

In Search of Queertopias:

James Albers

Amanda Amour-Lynx

Rylan Friday

Alex Gibson

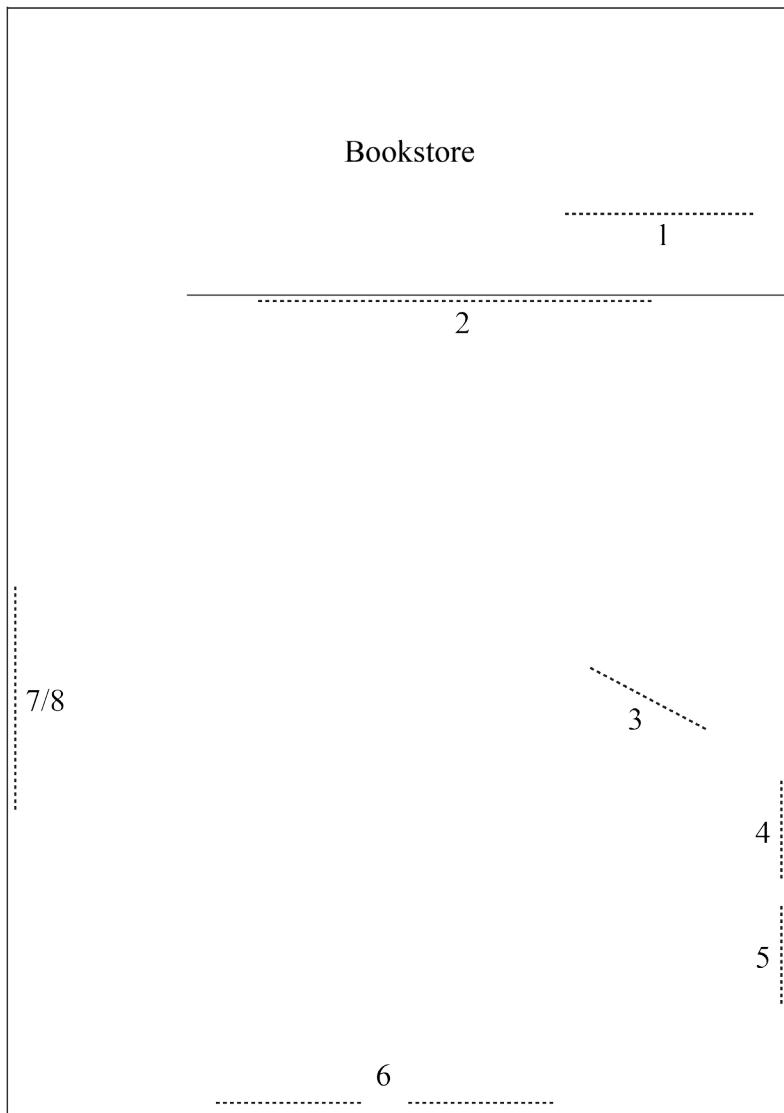
Queer Code

Curated by

Nathan Clark

July 15 – August 12, 2023

Or Gallery



- 1 Queer Code
Mementorium, Virtual Reality Game, 2020.
Courtesy of the artist.
- 2 Rylan Friday
The Sound of You Collapsing, 5 ceramic cups; 1 broken ceramic cup; ceramic cup shards, prosthetic leg cast, bedsheets, single channel video, 11:49, looped, 2023.
Courtesy of the artist.
- 3 Alex Gibson
two masses, single channel video, monitor, quartz sand, extension cord, 2022.
Courtesy of the artist.
- 4 Alex Gibson
Unicorn, unicorn, unicorn, unicorn, unicorn, archival inkjet print, framed, 12" x 16", 2023.
Courtesy of the artist.
- 5 Alex Gibson
Swan song of a bog body, archival inkjet print, framed 18" x 24", 2023.
Courtesy of the artist.
- 6 James Albers
silly boy you've been daydreaming again, float mounted paper prints, 24"x 36," sheer curtain, curtain rod, 2023
Photographer: Simone Chnarakis, Lighting Assistant: Ricky Chen, Stylist: Fareed Yaqub
Courtesy of the artist.
- 7 Amanda Amour-Lynx
Land Is Body, video performance art, 2:21, 2017.
Courtesy of the artist.
- 8 Amanda Amour-Lynx
Skite 'kmujuawti, MP4 Video, 2:10, 2017.
Audio: Riley Claire Sato
Courtesy of the artist.

In Search of Queertopias: What is a []-topia?

Nathan Clark

Caution: perspectives will switch consistently throughout your experience. As you cross the threshold into the unfamiliar, it will be up to you to navigate with your body.

Trust your body and leave your sense of familiarity at this gallery's threshold. Before you cross into the assemblage of queertopias, read these steps on how to find, enter, and define your own []-topias.

Step #1: []-topias

Walk into somewhere unfamiliar. Sense whether you are able to orient yourself. Sense your positionality. Feel what it is to be in a space that is devoid of familiarity. Feel the uncanny or perhaps eeriness of this sensation.

Move about this space. Take opportunities to stop and think: where is your body now, and what do you sense? What is unfamiliar to you?

Find yourself in a []-topia: a space with and without claim, one rich with history that has been erased and rewritten over time. A space devoid of YOU and your position, without impressions of your memories, ancestry, or history. []-topias are disorienting¹, unfamiliar and challenging to navigate.

My use of []-topia derives from its etymological origin, *Topos*, or a place/position you are in. The prefix before -topia defines how one orients themselves in that place; the prefix makes space into place. The term “place” originates from Greek *plateia hodos*, meaning

1 For the definition of disorientation and its methodological uses, see Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006).

“broad way;”² a pathway in space created over time and through persistent use by bodies. Bodies claim place within space, or Latin *spatium*, defined as room or area within a stretch of time.³ The body is consistently immersed in spatiotemporality with boundaries defined by architecture, objects, ideologies, and relations between other bodies. Place creates temporal pathways for the body to orient itself to. []-topias are cardinal points in space that reorient individuals toward spaces we can inhabit⁴, that expand identity. []-topias are places that exist when communities establish presence and, in turn, make place—whether that is home, a site of refuge, or a moment of celebration.

]-topias are formed by bodies coming into contact, an intimate and relational bond that evolves through a subject's positionality. Unfamiliar spaces can become navigation tools—they can aid you in navigating society, to make new of that which is familiar. In these ruptured perceptions, unfamiliarity with the familiar—what one may call the uncanny—shows us paths toward, or opportunities to deviate from, a multiplicity of possibilities.

Once space is claimed, and the body can orient itself, these []-topias transform space into place. Queertopias⁵ are the beginning of understanding the “in-between” worlds of no-place and some-place. In the gallery, you are immersed in Queertopic places.

2 “Place (n),” Online Etymology Dictionary, last modified June 30th, 2020, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/place>.

3 “Space (n),” Online Etymology Dictionary, last modified April 12th, 2023, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/space>.

4 For further reading on inhabitation and orienting oneself in spaces, see Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*, 51-63.

5 The term “Queertopia” expands upon and challenges José Esteban Muñoz's definition of queer space, which he sees as a collective understanding of queer space as “not-yet,” or just over the horizon; in other words, a form of Utopia. Read more in his introduction in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009): 11-18.

Queertopias are making new of the all-too-familiar and infamous “Utopia,”⁶ or places which do not exist, yet they intervene in the imagination. Abstract in nature, these places disorient our sense of familiarity. Those who create them guide us through worlds of alternative perspectives by immersing us into the unfamiliar.

Utopias can neither be claimed nor be a position in space; yet they make new of what we find familiar and subsequently desire. Desire drives Utopias to appear, although they remain at the peripheries of our collective imagination: novels, art, film, revolutions—they are objectives we strive to produce. Queer places are commonly seen as sites of hedonism, of the emotional human spirit par excellence. They are seen as places of pure and unadulterated erotic desire.

Queerness has always been a spatial question, of how one can access, of how to cross the threshold from normative space to one which has been queered, made “deviant,” or in “error.”⁷ Queertopias are ultimately familiarity-in-error: they invert those long-standing truths we’ve embodied, they take space where they were historically denied, and were actively erased or made fictitious by heteronormative gestures.

The unfamiliar—the disorienting—is a powerful tool to navigate spatial intervention. Queerness, or to be “queer,” means to slip, to deviate from conventional/normative orientations. Queertopias are not Utopic: they are actively produced by the intimate gestures of their inhabitants. They are places of inverting what is socially familiar through slippages and errors, of rupturing binaries⁸. They

6 I’m thinking here primarily of Thomas Moore’s 1516 classic, *Utopia*, where he outlines the rather ironic rules and hierarchical roles of the island’s inhabitants.

7 Legacy Russell defines error as a glitch unable to be defined until it is revealed. Errors point out unknowns and provide opportunities for them to be examined. To read more, see *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2020): 73-78.

8 Russell provides a phenomenal exploration into the relation between the body and its role in rupturing our Western binary understanding of gender and sexual roles in space. Queer bodies ultimately refuse binary roles. See more in

are occupied by bodies slipping and multiplying between places, creating pathways in their quest to find their familiar.

Queertopia is also an inversion of Michel Foucault’s Heterotopia⁹, queering in-between spaces to become places for marginalized folks to inhabit. This begins at the point of the subject and their orientation in space. Queer places gesture toward alternative ways of being.

Queertopias emerge from bodies: they are lands colliding, dreamscapes forming out of subconscious nebulas, crawling through windows and serving, inhabiting spaces produced through language. Fantasy realms, dreamscapes, and cyberspace are also []-topias, immersive environments which allow you to re-embodiment and/or multiply subjecthood. Queertopias are about simultaneously claiming past and future potentials of a space, about making new of the familiar.

Step #2: []-topic Gestures

Queertopias require the body to merge with space. Guided by collective and intimate gesture, the familiar is made anew. New pathways and future meanings of place are forged through the embrace of desire. Queertopias are sensorial gestures, ones which immerse your body into places within a space.

Art galleries are themselves []-topias, continually transformed by the artist’s intimate gestures that occupy them. They engulf your vision and haptic senses to retrace and redefine memory and experience. The artists throughout this exhibition have extended their own subject position into their artworks: each is its own Queertopia, layers of bodies intimately relating with one another to create an assemblage-like place. Complex and

Glitch Feminism, 63-68.

9 To read more into what classifies and determines a Heterotopic space over a Utopic one, see Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” in *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuite* (October 1984).

intersectional, these Queertopias are immersive, a gesture of reorientation toward new possibilities of understanding intersectional worlds.

These Queertopia worlds support orientation and navigation of place through uncanny signifiers and inverted historical references. Feminine and masculine, space and place, the righteous and the deviant—Queertopias are intersectional, pathways which fork and divert from heteronormative society. The threshold between the public and private, the certain and the uncertain, are blurred as queer intersectional bodies transform meaning, as they occupy this place alongside you.

Concepts like “home” and “familiar” are complicated for us queer folk. They produce heart-wrenching feelings as many of us are transient, forced to the peripheries of the underground and twilight worlds. As subjects simultaneously immersed in heteronormative space, yet cast to the peripheries of society, we queer folk find refuge in the thresholds between spaces. Thresholds collide body and place together to produce and reproduce new Queertopias. Many of these are created when we dance, when we protest, sing, make love, or hang out with friends in public places. These corporeal gestures ascribe sentimental value to already occupied places, such as the original architectural layout of homes. Bedrooms, kitchens—spaces regulated by gender now inverted by queer bodies and re-oriented through intimate gestures.

For me personally, Queertopias begin in bed: the space of desire and of the imagination. As a non-binary, genderfluid individual, my queer subjecthood transformed what was once the primary bedroom of my home into a sanctuary of queer spirituality. As I move through the space, the Queertopia expands when I gather my friends around the table for a potluck, or watching a movie with a lover. It is formed through gifts given, photographs plastered to my walls, and in conversations around the dining room table. In my turn-of-the-century Edwardian home in East Vancouver, the legacy of those who came before me, who occupied these rooms, still res-

onates. Queertopia is needed to transform the energy, and to allow my presence as a queer subject to take precedence.

Step #3: Building Queertopias

Queertopias begin at the body. You can create your own by disorienting yourself from your familiarity and make it new:

1. Notice your surroundings: what is familiar to you? Make it new. Flip objects upside-down; rip pages out of books. Undo order. In Queertopias, history and chronological time are the antagonists. Make new that meaning which is ascribed to objects that inhabit your place.
2. Notice your body: how is it occupying the []-topia? How is it oriented? What is your position as a subject? Disassociate yourself from your surroundings; make them uncanny, make them dream-like.
3. Re-orient yourself in your re-arranged []-topia. Reposition your body to rearrange its immersion in the []-topia and move around to uncover new meanings.
4. Cross the threshold between bodies and forge pathways through movement of your body. Form a []-topia.

The final step is to claim your newly made []-topia. With the everyday transformed, you have cultivated a new place that begins with your body, and the collective body of your community. You have pushed beyond a heteronormative path, allowing for unfamiliarity to flourish.

Step #4: []-topic Pathways

If places are pathways, how do we define where to establish points of contestation, disruption, and expansion? Queertopias allow

places to be disoriented into space once more, a space to inscribe new histories and uncover memories where they were once obfuscated.

When creating Queertopic pathways, you are spatially re-orienting your body through intimate gestures of memory, history, and positionality. These are defined by your body-as-place, one which is ephemeral, mobile, and ever-changing. *Topos*, or places, are now created through your gestures and body's (re)/(dis)orientation in space.

You now find yourself at the end of this text: where are you situated now as you read this final passage? Where is your []-topia? How will you re-orient yourself in the familiar, and what pathways will you establish along the way?

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Artwork Descriptions:

James Albers:

silly boy you 've been daydreaming again is a diptych showing the before and after process of the body queering familiar spaces of intimacy. James Albers has adorned her drag persona, Bangkok, exploring the space of a bedroom. First, she is seen perched over the railing of a wooden window frame, perched over the wooden railing with her backside up in the air, exposing herself. An air of eroticism is produced as she playfully falls into the room and out of the frame and viewer's sight. Through Bangkok's uninvited presence and space-taking gesture, the bedroom is in an active state of becoming-queer, a place of rest and privacy now taken by Bangkok's queer body.

Bangkok is then perched on the window frame, straddling the space of the window frame between the interior space and exterior world. Her legs open widely to showcase her being in a political act of exposure. She is an unreal and fantastical being, sporting large elf ears and is haloed in a soft, golden light from the waning day. Her corset has knick-knacks attached to it that she has collected from odd places and taken with her on her explorative journey through the bedroom. She looks down at the floor in search of more knick-knacks.

Amanda Amour-Lynx:

Land Is Body explores identity, cultural erasure, the colonized body and the impacts of urban development in a society which actively erases the presence of marginalized bodies. In Mi'kmaw worldview, MsIt No'kmaq translates to "all my relations," which acknowledges our connection to all things around us. How we care for the land is interrelated with how our bodies are cared for. As resource extraction, land dispossession, and environmental racism continue to impose upon Indigenous sovereignty, *Land Is Body* contends with the feelings of violence on the land as though it were happening to the self.

Existing outside of the landscape via ritual is a way that Amanda reclaims agency over their body, resisting systems of power that aim is to erase people such as Amanda.

Skite'kmujuawti derives from Mi'kmaw (Sipekne'katik) linguist Curtis Michael's explanation of how words are derived from their cosmologies. The suffix for the L'nusimk word for Milky Way is "road" (awti), while the prefix translates to ghost (skite'kmuj).

This work captures Amanda holding ceremony with themselves. *Skite'kmujuawti* illustrates the process of readying oneself for initiation into cultural practices while longing for community connection and cultural teachings within the constraints of isolation. Landscapes traipse between physical and temporal spaces: the spirit realms, imagination, visions and reality. Exposed vantage lines and paths reveal humility and transparency in incomplete learning processes as one brings spiritual teachings from alternate dimensions down to earth, challenging the animacy of space and activating states of wonder. *Skite'kmujuawti* is an imagining of delivered messages from animal and star beings.

The L'nuk have taken experimental measures to heal the community in a pandemic world, bringing ceremony into spectrums not previously conceived. As traditional ceremony is heavily based on physical gathering, some have challenged this by adapting to other means and nonphysical realms: throughout the pandemic, recent social media movements like social distance powwow.

Rylan Friday:

The Sound of You Collapsing is a semi-autobiographical short film that explores emotional health and self-care in queer relationships framed by the ongoing issues of toxic masculinity that often go unnoticed. It follows Noah, a gay, First Nations man unable to sleep as he lies in bed next to his partner, Connor. Equipped with a dreamcatcher as a representation of his inner medicine wheel, Noah is transported to a dream world shaped by ambient sound-

scapes and projections of his trauma. It reflects on his troubled relationship as he struggles to deal with Connor's narcotics addiction. Noah soon encounters a manifestation of Connor, who slowly breaks apart: although Noah attempts to piece him together, he realizes that by doing so, he is sacrificing his own well-being and must finally make the decision to put himself first before others.

The Sound of You Collapsing is a reflection of how the artist, Rylan Friday, was so enamored by these relationships that, like Noah, he completely forgot to look after myself. Rylan's own self-care is regimented through working out, eating healthy, and smudging with traditional medicines. As Rylan sees himself in Noah in his journey toward balance, this film acts as a goodbye letter to these previous friends and relationships.

Alex Gibson:

two masses posits queer space within the realm of the imagined and geological time. Considering place and queerness through technology, the work utilizes 3D scanned imagery of existing environments which "collide" with each other. Posing the question, "can my body expand like two masses colliding, and build itself from sediment and coral?" Gibson considers body and place speculatively in geological time. As the two masses meet, they pass through each other, and their edges synthesize a connection point. Referencing ecological disasters such as earthquakes, Gibson considers how land masses are formed over millennia, and seeks to envision the body as an island and potential site of queer strength and futurity.

Swan song of a bog body and *Unicorn, unicorn, unicorn, unicorn*, are reflections of Gibson's own storytelling gesture by synthesizing images and objects on a flatbed scanner to create new indexical relationships between queerness, archive, time, fantasy and kitsch. While rendered flat on a scanner bed, their forms create depth and alter perspective synonymous with gestures of queerness and mythmaking. While mythical creatures such as the unicorn

have become attributed to queer symbolism, its “rarity” is exposed here in numbers as it has been reduced to a kitsch figurine.

Queer Code:

Mementorium is an interactive, heartfelt story about trans* identity and belonging, told through a branching narrative in virtual reality. It is an active exploration to uncover memories of gender and sexuality bias inside “mementos” that transport the participant to a dreamlike environment. It allows participants to use their own gestures, to choose their own pathways through the story, through playful interactions, to transform their “mementorium” into a place of strength and belonging. *Mementorium* is an opportunity for participants to shape their own story and discover: “who can we become when we belong?”

Biographies

James Albers (they/he) is an emerging artist, curator, writer, organizer, performer and drag artist based in Vancouver on the stolen and ancestral lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixwh (Squamish), and səlilwətaʔɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) First Nations. In their recent endeavors, James is thinking through subjects like queer fantasy, sci-fi, virtuality, digitization, futurism, poetics, nostalgia, humour, embodiment, and spirituality. They are interested in exploring the queer potentials of revisionist histories and choose to believe in the magic of fiction. Recently, James has been thinking through the truth that a perfect lie may hold, and vice versa. They graduated from the department of Art History, Visual Art & Theory at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, with a double major in Visual Arts and Art History. During their final year, they were the Assistant Director of the Hatch Art Gallery, UBC's only student-run art space.

Amanda Amour Lynx (they/she/nek̓m) is a Two Spirit, neurodivergent, mixed urban L'nu (Mi'kmaw) interdisciplinary artist and facilitator. Lynx was born and grew up in Tiohtià:ke (Montreal) and is a member of Wagmatcook FN, and currently works and resides in Guelph, Ontario. Their art making is a hybridity of traditional l'nuk approaches with new and traditional art media guided by the Mi'kmaq principles netukulimk (sustainability) and etuaptmumk (two-eyed seeing). Lynx's artistic practice discusses land and relationality, environmental issues, navigating systems and societal structures, cultural and gender identity, (L'nui'smk) language resurgence, quantum and spiritual multiplicities. Their facilitation work focuses on designing community spaces committed to healthy Indigenous futurities guided by lateral love, accessibility and world-building. Their writing was published as part of grunt gallery's *Together Apart* anthology (2020), and revue esse (2020). Lynx also worked as program assistant at Xspace Cultural Centre. They most recently curated *Shapeshifters* at Beaver Hall Gallery (Toronto) as part of the annual Bi+ Arts Festival.

Rylan Friday (he/him) is a multi-faceted, award-winning filmmaker and curator from Cote First Nation, Saskatchewan who currently works and resides in Vancouver on the stolen and ancestral lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixwh (Squamish), and səlilwətaʔɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) First Nations. His focus is to bring honest representations to the LGBTQ2+ and Indigenous communities. He produced and implemented a peer-to-peer mentorship for Trevor Mack's debut feature, *Portraits From a Fire*. He recently won the Kevin Tierney Emerging Producer Award, CMPA Indie Screen Awards, Prime Time Ottawa 2022 and the Leo Award for Best Motion Picture for his efforts on Mack's debut feature. Rylan works include: *Terror/Forming* (2022) with plans of it becoming his debut feature film; *The Sound of You Collapsing* (2023); and, *Musk* (2023). Rylan has programmed for VIFF's Catalyst Mentorship Program, and curated the highly successful #Indigeneity series for Reel Causes. Rylan was also the lead curator for the Who We Are Indigenous film series in collaboration with VIFF and the Museum of Vancouver. He recently won the Kevin Tierney Emerging Producer Award, CMPA Indie Screen Awards, Prime Time Ottawa 2022 and the Leo Award for Best Motion Picture for his efforts on Mack's debut feature.

Alex Gibson (they/them) is a queer, non-binary Barbadian artist who currently lives and works in Vancouver on the stolen and ancestral lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səlilwətaʔɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) First Nations. Gibson is a MFA candidate at the University of British Columbia, whose practice explores transgressive queer identities in relation to their Caribbean background. As an immigrant genderfluid artist, their practice focuses on queer identity, space and temporality, and how these relate to memory and place, time and geography, experience and ecosystem. Their work has been exhibited at Capture Photography Festival (Vancouver), Wil Aballe Art Projects (Vancouver), Tomato Mouse (New York), Number 3 Gallery (Vancouver), Caribbean Fine Arts Fair (Bridgetown, Barbados), Artists Alliance Barbados (Bridgetown, Barbados), RBC Media Gallery (Vancouver).

Queer Code is a design and research-based studio that designs, develops, and researches new models of code and coding with queer and trans experiences at the forefront. They explore computing at the intersections of critical theory, virtual reality, complexity, and interactive art. Leading team members for the exhibited project, *Mementorium*, include Dylan Paré, Scout Windsor, and John Craig.

Nathan (Nate) Clark (they/ them) is a genderfluid nonbinary second year candidate in the Masters of Art History in Critical Curatorial Studies at the University of British Columbia, where they also received their Bachelors in Art History and Museum Anthropology. Nathan currently works and resides in Vancouver on the stolen and ancestral lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish), and səl̓ílwətaʔɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) First Nations. Nathan's research focus is on the phenomenology and narrative poetics of virtual reality and digital immersive installations and the importance of embodied, affective relations between the viewer and the work of art. They also research digital queerscapes and the disembodiment of users within cyberspaces, and how artists are responding to this "Wild West" of new mediums and artistic processes. The body is the primary point of concern in understanding how we interact with this new "ontological turn." Nathan will be pursuing their PhD in Art History at the University of Toronto in Fall 2023."

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Or Gallery respectfully acknowledges its presence on the unceded territory of the xwməθkwəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and Səl̓ílwətaʔɬ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) First Nations, who have stewarded this land since time immemorial.

Director-Curator: Jenn Jackson

Programme Coordinator: Jamie Ward

Gallery Assistant: Gloria Wong

Installation Technician: Patrick Bravo / Bravo Fine Art Services

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