

AS IN FUTURES: Hazel Meyer and Atheana Picha Vanessa Kwan

*It is the first day of 2024 and I am writing this:
I want to talk about aliveness as a practice
I want to talk about refusals and interruptions and the messiness of our bodies,
our desires, our stories and our imaginations
I want to talk about how a single line through history is a lie, and a lonely story
to tell (much less live)*

T, AS IN TIME E, AS IN EVER is about gathering and desire. Moreover, it's about this moment that we're in, complex as it is, and all the moments before it—and those yet to pass. Hazel Meyer and Atheana Picha's practices draw upon a rare and expert engagement with time, and their pairing in this exhibition is a proposition to consider our relationship with time differently, to draw from it and reshape it to find what we need.

Let me try and explain.

Standing search terms

Hazel Meyer's *WEEPING CONCRETE* takes the form of a 17 foot tall scaffold and is both a sculpture and a stage. The current installation is an adaptation of a multi-storey public artwork that was originally performed at The Bentway in Toronto in 2022. As a site-specific commission *WEEPING CONCRETE* addressed, among other things, subcultural and queer histories, dalliances, resistances and protests (known, archival and inferred) of the city. The Bentway is a venue with many aspirations for art and engagement, a cavernous space beneath the Gardiner Expressway, itself a major conduit in a complex city-planned system. The work within this grandeur (I imagine to myself, having only viewed the performance in video clips) expresses a kind of orality, skirting along the edges of architecture and an urban plan and a city's history, more conversational and slippery than etched in stone or popular memory.

During the performances, white Tyvek banners hold a series of hand-written texts that sail from ceiling to floor; words legible as a descending, scrolling address:

A PIECE OF HOT RUBBER
BASKETBALLS, BALLOONS
& TIRED LUNGS
SWEAT FROM SEX
BEHIND THAT BUSH
BEFORE
IT BECAME
A CONDO

A before-now and an after-then (and maybe a never-was) is evident in the artist's prose-poem; as is a body and a not-body (and maybe an also-body). There is an intentional multiplicity in the writing, a people's history in many leaky and desiring parts that exist alongside the more 'presentation-ready' narratives of city life. The text for this Vancouver-based iteration has been adapted; Meyer draws on a variety of local archives and protest signs, including the banners being dropped from overpasses and viaducts this past weekend and likely next; the history is alive as I write.

It's January 5th, 2024, or it was when I wrote that line. This coming weekend (I'm writing this note on January 12th, 2024) there will be kites flying, tracing a different vertical trail, ground to sky, an opposite scroll.

Objects—running shoes, bags of citrus, flattened boxes—are slung over poles, and a debris chute hugs the side of the structure. A trio of fans circulate air from the platforms. The scaffold is itself a skeletal support system, sistered temporarily to the space, materials in, waste out. When not being performed, the texts are presented as images on an ancient Kodak Ektagaphic Slide Projector, back-lit handwritten texts on a white background.

AN EVICTION OF
HOMES
AN EVACUATION
OF BOWELS

A RUSHING
A GUSHING
TOWARDS SEWERS &
SPHINCTERS
SEWING BANNERS

If you're currently in the space, you might hear it operating: a percussive soundtrack that goes fli-flip (slide moves from hard plastic sleeve to light chamber and out again) ka-chunk (hard plastic carousel advances) shusssssszhshhhh (fan cools the obsolescent bulb). Oscillating fans exhale and hum like breaths in a crowd; air whooshes soundlessly in the building's HVAC system.

*I want to talk about the beauty of gathering, and gathering, and gathering and
the smell and sound and texture of what that is
I want to talk about scouring websites and archives for what you need
I want to talk about the wisdom to look elsewhere and keep looking*

Speaking with Meyer about scaffolds is a loving conversation. Her collection of scaffold images is extensive, much of it drawn from standing searches in news-image archive auction sites on eBay: SCAFFOLD, LESBIAN, AIDS, QUILT, CURTAINS, DRAPES, PROTEST, MARBLE, QUARRY, PUPPETS. Revisiting the search every few weeks or so, the spoils are diverse: grainy black and white images from publications spanning decades. The common throughline: temporary scaffold frameworks crawl up permanent structures, and always present is the ingenuity of humans and their quest to shore up, fix or otherwise alter the environment around them, through necessity or work order. The images and Meyer's enduring attraction for them speak about the practice of finding and building what is needed, in spite of systems that can't or won't support us as we are.

A SMELL FROM THE STREET
YOUR PITS
LIKE CHERRIES
BLOSSOMING
RIPENING
ON A CROWDED BUS
OUR COLLECTIVE PERFUME
STENCH

It's a joyful thing, actually, this archival funk, not as in depression (though that can be part of it), but as in a delightful rankness; a collective whiff.

If they were alive right now, we'd be besties.

Atheana Picha's work in the gallery is a series of nine coloured pencil drawings. Created between 2018 and 2023, they constitute a practice that has grown quietly alongside the more materially remarkable works in the artists' oeuvre. I say 'remarkable' because Picha works across materials—including weaving, painting, printmaking and carving—that carry with them a cultural lineage and a presentational weight that pencil drawing in general does not. Picha is deeply focused on cultural knowledge through material practice; her development has been shaped at every stage by the mentorship of Coast Salish elders, uncles, aunties and knowledge keepers including Debra Sparrow, Aaron Nelson-Moody, Shane Pointe and others. Speaking to Picha is replete with references to this ongoing intergenerational learning. The drawings occupy a unique space in this practice, clearly embedded in lineages and cultural knowledge, but materially looser and functionally more solitary than, say, an apprenticed process in carving or weaving. Relatives from the river and the sea are gathered together in this body of work: *Two Eagles* (2021), *Sturgeons* (2022), *Frog Moon* (2023), *Sculpin* (2023) and others show a progression in the artists' process through the medium. It's here amidst this chorus of voices that I want to sit with Picha's specific way of working relationally, and through time.

Being in the studio with her is both a singular (as in rare) and collective experience. She speaks about her work as one part of a vast multiplicity. The chorus is evident everywhere: surfaces are saturated with the objects of making and research, cabinets are intricately packed with belongings, flat files are stacked with prints, drawings and works in progress, a bookshelf teeters with rare and lovingly acquired reference material. A loom, blankets, baskets. These loops and warps are not only material, they are perceptual and temporal, and they provide a ground from which to observe how the artist gathers knowledge.

I want to talk about hard edges and the weave, as one

I want to talk about time as a material (how it can be crumpled, looped, hung, held, stretched, creased, stippled and etched and we could be the more fulfilled for that)

I want to talk about ceremony in all its forms

During one visit she shows me a collection of Nuuchahnulth baskets, stored in a large cedar chest. Some are over 100 years old. Many of them hold other baskets and belongings, and as we open them up one by one there are beads, tools, and fabrics inside. One basket interior in particular is richly coloured, the details of the maker's skill and design fully present. This richness of dye and weave is belied by a faded and monochrome exterior; it speaks of its advanced age and the moment of its creation, all at once. Picha expertly articulates her relationship to interiors and exteriors, not only as a function of who gets to learn from the teachings these belongings hold (as in, what is kept from view in institutional collections), but as a fundamental negotiation of engaging with knowledge across time. Turning over, looking under and being with are integral parts of this process, and some things are not for everyone to see. Her work develops alongside a constant, passionate gathering and sitting with the pieces in her collection, absorbing the complexity of what they have to say.

The collection is vast. It's been brought together through a varied practice of online searches and auctions, trades, gifting and happenstance—all of it is meaningful within the span of Picha's practice. A single excerpt: A jean jacket is slung over a loom, the back panel design is mid-90s era Joe David, with the original labels. A Depop score, it's good fashion, a beloved item, a teacher and a subtle flex. If you see her wearing it at an opening, trust and believe she knows its value. lykyk.

In Picha's most recent drawings *Split Rockfish* and *Sculpin* (both 2023) there is something very specific in the mark-making that reminds me of knife-finishing¹—the practice of honing the final layer of a carving to give it the texture of both the tool and the hand. As a repeated gesture it is the product of knowledge gleaned and taught, and it is also wholly the artists' own. Can we think of time as material? And can we think about what it means to work with it (becoming slowly expert) to shape the forms that we need?

*I want to talk about loving asynchronously
I want to talk about how you build up (from something that looks like nothing, or
at least feels that way) what you need from across time and space
I want to talk about a chorus of voices and how you carry them along with you*

The performances of *WEEPING CONCRETE* open with a half-hour playlist during which the audience can arrive, find their seat, mill, chat, hum, wait. Three people, Dana, Rhye and Hazel are already on the top platform of the scaffold, paying no mind to what is happening below. They eat pistachios and sunflower seeds, disposing of the seeds over the edge of their perch. The music stops and the banners begin their slow unfurling.² In the presence of an archive, it is a practice at being together, in this moment. It is a practice of waiting and looking, chatting, ready for something that hasn't happened yet.

1 Thank you to Joshua Prescott who introduced me to this term when I met him at Atheana's studio.

2 Thank you to Hazel for contributing the descriptions here.