

SACRED SPIT

by

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Abstract

SACRED SPIT is a curatorial thesis exhibition that explores the grotesque. Specifically, the act of degradation. It aims to lower all that is high, moral, and abstract to the material level. The holy descends to the bodily realm, and it renders our tactile intertwined forms as blessed. The grotesque's ability to mutate, shift, and destabilize 'boundaries' between self/other, us/them, you/me, earth/body, and brain/spirit holds a powerful re-structuring of established order.

SACRED SPIT positions three artist's works in dialogue: Karice Mitchell, Noelle Perdue, and Lauren Pirie to investigate the potentialities of the boundless body in intrinsic unity with human, animal, and natural worlds.

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Dedications

I dedicate this work to the following...

My mother, you believed in me since day one. We will have a special bond forever.

My father, you continuously teach me generosity and to trust my gut.

My brother and sister, you both helped raise me. I am so proud of you.

Guido Sebastianis and Olga Sebastianis, your blood runs through me. I can feel you with me.

Grandma Sophie Covello, you are the grand matriarch. William, you are the comedic relief.

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INTRODUCTION

“my body
writes into your flesh
the poem
you make of me.”

- “Recreation” by Audre Lorde

As a kid I was chubby and perfect. My skin was squishy. I had a big round head like the moon. I took baths with my older brother and sister. Their bodies were different than mine. In the morning I would see my mom blow-drying her hair, shirtless. She would run the hair dryer down my back... warming up my little body. I'd watch her put makeup on. I wondered when I'd get boobs. Flattening my chest against the wall I'd measure if I was growing. Then, I'd stuff my bra and go to school. If I was sick, I'd stay at home and watch TLC's A Baby Story (1998). My dad would come home from work – sweating. Hairy, muscles drenched, ready for dinner. Sometimes we would go to Corpus Christi for mass. I look more like my mom... no. I look more like my dad. I'm not sure. It changes all the time, depending on the angle. It's strange how families look the same and completely different at all times.

I've been obsessed with the body in transformation for as long as I can remember. In my youth I spent an excessive amount of energy trying to control my embodied form. I would: pop my pimples, pick my skin, lather myself in creams and oils, and shave my entire body. I'd starve myself, binge eat, puke it all back up, drink until black out, and consume any drug I could get my hands on. I'd work out, pierce my skin, cut myself, punch myself until bruised, give myself tattoos and then carve them out. I noticed my body changing dependent on the environment around me, the actions I would inflict, and biological growth. Like a repetitive call and response,

my coping mechanisms responded to both my outer and inner worlds simultaneously. My skin continues to be the passageway for all communication.

I share these intimate details because, similar to the authors I admire – bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Maggie Nelson, Kai Cheng Thom, Adrienne Marie Brown, among others – an important part of my research is remembering the self, even in its grotesqueries. Despite academic preferences for a separation of personal life and study, I am not outside of my research, I am deeply within it.

In my thesis exhibition, titled *SACRED SPIT* (2022), I set a stage for an exploration of the grotesque by bringing together works of three contemporary artists whose works explore relations to the body: Karice Mitchell, Noelle Perdue and Lauren Pirie. Mitchell's *Ib and 52* (2021) is an installation piece that consists of a transparent Plexiglas container filled with two years worth of the artist's cut hair. The black hair intertwines with itself and is embedded with remnants of dirt, oil, product, and life. In Perdue's *Blue Screen* (2021) we witness 1500 still frames from three Golden Age of Porn films: *Hot and Saucy Pizza Girls* (1978), *Deep Throat* (1972) and *Getting Into Heaven* (1970) manipulated by generative adversarial network, StyleGAN2. The artificial intelligence program created an unintelligible video consisting of the images fusing in and out of each other to create an entirely new pornographic work. Pirie's *Fluid Exchange* (2022) is a soft sculpture consisting of a flesh-coloured hand painted stuffed textile shaped in a tube with feet at the end, filled with an LED light, and tied into a mounded knot. I am interested in the ways these works, on their own and collectively, confront the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane. Religious ideology positions the sacred as an unreachable world that is closed to humans. Within this exhibition I bring the sacred down to be in and of the body.

My title reflects this desire. Spit, like all bodily fluids and the body itself, is in constant relationship to our outside environments. We kiss, make-out, share cups, take a bite of food and pass it around, share toothbrushes in a pinch, and spit-out tastes that revolt us. Animals lick each other to groom themselves and heal wounds. Spitting itself can be seen as an offensive act, as it's the inside becoming the outside. Like crying or sweating in public, spit is supposed to remain within the 'privacy' of the body. The mouth is the most obvious and visible open vessel for consumption, rejection, and communication. To make spit sacred means honouring the natural messiness of the porous body, the openings through which our worlds flow, and bodies in relationship, while rejecting the idealized hyper-individual closed body.

At the root of *SACRED SPIT* was a desire to embody the grotesque in all aspects of exhibition itself, creating an environment that reflects the ideas of the project and the artworks. In this paper, I go through the core ideas that I used to create this project, specifically around Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of the carnivalesque, as well as the main material and conceptual choices I made in staging this exhibition.

BODIES AND A HISTORY OF THE GROTESQUE

Original Sin and Women

During the Middle Ages, the body was heavily linked to religious doctrine that classified it as being extremely vulnerable to otherworldly demonic possession. In *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages*, Dylan Elliot writes “by virtue of original sin, the human body was fallen – rendered irretrievable impure from the outset and thus vulnerable to onslaughts of demons, who were perceived as inherently the enemies of purity” (2). Being born into a body becomes a sin against God simply through the act, and so, sins were associated with the various uncontrollable and natural aspects of the embodied form. For example, in the Middle Ages menstrual blood was believed to be so detestable and unclean that if it came into contact with dogs, they would run mad; plants would not germinate; and men could be killed in certain associations (Elliot 116). Through Eve’s initial coalition with Satan leading to humanity’s fall; women “even though free of personal sin, nevertheless [became] a compelling image for original sin and the fallen condition of the human body – an image of woman that would remain available throughout the Middle Ages” (Elliot 4;7). Eve set the blueprint for the easily tempted woman, with a fragile porous body ripe for demonic possession and disgrace.

The natural state of women’s bodies supported religious doctrine of the body as sin. Lactating breasts and monthly menstrual blood displayed obvious evidence of the terrifying uncontrollable form of the woman. Childbirth, still mystical, involved the literal consuming of liquid information from another body to produce new life. The nine months of pregnancy was a clear depiction of the body as shifting, changing, consuming, and growing. Pregnancy signaled sex, which began with lust – making all procreation “tainted with sin” (Cybulskie). The ability for the body to become so easily polluted by negative forces demonstrates medieval knowledge

of the porous body, and a history of deep fear associated with the lack of concrete boundaries between self and other.

The Virgin Mary became the highest representation of purity, while real women in the flesh become further associated with and punished for their earthly material forms. Here, we see a clear divide between the sacred and profane. The representation of the Virgin Mary is rendered sacred, whereas living breathing women were profane. Mary was the altruistic and ideal woman who could remain a virgin while entering divine motherhood. In Rabertus's *On the Parturition of the Virgin* he argued that Mary experienced no tribulations associated with childbirth; the travails of ordinary childbirth were associated with Eve (Elliot 108-109). Similarly, Thomas Aquinas (b. 1225) argued that "while the hot lust of ordinary intercourse draws the menstrual blood down to the woman's genitals for purposes of conception, the blood used in the conception of the Holy Spirit brought completely pure and untainted blood directly to the Virgin's womb" (Elliot 5). The sacred representation of the Virgin Mary ascended all bodily associations, while being offered as a "purified substitute" for women in general (Elliot 82).

The Grotesque Body

At the same time, in the Middle Ages, festivals and carnivals provided a refuge from fear driven theological doctrine. In Mikhail Bakhtin's seminal text *Rabelais and his World*, the author describes medieval festivities as momentary radical spaces of creative play that temporarily suspended hierarchical barriers like caste, property, profession and age (10). The carnival was a time for folk humour "that revives and renews at the same time", carnival laughter "of all the people", and the subversion of established religious order (Bakhtin 10; 11). In analyzing

Rabelais' work, Bakhtin points out that during carnivals the material body played a dominant role with its "food, drink, defecation, and sexual life" (18). The concept of grotesque realism was created to describe this embodied phenomenon. As Bakhtin writes:

In grotesque realism, therefore, the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egoistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. As such it is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world; it makes no pretense to renunciation of the earth or independence of the earth and the body. We repeat: the body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people's character; this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because it is not individualized. The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. This is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable. (19)

In the medieval carnival context, the body was interconnected and in dialogue with every other body, plant, and animal of the outside world. There was no concept of the individual self, or the self and other, all bodies were part of one "collective ancestral body", brimming over with fertility, growth, and abundance (Bakhtin 19).

Grotesque realism blossomed from the context of medieval carnivals. However, the grotesque itself derives from roughly the fifteenth century (Bakhtin 31). During the excavation of Titus' baths, ornaments were found and named *grottesca* from the Italian word *grotta* (Bakhtin 31-21). The characteristics of these ornaments included the blurring of boundaries between plant, animal, and human forms – were playful, free-flowing, and did not present a "static presentation of reality" (Bakhtin 32). Through the productive disruption of biological categorization, the

grotesque offers a newly ever-changing quality to form and being. Grotesque is not closed, finished, or finite, but instead emphasizes “the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it” like “the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly [and] the nose” (Bakhtin 26). By emphasizing the characteristics of the body that are typically hidden and associated with religious shame, the grotesque directly opposes the representative, individual, closed system that the church adamantly promoted.

Degradation and Horror

An essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation: “the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (Bakhtin 19-20). Degradation, in the context of my exhibition, means the descending of the holy to the material level in hopes of rendering the tactile as blessed intertwined forms. The grotesque’s ability to mutate, shift, and destabilize ‘boundaries’ between self/other, us/them, you/me, earth/body, and brain/spirit holds a powerful re-structuring of established order.

The horrific quality, sometimes affiliated with the grotesque, displays the uncomfortable nature of the grotesque’s possibilities. In late capitalism and the context of COVID-19, there is a desire for an individualized, closed, and autonomous self in all of its processes – or something holy: the closed body as the sacred, proper, and idealized state. But we’ve seen the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus *because* our bodies are porous; they are interconnected and intermingling, and we blend and change forms depending on our relationships. I’m interested in subverting religious language to render the grotesque as sacred. The body as not worshipped or

feared like the Virgin Mary, but honoured and revered for its ever-changing and inter-related qualities. The association of the grotesque with the horrific is a general fear of our lack of control, as well as the anxiety associated with the uncontrollable body.

SPACE OF EXHIBITION

Curatorial Research

By doing a close inspection on exhibitions that moved me, I was able to articulate my decisions more thoughtfully. As a first-time physical curator, it was helpful to learn from these exhibitions. There were two exhibitions that were particularly influential on my curatorial choices.

The first is the immersive installation *New Circadia (Adventures in Mental Spelunking)* (2019-2020) at the Architecture and Design Gallery in Daniels Faculty at the University of Toronto, which was a catalyst in applying to my MFA at OCAD University. Curated by Professor Richard Sommer and New York-based designers Pillow Culture, the expansive space was transformed into a dimly lit “soft utopia” (“NEW”). Prior to entering, visitors would take off their shoes, leave their belongings, and clip a curvy shaped pillow or “spelunking gear” to their bodies (“NEW”). Then, they would enter a felt curtain that acted as a transitory portal to the dark cave-like space. Inside the “cave,” the floor was soft accompanied by large rock-like structures with gentle rounds and dips designed to hold the body. Large pillows were dispersed through the space with muffled sounds spilling in from the vents. At the higher levels of the space there was an audio offering. Spelunkers could record a dream and listen to the collection of dreams left by past explorers.

New Circadia achieved its goal in disrupting the rhythm of our hyper-surveilled, digital, and excessively productive life in capitalism. With the connection to time being lost, I felt at ease engaging in meditation, sharing quiet secrets, reveling in mystery, reflecting in my journal, and finding nooks to rest in. I frequently left the space not knowing how much time had passed.

Sitting in slowness shifted my biological rhythm. Like the discovery of the grotesque in the grotto, the cave fosters a birthing place for creativity – secluded, isolated, dimly lit, and enclosed.

The second, which is an historical show, is the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* (1938), organized and production by André Breton and Marcel Duchamp. I'm interested in the Surrealist's ability to reject the gallery space as neutral, instead making it come alive in catalyzing it as a source of meaning. As O'Doherty notes, the context becomes the content, especially in Duchamp's ability to expose the gallery as a medium (67). Duchamp utilized an area of the gallery that in past ages was heavily stylized but in modernism was completely ignored: the ceiling. He subverted the positionality of the viewer in the space: the ceiling becomes the floor filled with *1,200 Bags of Coal*, the floor becomes the ceiling with a light filled stove and he made doors that "confuse inside and outside by spinning what they trap" (O'Doherty 69). In this disorientation, the viewer, through their subjective experience in the gallery, becomes an active participant in the space. The space itself becomes an essential site of meaning-making, rather than a holding place for objects.

More generally, the question of the surreal is incredibly important to my overall approach. In Surrealism, forms are expansive. Materiality exceeds its limits and is eternally mutable. States of consciousness allow for various understandings of perceived concrete forms. Marcel Duchamp's playful subversion positioned context as essential in the message of the works; the environment defined the object. Maya Deren showed the body as a mirror, a reflection of the outside world back into itself. In *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) Luis Buñuel and Salvadori Dali created a lasting relationship between the cutting of a woman's eye and the moon. And though not officially a part of the movement, Francesca Woodman's photography allowed her body to operate as a fragmented memory; ethereal as air through an open window, or using

herself as architecture – she was both in and of her space. My work builds upon the question of the surreal in the way that I chose to curate the space.

Black Box Gallery

At the root of all my curatorial choices for *SACRED SPIT* was a desire to embody the grotesque in the space itself. To accomplish this, I treated the gallery as a creative space that did not simply hold the works but became an element of the exhibition. *New Circadia* and the 1938 *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* provided an important vocabulary that helped me work with the space of the Black Box Gallery at OCAD, which is a self-contained, enclosed (cave or womb-like) space that has the key qualities of a grotto – the creative origin of the grotesque. I want to draw attention to two specific examples.

The first is the lighting of the exhibitionary space. There was no light in the entrance to my show, creating an atmosphere reflective of a grotto. Inside the gallery there are no windows, the walls and hanging curtains that frame the space are black, actively limiting the illumination. Reflecting the targeted use of lighting in the 1938 *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme*, I chose warm dim spotlights to direct the eye. The warm hue was similar to the warmth of the body, which also complimented the glowing inner LED light in Lauren Pirie's *Fluid Exchange*. The spotlights render the artworks almost like shrines – they appear as sacred yet dealing with aspects of the grotesque body. The only other source of light in the room is the projection of Noelle Perdue's *Blue Screen*. If viewers stand in certain areas around the work, their shadow manipulates the light from within. It glows brighter in the darkness of the shadow; some viewers don't notice the light unless they allow the work to enter the darkness of their personal space. It

is the lighting that creates a space where, similar to my experiences of *New Circadia*, time can temporarily be suspended.

The second is the development of the space, especially the floor, as a way of creating a womb-like or grotto-esque atmosphere that accentuated the ideas of the works and the exhibition itself. It was important to me that the two sculptural works, Karice Mitchell's *Ib and 52*" and Pirie's *Fluid Exchange*, be presented on the ground – not on a platform or pedestal, but instead as close to the ground, of the earth. In a gesture that parallels the leaves and dirt that covered the grotto space in the 1938 *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme*, I covered the floor of the Black Box Gallery with hair clippings (collected by my friend Selena Hoffman). While this element originally felt non-essential to the show, after the installation and opening I now see it as an essential component in making the space grotesque. Collected over the course of over a month, some of the hair was coarse and some was smooth; I was learning about strangers through their clippings. The hair allowed the artwork to be connected. It also created a material connection between the participants and the artworks. With each visitor walking through the space the hair on the ground changed. At the opening I was excited to see the hair get stuck on shoes and be carried throughout the space, a physical signifier of how we co-create our bodies together.

People respond to the hair in different ways, some people played in the hair while others were repulsed by it; some tiptoe around it while others defiantly move through it. The first visitors I had played in the hair; they were not afraid to touch it, pull it apart and sit in it. A few people untangled their hair with their fingers because they wanted to “contribute to the collection.” Two visitors described the exhibition to me as a “decay-space.” One of them admitted to being absolutely afraid of dying, making a connection between the hair and death. I

did not realize that stepping on hair, for some people, might feel repulsive or even disrespectful. We live the excesses of our bodies every day and the hair on the floor is an extension of that.

In these choices I actively moved away from the pristine, bright white, perfectly, neat, and tidy gallery space into the dark messy body-filled grotto. The space is animated. Many people laughed when entering the space, not knowing how to react to the strange world I created. I presented the works of three artists in this room. Perdue's *Blue Screen* was projected onto the back wall, greeting viewers as they enter. Lauren's *Fluid Exchange* was situated to the right, beneath and close to the wall on which the video was projected. These two works have similar visual components and I wanted them to be physically close to each other. Karice's *Ib and 52"* is placed further back to the left of the space, allowing viewers to walk between the two sculptural works on the floor. If you stand back and view the entire installation, you can see *Blue Screen* reflected on the Plexiglas top of *Ib and 52"*. Through the specific staging of these works, including the context I created, the architecture of the gallery operates as a grotesque experiment in and of itself.

ARTISTS AND ARTWORKS

Karice Mitchell

Karice Mitchell is an artist who uses archival pornographic imagery, specifically pornography created for black audiences from the 1970s to the 1990s, to explore the expansiveness of black eroticism. She argues that the representations of black women's sexuality in pornographic magazines, such as *Black Legs Magazine*, "defied the standards of sexual desirability during the time of their publication" and continues to be radical by contemporary standards (Mitchell 5). For her, pornography is "a space where black women can reclaim sexual agency and... reimagine the possibilities of black womanhood" (Mitchell 12). In her work, Mitchell recognizes the historical racism embedded in the pornographic industry. However, rather than demonize pornography, she highlights the potentialities in porn for black women to have agency in their own pleasures, desires, and erotic power. Mitchell's work transgresses restrictive boundaries of what a black identity can encompass.

The work I chose for *SACRED SPIT* is Mitchell's *1b and 52*". This sculptural work consists of a clear, square Plexiglas box inside of which is an unorganized pile of the artist's hair. She cut her braids for two years and collected them for what at the time was an unknown future project – an act that, as she shared with me, became ritualistic. The amalgamation of hair becomes an indistinguishable mess, with little visual cues to distinguish among the different cuttings. Some hair is in tight curls, other strands are straight, while still others are presented as braids. All of the hair is black. Looking at the work, I can't see the bottom of the container. Although finite, the hair feels endless in its depths. The Plexiglas is hard, cold, shiny, and sleek. The hair operates in an opposite manner. It is smooth, coarse, soft, flexible, endless, and biomorphic. It has the ability to move beyond the imposed borders of the container. The nature

of the clear box is that it claims to contain the uncontainable. But the Plexiglas is comical: there is no way its borders can completely stop the hair from falling into the world.

Mitchell works intimately with themes of Black women's sexuality, body, and hair. She participates in a long lineage of Black women working in these themes: Carrie Mae Weems, Doreen Garner, and Lorna Simpson. Particularly, Lorna Simpson's *Wigs* (1994) is called to attention. Both Simpson and Mitchell display a collection of Black women's hair that range in styles. Both *Wigs* (1994) and *Ib and 52* (2021) reference the body without the body being present. However, Mitchell's work is more intimately linked to her personal self, as it is a collection of her own clippings, whereas Simpson's work is more anthropological through her use of twenty-one panels of wigs and seventeen lithographic felt text panels that allude to slavery, entertainment, and drag ("MoMA"). Ultimately, both works tell expansive stories of Black women through their unifying act of using hair.

I am drawn to this work because it is made up of fragments of Mitchell's actual body, which are alive in the gallery. Within the kaleidoscopic of different groupings of hair intermingling are small clumps of dirt, natural oil, and product build up. The clumps of material embedded in the hair look like tiny nebulae. I like pointing them out to viewers, because on first glance they often go unnoticed. To me, these clumps of material are the essential representation of the hair consuming the world around it. *Ib and 52* is an archival of the black female body in motion, flux, and deep relationship to the outside world.

Noelle Perdue

Noelle Perdue has an extensive history of working in porn. She has held positions as a scriptwriter, producer, and production consultant. At the same time, she has nurtured her writing

talents and explored her interest in digital intimacies. Her integration of the erotic and the digital seeks to expand desire beyond human relations. Using artificial intelligence networks, like StyleGAN2, Perdue manipulates archival pornographic images. By creating an entirely ineligible video out of classic porn material, Perdue calls into question the reciprocal relationship contemporary sexual relationships have with technology. How are relationships informed by digital platforms and vice versa? How does intimacy operate in the digital age? Her work troubles the boundaries between human and digital relationships.

In *Blue Screen*, Perdue used Artificial Intelligence or Generative Adversarial Network (StyleGan2) to discombobulate 1500 frames from three Golden Age of Porn films: *Hot and Saucy Pizza Girls* (1978), *Deep Throat* (1972) and *Getting Into Heaven* (1970). These images undulate in and out of each other creating a new porn film, a completely ineligible goo of fleshy tones. The disorienting imagery represents the boundlessness of the body, and the excessive grotesque that keeps changing, shifting, and moving. In this video, not only do the bodies become intertwined, but they absorb the worlds around them. Bodies and environments are impossible to separate in the lack of barriers between self and other. The video is, to borrow the words of Bakhtin, “two bodies in one: the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated, and born” (Bakhtin 26). A new body is created, a grotesque body in intrinsic connection to everything else. The pornographic images are essential to the grotesque as well. Pornography, in all its glory, takes the sacred act of consummation, degrades it, and brings it back down to earth to explore the carnal, sloppy, leaking desires of the erotic body; a body that yearns to be devoured by another.

Perdue’s work cheekily references Andy Warhol’s pornographic film, *Blue Movie* (1969). However, it’s not the only artist her work calls to mind. Her interest in experimental video art,

bodies, and technology, references artists: Robbie Barrat, Mike Tyka, and André Kertész. If we look at André Kertész' Distortion series from the 1930s, the photographer uses mirrors to create a fun-house effect on both bodies and every-day objects – stretching them and folding them into new forms. Perdue takes this act, but rather than using the camera, programs A.I. to create ongoing continuously new images her video. The viewer does not have a moment to scrutinize the image.

Looking at Perdue's *Blue Screen*, trying to make sense of what one is seeing and yet never quite being able to decipher the imagery, the patterns are pleasantly hypnotizing and, at times, nausea inducing. There are key moments of the grotesque in our lives: pregnancy, birth, vomiting, defecating, sex, and death. This work allowed me to show a grotesque act in motion, the body in action, in the space itself. Numerous viewers asked about this video work and, when I explain to them what they were looking at, many responded not with surprise – I suspect they intrinsically knew it was pornographic but did not want to acknowledge this fact – but rather with curiosity. From cheeky stories of sexual encounters to more serious considerations of intimate moments, almost every visitor has a story to tell when they watch *Blue Screen*.

Lauren Pirie

Lauren Pirie has a history of creating works that blend the human, Mother Nature, and divine into enmeshed hybrid anatomies (“Serpentine Symbiosis”). In an interview with CBC Pirie said: “I draw hands a lot for their expressiveness and to convey a sense of touch, and serpents, which are often perceived as evil, but hold ties to the Earth Mother, creative energy, water and the underworld” (Grundy). Like the generative aspects of the grotesque that are inherently connected

to the natural world, Pirie uses serpentine qualities to symbolize our physical and mystical human-nature relationship.

I was initially drawn to Pirie's practice through her work *DAWN III* (2021), created in collaboration with photographer Jah Grey. What caught my attention was the grotesque qualities of this soft sculpture, which consisted of a mound of seemingly long arms with hands at the end, in an intertwined pile. Like a knot of snakes, the arms are completely disembodied in an intimately gathered entanglement that twists in and out of itself. Hand dyed fabric cover the tubular forms, reminding the viewer of the tactile process embedded in the creation of the work. Inside the arms, a warm glow beams gently from within. This might reference a light of knowledge to be gleaned from inside the self, amidst the inner world of the body. In her collaboration with Jah Grey for Mayten's, Grey captured photographs of semi-nude dancers engaging with the soft sculptures. The dancer's bodies are layered and twisted around the forms, holding, squeezing, and creating a new life in motion for *DAWN III*. In a physical way the interconnection and interdependence of both dancers and sculptures signified the 'other' as deeply within us and co-existing as a larger being, rather than a definable separation.

Pirie's use of hand-dyed fabric in bodily forms references both Dorothea Tanning and Hans Bellmer. In particular, Dorothea Tanning's sculpture *Nue Couchée* (1969-70), shares a resemblance with Pirie's *Fluid Exchange*. Both artist's use fabric to encapsulate stuffed flesh sculptures that reference the body in an inconceivable and surrealist manor. However, Pirie chooses to hand dye her fabrics and stuff her works with LED lights that glow from within. The forms of Pirie's work tend to be more fluid rather than jagged. These thoughtful decisions add to a heightened feeling of the uncanny and contribute to their sense of aliveness, while referencing serpentine worlds.

I chose Pirie's *Fluid Exchange* because of the way she combines the serpentine with the human body to create an unknown form full of possibility. The work consists of a long round tube tied into a large knot with two "legs," along with toes, emerging from it. The soft inner stuffing of the tube, along with the glowing inner LED light, is covered in a hand painted textile that blends fleshy nudes to create a pink colour with areas of beige and brown. By hand painting and sewing her fabrics, she is intrinsically woven into the piece itself. The remnants of her touch live on the skin of this sculptural form. As Erin Manning writes, "the skin that touches and is touched is continually rebuilding itself from the outer to the innermost layers. To reach toward skin through touch is to reach toward that which is in a continued state of (dis)integration and (dis)appearance" (85). The work's ineligibility allows for the grotesque to emerge through being both/and, an in between state that allows it to change, transform and shift its form. The work itself is never the same twice. As it moves from location to location, Lauren changes its configuration and hand sews it into place. More fabric is added, limbs are tied in new ways, the form changes dependent on the space it inhabits – just like our body. The warm light glows from within the tube as if the work is warm with body heat. In both content and form the work is grotesque.

THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE

SACRED SPIT is an exploration of the grotesque in all of its potential. What does the porous body look like? How does it move? What established order does it oppose? What possibilities does it open? Religious ideology positions the sacred as an unreachable world that is closed to humans; I'm interested in bringing down the sacred to be in and of the body. This is not an elevation of the body to the heavenly sphere, but rather the essential grotesque act of degradation: transferring the high, moral, abstract principles into the body of all the people. The sacred is not the representation or the holy, it is embedded in our fleshly tissue and in the messiness of our intermingling porous bodies.

This aspect of my exhibition, specifically the relation of the sacred and the profane, became increasingly important to me. One of the key theorists of this dichotomy is Émile Durkheim, who states, "Not only are sacred beings separated from profane ones, but in addition, nothing that directly or indirectly concerns profane life must be mingled with religious life" (303). Although these two categories must not interfere, they constantly bleed into each other and can never wholly separate. The grotesque recognizes this fact and articulates the ways the two inform each other.

As a way of accentuating this idea I included a little prayer request box, presented as an interactive element of the show. The idea came from an experience I had when I was visiting my family in Kelowna. In the Mission Thrift Store, I encountered a small box at the exit of the building, which displayed a card that read: "Prayer Request Box. If you have a prayer request, drop it in the Prayer Box and we will pray for you. All Prayers are confidential." The box was empty. I stared at it. I didn't understand who 'we' was. Who will be praying for me? On further thought, the idea of bodies praying for bodies felt inherently grotesque. This was the reason I

chose to create a prayer box for *SACRED SPIT*, which acted as a private space of sharing within the public space of the exhibition. The prayer allowed visitors to bear secrets and anonymously leave them in the space, for me.

I chose the location of the prayer box, which was placed on a plinth to the left of the video projection, in order to encourage visitors to walk through the space – which meant walk through the artworks and through the hair scattered across the floor. At the opening it became a controversial object, although for the most part it was understood to be part of the larger exhibition space. In fact, it was very popular especially amongst the younger visitors, almost all of whom left a prayer. Over the span of the exhibition many people continued to leave prayers in the box, so much so that, by the last day, I had to cut more pieces of paper and visitors were squeezing their prayers in.

Following the end of the exhibition, I was left with the decision of what to do with these prayers. Should I read all of them? Do I record some of what was written for this thesis? Or do I respect the expectation of anonymity? Most importantly, if I do read them, do I also pass along the prayers? If so, who am I praying to? In honour of the grotesque, I decided to read each prayer, pray harnessing the natural powers of the earth, light the requests on fire to seal the wish, and bury them in the dirt. By respecting the anonymity of the prayers, they are a sacred request, and through the act of burning them and burying in the dirt, they are profane.

THE CURATOR IS PRESENT

Throughout the duration of *SACRED SPIT*, it was necessary that I was always in the space during the hours in which the show was open to the public. At one point I joked saying, “I feel like Abramovic”. It was necessary for me to share this space with other bodies, ready to discuss the ideas, laugh with people in their responses and listen to and tell stories. I cannot imagine presenting this material and not being available to all of the richness that comes through the human dialogues around it. This has been the most transformative and healing aspect of my journey during my MFA.

Every morning when I walked into the space to set up, I would turn on all the lights and check around all the corners – which felt like a repetitive ritual. It always felt like someone was in there, hiding in the curtains. The space felt alive. I would turn on the projector for Perdue’s *Blue Screen*, plug in Pirie’s *Fluid Exchange* and check up on Mitchell’s *Ib and 52*”. Once everything was ready, I would put my sign outside the front door and sit at a table that was set up near the entrance to the exhibition space. While much of my time was spent doing various activities, it was surprising how many people visited my exhibition.

I have had some of the most intimate conversations inside the space. Visitors have been so generous in their stories – topics have spanned religion, self-harm, body control, gender, sexuality, biology, addiction, surrender, architecture, and death. At the root, a grotesque embodiment is the dismantling of hierarchies which allow the suppression of people; “to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things” (Bakhtin 34). The grotesque productively disrupts, disturbs, and unearths. It encourages a journey into the dark and mysterious grotto, to see what is found. In one case a friend who is journeying through her late teenage years visited the exhibition and we talked for three hours; she told me about the

religion she created among other things, and we closed the space together. One dear friend visited in a disguise to make me laugh. The friends that came through the space feel closer. The strangers are not all that strange anymore.

My relationship with the artworks also dramatically changed over the course of the thirteen days I had the pleasure of living with them. With each new encounter, with every conversation I had with visitors, the meanings of specific works shifted for me. Visitors from Non-Western cultures told me about the sanctity of hair. How hair can be used in coming-of-age rituals and as spiritual offerings. A medical student came into the space, reflecting on Pirie's *Fluid Exchange* as "plump, healthy intestines". This further complicates the sculpture, as it holds both inside, outside, and serpent. Perdue's video turned into a catalyst for discussions around intimacy and hallucinatory perspective shifts during sex. The space itself experienced changes too. Over time the hair has knotted and clumped together forming new mats from the movement of bodies in the space.

It's important to note that my curatorial methodology is both creative and interventionist. My approach is creative because I include my own aesthetic choices in terms of how the work will be interacted with and displayed. I intentionally intervene with the show by adding elements that support the work, like the prayer box and the hair on the ground. Through these decisions I've allowed myself to be in conversation with the artists I've curated. I could not see the show operating without myself, the prayer box, or the hair on the ground being present. My methodology privileges experiments, blurring rigid categories of artist and curator, and taking an active role in the creative process.

In relation to the prayer box, its meaning is expressed in each of the artworks present. Both Mitchell's box and the prayer box are constructed out of Plexiglas, one key quality of which

is the reflective nature of the surface. It changes depending on the context in which it sits and obscures the contents it contains. There is a reciprocal give and take relationship in the environment and the form itself. In *Fluid Exchange* (2022) by Lauren Pirie, the intertwined-being warmly glows from within. Similarly to the transparent yet hidden messages inside the prayer box, the light alludes to a secret inner meaning that is simultaneously personal but seen by all who enter the space. Lastly, Perdue explores intimate worlds in her work, *Blue Screen* (2021). By drastically obscuring various bodies, viewers look closer to make sense of the images that are oddly familiar. By doing so, they reflect on their most private physical connections.

On the last day that *SACRED SPIT* was open to the public, I entered the space, knelt down in the middle, put my head on the floor, and cried. I was exhausted but deeply fulfilled. The grotesque, above all, allows space for possibility where there seemingly is none. By subverting established order, it reimagines new forms, ways of being, and existing. The change it brings, although frightening or uncomfortable for some, is ultimately good *because* of its disruptive qualities. The grotesque transforms, shakes, and moves you – sometimes to tears.

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APPENDIX A: IMAGES OF THE EXHIBITION

Digital photos taken by: Kat Zoumboulakis

Film photos taken by: Grace An



Window text outside of the Blackbox in The Open Space Gallery



Ib and 52" (2021) by Karice Mitchell, *Blue Screen* (2022) by Noelle Perdue, and *Fluid Exchange* (2022) by Lauren Pirie



Ib and 52'' (2021) by Karice Mitchell, *Blue Screen* (2021) by Noelle Perdue, and *Fluid Exchange* (2022) by Lauren Pirie



Ib and 52'' (2021) by Karice Mitchell, *Blue Screen* (2021) by Noelle Perdue, and *Fluid Exchange* (2022) by Lauren Pirie



Blue Screen (2021) by Noelle Perdue, and *Fluid Exchange* (2022) by Lauren Pirie



Fluid Exchange (2022) by Lauren Pirie and *1b and 52"* (2021) by Karice Mitchell



Fluid Exchange (2022) by Lauren Pirie



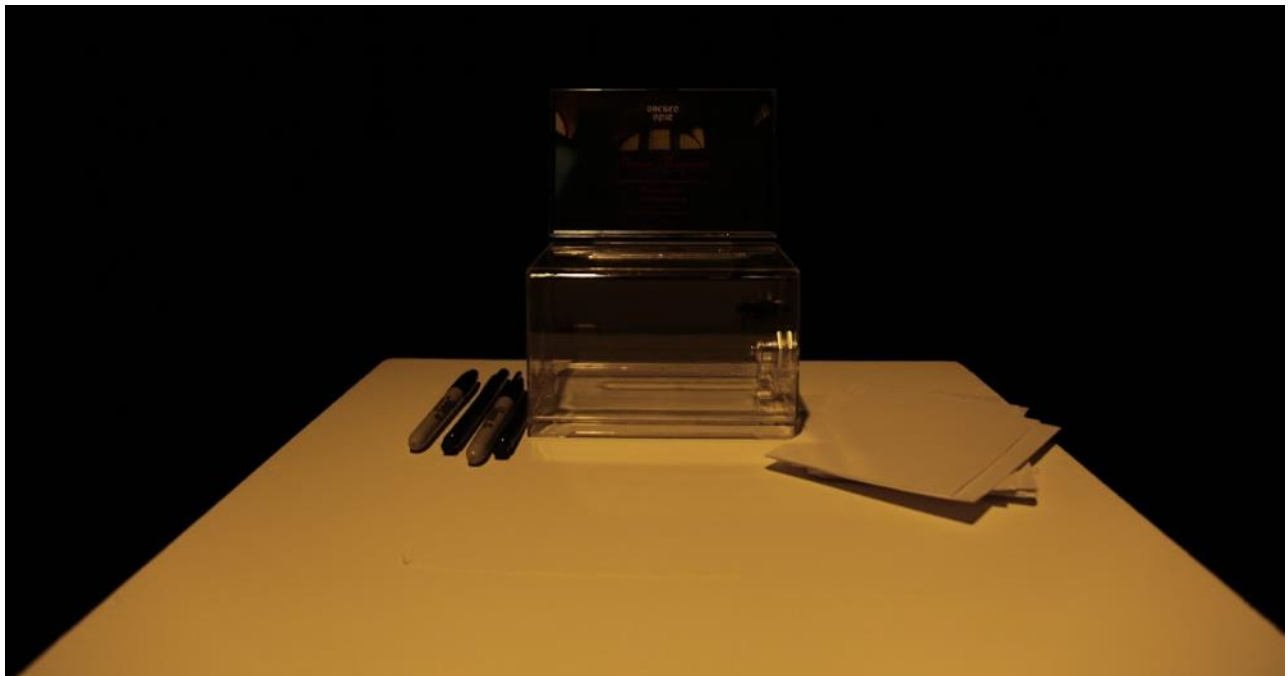
1b and 52" (2021) by Karice Mitchell



1b and 52" (2021) by Karice Mitchell with *Blue Screen* (2021) by Noelle Perdue reflected on its Plexiglas surface



Blue Screen (2021) by Noelle Perdue



The Prayer Box



The Prayer Box (detail)



1b and 52" (2021) by Karice Mitchell with hair on the ground and the prayer box plinth in the background

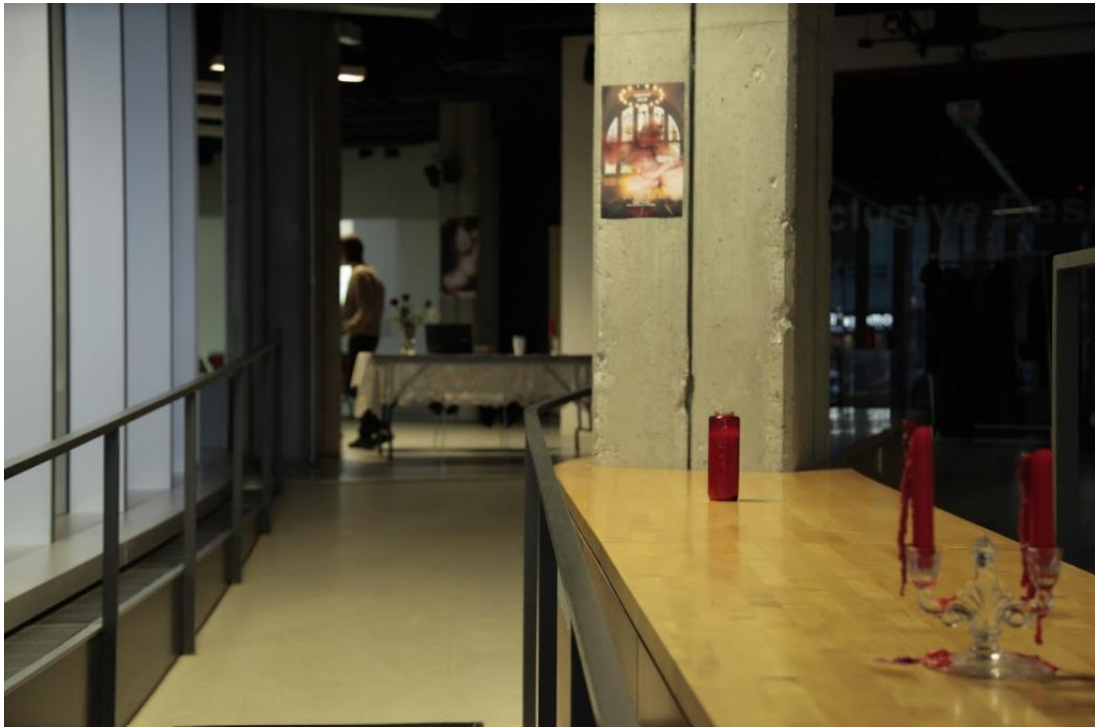


My table set up every day and me sitting at it

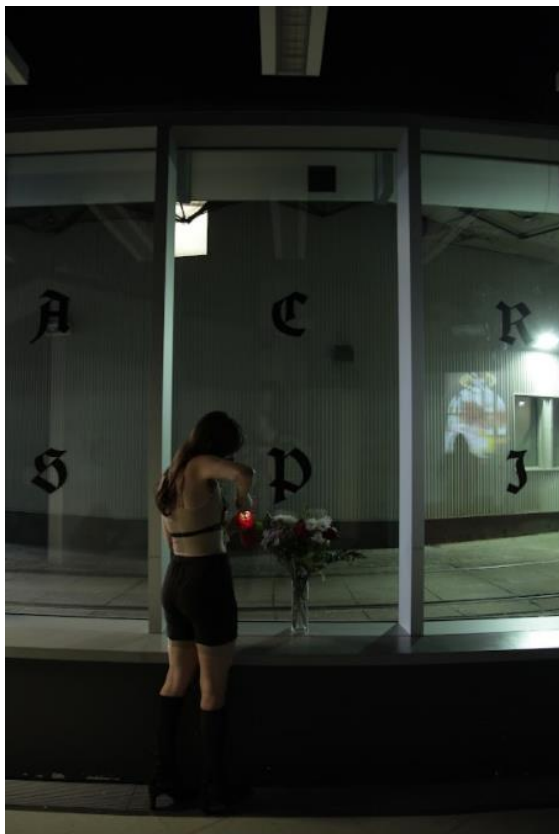


Me sitting with the window text before the opening

Images of the Opening



The perspective of entering the space from McCaul street



Lighting candles in preparation for visitors



My friend Katerina setting up her DJ booth



Posing with some flyers. Nate welcomed people into the show.



Dr. Amish Morrell, Dr. Julian Jason Haladyn, Grace An, and I chatting



Noelle Perdue and I chatting on the left with some visitors in the space



Visitors exploring the space



Avery curiously inspecting the prayer box



Talking with Hannah and a few others about Karice Mitchell's work





Sitting with Kalina to discuss Lauren Pirie's work



Chatting with Candide



Asking questions to the room



Chatting with artist's Lauren Pirie and Noelle Perdue



A group photo of Lauren Pirie, Noelle Perdue, and myself



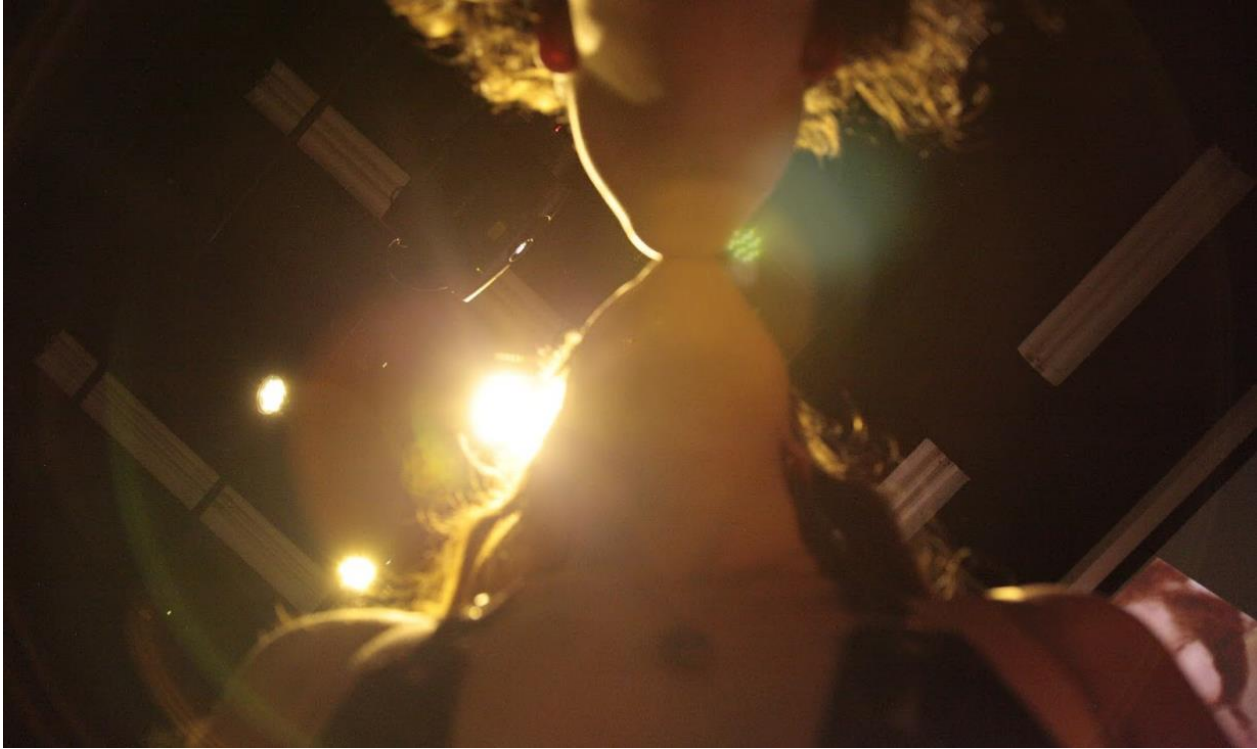
Praying with Noelle Perdue at the prayer box



A visitor taking a selfie



Lauren Pirie and friends taking selfies with the prayer box on the left starting to get filled up



Swapping spit at *Sacred Spit* with Kat Z



Maxwell and Emily who stayed late into the evening

APPENDIX B: ARTIST STATEMENTS

Karice Mitchell

Karice Mitchell (b. 1996, Toronto, Canada) is a photo-based installation artist whose practice uses found imagery and digital manipulation to engage with issues relating to the representation of the Black female body in pornography and popular culture. Her work seeks to re-contextualize pre-existing images to reimagine the possibilities for Black womanhood and sexuality detached from the white gaze and patriarchy. She received her BFA at York University in 2019 and her MFA at the University of Waterloo in June 2021. She currently resides on the unceded territory of the Musqueam people where she is a full-time lecturer at the University of British Columbia Vancouver campus.

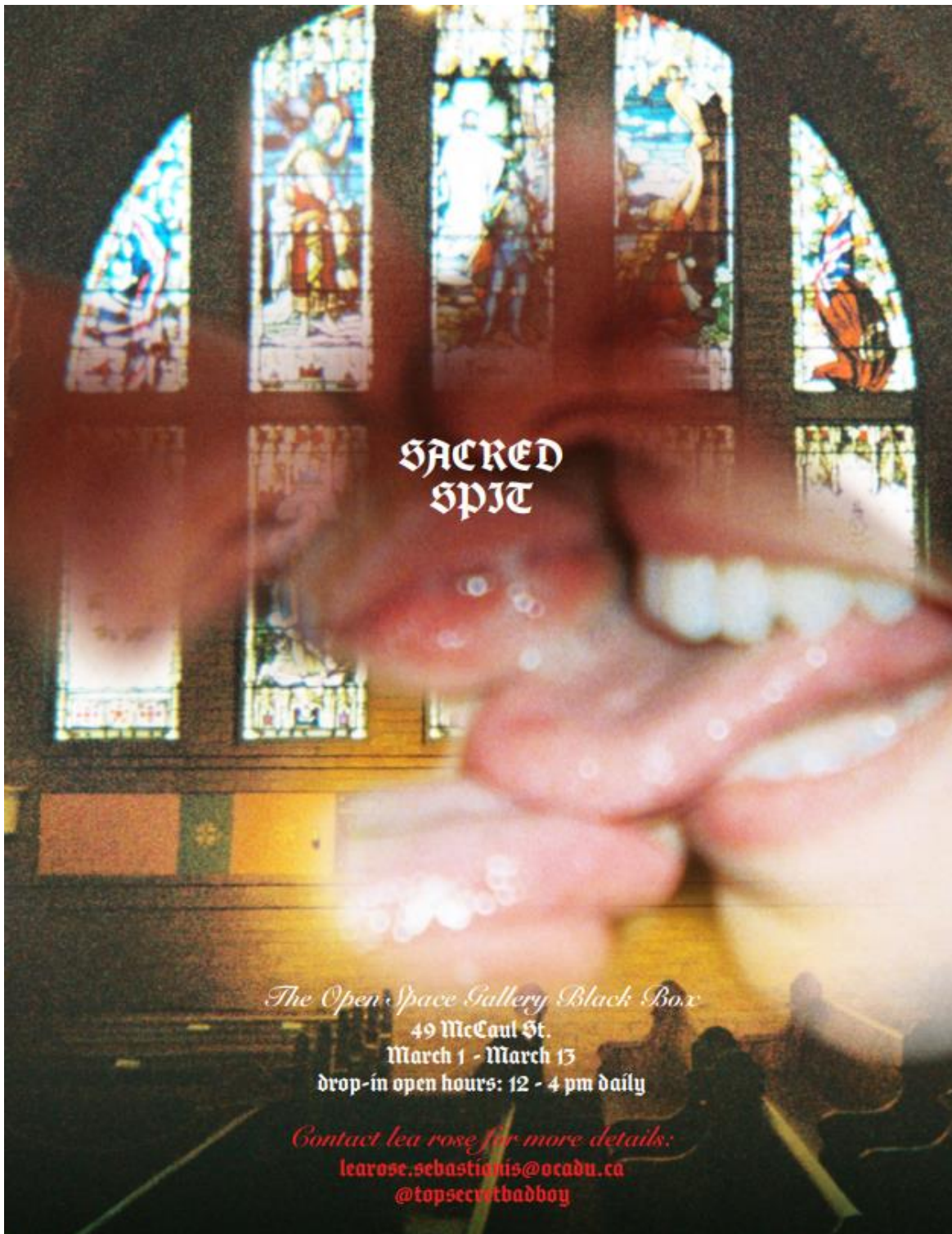
Noelle Perdue

Noelle Perdue is a writer and digital artist with a background in computer science, sex work and mainstream porn film production. Most of her work explores the points at which our relationship to technology becomes genuinely intimate both physically and emotionally, and has been featured in Wired, Washington Post, Input, Pornhub, Brazzers et al.

Lauren Pirie

Lauren Pirie is a Toronto-based artist working in a range of media and scale, from intricate ink drawings to large-scale murals and sculptural installations. Her practice explores environments in relation to interconnection, desire, and healing; both as themes in her own artwork and through collaborating with other artists. Pirie was a co-founder of grassroots art and environmental organization, The About Face Collective. She's curated collective art experiences and community events, including recent exhibits at PRIDE and MOCA Toronto, and created site-responsive illuminated soft sculptural installations and public artworks; recently for DesignTO and Winter Light. Pirie's largest public installation to date received grant funding as part of ArtworxTO: Toronto's Year of Public Art 2021–2022 and will be installed in Spring 2022, bringing together some prominent past themes, and collaborators from across disciplines. Recent gallery exhibitions include; Maake Projects in Pennsylvania, Mayten's Projects in Toronto in collaboration with Jah Grey, and at PADA Studios and Gallery in Lisbon, Portugal, where she was in residence this past Fall.

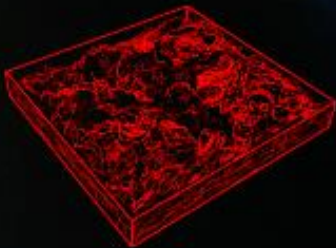
APPENDIX C: SHOW POSTER



Poster front

SACRED SPIT is a curatorial thesis exhibition that explores the grotesque as an act of degradation through which the holy descends to the bodily realm, and renders our tactile intertwined forms as blessed. The grotesque's ability to mutate, shift, and destabilize 'boundaries' between self/other, us/them, you/me, earth/body, and brain/spirit holds a powerful re-structuring of established order. *SACRED SPIT* positions three artist's works in dialogue – Karice Mitchell, Noelle Perdue, and Lauren Pirie – to investigate the potentialities of this restructuring through these artists' representations of the boundless body in intrinsic unity with human, animal, and natural worlds.

Karice Mitchell *16 and 52"* (2021)



Karice Mitchell (b. 1996, Toronto, Canada) is a photo-based installation artist whose practice uses found imagery and digital manipulation to engage with issues relating to the representation of the Black female body in pornography and popular culture. Her work seeks to re-contextualize pre-existing images to reimagine the possibilities for Black womanhood and sexuality detached from the white gaze and patriarchy. She received her BFA at York University in 2019 and her MFA at the University of Waterloo in June 2021. She currently resides on the unceded territory of the x̱məḡkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) people where she is a full-time lecturer at the University of British Columbia Vancouver campus.

Noelle Perdue *Blue Screen* (2021)

Noelle Perdue is a writer and digital artist with a background in computer science, sex work and mainstream porn film production. Most of her work explores the points at which our relationship to technology becomes genuinely intimate both physically and emotionally, and has been featured in *Wired*, *Washington Post*, *Input*, *Pornhub*, *Brazzers* et al.



Lauren Pirie *Fluid Exchange* (2022)



Lauren Pirie is a Toronto-based artist working in a range of media and scale, from intricate ink drawings to large-scale murals and sculptural installations. Her practice explores ideas of interconnection in relation to ecology, desire, and healing; both as themes in her own artwork and through collaborating with other artists. Her site-responsive installations have been exhibited in *DesignTO* and *Winter Light* and recently received grant funding as part of *ArtworxTO: Toronto's Year of Public Art 2021-2022*. Her public installation "A Longer Story" will be installed in Toronto in Spring 2022, bringing together some prominent past themes and collaborators from across disciplines. Recent gallery exhibitions include: *Maake Projects* in Pennsylvania, *Mayten's Projects* in Toronto in collaboration with Jah Grey, and at *PADA Studios and Gallery* in Lisbon, Portugal, where she was in residence this past Fall.