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*THE PERFORMANCE OF SHADOWS* AT ART MUSEUM,  
TORONTO

7 September–25 November, 2023

Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Art Museum at the University of Toronto.  
Curated by Lillian O'Brien Davis



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Featured image: Erika DeFreitas, still from *she looms in the resemblance should it be so anxious* (2021).

Circumambulating the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at the University of Toronto's Art Museum, I find myself oscillating between walls that are the standard glowing white and deep blue, nocturnal and watery. It is a fitting juxtaposition for the group exhibition *The Performance of Shadows*, curated by Lillian O'Brien Davis and featuring the works of Erika DeFreitas, Tim Whiten, and Betye Saar, which seeks to emphasize the relationship between consciousness and intuition rather than rational thought, "to connect with what lies beyond our immediate experience of reality."<sup>1</sup> Exhibition texts reveal that the artists' works are informed by engagements with politics, phenomenology, and spirituality, with the objects themselves often visibly gravitating toward religious iconography.

It strikes me, then, that in turning towards intersubjective economies of symbols to grapple with what elides conscious detection, *The Performance of Shadows* often treads the grounds of psychoanalysis. Where these artists turn to Christ or Mary to illustrate the imperceptible, analysts comparably look to Greek mythology, evoking Eros, Oedipus, Narcissus. That last figure, gazing upon his reflection in a pool, provides the basis of a retort to the Cartesian model of subjectivity, which famously posits a being who thinks and therefore is. In contradistinction, Jacques Lacan describes consciousness as caught in "the illusion of seeing itself seeing itself." The chief structure of this is the mirror stage, whereby one comes to identify with their specular image, and thus imagine themselves



as one—bounded, whole, and identifiable. Lacan considers this an illusion because the image is not the body—it is its ideal—and because it supposes a false autonomy, for consciousness “finds its basis in the inside-out structure of the gaze.”<sup>2</sup> This gaze comes from the Other; outside the visible, it is an object of desire by whom the subject is seen. In the mirror, “I” look at “myself,” but behind it lurks the gaze, alien and unassimilable, that looks at “me.” The artists of *The Performance of Shadows* likewise interrogate the independence of a thinking self, exploring the currents of intuition to glimpse the alterity in, for, and against which identity is articulated.





Installation view of *The Performance of Shadows*, 7 September–25 November, 2023, Art Museum at the University of Toronto. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid, courtesy of the Art Museum at the University of Toronto.







Erika DeFreitas, Installation view of *as it is, or even, perhaps a recitation and emigration* (2020), Art Museum at the University of Toronto. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid, courtesy of the Art Museum at the University of Toronto.

Such otherness appears at play in two video works by Erika DeFreitas that alternate on a single screen in a blue room. *as it is, or even, perhaps a recitation and emigration* (2020) depicts a pair of cupped hands against a meadow. The two pulsate throughout the video, assuming different positions vis-à-vis one another but never in a mode of self-exploration or discovery. Their fingers do not probe; actions are entirely directed in service of capturing a ray of light that roams their skin. Whether intentional or intuitive, DeFreitas arrives at Lacan's description of the gaze as "look at me at the level of the point of light."<sup>3</sup> The agency of these hands is an effect of their awareness of this Other, for whom they contort themselves in ineffectual pursuit.



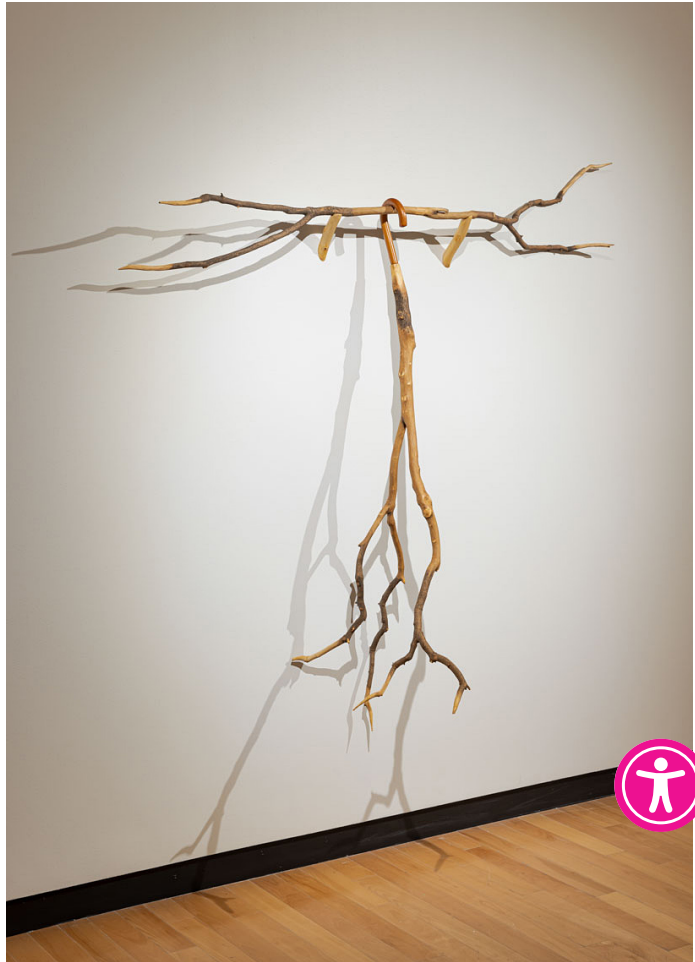
The alternating video, *she looms in the resemblance should it be so anxious* (2020), displays the lower half of a face, sunlight spreading out across cheeks, nose, and hair. Here, too, a stray beam appears. It fixates upon a mouth that slowly opens to capture it in the oral orifice, hands raising to secure its prison, only to find the light escapes. If the light is the gaze, the gaze is the Other, and the Other is in the mouth, then by a metonymic chain DeFreitas's work wordlessly points to that medium of the talking cure—speech.

The alterity of speech, or rather language, and its effects are materialized in Tim Whiten's *Book of Light: Containing Poetry from the Heart of God* (2015-16) through the poetics that unfurl between it and Whiten's other two mixed-media sculptures. All deny the viewer closed, i.e., definite iconographies or legible words to navigate them, instead soliciting interactions based on association. Or, per the exhibition's text, they "encourage 'sensing' over 'reading.'"<sup>4</sup> *Book of Light* appears as a pulpit bearing a glass case in the shape of a book that contains singed pieces of paper. The work interpellates the viewer in the role of interpreter while refusing them a literal text in the strictest sense. Beyond an ornate "L," the surface of the spectral tome is without written language. Initially based on similarly Christian imagery, I found myself connecting *Book of Light* to another work on the adjacent wall, *Hallelujah I* (2014). Two small wooden supports hold up empty lilac branches horizontally, onto which is hooked another, affixed to an umbrella handle. If the sculpture's material and T-shape recall a crucifix, the bifurcation of the hanging branch brings forth its dangling body.





Tim Whiten, *Book of Light: Containing Poetry from the Heart of God* (2015-16), Art Museum at the University of Toronto. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid, courtesy of the Art Museum at the University of Toronto.



Tim Whiten, *Hallelujah I* (2014), Art Museum at the University of Toronto. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid, courtesy of the Art Museum at the University of Toronto.



Tim Whiten, *Respite* (2019), Art Museum at the University of Toronto. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid, courtesy of the Art Museum at the University of Toronto.

This tempts us with identification, to understand the title not as containing a “one”—a first iteration—but as an “I.” It provides a foil for Whiten’s final piece, *Respite* (2019), whose surface, coated with shards of blue glass, reflects light hypnotically without ever offering the viewer a definable image, much less one of themselves. But let me return to that connection I intuited between *Book of Light* and *Hallelujah I*. If “I” can identify with the latter and thereby assume it to be complete, “I” overlook the fact that its branches are bare—and, indeed, I did not consciously note their lack until writing this. It also occurs, upon analysis, that those singed papers in *Book of Light* mimic leaves in shape and size. Kept away from the imaginary body by the language of which the book is a synecdoche, these works suggest something entirely in line with Lacanian thinking. Namely, that entering into language (and being entered by language) separates the

subject from its object of fascination, a loss that generates desire. This theoretically lost object assumes many phantasmatic forms—including the gaze—and replacements, though none fill its void; it remains out of touch, behind a case, producing desire within language for an object beyond words.

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*I strained to catch a glimpse of what is just  
beyond comprehension, perhaps sensing its  
presence more than actively perceiving it*

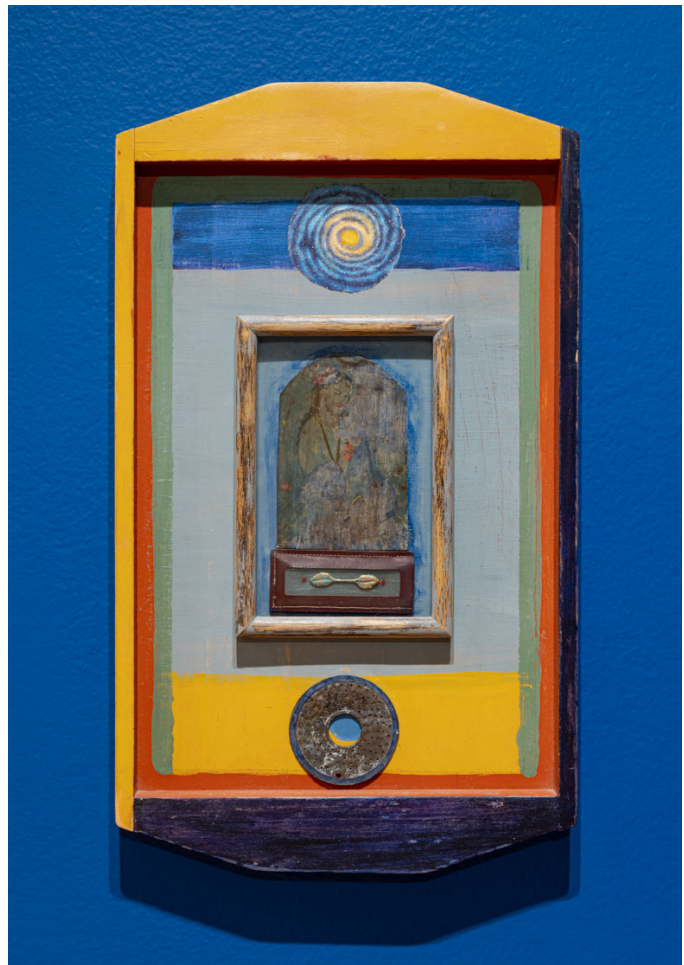
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What, then, does religion have to do with this? In this instance, religion serves as a model of the psychic dilemma of being subject to a system of symbols and images that provides definitions and identifications and hence produces exclusions. Los Angeles-based Betye Saar's mixed-media assemblage, *The Messiah* (1993), provides another perspective. I found *The Messiah* at the end of a long room, blue and dimly lit. Approaching it felt like attending to an altar. Several rectangular forms—sometimes literally protruding frames, elsewhere paint that mimes their shape—surround a small icon at the centre of the work. Each repeated rectangle decreases in size towards the core image, creating the sensation that space extends into the assemblage despite the general flatness of Saar's colour palette. It is abstraction with depth. The icon's figure has been painted over in a translucent gray, as if a wall of smoke or of incense mediates it. I strained to catch a glimpse of what is just beyond comprehension, perhaps sensing its presence more than actively perceiving it, yet nonetheless enticed.









Betye Saar, Installation views of *The Messiah* (1993), Art Museum at the University of Toronto.  
Photos: Toni Hafkenscheid, courtesy of the Art Museum at the University of Toronto.

In that sense, it phenomenologically analogizes faith in a distant entity with desire for the lost object, each seeking out something beyond perception and finding in its place representatives—icons, lovers. Intuition can share the same structure, as Suzanne Bauman’s 1977 film, *Spirit Catcher: The Art of Betye Saar* demonstrates. Playing on a wall-mounted monitor, the film shows Saar perusing a flea market, letting her intuition draw her to objects for use in her artmaking. She also discusses her personal life and the influence of the Civil Rights Movement on her work. The political and mystical are summoned in equal measure, with assemblages repurposing knick-knacks of the racist “mammy” caricature cut into montages overlaid with New Age music. The film and other textual materials succeed in



describing Saar's process and her political consciousness, but, at the same time, their inclusion highlights what is not there in the gallery. Lost objects again, then.



Erika DeFreitas, Installation view of *compositions on a colourless blue* (2021), Art Museum at the University of Toronto. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid, courtesy of the Art Museum at the University of Toronto.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, these gaps do not undermine the exhibition but instead underline its premise, drawing attention to consciousness and its instinct to paper over that absence. While one analysis links object loss to desire, another connects it to melancholy. The latter, frequently implicated in an archaic relationship to the mother, seems more appropriate in this instance, for in the same room that *Spirit Catcher* presents Saar discussing her children, works by DeFreitas intentionally thematize maternal absence. Her interest in the divine feminine as a transcendental force comes through in *compositions on a colourless blue* (2021), a series that reproduces Renaissance artworks of the Virgin Mary. The artist however excises Mary from each picture, revealing black and blue beneath her silhouette. Christ is routinely left abeyant but distinct against his mother's accentuated void. For Julia



Kristeva, rejecting the maternal authority on whom the infant has previously been reliant and imaginarily inseparable is logically precursory to the mirror stage. This inaugural loss makes the child blue and compels them towards signification—”upon losing mother...I retrieve her as sign, image, word.”<sup>5</sup> Staves appear on the compositions, frequently where Mary once was. In *scores on a colourless blue no. 28 (after Azure Blue)*, points from her silhouette even map onto notes written on the staff lines. Upon exiling her, DeFreitas recovers Christ’s mother in musical notation; upon lacking Saar’s works, *The Performance of Shadows* represents them in film and texts.

Through light and its reflections, symbols, and objects out of reach, *The Performance of Shadows* interrogates the places where consciousness stumbles upon something beyond itself. The realm of religion, with its repertoire of archetypes, provides a reliable metaphorical tool for such investigation. But, it too is approached intuitively rather than dogmatically—its affective function or structure is what is relevant. In this review, I have engaged psychoanalysis to provide parallel (or reflective) accounts of consciousness, language, desire, and melancholy. If both this discourse and *The Performance of Shadows* divert our eyes from our rippling “selves,” they redirect us towards the dark waters in which those images appear. It seems Narcissus stands before an expanse of oceanic feeling.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Lillian O’Brien Davis, “The Performance of Shadows,” Art Museum, accessed November 20, 2024,

<https://artmuseum.utoronto.ca/exhibition/the-performance-of-shadows> <  
<https://artmuseum.utoronto.ca/exhibition/the-performance-of-shadows>> .



**2** Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 2.

**3** Ibid., 95.

**4** O'Brien Davis, "The Performance of Shadows."

**5** Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 63.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Nicholas Markowski** is a writer and art historian that splits his time between Toronto and Kingston, Ontario. He is currently an MA student in Art History at Queen's University, and previously graduated with an HBA in History and Art History from the University of Toronto. His research interests include modern and contemporary art, the history of science, literature, the grotesque, psychoanalysis, and affect.

