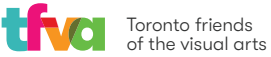


groundwork is a Mercer Union incubator for artistic and practice-based research.

The inaugural edition of the program is collaboratively produced with seven Toronto-based practitioners: artist Luis Jacob, the working group EMILIA-AMALIA (Cecilia Berkovic, Annie MacDonell, Gabrielle Moser, Zinnia Naqvi, and Joy Xiang), and curator Kate Wong.

To learn more about their self-directed projects and to see a running schedule of events, visit mercerunion.org

SPACE Billboard Commission
Leading Support provided by the Toronto Friends of the Visual Arts.



The TD Programming & Engagement Assistant is made possible with Leading Support from TD Bank Group.



Mercer Union, a centre for contemporary art
1286 Bloor Street West, Toronto ON M6H 1N9 Canada
(one block east of Lansdowne TTC Station)

Director & Curator: Theresa Wang
Curator & Head of Exhibitions: Aamna Muzaffar
Operations & Development Manager: Sonya Filman
TD Programming & Engagement Assistant: Abby Kettner
Lead Exhibition Preparator: Vanessa Rieger

Open Tuesday through Saturday, 11AM–6PM
office@mercerunion.org | mercerunion.org

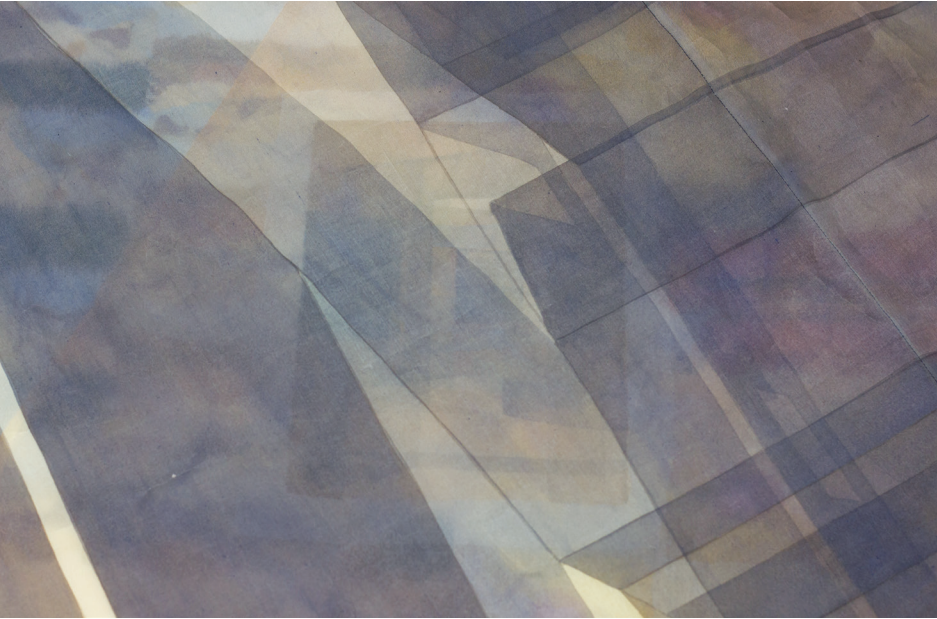
Board of Directors: Femi Adeyinka,
Sarah Heim, Christie Kirchner, David Neligan,
Philip Leonard Ocampo, Voke Odibo,
Erica Russell, Marina Shepaksov, Emma Steen,
Erica Stocking, Farnoosh Talaei, Yue Yin

Mercer Union acknowledges the support of its staff, volunteers and members, the Canada Council for the Arts, the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Arts Council, and the City of Toronto through the Toronto Arts Council.



Canada Council
for the Arts
Conseil des arts
du Canada

ISBN 978-1-926627-70-0



SPACE: Ella Gonzales | Sleeve: as that surface fluctuates
16 June–25 September 2025

Mercer Union's SPACE billboard commission has invited artist Ella Gonzales for its 2024–25 season for a yearlong series titled *Sleeve*. Working with materials such as plastics, silks, and acrylic paint, *Sleeve* plays with the billboard site through iterative gestures that change the composition within a single shell. Over the course of the year, the artist presents three sculptural banners or perhaps, three distinct moments in a single work always in the process of becoming. Read more about the third edition, as *that surface fluctuates* (2025), along with an accompanying text at mercerunion.org

Ella Gonzales is a Filipina Canadian artist working between painting and Computer-Aided Design programs. She has recently exhibited at YYZ Artists' Outlet, Toronto (2025); Unit 17, Vancouver (2024); grunt gallery, Vancouver (2024); The Power Plant, Toronto (2023); Galerie Nicolas Robert, Toronto (2023); Xpace Cultural Centre, Toronto (2023); and the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge (2022). She holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Western University and a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Guelph. Gonzales is represented by Unit 17, Vancouver.

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

Image: Ella Gonzales, production still from *Sleeve: as that surface fluctuates*, 2025. Courtesy the artist.

To receive future publications by mail and many other benefits, become a supporter of Mercer Union. Cultivating artists and challenging audiences since 1979.

BIOGRAPHIES

Based in Toronto, **Luis Jacob** is an artist whose work destabilizes conventions of viewing, and invites collisions of meaning. Jacob has achieved an international reputation, with his work exhibited at the Art Gallery of Ontario (2022); Museum der Moderne Salzburg (2019); Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart (2019); the Toronto Biennial of Art (2019); Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (2018); Museion, Bolzano, Italy (2017); La Biennale de Montréal (2016); Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York (2015); Taipei Biennial (2012); Generali Foundation, Vienna (2011); Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2010); Hamburg Kunstverein (2008); Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, Toronto (2008); and Documenta12, Kassel (2007). In 2016 he curated the exhibition, *Form Follows Fiction: Art and Artists in Toronto* at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto, with a catalogue co-published with Black Dog Press in 2020.

Luis Jacob would like to acknowledge the support of the City of Toronto through Toronto Arts Council, the Ontario Arts Council and the Government of Ontario.

EMILIA-AMALIA is a Toronto-based feminist experimental working group founded in 2016. The group uses informal knowledge sharing and experimental writing to cultivate relationships of mentorship, collaboration and reciprocal indebtedness between generations of artists, writers, thinkers, curators and practitioners.

Our writing and reading groups, film screenings, publications, public talks and workshops are intimate exchanges through which we centre the personal and the political in a desire to activate the undetonated potential of the past. Within our partnerships, we create space to address feminist histories that have been obscured or overlooked. Its current active members include Cecilia Berkovic, Annie MacDonell, Gabrielle Moser, Zinnia Naqvi, Joy Xiang.

Kate Wong is a curator and writer from Vancouver, British Columbia. She has held curatorial and leadership roles at the Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto, Serpentine Galleries, and V.O Curations, where she developed a residency program to support emerging cultural practitioners. Wong's recent exhibitions and programs include *But this is the language we met in* for Images Festival (2025); *Interface Remix* by Tishan Hsu (2024); *Greater Toronto Art*, a triennial co-curated with Ebony L. Haynes and Toleen Touq (2024); *Alienarium 5* by Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster (2022); and *Park Nights*, which featured performances by Linton Kwesi Johnson, Roscoe Mitchell, and Josiane M.H. Pozi, presented in Theaster Gates' *Black Chapel* (2022).

Wong approaches art as a site for critical discourse, centering people, process, and socially-engaged artistic practices. Working from and with marginalized perspectives, she seeks to build solidarity from these margins. Wong's writing on contemporary art and culture has appeared in publications including e-flux, Yishu Journal, AnOther Mag, and frieze. She has been a curatorial resident at Fogo Island Arts, an invited speaker at Tate Modern and V&A East, and a guest lecturer and critic at institutions including Queen's University, the University of Toronto, and the University of Guelph.

Kate Wong would like to thank Fogo Island Arts Residency for their support in the development of this project.



groundwork

LUIS JACOB
EMILIA-AMALIA
KATE WONG

12 July–20 Sept 2025

***groundwork*: An Introduction**

This summer, Mercer Union launches *groundwork*, an incubator program for artistic and practice-based research. As a format, *groundwork* invites multiple cultural practitioners to develop their projects concurrently in the gallery over time. As a program, it is interested in the generative possibilities that can emerge when we shape our practices publicly alongside one another.

The inaugural edition of *groundwork* is collaboratively produced with seven Toronto-based practitioners: artist Luis Jacob, the working group EMILIA-AMALIA (Cecilia Berkovic, Annie MacDonell, Gabrielle Moser, Zinnia Naqvi, and Joy Xiang), and curator Kate Wong. Their self-directed projects consider the conditions currently impacting artistic and cultural production in Toronto, guided by differing prompts and senses of scale. Delivered through aesthetic, informational, and programmatic means, the projects evolve over the summer through discursive events that call for public participation. These include discussions, workshops, presentations by invited speakers, a weekly reading group, as well as informal gatherings and shared meals. Taken together, these projects launch *groundwork* with a focus on Toronto and offer a living context brief for the desires shaping artistic and cultural life in the city—the stakes of which both engage and implicate our situated understanding of the world.

Luis Jacob’s project, *The Order of Canada (I’ll Be Your Mirror)*, offers an exercise in close looking. For over a decade, his artistic practice has critically examined Toronto’s relationship with its past, observing the city’s tendency to reproduce and then mask its settler colonial history. He traces this behaviour across different forms of infrastructure, from the way museums are managed to the way private interest is privileged in urban development. At Mercer Union, Jacob focuses on recent departures in the Art Gallery of Ontario’s curatorial department, searching for the signals that such events leave behind. He presents a series of new paintings, photographs, and works on paper that follow a process of excavation and disclosure, drawing our attention to images such as the seemingly empty museum wall or the vacant lot. These works are presented in dialogue with a site-specific artistic intervention: a cutout in the gallery’s east wall that partially reveals *What Then Remainz* (2016), a steel-stud installation from artist Duane Linklater’s 2016 exhibition at Mercer Union. In uncovering

the installation, which speaks to a relationship between institutional structures and Indigenous sovereignty, Jacob conceptually engages with the art gallery as a site of obligation. He accompanies this gesture with a series of talks, inviting speakers to discuss the interplay between governance structures and Indigenous cultural production, attending anew to the perspectives that *What Then Remainz* can offer today. Beyond locating the erased or unacknowledged foundations upon which systems are built, Jacob is also interested in the capacity to see beyond sight, to communicate across faulty transmissions. His colour field paintings pulse beyond their frames in shades of red, and, in the presence of Linklater’s work, suggest that what is hidden or blocked nevertheless seeps through to be discerned. He expands on these themes with a weekly reading group on Georges Didi-Huberman’s book *Survival of the Fireflies* (2018) alongside other texts, asking how we might get past the noise to detect the signals in need of our attention.

For their project *Open Hearing Hotline*, the EMILIA-AMALIA working group continues to extend the legacies of grassroots arts organizing from the 1960s and '70s into the present. In March 2025, the group led a community discussion in Toronto, titled “Open Hearing: Dreaming in Dark Times,” that was structured as a town hall and inspired by the 1969 “Open Hearing” staged by the Art Workers’ Coalition in New York. EMILIA-AMALIA’s event solicited public statements by artists and arts workers about the future of the Toronto arts ecosystem; 40 speakers and more than 200 community members participated in the effort to understand the economic, cultural, and relational problems impacting the sector and propose reforms. Just as the 1969 event took aim at institutional complicity with the Vietnam War, the 2025 iteration interrogated the censorship of expressions of solidarity with Palestinian sovereignty within arts and cultural organizations as symptomatic of larger power dynamics that have resulted in precarity, burnout working conditions, the misuse of non-disclosure agreements, and the need for labour organizing among artists and arts workers. At Mercer Union, EMILIA-AMALIA aims to strengthen collaboration across existing coalitions, collectives, and arts workers’ unions. *Open Hearing Hotline* begins with a guided listening session of the town hall audio recordings to deliberate and assess the proposals they’ve gathered, to be followed by other collaborative events. In the gallery, a self-serve photocopier and bookbinding machine point to one of the group’s intentions: distributing printed transcripts of the statements with

nine concrete calls to action addressed to select public institutions, as well as funding, policy, and labour apparatuses in the arts sector. This strategy references the role of zines and pamphlets in the history of artist-led activism and builds on a similar outcome from the 1969 event. With this framework in mind, *Open Hearing Hotline* positions the gallery as a site for testing ideas that open up not just critical dialogue but also forms of solidarity across networks.

Curator Kate Wong’s ongoing research and co-creation project *SITE Toronto* asks how arts institutions can more meaningfully respond to our time. Her project identifies an urgent need for cultural infrastructure to be shaped by local contexts and explores how this relationship can undergird both the societal value of arts institutions and the ways they can be funded more ethically and sustainably. Wong’s cross-disciplinary research has led her to examine organizations from within and beyond the arts, that have developed their funding, governance, and organizational frameworks through an informed understanding of their place’s contexts and community needs; these include SESC Pompéia (São Paulo), RAW Material Company (Dakar), Park Fiction (Hamburg), Agnes Etherington Art Centre (Kingston), and Shorefast (Fogo Island). While such place-based approaches necessarily emerge from distinct local conditions, her project is interested in how an application of these organizing principles might translate to our city. At Mercer Union, *SITE Toronto* advances its ambitious scope of inquiry through a three-part community visioning process in which participants draw on case studies and co-create new models for Toronto’s arts infrastructure rooted in people and place. Each session begins with a talk and follows with a participatory format to put learnings into action. These visioning events seek a wide group of participants, from artists and cultural workers to urban planners, economists, policymakers, funders, and members of the community more broadly. In doing so, Wong frames cultural infrastructure as civic infrastructure, wherein arts institutions are the meeting point between creative life and city building.

It’s worth noting that while we have been refining the curatorial frame of *groundwork* as a new initiative at Mercer Union for some time—to define emergent grounds for contemporary art across diverse publics—each of the project contributors independently sought out Mercer Union over the last year as a partner and a site for developing their ideas. This affirmed our organization’s community position as a site

of responsiveness—a sensibility that Mercer Union has continuously reinterpreted for forty-six years, ever since its founders came together to respond to a common need identified by artists for artists. All three of these projects demonstrate how artists and cultural practitioners in Toronto are retooling practices to meet the imperatives of this moment. The ongoing genocide in Gaza has been an animating force for arts and civic organizing in the city; practitioners already working under precarious material conditions continue to navigate ideological divisions within the sector and the grim censure of exercising solidarity with Palestine. This is an inflection point for the arts in Toronto, as it is globally, that has saturated the question of what it means to form any sort of practice anywhere.

What does responsiveness—and, furthermore, responsibility—look like for Mercer Union today? If this edition of *groundwork* resembles in parts an exhibition, a series of public programs, a residency, it is because it borrows from these languages as a means to begin a necessary retooling of institutional form. Throughout the process of developing this program, we have considered how the deliberate production of space can materially shape modes of discourse. In the gallery, furnishings have been designed to be assembled in various ways, generating an unfixed environment that each contributor, along with each visitor, is invited to reconfigure. As each of these projects critically navigates the relational stakes of artistic life through public participation, the gallery itself plays a role, devised to be a site where spatial strategies for exchange and mediation can be tested. In the spirit of learning from and alongside each other, visitors to the gallery will also find an unfinished reference library. The books and printed matter gathered there are selected by Jacob, EMILIA-AMALIA, Wong, and us as curators; they offer a starting point for some of the ideas that have been instructive to each project and to our process of developing *groundwork*. As the program begins, we are reminded that active critical engagement will shape the course of each of these projects, and we hope that every reader of this text will find reason to participate.

—Mercer Union curators