

Watery Ghosts

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Eliza Fernand & Sherry Walchuk
Curated by Amber PB

Neutral Ground Artist-Run Centre
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text by Amber PB

Watery Ghosts brings together the material practices of Sherry Walchuk and Eliza Fernand; artists whose work makes space for the subtleties of love, loss and grief, while remaining attuned to the fleeting nature of our human bodies, in all of their watery complexities. With raw and playful aesthetic sensibilities, Eliza and Sherry dig deep into the self with each physical act of making. The work is ecstatic yet tragic; playful but wise; material practices that act as personal archives, offering suggestions for ways to be in a physical body in a complicated world.

The work presented in *Watery Ghosts* has been discovered and articulated, through messy acts of living, loving and losing in a transitory and fallible human body. Lived experiences are felt shimmering through the simple, shiny faces

of Eliza Fernand's slip-cast ghosts and in the pencil crayon lines of Sherry Walchuk's utopian drawings. There is a hopefulness to the work, despite the grief that it navigates. In the face of loss, each artist searches for solutions to move through and beyond. If an adequate process is not available - they create one, no-matter how messy or incomplete; real or fantastical; plausible or aspirational.

shared waters

In her aphoristic and auto-biographical video work, Eliza Fernand muses on the unifying potential of water, as it circulates around and within us, in an endless ebbing flow.

"... all of the water on planet earth has been here the whole time. There is no more or no less water than there ever was, since this planet was born... The water that a whale strained through her baleen plates on the day of your birth is now plasma moving through your spleen, and next year it will end up evaporating

off of a cat's tongue while she is licking the fur on her back."

- Eliza Fernand

There are people we meet, whose waters feel very close to our own. Sweat evaporates off of a brow, years later, it trickles slowly out of a tear duct and down a salty cheek. In the endless cycle and recycle of earthly fluids, I feel certain that Eliza and I have breathed in various shared vapours, across time and space.

Years ago, I travelled across the continent to participate in an artist residency program that Eliza was coordinating. I had to navigate around vast bodies of water to get there on a multi-day, cross continental road-trip. Toll roads and freeways partitioned prairie and shield from urban sprawl. My voyage necessitated navigating various roadways around the great lakes. On my third day at the wheel, I got weary and pulled into a campsite in western Michigan around 1 am to sleep in the back of my station wagon. I awoke before dawn and pulled out

to avoid paying a camping fee for such a short and uncomfortable stay. I used an outhouse before I left:, I don't remember there being any running water.

I arrived after a 24 hour car voyage, feeling rather content with the adventurous nature of my journey. The two other visiting artists had arrived at the lake-side residency by bicycle and canoe. Any smugness about my journey was put aside, and we settled into a month-long period of art-making and cohabitation. We had all navigated a lot of water to be together.

"When I turn around at the beach I see the small dunes reflecting the peaks of the waves. The dune grass is taking the wind off the water, taking the pounding so gracefully."

-Eliza Fernand

In her video work, Ghosts, Eliza's lilting narration shares heartbreaking stories of personal losses with candid vulnerability. These heavy truths are interspersed with lighter musings on

topics such as “spectrophilia” (sex with a ghost) and Casper the friendly ghost. We are submerged into the artist’s world, a watery collage that oscillates between personal stories, research, and random musings. Ceramic objects from the videos are perched in familiar clusters across the room.

close encounters in an arid place

Sherry and I met a number of years ago, at an art residency in Banff. A couple weeks into our six-week stay, we reported having similar dreams of birthing and babies. We deduced that the themes being shared across our sub-consciousnesses were likely due to us both being immersed in a space of deep creative exploration - having the luxury of time to delve into our respective art practices. For months after this experience, we would occasionally check in with one another when a “baby dream” surfaced. Often, there were uncanny similarities to our personal lives that accompanied these dreams.

Years later, I was visiting friends near Joshua Tree National Park, in California. We were invited to attend a pancake breakfast for residents of the area. The breakfast was hosted in a community hall, plunked unceremoniously in the middle of the Mojave desert, Lynchian in it's isolation, surrounded by dust, and the occasional blowing tumbleweed. After finishing my pancakes and beans, I was looking at a rack of second-hand clothing for sale, tucked in the corner of the community hall. When I looked up from a gold, fringed, silk jacket, Sherry was standing in front of me. Our waters had crossed again, in this strange and arid place.

Sherry and I spent the rest of the day together exploring the Mojave in search of desert treasures. We pulled up to one such site just before sunset and saw a series of shimmering azure lines, stretched off into the distance - reflecting the endless inky expanses of desert sky above. They appeared as extraterrestrial troughs, reaching down into the depths of the earth's watery soul.

These canals were in fact salt evaporation ponds, overseen by the Amboy National Chloride Company of America. (Their name is misspelt as "Choloride" on google maps, and they appear to have little to no other online presence.) They appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, across from the Amboy Crater. We were told that a hiker had died there recently, of exposure and dehydration. Ghostly spectres on a parched and unforgiving landscape.

cry me a river

"Crying is one of the highest devotional songs. One who knows crying, knows spiritual practice."

-Swami Kripalu

Sherry's drawings and structures investigate both internal and external architectures, offering suggestions for the viewer to dwell in spaces of heightened feeling and sensation. Her work draws from her own experiences of death and loss - having closely cared for her father

and grandfather in palliative care, over the last months and weeks of their lives.

The *Cry Station* seems to request that we sit, cradled within its ready-made-rocker, and release a flow of tears as saline as the salt ponds of Amboy. However, just witnessing its physicality - the obviousness of its suggested use - is enough to prompt the viewer into reflection as they stand at a distance.

I wish that it were more commonly accepted to openly weep when visiting an art gallery or museum, but our tears are usually shed behind closed doors. We cry in private, perhaps, in the arms of a lover, close friend, or family member. If we have the privilege, perhaps in the armchair or Zoom screen of a trusted therapist. What if we, as a society, had readily available physical spaces for sadness? Does labelling a space and designating it for crying work towards normalizing public acts of tears? I aspire for a world where we visit an art gallery to dwell in the depths of our deepest emotions, wheth-

er this be weeping tears of sadness or bliss. But tears are not always so predictable.

Perhaps ideally, everyone who visits the *Cry Station* would have the opportunity to sit and weep for at least 20 minutes (the time generally acknowledged as needed to activate the para-sympathetic nervous system). But this interaction is unlikely to happen, nor does it really need to. Whatever our relationship may be to tears - whether of sadness, mourning, joy, or ecstasy - *Cry Station* prompts, rather than tells us how to feel.

from the depths

The work in *Watery Ghosts* is interconnected in an aqueous web of human experience. My own interactions and overlaps with these artists, over many years, have enabled a process of research based on relationship and mutual artistic admiration.

These process-informed installations allow us to dwell in the sometimes joyful, sometimes uncomfortable spaces of loss, change, wonder, confusion and grief while offering suggestions for coping with worldly problems. In the aspirational world of Watery Ghosts, we are left to experience the depths of our own feelings, essentially, coming to terms with the finite nature of these watery bodies that we temporarily inhabit.

- Amber PB