

Out of this World is the first institutional solo exhibition in Canada by British-American artist Danielle Dean.

Hemel (2024) is co-commissioned by Mercer Union, Toronto; Spike Island, Bristol; and The Vega Foundation. The film is produced by LONO Studio and made possible with the generous support of Patrick Collins, Jill and Peter Kraus, Patrick and Daniela Schmitz-Morkramer, and an Anonymous Donor.

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SONICPRINT



SPACE: Sukaina Kubba | *Jealousy: Now the Voice of the Second*
12 April–8 September 2024

Mercer Union's SPACE billboard commission has invited artist Sukaina Kubba for its 2023–24 season for a yearlong series titled, *Jealousy*. Working with materials such as photo emulsion, plastic filament, and various sheer fabrics, *Jealousy* looks to the history of Mercer Union's building as a cinema to present three sculptural works as adverts for a fictional premiere: a new film adaptation of Alain Robbe-Grillet's 1957 novel *La Jalousie*. Read the artist's note on the final edition: *Now the Voice of the Second* (2024), along with an accompanying text at mercerunion.org

Sukaina Kubba is an Iraqi-born Toronto-based artist who explores narratives of cultural and material assimilation and appropriation. Kubba will present her first institutional solo exhibition in the United Kingdom at Dundee Contemporary Arts, Scotland in April 2024. Her work is included in the triennial exhibition *Greater Toronto Art*, MOCA Toronto (2024); and in exhibitions at the plumb, Toronto (2023); The Next Contemporary, Toronto (2023); Aga Khan Museum, Toronto (2017); Centre for Contemporary Art, Glasgow (2016); and Glasgow International (2016, 2014). Kubba recently completed residencies at the International Studio and Curatorial Program, New York; and La Wayaka Current, Atacama Desert, Chile. She is a sessional lecturer in Visual Studies at the University of Toronto, and previously served as curator and lecturer at The Glasgow School of Art (2013–2018).

SPACE invites one artist to produce a yearlong series of images for a public-facing billboard on the east façade of Mercer Union.

Image: Detail from Sukaina Kubba, *Jealousy: Now the Voice of the Second*, 2024. Courtesy the artist. Commissioned by Mercer Union, Toronto. Photo: Nellie Davis.

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artistfirst

BIOGRAPHIES

Danielle Dean's multidisciplinary practice examines historical representations and contemporary conditions of labour, racialized identity, and popular culture. Drawing from archival records and materials like film and advertising, she produces bold environments to ground and enliven her research-based projects.

In 2022, Mercer Union invited Danielle to develop a new film project for her first institutional solo exhibition in Canada. Titled *Out of this World*, her exhibition presents the commissioned film *Hemel* (2024) and extends its scenography to the space of the gallery. The film is an intimate portrait of Hemel Hempstead, where the artist was raised, and unfolds as a personal essay on the town's history as a planned community under the New Towns Act of 1946. Filmed in 16mm with an ensemble of non-actors and family, *Hemel* blurs fiction and documentary to consider the race, class, and labour dynamics of a small English town in the post-Brexit context.

Mercer Union's collaboration with Danielle emerges from our long-held commitment to commissioning new work, and creating milestone opportunities for artists to bring their visions to fruition in Toronto. Through our commissioning platform *Artist First*, we invest in the lifecycle of a project from conception to realization, cultivating discovery, risk-taking, and artistic development through long-term support and dialogue. To learn more, visit mercerunion.org/support



Danielle Dean is an interdisciplinary artist whose work explores the geopolitical and material processes that colonize the mind and body. Dean has developed commissioned projects with the Wellcome Collection in London (2023); and with Performa 21, New York (2021). She has presented exhibitions at ICA San Diego (2023); The Contemporary Austin, Texas (2023); Midnight moment, Times Square Arts, New York (2023); Tate Britain, London (2022); The Whitney Biennale, New York (2022); and Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (2018). Dean holds a Master of Fine Arts from California Institute of the Arts, and is an alumna of the Whitney Independent Study Program.

Image: Danielle Dean, *Amazon*. Installation view: *Art Now* series, Tate Britain, London, 2022. Courtesy the artist and Tate Britain. Photo: Jai Monghan.



Danielle Dean:
Out of this World

13 April–15 June 2024



The Historical Entanglements of *Hemel* (2024)

by Yaniya Lee

The plot of the 1957 science-fiction film *Quatermass 2* revolves around an alien life form hiding and growing in a local factory. Nearby, scientists are working on a lunar colonization program that bears an eerie resemblance to the inner workings of the factory. Rocks begin to fall from the sky and upon examination by the scientists, it is discovered that these meteorites are actually high-tech alien vessels transporting a dangerous, parasitic gaseous substance onto Earth from outer space. When picked up, these meteorites burst, leaving a burnt brand on the handler's flesh as the gas takes over their body. The threat of this sentient alien life form derails the lunar exploration plans and sends the scientists into a frenzied effort to stop the impending invasion.

In the 50s, anxieties about impending alien invasions were a literary trope. The work of Anglo-American science-fiction writer H. P. Lovecraft, for instance, is emblematic of a certain xenophobic terror that had overcome white Americans: he fabricated spectacular visceral stories about strange creatures. Science-fiction writer N. K. Jemisin points out, “[Lovecraft’s] biases were the basis of his horror. The monsters came from his own fears of brown people, of immigrants, of Jewish people, of whatever.”¹

Not dissimilarly, the narrative in *Quatermass 2* thinly veils the paranoia of post-war Britain at the decline of the British Empire. This fear of invasion in Europe and North America was at the time relatively new. At the height of the British Empire, Europeans were setting sail to see what lay across the seas. In the course of their devastating exploits, they found sugar, tea, fruit, furs, tobacco, and cocoa, among other things. These goods were first given, then traded, and eventually stolen to be sent back to Europe. They were not afraid of invasion then. Rather than being overtaken with fear, as in *Quatermass 2*, they were brazen with acquisitive swagger.

According to historian C. L. R. James, the Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture identified the “French, British, and Spanish imperialists for the insatiable gangsters that they were, that there is no oath too sacred for them to break, no crime, deception, treachery, cruelty, destruction of human life and property which they would not commit against those who could not defend themselves.”² King Leopold II's bloodlust and ransacking in the Congo Free State, for example, underwrote Brussels' early 20th century Art Nouveau makeover. French merchant families' rapacious dealings in humans and goods allowed them to amass a hoard of wealth that still endures.

In her memoir *Imperial Intimacies*, Hazel V. Carby traces her family lineage prior to her birth in England in 1949. Around the time the *HMT Empire Windrush* (a ship after which a whole generation was later named) was dropping off large shiploads of West Indians from former British colonies to the United Kingdom, her poor, Welsh civil servant mother was meeting her Jamaican RAF Airman father for the first time. Through meticulous investigations in archives, Carby follows the history of her ancestors' migrations to and fro across the Atlantic. She finds her family's complex history entwined with the intimacies of empire. “One of the problems in contemporary Britain is that people imagine that the slave trade is a history only meaningful to aristocratic history—the big country houses built from its profits. But beneath the everyday soil, the everyday appearances, these entanglements of colonialism and imperialism are everywhere,”³ she writes.

Eventually, this colonial expansion sputtered and stalled. Labour from elsewhere, extracted to bring goods and wealth to the imperial center, had previously remained abstract. This shifted with developments in local industry, and the arrival of a labour force from outside the nation. The previous aggression of capital accumulation turned to fear as the empire mindset changed from colonial expansionism to its current neo-colonial and nationalist fascinations.



Attuning to this shift, British-American artist Danielle Dean's film *Hemel* (2024) takes up the premise and production of *Quatermass 2* in Hemel Hempstead—where she had been brought up—and reimagines and reenacts the very town in which the 1957 film was made. The town itself had existed in the English midlands as far back as the 8th century and underwent a radical transformation in the 1940s. At the time, despite

resistance from locals, the government constructed a New Town extension to Hemel Hempstead for people displaced from London after the Blitz bombings of World War II. The development corporation built factories, education and leisure facilities, and new housing stock in Modernist style guided by the ideals of the New Towns Act of 1946. Cul-de-sacs connected with other little centres and linked to other identical clusters, similar to the designs of urban planner Ebenezer Howard's visionary garden cities.



Very early on a Sunday morning in 2005, 273 million litres of oil at the storage terminal on the edge of Hemel Hempstead burst into flames. “The cause of the explosion was a fuel-air explosion in a vapor cloud of evaporated leaking petrol.”⁴ The explosion, later dubbed the Buncefield fire, was so great that the tremors it sent registered on the Richter scale. The fire let out billowing black smoke into the sky that could be seen for miles, and it took several days for the flames to die out. Across the road, the fire severely damaged one of the biggest industrial warehouses in the country. Named Mammoth by its developers, its site has since attracted businesses synonymous in scale, steadily bringing in new workers to Hemel Hempstead from all over the world. Amazon.com, Inc. operated for nearly a decade there, and now Sysco Corporation plans to establish at the site the largest food depot in all of Europe. These developments are accompanied by an ongoing influx of people, triggering a palpable anxiety and fear of invasion locally.

In Dean's *Hemel*, a local corporation haunts the town with an unidentifiable strangeness that speaks to the atomized condition of empire today. Workers move in slow choreographies, their bodies and minds mechanized by the mysterious force of the meteorites they handle. The alien inhabits

Hemel in many ways, not just as meteorites. There is a natural distance between the townspeople along racial lines, even while they are all connected as locals and labourers. At one point, a group of Black students talk about their experiences of living in Hemel Hempstead, and expose the stupidity and simplicity of the racism they regularly face.

At the end of *Quatermass 2* tensions escalate into a face-off between the angry out of work locals and the zombified aliens in host human bodies. The scientists launch a rocket they had meant to send to space at the occupied factory instead, to destroy the alien. The final explosion scene of *Quatermass 2* eerily foretells the Buncefield fire, and through Dean's reference to each in *Hemel*, fiction and reality become interwoven. As in *Quatermass 2* and the development of Hemel Hempstead, the story of capital is deeply tied to slavery and race and labour. While it may have once appeared simple to abstract the Other and their origins, new encounters have forced intimacies that were previously unthought of, and safely hidden out of sight. Fear of the Other is a red herring. Racism masks real connections. We are bound by our historical entanglements, especially when we feel most alien to one another. What seems to be foreign, and dangerous, is actually a part of who we are.

1. Caroline Lester, “N. K. Jemisin on H. P. Lovecraft,” January 31, 2020 in *The New Yorker Radio Hour*, produced by The New Yorker and WNYC Studios, podcast, MP3 audio, 14:54, <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/tnyradiohour/segments/n-k-jemisin-h-p-lovecraft>.
2. Sabrina Allie, “Hazel Carby: ‘If It Can’t Actually Cope with the Entanglement of All These Histories, Then to Me, It’s Useless.’” *Guernica*, April 21, 2021. <https://www.guernicamag.com/miscellaneous-files-hazel-carby>.
3. C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 271.
4. “Buncefield fire,” Wikimedia Foundation, last modified March 23, 2024, 12:22, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buncefield_fire.

Yaniya Lee is the author of *Selected Writing on Black Canadian Art* (figure ground, 2024) and the Black art history project *Buseje Bailey: reasons why we have to disappear every once in a while* (Artexte, 2024).

She has written about art for museums and galleries across Canada, as well as for *Vogue*, *Flash*, *Fader*, *Art in America*, *Vulture*, *Racar: Canadian Art Review*, *Chatelaine*, *Canadian Art*, *C Magazine*, *Montez Press* and *Asia Art Archive*.

Cover and interior images: Danielle Dean, production still from *Hemel*, 2024. Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York.