

What Do Stones Smell Like in the Forest?

Chloë Lum & Yannick Desranleau
January 16–February 23, 2019

An Object Glossary

Chloë Lum and Yannick Desranleau in conversation with Daniella Sanader

Chloë Lum and Yannick Desranleau's *What Do Stones Smell Like in the Forest?* creates a universe of things both mythic and ordinary, sensorial and abstract. From golems, perfume bottles, ibuprofen tablets, sculptural props for moving bodies, French horns, and copies of Clarice Lispector texts, these objects simmer throughout Lum and Desranleau's two-channel video installation, prompting questions about their agency and liveliness. *What Do Stones Smell Like in the Forest?* is the second chapter in a series about the relationships between bodies and objects, and it also charts a narrative of chronic illness as informed by Lum's experience. What follows is an object glossary-turned-conversation for their work, following the threads of inquiry laid out by the in/animate collaborations of *What Do Stones Smell Like in the Forest?*

- Daniella Sanader

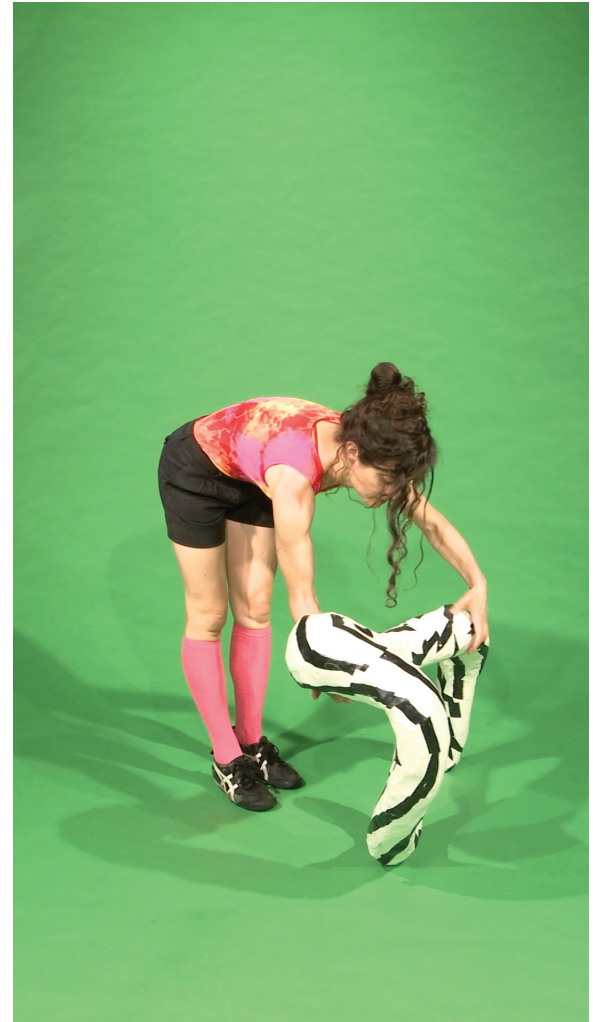
1) A prop

Daniella Sanader: The act of making props—objects that engage with bodies in your performance, video, and photo-based projects—is central to the work you have been producing over the last few years. As objects that require activation from a body, props are useful as we

think about the relationships between sentient bodies and objects. Is a prop still a prop if it isn't in use? Yet, it strikes me that a one-directional reading of the prop-body relationship is too simplistic for your work; bodies activate things, but things exert their influence on bodies as well. Could you speak a bit about your prop-making practice, and how these objects become interpolated into relationships with performers?

Yannick Desranleau: I feel that 'prop' can be a very imperfect word to define the kind of objects or 'environmental objects' we've been making. For me, 'prop' reduces them to their capacity for response, to what we are looking to find in them. In the theatrical sense, a 'prop' has nothing to offer except what we want to see in it; they end up being quite passive. We are interested in the active role of objects in their relationship with our bodies—in what they have to offer in terms of potentiality, in their unforeseeable reactions to us, and yes, how they provoke us to react in such and such a way. This kind of approach, as we learned by workshoping with the dancers and actors we have collaborated with, is very time consuming, as it demands both parties to spend a long time together. In the body-to-object relationships we aspire to show in our works, there is much more of a partnership, a collaboration happening from mutual understanding and communication.

Chloë Lum: We use the word prop to describe these objects as they are used for performance, though the



Chloë Lum and Yannick Desranleau, *5 Tableaux (It Bounces Back)*, 2015. Video still. Image courtesy of the artists.

word is very unsatisfying. I feel that the body-to-object relationships that Yannick describes could almost be seen as a form of animism. Neither of us are really spiritual in any way but I'm very interested in energies, sensations, or relationships that are difficult or impossible to describe, and that very indescribable nature can be understood as magic.

DS: I'm interested that you've spoken about the nature of your engagements with objects as a collaborative one. It strikes me that so much of your work prioritizes collaboration in a significant way: whether that means working together as a duo; working with other artists, musicians, and performers to develop your work; or collaborating with found objects or those you produce in your studio. Like you both say, collaboration requires a distinct level of active engagement, of becoming attuned to the energies of those you are in relation with, of developing a flow that is in many ways impossible to describe.

How do you situate yourselves in collaboration with other so-called sentient bodies, whether it's the dancers and mezzo soprano of *Stones* or the figures in your photographic work at TPW?

CL: I think a lot of how we work with (human) collaborators is informed by the amount of time we spent playing in bands, both separately and together. On the one hand, when you are crammed together in a van for six weeks you

learn to be diplomatic, on the other, you learn to trust the people you chose to collaborate with to enact their roles. While we are the authors of these works, we nevertheless choose the people we work with based on their aesthetic and their personality. And though we do have a clear idea of what we want, we are not choreographers, we are not composers, we are not even filmmakers; so we really just have to trust everyone, take their feedback, and then kind of let things play out.

YD: Our approach is that we hope that collaborating with other people will bring a knowledge or capability to the project that we could not provide ourselves. As much as we have learned to work with objects through the ways in which they bring us unexpected reactions and forms that we then compose with, we hope that our working relations with human collaborators will function similarly, and enrich each project. However, while with the materials or objects, those unexpected forms or reactions are often happening at the presentation site, and with dancers or singers, these are workshoped; but there is still the same 'getting-to-know-you' process happening.

2) A golem

DS: Can you speak about this distinction between the characters within the universe of *Stones*? I'm curious about the role of the choir in relation to the golem—the golem being an interpretation of the figure of Jewish folklore, an animated body molded of inanimate matter.



Chloë Lum and Yannick Desranleau, *What Do Stones Smell Like in the Forest?*, 2018. Video still. Two-channel HD digital video.
Top: Marie-Annick Béliveau, mezzo soprano
Bottom: Mary St-Amand Williamson, Karen Fennell, Maxine Segalowicz, chorus

How do these characters work within the libretto and video installation—the full landscape of characters within this operatic scene?

YD: In writing the text as a libretto, it felt necessary to put into context the isolation that the golem character is gradually entering due to her mobility issues. The text, despite being a monologue, has a call-and-response feel. Introducing the choir felt right to us, as it would dynamise this quality. The choir characters represent both the social circle that the golem is finding herself growing more and more distant from, and her own past, more ‘mobile’ self. There is a sort of ‘envy’ felt from the golem character for this past, but we also feel that her outlook towards her golem self is nonetheless fairly resilient and, for lack of a better word, ‘positive’ in the end. Having the choir as an antagonist helped materialize this affective exchange on the screen.

We chose to place the choir on a second screen as a way to illustrate the ‘détachement’ of the golem from these people, but also as a more abstract hint to this more ‘immaterial’—or less visible—new sensorial reach of the less-mobile golem; a situation hinted at in the libretto through the references to ‘smell.’ We made sure to emphasize this through multiple formal strategies, like the complementary colour palettes dedicated to each screen and the subtle, slow tracking shots, opening and closing the spaces as the story moves forward.

DS: This dynamic of a call-and-response is an interesting one; how the choir works to both emphasize the golem's narrative but also render it difficult—like a network of friends who mean well but their words of support fall short.

There's another less visible call-and-response happening in *Stones*. There's a distinction you draw between the golem and the cyborg; as two figures that hover between animate and inanimate states. The cyborg is a well-articulated figure in feminist philosophy and critical theory—visualizing the dissolving boundaries between bodies and non-human matter or technologies—yet in *Stones*, this figure is referenced in a slightly different way. While the golem and the choir sing about the cyborg's beauty and efficiency, they also reference its chemical-coldness, its artificiality: “the cyborg is sleek but smells of the one-dollar store; that is its contradiction.”

You place the golem—its mustiness, its stiff, crumbling limbs—as a predecessor to the cyborg; how does that lineage work within the universe of *Stones*? And can you describe what a golem's embodiment can offer to your articulations of chronic illness?

CL: The idea of the golem as a response to the cyborg was something that came to me in a writing residency. I forget the exact context, but we were talking about Donna Haraway and I quipped that despite all my meds and doctors appointments, I felt much more like a golem—messy, clammy, clumsy, not fully in control of my body,

slightly ridiculous—than a cyborg. It wasn't until a few days later when I started typing up my notes that I realized just how much this worked to describe a lot of what I was experiencing with chronic illness, especially one that is hard to manage or treat.

A lot of writing around disability takes the position that disability is a social construct, that is if you remove the barriers to access, you effectively get rid of disability. This however doesn't work for many chronic illnesses, especially those that lack effective treatments. My life is better when I have access to comfortable seating and elevators, and would be improved if my medication was covered by insurance; but even with those barriers removed, I will still have vertigo and most of the time, I'll still have muscle spasms that keep me awake and in pain. As a pre-technological automation, the golem's will has little to do with its actions.

3) A layer of dust

DS: To follow from what you're saying about ways that the golem can narrate an embodiment of chronic illness, it strikes me that a golem also has an oblique relationship to time; immobile, inert, waiting to be animated by some external force or magic. A lot can build up in that slowness—a new layer of dust, a tarnish, a landscape of moss and clutter and musty things. Your golem sings about finding “hair-ties and receipts; lip balm and store-brand ibuprofen, coated in lint” in her pockets, cluttered

amongst all the things she owns. These everyday objects—and the lint that coats them—perhaps speak to a different material reality, a different attunement to the things that surround her, that constitute her.

Can you speak about this notion of ‘sick time,’ and how it plays out in the universe of *Stones*? I even wonder if there’s something about the operatic nature of the performance that allows us, as viewers, to attune ourselves to this slowness in a different way—as we take in the narrative through each long, resonant syllable.

CL: Maybe sick time could be understood more through how videos can be made in parts with breaks and varying in-between steps. Or, how unlike a live performance, a looping gallery video can be seen on a wide and loose time frame. These are the two main reasons I feel the push towards video performance or performance photographs over live works. The time for live performance is strict and not always accommodating.

Sick time is slow and also a palimpsest. The sick person is removed from the quotidian and layers their stories because that is the only way to create the action. This is why the golem speaks of both the personal and the literary, because she doesn’t have enough going on and the experience of fiction and stillness is often the largest part of her life.



Chloë Lum and Yannick Desranleau, *5 Tableaux (It Bounces Back)*, 2015. Video still. Image courtesy of the artists.

4) A pillowcase and bedsheet

CL: We just recently bought a new bed, as a holiday gift to ourselves, I guess. It feels like I'm just learning the definition of comfort for the first time. First it was just the mattress: we replaced a ridiculously old mattress with a new one. That was better, but it seemed like the improvement brought with it the awareness that a double bed was a bad joke when slept on by two insomniacs, so we returned the mattress and upgraded to a queen. This meant all new bed clothes and since we had already spent so much money on a new mattress and a fancy-ish new bed, it seemed absurd to skimp on the bedding.

So I trawled the internet, looking for natural fibres, for boxing day sales, for rich colours. Gradually parcels arrived and I washed the new blankets, the new duvet and cover, the new sheets and pillowcases. We put the all-new bedding on just before midnight, ringing in the new year watching television on the softest bamboo-cotton sheets. I'm sitting on the bed now, it's unmade, fresh enough to be free of crumbs.

5) A letter to Clarice Lispector

DS: I'm sitting in my own bed right now too, and there's a dog-eared copy of Clarice Lispector's *Água Viva* sitting on my bedside table amongst the half-drunk cups of water left behind by my partner. Chloë, I understand

that much of your writing becomes integrated into your work with Yannick, and lately you've been writing letters to Lispector—the late Brazilian novelist—as an ongoing research practice. Can you speak about that work, and what it means to write to someone who cannot respond to you?

CL: The letters I'm writing to Clarice, are to me, hilarious. They are also bitter, wistful, amazed, bored, starstruck, 'diaric.' I want 'diaric' to be a word. An adjective signifying diary-like qualities, a daily practice. Not a lot of people get my sense of humour so it makes sense that these letters are addressed to a dead author who seemed to always be slightly sad. I see comedy in that lingering sadness but it's a comedy that's hard to quantify or explain. I know very few people who also see that comedy in sadness and stunted expectations. Even in those cases, no one wants things to get too awkward or too dark.

Writing (letters) to friends is much harder, I envy those who maintain a practice of doing so. There are so many burdens and expectations; how to respond when things get weird, how to respond when too much time has gone by since one was supposed to respond.

Writing to Clarice is open ended, even though I know it's material for our projects and much of it will become public in a script, lyrics, or text on a photograph, maybe even as an artist book; it still feels more private than a letter I could



Chloë Lum and Yannick Desranleau, *What Do Stones Smell Like in the Forest?*, 2018. Production still. Two-channel HD digital video.

write to a living person because I wonder if imagining then traversing into an afterlife transforms them into an artifact that we can then use and collage.

DS: Lately, I've been thinking about how letter writing is a practice done in the singular, not always a *lonely* practice (although it definitely is, sometimes), but necessarily done on your own, in an effort to reach out to someone else. Receiving or reading a letter is typically the same; letters can form a one-to-one relationship between writer and reader, sender and receiver, a you and an I. Perhaps there's something of that in the privacy you mention, that internal moment before these texts turn towards the public. Anyway, I like diaric; like the daily practice of writing-down....

What drew you to Clarice Lispector, as the intended recipient of these letters? How has her work and writing become folded into your practice, as of late?

CL: I got the idea from her novel *A Breath of Life*, in which a fictional author and his protagonist speak to each other, trading off chapters. It doesn't explicitly take the form of letters, as I assume it all takes place in the head of the (fictional) author, but the affect is the same as they move back and forth, responding to each other.

I had already been citing her work in five projects we've done in the past few years, including *Stones* and *Becoming Unreal*, and the things that drew me so intensely to her

work—how closed off and interior her writing tends to be, how it's often repetitive and very rhythmic, how it deals with materiality and objects to situate the narrative—these are all strategies I use in my own writing to the point that as I'd read and re-read her books I'd underline passages that are things I have thought long before reading her.

I'm sure that many readers are drawn to her for similar reasons, but it really seemed like her books where there to articulate the ways I think about and experience the world. It just seemed natural then that I would seek her advice on making work while in pain, creating personal narrative through objects, how to deal with career lulls, what feminine art or writing can look like, etc. I also figured that someone with the hindsight of death might have some interesting observations on the thingness of the body and embodied experiences.

A regular correspondence, even if not maintained long-term, relieves a FOMO I have about ritualized practices. I've usually kept erratic schedules and chronic illness has made it harder to maintain standing appointments.

I think writing to someone who cannot respond is even more of a lonely practice, and this might be a very freeing aspect of that. That said, my experience of being an artist, even one in a collaborative relationship, is a lonely practice overall as it involves so much time alone; so much time in one's head.

6) A lead apron

CL: A lead apron is given to the patient before an x-ray in order to lessen the exposure to radiation. It is extremely heavy and cumbersome. When I was in and out of the hospital for tests, it was extremely stressful as my symptoms were so wide and unspecific that I had no idea what was going on. At one point I had to get a third round of x-rays that summer and it was as if the feeling of the lead apron was making the heaviness I felt in my limbs visible, describable. At the same time it felt strangely soothing.

I think I re-read most of Barbara Pym's work that summer. It felt appropriate.

7) An empty perfume bottle

DS: There are many objects not literally seen in *Stones*, yet their presence is evoked. I'm thinking here of perfume bottles. Chloë, you write about collecting these objects in your extended text from the catalogue produced when *Stones* was shown at FOFA Gallery in Montreal, and they seem to be an interesting prompt for thinking through the sensorial focus of the work. In your libretto, the choir sings: "Does the body in pain give off a particular scent?" What does this sensorially-focused approach offer to the narratives you're articulating?



Chloë Lum and Yannick Desranleau, *5 Tableaux (It Bounces Back)*, 2015. Video still. Image courtesy of the artists.

CL: The perfume bottle in my text has a dual purpose. Firstly, it speaks of death and loss. My friend Victoria died suddenly about a year before I wrote the text; the bottle I mention had been hers and was given to me by her best friend after she passed. It became this very loaded object because she was someone I knew for a long time, but we had never been close, partly because we'd lived in different cities for the last ten years. Having this thing of hers—that I wasn't sure I deserved—made me feel guilty and dwell on a friendship that perhaps could have developed more, even though we had been talking online fairly often in the year before she passed.

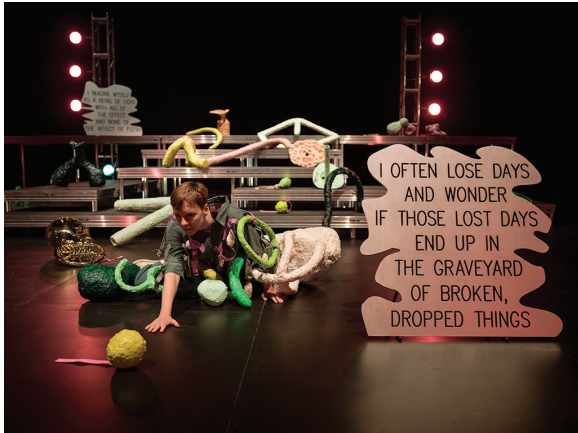
Just a few months before she passed, I started taking a serious interest in perfume; reading reviews and the histories of iconic fragrances, but also reading about olfaction and the chemistry of isolating scents and creating perfumes. Having fibromyalgia had made my sense of smell so strong that it was often making me quite ill, so I decided I would use perfumes as a type of forcefield to block out the smells that were making me nauseated. I kind of approached it the way I approached record collecting, where I could draw upon a library of scents. This in turn trained me to think of scents more abstractly and also as part of the makeup of an impression.

Because illness forces one deep into their body, I'm interested in the role of fragrance or the connotation of fragrance in making the prose or script very internally focused. I'm also very interested in the narrative lives of objects.

DS: I definitely share this interest in the narrative lives of objects! In particular, for a while I've been interested in moments when writers and artists have struggled to articulate things that are ordinary, things that are so worn in and familiar that it becomes difficult to look at them directly. The French poet Francis Ponge is quite well known for this, there's a beautiful collection of his posthumously-published notebooks titled *The Table*, where he spent years trying to write about the very thing that supported his body while writing: wandering through dictionaries and etymological lineages, describing his posture over again, stretching out every syllable until it lost all meaning. To me, there's something really beautiful and generative in that failure to 'capture' a thing, something that speaks to the strange vitality of the objects we live with.

8) A lined notebook and mechanical pencil

DS: We keep circling around writing—about the intersections between your writing practice and your art practice; or perhaps they are one in the same. I'm also thinking about the things or environments that support us while writing: Ponge's table, or your newly-purchased bedsheets, or my own need to keep buying the same brand of soft-cover black notebooks, used for everything from job notes to journaling to to-do lists. What does the material world of your writing practice look like, and how do you see your writing and your photo and video-based work intersecting?



Chloë Lum and Yannick Desranleau, *The Lead Apron*, 2018. Performed by Sarah Wendt. FOFA Gallery, Montreal. Performance still courtesy of the artists.

CL: For myself, part of my interest in centering writing in our joint practice is its relative detachment from things or place. I find this very important when I feel frustrated that I cannot work with my hands in the studio, when I cannot make the trip to get there. I do most of my writing in bed, but sometimes just wherever I am. As a person into objects, into aesthetics, I have certain utensils I prefer—small lined notebooks, perfect-bound and not too thick, mechanical pencils for writing, fine red gel pens for editing—but I’m not terribly fussed one way or another. These utensils are practical: with a pencil I can write while lying down, and I can tuck a small, slim notebook in my purse without adding much extra weight.

For me, it’s more about having my home as a place that is comfortable, personal and semi-luxe and understanding myself as a character, a thing, in that setting.

9) A French horn

DS: In *The Lead Apron*, the performance interpreted by Sarah Wendt that acts as an accompanying chapter to *Stones*, the performer alternates between reciting a monologue and playing the French horn; an assortment of notes that are short and clipped or long and deeply resonant. Occasionally its mouthpiece is removed from the horn and used on other sculptural objects that are scattered throughout the performance space, and Sarah produces other echoing, buzzing sounds. You’ve referred to the French horn as the second character of *The Lead Apron*. In collaboration with Sarah, how does the horn enact its voice in this performance?

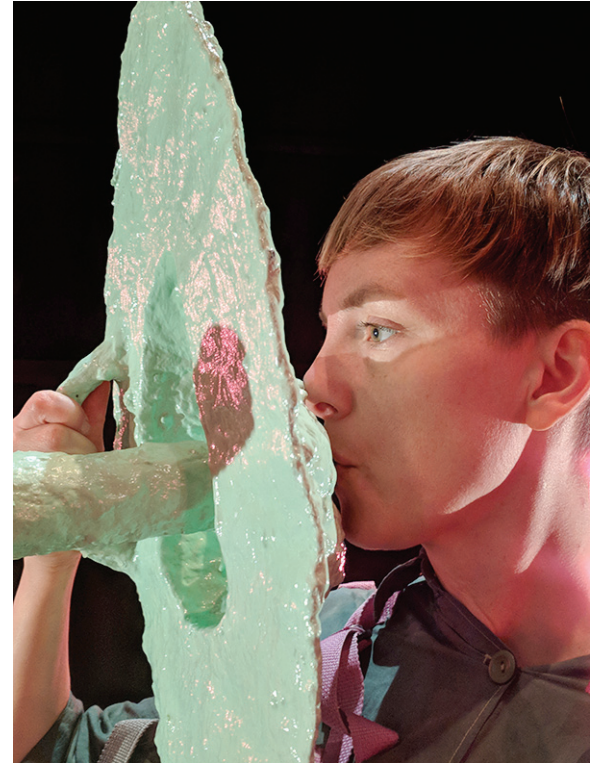
YD: The idea behind *The Lead Apron* came about as we considered how to depict or materialize those more ‘abstract’ or ‘immaterial’ body-to-object relations in *Stones*; like the concept of smell and how it is used as mediator between the golem and the world. Music seemed like an adequate medium to translate this, as the non-visual senses still allow for an exchange, and allow the body to travel distances while staying immobile, in a way. Immediately it was clear to us that a brass instrument, and specifically the French horn, was going to be the perfect fit for this situation. This was true not only because of its

tonal qualities, but also because of how the instrument is in contact with the body while being played; it's as if it is simultaneously a precious thing that needs to be constantly cradled, and an extension of the player's guts outside of their body. That material and sensual aspect of the instrument was very important in our choice, and the visual impact of those qualities serve as a bond between Sarah, as the golem, and the other objects that are part of the performance.

Then, when the instrument is taken apart and the objects are played with the mouthpiece, or when one of the musical themes is played with the horn's bell right above specific objects, that's where we saw a sort of affirmation of the other objects as 'beings' rather than mere tools. Sarah, through her horn, is talking to them and through them, serenading them. Through her horn, she makes the objects appear more and more part of her instrument, and then, by a sort of symbiosis, her own body.

This transformation is possible because the score goes from phrases that are very onomatopoeic to ones that are much more tonal, 'musical.' It was written to signify a shift in the monologue, from sounds that evoke conversation to straight-up melody, which acts more metaphorically and is meant to illustrate the interiorization of the thoughts expressed by the golem.

DS: There's also a sort of percussive quality that emerges throughout the performance in beautiful ways, as Sarah



Chloë Lum and Yannick Desranleau, *The Lead Apron*, 2018.
Performed by Sarah Wendt. FOFA Gallery, Montreal. Performance still courtesy of the artists.

moves across the tiered seating of the stage and the sculptural objects (both scattered around her and attached to her body) clatter and jangle and echo loudly as she moves. It seems in some ways that they impede her movement, but they also generate a new soundtrack or language of their own—adding to the conversation, as you say. I can sense this nuance throughout much of the Stones universe; of things that both restrict and support us, speaking from a place where these sensations are deeply interconnected. Perhaps that’s another way of thinking through these objects as beings, like you say—that our relationships with them are not simply about use and utility—that there’s another kind of agency in the way they push back, speak back?

YD: Yes indeed, and this apparent push back or response is what started our collaborative installation practice in the first place. Objects ‘speak’ in a way when they act or react, and I guess this kind of indecipherable monologue has been always interesting to humans as there has always been a fascination with the old, the decayed, the storied. As artists, I find it absurd to put objects out in the world and expect them to stay pristine forever; isn’t there more thrill to seeing the objects in how they have acted on their own, without our planning or consent? As if that’s really where their personalities start to show. ■

Chloë Lum and Yannick Desranleau are multidisciplinary visual artists based in Montreal, Canada. Their work focuses on theatricality and the choreographic; in their performance work but also in their interest in staging tableaux and working with ephemeral materials that can be said to perform through re-deployment and decay. The duo's recent works investigate the agency of objects, the material condition of the body, and the transformative potential that bodies and objects exert upon each other. These interests are informed by Chloë's experience with chronic illness and its effect on their collaboration as well the duo's exploration of narrative tropes from literature, theatre and television.

They have exhibited widely, notably at Or Gallery, Vancouver; the Center for Books and Paper Arts, Columbia College, Chicago; the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal; the Kunsthalle Wien; BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art; Whitechapel Project Space, London; the University of Texas, Austin; the Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown; the Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto; and the Darling Foundry, Montreal. Lum and Desranleau are also known on the international music scene as co-founders of the avant-rock group AIDS Wolf, for whom they also produced award-winning concert posters under the name Séripop. Their work is in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Montreal Museum of Fine Art, and the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal.

In 2016, Desranleau was awarded the Claudine and Stephen Bronfman Fellowship in Contemporary Art, and in 2015, the duo was long-listed for the Sobey Art Award.

Daniella Sanader is the Program and Publications Coordinator at Gallery TPW. Her reviews, essays, speculations, and oblique texts have been commissioned by a variety of publications, galleries, and artist-run spaces across Canada. She has curated projects for Vtape, Oakville Galleries, Open Studio, and Gallery TPW.

Gallery TPW also acknowledges the generous support of our funders:



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