

***The Willful Plot* Online Artist Talk with Gabi Dao**

Artist Talk Transcript

Gabi Dao

My name is Gabi Dao, and I'm currently speaking from Rotterdam, the Netherlands, from my studio in the Piet Zwart Institute MFA Building.

Beginning with *The Protagonists*, which is a short film that is composed of rhythmically edited images. Some of these images include family photographs, a garden, this kind of quirkily moving animatronic puppet hand, amidst other motifs like a metronome that ticks. And it's all quite rapidly cut, according to a MIDI orchestrated musical composition. I guess it's a rather poetic experimental film, where you'll see imagery of a greenhouse that erupts in purple plumed smoke, reflections of people tending to herbs and vegetables, caught in the reflection of the moss, which covers the greenhouse, and pictures that are being rapidly thrown across the camera screen. A hand that slices open oozing aloe leaves, and another hand, the robotic one that clutches a dirty cloth.

And then *Tear Possibility*, which are the collages, are a series of clauses that I made from the remnants of a process of making an experimental film. Which I would describe as a sonic film that I made in collaboration with the artist John Brennan and Elisa Ferrari. And essentially a part of that film, and the remnants that I use to make the collages are bootlegged from the City of Vancouver archives, specifically from the BC Sugar fonds. Which include this collection of quite bigoted, xenophobic and racist advertisements against sugar that was being imported into Vancouver in the beginning of the 20th century from Hong Kong.

And so, one of the creative conceptual ways I kind of thought of to deal with that material, was to tear it apart and put compost on it to decompose it and film it. So, I took those after and put those into a collage, which is what you see, in the exhibition. It was a way of working with these toxic materials that was both acknowledging them, but at the same time disavowing them. And kind of like having them there in the forefront of understanding how this kind of material constructed, you know, the city of so-called Vancouver, and largely, the nation state of Canada as well.

The other work, *Antigen Allergen Molecule Wing*, which is the scent work. I would describe as a wet soil earthy scent, that is made from perfume molecules, so ingredients that are used to make perfume that you would wear on your body. It's a collection of both natural and synthetic ingredients, and it is being diffused in a diffuser. So, you can't really see it, but you smell it.

For me, the garden, when I was making this film was always going to be this site of interest as this place that has had so much care and intergenerational knowledge, literally sewn into it. But at the same time, the complexity of that care, I'm trying to frame this

question in relation to will, but maybe I'll just begin with this. But the complexity of that care, which was my parents' garden, my childhood garden, my childhood home. I was raised in a family that arrived to Canada, not necessarily out of their choice, but because of French colonialism and then the Cold War. So, to come to a place and come to a place that you then make a home, and cultivate and care for, and insert a kind of like will to like live and move on. Onto land that is unceded and stolen and ancestral and has already that kind of violence imbued in it is insanely complex, right? And it's still something that I think about all the time. I'm trying to frame it in relation to will, but for me, I think it's more about this relation to a surrender of will, or a surrender of knowing if that repair is ever gonna be complete. Or maybe rather to restate it, a surrender to knowing that the repair will always be incomplete.

I'm gonna continue from this idea that will in relation to human will, in relation to the reparative will of the garden, is something that is always gonna be incomplete, and it extremely complicated, is something that I think I saw within the context of experimental filmmaking broadly. I was never really interested in filmmaking in relation to narrative that was complete or resolved or had a singular ending or notion of truth. I always saw experimental filmmaking as something that was ongoing and didn't really end, and was incomplete much like that. Something that was an interesting tension within making this film in particular is that again, like the *Tear Possibility* collages, I actually do engage with a lot of internet bootlegging, and with *The Protagonist*, I did glean and collect a lot of this footage online through YouTube videos, through streaming site videos, and I called them together, and I kind of brought them into this rhythm and thought of time-based material akin to a garden in a way. Like for me, a lot of experimental filmmaking had a lot of traits like gardening, or like tending to plants and living matter. Although sometimes it's very strange to think about them in that way, especially in relation to a lot of desktop filmmaking, or digital filmmaking, which for me is so... I have such a tense relationship to it because on the one hand it's so abundant, it's so there, it's so accessible. But then on the other hand, it feels very, at times, disengaged from the body. You're just looking at this screen for so long and really trying to sense and feel the materials. And I guess for me, so much of working with gardens as a motif, and the first few of my films was a way to bring that back into the body.

Broadly, scent in my practice, just to back step a little bit, has been another kind of workaround to engage, or perhaps even question my interest in moving image practice, and digital moving image practice. Because again, it is something that at times can feel very distant from my body, very alien. A lot of the times I also really question lens-based practices and lens-based media as this kind of ultimate form of representation, especially when it's paired to text, especially when it's like synchronized in a very cause and effect way with sound. As this kind of mast head of like, what is truth?

For me, scent was a way to think about narrative making, and also time-based media in a way that felt very in my body, and felt very intuitive. For a long time I just kind of had scent making practice as this kind of retreat from the screen and from the lens. And gradually, I

guess it's begun to come out more. But in a way that I think of, it's also not innocent like, images, right? But in a way it also is a way to kind of combat this kind of compulsion, or at least question this compulsion to looking at things on a screen or through lens.

I often think of scent as a fugitive image as well. Scent is directly wired to neurons in our brain that are connected to memory. Although maybe thinking of it as a fugitive image is not even - image is such a weird word to me. It's like when you smell something, then you image something in your head. Even the term imagination has to do with ocular centrism, right? So, I think scent right now rests at that. It hasn't been fully articulated for me yet, and it sits in this interesting, kind of like limbo of is it, you know, a part of my practice now as an artist? Or is it something that I just am kind of always mulling over in the studio? I'm not too sure. It's kind of in that liminal space for me, but I also like it that way.

There's this really incredible scent researcher and academic Hsuan L. Hsu, who has this lecture called "Decolonizing Smell". He talks about how, for example, skunk gas is used by the Israeli army against Palestinian people, right? Scent, and the way that we bring in scent, is through breathing, is through atmosphere, and scent can be employed to dominate our atmospheres in that way. And, when we think about it in relation to, for example, scent-free products being mandatory in a workspace, it's because scent can really trigger sensitivities in people's bodies. There can be really intense reactions. My mother was extremely sensitive to scents growing up. We didn't engage with scent. We didn't even really use incense much because she was so, allergic and sensitive to it.

At the same time, scent becomes really interesting in that way, as almost this kind of threat. Like this existential threat to like other beings. So, I think if we think of scent as having this kind of latent aggression, it also kind of troubles some kind of conversations that scent can be brought into as scent. Obviously, scent is also a very like healing, powerful, evocative cultural practice across the world, but I think for me it's very important and interesting to hold these complexities close to each other.

To return to this thinking of incompleteness. And, I think in terms of being abstracted from one's own sense of self and place through various modes of cultural representation, films, mass media images, music, et cetera, and the way that I've engaged with that in my work is to think of artistic practice broadly as a kind of coping mechanism for these narratives that dominate our lives, for these materials that dominate our lives. And how do we seek agency, and creative will against these narratives, while at the same time acknowledging their presence and their effect on us. And understanding that forming a sense of self will always be abstracted, and will always be a form of repair, and will always be about working with fragments. And as I said, it will always be ineffable, and I think that is something where I hold hope for in the cultivation of artistic practice as that space. If you could have one moment of agency in your life, for me at least, it's that.