



Main Space

Xpace Cultural Centre
2-303 Lansdowne Ave
Toronto ON M6K 2W5
416 849 2864
Tuesday-Saturday 12-6
www.xpace.info

***The way you look tonight* curated by Philip Leonard Ocampo**

Raúl Aguilar Canela, Vida Beyer, Olivia Klevorn, Karice Mitchell,
Ryan Danny Owen, Aden Solway and additional programming by Josi Smit
January 19 - March 27, 2021

*I've never seen you looking so gorgeous as you did tonight,
I've never seen you shine so bright*

*And when you turned to me and smiled, it took my breath away,
And I have never had such a feeling,
Such a feeling of complete and utter love, as I do tonight;¹*

Singer-songwriter Chris de Burgh's classic 1986 ballad, *The Lady in Red*, recounts the artist's first encounter with a significant other, who is clothed in a dazzling red dress. Crooning over a soft but sweeping chorus backing, he sings of her beauty over guitar plucks that make the song sound distinctly 80s. The lyrics are sentimental and the vocals are sweet: Its romantic fanfare helped garner widespread popularity among mainstream audiences of the time, establishing the single as an iconic song for lovers, new and old. Making use of the word *tonight*, de Burgh sought to preserve a moment of time, using the song to denote an

¹ de Burgh, Chris. *The Lady in Red*, A&M, 1986.

experience like no other; no night like that night, just right then and there. It was a moment of profound importance that he wished to remember forever, immortalizing the night in melody and harmony.

By the logic of nostalgia, the word *tonight* can escape the inevitability of time passing, becoming a timeless site of return and igniting our longing for the past experiences we look lovingly upon. While music is just one vehicle through which we can relive experiences in deeply personal and empathetic ways, popular culture and history can influence our own relationships to the memories we carry, and the things we feel nostalgic for. The elusive ambiguity of the word *tonight* is what this exhibition seeks to encompass as a namesake.

The way you look *tonight*.

As an embodied sensation, nostalgia allows that which we recall fondly to emerge again, briefly invoking moments of bittersweet familiarity in our daily lives. The malleable nature of this phenomena— and its ability to interpret time and romanticize memory— is what assembles the works of *The way you look tonight*. Bringing together text, drawing, painting, sculpture, video and image-based works across virtual and physical exhibition platforms, this exhibition presents artworks by Vida Beyer, Raúl Aguilar Canela, Olivia Klevorn, Karice Mitchell, Ryan Danny Owen, and Aden Solway that seek to explore nostalgia as a complicated method of both remembering and forgetting. Celebrating, subverting and reimagining how popular culture, generational experiences, and documented histories influence our personal and collective archives, the works of this exhibition are interested in reevaluating the complex relationships we have with the past; regardless of whether or not we've actually lived them.

Raúl Aguilar Canela's practice reinterprets the visual iconography of popular culture into syntax that alludes to personal experiences of heartbreak, labour and loss. Raúl sources assets from a growing archive of images he's culled from the online sphere- from miscellaneous images, memes and screenshots to personal notes and text documents- and

depicts moments of quiet introspection in his meticulously crafted drawings and paintings. In his online contribution to the exhibition, Canela confides in *Poochie*, a disembodied entity in which his deepest personal thoughts may be held and heard. Presented as a mock desktop, Canela faces an internal dialogue outward, staging a composition of confessions from the perspective of the artist himself - reliving an honest moment of emotional catharsis from his very own desk.

On a snowy day late last year I received a drawing by Canela in the mail as a letter of shorts, sent from his home to mine. Simply populated with a few words and an image skillfully rendered in ink, I interpret its sparse but intentional contents intuitively; *Wet*, *high* and *tired*, each written in different fonts of red encapsulates states of precarity and euphoria that are shared among culture workers (Raul and I included). *4EVER my love* lends an offering of tender solidarity, signing off the letter with good wishes and care. In the background, Eva-01 from *Neon Genesis Evangelion* kneels humbly with its head lowered. Considered to be one of the most iconic anime series of all time, *Eva* has long been revered as a children's television program that dared to explore ambitious, broad subject matter such as consciousness, individuality, depression and social interconnectedness. Considering the series' existential thematic subtexts, I can't help but think of how these themes might also feel immediate to the artist and immediate to myself, how the two of us relate to each other, and the way we may relate to the changing world around us.

Drawing from a similar process of accumulation and collection, Vida Beyer has been gradually amassing artworks for *Night Moves (2016 - 2021)*, a body of work that has been in development for a little over half a decade. Exhibiting a smaller configuration of works within this series, *Excerpt From: Night Moves (2016-2021)* consists of needle points, watercolours and stitched clothing. A text message, karaoke lyrics, paintings of personal images and scenes from films across various decades; this selection of items display an ambiguous timelessness in the way they render vignettes of fiction and reality as not immediately discernible from one another. Instead, Beyer collapses these moments into a timeline that entangles the two; a certain cinematic magic is found across each. Accompanying this work is an online playlist called *Night Moves: I need a rendezvous*. Featuring music from Robyn,

PJ Harvey, R.E.M, Blood Orange and more, this collection of songs illustrate an encounter at twilight— mysterious, romantic, curious and transportive.

As these items, songs and artworks inhabit similar spaces, Beyer reiterates the role that popular culture plays in the way we project our memories outward: picturesque moments inspired by the media we watch, hear and otherwise absorb.

Mimicking the perspective of a viewfinder, *Die Alpen*, a new video work by Aden Solway, dollies horizontally along a snowy German mountainside as if the viewer is standing at the highest point of a lookout with a gorgeous landscape in view; Below the footage is a collection of postcards consisting of what appears to be the same pink mountain with different sites in its foreground. As a nostalgic representation of the majestic landscape, no such pink mountains actually exist; the original postcards embellish a true landscape with a rosy veneer. Obscuring the line between fiction and reality by fabricating an idyllic, picturesque space that feels more aspirational and scenic in nature, Solway similarly fabricates a scene set within the same continuity.

By this logic of revisionist histories, Aden Solway works in the same process as Vida Beyer, both exploring truth, fiction, and what happens when such timelines collide. On site, the artist presents a configuration of new and older artworks and utilitarian objects which collapse multiple timelines. Assembling a mixture of artworks and objects dating back as early as the 1900s, the arrangement is anchored around a central sculpture, *Composition in One Part (A Malapropism)*. In this work, Solway constructs a replica of a lighting fixture mistakenly seen in a shot of the 1967 romantic comedy *Thoroughly Modern Millie*², a film that is set almost 30 years before its production began. Such a glaring historical inaccuracy was the anachronism that served as the impetus for this selection of objects (*Composition in Three Parts (Tier, Mirror, Eagle)*). Solway drapes swimming trunks flirtatiously on the lighting fixture and sprawls cups and martini glasses across the gallery floor. Representing time untethered, Solway combines utilitarian and decorative items as props into a fictitious

²Starring Julie Andrews, *Thoroughly Modern Millie* is a 1967 American musical-romantic comedy film directed by George Roy Hill. The film follows flapper Millie Dillmount's escapade in pursuit of her wealthy boss.

pseudo-set. Invoking the spirit of hedonistic scenes— skinny dipping in a pool, and the remnants of an evening of drinking, the work alludes to some other reality; a night lived, as if people had been in the space not very long before you arrived.

With this stage of remnants set, consider this scene: The sweat, the heat, the music, the flashing strobe lights and the haze of smoke consuming the euphoric dance floor. As a site of gathering, the dance floor has always been a space to lose your inhibitions and realize joyous potential. Artworks in this exhibition by Olivia Klevorn and Ryan Danny Owen speak to the idea of the empty dance floor as atemporal space in which we may inhabit in alternative, immaterial ways. Exploring how queer and Black histories have always been intrinsically linked to dance and dance music, Klevorn and Owen remain implicated to the histories that they're ancestrally connected to.

Olivia Klevorn's *Nostalgic, Queer & Black* pulses with the lights we might typically see on a dance floor. Its undeniable aesthetic— dark and cavernous, yet ticking with saturated blues, reds, purples and greens— has become unfamiliar to us in times of necessary distance. A closeup of Klevorn's body grooves in isolation as her movements are superimposed with found footage, personal videos, and other archival materials. The fabric stretches and moves across her stomach spritely to the soundtrack of Donna Summer, Sylvester, Whitney Houston and others. Klevorn narrates a text of internal dialogue about inherited histories manifesting both physically and psychologically.

There is something therapeutic and healing to the repetition of dance music and dancing as an act itself. Call it a mantra, call it cathartic— Klevorn honors the dance floor as a site of liberation, incorporating an extensive variety of sources indicative of the timeline of dance music into the video and its accompanying text work, *Sweet Dreams*. Hailing from Chicago, this bears specific poignancy, as the genre of house music itself was born in the city during the 1980s.³ As the beat of the song repeats almost endlessly, *Nostalgic, Queer and Black* ends with an excerpt of a BLM dance party in Chicago as nostalgic Youtube

³Magana, Daisy. "The History of House Music Starts in Chicago." 6AM, June 8, 2020. <https://www.6amgroup.com/the-history-of-house-music-chicago/>.

comments pop in and out of the frame. Klevorn dedicates the work to loved ones and Chicago, both whom the artist longs to see again.

The word nostalgia derives from the Greek word nostos ('return home') and algos ('pain').

Call 1-877-957-7818, and you'll be greeted with audio messages of music, poetry and other audio soundbites composed and cycled out daily by Ryan Danny Owen. Advertisements for the hotline number teem with the tantalizing promise for telerotic fulfillment.

Torrid fictions & Midnight callers.
Private dance tonight,
To anthems of endless love
in beautiful rooms of glass and light.⁴

This work seeks to conjure the remnants of physical spaces that do not presently exist, transforming the empty dance floor into a liminal, embodied dreamscape instead of a space we can't even be in anyways; an ephemeral meeting place of utopian fantasy. In the context of contemporary times, the idea of the empty dance floor is indicative of our current inability to gather physically. But here, the nonphysical space points more reverently to the AIDS epidemic, which historically claimed the lives of many queer people during the 1980s and continue to affect many queer people today. Owen speculates about what a dance floor in the heavens could look like⁵, and how we might be able to access such an intangible site.

⁴ Ryan Danny Owen, *MIDNIGHT CALLERS (1-877-957-7818)*, 2021. Vinyl, posters, online project, & mail out publication ,

⁵ Ryan Danny Owen, in conversation with the author, January 9th, 2019.

The mysterious telephone number invites you to call nightly, and let its contents invigorate you with sonic wonder.

In the gallery, these same conceptual interests materialize as rubbings, archival images taken from vintage pornographic magazines dating from the early 1970s to the late 1990s— in sync with the emergence of AIDS and the later emergence of the virus in the public sphere. Enacting the sexual act of rubbing, Owen's images have been partially deteriorated by removing and rubbing pigments with acetone, sand paper and an eraser. Purposefully diminishing the quality of the images, Owen enacts a intentional loss of information upon archival material imbued with significant historic weight. In doing so, these altered images re-enter a queer timeline while acknowledging the intergenerational loss that can be felt today. They encompass queer futures and queer pasts.

Through Owen's material interventions, the figures of these photographs become shrouded in a white haze; the nude men meet your eye longingly through the smoke in the air, akin to the sublime haze of the crowded dance floors of the past that inspire it.

Making advantageous use of the scanner bed as a lens-based practice, Karice Mitchell similarly distorts archival materials, appropriating Black pornography through digital manipulation. Mitchell's processed based interventions consist of clippings from magazines that are warped, cropped, and technicolour. The images radiate with vibrant blues, yellows, reds and greens. Blowing the materials up to extreme degrees, representations of the Black women body are expanded to intensely detailed resolution, revealing the pixels that constitute these images and breaking down the artifice that mediates these cultural depictions. Exploring how race has been interpreted by popular culture, Mitchell seeks to counter racist histories of representation— images of Black women in these magazines mirror an ongoing stereotype of the Black body as hypersexualized. Across both streams of the exhibition, this collection of new artworks are exhibited alongside the archival images that are used to create it. Reframing the vintage aesthetic appeal of 90s pulp pornographic magazines, these works are as elusive and revealing as the artist intends. Mitchell challenges the source as a means of misrepresentation, how Black bodies are remembered, the

embodied realities of these assumptions, and whether or not archives were *ever* a site of objective knowledge.

Time, as extensible as it always seems, is entirely subject to an myriad of encounters in our everyday lives. You may lose yourself on the dance floor as the night bounds by, or lie in bed restless and unable to sleep as the hours almost stop entirely. In my life I've commonly heard that to feel nostalgic is to feel melodramatic and overly emotional. Though I don't disagree, these criticisms fail to acknowledge the importance of remembering in such exaggerated ways: Informed by culture, history, our collective and personal experiences, nostalgia has the unique capacity to wield time. It's an embodied desire that helps us process and interpret its complex irregularities. *The way you look tonight* asks its contributors to look knowingly at this fleeting sensation. And in doing so, they assert agency in exploring the histories that inform how we may relive the spectacular, unforgettable, or otherwise formative nights of our interconnected lives.

Always slipping from my hands

Sand's a time of its own

Take your seaside arms and write the next line

*I want the truth to be known*⁶

- Philip Leonard Ocampo

⁶ Spandu Ballet, True. Chrysalis, 1983.