

Future (Im)perfect

Scott Benesiinaabandan
Frances Adair Mckenzie
Payam Mofidi

Curator Aaron Pollard
with the participation of Anne Parisien

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CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

Future (Im)perfect, the exhibition—along with connected events celebrating OBORO's 35 years of existence—is the result of much contemplation and many discussions within OBORO's artistic committee and among its staff and board members, past and present. Through the course of examining how to mark the passage of time and how to carry out the work, these conversations ripple out into a broader sphere of artists and collaborators invited into the process. What we have gathered for this exhibition is a small cross-section of artists who, through their respective practices, intersect with each other through this quirky organisation we've come to know and love.

Delegated by the artistic committee to propose a group exhibition that marks a significant point in OBORO's development and that simultaneously calls up a vision for the next 35 years, my colleague Anne Parisien and I came up with a set of parameters to consider who, through their existing artistic practices, could provide a glimpse into our destiny that also is rooted in understanding the significance of memory. We considered artists who were familiar with OBORO's mandate, who had manifested an interest in working with us but who had yet to take part in a major exhibition with our organization. We approached these three artists individually, with the knowledge that their respective practices already addressed these questions, albeit in a diversity of ways. The selection of work wasn't predetermined; it emerged from discussions that followed each artist's trajectory and thinking. This exhibition is comprised entirely of new work.

WHAT THE FUTURE (IM)PERFECT HOLDS

In considering the works displayed here and in looking to the future as a component of time, I propose a divestment from the notion of the linear in favour of something far more elastic. While the idea of a bending, folding space-time may be somewhat familiar, it remains difficult to grasp within the confines of a society obsessed with goals and linear processes. However, space-time, as elusive as it is, is a useful tool in contemplating this exhibition, in the sum of its parts and as a whole. While these artists' preoccupations overlap to some degree, it is my contention that these pieces seem to orbit each other, each of them representing a world unto itself.

With *I am the sun*, Scott Benesiinaabandan makes direct reference to the star we are circling as seen through the filtering membrane of a blue plastic tarpaulin. Rolled into a cylinder, lit from inside with LEDs and sitting next to a lone florescent bulb, the plastic textile accompanies a photograph entitled *we are medicines wrapped in light...*, consisting of an image of the tarp, backlit with another florescent bulb. Beyond the playful dialogue between the object, the image of the object and the unpacking of the mechanics of the light box, Benesiinaabandan points to the possibility of imbuing a prosaic material with poetic significance. The tarp, and more precisely the experience of bathing in the blue light passing

through the material or bouncing off its surface, is universally recognisable, yet the objects and images presented emerge from something culturally specific: namely the artist's experience of entering Anishinaabe teaching/learning and sweat lodges, gikinoo'amaadiiwigamigag and maadoodsaanag as they are respectively called. As a ubiquitous textile used contemporaneously across Anishnaabe territory to cover ceremonial structures, the blue tarp can be interpreted as a connecting fabric between traditions that differ from one community to another. In isolating and framing the tarp—an inexpensive, lightweight material most often adopted for the sake of expediency and protection against the elements—Benesiinaabandan also brings into question, as he puts it, “the frames of reference we choose to inform our worlds.” With an economy of means, the artist unravels the false dichotomy between tradition and innovation while pointing to the existence of non-human entities and objects that are often overlooked.

Frances Adair McKenzie's *Space Portrait* takes up questions of non-human subjectivity along with what constitutes the trans-human. The work's title is a nod to Lee Miller's 1937 *Portrait of Space*, a puzzling photograph that features a desert landscape and sky, framed from inside a provisional and deteriorating hut. McKenzie shares Miller's penchant for the inscrutable. Still and moving objects, body parts and creatures inhabit the artist's universe, each of them rendered dimensional through the magic of stereoscopy. This VR experience is unlike any video game. Rather than leap and crash from one scene to the next, the viewer is invited to contemplate this strange but gentle space from a single vantage point. Once the goggles are on, one is at the centre of it all, yet entirely inconsequential to the surrounding world. Though locked in a kind of stasis, *Space Portrait* merits time and consideration. At first glance, this world appears sparse and lonely but it is heavily populated with textured, colourful beings, ever-present but somehow elusive to the eyes. Much of the imagery consists of photographed props, made, modified and animated by the artist. After a while, one starts to connect some seemingly incongruous elements; whimsy steps aside to make room for something a little more polemic. Certain objects that appear in the VR environment are also found transformed and inhabiting the exhibition space. Shapes fashioned in leaded glass and wax, resembling parts of bodies, reflect and refract available light, ever-present like their virtual counterparts.

Payam Mofidi's sculptural installation and video projections form part of an ambitious body of work entitled *Colonial Body Islands*. The sculpture consists of an inflatable rubber boat full of standing figures, shrouded in a large black tarp. The dinghy floats on a pool of water. Beneath the water are points of light. Mofidi notes that the number of lights in the pool corresponds to the number of nations that form the European Union. The boat floats listlessly and endlessly in the pool of water, obscuring the lights as it moves. The related video projection component, installed in a separate space, consists of collected sounds and images from Internet archives along with the artist's own imagery. Through image recall of forced migration, the artist's aim is to expose the existential displacement that is often overlooked during efforts to settle populations. Mofidi's art resides in an uncomfortable space between beauty, poetics and incalculable human suffering. His sculptures and projections evoke the current and impending mass movement of people, underlining the devastating impact of dominant powers on the body politic.

One important, long-standing practice that emerges from OBORO's origins and mission includes the encounter between indigenous, settler and diasporic perspectives, often through a feminist and postcolonial lens; it seems incumbent that any vision of the future must boldly take into account these meeting places and all the lived and possible repercussions that result from them. Individually and collectively, these works of art provide insight into the dangers and potential inherent to this type of experiment, while resonating far beyond the here and now.

— Aaron Pollard