

Susan Hobbs

Katie Bethune-Leamen

- 1973 born in Vancouver
1996 B.F.A. Studio Art/Art History, Concordia University, Montreal
2003 M.F.A. Studio Art, University of Guelph, Guelph

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2019 *La douche écossaise*, Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto
2018 *Orchid mantis. Tom Selleck. Hats. (Gold-batted, high-bouncing lover.) Also hats.*,
University of Waterloo Art Gallery, Waterloo
2017 *Hair did. Nails did. Keep everything did. (Gustav von Aschenbach)*, DNA Artspace,
London
2016 *dango emoji*, Richard Rhodes Dupont Projects, Toronto
2015 *YOU WIN! (FEBRUARY.)*, 8-11, Toronto
Turn that brown upside down, Modern Fuel, Kingston
Marry Snog Avoid, Eastern Edge, St John's
2014 *Hologram Tupac. Other Things. ALL-ONE!*, Open Studio, Toronto
2012 *Shiny, Object, Person.*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto
2011 *Older, Sadder, And All In White This Time*, Latcham Gallery, Stouffville
2010 *Dazzle Shizzle*, MKG 127, Toronto
2009 *Mushroom Studio*, Toronto Sculpture Garden, Toronto
2008 *The Ghost of Tupac Amaru Shakur...*, Convenience Gallery, Toronto
2007 *The Valhalla Suite: A Critical Misunderstanding*, CCLNo. 1, Toronto
2005 *Wouldn't It be (Ice, Ice)*, Khyber Centre for the Arts, Halifax
2003 *Bite*, Paul Petro Gallery, Toronto

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2022 *Piers*, University of Victoria Legacy Gallery, Victoria
2019 *On the use of unknown objects*, Aldea Gallery, Bergen
Dazzled, MOCA Tucson, Tucson
2018 *Glimmer of the Radiant Real*, Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa; Art Gallery
of Peterborough, Peterborough; The Reach, Abbotsford; McIntosh
Gallery, London
New Relics, Thames-Side Gallery, London
Harborview & Pole, Material Art Fair, Mexico City
2017 *A Viewing Room v.2*, Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto
2016 *In The Shadow of the Millennium*, Judith & Norman Alix Gallery, Sarnia
Summertime in Paris: Solstice, Parisian Laundry, Montreal
2015 *Future*, Erin Stump Projects, Toronto

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Selected Group Exhibitions — continued

- 2015 *New Fires*, Art Metropole, Toronto
- 2014 *Northern Exposure*, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax
- 2013 *Relate North*, Nordic House, Reykjavik
- 2012 *Expeditions*, Ottawa Art Gallery, Ottawa
- 2011 *MESSA*, curated by Framkvæmdafélag listamanna, Kex Hotel, Reykjavik
Cognitive Dissonance, Cottage Home Gallery, Los Angeles
Autofunction, G Gallery, Toronto
- 2010 *On N'Enchaine Pas Des Volcans*, Printemps de Septembre, Toulouse
The Dazzle, Narwhal Art Projects, Toronto
- 2009 *Reverse Pedagogy III*, curated by Seamus Kealey, The Model Arts Centre, Sligo, Ireland
Ghost Chorus: A Dirge for Dead Slang, Nuit Blanche, Toronto
Production, with Luis Jacob, Jen Hutton & others, 401 Building, Toronto
PreView, curated by Maura Broadhurst, Latcham Gallery, Stouffville
Goodbye to Romance, curated by Elaine Gaito, Mercer Union
- 2008 *I_wanna_see_YOU*, (exchange & exhibition) De Overslag, Eindhoven, Netherlands
I_wanna_see_YOU, YYY Artists' Outlet, Toronto
- 2007 *Goin' Postal: Mail Art Group Show*, Art Metropole, Toronto
Will 100 Artists Please Draw A 1959 Ford, Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton
The Mushrooms of Parkdale, as part of play/grounds, Toronto
Li'l Dude, Paul Petro Gallery, Toronto
- 2006 *Making Room*, curated by Paulette Phillips, Toronto
Jingle, Gladstone Hotel, Toronto
The End, H Block Gallery, Brisbane
- 2004 *Debrayé*, Darling Foundry, Centre d'Arts Quartier Éphémère, Montreal
- 2003 *The Michael Jackson Project*, Zsa Zsa Gallery, Toronto
Got Work?, Millicent Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
Buy-Sellf, Darling Foundry, Centre d'Arts Quartier Éphémère, Montreal
TeeTime, Millicent Gallery, Los Angeles
2For, Zavitz Gallery, Guelph

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- Court, David and Shannon Garden-Smith. *Toxicity and Intoxication: Catherine Telford-Keogh and Katie Bethune-Leamen at the University of Waterloo Art Gallery*, Peripheral Review, May 2019;
- Goddard, Peter. *Wacko Jacko an inspiration to us all*. Toronto Star, August 2003;
- Henderson, L. *Katie Bethune-Leamen: Public Images...* Canadian Art, Winter 2010;
- Jazvac, Kelly. *Review: Older, Sadder, And All in White....* Border Crossings, 2011

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Sanader, Daniella. *Katie Bethune-Leamen, Critics Pick*. Artforum, 2020;
Smit, Josi. *FrameWork 12/19*. Susan Hobbs Gallery, December 2019;
Tripp, Carolyn. *Katie Bethune-Leamen: Mushroom Studio*. C Magazine, November 2008.

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***La douche ecossaise:* Katie
Bethune-Leamen Susan
Hobbs Gallery, Toronto
November 28, 2019 - January 25, 2020
by John Nyman**

Things—whether extracted, manufactured or discarded—are a defining part of modern life. They are also a defining problem for modern art, one which Katie Bethune-Leamen's most recent show at Susan Hobbs Gallery addresses with generous helpings of drollery, pleasure and play. Her approach is exemplified by her cornucopian list of works, in which the exhibition's series of formally similar porcelain, bronze and mother-of-pearl sculptures are titled with reference to an evocative array of objects—an Aztec knife, a teething clamp, a honeydew Melona bar—as well as to their real or imagined relationships with human subjects, as in the group of 2019 works collectively titled *Sculptures people might want to be friends with or put in their butts*. As an artist, Bethune-Leamen uses her impressions of things—what they look like, how they feel, how they make her feel—as prompts to make new things that remind her of them, or of other things. You might say she has a thing for things, with both the sensual connotations and the ironic redundancy of that phrasing very much intended. Where too many artists have sought to rescue modern objects from a world they believe merely consumes them, Bethune-Leamen finds new pleasures in that consumption, further en- folding it in the flow of *stuff* and *us* that makes up an embodied modernity.

Figuratively, the French expression *la douche ecossaise* refers to a rapid alternation of contrasting behaviours or tones, much like the homonymous mixed programs of comedy, romance and horror that played at Paris's Theatre du Grand-Guignol during the first half of the 1900s. In this sense, it offers an ingenious lens through which to encounter Bethune-Leamen's artworks, which often pull their viewers through am- bivalent pairings of familiar and outlandish, placid and discomfiting, or charming and grotesque. Surprisingly, though, the show seems even more indebted to its title's literal meaning of "the Scottish shower," a 19th-century process of bathing limbs in hot and then suddenly cold water that was said to have originated in Scotland. Many of Bethune-Leamen's sculptural objects are perched on pastel- and skin-coloured rods anchored by slabs of smooth, veiny marble, reproducing the distinct look of a bathroom countertop or spa. This ambience is reinforced by gallery-spanning installations of grooved porcelain tiles—burgundy on the first floor and viridian on the second—that segment the space's walls into soft-cornered rectangles, narrow channels and arched niches in the exact manner of decorative architectural moulding.

But all of this is only set-up for an exhibition that makes a point of being bodily, even a little gross. On the whole, *La douche ecossaise* cultivates an exceptional kind of ickiness, one just un-cloying enough to take pleasure in—but where does it

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come from? Sure, the show's ubiquitous bronze sculptures—shiny spud- and sausage-shaped lumps with palpably kneaded rumples—look a little like turds (with beautifully crunchy bits of mother of pearl sticking out for extra cringe). And okay, the close-up photographs of delicate, dewy pink flowers on the second floor suggest something from one's nether regions—an association further corroborated by the images' title: *The accumulation of pictures of your tattered asshole on your phone 01, 02, 03* (2019). But the thing is, even these pieces would just look like more modern art if not for their being situated in a space that borrows its predominant aesthetic from a Victorian lavatory. The result is a viscosity that is neither representational nor expressive, but euphemistic: objects that might be gross in surroundings meant to distract from our bodies' inherent grossness by being as polite as possible.



Katie Bethune-Leamen, *The accumulation of pictures of your tattered asshole on your phone 01, 02, 03*, 2019, iPhone photographs printed on cotton rag paper, artist frames, edition of 3, 190.5 cm x 256.5 cm x 6.4 cm; installation view from *La douche ecossaise*, 2019-20, Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto. PHOTO: TONI HAFKENSCHÉ1DJ COURTESY OF SUSAN HOBBS GALLERY

Euphemism, humour and irony are often seen as means of keeping one's distance. Yet Bethune-Leamen's insistence on folding the ends of such distances together, and dwelling in their kinks and crinkles, evokes an intimacy with modern life. I'm reminded of a musing from Karl Ove Knausgaard's *Winter* (2015): "[W]hat is the pipe that leads to the water tap other than an extension of the gullet, the pipe that leads out from the toilet bowl an extension of the colon and the urethra ... ?" But where Knausgaard speaks of human extension—the way we send our insides out, like satellites into orbit—Bethune-Leamen illustrates how we bring our outsides in. The print of a trampled and then pearl-and-tassel-spangled can of Crush titled *Shrimp study-squished*

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cream soda can 02: Billboard (2019)—a kind of cryptic centrepiece of the exhibition—phases between imagination and trash. Even the grid-folded Paper it rests on evokes both cheap advertising material and a plush, quilted mattress. In bizarrely analogous fashion, the face-like, partially pearl-studded wads of white clay pictured in *Pearl blob face I Green Man 01 (no pearls) x mascarpone*, *02 (2 pearls) x gardenia* and *03 (lotsa pearls) x frostine* (all 2019) also push out and in, bubbling recognizable forms out of their bulbous masses while simultaneously absorbing us in the false interiority of the face.

Just below the surface, almost everything in *La douche ecossaise* bears reference to water; like in Knausgaard's vision, it's water in the pipes behind the walls, water under the skin. The pearls invoke a direct connection to water, while the porcelain tiles dialogue with water by demarcating and enclosing its proper space. Water is in full bloom in the dewdrops of *The accumulation of pictures...*, but only behind thick, fleshy frames, which make it seem as if the flowers are being viewed through the portholes of a submarine. Much lip service is paid to the idea of sidestepping the linear (read: capitalistic, imperialistic, environmentally destructive) notion of progress implied by modernity's objects and aesthetics, but embodying its alternatives is both a more difficult and a subtler affair. In fact, easy contrasts between the modern technologies of hierarchization and a supposedly ancient feeling of oneness have been around since modernity's beginnings. For those more deeply concerned with the problem, Bethune-Leamen addresses it on a level that is not dismissive but integrative; her modernity is both spiritually embodied and viscerally dismembered, refreshingly novel and *same old, same old* at once.

John Nyman is a poet, critic and scholar from Toronto.

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ARTFORUM

Critic's Pick



Katie Bethune-Leamen, *The accumulation of pictures of your tattered asshole on your phone 01, 02, 03 (detail)*, 2019, ink-jet prints, artist's frames, tile, 75 x 101 x 2 1/2".

already darkened and mottled. Bethune-Leamen produces further contrast by likening each flower to a “tattered asshole” in the work's title. There's a messy joy in her titling process; each one unfurls with associations and exclamatory remarks. Take, for example, *Cherry studded ham wall cloud (your tiny beautiful body! torn open and this brought out! x210)*, 2019, which features a constellation of dozens of pearl-and-bronze pins corralled by burgundy tile. The title lends vulgarity and scattered sweetness to the work, a charm that's slightly uncomfortable and wholly infectious.

— Daniella Sanader

Katie Bethune-Leamen

Susan Hobbs Gallery , 137 Tecumseth Street,
November 28, 2019–January 25, 2020

In “La douche écossaise,” Katie Bethune-Leamen's recent irregularly shaped porcelain sculptures are complemented by bronze casts of similarly lumpy forms. Embellished with imperfect pearls, these new blobs sit atop thin, brightly colored steel rods with wide bases, whose height gives the works a human scale. Indeed, the mushy abstractions of these objects make bodily associations hard to ignore—each piece could be an ear, a tongue, an internal organ, or a thing one ingests or expels—even as the luster of bronze and pearl creates an equally compelling sense of the ornamental.

The pearl, a hardened animal secretion laden with human-assigned value—both gross and precious—is perhaps the ideal material flourish for Bethune-Leamen's work. The artist's interest in generating tension through associative opposites is foregrounded throughout the exhibition, including in its title, which translates as “the Scottish shower,” referencing a hydrotherapy practice of standing under alternating hot and cold streams of water. Upstairs, three circular frames connected by a wiggly line of forest-green tiling house images of pale pink flowers. Pretty and innocuous, the blooms are on the verge of wilting; some petals are

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Toxicity and Intoxication: Catherine Telford-Keogh and Katie Bethune-Leamen at the University of Waterloo Art Gallery

Review May 22, 2019

By David Court & Shannon Garden-Smith

In an essay on disgust in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed asks: How can we tell the story of disgust in a way that works with the complicated relations between bodies, objects and others? (1) Considering the exhibitions of Katie Bethune-Leamen and Catherine Telford-Keogh at the University of Waterloo Art Gallery (UWAG), we encounter similar questions: How do disgust and pleasure go together in desire and consumption (understood as both shopping and eating)? How do we compose ourselves in relation to the ineluctable intimacy of consumption as contact, contamination, and in/digestion? What is composition other than a proposition about taste and desire, about the proper discernment of value and waste? At UWAG, an oblique dialog takes place along these lines, between these exhibitions, approached together, separately. What seeps across the boundary between these bodies of work are shared engagements with the activity of composition as the ongoing activity of

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managing the messy material and symbolic relations of insides and outsides, bodies and boundaries, of compulsory consumption...

Following Telford-Keogh's rhyming relationships between materials, there is something like an imperfect rhyme at work between Telford-Keogh's work with plastic and Katie Bethune-Leamen's approach to porcelain as a material saturated with bodily associations—the hand and mouth, the vessel and support, and the implied acts of pouring, sipping, slurping, and so on. As with Bethune-Leamen's recent exhibitions, *Orchid mantis*. *Tom Selleck*. *Hats*. (*Gold-hatted*, *high-bouncing lover*.) *Also hats*. is to a significant extent animated by an array of lumpy porcelain forms, distributed throughout the exhibition space, appearing variously and vaguely as figures, supports and adornments—tumorous and scatological heaps of porcelain slathered in goopy glazes of lavender, lime, and peach (11)—forms flirting with animation and thingliness in a parodic reverberation of clay's mythical figural potency. (12) These commingle with familiar materials from Bethune-Leamen's recent exhibitions—custom-fabricated steel and ceramic supports, digitally-printed textiles, soft and irregular tubes of fluorescent light—alongside eclectic ephemera from consumer culture: a vintage Parisian metro advertisement for Alejandro Jodorowsky's film *The Holy Mountain*; a magazine advertisement for Salem cigarettes featuring the actor Tom Selleck (five of these, actually); a large-format photograph of a cardboard display stand for Bourjois cosmetics; a package of Excel gum; a bunch of "attractive found purple garbage." (13)



Image: Installation view of *Orchid mantis*. *Tom Selleck*. *Hats*. (*Gold-hatted*, *high-bouncing lover*.) *Also hats*. by Katie Bethune-Leamen. Photo by Toni Hafkensheid.

In Bethune-Leamen's work, these heterogeneous materials are coordinated through an associative approach to production and display that recalls Elizabeth Grosz's theorization of art as a mode of intensification that is

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fundamentally bound up with the two features that characterize all of animal existence: the force of sexual selection, that is, the vibratory power of seduction (attention, attraction, performance, courtship); and the force of territorialization (the loosening of qualities from the milieus in which they originate and function through the construction of a boundary or frame within which these qualities can exist in different form). (14)

The titular figure of the orchid mantis, incorporated as a graphic pattern on swaths of digitally printed silk crêpe de chine, appears as a kind of emblem for this spirit of the work. This particular type of mantis is understood to practice a form of predation called aggressive mimicry, which is a mimicry not of any particular orchid, as in an act of camouflage, but rather the performance of a more general orchid-ness for the predatory purposes of attraction. It doesn't blend in so much as it stands out as something that it isn't. The mantis imagery, all high-key pinks and greens, flickering between figure and ground, appears as a decorative motif and mimetic principle for the play of attraction and association in Bethune-Leamen's exhibition.

For example, a large blob situated on the corner of the reception desk at the entrance to the gallery—glazed, as a pastry (say, a donut) is glazed, in a goopy dripping creamy blushing pink—poses as office décor, gently pulling the reception desk into the mise-en-scène. The checklist indicates that this object is a part of a multi-component work with the title *Coin Rosé All Day (large pinky blob; baby pink neon with porcelain holders; bokashi box flown home across the ocean, here photographed and a print made to scale of the original, in a perhaps ridiculous frame; orchid mantis polka dots print-cotton...* (2018) epitomizing the territorializing logic of Bethune-Leamen's approach to installation in this mouthful of materials gathering around the blushing bokashi graphic of the Bourjois cosmetic box. Adjacent to this stands *Blobby mint green porcelain stack supported by mint green stand* (2018)—a towering, tapering stack of mint-green piles of porcelain, secured to the wall by the described support. This rhymes with the adjacent *Tom Selleck stack with image of found Excel gum pack photographed and printed to scale, the colours of which determined the colours of the frames*, (2018) where Selleck is featured in a uniform column of framed cigarette ads, interrupted by the backside of a prosaic package of gum, which we are informed provides the palette for the stack's custom-fabricated frames. These round-edged frames hold the advertisements at a 90 degree angle to the portrait orientation of the page, which features the tagline "I can talk about enjoyment. I've tasted it." This slight shift away from a literal reading suggests a more oblique approach to iconographic familiarity and associations of seriality with consumption, enjoyment and taste, where semiotics yields to affect, an expression on the tip of the tongue.

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Image: *Coin Rosé All Day* (large pinky blob; baby pink neon with porcelain holders; bokashi box flown home across the ocean, here photographed and a print made to scale of the original, in a perhaps ridiculous frame; orchid mantis polka dots print-cotton..., 2018 by Katie Bethune-Leamen. Photo by Toni Hafkensheid.

Bethune-Leamen's assemblages are at once figure and ground, dwelling, or environment. The suggestion here is of a space—Quangle Wangle's hat, (15) say—that virtually encompasses the exhibition, making of the gallery a space of animation, anthropomorphism and pareidolia, (16) entangling or incorporating the viewer in a constellation of associations that hover around the work. The body is everywhere—a scattering of suggested torsos, limbs, organs, heads—often humorous and/or scatological. A pair of eyes is fixed at the upper threshold of a gallery wall; (17) clusters of ceramic fingers hold layered sheets of fabric and latex yardage to another wall; (18) a porcelain blob on a steel support forms a gross approximation of a nose in front of a pair of short neon tubes arranged as a set of hikimayu eyebrows on the adjacent wall. (19) Tall custom-fabricated steel armatures adorned with evocative porcelain blobs, draping fabrics, and the titular hats suggest gaunt and ambiguous forms of figuration.

Again and again in Bethune-Leamen's work, the cheerful and banal aesthetics of consumer culture—the soft pink-to-white gradient of the Bourjois cosmetics branding, the flirtation with corporate and commercial approaches to display and décor in the adornment of the exhibition space—collide with the endearingly abject, awkward, monstrous, etc. In this work, there is a play between the abject and the cute, as Saelen Twerdy has observed. (20) The 'cute' is among the weak or equivocal aesthetic categories that theorist Sianne Ngai posits as crucial for understanding contemporary experience as it is shaped by and reflects the conditions of capitalism. For Ngai, the cute is a commodity aesthetic, a genre of easy consumption, of reduced or simplified pleasures, where the relational demand of the

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commodity is a demand to be needed and adored through consumption. The abject, of course, is associated with the inverse—the threat of self-loss in the incoherence of the disgusting, in the repulsion of the disgusting border object, as in the expelled or unconsumed refuse of the body.



Image: Installation view of *Orchid mantis*. Tom Selleck. *Hats*. (Gold-hatted, high-bouncing lover.) Also hats. by Katie Bethune-Leamen. Photo by Toni Hafkensheid.

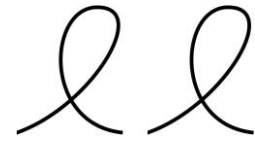
Crucially, in Bethune-Leamen's work, the abject appears as something like a cartoon, a cute parody, where parody is understood as a form of deviously playful mimesis. The porcelain figures in particular, effusively incoherent, encapsulate this coincidence of the abject and the cute as it scrambles the coordinates of taste in the distinction of attraction and repulsion, value and waste. Beyond critical attitudes of sanitation or negation, Bethune-Leamen's assemblages present situations in which attraction as an aesthetic relation is complex, capacious and deeply complicated. This is crucial, or critical, insofar as it entails a nuanced engagement with affective, psychological and material entanglement in the circuits of consumer culture—beauty, health or entertainment as *industries*—both elective and ineluctable, through an insistence on pleasure, play and seduction against the normativity of good taste.

Taken together then, Bethune-Leamen and Telford-Keogh's bodies of work at UWAG suggest approaches to composition as a critical mode of consumption, of possessing and being possessed. For both, pleasure in the formal excesses of composition is neither superfluous nor superficial but essential to the messy and ongoing activity of managing the psychic and material toxicity of contemporary life contingent on consumption. This is not the consumption

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of the mindless, distracted or hypnotized consumer, but a more ruminative and disruptive activity. Their work opens up a space of indigestion, engaging the uncomfortable proximity and instability of self-other and subject-object relations, through and with desire's inherent optimism, which is perhaps how shared worlds of meaning are composed.

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Loving and Leaking: Katie Bethune-Leamen's Cute Blobs

In her wonderful book *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Harvard UP, 2012), Sianne Ngai argues that, despite their apparently minor status, these are the three categories best suited for “grasping how aesthetic experience has been transformed by the hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism” (1). The cute, zany, and interesting, she argues, are intimately tied up with “the system’s most socially binding processes” (production, consumption, and circulation) and so help us grasp the underlying social dynamics of contemporary life in a way that other, more prestigious categories such as the beautiful or sublime cannot.

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