

A Portrait of Cry Baby Gallery

by

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## Abstract

This MRP tells a personal story about the Toronto-based Cry Baby Gallery. Written as a first-person narrative, this exploratory text is about the gallery and my experiences of it, from travelling to the gallery and considering its context in the city, to observing attendees at art openings and other related events. I examine several exhibitions at Cry Baby Gallery, starting with a solo exhibition for Celia Lees, with the overall goal of considering the vision of the gallery's director Mony Zakhour. Drawing on my own experience in the Toronto artworld, *Portrait of Cry Baby Gallery* is a snapshot that documents a unique set of details in Toronto's art scene in 2023 and 2024.

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## Getting to the Gallery

I'm sitting in the back room of ICHA TEA on Queen West on a winter weekday afternoon. Based only on its façade, you wouldn't assume that there is a quiet and peaceful studying oasis in the back room during the day that turns into a cocktail bar at night. Sun hits some areas of the room through skylights. I'm having a matcha green tea latte. As I glance around the room I see a braided money tree, potted ivy scattered throughout the room and a bouquet of dried baby's breath dangling below one of the skylights. Looking up and in front of me, out the front window of the establishment, I saw the glowing orange sign: "501 masks are mandatory." A TTC (Toronto Transit Commission) red and white streetcar, it's driver and all its passengers are waiting for the traffic light to turn green. This is how they set the scene in movies, right?

I'm in the West End of Toronto. I'm the only one back here taking advantage of this study space. I saw it full once, I think it was on a weekday evening, that's how I know about it. Without the sound of whispers, people shuffling though their things, their faces being lit up by the screens of their various devices and steam emerging from teapots, I'm not sure I would have noticed this space. On that day I thought to myself, "I'll be back to study here."

I'm going to Cry Baby Gallery tonight because I've promised a few people, including the exhibiting artist, Celia Lees that I would be there. I always show up to things that I've committed to verbally, and I think that's a big part of what drives the art scene in Toronto these days; if you get an invite or promise someone that you'll support what they're doing it keeps things moving along and fills rooms. Openings are social events. They're sort of like art industry extra-curriculars in the sense that attending them will not only benefit you, but also the hosting gallery, and the artists, by enhancing each of our networks. These events take place during our spare

time, so no one really wants to discuss work on a deep level. The best time to really pick people's brains and get a real understanding of what they do and why they do it is during weekdays for galleries and during studio visits for artists.

I recently went to four openings in one weekend and at all of them I took note of who I saw there. The artist themselves almost always attend, others there for certain are the gallery director and some staff or interns, the writer who wrote the catalogue essay, collectors, students and of course everyone's friends and even family. Special programming often takes place at openings such as performances, artist talks, and I think that these really enhance openings and re-centre the work and for me, this programming also tends to contribute to whether I make it there on that day or not. The more I think about it, the more I realize I don't like openings as much as it may seem - but will I be attending several openings for next round of exhibitions? Yes, I will. I'll go back to the same galleries, explore some new ones and also go where I want to express my support for the people I know. I could avoid openings and discover new art by myself during gallery hours, but the social aspect of art can be so satisfying. I love to hear what other people take away from the exhibition - people tend to speak freely with a glass of wine in their hand - you learn more about them at the same time as you all engage in interpreting the art in the room. And if you come up with a question that's perfect because then you have something to talk about when you get around to meeting the artist.

I really should attend more openings. I like to pencil in as many openings as possible, but I don't always make it to all of them. Sometimes openings passes and I couldn't get to that corner of the city in time. Those same-day openings that Olga Korper and Christopher Cutts do are great, 401 Richmond tries to coordinate openings too, that way everyone can capitalize on the high traffic in the building. Toronto has some barriers to accessing all of the events that take

place in the arts, for sure. Getting from place to place could cost you and, in the winter, there really are only two options: pay for car service or wait an undisclosed amount of time for transit to take you there. Summer offers the freedom of biking or walking. And most people who live here will confirm this without hesitation, hopping from neighbourhood to neighbourhood in Toronto is time consuming and pricy. I'm not sure as many people think about the effect this can have on the art market, though.<sup>1</sup> If the turnout at these events becomes too low, the gallery can suddenly find itself under pressure to generate more interest for the artist's work so they can sell it. This is always a consideration for commercial galleries, whose mandates are to sell art. There are many different types of art venues.<sup>2</sup> To some visitors, the difference between a museum and a commercial art gallery is a mystery. This is apparent when people approach the front desk at Abbozzo Gallery and ask where they can pay to receive full access to viewing the exhibitions in the 401 Richmond Building. The costs at commercial galleries are not covered by ticket sales like they are at museums, they are all generated from selling the art on the walls. It can be an awkward conversation when visitors don't realize the art is for sale and they're the customer.

I'll tell you why I think going to art gallery openings is a great way to spend an evening in the city, regardless of your current connection to the art world. I think that it's fun to dress up, travel across the city, and arrive at a venue to show support for the people who worked hard to make it all happen. But more importantly, there are few places left where it's socially acceptable to approach a complete stranger with no known mutual friends because they seem interesting. Moving through a crowded room and asking people what brought them to the party might seem a little weird in some contexts but at an art gallery opening its common practice. When my

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<sup>1</sup> Artsy's editorial section has a great selection of articles about the global art market that are frequently updated, this one from January 2024 is about predictions for the art market in 2024 (Kakar, "5 Themes").

<sup>2</sup> ADAC's Canadian Art Hop website defines the different types of art venues accross Canada, with examples (Canadian Art Hop, "About the Participants").

friends who I had invited to an opening at Abbozzo Gallery came up to me halfway through the night and said, “that guy over there just came up to us and started asking if we were artists”.

They were not artists, they held corporate roles at various companies. I realized that in this world, the confident “intruder” was the one who would takeaway something indispensable from attending the event: art-world connections. People who are at an arm’s reach from the art world are the ones who are most likely to become art collectors. Attending social art events like these gallery openings can kickstart an interest in getting to know an artist and diving deeper into your own personal interests and tastes.

There are a few good ways to get to Cry Baby Gallery in the summer, from renting a city bike to calling an Uber. This time, I opted for taking the streetcar; the 505 will drop me off a few steps away from Cry Baby. As we pass Lansdowne, I see the address 222 and I know I’m almost there. I used to work at a bar in the area and I know the route well. I still look out the window as we pass by storefront after storefront. I always take a window seat and watch the same buildings go by as I tread through the city on public transit and somehow, I always notice something new – at the same time I take comfort in passing by the same shops over and over again.

The streetcar just cleared the uphill stretch along Dundas West that usually is the most gruelling portion of cycling to Dundas West from the Junction. I’m facing East and the downtown skyline is in full view, the rain clouds have cleared, and the sun is setting. I can see the golden hues cast onto the glass windows of the skyscrapers ahead.<sup>3</sup> I’m reminded that I’m part of the city too and I’m about to become an even more active participant very soon. A mix of older and established businesses share this stretch of Dundas West with brand new and trendy

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<sup>3</sup> My approach to watching the city and taking note of what I see was inspired by Georges Perec’s book, *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*. Here’s a quote that really resonated with me, “No one ever sees buses pass by unless they’re waiting for one” (34).

spots. The streetcar passes La Piscina, Brazil Bakery & Pastry Ltd., Sakai Bar, Four Stars Café, and Issues Magazine Shop. There's traffic passing us in the opposite lane. Brave cyclists who manage to squeeze through the narrow space between street-parked cars and the streetcar itself zoom past us. The automated TTC voice announces, "Dufferin Street" - we're here.

### Opening Night

It's a rainy early October evening and Cry Baby Gallery is having an opening reception for a new solo exhibition. You can tell there's an event happening because on a regular night, the front room – the art gallery – would not be filled with people holding drinks and chatting with each other. The people inside the gallery are having drinks in tiki mugs, which is not Cry Baby's typical glassware, they usually serve cocktails in vintage glassware that you can tell is collected because the designs vary. Based on this observation, I can tell that tonight is an extra-special event because I haven't seen featured glassware at Cry Baby before. Later on, I found out that only drinks served in those mugs are allowed past the heavy black curtain that conceals the bar behind the gallery.<sup>4</sup> The tiki mugs are a special touch added by the sponsor of tonight's event, Casamigos Tequila. Cry Baby falls into the commercial gallery category I mentioned earlier. The art exhibited is for sale, but this gallery is unique because it's also a cocktail bar, which is why the sponsor is more often than not, an alcohol company.

I've worked with Celia Lees, the exhibiting artist before. I co-curated a group exhibition that included her abstract paintings so not only have I seen her work in-person before, but I've touched it too. A privilege only granted to those of us who work as staff at art galleries and the

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<sup>4</sup> Ingrid K. Williams included passing through Cry Baby's curtain as a key stop in a list of 2024 Toronto recommendations for The New York Times.



artists who create the work. I guess collectors end up touching the art they purchase too but there's a special connection to the artwork that I develop as I move it around, store it, care for it, and hang it in preparation for the gaze of others. Although at times it can feel like a chore when "stock" piles up and the artworks need to be Tetris'ed in to fit nicely in its allotted storage area until a collector brings it home. The pendulum can quickly shift from a piece of art to a stock item in the backroom of a commercial gallery. When a stretched canvas is wrapped up in plastic with its face covered, its power is certainly diminished compared to when it is hung level and to the perfect height on a pure white gallery wall with lighting angled to illuminate its best qualities. It's all part of the process.

When I first started as an intern at Abbozzo gallery, I was given the option to choose one personal project, I was able to choose anything that would both give me a good internship experience and help the gallery. So, the task I choose was to focus on building the gallery's social media presence. This involved taking artwork out of storage, freeing it from the layer of plastic that protects it, revealing the piece and exposing all of its texture, mounting it and proceeding to capture the content I needed and then leaving it up because it looks great! Before I knew it my 3-hour shifts would come to an end, and I would leave and come back the next day to a clean gallery - just to repeat the process all over again for a different set of works. It was great experience as an intern, the social media analytics improved, and a few pieces sold too. Once I started working there full-time, I had to see through that whole process from start to finish and that included cleaning up my own messes so, I thought the magic would be lost but it's still just as fun to reveal pieces and care for them. When you go to an art gallery or museum and wish that you could touch the work, it really is as satisfying as you imagine it to be. All that to say - I'm excited to see Celia's newest body of work, *Notes to myself – and now you*. I haven't seen the

paintings in-person yet, but I knew what to expect from what I could see on Celia's and Cry Baby Gallery's Instagram pages, they both have a strong online presence.

There are a lot of unfamiliar faces in the crowd, but I've spotted Cry Baby's gallery director, Mony Zakhour moving quickly from one conversation to another, making each attendee feel welcomed and appreciated. As I look around the room, I'm trying to peer past people I don't know (I'll meet the people I don't know yet later) in an attempt to catch a glimpse at the artwork, but I didn't get here early enough, and the room is already full. I'm searching for a piece that I can sneak up to and look at in its entirety. I saw Mony talking to others when I came in, now he sees me from across the room and before I know it, I'm swept into the bar and handed several drink tickets, the ones that get you a drink in a tiki mug instead of a vintage coupe. Cry Baby Gallery is the storefront to a speakeasy. The 150 square foot gallery conceals the 700 square foot bar.<sup>5</sup> When you peer in from the street you see a gallery with a strong rotation of emerging artists, once you're in the gallery you see a black velvet curtain hidden behind one of the gallery walls.

I've returned to the gallery to look at the art. As I scan the room once again for a good place to position myself, I lock eyes with Claire, my friend from school who I mentioned tonight's opening to earlier that day. We start chatting about what we were doing before arriving and how we ended up here at the same time without coordinating it. I quickly enlist her to move through the room with me until we can see the pieces, after a short mission to view the as much of the art as possible, we agree to go into the bar and get something to drink. I introduce Claire to Mony as we pass through the back velvet curtain, and we slip away further and further into the hidden back room until we find a space to stand at the bar. It's dark, there's a yellow glow

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<sup>5</sup> I roughly guessed these dimensions but the mention of 1200 sq f in Betty Wood's article about Cry Baby suggests I'm not too far off.

coming from the lighting it's reminiscent of candle lights, but the lights are definitely not candle-like or antique, they are modern, underlit mirrors and bar shelves.

I survey the bar and see a few familiar faces; they are deep in conversation, and I know I'll run into them at some point during the night when there's a better opportunity to interject. I run into Celia as I move through the crowd, she is holding a flute of champagne and wearing an all-black outfit, she looks cool and sophisticated at the same time, as usual. I congratulate her on her solo-exhibition, and she explains what makes this series special – included with the purchase of a painting is a one-of-a-kind handwritten note enclosed in an envelope and sealed with a wax C stamp and fixed to the canvas stretcher. The exhibition title *Notes to myself and now you* says it all. Celia explains to me that these notes are personal messages and thoughts she had while creating the work. She said there's a vulnerability to the notes, so she hopes this unique twist to art collecting is well-received. Now that I think of it, I saw these stamped letters online, but I didn't register the correlation until this moment. I made it a point to bring up these notes to future art collectors in conversation for the rest of the night; it turns out that they do end up being well-received and the question of the night quickly becomes, "what do those notes say?". Many people asked me as if I knew what they said since I brought it up, but Celia never told me the content of the notes; the notes are to her collectors.

Celia's paintings are abstracts. They have an organic feel which is probably because she paints directly onto the canvas with her hands. I once noticed at an opening that she held her glass with some paint stains remaining on her hands even though she was all dressed up for the opening. She uses other tools to paint too, it's not all done with her hands but also with palette knives and all parts of a paint brush, including the handle. The pictures she posts to Instagram of her studio are a beautiful mess. The paint colours are carefully selected by her, and although they

are splattered all over the place in a mess of what didn't make it onto a canvas, they all complement each other though they really only have one common trait: Celia picked them. The space is a loft in a former factory, it was probably built in the early 1900s. The walls are exposed red brick, and the ceilings are warm wood with red and white exposed ducts. I've never been to Celia's studio - I know all of this from following her on Instagram. She posts so much of her process in a way that is in-line with her personal-brand. She usually wears a comfy outfit with Ugg's, a bandana and headphones being her staple pieces. She posts videos of herself lighting incense and still photos of red solo cups that she uses to rinse and store her brushes. These items come up over and over again in her content and before I even see who posted it, I know its CELiA. Her name spelled like that is part of her personal branding and it appears that way on her website, on her Instagram page and on the vinyl stuck to Cry Baby's front window.<sup>6</sup>

Celia's aesthetic is the opposite of the first thing that comes to mind when you imagine an artist working away in their studio with a predictable easel, palette, brush, and apron. Celia's technique, process and studio practice is just as aesthetically pleasing as the colour combinations that emerge from the canvases in the room. One medium that comes up in many of her pieces is charcoal. Celia's practice and the final result are all connected and all her. Her work is identifiable. When I was walking home one day, I passed by a French restaurant called Bouffe by Adjey on Dundas West near Ossington and I immediately stopped because I spotted one of Celia's paintings in the front window. It was already getting dark outside, and the restaurant was mainly lit by candlelight. As I looked further into the restaurant, I realized that exclusively her pieces were hung on the walls above the dining tables. The front table was seated with a family

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<sup>6</sup> Celia's (Celia Lees, "CELiA LEES").

of four, they probably saw me stop in my tracks and start looking intensely in their direction while I was confirming whether or not the pieces were Celia's or if they just looked like them.

In an online piece by Munthe, a fashion website, Celia says she wants people to notice the emotional intensity in her work.<sup>7</sup> For me, the lines, shapes, and colour blends make me think of thoughts trialling off, thoughts disconnected, interruptions, distractions and choice paralysis. At the same time, I also see connection, memory, and realization. Pink, red, green, yellow, BLACK. There are orange and blue hues in the piece I'm looking at too but they're not where my eyes focus. The piece is called, *secrets*. It's a large 84 x 78-inch canvas; it's the piece I saw the most at the Cry Baby opening because at seven feet, it towered over even the tallest people who attended. It was painted in 2023, all of Celia's work is new because her work sells so quickly. When you go to a Celia Lees exhibition you can expect to see the pieces dated within the same year. Celia experiments with her style in the best way because she has an identifiable signature making all of her work very cohesive, only getting better and becoming more realized over time.

I position myself in the gallery, I'm not ready to go back into the bar right now, I'm still trying to look at the artworks but I'm not looking at the art, I'm having conversations. Suddenly, I see my colleague and a friend of ours who also works in the 401 Richmond Building. We all have a lot in common, so our eyes are on the same commercial galleries. We bump into each other at openings so often that we started to plan to be there at the same time and sometimes even going together. The room is getting louder, its shoulder to shoulder inside with the black charcoal lines that appear in most of the paintings in the background poke out above the heads in the crowd. Celia likes to paint big. I've seen her gush over the huge walls and tall ceilings at

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<sup>7</sup> Munthe, "Munthe Art Monday".

Abbozzo Gallery. In her studio footage, she is often standing on a paint splattered chair, wearing paint splattered clothing and shoes, reaching to the top of her canvas. She told me that she likes listening to either jazz or rap when she's in the studio because of the emotion behind the music, it gives her inspiration.<sup>8</sup> She said in an interview for Munthe, "I am in constant pursuit of painting what does not exist, and what cannot be said."

I find myself in a rare moment of solitude at the opening - it's a quiet and maybe even awkward moment when you find yourself in-between conversations. I want to move around so I come up with the idea to take a closer look at the texture of the paint and the places where the colours of the paint blend together since I'm finally standing beside the piece that I'm drawn to the most. Before I step forward, a tall guy holding a film camera next to me who was also in a moment of solitude turned towards me, says hi and asks what brought me to this opening reception. The second most common question asked at openings, after "are you an artist?". We start talking about our positions in the art world, him being a photographer and me being a master's student and an assistant curator. He mentions that he was hired by Mony to photograph people at the opening tonight. So, I mentioned that I know another photographer that Mony has worked with named Sadiq. He smiles in a way that clearly suggests he knows who I'm talking about and says, "he's actually a good friend of mine who connected me and Mony for tonight's gig." What a small world? That's something I've heard about the Toronto art community specifically over and over again. I guess it's true - but there seems to be quite the gap between the commercial art world and the academic, non-profit one. Everyone knows everyone in the respective communities - but the two don't cross as often as the saying, "the art world in Toronto is so small" suggests. I'm thinking about who I can talk to next, what conversations I can start,

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<sup>8</sup> Silk Laundry, "A Silk Laundry Playlist by Celia Lees".

who I need to go find. I'm not going to take up too much of Mony or Celia's time tonight; they could have someone waiting to talk to them who would like to make a purchase and take home a piece with a note by Celia fixed to the stretcher.

### Panel at The Combine

It's 6:10 pm, I just finished working at Abbozzo Gallery, and I'm off to attend a panel discussion with all-women artists for International Women's Month, hosted by Cry Baby Gallery and Tacit Collective. The artists on the panel all have an ongoing relationship with Cry Baby Gallery and frequently exhibit their work there, but this event was also organized by Nuria Madrenas from Tacit Collective, an online gallery that represents women artists.<sup>9</sup> Tomorrow night there's an opening for a group exhibition co-curated by Nuria and Mony called *No Man's Land* which this panel is a sort of precursor to. The venue is the collaborative workspace called The Combine, it's located south of King Street, close to the downtown core but not quite in the madness. King and Queen Street run parallel to each other, but they feel like two completely different parts of the city. To get from Abbozzo Gallery to The Combine I need to head south, but almost everyone else is heading east or west. The people who walk west on Queen compared to people who go east on King are part of what make the two streets feel like opposites.

When I usually go straight home after work, I'm part of the group of people going westbound on Queen. For the most part, people on Queen wear trendy, loose fitting, comfy, casual outfits, and they walk in slow strides. Dundas Street West, where Cry Baby Gallery exists has a similar crowd, some even more unique and creative people who have a heightened sense of their own personal style can be found on Dundas West. Tonight's event is partly hosted by Cry

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<sup>9</sup> Tacit Collective, Tacit.

Baby but it's downtown, in a completely different district called King West, which still isn't technically part of the downtown core but The Combine specifically, sits right on the edge of King West, just a block away from the official boarder between King West and The Core. King West is definitely not West in the same way as Queen West or Dundas West. In terms of "West Toronto" King West is the final front and it's the least West out of the bunch.

On King West, people are dressed in business casual or workout clothes and their pace suggests that they are in a rush. When I used to work at a restaurant in this area the weeknight reservations were often booked at 5:00 pm sharp and then they would rush through their shared plates and leave quickly to get to a show starting at 7:30 pm. The shows included but were not limited to the symphony, plays, sports, opera. Some tables had small notes associated with the reservation that would get passed off from the hosts to the servers, they either read *business dinner*, *anniversary* or most mysterious of them all, *special occasion*. It's not relaxed, there's nothing effortless about King West. Condo towers and business towers sparkle around the bustling sidewalks in the evenings, but the scene feels equally stressful and dreamy to me. Elevators, fire alarms, dog walkers, packages, underground parking garages, buzzer codes aren't visible from these sidewalks and go unknown to outsiders. I lived in one of these towers when I first moved to the city and there's a reason why my centre of gravity leans West. Thinking about my life during that time gives me the same feeling you get when you look up at a fifty-storey building and feel like it's slowing falling down towards you. At the time, my partner, Jay, worked as an engineering and he had a client who needed to buy equipment that would measure the sway of these towers in the event of a storm to make sure that they are structurally sound in case of extreme winds. They would test for this by blasting a miniature model city with a wind



simulator. When Jay told me that story, I was shocked because I thought that was a really cool job but also the thought of our apartment at the time swaying gently in a storm was terrifying.

I'm only a block away from the financial district. I'm headed to The Combine for this panel discussion. There are some fuzzy feelings I get when I forget about the everyday and remember that there was a time when I was limited to dreaming of living in a big city. It's kind of thrilling to peel away from the West End for an event because those dreams of city life never included the parts of the city that I've come to the most admire now. Being downtown reminds me why I came here. I saw a woman waiting for a 504 streetcar with a violin case strapped to her back. We're so close to Roy Thompson Hall that my first thought is, "she must be a professional who plays for the Toronto Symphony Orchestra", whereas in the West End anyone I see carrying an instrument on the sidewalk is more likely a band member in my imagination. There's something really serious and almost pretentious about the downtown core that doesn't reach the heart of the West End.

As soon as I arrive, I see Tyler, the owner of La Piscina, a coffee shop turned DJ bar on Dundas and Brock, a few blocks west of Cry Baby Gallery. Tyler studied abroad in Spain and continues to spend every August in Europe. His feed consists of dinner al fresco tablespace, beaches, and glasses of wine (not necessarily the wine bottle labels you usually see from sommeliers, Tyler's pictures capture the essence of a good wine not the credentials). Since it's almost spring and it feels like the winter couldn't possibly last any longer, Tyler almost immediately starts talking about how travelling each summer really heightens his creativity and even when he comes back, he has a fresh outlook for some time until it eventually fades, and he can't wait to leave again. At least I think that's what he was saying because that's exactly how I feel before during and after travelling to a new place. Besides travelling, moving to a new part of

the city has a similar effect on me. Once I feel the need to take in where I am, I slow down and take notice of my surroundings more than I do when I frequent the same places in the same neighbourhood too often. I came to Dineen Café to write today, and I managed to get a corner spot facing Yonge Street. It's late in the afternoon before a long weekend and the people who pass by on the sidewalks are making calls, pointing things out to their friends, they walk quickly. The buildings here a mix of Toronto's first tall buildings and new towers.<sup>10</sup> Slowing down to write takes me back to a place where I see things with fresh eyes too. That's the difference – seeing things for what they could be instead of what they are.

The Combine is a workspace for creatives. It's one of those places that looks like a mix between a tech office and an architecture firm. There's a dynamic set up at the front door where tonight's hosts, Mony and Nuria co-curated some pieces by the artists who will be speaking on the panel tonight. There isn't much use for this foyer otherwise, it's separate from the rest of venue. It makes all the guests stop and see the art right when they enter. It feels museum-like because of the glass cases and the lighting, but the surroundings remind me of other design-centred foyers like the Ace Hotel. I can hear the hum of voices down the hallway, I head over and the first thing I notice are pool tables and then I see the desks, each one with a Herman Miller Aeron pushed in, there's at least 50 desks and chairs. There's a bar too, that's where most people are gathering. I join them and trade in a drink ticket for an Ace Hill Mexican beer in a teal green can. The place where the panel will eventually take place isn't visible from the bar, I follow the noise through a concrete hallway and find the setup. I get organized and pull out a tiny notebook and normal sized pen, open it up to the first blank page, sandwich in the pen and hold it closed in my hand until it begins. The woman sitting next to me says hi and as we start chatting, I

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<sup>10</sup> McHugh & Bozikovic's (2017) city guide features a run-down of the historically significant architecture on the same block on pages 59 to 83.

mention that I'm writing about this panel discussion to explain why I'm holding a pen and paper even though she didn't ask. The moderator starts testing the microphone and I glance around the room and take in my surroundings. I realize the discussion has barely even started and I've already opened my notebook to jot things down.

We're sitting in rows of about five chairs and some people are leaning against a kitchen island in the back of the room. It's not obvious until I look around - we're sitting in a half-size basketball court. The front wall looks like a gymnasium, there's a basketball net hovering over the panelist's seats; the back wall is a full-size kitchen. This is a workspace, so the kitchen is for heating up lunch but its huge and equipped for so much more than just heat something up. The people standing around the kitchen island are laughing together and holding red solo cups, that one area looks like it was carved out of a house party. The back wall with the basketball net has a black and white mural painted onto the concrete. There's an exit sign caged in to protect it from flying basketballs. It looks like the coolest version of a high school gym that a teenager could imagine. I can see the sound system where the mics are hooked up, it looks like a DJ stand with colourful cords spilling off the back, the cords tangle at the bottom and wrap around a cart overflowing with basketballs. The panel setup itself reminds me of a staged living room on set of a TV talk show. There's a separate chair for the moderator, slightly angled to face a large couch where all the panelists sit together. The host and the artists settle in, each artist with a drink in hand and the introductions begin.

Based on the atmosphere and the opening remarks, I can tell that this panel is intended to be conversational and relaxed as opposed to serious and stiff which suggests to me that the artists can be candid and speak freely and possibly reveal something new about themselves or their practice. Megan Young is the moderator, she introduces herself and thanks The Combine for

allowing them to use this space. She mentions that art doesn't have to happen in traditional spaces, which is in line with Cry Baby's brand, as the acting storefront of a speakeasy; making The Combine the ideal venue. After the organizers, Mony from Cry Baby Gallery, and Nuria from Tacit Collective address the crowd, each panelist gets briefly introduced: Celia Lees, Tamara "Solem" Al-Issa and Maxine McCrann.

Celia Lees is a Toronto-based artist, she grew up just outside of the city and now her studio is located in Little Portugal. Celia is the first artist Megan introduces and she begins to describe what type of artist she is. She says she works with the movement of her body informing her mark-making. Since her paintings are familiar to me and I can imagine her in her studio as she describes her practice as an abstract painter. Her works themselves aren't described – there are plenty of places to see what it looks like. None of the artists describe the look and feel of their work but rather their personal process. Going into this panel, I knew what each of their work looked like just from memory, I wanted to attend this panel to hear each artist talk about their experience as artists. The topic is supposed to be how they experience being women artists, but the conversation moves away from a feminist lens and towards a practical and economic one.

Tamara "Solem" Al-Issa and Maxine McCrann are the other two artists on the panel, and I haven't met either of them before. I'm really interested in hearing what they have to say so that I can be more familiar with them the next time I see their work somewhere or if someone brings them up in conversation. The benefit of events like those are finding out more, it's a place where information lives and where anyone who attends can become more involved in this world.

Tamara introduces herself as a ceramicist who also uses her body to inform her work, her and Celia describe their studio practice in a similar way, but their work looks completely different. I said I wasn't familiar with anyone besides Celia, but I actually have seen Tamara pop

up in a few places. I was talking about this with the stranger I ended up sitting next to. I told her how I first came across Tamara's work in a fun way. I've been following the beauty French influencer violette.fr for years now, she has a very French attitude towards beauty and fully embraces natural beauty but also sells her own line of makeup. Her whole account is branding for her makeup, and she is always talking about enhancing the features you have as opposed to covering them up. As part of a recent campaign to promote a new bright and vivid blue makeup colour, she posted daily inspiration images pulled from all over the internet that featured that specific shade of blue. Among photos of Violette's photos of her own swatches on her studio table to create the makeup colour, are architecture, prints and one of Tamara's electric blue vases.<sup>11</sup> She's associating her makeup brand with fine art.

I've seen Tamara's blue vases in-person at a furniture shop called Sunday's on Ossington. Like Celia, whose work I saw through the window of a French restaurant a few steps away from the Dundas and Ossington intersection, these artists are recognizable and placed on Ossington, which is ranked one of the coolest streets in the world because of that strong branding that centres fun that they show on social media.<sup>12</sup> In the late 2010s, Ossington street used to be very different and was a trendy and hipster spot to get drinks and hold a conversation, still unknown (or too far West) to the crowds who instead, flocked to the dance clubs on King West for a night out. Now, "The Ossington Strip" which starts at Queen and ends at Dundas, is filled with shops, cocktail bars, restaurants on the Michelin guide, and those big crowds on weeknights and weekends – it's where people come to spend their spare-time. Suddenly, everyone knows about Ossington and the people who used to appreciate it for its unfussy atmosphere have to keep

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<sup>11</sup> Violette, "If you know me".

<sup>12</sup> Isaac Phan Nay's Toronto Star article is one of the last bits of evidence online about Ossington's ranking as one of the coolest streets in the world according to Time Out in 2022 – the list of cool streets gets updated each year and Ossington didn't make the cut in 2024.

moving West or risk sharing the space with – everyone. From the artists perspective, their work on Ossington has more eyes on it than ever.

Maxine is the one artist I truly know the least about. I saw her work in another group exhibition at Cry Baby Gallery last year. Maxine has a studio in the same building as Celia, they're studio neighbours. She recently moved here from Detroit. During the panel she talked about how friendly and helpful Celia has been, especially for giving her all the art supply store recommendations. Maxine does bright and colourful, abstract figurative paintings. Her subject matter typically includes tablespaces and food.

Megan guided a fun but also serious discussion. The content was very practical and things like material costs, studio rental prices, physical capabilities, support networks, artwork pricing, social media and working with galleries. It was interesting to hear the experiences of the three artists to see where they converged but also the differences between them and their experience as artists in Toronto. The focus was on them as individual artists as opposed to a group of women, we got a glimpse into their studio practices and the thoughts that pass as they navigate an everchanging art world. The throughline for women's month was the upcoming group exhibition curated by Tacit happening at Cry Baby Gallery, the artists all agreed that they appreciated not being tokenized by galleries as women artists.

At the end of the discussion, Megan opened it up to questions from the audience. After a few questions that were directed to one artist at a time for clarification, there was an interruption. This question was chaotic from the start and began the way heavy hitter questions do - "this is a two-part question, firstly..." To summarize: The first half of the question, is Toronto an art city? And the second part of the question, do you ever make time to fuck around in your studio? After a serious conversation about Toronto as an art city the host asked them to clarify what they

meant by do you fuck around...after saying fuck around several more times, the audience started to laugh and speaking amongst themselves. The artists answer to the first question led to what I concluded as the answer to both questions, all the artists agreed that there is a lot of impressive work produced by emerging artists in the city and that people here can be very creative. As a member of the audience, I'm already starting to think that the city's culture and freedom of expression is what fosters creativity. They all agreed that once an emerging artist starts to develop their style and their career starts to evolve and develop, it's very tough to make things happen in Toronto because the cost of living, supplies and studio space apply a lot of pressure to their studio practice. Tamara said that as much as she would probably enjoy "fucking around" in her studio, she's reluctant to because of the risk that she'll produce work that doesn't sell and then she'll be faced with tons of expenses incurred and no collectors to endorse that process.

The red solo cups at the event are the same ones in Celia's studio pictures. Of course, red solo cups could pop up anywhere but these ones at The Combine and in Celia's studio signal the same thing to me, work, and play coming together. It explains Celia's answer to the previous question: "all the time." The red cups match Maxine's red ballet flats, her ballet flats match the layered carpets that ground the whole panel setup, there's a red blanket draped over the back of the couch the artist's sit on, the basketballs spilling out of the cart are various shades of red blending into orange. The general consensus on the "is Toronto an art city" question ended up being that there is so much talent here but there isn't really the infrastructure for artists to survive financially with a few exceptions like great galleries and arts communities. There's a lot of luxury and a lack of affordability that don't balance out, continuing to leave the spaces where art happens vulnerable. Celia mentions that because of the role that Cry Baby and Tacit play in

cultivating a thriving art community in Toronto, it makes the city a great place to get a start as an emerging artist.

After closing remarks and many thank-you's, everyone got up from their seats and headed over to the bar. At the bar, the atmosphere was light and cheery, and everyone was released from the seriousness of the panel to the unseriousness of catching up with friends and colleagues over a few drinks. There's loud music and neon lights casting red, blue, and purple hues onto everyone's faces. The energy completely shifted, and it feels like a big presentation just ended and now everyone can let loose. It seems like everyone here came with at least one other person in the crowd, everyone is chatting. Celia doesn't say this during the panel, but she won't be at the opening reception for the group show tomorrow night because her career has evolved to the point where she'll be attending an opening for her latest solo-exhibition *Love Language* at Sugarlift, in New York City<sup>13</sup>. I go up to her and congratulate her on the NYC solo exhibition and she congratulates me on Abbozzo Gallery's recent group exhibition called *Girl Dinner* that I co-curated. The *Girl Dinner* exhibition included seven, woman artists working in a variety of different mediums and styles that theoretically aren't supposed to match but they end up working very well together like a true girl dinner. Abbozzo Gallery does an annual group exhibition every February to exhibit the work of emerging artists in the main gallery. Last year, Celia was one of the artists included in Abbozzo's February group show called *Wavelengths*. Celia's career as an artist has been developing rapidly since her first solo exhibition with Cry

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<sup>13</sup> Sugarlift's exhibition text explains the meaning behind the exhibition title: *Love Language* and there are some incredible installation pictures of the 20-foot painting called *at long last* that anchored this exhibition (Sugarlift, Celia Lees: LOVE LANGUAGE).



Baby Gallery at Stackt Market in November 2022; it's been a little more than one year, and she has already moved on to a solo exhibition at Sugarlift in New York.<sup>14</sup>

I say hi to the people I know and begin making conversation with others who I don't know too. I end up talking to people who work at The Combine during the day and stayed after work to attend the panel discussion. A company perk for them is attending the events that are held in the space. It turns out that the person who asked the question about fucking around worked The at The Combine and had a lot of opinions about Toronto as an art city compared to Montréal and that a city as a whole can foster a lack of creative freedom.

I also got to meet Maxine; I told her I noticed her shoes matched the set. On my way out I spotted a DJ playing pool at those pool tables I saw when I first came in. I found out he uses The Combine as a workspace too, for producing new music. I promised him I'd follow along and listen to the new album when it gets released. I was surprised to run into so many people from the West End at the panel downtown, instead of a different crowd adjusted to the location of the event, the location of the event adjusts the crowd in a different part of the city. I'll see a lot of tonight's attendees in the West End tomorrow night at the opening reception at Cry Baby, I say see you tomorrow over and over again until I'm out the door.

### Conclusion

I took an Uber to the opening this time and I showed up around 7:30 pm and by then the gallery and the bar were both full. I spent the day installing artwork at Abbozzo Gallery for a group exhibition I co-curated with my classmates from OCAD, so I had to stop at home and change my clothes. After being on my feet all day long, I felt tired but as I started to see people I

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<sup>14</sup> Here are a few interviews she's done in-between her first solo exhibition and her most recent one, that describe her practice: Alexander, "Adding Personality"; Munthe, "Munthe Art Monday"; New & Abstract, "Five Questions".

knew and started chatting, the excitement in the room gave me energy. Katie Marks is here. She attends tons of openings now that she has officially started releasing her much anticipated art podcast called Art Beat. On the podcast, Katie interviews Canadian artists. She already released a couple interviews for artists who have exhibited at Cry Baby Gallery before like Emily Pope and Katie Butler, one of the artists in the *No Man's Land* exhibition opening tonight.<sup>15</sup> Rachel from Lio Projects art consultancy is here with Mackenzie, the two are good friends and are some of the organizers of Studio Hours, a group that frequently hosts art related events like tours and meet and greets in Toronto. Tania Love, a French artist who often participates in Design TO is here, she's carrying her bike helmet on her arm and drinking a bourbon forward cocktail. My colleagues from Abbozzo and friends from the 401 Richmond building are here, we cheers to a fun night out together and socializing outside of work.

It feels like an industry night for us thanks to Cry Baby's half art gallery, half cocktail bar setup. People are waiting in the gallery for a seat at the very busy bar past the black curtain. I pop in and out of the bar and the gallery and I see people who wait look at the art on the walls, a few pieces have already been sold. The pieces look great together as a group. There are a couple mirrored pieces by Katie Kohls that reflections of the other artwork across from it can be seen from other corners of the room, exposing more possible pairings of different artists' works together. I see people are taking pictures together in the mirrors each time I peek into the gallery. Katie Kohls' work is another example of an artist whose work is part of the visual fabric that defines the Dundas West and Ossington intersection, with her mirrors placed in Grape Witches, a wine bottle shop. Another interesting medium in the exhibition that caught my attention is Adrienna Matzeg's framed textiles. The textured images of embroidered buildings and signs

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<sup>15</sup> The first podcast Katie Marks released was an interview with Emily Pope, as of now, it's my personal favourite. (Pope, Capturing Time & Embracing Vulnerability).

really stood out and throughout the night I learned that they were a crowd favourite. Nuria is here, some of the artists are here, Mony is here. Tonight is a big celebration of all the work that was been ongoing to prepare for this annual women's month group exhibition.

I remember the first time I visited Cry Baby Gallery; I didn't work at a gallery yet but as an art student, I was interested in the gallery as much as the bar in the back that most people only go there for. Cry Baby is on Dundas Street West which is a trendy pocket of the city these days. The neighbourhood is technically called Little Portugal but depending on which map you look at it varies from Dufferin Grove, Brockton Village, Beaconsfield Village to Portugal Village. The street signs themselves reveal the neighbourhood's historical roots – Rua Açores, which translates to Azores Street. Walking down any of the side streets off that stretch of Dundas West are lined with family homes, with colourful tiles indicating every other house number.<sup>16</sup> If you follow the sidewalks and turn onto one of the side alleyways behind these houses, you'll find yourself surrounded by colourful street art – including Mony's own work. Mony, the gallery director at Cry Baby Gallery is also an artist. His signature style can be found across the city if you know what you're looking for.<sup>17</sup> Mony paints on canvas too and sells his art. Over the summer, during a quiet time for commercial art sales, Mony will occasionally showcase exhibitions featuring his own work at Cry Baby Gallery.<sup>18</sup> I've spotted his work on walls across the city from a secret spot in the Junction to Chef's Hall.

All of this was unknown to me during my first visit to Cry Baby Gallery. I stumbled upon it on my way to a diner reservation at Sakai bar, a Japanese sake bar, and made a note to come

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<sup>16</sup> “In my neighbourhood, there are artists and young people living cheaply who rent apartments over the storefronts on Queen and there are well-off Portuguese families who live in well-kept houses on the north half of the Beaconsfield block” (Heti, 2011, 30).

<sup>17</sup> “It's not hard to spot his organized chaos, constantly popping up in new corners of the city” (Gandhi).

<sup>18</sup> Mony talks about his experience as a curator and what that entails when it comes to sales and displaying his own art compared to art done by others in Gandhi's interview.

back to the gallery. Before I found time to go back, I found out that it was a speakeasy, not a historical one from Canada's prohibition era like Montréal's The Coldroom, but a cocktail bar hidden bar behind the art gallery. I finally went to Cry Baby with a group of friends and halfway through the night I left the bar to go back into the gallery we entered through. I already started drinking and when I came back into the gallery, I was ready to look at the art for as long as I wanted to. Discussing a body of work with a friend over a drink is such a fun way to slow down, carefully observe the art, come up with your own interpretations and hear out what your friends noticed in the work. Coming to Cry Baby on a regular night instead of during an opening reception can be just as satisfying, depending on what you want to get out of going. My two favourite times to look carefully at art are in a museum in the middle of a weekday or at Cry Baby Gallery after a drink inside.

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