



Main Space

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Shannon Sandwell, Pixel Heller, Emerald Repard-Denniston

step into this place, they remember

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There is a place where time doesn't follow but everything else resonates with great intensity. In this space, there are no boundaries; they are walking through a dream, catching a glimpse of the future, reliving a memory that belongs to someone.

This group exhibition, *step into this place, they remember* is a collection of portals to places where the familiar is imminent. The works of Shannon Sandwell, Pixel Heller, and Emerald Repard-Denniston guide the viewer through a landscape where time folds in on itself—where memory escapes its boundaries, and what one remembers becomes accessible to those who are attuned. These works beckon us into a realm that exists between here and elsewhere, where every image, every form, and every gesture offers a new question, a new way of seeing. At this intersection of remembering and reimagining, the exhibition becomes a space of curiosity and reflection, urging us to embrace the complexity of what we remember and how it shapes who we are. Through this dynamic interplay, *step into this place, they remember* reimagines what it means to exist within the ever-changing currents of memory, identity, and connection.

As soon as the viewer steps into the gallery they are met with Pixel Heller's collection of drums, *Ancestral technology*. The small, vividly coloured collection of drums draws the eye inward, inviting a physical closeness—an instinct to lean in, to contemplate at the first series of portals in the exhibition. Grounding their practice in Moko Jumbie—a stilt walking performance rooted in Afro-Caribbean Carnival masquerade—Heller naturally has an inseparable and sacred partnership with drums. At the top of their hierarchy of music, drumming opens a portal to the spiritual space they share with

their ancestors. Through movement, sound, and repetition, Heller uses the drum to enter a deeper state—what they often describe as ancestral memory stored in the body. The sound from the drums awakens these memories, moving through the body and offering a communion between spirit, past, and present.

The ceramic drums are painted in bright colours inspired by the rich hues of Afro-Caribbean carnival—a palette that appears throughout Heller’s work, reflecting a legacy of resistance and the celebration of freedom. The plinths ground the drums like altars, while the colours work to situate each drum within its own emotional and spiritual frequency. The form of the drums draw from the physicality of carnival figures, ancestral beings, and the diverse expressions of Black embodiment. The protruding points on the drums mirror the horns of Jab Jab—a masquerade character in which revelers take on the guise of devilish figures adorned with chains and horns. This figure symbolizes both the brutality of oppression and the triumph of liberation. Their horns serve as both a warning and a welcome. By placing them on the drums, Heller is fusing two ancestral practices, rhythm and masquerade. As sculptural shapes, they take on an otherworldly presence—at once protectors, spirit beings, and vessels of memory.

By creating a collection of hand drums, Heller has formed another bridge to their ancestors—this time through the transmission of knowledge by Jean Paul Mohammed, a traditional healer of the Ballacus people of Trinidad and Tobago, a master drummer, craftsman, and oral historian. Cross generational exchange engaged in strengthening cultural preservation has been a central aspect of Heller’s practice, making the drums physical manifestations of these processes. Learning to make drums from Jean Paul was a transformative experience. Heller describes his generosity felt like a blessing—one that revealed drum making as an act of remembrance. The drum possesses a multisensory portal, not only creating the sound that brings Heller into an ancestral space, but also a sacred synchronized movement with their ancestors. Each step—from the movement of the hands shaping the drum’s body to the stretching of goat skin across its base—is a ritual. Heller’s use of Canadian goatskin expresses the resilience of Afro-Caribbean craft traditions alive throughout the diaspora. While the creation of the object itself releases rich physical and audio memory that exists in an enduring archive across generations of Afro-Caribbean people.

As viewers progress through the gallery, they are overtaken by the immense scale of Shannon Sandwell’s paintings, *Sentimental Attachment*. Consisting of four large horizontally oriented paintings arranged in a two-by-two grid, they build an environment

where the viewer is inhabiting the frame and becoming part of the ensemble. The interconnected body of *Sentimental Attachment* engages the viewer in an act of remembering, asking: *What do you recall from this place? Where were you in this moment?* The paintings are composed of images from photos taken by Sandwell, friends, and their extended community. The figures are anonymized by way of high colour saturation, altering scale, cropping, and reorientation.

Using the technique of *defamiliarization*, rendering the familiar, unfamiliar, Sandwell disrupts any clear narrative, prompting viewers to linger, to search. The images—depicting stuffed animals, pets, and tattoos, and portraits of queer friends—represent intimate moments and portrays platonic queerness in it's quiet and lived reality. The composition of these images, along with the presence of familiar cultural motifs—such as Charli XCX's *Brat* album or commonly worn shoes like Doc Martens, Crocs, and Adidas Superstars—helps to blur the boundaries between the personal and the universal. Even for those who were there, who recognize the people, objects, and places depicted, there is an uncanny sense of rediscovery—as if seeing these moments for the first time, refracted through the tender and thoughtful distortion. Sandwells intention is to illuminate, in both subtle and striking ways, how we can exist in vignettes of each others memories. In this way, *Sentimental Attachment* serves as a portal to and from a collective memory.

In Sandwell's work, the force of each brushstroke is unmistakable—marks that carry the weight of physical strength, yet emerge from a place of deep tenderness. This tension mirrors the body's own way of processing powerful emotion: the instinct to grip, to hold tight, or to clench as a way to try to make a special moment last a little longer. The marks are made even more clear by the vivid colours used by the artist. Despite the saturation of color, every scene is crafted from the same primary yellow, red, and blue, uniting them within a shared visual world. Earlier works by the artist in the gallery space employ the same technique, creating an assemblage of chroma that honors how connections can be reimagined and revisited—an ongoing, evolving process of remembering.

On the opposite wall, Emerald Repard Denniston's body of work is spread across the bend of the gallery. The paintings' uncanny, sweeping scenes lure the viewer's eye, revealing endless plotlines on the horizon, ultimately bearing witness to the artist's traversal of psychological terrain following her first reunion with her birth family. Her collection of paintings—three large-scale works and three smaller pieces—offers visual expressions of a liminal space where her inner world meets, merges, and exists in unison

with life-altering memories. Adopted from China as an infant, Repard Denniston reflects on the surreal experience of meeting the family she had long envisioned—figures who, for much of her life, only existed in her 'ghost kingdom.' This term, coined by adoption advocate Betty Jean Lifton, describes the imagined world created by adoptees, where projections of lost or wished-for family members reside as unrealized figures, shaping identity in their absence. Now, a year after their reunion, Repard Denniston's birth family have become real, formative presences—central figures in the ongoing reconstruction of her self-understanding, both as a vessel and as a spirit moving through the many worlds she inhabits. The artist's body of work illustrates moments during her first return home, rendered with the emotional weight of memory—her family gathered around a lazy Susan sharing a meal, fireworks illuminating the sky before her childhood home, and intimate perspective of seeing the street where she was born for the first time.

Crossing Over depicts the artist's family atop an iceberg adrift in a chaotic sea, creating a palpable tension in the painting: the world above, grounded in lived reality, hovers just shy of contact with what lies beneath—an equally consequential realm: the artist's inner world, shaped by her ghost kingdom and the lurking persistence of her hauntings. These figures follow her into *The Lady or the Tiger*—her ghost mother, with an open wound, cries on the street where the artist entered the world. The apocalyptic darkness of the painting screams into a deafening silence, leaving a raw, unspoken grief that lingers like the shadows of creatures on the buildings. Many of these creatures and forms emerged directly from her sketchbook, drawn during the time of her reunion. The three smaller works, *Eating the Other*, *Eating the Self*, and *Between and Between*, offer a contained space where these presences can exist in a kind of tangled convergence—ghosts interwoven with the emotional residue of retrospection, fragments of lost lines, and unresolved shapes that Repard Denniston is still in the process of placing in her memory.

In *Welcome Home To My Ghost Kingdom*, the artist's extended family is depicted in unison, brushed in golden yellow against a red backdrop—colours deeply ingrained in Chinese culture. The painting meditates on that first encounter, where the artist stands among generations of relatives on the land they have dwelled for generations. They imagined who she might be, just as many other Chinese families had imagined their lost children during the era of the One Child Policy. The dreamt versions of one another collide with reality, under the same sky, now filled with light, listening to the same sounds echo through the place that has awaited her return.

As the viewer moves through the gallery, their interactions with the works carry them across an elusive landscape that connects individuals across time, space, and relationships. The artists invite us into places that honour the act of remembering, where stories are shared, preserved, and passed down, and the boundaries between past and present dissolve. The works urge us not merely to observe, but to feel—to inhabit the space between what is seen and what is remembered, discovering ourselves within the folds of these collective narratives.

- Serene Mitchell