

Large Text

acts of preservation / acts of decay

Curated by Erin Storus

May 3–31, 2023

Clark Quadrangle, University College

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Works by Marli Davis, Shannon Garden-Smith, and Sara Maston

Art
Museum

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This exhibition is produced as part of the requirements for the MVS degree in Curatorial Studies at the John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design, University of Toronto.

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In our natural ecosystem, decomposition and decay play an essential role in the breakdown of organic matter, recycling it and making its elements newly available to other organisms. Without these processes of change, the world would overflow with plant, animal, and human remains. New growth would also decline, since nutrients would remain locked up and unavailable in dead forms that resist rot. Decay and its impacts on virtually all aspects of life are considered in their various forms by artists Marli Davis, Shannon Garden-Smith, and Sara Maston in this site-specific exhibition, *acts of preservation / acts of decay*, in the courtyard space adjacent to the Art Museum at the University of Toronto. Invoking the tension between preservation and decay, the project draws attention to the University College courtyard and museums more generally as sites at once carefully maintained and susceptible to the decomposing force of the natural environment.

In *Spirit Pool; Ecologies of Ancestryship* - 侘寂, Davis asks: when home and body decay, do interconnected and kindred narratives disappear too? Resisting traditional archival processes, she uses the physical decay of her DNA and familial archives to culture new growth, manifested as primordial bio-materials. Davis uses science and spirituality to navigate her fragmented multicultural heritage in an installation where commemorative ritual and corporal matter become a hybrid archive. Implementing ancient Japanese cultural heritage through bathing and cleansing rituals (*Onsen* - *Tsukubai* - *Misogi Harae*), tea ceremonies (*Sado*/

Chado/Chanoyu - Wabi/Sabi), sacred shrines and temples (*Chinju no mori - Jinja - Karesansui*), and traditional paper making (*Washi*), Davis enacts her inherited knowledge, unspoken cultural narratives, and ancestral histories within decay. The resulting ceremonial space is infused with her DNA—a trace of her predecessors—and re-grows lineal narratives and cultivates transgenerational kinships. The methodical decomposition of this installation simulates the (non-)preservation of intangible cultural knowledges through the continuous transformation of cross-generational cultural narratives.

Working across sculpture, installation, and photography, Garden-Smith examines the contradictory nature of gelatin in her work *Blinds* (diptych for University College). Made from highly processed animal bones and tendons, gelatin promotes preservation not only by extending the lives of foodstuffs but also as a substrate of photography, an archive-oriented practice. Yet as an organic material, gelatin will inevitably change shape and break down when ingested or exposed to sun, rain, or snow. Its range of uses suggests a relationship to the human body and how a body responds to aliveness, time, and its environment. Garden-Smith considers this relationship by embedding in her gelatin sculptures pieces of jewellery and hair ornaments collected from friends and acquaintances. These ornaments, once worn by their previous owners, gesture to a kind of embodied intimacy, provoking a consideration of the human relationship to preserving bodies—our bodies, or another's.

Maston's *the hoof goes in, the hoof goes out* presents a pool adorned with the cast footprints of various animal

visitors such as heron, beaver, coyote, deer, goose, and fox. Remnants of meals, shells, bones, and other ecological detritus are assembled within a continuously evolving ecological site. A clay offering vessel, an array of recycled wasp's nests containing bird seed, and what Maston refers to as "ghost currency" mark the transition into springtime, a period when decay is necessary to enable new growth. Through a slow process of transformation, Maston's ecological installation reveals a liveliness hibernating through the long winter months. As animal visitors feed, seeds will drop into the pool below and eventually sprout, nourished by decay. These processes of becoming, decaying, and dying indicate the life-giving capacity of interspecies exchange, presenting an opportunity for human audiences to consider cycles of degeneration and regeneration in the natural environment.

If decay is inevitable, can we have a more thoughtful consideration of where it occurs and who and what it affects? When must preservation make space for decay, and when, if ever, must it not?

About the Curator

Erin Storus is an independent curator and artist based in Toronto/Tkaronto, the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit. Currently completing a Master of Visual Studies in Curatorial Studies at the University of Toronto, Erin's curatorial practice is variously informed by investigations into ephemerality, decay, world-building, and spectacle. She curated a series of outdoor group art exhibitions entitled *Garden Variety* in her backyard in Summer 2021 and Summer 2022; a solo show entitled *Rosalie Lam: Cholon, Not Forgotten* at the John B. Aird Gallery in Spring 2022; a group exhibition at the Jackman Humanities Institute presented in conjunction with the Art Museum at the University of Toronto, entitled *These Walls Hold Our Wounds*, open until June 2023; and a two-person show at the plumb, open from April to May 2023. She is the recipient of a 2021–23 University of Toronto Fellowship, a 2022 Art Museum Curatorial Residency Award, and a 2023 Canada Arts Council grant.

Curator's Acknowledgments

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Wednesday, May 3, 6pm–8pm

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University of Toronto Art Centre

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