



## Main Space

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### **digital intimacies curated by Emma Steen**

Aria Evans, Camila Salcedo, Florence Yee, Lacie Lee Burning, and Noelle Perdue  
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#### **The Internet is for Lovers**

Intimacies, the familiar way we understand and connect to ourselves and others, have been at the top of my mind this past year. As we navigate the many ways in which we need to be distant from others, I have been struck with how little I hear about intimacy being affected during this period of isolation. Although we do not need to touch to be intimate, closeness, affinities, and the yearning to be understood by someone else are made additionally difficult by imposed social-distancing protocols due to the global Covid-19 pandemic. When we lose the ability to find intimacies with others, does that need turn inwards or fully disappear? If we can't access intimacy physically, what are our options for filling this void?

With methods of meeting others already present at the click of a button, digital intimacies are at an all-time high as we all turn to our screens in order to access affirmation, care, and human connection. I have always been interested in art that explores bodies, sex and love. The politics of who we are and the inherent agency we

have<sup>1</sup> over our bodies creates dynamic work when choosing to move, share, or project what we feel about ourselves outward. For many, our bodies are what makes us feel most vulnerable, but also they are often the only things we can control. I am interesting in how we engage bodies, sex and identity in art and the methods we use to find fun, power, and humour in those vulnerabilities. Dating websites, where all we have to share is our picture and a few lines, feels like an epicenter of vulnerability—unabashedly putting ourselves out there in search for intimacy.

*Digital Intimacies*, above all else, attempts to find some levity in the strain of isolation. Greeting you in the form of a late 90s or early 2000s dating website<sup>2</sup>, *Digital Intimacies* attempts to evoke the vulnerability, silliness, and discomfort of being online as a means to connect, popups and all. Using the online dating site as a cultural and aesthetic touchstone, the artists' individual pages are set up as their dating profiles, their artworks attempting to make their own connection with the audiences passing through the site. The artists invited to join this project were tasked with considering how they themselves explore gender, sex and love while in isolation, and how they access intimacy through the digital. The artists who worked on *Digital Intimacies* all come from different artistic backgrounds and approached these prompts through vastly different means and perspectives activating .gifs, memes, old footage, and their own bodies to engage with the themes.

Camila Salcedo, also known as Lil Arepa, is a performance and mixed media artist and DJ. Salcedo's *to be (or to be with) Bad Bunny: a queer love letter via memes* is an unapologetic ode to the Puerto Rican rapper, contextualized through Salcedo's process of dealing with being in a long distance relationship (LDR) during a global pandemic. Through a series of ten memes, Salcedo inserts her face onto images of Bad Bunny or the women (often the Spanish musician, Rosalia) pictured next to him. Accompanying the images are texts written in both Spanish or English, turning Salcedo's compositions into proper meme formats that play up her crush on the artist as well as her own queer identity. Stepping in and out of differing drag and high glam personas, one meme

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<sup>1</sup> Or are fighting to enforce

<sup>2</sup> Thinking Match.com, Plenty of Fish, or eHarmony circa 2000

presents a diptych of Salcedo dressed as Bad Bunny beside an image the artist with his arm around a woman with Salcedo's face, reading "ser queer es like, no se si quiero ser o estar con Bad Bunny"<sup>3</sup> or "Being queer is like, I don't know if I want to be or be with Bad Bunny." Salcedo also references her loneliness during isolation and being away from her partner, as well as the general state of affairs living in Toronto during the pandemic. As a gift to the audience, and possibly other lonely lovers visiting her page, Salcedo adds a link to her LDR Playlist, expertly crafted to flex her music knowledge as well as her longing heart.

In Lacie Burning's *Untitled (beware) series*, Burning approaches the conversation of the digital as it connects to western capitalist appropriation of Indigenous iconography and the relationship between desire and colonial consumption. Considering the immediate availability of art, knowledge, and customs shared online,<sup>4</sup> Burning warps the ease in which many non-Indigenous folks comfortably take from and fetishize Indigenous makers and community, by putting forward what can only be read as a soft threat, *Beware the Red*. Taking inspiration from old mass-produced T-Shirt logos<sup>5</sup> and found footage from past disposable cameras, Burning overlays their statement 'Beware the Red' overtop of an unidentifiable image of the sky and of a picture in their Ista's backyard on their home in Six Nations. Pairing their statement with images of intimate and comforting images, Burning creates a work that cannot be appropriated by non-Indigenous individuals who may try to pull from Burning's inherent being and knowledge, using the intimacy of the work as Burning's strength to go against those who would attempt to take from them. The work itself exists as a forceful declaration to those who may attempt at co-opting something they could never understand, making abundantly clear that it is not for them. Burning's work engages with critique of digital accessibility as it feeds into non-Indigenous fetish and consumption during a push for more Indigenous representation, while also creating a work that showcases the power of Indigenous community against colonial greed and desire. Burning engages with desire as it relates to both fetishism of Indigeneity and the lustful nature of colonialism, playing

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<sup>3</sup> Camila Salcedo, "to be (or to be with) Bad Bunny: a queer love letter via memes," 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Many young Indigenous creatives have turned to TikTok and Instagram as a means of sharing selected practices and teachings, and of connecting with other Indigenous youth from across territories.

<sup>5</sup> Chevrolet's 'Red is for Racing,' and 'Beware the Red Bowtie'

with the exhibition of *Digital Intimacies* itself as a parody of a dating website to turn our regular expectations of desire and want on its head and expose the negative association of fetish. *Beware the Red* critiques colonial wants while functioning to determine Indigenous creative and inherent sovereignty over knowledge, land, and individual being, engaging with intimacy as the tool to push back against these forces that seek to only take.

Florence Yee is a community organizer and multidisciplinary artist who often works in the collaboration of texts and textiles. Their piece *Lettersize* is a text-based work with accompanying images of a silk tapestry they made in what feels like a past life.<sup>6</sup> The text follows the production of the silk piece and documents the company around Yee while they slowly worked on their weaving. *Lettersize* reads like a longing diary entry of a time where we could sit with others in a room and work, listening to someone read or gossip, with the company inevitably inferring onto the final product. Yee writes, “The next two [inches] were done around the middle parts of Kai Cheng Thom’s *A Place Called No Homeland*.<sup>7</sup> It was a reminder of times and people that were not that far behind, and some that even linger when they aimlessly scroll through instagram at two in the morning.”<sup>8</sup> Their poetic styling transports you into their creative process of art-making with community, slow work methods, as well as a nod to the unfortunate dependency on Amazon to supply hard-to-find materials. The images of the silk tapestry support the words, instead of the other way around, now the living evidence of the process Yee went through making it, and of a time they yearn to quickly return to.

*Blue Screen*, by multidisciplinary artist, porn script writer, and Artificial Intelligence coder Noelle Perdue, is an AI generated short film which draws from three porno films produced during the years 1969-1984, colloquially referenced as the ‘golden age of porn,’ during which time sexually explicit films received positive attention from mainstream cinemas, critics, and audiences alike. Training the AI by watching *Hot and Saucy Pizza Girls* (1978), *Deep Throat* (1972) and *Getting Into Heaven* (1970), the final

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<sup>6</sup> Read: before Covid

<sup>7</sup> A poetry collection that navigates Chinese and Canadian cross-cultural expectations of gender and identity.

<sup>8</sup> Florence Yee, “Lettersize,” 2021.

piece the computer generates is a distorted, bizarre, yet still sexually charged 3 minute video that shows the somewhat identifiable warping of flesh and bodies against blue and green backgrounds. Perdue's *Blue Screen* considers the internet's presence in contemporary sexuality, stating in their accompanying essay, "human sexuality has started to become distorted- truck sized hentai titties, robot vaginas that suck like a microwavable hoover vacuum, chatbots whose sense of humour can be upgraded for as little as \$3.99— the landscape has changed for those interested in fucking."<sup>9</sup> The artwork itself pokes fun at the peculiarities of porn and highlights the perversion, messiness and humour that arises from sex, whether we're partaking in it or just watching, (though only the latter follows social distancing guidelines.) The accompanying essay displays Perdue's niche in the history of porn and the world of contemporary digital sex work, offering educational and critical takes and resources to compel the audience to consider their own engagement with porn in a larger framework of ethics, capitalism, and the ongoing struggle for the full decriminalization of sex work.

In movement artist and training intimacy coordinator Aria Evans' *TELL ME YOU MISS ME*, Evan's physicalizes the weight of each word of the title through movement captured in five animated .gif files. The statement itself came from an early pandemic moment of, in Evans' words, seeking "attention and validation"<sup>10</sup> from someone they had started seeing. Though the .gifs themselves tell a story of the artist's deep want, the piece as a whole is a reflection on Evans' needing to learn to change the way they communicate, stating "how when so much of our current communication is using some form of a digital platform, I have to be more vulnerable with asking for my needs to be met."<sup>11</sup> As well as the .gifs is a collage of cut-out letters spelling *TELL ME YOU MISS ME* in all capitals, made up of physical letters people sent to Evans' over the years. The .gifs can also be read as an homage to the many solo dance parties that they performed throughout the pandemic. Using their body to perform the growth and process of learning better communication, and also of having only their body to hold them during periods of being alone, *TELL ME YOU MISS ME* is a raw exposure of many of our own

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<sup>9</sup> Noelle Perdue, "Blue Screen," 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Aria Evans, "Tell Me You Miss Me," 2021.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

insecurities around being vulnerable and the difficulty of asking for what we want. To use Evan's words, "*TELL ME YOU MISS ME* is an homage to finding love and finding the words to ask for what I need inside of it."<sup>12</sup>

The many differing approaches to considering sex, gender, and isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic by the artists in *Digital Intimacies* highlights that there is no one way to process this shared experience. Though many pandemics and crises have in the past forced people indoors and away from social settings, this pandemic has arrived during a time of extreme online accessibility. To reflect on what has happened over the past year through a digital lens allows for a pluralistic exploration of the many ways we have kept ourselves engaged and connected. Though each work considers what has been lost, the access to physical company or intimacy, each artist brings a lightness and vulnerability to their piece which in turn manifest new methods of intimacy and connection.

The artworks exhibited will exist long after the pandemic is over, and serve as a capsule of sorts, of a moment in our search for intimacy. My hope is that audiences moving through this digital exhibition will be struck by how honest, clear, educational, and funny the artworks exhibited are, and that they find elements of their own experiences reflected back at them through these explorations. I hope audiences feel that they have stumbled upon a space to find their own digital connection while we find ourselves still apart from each other.

As splashed across the homepage for the exhibition:

*"You've come to the right place"*

-Emma Steen

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<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*