



LET ME TAKE YOU THERE
MONA FILIP

The stories we tell about the world – how it came to be, what forces influence its course, and what our place is in its ecosystem – articulate who we are as much as who we could be. Passed on through many generations, these beliefs, legends, or parables never belong to the past; their teachings continue their work in the present as they keep showing us how we can forge boundless paths forward, constantly rebuilding the world. Even if sometimes forgotten and lost, they linger in our inherited subconscious and may be recalled intuitively through our receptive bodies.

Let me take you there is an exhibition that brings together a group of Canadian artists whose practices delve into ancestral histories and knowledge accessed through oral traditions, folklore, spiritual practices, and embodied awareness to envision possible futures. Inspired by cultural stories of creation, transformation, and rebirth, as well as instinctively conceived rituals of empathy and repair, these artists propose new ways of being in community and a rethinking of social and natural systems, interpersonal relations, and beyond-human connections. Through their work, they extend an invitation to collectively dream the world anew.

Reconsidering old stories for our current times, some of these artists appeal to ancient deities for guidance in facing urgent concerns. Others braid myth and autobiography, reimagining legendary tricksters, shape-shifters, and chimeras to explore adaptation and belonging. Many of them draw on their own subjectivities to articulate new spiritual ways of communing across cultures and species.

Notions of transformation, separation, and attachment underline Marigold Santos's investigations of identity and home through the lens of displacement. Embracing fragmentation and multiplicity as intrinsic to a sense of self formed in diasporic in-betweenness, Santos's work is steeped in the Filipino folktales she grew up with after immigrating with her family from Manila to Canada as a child. Nourished by

the fertile imaginary of these tales, Santos developed an art practice that entwines lived experience with storytelling, creating her own mythologies to counter reductive, hegemonic narratives. Central to her creative universe is the Aswang, a shape-shifting creature, subject of countless Filipino myths, stories, and artistic expressions. Santos's paintings in the exhibition, *shroud (in threadbare light) 1 and 2* (2020) reference this eerie character who originated in pre-Hispanicized tribal societies as a shamanic figure of a medicine woman. Colonial influences distorted the Aswang into a dangerous, gruesome character depicted as a beautiful woman by day and a flesh-eating witch by night, who severs and discards her lower half while her upper body roams and preys upon the vulnerable. The two parts must re-join by dawn, generating a cycle of cleaving apart and together that functions as a ritual of survival.

Santos reclaims the Aswang as a symbol of migration, adaptation, and resilience. Majestically staged within atmospheric landscapes steeped in the hazy light of dusk – the transformational hour – the Aswangs float in a liminal state of unfurling and reconstituting. Background elements evoke both geological formations of Alberta's Badlands as well as memories of the Philippines, creating an uncanny space where reality and recollection merge. The towering figures seem to materialize from their surroundings, weaving air, light, darkness, and flora into solid form. Celebrating an



Marigold Santos, *shroud (in threadbare light) 1*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist, and Matthew Kingston and Michelle Bilodeau.



Clovis-Alexandre Desvarieux, *Bwa Kayiman*, 2019.
Courtesy of the artist and Le Musée d'art actuel / Département des invisibles (MAADI).

evanescent, constantly transforming self-in-process, Santos's retellings of the Aswang posit survival through separation and re-merging – a vision of identity that is empoweringly fluid, accumulative, and plural.

Similarly defining a sense of self sustained by ancestral spiritual practices, Haitian-Canadian artist Clovis-Alexandre Desvarieux addresses existential concepts through the prisms of mythology and history. Part of *Mitoloji*, Desvarieux's ongoing series focused on Haitian divine beings and their lore, the four large paintings included in the exhibition unfold their significant narratives in vibrant colours and powerful strokes.

The grand composition *Bwa Kayiman* (2019) celebrates the August 14, 1791 ceremony in St-Domingue that is believed to have launched the Haitian revolution leading to independence from French rule thirteen years later. Oral accounts as well as historical records inspired the scene depicting this legendary event. Portrayed on the left is Dutty Boukman, one of the early leaders of the revolution, dancing with a machete and a sacred asson rattle. A houngan (chief Vodou

priest) and army general, he officiated the ceremony and recited what became known as the Boukman Prayer, galvanizing solidarity around the freedom cause. In the middle of the painting, a woman is holding the corpse of a young man, referencing a Catholic pietà pose. During this type of animist ceremony based on African and Taino traditions now known as Haitian Vodou, a blood sacrifice is customarily offered to the loas – gods and spirits. Historical accounts tell that a black pig known as Kochon Mawon was to be sacrificed in this gathering; however, a young man named Jean-Baptiste Vixamar Legrand, possessed by Damballah, the spirit of wisdom, bounty, and creation, offered his own blood instead. Holding him in her arms is Cécile Fatiman, the manbo (priestess) who officiated alongside Boukman, incarnating the Èzili Dantò, the great mother warrior spirit. On the right is manbo Edaïse, said to be inhabited by Ogou Feray, spirit of ironsmiths, war, and fire, who gathered and distributed the sacrificial blood to the assembly. Finally, in the foreground to the right is the sacred black pig, whose place Legrand took in sacrifice. The green backdrop of the composition alludes to



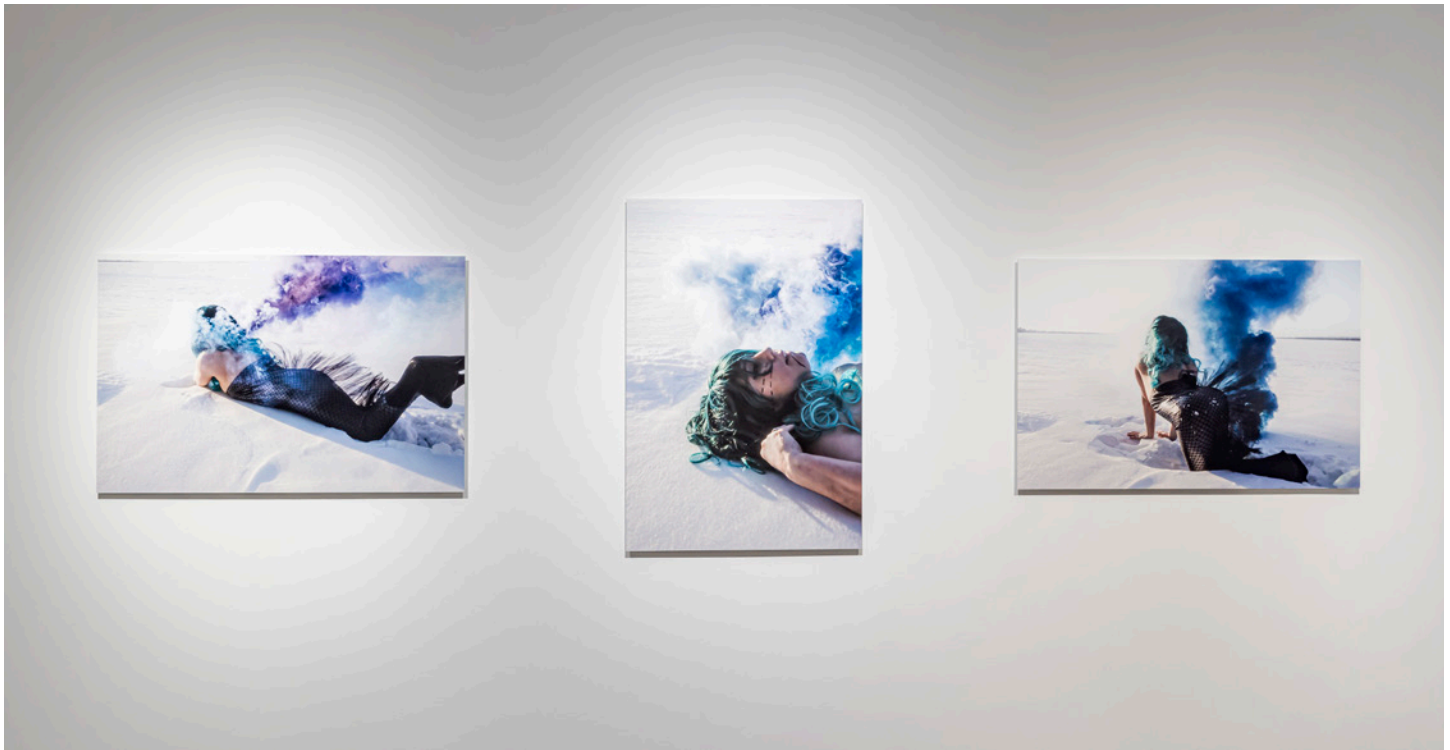
(L) Clovis-Alexandre Desvarieux, *Majisyen*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Hugues Charbonneau.
 (R) Clovis-Alexandre Desvarieux, *Tanbouryè*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist, and Kaitlin Trilwood and Simon Beaulieu.

the leaves of mapou, an indigenous tree of Haiti considered to be the dwelling of the spirits. Framing the painting and dominating the composition, the colours red and black reference the revolutionary army as well as secret societies linked with the organization of this event.

Next to *Bwa Kayiman* are two slightly smaller paintings, and a third one presides in the gallery lobby. *Majisyen* (2020) invokes the Simbi family of loa known to be sacred messengers of other spirits, as well as the protectors of magicians; closely linked with water, they can assist in accomplishing ritual and spiritual work. The painting celebrates Simbi Makaya, a great sorcerer summoned by the artist to help fulfill the magic of hope. *Tanbouryè* (2022) reflects on the loss of a close being and a missed chance to pay homage, expressing gratitude for the benevolence of a soul watching over as they cross to the other side. The manifestation of a tambourine man onto the canvas echoes the drum rolls that revive spirits and open the doors of Ginen (Paradise) to welcome the dead in the realm of the ancestors. Also alluding to Bob Dylan's song *Mr. Tambourine*

Man, Tanbouryè comes to represent the rhythm of the soul connecting us with our ancestors to embody their wisdom. Finally, *Mater Salvatoris* (2022) depicts the loa Èzili Dantò, the elder feminine spirit that represents womanhood. She is a goddess of love, protector of mothers and hard-working women, seen as the warrior matriarch ready to go to great lengths to defend her children. Desvarieux sees her as the protector of the physical environment, the great Mother Earth; painting her is a way to pray for Haiti and the world to find salvation through the sacredness in all matter.

A powerful feminine divinity also inspires the work of Inuk artist Katherine Takpannie. In her stunning photographs, Takpannie captures political gestures and staged performances in both natural and urban environments, focusing primarily on intimate portraits of women. She honours the Inuit worldview through her lens, using the medium to reclaim her identity, interpret her lived experiences, and assert a vision strongly grounded in social accountability and unity. In her *Sedna* series from 2021, Takpannie references the figure of the



Katherine Takpannie, (L-R) *Sedna* | ᐱᓄᓄ #6, 2021; *Sedna* | ᐱᓄᓄ #10, 2021; *Sedna* | ᐱᓄᓄ #4, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Olga Korper Gallery.

ancient sea goddess, entreating her wisdom and wrath to steer against contemporary threats to Indigenous ways of life. Many versions of the Inuit legend of Sedna exist from Greenland to Alaska, describing her as the matriarch of the deep, mother of all marine mammals. Whether the daughter of a goddess or a creator-god, at times a giant, a dissatisfied, or tricked young woman rejecting marriage, or a mistreated orphan, Sedna is either kidnapped, deceived, or unjustly accused, ultimately thrown to certain death into angry waters. Instead of her demise, transformation awaits at the bottom of the sea, where Sedna finds her eternal dwelling, protecting and commanding the animals that spring from her brutally severed limbs – the seals, walruses, and whales hunted by Inuit for nourishment. Humans depend on her goodwill, as she can prevent animals from coming to their hunting sites when angered, causing scarcity and starvation. A shaman then travels to wash and comb her hair, while the community prays and presents offerings to placate and compel Sedna to release animals from the ocean depths to the hunters.

Takpannie's series poses the question, "What will Sedna do when she hears the seismic testing?" These aggressive, rapid airgun blasts into the seafloor intended to measure echoes and map offshore oil and gas reserves, profoundly disturb, injure, and kill marine wildlife. In Takpannie's images, a solitary mermaid-like figure lies on a white expanse of ice stretching to the horizon. Veiled in swirls of blue, grey, and purple smoke – perhaps her laboured breath, perhaps a distress signal – she listens anxiously to the frozen surface of the ocean. Referencing her ancestral epistemology, Takpannie's work denounces the violent disruption of Inuit homelands through the relentless exploitation of resources and extractive pursuits of colonialism. Warning us of the consequences of Sedna's anger and retaliation, Takpannie's work conveys a plea to re-balance our interdependent ecosystem.

Driven by a parallel urge to dissuade human greed and elicit care for our endangered environment, Edmonton-based artist Emily Jan creates intricate installations that immerse viewers into hyper-realistic compositions evocative of natural museum



Emily Jan, detail, *Kali Yuga I: Footsteps / Traces des pas*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.



Eve Tagny, installation view, (L-R) *Shelters for ancient grains*, 2022; *Sutures*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Cooper Cole Gallery.

displays. Crafted from a variety of materials that either mimic or integrate natural textures by combining both handmade and gleaned flora and fauna, she builds her sculptural tableaux based on scientific and journalistic research, as well as ancient legends and literary fiction. A mix of factual and fantastic, Jan's utterly believable creatures spark both empathy and alarm, moving us to envision the ominous worlds they foreshadow.

Centered on a monstrous chimera emerging as a twisted mass of entangled biological species, *Kali Yuga I: Footsteps / Traces des pas* (2022) alludes to the unintended consequences of humankind's passage through the world and the cumulative disasters we leave behind, beckoning the end times. Jan's hybrid fiend prowls across a devastated marshy landscape, leaving a trail of damage as it moves – muddy footsteps encrusted with quagga mussels, invasive plants, and toxins. This slimy wreckage, like primordial ooze, begins to generate new adaptable forms of life that seem destined to survive humanity's downfall. In Hindu mythology, Kali Yuga – our current era – is the age of darkness, of the demonic,

signalling the destruction of the world and the eventual rise of a new cycle of creation. The mass extinctions and disastrous climate changes seen in our time align with this ancient idea of apocalypse bringing about both annihilation and eventual regeneration. Hopeful as much as cautionary, Jan's work invites us to visualize our indelible impact on the eco-system, relying on our capacity for curiosity and wonder to elicit an emotional response conducive to a repositioning of relationships within our damaged yet still poignantly beautiful world.

Searching for ways to reconcile and heal the broken bond with our environment, Montreal-based Eve Tagny envisions spiritual, embodied expressions of grief and resilience in correlation with nature's rhythms, cycles, and materiality. Her interdisciplinary practice centres corporeal gesture in articulating poignant investigations of gardens and disrupted landscapes as fluid sites where the impact of colonial histories and power dynamics on personal and collective memory can be evidenced. Thoroughly researched, Tagny's works expose the hegemony of Western ideas of

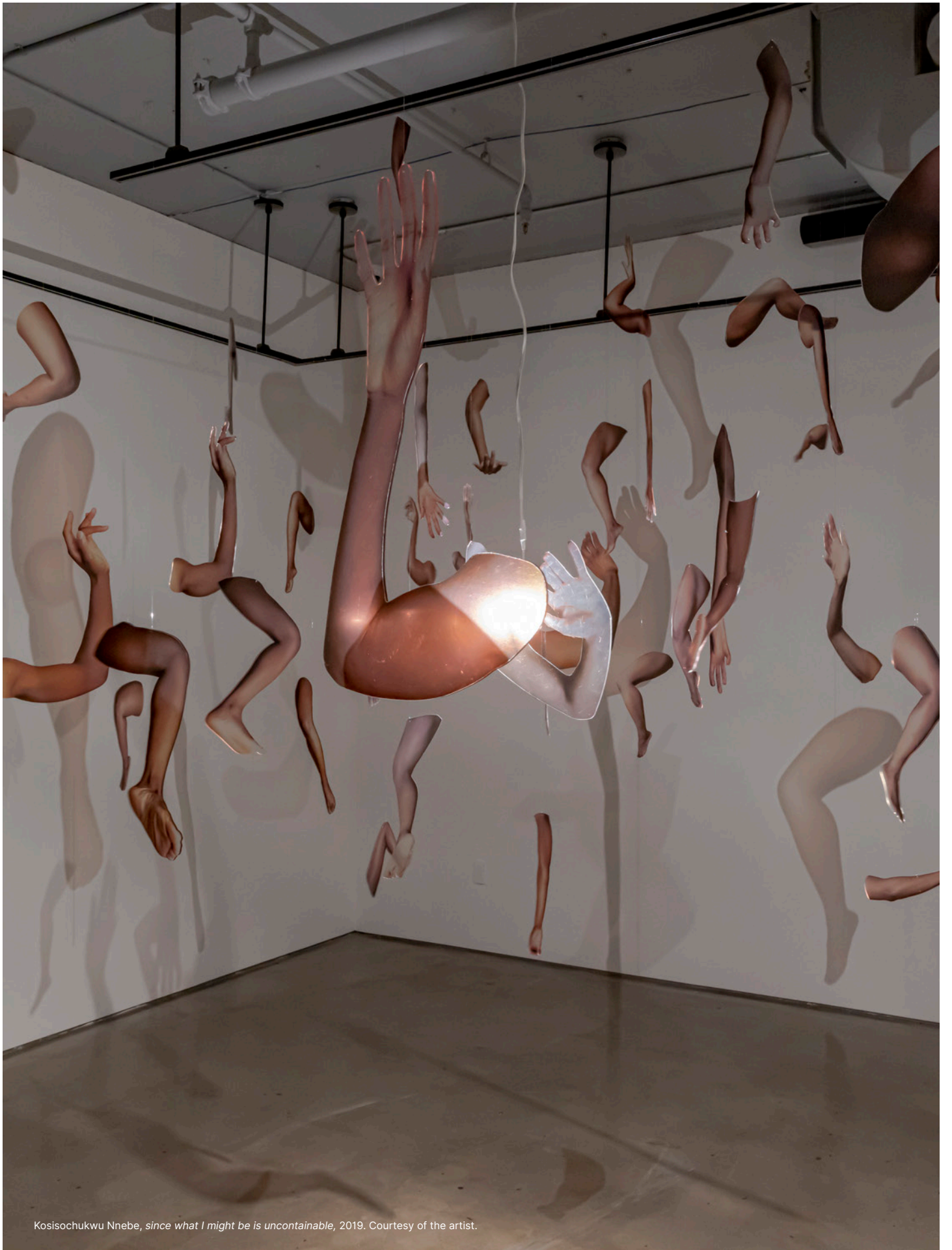
nature, subverting their hold to reconsider notions of autonomy, labour, and desire. Through physical presence, intentionality, and sensitive movement, she conceives rituals of commemoration, interpretation, or transmission that counter the oppressive legacies underlying our contemporary assumptions.

In *Shelters for ancient grains* (2022), Tagny performs a sequence of tender acts striving to commune with construction vestiges and sparse resurgent flora on the former site of the brick manufacturing oven at the Villa Lena in Tuscany. Finding symbolic purpose for both construction and biological debris, she seeks to recover lost connections within this abandoned site of dwelling fabrication, nurturing self and nature back into an organic, symbiotic relation. Similar intentions activate Tagny's gestures in *Sutures* (2022), where her responsive rituals attune to adjacent sites of overlap between the built, controlled, and natural environments. Using her body to absorb, manifest, and transmit care and support between human and more-than-human entities, she positions herself as a conduit for mutual sustenance. Inside the gallery, in front of the monitors displaying Tagny's two videos, a discreet semi-circle of oat seeds and long grass strewn on the concrete floor interrupt the sterility of the space, bringing in the link with the ecological system to which we all belong. Rousing the ancestral memory of the body, Tagny intimates a ritual of mutually restorative togetherness.

Examining the possibility of wholeness in the context of human society and interpersonal relations fraught with prejudice and misconception, Nigerian-Canadian artist Kosisochukwu Nnebe envisions an inner unity made possible through fragmentation and reserve. Inspired by postcolonial theorists Frantz Fanon and Édouard Glissant, Nnebe's practice is invested in unraveling the process of racialization and re-thinking the politics of Black visibility. Striving to untangle racial constructs, her multimedia installation, *since what I might be is uncontainable* (2019)

hints at the contradictions of race as lived experience and reveals the infinitely multifaceted reality of diasporic being. The work centres on the body as the physical core confronting and processing paradoxical realities. As a model for navigating between fixed identities and existential contradictions, Nnebe's work calls into being the figure of Anansi – a trickster god in Ashanti folklore who often takes the shape of a spider, which gives him his name. Anansi is the god of stories, wisdom, and deception central to West African, African American, and West Indian folktales originating in Ghana and transmitted to the Caribbean by way of the transatlantic slave trade. Anansi is known for his ability to outsmart and triumph over powerful opponents through his cunning, creativity, and wit, becoming a symbol of resistance and survival among North American Black communities because of his ability to turn tables on oppressors.

In Nnebe's installation, cut-out images of willowy limbs printed on Plexiglass float in the gallery space suspended from the ceiling, gravitating around a small light fixture that sends their projections across the room's walls. Air flow and visitor movements keeps them in continuous motion, choreographing an ever-changing dance of shadows and luminous reflections. A thunderous soundtrack bathes the space in powerful, echoing pronouncements. Extracted from the 1995 documentary *Black is... Black Ain't* by Marlon Riggs – an exploration of the irreducible complexities of African American identity expressions – the audio composition that Nnebe created by layering and editing booming bursts of speech articulates a call and response between a multiplicity of voices, reminiscent of both gospel choirs and political rallies. Oscillating in and out of sight, between presence and absence, the figure at the core of Nnebe's work – herself as Anansi the spider – shimmers on the verge of appearing or disappearing, refusing to be fixed, teasing yet eluding the viewer, in a constant state of evanescence. Rather than absolute definitions, the trickster offers slippage and simultaneity: between moments



Kosisochukwu Nnebe, *since what I might be is uncontainable*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.



Kosisochukwu Nnebe, video still, *Ndi nna nnanyi na ezuko maka na anyi zukoro / Imaaqa, suvulivut katittut katisimagannuk / The ancestors are meeting because we have met*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

of agency and vulnerability, violence and protection, hyper visibility and invisibility. As the artist alludes, to be a trickster is to be uncontainable, unknowable, and free to remake oneself, using fragmentation as a strategy for survival and preservation of one's fullness.

Nnebe's video performance *Ndi nna nnanyi na ezuko maka na anyi zukoro / Imaaqa, suvulivut katittut katisimagannuk / The ancestors are meeting because we have met* (2022) features a conversation between herself and Katherine Takpannie. Attempting to conduct a dialogue in their respective native languages, Igbo and Inuktitut, the two artists reveal the deep loss and cultural trauma caused by colonial suppression of Indigenous language – key instrument of inter-generational transmission. Nnebe and Takpannie's halting attempts to speak their mother tongue evidence language not only as a site of ongoing colonial violence but also as a hopeful space for healing through inter-cultural kinship. Connecting distinct historic and political contexts, the work highlights a lineage of imperialism, calling forward a different conceptual framework

for understanding Black-Indigenous relations otherwise, grounded in an exploration of intimacies between Turtle Island and the African continent. Enacting recovery and restitution through dialogic relationality, the work approaches language reclamation through the mediation of the artists' ancestors – both living, in the form of the parental figures they turn to for translation, and those already transitioned – offering a model for envisioning shared Black and Indigenous futures in solidarity.

Returning to the figure of the trickster, Montreal-based artist Hea R. Kim creates a playful yet laborious installation, *Sugary Islands* (2023), which articulates a dream world where mythological, spiritual, and illusory mindscapes intermingle. Drawing inspiration from her childhood and diasporic experiences, South Korean cultural heritage, literary references, and a variety of other sources, Kim thoughtfully meshes the fantastical with the mundane, the heroic with the cute, and the bubbly of popular culture with deeper social concerns. Her artistic technique equally mixes media employing fibres, papier-mâché, and



Hea R. Kim, *Sugary Islands*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist.

ceramics that she combines with mass-produced objects and found materials. Engaging the philosophical limits of both craft and art, as well as reality and fantasy, Kim intentionally stretches established boundaries, bringing subversive notions into sustained harmony.

Recurrent in her bubbly installations, the rabbit takes central place as a wise trickster who has the ability to open secret worlds. In many East Asian stories, the rabbit evades death through quick wit and deception. In Western literary tales like *Alice in Wonderland*, the rabbit and the hare can lead to mysterious lands or offer moral fables. Prevalent in Korean folktales, the rabbit is seen to inhabit the full moon preparing rice cakes – symbolic of bountiful harvest and dreams – or constantly mashing an elixir of life for the immortals and medicine for the mortals. The legend goes back to Buddhist lore where a fox, a monkey, and a rabbit have their faith tested one day by the Emperor of the Heavens. Disguised as a beggar, he asks the animals for something to eat. Each animal goes to gather food, and the fox returns with fish, the monkey brings fruit, and the rabbit

some grass. Considering the grass offering too modest, the rabbit decides to light it on fire and jumps in as nourishment for the beggar. Deeply moved by this sacrifice, the Emperor takes the rabbit to heaven as guardian of the moon.

Kim's whimsical sculptures convey a longing for adventure and experimentation, placing herself as an ever-curious explorer of fantastic worlds amidst which she may float following the rabbit guide, untethered by the pressures and restrictions that daunted her growing up. Bringing together her immigrant experiences of cultural synchronicities with reminiscences of Korean city life where sacred sites and urban modernity intermingle, Kim constructs a fluid realm of endless becoming.

Reimagining cultural archetypes, myths, and symbols to engage themes of dispersion and transcendence, Alberta-based artist Miruna Drăgan creates works that offer themselves as tools for meta/physics. In her infinitely expandable rug work, *Visitation, VII & VIII* (2023), Drăgan reinterprets a symbolic geometric motif prevalent in Romanian crafts,



Miruna Drăgan, *Visitation, VII & VIII*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist.

expanding on the cross-cultural allegory of the tree of life and entwining myth and science into a living ecosystem of dyes and fibres. The image of the tree as axis mundi – a channel connecting all aspects of life and death from the underworld to the heavens – appears around the globe, predating Christianity and the Roman conquest of the Dacian people living before the common era on what is now the territory of Romania. Ever since, folk crafts have captured related spiritual and popular beliefs in material forms, from embroidered clothing to decorative rugs, clay bowls, painted porches, and carved wooden gates, infusing the sacred into the everyday. A central element in Romanian legends and folklore, the mythical tree is said to contain within its fruit or sap a miraculous elixir that can provide eternal life and youth. A symbol of the constantly regenerating, living Cosmos, the tree signifies the cyclic continuum of existence.

Hand-woven with wool and cotton on indigo-dyed warp using a standing loom built into a log wall of her house, Drăgan's rug reflects an ongoing attempt to learn and reconnect with ancestral practices,

shaping a dialogue between her cultural heritage and her contemporary, diasporic reality. Applying physics and mathematics to conceive the tree of life as a rhizomatic network of relations based on the Fibonacci numeric sequence, Drăgan's pattern expands in all directions across potentially multiplying carpets, allowing for constant reassembling and expansion that may either follow the design or separate pieces into different groupings. Partly using coloured yarn and partly white cotton that she later over-dyes, Drăgan relinquishes control, trusting and enabling elements of chance to determine the final outcome. Exploring optic tensions, RGB colours are woven in, while CMYK colours are mixed directly onto the woven rug like a poured painting. The logic of the work relies on a combination of predetermined structure and chaotic risk suggestive of the workings of life itself. Creating an enchanted object that connects past and present cosmologies, Drăgan weaves the world anew, using the process of domesticizing as an act of connection and receptiveness.



Sara Khan, (L-R) *Performance on the Terrace – Bullheaded*, 2020; *Performance on the Terrace*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

Interweaving reality and imagination through composition and collage, Sara Khan also examines her experiences of immigration and displacement to investigate the emotional bonds that connect her to people, places, and histories forming her familial heritage. Born in Birmingham, England and raised in Lahore, Pakistan, Khan immigrated to Canada after marriage, establishing her life and artistic practice in Vancouver. Part of a recent body of work titled *Roshni Key Teh Mein (In the Fold of Light)* (2020), the five watercolours in the exhibition immerse viewers into a magical reality where the fantastic heightens the everyday. Khan's handling of both material and metaphor shapes visual landscapes of absence and presence, attraction and repulsion, beauty and strangeness. Her layered imagery morphs familiar experiences into uncanny scenes and highlight the mystery in the mundane. Hybrid anthropomorphic creatures with animal heads and horns, humans riding flower-bodied crocodiles, and armies of tiny colourful monsters collide, dance, or negotiate domestic spaces, springing from lush gardens and materializing from thin air.

Constantly redefining her self in response to changing contexts of adoptive cultures and family relations, Khan draws from the realm of fiction and mythology to process and reconcile the diffusion of identity. Navigating between what is missing, what is recalled, and what is present in her world now, she articulates a delicate balance in the space between past and present realities where her alter egos, nemeses, and sidekicks accompany her tightrope performance.

Unlocking many wondrous journeys for the viewer, *Let me take you there* is an invitation to look at the world and its endlessly renewing prospects through the eyes of artists. Through their enticing works, they ask us to conceive new ways of relating responsively, repairing society, and shaping a more interconnected reality. Deploying stories as devices of defiance, dialogue, forewarning, and recovery, these artists propose abundantly generative models for worlding through storytelling. Let us listen and follow them to new foundations.



This essay accompanies the exhibition
Let me take you there, at the Doris McCarthy
Gallery from May 13 - July 22, 2023.

Mona Filip is Curator at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto. Originally from Bucharest, Romania, Filip received her BFA from the Corcoran School of Art, Washington DC, and her MFA from SUNY at Buffalo. Previously Director/Curator of the Koffler Gallery, she led the organization's visual art program for fifteen years, producing over forty exhibitions and off-site projects. She developed first public gallery shows in Toronto of prominent Canadian artists such as Ghazaleh Avarzamani, Sameer Farooq, Karen Tam, and José Luis Torres, and first Canadian exhibitions of acclaimed international artists Raphaël Zarka (France) and Christian Hidaka (UK), Sigalit Landau (Israel), Esther Shalev-Gerz (France), Isabel Rocamora (UK/Spain), Iara Freiberg (Brazil/Argentina) Adi Nes (Israel), and Joshua Neustein (USA).

PREVIOUS PAGE: Installation views, *Let me take you there*. Photos by Toni Hafkenscheid.
COVER: Katherine Takpannie, *Sedna* | ٤٠٠. #10, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Olga Korper Gallery.

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