

About the artists

Ghislan Sutherland-Timm is a craftsman based in Tkaronto/Toronto. Their artistic practice is influenced by their ancestral ties and reconnection to their Afro-Caribbean heritage and Carib roots. Their work is also ignited by the ephemerality and tactility of sound and film. In creating “incomplete complete” works, collage-making is frequently utilized within their practice to shape autobiographical-fictional narratives and subjects of ambiguous beings addressing identity, memory, and landmarking. This often reflects the intersections of Sutherland-Timm’s multicultural queer identity and unravels the mythologies and romanticization of home and homecoming.

Mehrnaz Abdoos is a Toronto-based multi-media artist and designer, specializing in the dynamic realm of interactive media. Her work is a exploration of innovative storytelling, brought to life through immersive experiences.

About the author

Furqan Mohamed is a writer and educator from Toronto. She is interested in all things popular culture, diaspora, kinship, and abolition. Her writing has appeared in publications such as This Magazine, Maisonneuve, and The Local, where she was an inaugural Journalism Fellow. Her artistic works include building the literary reading series, “Who’s Afraid?” an episode of “Dreams in Vantablack,” on CBC Gem, and an artist residency with the inPrint Collective in collaboration with Mackenzie House in 2022. She is presently a Master of Arts in Child Study & Education candidate at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto.

About the InterAccess Media Arts Prize

For over twenty years the InterAccess Media Arts Prize has been granted annually to a graduating student whose work exhibits excellence and innovation in new media practice. Participating colleges and universities are invited to nominate one graduating student to be considered for a solo exhibition in InterAccess’s gallery. Nominations are adjudicated by InterAccess’s Programming Committee, who select one nominee for an exhibition at InterAccess. All nominees receive a complimentary one-year studio membership to InterAccess.

Inter/Access

950 Dupont St., Unit 1
Toronto, Ontario M6H 1Z2

interaccess.org

Gallery Hours
Tuesday—Saturday
11AM—6PM
Admission is always free

Founded in 1983, InterAccess is a non-profit gallery, educational facility, production studio, festival, and registered charity dedicated to emerging practices in art and technology. Our programs support art forms that integrate technology, fostering and supporting the full cycle of art and artistic practice through education, production, and exhibition. InterAccess is regarded as a preeminent Canadian arts and technology centre.



**ONCE MORE,
ONCE AGAIN**
**GHISLAN
SUTHERLAND-TIMM**

**KABOOS:
AN EXHIBITION OF
NIGHTMARES**
MEHRNAZ ABDOOS

InterAccess Media Arts Prize 2023 Exhibition
Essay by Furqan Mohamed

January 17 – February 17, 2024

Nostalgia, the desire and yearning to return to a time, place, or people, can be hard to pinpoint. It can creep up on you, and artists Mehrnaz Abdoos and Ghislan Sutherland-Timm are counting on that. Time is a "pleated concept," Ghislan says during our December afternoon conversation. The works of both these artists are concerned with memory and fragmentation—how do we know something that only appears in our understanding once we come across it? To live with an incomplete sense but to remain curious, conscious that knowledge is out there waiting to be accessed through play, touch, and experimentation.

Working with found film, repurposing materials and pieces that were once loved by someone else, for something else, tapping into them, locating what feels familiar as one engages with the object—what Ghislan calls "living entities"—is part of the storytelling process. Once you enter the exhibition, you're greeted by antiques that serve a purpose beyond or utterly different from their original state. For so many of us, touch reifies memory. For others, memory is cemented by sight or sound. *once more and once again* features decades-old, donated 35mm slides of explorations across Turtle Island playing on

a carousel. Not much else is known about the origins of the images. They're not exactly "new," but "old new." We must fill in the blanks with our own memories and piece a narrative together while the neighbouring installation echoes. We are encouraged to explore as active participants to provide the objects with new meaning and raise further questions. There is a spinning wheel with chimes alongside a cello that was once a chair set waiting to be activated.

Afro-Caribbean people who have found themselves here, often due to forces beyond control, complicate the passive mosaic often used by the state to describe Canadian diversity. The mosaic never accounts for violence, informal and formal segregation, or erasure—the afterlives of enslavement and colonial rule. While working with what may be unknown to them at first, Ghislan is tapping into a kind of "critical fabulation," the tool American academic and writer Saidiya Hartman brought to fill in these gaps. Hartman offers us an intervention, storytelling, and speculative work to remedy official archives' apertures and omissions. In an interview with BOMB Magazine, poet Asiya Wadud names Hartman as an inspiration, saying she is "interested in the fissures and the breaks, what

happens just beyond the frame of the official record." The dents, chips, scratches, and scuff marks are still part of the story of the furnishings, even if we do not have all the information. And they're present as the objects undergo a kind of collaging: taking something like a forgotten chair set found on a Toronto stoop, at first a representation of a type of domesticity and family life in this city, and then building a musical instrument that takes us through a visual, auditory, and autobiographical-fictional narrative. What's happening now that this object is part of and separate from the official record? What are the limits and possibilities of these living entities as archives? What does it mean that we must now engage in our imagination?

For Mehrnaz, tapping into memory requires play and experimentation, too, as she worked to conjure "a new type of storytelling" within *Kaboos*, an interactive video game. Thanks to immersive projections, players will be immersed in a world—a nightmare—they explore by themselves, one by one. Easter eggs are littered across the nightmare as a distorted voice-over plays, but there is no set path or instruction. Others can watch others play, which Mehrnaz finds to be one of the most critical aspects of the exhibition.

She notes how people gather to observe others and how some decidedly back out after witnessing, second-hand, how unsettling some scenes are.

Nightmares are personal for Mehrnaz, who first designed the game as a form of relief and self-expression. She describes navigating her experiences as an Iranian immigrant and periods from her girlhood as being in limbo, expressing a kind of diasporic uneasiness with the past and the present co-occurring. Very intimate fragments of her personal life are scattered across the game: photos of her family, her parents' wedding photo, and the artist as a baby. You are invited to step into her experience and reflect on your own. Mehrnaz is working to fill gaps, too, invoking emotions usually reserved for private, subconscious moments.

Using avatars and usernames allows you to choose to be someone else, to step away from yourself. But you're playing *Kaboos* without those accoutrements in front of others. When you forget momentarily that you are doing so in a gallery, the game still asks you to look, to be present with feelings of fear, longing, shame, discomfort, and confusion.

When I first viewed a walk-through of *Kaboos*, I was immediately preoccupied with the eyeballs staring down at you as you maneuver yourself through. Mehrnaz admits to having a bit of an obsession with eyes, and during our conversation, pans her Zoom camera to show her earlier work, paintings saturated with eyes. As she speaks, I think of Trevor Paglan, who opens his 2016 essay "Invisible Images" with his own fascination with eyeballs. When looking closely at a painting, we see the brushstrokes and know a person is at the other end of the work, but digital images appear differently. We assume the digital image is neutral, without human influence, or at least hope they can become that way (Paglan 2016). But this narrative is personal. There are patches of poppies on the gray earth and mourning tulips native to Iran that have long been used to symbolize sleep, death, and peace, a contrast to the pine trees and their invitation to consider life and immortality. A sliver of a body of water runs through the game as the bigger, faceless figures sluggishly move towards it.

The fires in the game, more orange than red, one of its more glaring and ominous features, are also meant to

serve as a beacon of hope. The stock figures often run towards the elements, some praying in the Islamic tradition in their direction, others facing a moon that feels like it could start barrelling towards you at any point, a high-pitched version of the Athan (call to prayer) playing in the background.

As our Zoom call ends, I remember the rattan magazine holder I bought second-hand, nestled beside my desk, filled with print media and postcards. My parents were amused by my prized find, telling me that back home, in Somalia, they grew up with rattan everywhere: in the living room and kitchenware. If I squint at the few family photos we have, faded over time, I can make out the distinct woven pattern on a basket or seat, sitting in a home decades behind and a time-zone ahead of me, that, for now, I can only return to in my dreams.

Works Referenced

Burnished, Etched, Emblazoned: Asiya Wadud Interviewed by Emily Skillings, BOMB (2020)

Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe: A Journal of Criticism* No. 26 (2008) P. 1-14 (2008)

Invisible Images (Your Pictures Are Looking at You) by Trevor Paglan, *The New Inquiry* (2016)