Katie Bruce
Miles Collyer
Ashley Culver
Scott Harber
Rebecca Houston
Michelle MacKinnon
Ella Morton
Christos Pantieras
Anna Sarchami
Frances Thomas
Amy Wong

ENCOUNTERS
FOREWORD

The MFA student experience at York University is enhanced by engagement in various exhibitions, each marking an important stage in the graduate program in Visual Arts.

Beginning with the September group exhibition, hosted by second year students to welcome incoming MFA and PhD candidates, the students' first interactions with each other are art-related and social. Various exhibition opportunities, self-curated as well as competitive, exist throughout the year. The April series of solo thesis exhibitions at the Gales and Special Projects Galleries on campus, as well as various downtown Toronto venues, mark the culmination of the MFA program.

Encounters continues the tradition of a second-year MFA Winter group exhibition. Working closely with the curators, two doctoral candidates from the Art History and Visual Culture program, this cohort of students secured a downtown gallery and engaged in fundraising to produce this publication. Encounters is a celebration of their diverse community as well as a glimpse into what their future art careers might hold.

Such an endeavour involves a debt of gratitude to various groups and individuals. First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge and congratulate all the participating artists, as well as the curators, Vanessa Fleet and Megan Toye.

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In the past two years, the eleven artists participating in this exhibition have worked to develop, deconstruct, and redefine their individual art practices within the incubating structure of the MFA program at York University. Having shared workspaces, mentors, and classes together, the graduating artists emerge here not as creative collaborators. Rather, they form a set of singular, potent voices that grow more resonant through the incidental fricatives and harmonies arising in and from encounters with one another.

To encounter is to meet or unexpectedly come upon what is beyond the self—an object, a situation, another being. The word is derivative of contra, meaning ‘against’—the point of impact or conflict, the moment of recognition or discovery—where what’s outside ourselves is mediated through our internal lived experience. The artists in this exhibition evoke multiple iterations of the concept of encounter, speaking to the broader, personal, social, environmental, and political frameworks they inhabit.

Christos Pantieras explores the frailty of human connection and sexual encounter in an installation that unpacks the semiotics of queer hook-up culture in online and social media platforms such as Scruff and Grindr. The site’s most popular greetings—hey, horny, grrrr—emerge in cascading swells from an installation of thousands of concrete letters tumbled together in an abundance of unformed or partly-digested words. The partiality of these utterances creates tension against the solidity of their concrete form. Speaking to the volatile nature of electronic communiqués, which transpire at an accelerated pace only to fade just as quickly, Pantieras’s installation asks us to reconsider the registers of intimacy, transparency, and affect across such lines of encounter.

The notion of human frailty and speculative engagement with the unknown is likewise taken up by Ella Morton, whose work references alleged and fictional encounters with the supernatural in desolate locations such as Roswell, New Mexico. The mystical expanse of the sky, emphasized in Morton’s use of the cyanotype photographic process, captures the sublime aspect of nature. The void-space of the atmosphere overpowers the faint traces of human development on the landscape: fence-posts, train tracks, and hydro-electric towers. Morton’s work is characterized by a relentless searching for the presence of the other-worldly and supernatural, while simultaneously exposing the particularly human instinct to confirm the existence of that which lies beyond our senses and cognitive-rational faculties.

Scott Harber and Frances Thomas come to encounter by reflecting on the nature of struggle, exertion, and the limits of human action. The painted canvas becomes a site of combat or testing ground for the physics of human force and will. For Harber, whose work explicitly references the prescribed set of moves used in one-on-one combat sport, the aesthetic action of painting is linked with that of physical fight. Thomas’s paintings, on the other hand, are territories of emotional grappling, whose abstract syntax underscores the heart’s reaches, failures, and paths of resistance. The gaze of the spectator is suspended between the colourful and chaotic forms where we wander through an affective landscape that resists optical resolution and conclusion.

Michelle MacKinnon and Amy Wong’s work makes encounter visible as a process in the formation of identity. MacKinnon’s hyperrealistic large-scale graphite portrait of her father, titled Dad, Ken, raises questions about the decisiveness of what we inherit from family. MacKinnon considers the labour of her meticulously-detailed renderings an exercise in self-portraiture. The magnified lines
Miles Collyer – 6

linear perspective and other related atrocities – detail, 2014
UV-printed PETG plastic, steel, gesso
Dimensions variable

Christos Pantieras – 7

HEY. HORY. GRRRR, 2014
Letters cast in cement
Dimensions variable

Anna Sarchami – 8

“”, 2014
Performance art object
Roll of toilet paper, metal stand, gone wishes
Dimensions variable

Rebecca Houston – 9

Your Old Nonsense, 2014
Reclaimed 2 x 4’s
Dimensions variable

Ashley Culver – 10

Remnant Keepsakes; Yellow Onionskin – detail, 2014
Yellow onionskin with tape on paper
28 cm x 43 cm

Frances Thomas – 11

It Thinks It’s a Landscape, 2014
Monoprint
44.5 x 44.5 cm

dwell in the heterogeneous space of a de-colonial, feminist perspective.

Encounter becomes a means of exposing the contradictions invested in materiality and object-hood by testing the limits and possibilities of discrete artistic mediums. Rebecca Houston’s kinetic sculptures, fabricated from re-purposed lumber, propose a radical politics of ecology. Activating new liveliness into industrial two-by-fours through the use of joints and hinges, the kinetic potential in Houston’s work emphasizes the pervasiveness of life even in discarded, ostensibly inert matter. Working in experimental photographic processes and installation practices, Miles Collyer similarly disrupts the traditional two-dimensional image plane through his translations between photographic source material and sculptural modes of presentation. In this work, the artist complicates the representational frame of the photographic object by exhibiting it draped on a rigid structural form. Here, the ontology of politics is rendered aesthetic; Collyer uses objects as proxies for political ideas and discussions that must make themselves known against imposing ideological structures, represented in the spatially dominant rendering of a concrete cinder block.

Ashley Culver’s work employs fragile, trace elements of food such as onion-skins – reframing the non-precious, disposable material in a way that unexpectedly conflates the botanical with the beautiful. Through Culver’s work, we are offered an aesthetic perspective on the ordinary ingredients that make up our everyday habits of consumption and discard. Relatedly, Katie Bruce’s practice reveals the porous marks, punctures, and imprints that accumulate on everyday surfaces as poetic meditations on the fragility and precarity of the body. She offers a temporary relief for the marked and wounded surfaces in her work. While Bruce mimetically references the skin of the body, Anna Sarchami’s embodied performance art lays bare the social and structural violence that is marked upon the bodies of women in the Middle East and elsewhere. The objects used in Sarchami’s performance are exhibited here, acting as indexical traces of the event.

To encounter another is to encounter the partiality of the self. It is to realize that the self is never complete or whole, but rather is always reliant upon and constituted through engagement with others. By revisiting and subverting the accepted personal, social, and political contexts we inhabit, these artists assert the dialogical, mediated space of encounter as a site for articulating and understanding the complexity of experience.
CURATORS

Vanessa Fleet is a PhD candidate in Art History and Visual Culture at York University, where she focuses on photographic collecting practices and the relationship between photographs and cultural institutions. She has completed curatorial projects at the City of Toronto Archives, the University of Toronto Art Centre, the Art Gallery of Ontario, and the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. Her research at York is funded by a Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarship.

Megan Toye is a PhD candidate in Art History and Visual Culture at York University. Her research explores the intersections between communication disorders and aesthetics; spectatorship and affect; and phenomenology and cognitive science. She completed her M.A. in Art History at McGill University in 2013 and worked as an assistant curator at The Alternator Centre for Contemporary Art in Kelowna, BC.

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