



Shuinai Ashoona, *Untitled* (2007),
Coloured pencil and ink on paper
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Mercer Union, a centre for contemporary art
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Cover image: Pamela Norrish, *Outfit for the Afterlife* (2010-2015), Glass beads and nylon thread
Collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts (photo: Ward Bastian)

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ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

Shuinai Ashoona was born in Cape Dorset in 1961, the daughter of artists Kiawak Ashoona and Sorosilutu. She began drawing in 1996, and was first included in the Cape Dorset annual print collection in 1997. Ashoona's work has appeared in exhibitions including: *Three Women, Three Generations*, McMichael Canadian Collection (1999); Toronto's Nuit Blanche (2008); Justina Barnicke Gallery, Toronto (2009); The 18th Biennale of Sydney and *Sakahans*, National Gallery of Canada (both 2013), and *SITELines 2014: Unsettled Landscapes*, Sante Fe, New Mexico.

Karen Azoulay is a multi-disciplinary artist working between sculpture, performance and photography. Her solo exhibitions include: CUE Art Foundation, New York, curated by Glenn Ligon; Four Gallery, Dublin; Mercer Union, Toronto; Primetime, Brooklyn; and Dose Projects, Brooklyn. Recent group exhibitions include: Palfyho Palace, Bratislava, Slovakia; The Islip Art Museum, East Islip, NY; Stichting, Eindhoven, Netherlands; Lamp Gallery, Tokyo; Art & Idea, Mexico City; Galerie Kunstbuero, Vienna and White Columns, New York among others. Upcoming projects include a solo exhibition at Drew University, Madison, NJ and a commission for The Kitchener Waterloo Art Gallery. Azoulay is a Canadian artist based in Brooklyn.

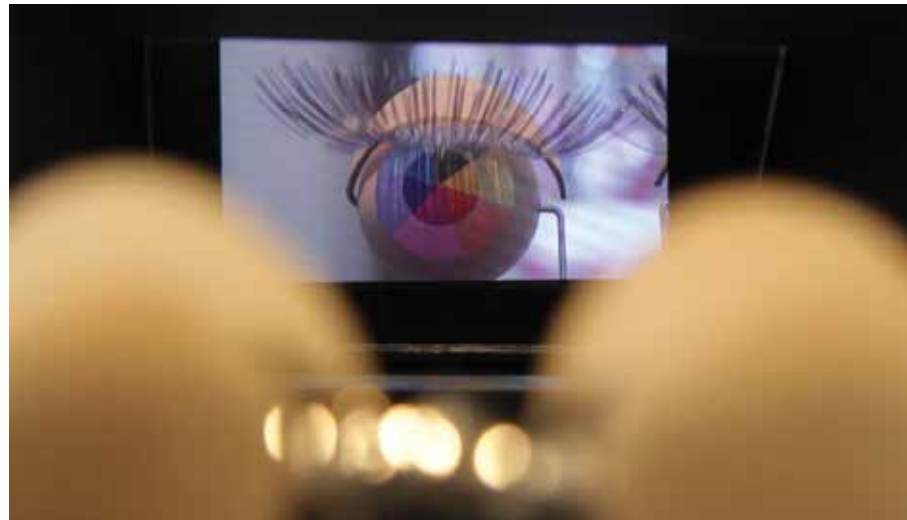
Shary Boyle works across diverse media, including sculpture, painting, installation and performance. In 2013, she represented Canada at the 55th Venice Biennale with her project *Music for Silence*. In 2015 Boyle performed at Toronto's Luminato Festival and the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, as well as creating a commissioned sculpture for the Musee des Beaux Art Montreal. In 2016 she was awarded a public art commission for the Gardiner Museum in Toronto, and participated in *Ceramik, Ceramics and art from Rodin to Schutte* at Cite de la ceramique Sevres, and la Maison Rouge, Paris, France. In 2017, Boyle will premiere the touring exhibition *Earthlings* at the Esker Foundation in Calgary, as well as presenting new work at the *Gyeongchung-daero International Ceramic Biannual* in Korea, and the Suzanne Biederberg Gallery of Amsterdam. Boyle lives in Toronto.

Born in Toronto in 1952, **Spring Hurlbut** studied at the Ontario College of Art and the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design. Since her installation, *A Wall on Location*, at P.S.1. Long Island City, New York (1981), Hurlbut's work has been included in National and International exhibitions including: The Power Plant, Toronto; Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto; Musee des Beaux-Arts de Montreal; Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver; Manchester Museum, Manchester, UK; Wurttembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart, Germany; The Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, USA; Creative Time Inc./The Municipal Art Society, New York, USA; and MOCA, Cleveland, USA and most recently The New Orleans Museum of Art, USA. Hurlbut's work is represented in the collections of numerous institutions including the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, USA; the National Gallery of Canada; the Art Gallery of Ontario; and, the Musee d'art Contemporain de Montreal.

Pamela Norrish studied at the Alberta College of Art and Design, the New York Studio Program at Parsons The New School, New York City, and the Ontario College of Art and Design, Toronto. Her work has been featured in *Pamela Norrish: Magical Thinking*, Glenbow Museum, Calgary (2016); *Color Me Calm*, Torrance Shipman, New York (2016); *Voted Most Likely*, C2 Contemporary Calgary, Calgary (2014); *Screen and Décor*, The Illingworth Kerr Gallery, Calgary (2014); *The News from Here*: The 2013 Alberta Biennial of Contemporary Art, Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton; *Little Truth*, Haight Gallery, Calgary (2011); and *being-there/there-being*, LEDGE Gallery, EPCOR Centre for the Performing Arts, Calgary (2011). Norrish has also attended artist residencies at The Banff Centre for the Arts, the Ledge Gallery, Calgary; Mentoring Artist's for Women's Art (MAWA), Winnipeg; and Artscape Gibraltar Point, Toronto.

York Lethbridge is the Director of Operations & Development at Mercer Union.

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Deborah Edmeades, *Blinking and Other Involuntary Portals* (2016), Still from video documentation

SPACE: Deborah Edmeades

25 November 2016 – 25 March 2017
Arist Talk: Saturday 26 November at 2PM

The next artist to create a commissioned work for SPACE, Mercer Union's billboard project, will be Deborah Edmeades.

Edmeades' work, which ranges loosely between the lens, object-making and drawing, has been focused through a practice of performance that has continued at times outside of an artistic or academic context and into therapeutic and esoteric experiments. Recent group exhibitions include: *The Accursed Share* at Artspeak in Vancouver (2016); *Performing Franklin Furnace* at Participant Inc. and Pratt Manhattan Gallery in New York (2015); and *Martha Wilson "Staging the Self"* at University of Utah Fine Arts Museum, Nichols Art Gallery at the Pitzer College of Art in Los Angeles, and the Institute of Visual Arts at the University of Wisconsin (2013). She completed an MFA at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver in 2014 and was visiting artist and guest lecturer of performance art at the University of Texas at Austin in 2000. Edmeades lives in Vancouver.

UPCOMING

FORUM: Ancestral Inheritance, Queer Unbecoming

Fan Wu
25 January 2017 at 7PM

Fan Wu will be the next guest in Mercer Union's FORUM critical conversation series, including talks, lectures, interviews, screenings and performances. *Ancestral Inheritance, Queer Unbecoming* is a performance that will swing between identity and becoming as the two extremities of our being, leading into an invitation for public conversation around these two poles. Free as always.

SAVE THE DATE

STELLAR LIVING 2017

Mercer Union's biannual fundraising auction returns **25 April 2017** at Scrap Metal. Canadian and international contemporary artists have generously contributed work to be a sold in support of the artist-run centre's projects and programs. Mark your calendar and plan to join us for this important event! Check www.mercerunion.org for details.

Mercer Union: cultivating artists and challenging audiences since 1979.

Astral Bodies

Shuinai Ashoona, Karen Azoulay, Shary Boyle, Spring Hurlbut and Pamela Norrish
Curated by York Lethbridge

25 November 2016 – 4 February 2017
Opening Friday 25 November, 7PM



Astral Bodies

Any one who has common sense will remember that the bewilderments of the eyes are of two kinds, and arise from two causes, either from coming out of the light or from going into the light.

— Plato, “The Allegory of the Cave” in “Book VII” of *The Republic*

In “The Allegory of the Cave,” the Greek philosopher Plato sums up his views in an image of ignorant humanity, trapped in the depths and unaware of its limited perspective. The rare individual escapes the limitations of that cave and, through a long, tortuous intellectual journey, discovers a higher realm, a true reality, with a final mystical awareness of Goodness as the origin of everything that exists. Plato’s “Allegory” is a compelling attempt to explain the nature of reality, the development of knowledge through perception and reasoning, and the basis for human existential concern. He surmises that we may acquire concepts by our perceptual experience of the world, but we would be mistaken if we thought that the concepts that we grasp were equivalent to the forms/things we perceive. In effect, our perception is imperfect, therefore limiting our understanding, which in turn drives our desire to explore in an ongoing quest for fulfillment, or is left to our imagination to fill in the gaps.

For Plato, knowledge is holistic. You need to understand everything to understand anything, and once you understand anything you can proceed to an understanding of everything. But in this perpetual quest for enlightenment, we are asked to ignore our senses in the search for truth, thereby breaking Plato’s dependent conditions. This contradiction and suspension of certainty is what makes room for faith; it is the root of human spirituality.

In our current circumstances of accelerating change and discovery, there are still mysteries that defy comprehension, not simply due to an inadequacy of perception, but that leave us grasping at forms and continuing to stare into the shadows. We are fascinated by things that are difficult to explain, trying to pull them into the visible realm. This is not a disavowal of enlightened concepts, but a desire to return to wonderment and magic, exploring ideas that are impossible to experience outside of our place in time – essentially anything that lies beyond our lived reality. Even within the orderly system of the cosmos, there are dark corners made inaccessible to us by virtue of our limits to understand and the parameters through which we live and experience the world.

A potential point of access is Plato’s ‘astral body’: A body of concrete consciousness shaped by the psyche, it is what survives as an individuality after death. It contains most of those parts of the self we normally think of as our inner world - emotion, imagination, will, intellect and memory: the instruments of consciousness. It is also a state of consciousness able to transcend the physical universe. The astral body is a field of energy that is shaped and reshaped by patterns of thought and feeling, affected by images, words, and sensations, which are in turn affected. The astral body interacts freely with the astral level of the cosmos, and with the astral bodies of other beings. It is this cosmic body that is the channel through which the invited artists engage with their subjects.

The exhibition, *Astral Bodies*, brings together works that imagine spaces beyond the physical and experiential – the emotional, the mythological and the cosmological, tracing efforts to understand how we fit into the universe. Some works tug on existential threads connected to historical ideas of being, animism, and the power of making the imagination take form. In particular, they embody scepticism of empirical experience, delving into mysteries that linger at the margins of modern life. They evoke the subjective in relation to the vastness of the world and offer fantastical reflections on the juncture between reason and dreams. It is through this alternate world that we can imagine our escape from the anxieties that hound us.

Karen Azoulay has an ongoing interest in *tableaux vivant* – the living pictures favoured by Romantic artists of the 19th century – that recreated static works of visual art with live actors for the stage, studio, or private boudoir. Her video installation *The Astronomer’s Mime* (2011), presented in the main gallery, evolved out of interactive workshops. At the invitation of artist Ed Pien, Azoulay worked with students at the University of Toronto, documenting ruffs they made out of toilet paper and thread, using a black backdrop and camera setup. After photographing each student, Azoulay created composite images of their hands as constellations. These workshops were repeated at a gallery in Cape Breton, the Elizabeth Foundation in New York, and studio parties in Toronto and Brooklyn. Azoulay’s still photography culminates in an animated sky-scape, illuminated entirely by candle flame.

Shary Boyle, *God’s Eye* (2015), Porcelain, glazes (photo: Sean Weaver)



The Astronomer’s Mime is a playful 21st century-take on the magic lantern, projecting starlight ushered by the spirit hands of astronomers long past. But the simple optics that made this parlour trick spectacle possible share common history with observational astronomy.

Many cultures believed the positions of the stars were divine pathways, giving directives from the gods. Indeed, our modern Western names for constellations are inherited from Greek mythology. Their positions were important in the development of agriculture, signaling seasonal change; and key to naval navigation, allowing ships to determine their global position in nighttime waters. And yet, advancements in astronomical optics developed in the 17th through 19th centuries profoundly shifted our understanding of the cosmos, both macro- and microscopic. Azoulay’s *The Astronomer’s Mime* is a reflection on the wonderment lost to those urgent discoveries towards the end of the Enlightenment.

Shary Boyle’s work reaches further into otherworldliness to embrace the obscure and weird. Her sculptural objects and installations have made extensive use of outmoded porcelain practices, evolving into creations that are both beautiful and macabre. Boyle’s small-scale sculptural work *God’s Eye* (2015) imagines a male nymph supporting an imperfect glassy sphere. If *God’s Eye* appears eerily familiar, perhaps it cues depictions of Atlas, the Titan condemned to support the heavens across his shoulders: the embodiment of a celestial axis. It points to the impossibility of giving form to an omnipresent god and the headiness of that endeavour. An all-seeing, all-knowing deity’s only possible form is an impenetrable oculus. *God’s Eye* reflects a dim and distorted image of the world, not so much seeing as reflecting. It is both confrontational and soothing – a deep well for divining personal revelation.

Boyle’s confluence of mythology and fantasy has an affinity with the work of Shuvinai Ashoona (in fact, the artists have collaborated extensively in the last few years). Ashoona’s drawings are heady apparitions of contemporary Northern life overlapped with Inuit legend, reveries, monsters and parallel worlds. Globes appear frequently in Ashoona’s drawings, suggesting a concern for the earth under environmental threat. The north exists in popular imagination as a remote place of environmental extremes with communities that exist in physical and cultural isolation, but Ashoona signals a global view influenced by colonization and technology creeping into her way of life in scenarios that are both euphoric and terrifying. Planets spill forth from the pupils of an untitled portrait, assuming uncomfortable orbits across the subject’s face. In another image, a giant pisses on the world as two demons writhe below it. In yet another, a serpent and Noah’s arc ride a phallic beam set to penetrate the planet. Other planets have sprouted wings and fishtails, connected by umbilical cords to a large orange orb with dolphins, perhaps the sun as a cosmic womb tethered to its progeny. This aquatic motif repeats in a portrait of Earth encircled with a school of fish, each inscribed with a recent or future year. Their abundance belies a countdown to an inevitable fate. Ashoona’s worlds are hopeful but precarious futures persist.

Death is our barrier to the future, and an ultimate mystery. It is the undercurrent to Spring Hurlbut’s work, which elicits visceral experience in her use of cremated remains. Within the back gallery, *Sum Fong* (2015) depicts four sequences of Hurlbut’s subtle interactions with the ashes of an individual. This video work begins with Hurlbut gently removing the lid of an urn containing the ashes of her subject, fine particles slowly ascend, carried by the subtle currents of air in the artist’s studio and eventually disappearing into the ether. This cycle repeats continuously, creating a sequence in which endings are re-staged as beginnings and death arcs into an animated afterlife.

Entrusted with ashes of friends and family members, Hurlbut has worked with cremated remains for some time. She first explored the possibilities of working with this material through the medium of photography by recording the patterns of ash as it accumulated on flat black surfaces. Documenting the swirls of illuminated particles in the black space of the video projection shown here reinforce a sense of spiritualism. These posthumous portraits acknowledge the transmutation of the body, but challenge the inertia of death. They speak to loss, to mourning, while softening the boundary between the animate and inanimate.

Like Hurlbut’s work with ashes, Pamela Norrish’s *Outfit for the Afterlife* (2010-2015) imagines what lies beyond the living realm. Norrish’s *Outfit* presents finely beaded work appearing as an empty T-shirt and pair of jeans laid out on a plinth. It is the result of her study of the history of beadwork and a response to personal loss. The T-shirt and jeans – constructed to fit Norrish’s own body – are her preferred garments to wear in the studio and



Spring Hurlbut, *Sum Fong* (2008-2016), Video 4 min 20 sec loop (courtesy of Georgia Scherman Projects)

seemed an appropriately comfortable choice as something to wear for eternity. Half a million 1.6 mm glass beads were used to complete it, each hand sewn with nylon thread. The details of her cotton jersey and industrial denim are meticulously replicated in orderly rows of minute shimmering glass spheres. In a project that took five years to complete, Norrish’s meditative process and dazzling result is a counterpoint to an attempt to affix permanence to a life that is fleeting, and an amulet to ward off death.

Both Norrish and Hurlbut present the body in absence. Clothing and human ash are vessels for the astral body, and ciphers for invisible forces that exist outside the boundaries of reality. But these are facets of real life. If Azoulay’s projector replaces Plato’s fire, they return to Plato’s cave, exploring the shadows and hoping to expose their invisible truths.

— York Lethbridge