

**Chloë Lum and Yannick Desranleau: *What Do Stones Smell Like in the Forest?***  
FOFA Gallery, Montreal  
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By Karie Liao

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- 1 Chloë Lum, "What Do Stones Smell Like?" in *Chloë Lum and Yannick Desranleau: What Do Stones Smell Like in the Forest?* (Montreal: FOFA Gallery, 2018), 63.
- 2 Jake Moore, "This is the sound that bird makes," in *Chloë Lum and Yannick Desranleau: What Do Stones Smell Like in the Forest?* (Montreal: FOFA Gallery, 2018), 30.
- 3 Donald E. Whittaker III, "Subversive aspects of American musical theatre," PhD diss., Louisiana State University, 2002. LSU Digital Commons (1125).
- 4 Leslie Jamison, *The Empathy Exams* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014), 5.

*What Do Stones Smell Like in the Forest* (2018) is an auto-fictional opera on video about living with illness—exploring what it might feel, smell, look and sound like. Presented on two expansive screens, *Stones* opens with the sound of wind instruments playing an atonal tune of scattered notes. A lime green screen fades in on the right, and on the left, a dancer in a purple tie-dye outfit, bathed in hot pink light. She holds a chartreuse mask to her face that resembles a safety pin bent slightly out of shape. It has two openings: a hole just wide enough for her mouth and small rectangular window for her eyes. Its large, looped handle offers the dancer a secure grip but also a dancing partner, shield and disguise. While a crooked safety pin might insinuate a temporary fix, vulnerability or subterfuge, the dancer's apparent agency and strong gaze suggest an alternative reading.

On the adjacent screen enters our protagonist, named in the libretto as the Golem—in Jewish legend, a mud or clay figure brought to life by magic. Our Golem is made up of several sculptural objects painted the colours of bruises: green, yellow, pink and purple. They are lumpy, intestinal and kettlebell-shaped, wrapped around her body and held together with straps. Her hair, in teased curls, is unruly, as if she has just arisen from bed in the late afternoon, or perhaps never left it. In her mezzo-soprano, the Golem belts, whispers and drags out words, alternating between crescendo and decrescendo: "IIIIIIII thiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiink of the

sennnnnsaaaaaaaation that ra-di-ates from the pro-tru-ding knot of booooooone," describing her relentless discomfort. "No amount of anti-inflammatories lessssssen the bone-deeeeeeeep yaaawwwwwwning iiiiiiiiiiiitich." She is slow, clumsy and lumbers across the ground. As the Golem sings, the first dancer is eventually joined by two more dancers, becoming a chorus of three.

Similar to past work, Lum and Desranleau continue to explore the relationship between the body, materials and objects—or, more specifically, masks, cyborgs, prosthetics and body extensions. Lum's accompanying exhibition text provides a framework for the opera; many of its lines can be found in this text. We learn of her personal struggle and experience living with an invisible chronic condition that is unspecified. She writes, "[d]aily life requires me to perform wellness, must I also perform illness?"<sup>1</sup> The masks featured in *Stones* echo a voice-over sequence from *Is It The Sun Or The Asphalt All I See Is Black* (2017): "perhaps it's the pretense of not being oneself when masked that allows me to act like myself under their cover. Putting the mask on to take all other masks off." Here, masking emphasizes the performativity of identity as well as being.

In the accompanying exhibition essay, Jake Moore describes *Stones* as epic, referring to Bertolt Brecht's theatrical movement. "Epic Theatre," he explains, "did not argue for a suspension of disbelief to narcotize its viewers, instead it asserted a technique of alienation, or *Verfremdungseffekt*, to demand a more engaged and intellectual role for the audience."<sup>2</sup> *Stones* is multi-faceted in material, media and form, creating an affective and multi-sensorial experience.

Halfway through the performance, the dancers leave and re-enter the stage/screen in a synchronized fashion, tip-toeing, hopping, bending their bodies and snapping their fingers, conjuring *West Side Story* imagery. In musical theatre, the Chorus plays a very important role in engaging the viewer, often portraying everyday townspeople or bystanders inadvertently acting as proxies for the audience, helping them to empathize with the protagonist.<sup>3</sup> Here, the Chorus dances as the Golem sings and echoes her soliloquy, providing affirmations when appropriate. They move for her when she cannot and ask

questions on our behalf, like "How bad must it be to be pain / Instead of pain-adjacent?" or "Does the body in pain give off a particular scent?" To the latter, the Golem replies, "Wet, earthy, a bit salty and a touch green. Somewhat like petrichor—with a whiff of musty stillness tinged with iron." The Chorus then asks, "How does one describe the scent of salt to those convinced that the mineral has none?," reminding us through metaphor that describing the body in pain is a challenging task. The Chorus is our empathy surrogate.

In *The Empathy Exams* (2014), Leslie Jamison recounts her experience being a simulated patient for medical students. An important part of their exam was to voice empathy. For Jamison, "empathy isn't just listening, it's asking the questions whose answers need to be listened to. Empathy requires inquiry as much as imagination. Empathy requires knowing you know nothing. Empathy means acknowledging a horizon of context that extends perpetually beyond what you can see."<sup>4</sup>

The Golem sings earnestly about her being—the discomforts, limitations and frustrations—but she also works to embrace the heightened qualities of her existence with the help of others. *Stones* is a reclaiming of the ill body from stillness and lost time. It is also a lesson in empathy.

*What Do Stones Smell Like in the Forest?* will open at Gallery TPW in Toronto, in January 2019.

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Chloë Lum and Yannick Desranleau, *Does the body in pain give off a particular scent?*, 2018, digital inkjet on canvas, grommets, 97 cm x 130 cm  
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS