheless, this feeling relies on false relatability, as technology is limited and can never accurately recreate a soon-to-be lost natural environment.

To end on a more practical note, this exhibition is an amazing demonstration of the power of the curator and the importance of arrangement. The choice to leave walls mostly blank invites viewers to sit on the



Michelle-Marie Letelier, *Am I Ancient or Human-Made Machine?*, Photo courtesy of Or Gallery.

floor cushions to converse and experience the work—creating a sense of intimacy, as opposed to claustrophobia, despite the small space. The separation between the exhibition and the didactics offers autonomy of reflection for the viewer, who has been given the space to do so comfortably. The guiding pamphlet evidently provides a starting point for approaching the exhibition, but its scope is still significantly restricted and restrictive; especially if this is the only way one chooses to interact with the exhibit. The online components—namely,

recorded conversations with the artist titled *Poethics of a Sovereign Ocean: Orality, Reciprocity and Geopolitical Trajectories* (2021)—could be useful in supplementing the descriptive material. This additional material offers viewers a deeper understanding of the thinking and research behind the work. However, it is ultimately one’s embodied navigation of space that brings prominence and life to the work. The exhibition’s immersive nature physically separates you from your surroundings to make you experience the ideas at

hand; you hear the live stream, read their direct words in diary entries, escape into underwater zones, among other things. Its understanding comes from the way it feels to exist in the space while lost in time and meditation, examining our human experience through humanity’s consequences on our environment. *Am I Ancient or a Human-Made Machine’s* contents exist in such a way that additional explanations simply fall short.

