Imposs(s)(s)able: Impositions

**UBC Master of Fine Arts
Graduate Exhibition 2025
May 2 – June 1**

Solange Adum Abdala

Mahsa Farzi

Vanessa Mercedes Figueroa

Sarah Haider

Yuan Wen

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Introduction

The Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery is pleased to present an exhibition of work by the 2025 graduates of the University of British Columbia's Master of Fine Arts program: Solange Adum Abdala, Mahsa Farzi, Vanessa Mercedes Figueroa, Sarah Haider and Yuan Wen. This program in the Department of Art History, Visual Art and Theory is limited each year to a small group of five to six artists. Their contributions to this exhibition are the result of intensive feedback and development within an intimate and discursive working environment. During the past two years, these artists have worked closely with their advisory committees, engaged with their fellow MFAs in weekly group critiques and reading groups, artist talks and open studios, and built relationships with their peers and the faculty of the department's art history and critical and curatorial studies streams to develop their own aesthetic, theoretical and historically grounded artistic practices.

Impos(s)able Impositions: UBC Master of Fine Arts Graduate Exhibition is curated by the Belkin team on the invitation of the Belkin. The exhibition and catalogue are made possible with support from the Department of Art History, Visual Art and Theory at the University of British Columbia.
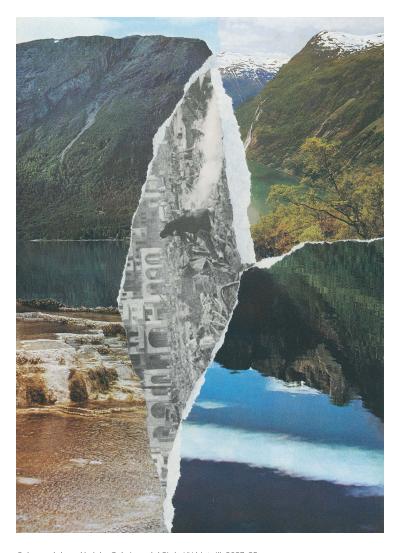
SOLANGE ADUM ABDALA

Deconstructive Construction:
The Practice of Solange Adum Abdala

Anna Be

Solange Adum Abdala approaches her artistic practice by "being photography." Born in Peru with Lebanese and Palestinian ancestry in a family of migrants arriving to Latin America at the beginning of the twentieth century, Adum Abdala has always felt a sense of displacement and alienation, yet a sense of profound respect, love and care for her physical surroundings. In response to this chain of ancestral displacement, Adum Abdala's practice is underscored by searching for a space of belonging. *Crónica de una Disección de Maravillas* (2023–25) showcases three projects of Adum Abdala's motivations in uncovering the colonizing, controlling and shaping effects of the photographic medium. Through her constructing and reconstructing acts in her practice, she aims to understand how her own existence is interwoven in her ancestral past, future and present—by experiencing the different realities that her photographs showcase.[1]

Maravillas Naturales del Mundo uses photographic materials taken from the book *Maravillas Naturales del Mundo*, a 1983 Spanish translation of the 1980 English publication by the Reader's Digest Association.[2] Employing modes of scientific inquiry and photography, the book showcases photographs of landscapes that are deemed to be the greatest in the world by a group of *Reader's Digest* editors from the United States. This publication imposes a desire to control, understand, neatly organize and judge landscapes based on arbitrary markers of human aesthetic value, backed up by the endorsements of anonymized scientific specialists from various disciplines. The gaze of the human upon these landscape images is emphasized, which in turn transforms the images into those of consumption, production and normalization within a commodity format. Organizing the printed photographs in a grid, Adum Abdala first places each image in the middle row according to its depiction of territory and colour palette. For the top row, Adum Abdala creates monochrome images by manually algorithmically averaging the colours of each landscape photograph she has chosen from the book. Finally, the lower row comprises

Solange Adum Abdala, *Crónicas del Siglo XX* (detail), 2023–25

a third set of images that have been digitally merged using AI deep learning models in Photoshop.[3] These new landscapes evoke natural ones, but ultimately become an accumulation of signifiers—a mean image—which Hito Steyerl defines as "blur[ing] and superimpos[ing] seemingly incompatible layers of signification,"[4] which "replace likenesses with likelinesses."[5]

In *Maravillas Naturales del Mundo + Crónicas del Siglo XX*, Adum Abdala constructs new landscape compositions from images physically cut out of imagery from the Spanish book *Crónica del Siglo XX*, published in 1988 by Plaza & Janés Editores; as well as from the *Maravillas* book. The book *Crónica* posits itself in a newspaper-like format; deliberately selecting certain moments or events throughout human history around the world, which are then carefully sorted by year. For Adum Abdala, this book is a quintessential representation of the anthropocene: as it showcases how humans have dramatically impacted the earth, as a recent history of power. By using a set of her own theorized rules, Adum Abdala first organizes cut-out images from both books into piles of elements (such as a pile of top-right corners, bottom-left corners, background, foreground pieces, etc.). She then interlaces four fractions of cut fragments from the *Maravillas* book, which mirror the records of events published in the *Crónica* book.

Finally, *Crónicas del Siglo XX* utilizes a method of photographic abstraction utilizing the *Crónica* book. Adum Abdala employs a light table to reveal a palimpsest of information, alluding to the forgetting, remembering and merging of collective memories. Demonstrating how systematized methods of imposing narratives are ingrained in the very foundation of the book, its thin paper allows images from both sides to merge visually when exposed to light, creating a visual interplay of recto and verso.

Both books Adum Abdala draws on in her projects stand as colonial projects: intentionally organizing aspects of history in the guise of popular-education material, through the form of a product meant to be purchased and to generate profit. Such editorials furthered colonial ideas in the 1980s through the unconscious repetition of modes of representation and codification of images. In both projects, Adum Abdala's own methodological system of photographic rules deconstruct and refuse the editorial, colonial gaze of the images

in the books. Adum Abdala's body becomes a photographic machine that showcases alternative narratives beyond the pre-established editorial photographic norms—exploring how the editorialized images distort the lived reality of how these landscapes are so valuable to their inhabitants.

1. Solange Adum Abdala, "Morphing Photography: Reimagining Spacetime." Roundtable presentation, University of British Columbia, November 22, 2024.

2. The Spanish edition is *Selecciones del Reader's Digest*.

3. Specifically through the Neural Filter "Landscape Mixer" in Adobe Photoshop, which relies on machine learning models, specifically generative adversarial networks, trained on a vast dataset of landscapes that analyze various visual elements.

4. Hito Steyerl, "Mean Images," *New Left Review* 140–41, no. 1 (March–June 2023): 84, https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii140/articles/hito-steyerl-mean-images.

5. Steyerl, "Mean Images," 82.

MAHSA FARZI

Untamed

Connor Crable

Mahsa Farzi describes how her work emerges from a certain absurdism of Iranian humour. While scholars have pointed to the influence European absurdism held on Iranian writers in the moments of the birth of modern Iranian literature in the mid-twentieth century, the figure of Nasreddin, the folk-hero trickster, satirist and holy fool of medieval Sufi literature, suggests an extended presence of the theatre of the absurd.[1] According to the artist, black humour today is a sensible response to the conflicting pressures of threats of external war and the intensity of internal repression. And, the sense that both might be for show.[2] Thus, I suggest the question that every viewer of Farzi's work must ask themselves is *what do these jokes mean* here, *in Canada?*

Farzi's current work tends towards the production of abstract non-compositions, peppered with moments of figuration—sometimes contextually recognizable as *figures*, proper, for those privy to Persian folklore and mythology—painted on plexiglass and layered to generate perceptual depth. This is a depth which suggests a puppet show, or the miniaturization of a diorama, a doll's house, or even, at times, a maximalization of scale towards the live theatricalization of a full stage of actors. It creates the sense of a scene wherein Farzi's jokes will unfold.

On the most immediate level, this takes place in the tension between Farzi's figuration and the other figure on our stage, abstraction, which, in its modernist face swallows the narrative coherence of the image to replace it with a resolute muteness. The joy of abstraction for Farzi, echoing the words of artist Amy Sillman, is the promise of a language she will never really speak.[3] Unspeakable even.[4] This, a modernist refusal of communicability, is what we art historians generally call *opacity*.[5]

For Theodor Adorno, the primary theorist of modernist opacity, it is a sacrificial withdrawal of communicability in its own name; to recoil from exchange is to safeguard its future potential, a gamble for higher orders of communication even.[6] Opacity secures art's participation in the world through its separateness while serving as

Mahsa Farzi, *Untamed* (detail), 2025

an immanent critique of "instrumental reason" and other positivism.[7] While there is no doubt Adorno saw this operative in modernist painterly abstraction, it was especially in the absurdism of Kafka and Beckett that opacity was transformed into an "idea."[8] Here it is in most direct contact—that is, made to play of and with—with the reality of the extra-artistic opacity of modern society to those living within it.[9]

Farzi formally redoubles this; the absurdist non-scene takes place cropped, vivisected and suspended between layered "plexi" literally opacified by her paint. "Expression" and mark-marking turn against themselves becoming techniques of disclosure.

It is perhaps truer now than when Adorno first sensed it that today's opacity of society is secured not just through illusionary but real transparency.[10] It was, after all, the opaque transparency of communication, what he called "discursive barbarism," or the thinly veiled continuity between linguistic and economic exchange—the historical colonization of the former by the latter—that contributed to Adorno's recognition of its artistic politicization.[11] It is in this sense that we might think of Farzi's debilitation of her surfaces.[12]

Of course, Adorno's theory of absurdism and opacity was reticulated to the ruin-strewn terrain of the perceived convalescence of Western liberal modernity, conditions meaningfully different (though not wholly unconnected) from those of the Iranian absurdism Farzi describes.[13] Farzi's work draws our attention to the degrees of their difference and resemblance; the joke of deracination finds itself deracinated, decontextualized from its role in preserving happiness under duress and recontextualized within the field of Canadian art where we are trained to recognize and recite the telos of its Western cousin but not without a bit of discomfort. Farzi's gesture is to treat the dialectics of transparency and opacity as problems of *artistic subjectivity*, objectifying them as artistic form, and, in so doing, alighting *against* the ideal-typical Canadian artist today, the transparent artist.[14] What is vibrant about Farzi's work is that it is opaque to itself; what appears at first blush as Farzi obeying these dictates imposed by our desire for the generous artist of entirely communicable and sociologically consistent depth—one who shares the wisdom of cultural technique, for example—gives way to a renewal of a modernist impulse, opacity, which our desire surges to repress. Expectant eyes watch as the artist's jaws clamp shut, chopping the joke in two.

Even still, though humour is being pulled apart in the immediacy of Farzi's scenes, it lives on elsewhere. There is something funny about a deeply intuitive artist, concerned with minimizing art's work on the production side and maximizing a non-laborious enjoyment, one prone to reveling in the simple pleasure of mark-making, jumping through the bureaucratic hoops of coordinating with laboratory techs to orchestrate the manufacture of these works.[15] This contradiction repeats itself in the "blackness" of the work's spirit, to appropriate Adorno's metaphor of opacity, and the jubilant effervescence of its realization. There are a few rules of Farzi's game: to never be serious about this seriousness and to seek contradiction as the exemplar of form. This is just another.

1. See Zahra Saadatynia et. al, "A Comparative Study of Absurdism in Western and Iranian Fiction (Based on the Works of Kafka, Camus, Hedayat, and Sadeghi)," *Literary-Philosophical Researches* 1, no. 1 (2023): 179–94; and Zahra Saadatynia, "The Reflection of Absurdism in the Works of Gholamhossein Sa'edi," *Journal of Research on Fictional Literature* 9, no 1 (2020): 61–77.

2. An extended analysis of the absurdist currents of contemporary Iranian humour is beyond the scope of this essay. Yet, it might be noted, per descriptions by the artist, the significance of making sport of ontic values, such as the meaningfulness of life or importance of freedom, for the sublimation of anxiety and, critically, the keeping open of the possibility of joy and levity.

3. Amy Sillman, *Faux Pas: Selected Writing and Drawings* (After 8 Books, 2022), 83.

4. That the "institution" (academy, state, museum) has long since learned to speak the language of abstraction, at least highly domesticated and reified dialects of it, is a factor that needs to be worked out *within the work*. There is a fundamental isomorphism between the absurdist joke and abstraction; this is a basic condition of the work. I suggest abstraction be understood as a device, one which serves to reiterate the "strakes" of the joke. Just as a production of *Endgame* transforms the closing of stage curtains from the re-entry to reality to an extension of its vacuity into "real time," Farzi's jokes transform abstraction through a reactivation of its basic premise.

5. This essay follows the elaboration of opacity presented by Theodor Adorno (1903–1969), though there have been many who have contributed to aesthetic, philosophical and art historical debates around the concept. Adorno's own theory emerges from an immanent critique of Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) attempt to think aesthetics in relation to knowledge and George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's (1770–1831) dialectic of aesthetic sensuality and conceptuality. Opacity, therefore, has circulated through many Romantic and post-Romantic aesthetic ideologies, for example nineteenth-century aestheticism. Other figures who have contributed to this dialogue include Clement Greenberg and Jean-Francois Lyotard.

6. "If the subject is no longer able to speak directly, then at least it should—in accord with a modernism that has not pledged itself to complete construction—speak through things, through their alienated and mutilated forms," Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (continuum, 2002), 118.

7. Adorno, 145.

8. Adorno, 16.

9. See "Trying to Understand *Endgame*," Theodor Adorno and Michael T. Jones, *New German Critique* 26 (Spring–Summer 1982): 119–50.

10. See Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno and Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford University Press, 2002).

11. Adorno, 32.

12. Perhaps counterintuitively, I suggest that Farzi's work might be thought of in relation to the empty cubes of minimalism or, perhaps more importantly, its critique by artists such as Dan Graham in his use of the motif of the glass house from the 1970s onward. Minimalism from the perspective of Graham's critique is a somewhat nihilistic or reactionary negation of modernist interiority (even an opaque one)—minimalism claimed the box was empty all along. Transparency was a deflationary technique meant to reveal bankruptcy. Graham sought to connect the criticality of modernism to a sociological referent and introduce critical specificity. Therefore, the empty box was made to rhyme with the modernist glass house. In so doing, the artist gave critical historical and conceptual character to the "failure of modernism." The glass house became a symbol of the failed *promise of transparency* as it historically devolved into a rule through opaque-transparency and spawned an ever-intensified regime of bourgeois privacy. Farzi's work is far from architectural, yet the transparency versus opacity dialectic retains the historical flavour granted to it by Graham. Farzi's opacification of the transparent through the citation to the contemporary anthropological imaginary is a gesture that might recall Graham's.

13. The question of the connectedness of these modes is a question of the history of modernity. The contemporary political form of Iran and the types and experiences of life it engenders is already a response, not unlike absurdism, to the contradictions of bourgeois society and European capital. That is to say that these differences need to be thought dialectically and historically rather than essentially. That Farzi's work so critically blurs any sense of essence—either through jokes which displace it or abstraction which withdraws it—affirms this. Indeed, this is likely a critical moment in the process of the works' reception.

14. Graham's glass house becomes the *glass artist*.

15. The way Farzi employs humour recalls Slavoj Žižek's suggestion of the real epistemological value of the joke as the linguistic container of social contradiction. For analysis of Žižek's theory of the joke see Todd McGowan, *Only a Joke Can Save Us, A Theory of Comedy* (Northwestern University Press, 2017).

VANESSA MERCEDES FIGUEROA

Glitching the Gaze: Cyber-Tenderness and the Circuits of Becoming

Rebecca Wang 王晨釔

Entering Vanessa Mercedes Figueroa's open studio last fall was to step into a live performance. Dressed in office attire—a white chiffon blouse tied at the collar, a short grey striped skirt and black high heels—Figueroa stood before a desk neatly arranged with a flatbed scanner, a laptop and a printer. Her performance unfolded through a mesmerizing sequence of actions: pressing her face or upper body onto the scanner in a dragging motion, reviewing the resulting image on the laptop and inspecting each print as it emerged from the printer. Some prints revealed the flattened frontal or profile view of her face, with compressed areas appearing lighter than her natural brown skin tone; some displayed abstract, flesh-toned compositions, warped by zig-zagging movements; and others blended elements of both. Each print became a layered digital relic, simultaneously freezing a singular moment of anonymous intervention and creating temporal depth through the physical acts of pressing, dragging and squeezing. As more prints cascaded onto the growing pile on the floor, a fragmented, shifting, uncanny terrain of bodily landscapes began to emerge.

With her teenage years steeped in the Tumblr Sad Girl[1] era of the early to mid-2010s, Figueroa's performance aligns with the lineage of cyber-tenderness—a term coined by Veronica Obenauer to describe open expression of online vulnerability, particularly among women, as both an act of resistance against societal (and gendered) norms and a means of fostering authentic connections.[2] Beneath the "sweet and tender"[3] façade of Figueroa's performance lies an unyielding intent to glitch the operation of the device—to trick it into playing her games. Engaged in creating jagged, ambiguous and intimate imagery of her face and body, the document scanner functions as a "prosthetic device,"[4] rendering her body—and by extension, her subjectivity—in inscrutable multiples. In "A Cyborg Manifesto," Donna J. Haraway conceptualizes technologies interfaced with bodies as both tool and myth, offering possibilities for reimagining connection—even with seemingly oppositional

counterparts—as well as kinship and fragmentation in relation to subjectivity. Haraway suggests that the cyborg body shares an affinity with the potent identity of women of colour, as both reject the myth of an origin story and wholeness.[5] At once mischievous and political, Figueroa's collaboration with the scanner, on the one hand, submits to the legitimacy-determining gaze of the machine; on the other hand, it manipulates its output by introducing variables like motion and distortion, along with visceral interventions such as licking and spitting on the scanner bed.

In a documented performance titled *Machinic Makeout Sesh* (2024), Figueroa eliminates the final product of prints altogether, focusing solely on her interaction with the scanner's gaze. Envisioning the walls of an entire room as a scanner bed, she deploys a giant blue light bar that steadily sweeps across the dark room. She dances against the wall, her movements fluid and spontaneous—at times aligning with and touching the light. Fleeting glimpses of her face appear as the light passes by, while her dark, glossy curls, partially obscuring her features, catch and reflect the light. In *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*, Legacy Russell explores the plasticity and agency of the glitch, framing it as a means of encrypting the body and "push[ing] the machine to its breaking point by … refusing to upload its fiction."[6] Although this performance does not present visible glitches like the blurred images earlier, it is itself a poetic enactment of an intentional glitch—not a straightforward refusal or resistance, but a pleasurable dance between partial revelation and playful deception. Scanning, as a technological tool designed to render objects legible within a larger information framework, is commonly employed for archiving and administrative purposes. The data encoded in each scan is neither more nor less specific than necessary to replicate the original object according to pre-set standards. By transforming the result- and efficiency-orientated logic of this technology into a partner in crime for a self-directed, elaborative, improvisational interaction, Figueroa literalizes the fetishistic prerogatives of the consumptive gaze—one that often reduces marginalized bodies to singular cultural symbols.

By embodying the stereotypical representation of a female office worker—a role Figueroa once performed in her real life—she intertwines her lived experience with her art, asserting the performative agency of practicing cyber-tenderness and glitch-making in her everyday as an artist. The unilaterally rigged performance is

Vanessa Mercedes Figueroa, *Wow Factor II* (production still), 2025. Photo: Yin Mei 梅俠

not intended to be explicitly subversive or reaffirming; rather, it exists as an end in itself—a celebration of play, pleasure, self-love and the process of (un)becoming through intuition, tenderness, vulnerability, fragmentation and messiness. These acts become a means of surviving the diaspora, where the codes of dominant systems— capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy—are fundamentally ill-equipped to capture, comprehend or articulate the circuitry of a woman of colour like Figueroa herself.

1. An aesthetic emerged on blogging platforms like Tumblr in the early 2010s, where teenaged girls and young women embraced melancholia, vulnerability and sorrow through romanticized images, quotes and reflections on mental-health struggles.

2. Veronica Obenauer, "Performing Cyber Tenderness: On Authenticity in Vulnerability in Digital Spaces," *Very Digital Grafik*, 2023, https://very.digitale-grafik.com/performingcybertenderness/index.html.

3. Gabriella Hileman, Violet Forest and May Waver, "The Cybertwee Manifesto," 2014, http://cybertwee.net/the_manifesto/.

4. Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Manifestly Haraway* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 61.

5. Haraway argues that the cyborg body, by embracing openings in social relations mediated by technology, holds the potential to dismantle hierarchical dualisms such as self/other, agent/resource and maker/made. Acknowledging the limitations of identity politics and its complicity in the very logics it seeks to disrupt, Haraway discusses the notion of "women of colour" as a cyborg identity—a synthesis of "outsider" identities often overlooked within broad categorized groups such as "women" or "Black." See Haraway, 60, 54.

6. Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (Verso Books, 2020), 52, 89.

SARAH HAIDER

Scent Memory Warm Citrus

Alex Gibson
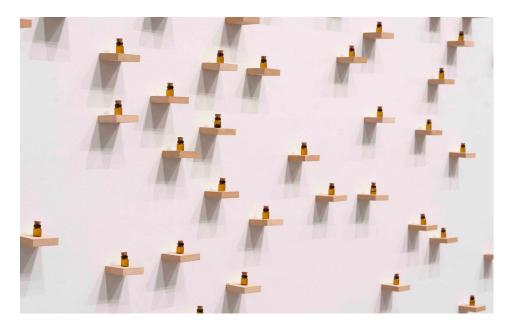
What is at stake when we forget? What is lost when trying to recall a memory and it dissolves before you in a way that feels palpable? What is gained from that loss, and does the loss produce an entirely new memory as our mind tries to fill in the holes?

Sarah Haider's practice asserts that the olfactory sense provides a direct relationship to the materiality of memory. Smell magnifies the ways in which memories travel— by that I mean to smell something familiar transports us (metaphorically) to the site housed by the memory. Haider also literally transports smells across vast geographical distances in a gesture to provide *remembering* to loved-ones. Strips of canvas are infused with her sweat, deodorant, perfumes, turmeric, citrus, melted Canadian snow and then bagged, sealed and mailed out into the world. Here, smell collapses distance.

What is lost when we forget the smells of a home left behind, and in Haider's case, the smells so culturally tied to her home country of Pakistan? Her olfactory, image and text-based practice offers us a window through which we might find traces to answer some of the above questions, before being entirely lost again in the fog of forgetting.

In a studio visit with Haider—about a year ago in the spring of 2024—we discussed the effects that COVID-19 had on our sense of smell. A group of artists recalled what snippets of scientific research we could remember from that moment: the virus doesn't just dampen our sense of smell because of congestion; it actually blocks our sense receptors on a chemical level in our brain. A direct connection can be drawn between the experience of losing your sense of smell and losing the memories uniquely accessed through scent. The brain holds memory, and those memories are blocked through a suppression of neural networks.

Haider's practice activates networks of familiarity and unfamiliarity. As the sample of Canadian snow she bagged and mailed to a friend, thousands of kilometres away in Brazil (9,890 km to be exact), inevitably melted, the chemical change brought

Sarah Haider, چلو کے چلیں! *Chalo k Chalen! (Let's go!)* (detail), 2024

about by its interaction with the strip of canvas that served as its enduring substrate created a particular, nameless smell of melted-snow-soaked canvas: a pungent, almost aged-cheese-like odour.[1] On the other hand, Haider uses turmeric as a familiar culinary ingredient to make ultraviolet-exposed anthotype prints of family photographs. *Re*-printing the *already*-printed photos, Haider makes an effort to recall memories and history while being bathed in the subtle, sweet-spice scent. I go to my spice cabinet while writing this essay to sniff the turmeric in an effort to conjure appropriately evocative adjectives for the smell of turmeric (I fail).

Haider's images explore the often idealized and fragmentary translations of memory of the home, which are so ingrained within immigrant experiences. In *Negatives from the Washing Machine* (2025), processes of multiples and alterations are employed, akin to remembering and forgetting and remembering again (and forgetting again). Family photographs are rephotographed and further diluted through turmeric dyes and chemical baths. The memory of the thing, or the home, may appear more distant from an accurate recalling, but in the process a new image or memory is formed. Can this new image then be considered real and true?

During an olfactory workshop I participated in with other artists and writers—about two years ago in the summer of 2023—we conducted a scent-focused experiment. The perfumer passed around a handful of swatches sprayed with various fragrances, and we were each tasked with identifying an individual scent. The degree to which our scents varied through descriptive language was so drastic that we began trying to guess each other's smells. After some time, it was revealed to us that we in fact all received the same perfume (I can't recall what it was). Our brains were interpreting multitudes of difference so vast that it might as well have been thousands of different options. Individual interpretation created distinct new smells, evoked verbally, based on recalling familiarity. The unfamiliar was brought to the surface and *made* familiar, through the transposition of individual subjective memories.

If Haider recalls familiarity through scent in her practice to access memories—as she ships a swab of her deodorant to a partner in Pakistan so that they can remember her smell—then those unfamiliar, fragmented and altered memory pathways she traces through image and text making also make new networks. New truths.

Haider describes a childhood remedy for the flu passed on to her from her parents in Pakistan: a whole orange is placed on the open fire of the stove until completely burnt and blackened. You then peel the citrus and eat its segments warm, with salt and pepper, to soothe a sore throat and combat the illness. Her parents back home don't believe her when she tells them that she tried this, and it worked. So as proof, Haider rubs the charred citrus on a small cutting of canvas, infusing the fabric with blackened marks and fragrant oils. It is then placed in a scent-proof sealed bag and mailed to her family in Pakistan, collapsing the distance between herself and her home. Olfactory sense is a conduit for Haider to build these new networks of truth, which emphasizes memory's capacity to be a potent, tangible material.

1. Sarah Haider, *Pouring from an Empty Cup* (2025), mulberry paper, smell-proof bags with canvas.

YUAN WEN

Unrooted

Jingxian (Gloria) Jin

There are two paintings on Xuan paper attached to floating bamboo frames hanging from the ceiling. Nailed to the upper part of the frame, the Xuan paper extends down beyond the solid bamboo rod and hovers in the air. For Yuan Wen, bamboo is both a practical resource from her childhood experience in Sichuan and a representation of tradition she recognized in Vancouver. It was after her reencounter with the material at a local supply shop on East Hastings Street that the bamboo appeared to her as an imported natural material. In her current works, Wen makes multimedia bamboo blocks, woven structures and musical instruments based on memories of her past village life, utilizing processes similar to those used there daily. Recent scholarship presents the appearance of traditional materials in contemporary art galleries as a "continuation of cultural tradition" to counter the dichotomy between "tradition" and "modernity."[1] However, "tradition" contains a cluster of concepts that overlap with past temporalities, while "modernity" comes in more ontological ways than the denouncement of global trade networks underlying physical dislocation. In the course of considering Wen's recollections, I hereby suggest that we extend our mode of seeing the artist's work by going beyond the dichotomy and recognize "traditional" materials not as the end but as meeting points of transversality, where ways of recognizing the world are anchored.

Wen's multimedia installation demonstrates the layering of sources[2] she had acquired during her years of artistic practice moving between China and Canada. The wetting of the Xuan paper, as a material process that came from "old practice,"[3] has been critically repurposed in Wen's work through a new printmaking process. In *Walking to the End of the River* (2024), Wen shifts the paper moulding practice used in traditional Chinese hanging scroll paintings. In traditional scrolls, Xuan paper is first wet and then attached to a silk ground followed by decoration with fabric borders.[4] In Wen's rendition, she prepared ink drawings on a metal lithographic plate and pressed the wet Xuan paper onto them. She then allowed them to air dry, leaving the paper to wrinkle before draping it over the frame. Although printing is often considered a technique of reproduction, here the process is used to create a sole encounter between flowing ink and Xuan paper.

Yuan Wen, *Following this Wave* (detail), 2025

Wen says the images are ways of interweaving her memory of childhood and her experience of seeing water flowing on the beach in Vancouver. The pattern appears elusive and presents potential images that make the viewer realize the active, subjective nature of vision.[5] The inarticulation of the metamorphic shape suggests potential forms in motion. The images tangibly echo the capricious, formless air. The paper is attached to nothing but the air, nailed only at its bottom edge. Rendered unnoticeable before, the air now becomes Wen's ground. By dissociating the art from a certain focal point, our experience with Wen's installation returns to a holistic encounter. The rigid assemblages of bamboo structures bring tension between the images and the formality of their presentation.

Chopped by hand to the ideal length, bamboo pieces have been tied together with straw rope. We naturally call her construction frames, but Wen says they are windows. The windows come in pairs. These paired windows allude to the indistinguishability between different selves, versions of flowing water created by metal and stone plates.[6] The frame of the artwork is always metaphorically a window. With the interaction between the Xuan paper and the bamboo, the artist suggests processes of vision that could be both outward and inward. With the changing course of the water, the messages we receive emerge without reducing either images or materials to mere signifiers. Bamboo was not merely selected from a disconnected history; it continuously participates in aspects of daily activities. Such mediums participate in a broader reconciliation between materials, human practices, as well as local and global spaces. Within Wen's work, "tradition" and "modernity" are just too simplified a framework that limits our modes of seeing. Without passively accepting the mediums as tradition, these artworks open up the potential to see things within a continuous flow that accords with our tangible experience of sensing the world today.

1. Thomas J. Berghuis, "Traditions without Tensions, Medium and Form in Contemporary Chinese Art," in *Unscrolled: Reframing Tradition in Chinese Contemporary Art*, ed. Diana Freundl and Carol Yinghua Lu (Vancouver Art Gallery, 2015), 30.

2. Jonathan Reynolds, "The Bunriha and the Problem of 'Tradition' for Modernist Architecture in Japan, 1920–1928," in *Japan's Competing Modernities*, ed. Sharon Minichiello (University of Hawaii Press, 1998), 242–43.

3. Carol Yinghua Lu, "After Tradition: The Notion of Tradition as a Projection of Subjectivity in Contemporary Art Practice in China," in *Unscrolled*, 18–19.

4. See scholarship on the art historiographical attention to this matter in the twentieth century in Dorothy Ko, "R. H. van Gulik, Mi Fu, and Connoisseurship of Chinese Art," *Hanxue Yanjiu* 漢學研究 30, no. 2 (2012): 265–96.

5. Dario Gamboni, *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art* (Reaktion, 2002), 13–20.

6. Ting Luo, "Tradition, Transmediality, and Modernity: Representation of the Double," *Chinese Modern Visual Culture, Critical Arts* 36, no. 5–6 (2022): 144–61.

List of Works

Solange Adum Abdala
Crónicas del Siglo XX / Chronicles of the 20th Century
from the *Crónica de una Disección de Maravillas /
Chronic of Dissection of Wonders* series, 2023–25
inkjet on paper
Courtesy of the artist

Solange Adum Abdala
*Maravillas Naturales del Mundo / Natural Wonders of the
World* from the *Crónica de una Disección de Maravillas /
Chronic of Dissection of Wonders* series, 2023–25
video and inkjet on paper, 2 m 38 s
Courtesy of the artist

Solange Adum Abdala
*Maravillas Naturales del Mundo + Crónicas del Siglo
XX* from the *Crónica de una Disección de Maravillas /
Chronic of Dissection of Wonders* series, 2023–25
collage on mirrors
Courtesy of the artist

Mahsa Farzi
Untamed, 2025
oil paint on plexiglass and sound recording
dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

Vanessa Mercedes Figueroa
BusyWork III, 2025
video, 5 m 8 s
Courtesy of the artist

Vanessa Mercedes Figueroa
Wow Factor III, 2025
durational action, workplace setting
Courtesy of the artist

Activated by the artist from
Wednesday to Friday, 10 am to 3 pm and video
documentation when artist is not present

Sarah Haider
Negatives from the Washing Machine, 2025
cyanotype and anthotype on paper
dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

Sarah Haider
Pouring from an Empty Cup, 2025
ink on mulberry paper and scent on canvas
dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

Yuan Wen
Following this Wave 1, 2025
lithograph on Xuan paper and bamboo
dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

Yuan Wen
Play in the Field, 2025
bamboo, recycled materials, Xuan paper, video and
sound recording
dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

Artist Biographies

Solange Adum Abdala is a Peruvian-born photographer and visual artist currently based in Vancouver, where she is a candidate in the MFA program at the University of British Columbia. She holds a BA in visual project direction and photography from the Escuela Superior Tecnológica Centro de la Imagen. Influenced by her Lebanese-Palestinian heritage and experiences of migration, Adum Abdala's practice engages with temporality, space, territory and landscape. Initially focused on lens-based views, Adum Abdala now repurposes previous works to comment on colonization, incorporating drawing, video, collage, AI and vision-extension devices to invite viewers to re/de/construct their perceptions of the world. Her work has been shown in solo and group exhibitions in Peru, as well as in the US, Europe and Asia. She has been recognized by the Prix Pictet (2022), Instituto Cultural Peruano Norteamericano, CPNA Contemporary Art Award (2020, 2024), American Illustration-American Photography (2019) and NextFoto Ibero-America (2014). In addition to her artistic practice, Adum Abdala teaches photography and, in 2021, co-founded Galería Pública, a virtual gallery specializing in disseminating photographic production in Peru.

Mahsa Farzi is an Iranian artist whose practice uses irony and dark humour to critique power, control, sexuality and the political forces that shape identity. In 2024, she was awarded the Joan Wright Hassell Prize in Visual Arts at the University of British Columbia and received the Best Thesis award for her MFA at the Art University of Tehran in 2018.

Vanessa Mercedes Figueroa lives and works in Vancouver. She is an emerging artist exploring identity politics and critical theory to create a visual response and evaluate her positionality as a racialized, feminized individual. Figueroa's work primarily functions through a diaristic lens, exploring the treatment of brown bodies in the sociopolitical period to allow for reevaluation and critical reflection.

Sarah Haider is an emerging Pakistani multidisciplinary artist from Karachi who is now situated in Vancouver. She is currently pursuing her MFA at the University of British Columbia, working with the medium of smell to investigate themes of memory, gender, culture and storytelling. Haider holds a BFA in painting from the National College of Art, Lahore, where she developed her practice exploring the mediums of painting, photography, video and performance art to consider ideas of unconventional measurement of time and body politics. Haider was included in the Lahore Digital Arts Festival exhibitions in 2021 and 2023, and participated in the Mantiq of the Mantis residency project in 2019. In addition to her artistic practice, Haider has worked as an archivist, transcriber and educator.

Yuan Wen is an interdisciplinary artist based in Vancouver whose practice encompasses printmaking, drawing and installation. Her work explores the connections between nature, materials

and human experience. As a first-generation Chinese immigrant, Wen draws upon Eastern philosophy and her cultural heritage to reflect themes of interdependence and transformation. She received a graphic design diploma from Mohawk College, a fine arts diploma from Langara College and a bachelor of fine arts from Emily Carr University. Recognized with various awards, including the Audain Travel Award, the Helen Pitt Fund for Fine Arts and Judge W. K. Warrender Award, Wen has exhibited her work in British Columbia and Ontario, fostering a deeper connection to the natural world.

Acknowledgements

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