

Large Text

THE COUNTER/SELF

Curated by Mona Filip

January 11–March 25, 2023

Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

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Works by 2Fik, Helio Eudoro,
Julius Poncelet Manapul, Meryl McMaster,
Sasha Shevchenko, Adrian Stimson,
Stacey Tyrell, Laakkuluk Williamson Bathory,
and Jamie Griffiths

Art
Museum

THE COUNTER/SELF

Navigating the complexities of selfhood, agency, and representation, artists transform their appearance and stage complex images, videos, and installations that expose and disrupt prejudices with regards to gender, race, ethnicity, and nationhood. Informed by personal and cultural histories entwined within the artists' life experiences, their counter/selves advance divergent perspectives that upend deceptive national legacies and social expectations.

Our Supporters

We gratefully acknowledge operating support from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Toronto Arts Council, and the Ontario Arts Council, with additional project support from Yvonne and David Fleck, Debra Campbell, Janice Lewis, Catherine Barbaro and Anthony Grossi, Judy and Craig Jarvis, Jane L. Thompson and Tim Murphy.

Exhibition Essay

To a certain extent, every self is performative – a cast of characters we can summon or shape to serve our needs as we face the world. We each contain potential multitudes that can express or withhold different sides of ourselves, adapt to specific contexts, determine or respond to a boundless range of human interactions, surmount or succumb to inner drives and outside pressures. Navigating the complexities of selfhood, agency and representation, this exhibition brings together a group of Canadian artists who create and embody imaginative alter egos to examine, perform and subvert identity constructs. Transforming their appearance and staging complex images, videos and installations, they expose and disrupt prejudices with regards to gender, race, ethnicity and nationhood. Informed by personal and cultural histories entwined within the artists' life experiences, their counter/selves advance divergent perspectives that undercut deceptive national legacies and social expectations.

A member of the Siksika Nation, Adrian Stimson unsettles colonial narratives through humour and counter-memory, confronting historical oppression with fierce irreverence. Shattering stereotypes through transformative gestures melding real and fictionalized notions, Buffalo Boy and the Shaman Exterminator are two recurring, intertwined alter-egos central to Stimson's performance work. Derived from the artist's ancestral worldview and honouring the centrality of the bison to Blackfoot spirituality and survival, they function as devices to dislocate, dispel and alter entrenched oppressive outlooks. Upending colonial nostalgia, Stimson's

personas bring forth absented narratives, creating space to shape a new reality.

With similar strategies of dismantling colonial creeds, Stacey Tyrell examines identity, race and heritage in the context of post-colonial societies and the Caribbean Diaspora. In her series *Pour La Victoire* (2015-17), she transforms her physical appearance through make-up and costume to pose as allegorical personifications of European and North American nations. Tyrell's images perform a radical subversion, substituting her racialized body for the Eurocentric ideal, any signs of difference concealed. An irreconcilable disjunction lies beneath these symbols of nationhood, unmasking an effort to protect privilege and power under the cover of lies. Tyrell further transforms her appearance in *Mistress and Slave* (2018) to highlight opposing sides of her dual ancestry, Caribbean and European. Creating a provocative image of contrasting selves, she lays bare socially constructed racial concepts and challenges the pervasive fiction of whiteness.

Julius Poncelet Manapul's triptych *Whitewashed Bakla in the Presence of the Rice Queen* (2017) evokes acts of self-transformation, erasure of difference, and ornamental representation of Filipino queer identities under a whitewashing, homonormative gaze. The paper costume of the Rice Queen, adorned with gay porn cutouts and a demon mask of Asian influence, references Spanish royal garments, while the two flanking figures combine Indigenous Ifugao, Igorot and Ilocano attire, designed from paper templates of butterflies indigenous to the Philippines, crafted in turn from images of gay porn. The figures are framed by patterns composed from ads for skin-whitening products, blending

with queered butterfly motifs. Inhabiting both colonized and colonizer personas that tackle the Spanish dominion over the Philippines' Indigenous populations, Manapul examines the multi-layered displacement caused by colonialism, sexual normativity, and Eurocentric hegemony.

Exploring related concerns in a Québécois context, 2Fik deploys a group of recurring characters stemming from his experiences and inner tensions, deftly dismantling stereotypes. Born in Paris to a Moroccan Muslim family, he moved to Montreal in 2003, finding an environment that inspired him to examine identity and its socio-political ramifications. 2Fik's performance as his main alter-ego, Ludmilla-Mary – a stylish, gender-bending character sporting a hijab and an abundant beard – asks viewers to confront their apprehensions and biases. Challenging cultural and social norms, Ludmilla-Mary strolls silently through public spaces while raising questions about difference, otherness and belonging, as captured in the *Fanion* (2019) panels. In a related series produced in Matane, she wanders the rural Québec landscape alone, searching for an elusive connection to her environment. Evoking a loneliness that may seem either sought as respite or inflicted by social rejection, the images remain ambiguous.

Informed by her nêhiyaw (Plains Cree), British and Dutch ancestry, Meryl McMaster's work uses intricate props, sculptural garments and performance to create contemplative images that invite introspection. She brings viewers along into a journey of reflection, examining the inextricable entanglements of the self with the land, lineage, history, culture, and the more-than-human world. In her prints

from the series *As Immense As The Sky* (2019), the artist, spurred by the urgency to address our collective impact upon the environment, seeks wisdom in places of ancestral life and community and shares her understanding through a transformative, embodied process, articulating an urgent call to protect and strengthen the precarious ecological balance with the world around us.

Equally focused on ancestral histories, Laakkuluk Williamson Bathory (Inuk) and Jamie Griffiths (Canada-UK) expose the colonial influence that perpetuates inequity for Inuit in their own homelands. In their work *White Liar and the Known Shore: Frobisher and the Queen* (2021), the two collaborating artists based in Iqaluit examine the impact of European incursions on Nunavut, adopting the personas of Sir Martin Frobisher and Queen Elizabeth I. Griffiths embodies the British explorer all dressed in white, exposing him as a White Liar upholding the fallacies of those in power. Williamson Bathory performs Queen Elizabeth I, donning white face to mimic her famous make-up while alluding to whitened bones – an Inuit mark of respect for ancestors. Her red and black flagstaff (colours significant to uajaerneq – Greenlandic mask dance), Frobisher’s hat and a piece of his “fool’s gold” complete the installation. The concept of Terra Nullius, the Doctrine of Discovery, and Elizabeth’s naming of the South Baffin Island as “Meta Incognita” (The Unknown Shore), established a fictional reality that allowed explorers to callously claim Indigenous lands.

Brazilian-Canadian artist Helio Eudoro investigates the layers that envelop and reveal aspects of the self related to gender, sexuality, body image, diasporic experience and social

exclusion. His *Mantos* (2017-21) are a series of sculptures, performances and installations made from deconstructed pieces of clothing stripped of associations with class, gender, sexuality or body size. They reframe garments as a fluid tissue freed from the pressures of industry and society, restoring and releasing the body. The sumptuous ceremonial robe in *Manto N°5 – BATTLE AGAINST DESTINY – Moirai's Fate Armour* (2021) is a stand-in for the body before God on Judgment Day. The elements composing the vestment reference a multiplicity of rituals and roles, genders and sexualities.

With a similar intention to protect and mend, Sasha Shevchenko's work stems from her experience of displacement as a Ukrainian immigrant. Her iterative installation *Twice Bound, Once removed, Born Quick, Born Tangled*, (2021–22) is an object-based reflection on imagination as a tool for diasporic becoming. The work centres on a fragile alter-ego, Lyusterko – meaning “little mirror” – who gradually emerges within the displays, taking shape at the cusp of presence and absence. Materializing from the fragments, Lyusterko begins to articulate new origin stories, creating spaces of healing. Her recursive apparitions become a tribute to resilient hope, to trans-locality, and to persistent creation in times of tragedy that feel timeless.

Audacious or enigmatic, probing power structures, asserting belonging, or obscuring presence, the counter/selves reclaim space, protect the vulnerable, and reveal the fallacies of dominant discourses, counteracting their harmful sways. In all their incarnations, they epitomize resilience, resistance and renewal.

Public Programming

Opening Reception

Wednesday, January 11, 6pm–8pm

University of Toronto Art Centre

Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

Celebrate the opening of *Conceptions of White* at the University of Toronto Art Centre in University College and *THE COUNTER/SELF* at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery in Hart House.

Curatorial Tour with Mona Filip

Saturday, January 28, 2pm–4pm

Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

Join Mona Filip for an in-depth curatorial tour examining the themes and artistic strategies in the new exhibition, *THE COUNTER/SELF*.

All programs are free and open to all. For more information and to register, visit artmuseum.utoronto.ca/programs/

Visiting the Art Museum

Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

7 Hart House Circle
Toronto, Ontario M5S 3H3
416-978-8398

University of Toronto Art Centre

15 King's College Circle
Toronto, Ontario M5S 3H7
416-978-1838

Hours

Tuesday	Noon–5pm
Wednesday	Noon–8pm
Thursday	Noon–5pm
Friday	Noon–5pm
Saturday	Noon–5pm
Sunday	Closed
Monday	Closed

Closed on statutory holidays. For information about class tours and group bookings, contact artmuseum@utoronto.ca

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