

How to Read a Vessel

September 10, 2021 - January 9, 2022

Curated by Tara Bursey, Suzanne Carte, Ness Lee, Su-Ying Lee, and Christine Saly-Chapman

Featuring: Marissa Y Alexander, Althea Balmes, Anong Beam, Francisca Benítez, Tamyka Bullen, Nicole Clouston, Bojana Coklyat, Rania El Mugammar, Sameer Farooq, Shannon Finnegan, Naoko Fukumaru, Shaya Ishaq, Beatriz Paz Jiménez, Joon Hee Kim, Myung-Sun Kim, Ivy Knight, Vanessa Kwan, Ness Lee, Pamila Matharu, Primal Studio, Noe Martínez, Mark Menjivar, Peter Morin, Lisa Myers, Haruko Okano, Karla Rivera, Jamie Ross, Sin Wai Kin, Stephanie Singh, Nurielle Stern, Amina Z. Suhrwardy, Isola Tong, Camille Turner, Adam Williams, Kendra Yee, Z'otz* Collective, and work from over 550 AGB Permanent Collection artists.

"We've all heard about the sticks and spears and swords, the things to bash and poke and hit with, the long, hard things, but we have not heard about the things to put things in, the container for the thing contained. That is a new story."

- Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, London: Ignota, 2019, page 29.

Over the last 38 years, the Art Gallery of Burlington (AGB) has amassed the largest comprehensive collection of contemporary Canadian ceramics in the world. Totalling over 4,000 works, the collection ranges from functional ware to sculptural installations.

How to Read a Vessel is an experimental exhibition and communal site of learning that openly discusses the challenges and excitement of holding, caring for, and exhibiting this object-based, craft-forward permanent collection, while continuing to develop a vision that incorporates critical social practice at its core.

The assembly of programs and projects by artists and curators Suzanne Carte, Tara Bursey, Ness Lee, Su-Ying Lee, Myung-Sun Kim, Ivy Knight, and Christine Saly-Chapman has been conceived of in response to two key texts: Elizabeth Fisher's "Carrier Bag Theory of

Evolution,” which proposes that the first tool was a container, rather than a weapon, thereby feminizing concepts of early society; and, by extension, Ursula K. Le Guin's “Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” which applies the container approach to stories, arguing for an expansion of the types of narratives and outcomes that are made visible beyond the finality of a singular weapon-wielding hero.

With these texts as a guiding force, the exhibition examines how a collection of vessels speaks to an unaccounted and unrecognized history of women’s ingenuity and labour in the arts. *How to Read a Vessel* unpacks the matriarchal history of craft production and the AGB’s own institutional beginnings by bringing its ceramic vessels out of their vaults and into the public space, alongside newly commissioned pieces and an array of international artworks. It is a non-linear, queer exhibition exploring the vessel as language, lineage, containment, nourishment, and archive. Within it, art objects become metaphors, or mnemonic devices, to discuss the colonial constructs of collections and their histories.

The Hero as a Bottle: A Stringent Re-evaluation

Su-Ying Lee

Le Guin’s carrier bag is a holder, conduit, and symbol, encouraging a space for the inclusion of more stories with different, unpredictable, and continuing trajectories. The AGB’s collection, and others, have similar potential. Each piece is accompanied by a story, but like many collections created under normative conditions, the narrative is limited. The collection vault and the institution itself have the capacity to hold multitudes, but to meaningfully think through collecting institutions, we must overturn the container, empty it, and examine its contents.

Empty it, break it, fix it, fill it (or not).

“When Virginia Woolf was planning the book that ended up as *Three Guineas*, she wrote a heading in her notebook, ‘Glossary’; she had thought of reinventing English according to a new plan, in order to tell a different story. One of the entries in this glossary is *heroism*, defined as ‘botulism.’ And *hero*, in Woolf’s dictionary, is ‘bottle.’”

- Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (London: Ignota, 2019): 28.

This section of Le Guin’s essay reminds readers that we invented language and continue to do so. Users give language its legitimacy and power. The idea is an antidote to language gatekeepers who narrow representation by excluding stories that they don’t understand. Our languages and our worldviews are interconnected. We risk ignorance when we dismiss “other” Englishes, inventive users, adaptors, adopters, and languages we don’t comprehend. To push against monocultural ideas of meaning-making, literacy, and fluency, works that complicate language have been included in *How to Read a Vessel*.

The practice of collecting cultural objects can’t be separated from the events of acquisition, the power to acquire, designations of belonging, practices of alienation, and the spaces taken for the purposes of hoarding and sequestering—these are interwoven with the story of collections. Cultural institutions have legitimized imperial destruction for empire-building through collections. Professor, curator, filmmaker, and theorist Ariella Aïsha Azoulay argues that people whose worlds have been destroyed by centuries of imperialism have the right to live near the objects that have been plundered from their cultures.^[1]

Instead, we criminalize those that migrate towards their very own objects; we criminalize those who manage survival under imperialism, colonization, and plunder. Museums and prisons have been “naturalized” to the point of societal detachment from their violent foundations. Prisons, collections, and the production of worlds are linked through some of

the works in the exhibition, reminding us that long-standing institutional collection and display practices have larger implications.

In recognition of the discussions on institutions, language, and criminalization contained in this project, the AGB is raising funds towards the purchase of books for the library at the Grand Valley Institution for Women in Kitchener, Ontario.

Queering the collection

Ness Lee

To queer a collection is to examine the collection and question it—to assume the role as an agitator¹, to understand how the collection came to be, and to ask questions. What does it reflect? In what ways does it perpetuate and exclude? And who gets to decide?

Through exhibiting AGB's vast collection of contemporary Canadian ceramics, we are able to experience the collection in its entirety. But also, we can have a better understanding of the collection's development, and how it offers a clearer picture of the creative values being upheld in the institutional narratives of the Canadian history of ceramics.

In the spirit of “messiness” and to further examine the various intersections in which acquisitions were made, visual clusters of the vessels are dispersed within the gallery, to simulate a more experiential understanding of the collection in newly considered categorizations. This visual sorting facilitates the often-limited representation of intersectional identities and voices that more accurately represent contemporary Canadian ceramic history.

¹ Be Oakley, *Queering the Collection*, GenderFail Press, 2019

While this challenges how we view the collection, it is also important to acknowledge the valuable role the Burlington Potters Guild plays in the future-building of the AGB. With their wealth of historical knowledge and skills, they are a powerful voice in the institution. The guild nurtures and promotes growth within arts and crafts movements and supports institutional accountability to address issues of intersectionality and inclusivity for future generations, both in the gallery and within the collection.

Tisane

Suzanne Carte

Embedded in How to Read a Vessel is tisane, an ongoing lecture series on craft, social relations, and queering institutional practices. The series invites academics, writers, and critical thinkers to engage in discussions ranging from art and utility to collections and care, over a mug of tea. As we connect and drink, conversations will address the entrenched, institutional norms that are intrinsically linked to colonialism, capitalism, and neoliberalism and listen to artists, academics, and activists speak to anti-racism, anti-productivity, anti-consumption, and anti-assimilist paradigms. It is a multi-layered project recognizing the restorative potential of art and craft while using the healing power of botanical medicines.

For these conversations, herbalist-healers Amina Suhrwardy, Jamie Ross, and Isola Tong have concocted tisane recipes designed to fortify and strengthen or relax and relieve both presenters and audiences. The recommended herbs have been grown onsite in the newly constructed AGB Community Garden and are harvested for the tisane.

The homegrown, herbal brew is consumed out of a mug commissioned from local artists, Marissa Y Alexander, Joon Hee Kim, Ness Lee, Nurielle Stern, and Adam Williams and served out of a teapot by Karla Rivera. A significant section of the AGB's permanent collection is

dedicated to mugs. Holding 201 vessels from over 130 artists, the sub-section represents the most common of the functional wares. AGB Curator Emeritus, Jonathan Smith, explains that the mug, “is the one object that almost every ceramist creates at some point. It is the simplest compound object - made up of a vessel and an attached handle...”

Upon entering the gallery or vault, such functional craft pieces are often stripped of their initial purpose and anointed a second life, that of Art. Although the possibility always exists for works in a collection to be used, the intention for potential use needs to be first addressed at the point of entry. For Tisane, this new series of artists’ mugs have been specifically earmarked for use. Over the course of the How to Read a Vessel exhibition, audiences, members and contributing guests all drink with the intention that their mugs be accepted into the collection (2022), with the additional provision that they remain available for future use. The utility of the pieces does not remove or question their status as artwork, but rather reenforces it with every physical engagement.

Through these repeated drinking acts, the process of connecting with art and archives is queered, as these encounters transgress how one is to engage with a work of art in a gallery (no touching/looking only) and proper art handling protocol. Can new works taken into the collection be marked for dual use as both art and instrument? Can the act of using the artwork re-energize the object and dismantle the artificial boundaries between archive and article? In troubling these dualities, Tisane asks us to consider the very act of collecting objects in a public institution, while inciting discussion around equity, care, preservation, and activation.

rituals for belonging

Myung-Sun Kim

rituals for belonging is a series of ceramic vessels and collaborative rituals function as a container for time and space to hold conversations and connections. The patterns on the

ceramic work reference beeswax tessellation as a metaphor to think about systems, lineage, and kinship. Playful interventions into the patterns disrupt their uniform structures and create new images and formations. *Rituals for belonging* explores the malleability and non-linear evolution of belonging to our lineages (both familial and non-familial), cultural inheritance, the diaspora, and relationship between our body and memory.

Artists and writers Althea Balmes, Vanessa Kwan, Pamila Matharu, Peter Morin, Lisa Myers, Haruko Okano, and Camille Turner contributed an intimate collection of rituals to accompany the vessels. These rituals offer possible cultural inheritances to put forward into the future, carrying our ways of expressing and embodying compassion for each other. The rituals include a meditation, a recipe, a score (non/sonic), affirmations, a call to action, or other forms of instructions to elicit the act of belonging or the possibility for remediation of the body, the mind, and the healing of all our relations. These rituals become scores for each visitor, which they can reinterpret and respond to as a performance.

rituals for belonging was developed and produced through the AGB Artist-In-Residency program, and is an ongoing project. Visitors are invited to take ritual cards as they wish.

The Vault as a Vessel

Christine Saly-Chapman

“A book holds words. Words hold things. They bear meanings. A novel is a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us.”

– Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (London: Ignota, 2019): 34.

The AGB’s vault takes on the role of a book-like vessel through its physical containment of work, and its ability to allow relationships to form between pieces. The goal of the collection is to tell the story of contemporary Canadian ceramics in all its parts. Each piece

holds multiple meanings: from tangible techniques and methods of production, to a visual representation of social and political commentary and can be arranged in various combinations to tell different narratives of Canadian ceramics and the Canadian experience.

This exhibition calls on works to highlight the shifts in AGB's collecting mandate over the years and to celebrate the growth of the collection from a regional to national anthology of stories. Beginning with local and Ontario-based artists from the initial donation of works from Herbert O. Bunt in the 1980s, to the inclusion of international works by principal ceramists such as Bernard Leach (England) and Shoji Hamada (Japan) in the late 2000s, the AGB's permanent collection illustrates the ever-developing tale of contemporary Canadian ceramics.

Jugs & Cans: A Reaping
Ivy Knight

Jugs & Cans: A Reaping is a collection of empty vessels; jugs, cans, bottles and boxes, collected from women in food across Canada and the United States since 2019. In gathering the vessels, she records the women's lived experiences in the food industry. The containers hold the stories and struggles of the cooks, bakers, food writers, restaurateurs and servers who opened, emptied, and used them. In the exchange of vessels and accounts she gives their stories a new life. Ivy enrobes the objects in brightly coloured yarn. These crocheted vestments hold the donor's voiced realities in a protective shield of craft.

As museums and galleries face the rising demand for repatriation, racial justice, and economic parity, the food industry has begun to question the colonialism, racism, and hetero-patriarchal systems of oppression in kitchen culture. As a writer, journalist, and programmer Ivy has built a career advocating for better working conditions. This collection of over 150 containers becomes another form of editorial research. Her interview methodology uncovers truths of the systems inherent in the restaurant scene

and points to gendered inequities, uncovers sexual violence, and humanizes and normalizes recovery narratives.

House of the Three-Time Loser

Ivy Knight

House of the Three-Time Loser is an exhibition housed in a vintage fiberglass 1974 Trillium Trailer parked outside of the AGB's Lakeshore entrance. Inspired by Joyce Weiland, *Strangers with Candy's* Jerri Blank, and the World Famous Crochet Museum in Joshua Tree, the installation looks at the three ways in which women are seen to lose at life: craftwork, housework, and aging. In heteropatriarchal society, crafting is not seen as valuable art, housekeeping and childcare are not seen as legitimate work, and relevance is stripped from women once they hit middle age. Over 40, cleaning house, raising kids, and expressing herself through crafts; welcome to the house of the three-time loser.

The Things We Carry

Tara Bursey

What things do you carry with you? How do the things we carry—from immaterial ancestral or familial knowledge to material collections and forged matter—serve as generative tools for understanding and creation? And how do they stem from (or serve us in the face of) adversity, or crisis?

This education program borrows from a book of the same name that explores the emotional labour of university level writing teachers [1] who work to help students write (and live) against the backdrop of personal and collective trauma. Similarly, as artists and arts workers, we are living and working through a web of crises. The lifetime of experiences

and discoveries we collect allow us to practice against the odds. When we share what we know as educators and artists in public, we pass on the things we carry for better or for worse, democratizing and perpetuating knowledge, and adding our “tools” to the Commons.

Drawing from these ideas, *The Things We Carry* features a series of talks and workshops facilitated by Althea Balmes, Anong Beam of Beam Paints, Nicole Clouston, Stephanie Singh, Kendra Yee, and Z'otz* Collective (Nahúm Flores, Erik Jerezano, and Ilyana Martínez). It uses the form and concept of the vessel as a departure point to explore ecological stewardship, storytelling, ritual, collectivism, health and safety, and self/community care through hands-on encounters with ceramics, comics, paper-making, drawing and painting. These workshops position learning and creativity as a means of dialogue and resilience.

[1] *The Things We Carry: Strategies for Recognizing and Negotiating Emotional Labor in Writing Program Administration*. Edited by Courtney Adams Wooten, Jacob Babb, Kristi Murray Costello, and Kate Navickas. 2020

Acknowledgements

Exhibition and program assistance: Selin Kahramanoglu and Jasmine Mander

Exhibition Installation: Chris Blanchenot, Nicholas Breton, Nick Chomyshyn, Alexandria Nelson, and Grayson Richards

Studio Technicians-Educators: Heather Kuzyk and Michelle Lynn

Outreach partners: Reach Out Centre for Kids (ROCK), Positive Space Network (PSN), and Joseph Brant Hospital

Designers: Osman Bari, Paul Cavanaugh, and Selin Kahramanoglu

Editor: Daniella Sanader

Photographers: Jaclyn Patterson, Stacey Newman, and Kat Williams

The AGB is generously supported by the Ontario Arts Council, Ontario Trillium Foundation, and the Canada Council for the Arts. Thank you to the Pieczonka Family Foundation Fund and Dan Lawrie Family Foundation for their generous donations. The AGB Community Garden is supported by the Government of Canada's Healthy Communities Initiative.

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Biographies

Myung-Sun Kim is an interdisciplinary artist and a cultural programmer. Kim's work explores ideas around foodways, silenced histories, fiction, memory, resilience, and community care. She has presented her work across North America and in Finland, including the Art Gallery of Ontario, MOCA Toronto, FADO Performance Art Centre, and Plug In ICA. She has recently completed her Fellowship with the Toronto Arts Council's Leaders Lab in collaboration with the Banff Centre. Currently, she is the Assistant Curator of Public Programming & Learning at the Toronto Biennial of Art.

Ivy Knight is a regular contributor at the *New York Times*, *Food & Wine*, *Playboy*, and *Condé Nast* and has been a *Vice* correspondent since 2013. During her career she

has interviewed everyone from Anthony Bourdain to Miranda July. She was nominated for the Landsberg Award for her investigative work with the *Globe and Mail* at the height of the Me Too movement. She has produced and hosted events for Munchies, Food Network, and Arts & Crafts Productions, where she has featured a diverse array of guests from competitive hot dog eater Takeru Kobayashi, to *New York Times* bestselling author Sheila Heti, activist/comedian Jacq the Stripper, and New Yorker cartoonist Liana Finck. Prior to all this, she spent a decade working in restaurant kitchens and lived to tell the tale.

Ness Lee draws upon history and personal narratives to create tender and surreal illustrations, paintings, sculptures, and installations. Exploring states of mind during intimate stages of vulnerability, Lee's work takes form as an effort in seeking comfort, forgiveness, and desire for an end of a self-perpetuated state. Based in Toronto, their work has been featured at the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, the Art Gallery of Hamilton, Art Toronto, as well as galleries in Boston, Los Angeles, New York, Montreal, and Toronto. They are currently represented by Patel Gallery.

Su-Ying Lee is an independent curator and has also worked in institutions as Assistant Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (MOCCA), Curator in Residence at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, and Assistant Curator at the Art Gallery of Mississauga. She received a master's degree in Curatorial Studies at the University of Toronto and is an alumnus of the Toronto Arts Council/Banff Centre's Cultural Leaders Lab. Her projects have taken place across Canada, in Hong Kong, and Mexico City. She is co-curator of the third Kamias Triennial, which took place in Quezon City, Metro Manila in February 2020.

She lives in *Toronto, Canada, the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River. Toronto continues to be the meeting

place and home to many Indigenous people from across **Turtle Island. She is grateful to have the opportunity to live and work on this land.

*Tkaronto (Mohawk)/Taranton (Wendat)/Toronto (settler colonial)

**Turtle Island is a name that many Indigenous people use for North America

[1] <https://www.e-flux.com/video/404821/ariela-asha-azoulay-nbsp-un-documented-unlearning-imperial-plunder/>