NSCAD artistic duo’s show at Mercer Union embraces a makeshift, humble, collaborative ethos

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Art duo HaeAhn Paul Kwon Kajander at their Mercer Union show. Photo credit: Vuk Dragojevic

HaeAhn Paul Kwon Kajander’s exhibition, *How is Where You Are*, at Mercer Union in Toronto, serves as a visual and intellectual salve for those worried about the future of artificial intelligence and its profound effects on creative ownership and process.

In their first institutional show, the artistic duo, who are both faculty at NSCAD’s fine arts division, celebrates human adaptability alongside themes as varied as familial identity, memory-making and the restrictiveness of colonial timekeeping. Ambitious yet accessible, these sculptural and video works are delivered with a humour, kindness and sense of community that no bot could replicate.

‘We’ve found working collaboratively to be so much more enriching’

Originally, HaeAhn Woo Kwon and Paul Kajander, who met in South Korea, each had their own practices. But in 2018, following a serious cycling accident and subsequent brain injury, Kwon required assistance to complete her grad school thesis and the couple began collaborating out of necessity. By 2024, they began working exclusively as the partnership HaeAhn Paul Kwon Kajander. It’s a cheeky play on their names as a critique of the notion of artist “brand” but also a reflection of their working relationship.

“We’ve each let our individual practices wither on the vine and die, and we’re not really interested in pursuing solo work anymore,” says Kajander. On occasion, they bring this ethos to their work at NSCAD. While Kwon is an assistant professor of sculpture, the duo have been co-teaching installation, which students enjoy for the breadth of media covered. “We’ve found working collaboratively to be so much more enriching and exciting.”

How is Where You Are is their most ambitious exhibition to date, and the first that combines sculptural works and video, drawing upon both their artistic and cultural backgrounds. Upon entering the gallery, one might miss the feathery hand-painted pattern on the ceiling, a replica of a grass-like motif painted by Kajander’s paternal grandmother on the walls of her bedroom in her rural Vancouver Island home.

“HaeAhn and I had always been really interested in this idea of the makeshift or humble solutions where somebody without a professional practice or training just takes it upon themselves with very frugal means to beautify or improve something about, say, their living space,” says Kajander.

Resourcefulness, makeshift objects, and imagining out of reach places

Originally from Karelia, an area of northern Finland that was annexed by Russia during the Winter War of 1939, Kajander’s grandmother fled to Canada during the late 1950s, unable to return home. As part of their research, Kwon and Kajander originally planned to travel along the border between Finland and Russia, but the increased military presence due to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine made this an untenable plan.

Adjacent to the painted ceiling, a consumer boat seat is mounted face-forward on the wall, mimicking the back of an airplane seat while serving as a frame for a looping cellphone video. If resourcefulness is part of HaeAhn Paul Kwon Kajander’s ethos, makeshift objects are often their output. The cellphone is held up at the seat’s centre with an air-sickness bag, inspired by

a clever teenager the duo observed on a flight, tucking their phone case into a bag on the back of the seat to create a hands-free screen to watch videos.

Although both pieces celebrate ingenuity, a natural tension comes into play between technology and the human hand. “This relationship between the hand-painted ceiling and this airplane-seat situ sculpture sets the tone for the exhibition, as they come in to clash with each other,” says Kwon.

The looping video focuses on a striped obelisk marking the Finnish border at the Helsinki airport. These markers—a white-and-blue striped pattern to indicate the Finnish side, facing off against a magenta-green stripe for Russia—dot the border along the natural landscape, but this symbolic entry point was the only one Kwon and Kajander were able to safely visit in person. Although they had to change their travel plans, the duo uses physical materials throughout the show to imagine places beyond their reach. Sometimes it’s to reminisce—like the refrigerator door that serves as another unique video frame but also as a cultural reminder of home and food.

Many modes of production and NSCAD connections

How is Where You Are also displays the breadth of HaeAhn Paul Kwon Kajander’s practice and their many modes of production, as well as their connections to the NSCAD community. Kwon points out a graphic yellow rug with a giant red hand motif, custom-produced by a textile mill, that takes a halt sign from the Finland-Russia border and transforms it to something more welcoming. A stool was beautifully retrofitted with an orange glass dome found in Helsinki achieved through precise cuts made with help from Mark Whidden, an artist and technician at NSCAD’s wood shop.

The show includes two toilets; one of which is a Western seating toilet glazed in muddy marbled patterns and, the other, a squat toilet from East Asia, which hangs on the wall like a urinal or a weird tchotchke shelf, reglazed at NSCAD with assistance from ceramicist and technician George Jae Hyun Cho. In between, a clustered lighting fixture inspired by Scandinavian design pioneers Alvar and Aino Aalto is created from coffee cans and vintage lights. One of the lamps was constructed with help from MFA grad and ceramicist Gracia Isabel Gomez Cantoya, who put her expertise with porcelain to great use for what looks as light as air but is deceivingly heavy.

“It took a lot of trial and error to make this. It’s also interesting to us that a designer or architect often does solicit the services of an expert fabricator, but in some of the gestures we wanted to bring into the show, we really felt it was important to figure it out by trying it out

ourselves, working through the materials, and seeing what was possible in them," says Kajander.

In talking about their many trials and way of working, Kajander refers to *Intimacies*, a 2008 book of philosophy and literary criticism by intellectuals Adam Phillips and Leo Bersani, which ruminates on human intimacy and relationships.

"They talk about their process of writing a chapter, sending it to each other, how they're writing a response, and just building the text that way," Kajander says. "We're 'working it out by trying it out.'"

"When we read that sentence, we were like, 'Oh, that perfectly articulates what we do," nods Kwon in agreement.

HaeAhn Paul Kwon Kajander's show, *How is Where You Are*, is on at Mercer Union in Toronto until January 17, 2026