

Susan Hobbs

Benny Nemer

Biography

1973	Born in Montréal, Canada
1996	BA, York University, Toronto
2010	MFA, Concordia University, Montréal
2020	PhD, Edinburgh College of Art, Edinburgh

Selected Solo Exhibitions

2025	<i>Quelques Corps Favorables</i> , Convent, Ghent
2023	<i>I Don't Know Where Paradise Is</i> , Kunstenbibliotheek, Ghent
2022	<i>The Making Known</i> , Flaten Art Museum, Northfield
2021	<i>Pour un Herbarium</i> , Pierre-François Ouellette Art Contemporain, Montreal
2020	<i>I Don't Know Where Paradise Is</i> , Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa
2019	<i>Where Paradise Is</i> , Playfair Library, Edinburgh
2018	<i>Prologue and Variations</i> , Stadtbibliothek, Stuttgart
2017	<i>Colin Is My Real Name</i> , Struts with Owens Gallery, Sackville
2016	<i>Une Autre Voix</i> , Tiroler Kunstpavillon, Innsbruck
2013	<i>Day Breaks Instead of Night Falling</i> , Neutral Ground, Regina <i>I Have Come To Ask You To Tell Me Everything</i> , The Khyber, Halifax
2012	<i>Romantical</i> , Owens Gallery, Sackville
2010	<i>Legacy</i> , Dazibao Centre de Photographies Actuelles, Montreal
2007	<i>Radio Killed the Video Star</i> , Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba, Brandon
2006	<i>Lyrice</i> , Künstlerhaus Büchsenhausen, Innsbruck
2004	<i>Neverending Song of Love</i> , Plug-In ICA, Winnipeg CA <i>Lyrice</i> Galerie Schapp, Stuttgart
2003	<i>When the Music Stops My Troubles Begin</i> , New Langton Arts, San Francisco
2000	<i>Erasure</i> , Zsa Zsa Gallery, Toronto

Selected Group Exhibitions

2024	<i>Façonner l'amitié</i> , McClure Gallery, Montreal <i>(un)critical proximity</i> , Kunstverein Kevin Space, Vienna
2023	<i>Absent de Paris</i> , Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris
2022	<i>À corps perdu sharing madness</i> , La Galerie de l'UQAM, Montréal
2021	<i>Fissures</i> , Oboro, Montreal <i>In Your Hands</i> , Newlyn Art Gallery, Newlyn
2020	<i>Arrangements</i> , Art Gallery at Evergreen, Coquitlam <i>To Feel Close</i> , AKA Artist Run, Saskatoon
2019	<i>Oscillations</i> , Q-O2, Brussels <i>You May Be My Lucky Star</i> , HB Studio, Tokyo
2018	<i>The things they've seen and the places they've been</i> , NNGN, Tokyo <i>A Dream In Which I Am You</i> , Darling Foundry, Montreal <i>Desire as Politics</i> , Valade Gallery, Detroit
2017	<i>Odarodde</i> , Schwules Museum, Berlin <i>Some Far Place</i> , The Rooms, St-Johns
2016	<i>Form Follows Fiction</i> , Art Museum at the University of Toronto, Toronto

- 2013 *Coming to Terms*, Justina Barnicke Gallery, Toronto
 2012 *Sounding Selves*, Dalhousie Gallery, Halifax
 2011 *Coming After*, The Power Plant, Toronto
PopSex!, Illingsworth Kerr Gallery, Calgary
Patria o Libertad!, Museum of Canadian Contemporary Art, Toronto
 2010 *Projections*, Musée d'Art Contemporain, Montreal
It is What it Is: Canadian Biennial, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
 2009 *You Can't Get There From Here*, York Quay Gallery, Toronto
Minimalistic, Galerie Vanessa Quang, Paris
 2008 *Reverberations*, Yuangong Art Museum, Shanghai
 2007 *Auto Emotion*, The Power Plant, Toronto
 2006 *Bühne des Lebens*, Lenbachhaus, Munich
 2005 *Manipulations: Economies of Deceit*, Prague Biennale, Prague
 2004 *Monitoring*, Kunstbahnhof, Kassel
 1999 *Shermantics: Selves inspired by Cindy Sherman*, Area Gallery, Toronto

Selected Performance

- 2022 *Tunings*, Ystads Konstmuseum, Ystad
 2021 *Anemones*, Ellen deBruijne Projects, Amsterdam
 2020 *Afstemmingen*, ZEIT, Antwerp
Ojalá estuvieras aquí, Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid
 2019 *Garde Rose*, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh
 2018 *Lover*, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh
 2017 *The Five Ages*, Schwules Museum, Berlin
 2015 *Flowers of the Soviet War Memorial*, Dock 11, Berlin
 2012 *Bonne Fête*, Owens Gallery, Sackville
 2009 *I Imagine You Are Someone Else*, Les Grandes Traversées, Bordeaux
 2006 *Hollow*, Bus Gallery, Toronto

Collections

Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna; The Polin Museum for the History of Polish Jews, Warsaw; Thielska Galleriet, Stockholm; The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; The Ystads Konstmuseum, Ystad.

Selected Bibliography

- Benoit, Guillaume. *Le pouvoir de la langage*. Slash, 2022;
 Bunnell, Alexa. *Vaster and More Slow*. Canadian Art, 20 May 2020;
 Chang, Derrick. *Shout, Shout, Let It All Out*. C Magazine, Winter 2016;
 Charron, Marie-Ève. *Miroirs Trompeurs*. Le Devoir, 2010;
 Davies, Jon. *Coming After*. The Power Plant, 2012;
 Enright, Robert. *Heartbreaker*. Bordercrossings, 2004;
 Evans, Jennifer V. *The Queer Art of History*. Duke University Press, April 2023;
 Fornwald, Blair. *The Gift of Frustration*. Dunlop Exhibition Catalogue, 7 October 2016;
 Milroy, Sarah. *Art that Weeps, Sings and Bleeds*. Globe & Mail, 11 June 2007;
 Rumack, Leah. *A 400-year old Boyband*. National Post, 2003;
 Skelly, Julia. *À corps perdu/ sharing madness*. Esse Magazine, 2023;
 Vaughan, RM. *Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay Spins a Yarn*. Canadian Art, 11 May 2015;

ESSAYS / MAY 20, 2020

Vaster and More Slow

Queer botanical bonds are forged in histories of cruising and the works of Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay and Derrick Woods-Morrow—encouraging radical plant-human relations in these current conditions



Alexa Bunnell, *Ollie and Sofie caught fingering flowers and loving a tree*, Halifax Public Gardens, 2019. Digital scan of 35mm film.

by **Alexa Bunnell**

Artist Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay's 20-minute audio guide, *Trees Are Fags* (2018), encourages the listener to find a park, urban space or the garden of their mind to perform a series of choreographed cruising gestures, referring to "the trees that populate those places where men congregate to have sex." Instead of cruising for a human lover, the listener is asked to seek out an arboreal lover.

In following Nemerofsky's instructions (accessed through a [dedicated website](#)) during this time of removal from each other, I found myself cruising through half-frozen puddles, slush and mud in search of an arboreal lover. Here in Mohkínstsis, winter lingers much longer than desired. Trees become early hints of spring, shooting out buds to detect warmth and light. These buds are the only part not swaddled in dead bark, and are packed with photoreceptor proteins that measure the light each day. The bark of the tree gathers warmth and reflects it to the ground, melting the snow and

forming little pools of water around the base of the trunk. These puddles still freeze at night, capturing air bubbles that crunch and snap pleurably when you step on them.

Nemerofsky's voice tenderly presses me to reconsider my own relationship with trees, imagining the rhizomatic connection between ancient forests as queer families of odd numbers and found mothers. The audio traces the etymology of the word *faggot* to bundles of sticks dowsed in oil and lit to burn witches. It proposes that a *fagotto*, the Italian word for bassoon, is the arboreal voice of homosexuality, and envisions the space between trees, heavy with pollen, as like the air on a dancefloor, thick with pheromones. I follow the guided gestures, feeling the absence of a known path, making oblique moves and stepping toward things I cannot see. Feeling spring buds graze my tightly clad legs, I approach walls of branches where my body does not quite fit, and green branches bend back to accommodate my weight. A chorus of voices from the audio proposes queer methods of moving, queering my path and subverting the directives I am given. Each time I cruise, it is different; the choreographic cues shuffle to produce a new lover, a new tree with whom to have an encounter.



Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay, *Trees Are Fags* (documentation), Waterlow Park, London, UK, 2018. Commissioned by LUX and CRUSEV. Photo: Ed Twaddle.

Trees Are Fags encourages considerations of cruising's many transgressions, breakages and queer affects. Nemerofsky guides willing participants to consider the sexual experience of a tree—the multitudes of lovers and erotic actions it has witnessed and sheltered. Over a video call, the artist expands on these multitudes: "I care a lot about queer lineages, about the transmission of queer information from one generation to another. And while many gay clubs have in some cases survived many decades, men have been cruising for sex in parks and wooded areas since time immemorial." In a short film commissioned by arts organization Visual AIDS in late 2019, Chicago artist Derrick Woods-Morrow memorializes histories of cruising culture, and captures images of trees sheltering, witnessing and participating in erotic activity. *Much handled things are always*

soft unfurls Chicago's unwritten history of public sex and cruising in urban park spaces, specifically as a sexual community active from the 1960s through the '80s that was created by gay Black men against a background of housing segregation and heightened policing practices. In the film, artist and long-term HIV survivor Patric McCoy narrates: "It's hard to describe an invisible society, because it's invisible." There are images of men holding each other's gaze, kissing and touching one another, surrounded by late summer's rich foliage. While McCoy speaks of the tensions of visibility and invisibility, the plants provide refuge, holding secret human relations and human-plant relations in their own secret selves. The worlds created by these marginalized communities act in solidarity and in collaboration with the interior world of plants, worlds that grow in resistance to colonial and capitalistic exploitation.

The congregations depicted by McCoy's words and Wood-Morrow's images ask, What of the spaces that held the interiority and privacy of cruising? The parks McCoy describes were razed by the city of Chicago and rebuilt, leaving easy sightlines and fewer cruising possibilities. This is a familiar story in many other places. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, physical distancing and other regulations have shifted social spaces to become tense and lonely. On the streets, narrow walking trajectories have morphed into arching wide berths, a distressing reminder that we cannot be close to other humans in public space. Missing intimacy with other people, I have been orienting toward the plants and trees in my nearby parks as memory keepers and guardians of queer intimacy.

Plant-human entanglements come to light as the listener is guided to their arboreal lover in *Trees Are Fags*. Nemerofsky's audio intrinsically links queer bodies to that of trees: "We might look to trees as ancestors, as faggoty relations, to see the relation between our bodies and the bodies of trees." In blurring the boundaries between our bodies and those of trees, the artist allows us to consider unwritten queer histories and futurities, ones that grow in resilience against hetero-colonial exploitation and its non-consensual, proprietary practices. Upon finding a potential lover, the listener-cruiser is told to seek consent, and to wait as long as it takes to receive that consent. In slowing our human tempo and adjusting our impulses, our gestures can adapt to queer desires, to the needs of vegetal others. We can envision outcomes that encourage the messier, queered spaces of plant-human alliances, the encroaching garden or the concrete paths torn up by the roots of a poplar tree.

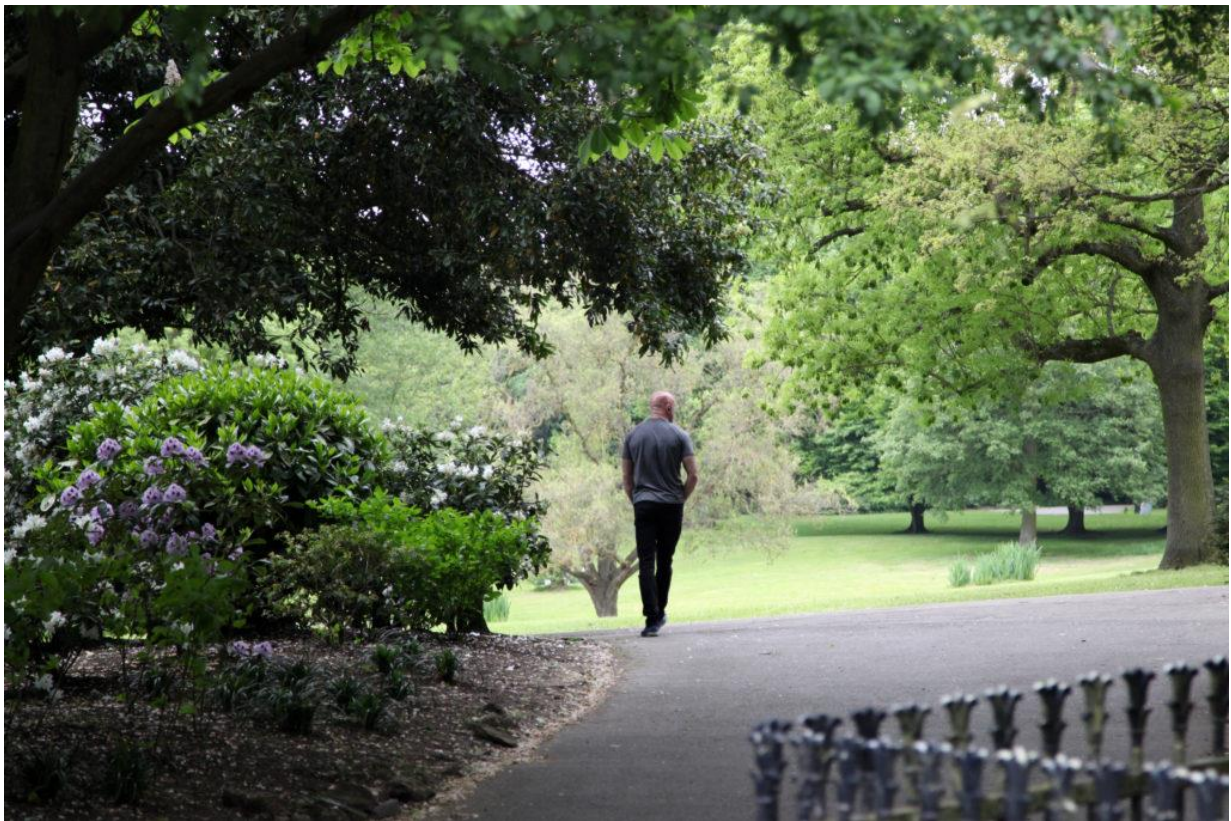
I reflect on how to slow my movements to match the tree's tempo; I envision its own method of counting time and lovers.

In my own wandering, I press my fingers into the grooves of an old balsam poplar, fissures drawn deep in the bark, betraying its age. I deliberate about what this tree is perceiving in the moment, how its senses are of a different kind than my own—xylem and phloem tissue rushing below my fingers to carry starchy sugars from the roots, to feed budding leaves. I reflect on how to slow my movements to match the tree's tempo; I envision its own method of counting time and lovers. My movements lock us in a polytempic encounter. *Trees Are Fags* demands that I simultaneously queer my approach to nature and become plant-like through slowing my movements and problematizing my own immediate urges and desires for the nonhuman. The tree appears to be an experienced lover, its trifurcating branches representing a resilient queer partner.

In *Radical Botany*, Meeker and Szabari ask, "Can plants help us imagine life differently with their inclusion in human economies of pleasure, agency, and speculative creations?" They posit that plants destabilize our human capacities for worldmaking, perceiving and existing, paving the way for new planthropocentric worlds to be conceived. Anthropologist Natasha Myers describes these plant-centric entanglements: "It is not an overstatement to say that *we are only because they are*. The thickness of this relation teaches us the full

meaning of the word *interimplication*... It is time for a radical solidarity project that insists that *we are of the plants*.”

And so, what occurs when marginalized queer orientations, communities and congregations gather in the peripheral spaces filled with greenery? What does the memory of cruising, beyond meeting in former clubs and basements, introduce to outdoor spaces? Intimate and queer plant-human mutuality offers visions of non-hierarchical relations: desire outside colonial and capitalist designations. *Trees Are Fags* aids listeners in envisioning possibilities of nonbinary, nonhuman designation and sexiness. Both Nemerofsky and Woods-Morrow recall histories of cruising to memorialize intimacy in the company of foliage. Together with the plant-human affinities revealed by the history of cruising, Myers’s call for solidarity through the lens of queer intimacy and worldbuilding may grow concealed worlds abundant with possibilities, rhizomatic in nature.



Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay, *Trees Are Fags* (documentation), Waterlow Park, London, UK, 2018. Commissioned by LUX and CRUSEV. Photo: Ed Twaddle.

REVIEWS / MAY 11, 2015

Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay Spins a Yarn

POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Warsaw, Permanent Display



A museum visitor listening to Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay's audio guide, *The Muranow Lily* (2015), at the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw

by R.M. Vaughan

I would not swear to the following assertion in court, but I believe Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay's new audio guide for POLIN is the first museum audio guide that begins by asking the listener, very politely, to put on their hat and gloves and *leave the museum*. Go outside, walk around, get out.

You can't blame Nemerofsky: POLIN is a sparkling new postmodern cube dedicated to all things Jewish and Polish, good and bad, but it is relentlessly noisy, visually and aurally. The permanent exhibition is an interactive, non-stop whirl of projections, abrupt lighting changes and competing soundscapes, a bells-and-whistles presentation of history obviously designed to catch the flitting attentions of our inattentive world. The kids love it! And parts of the exhibition, the more tidy corners where everything syncs, are truly lovely.

But walking through the permanent exhibition with any sort of added sound attached to your ears is pointless. I breathed a sigh of relief five steps in when I heard Nemerofsky's gentle voice instructing me to head for the front door.

Here I need to put in a proviso. I am a member of the media. I get into places like POLIN for free, and I am always grateful for that opportunity, and try never to take it for granted. However, most people are not members of the media, and they might rightly be confused by Nemerofsky's instructions—can one just leave the museum with an audio guide attached to one's ear? I had to negotiate doing so first with the information desk (who had never been asked about the situation before) and then again with the security guards, who, once they saw the press kit in my hands, immediately became friendly and co-operative—befuddled, but helpful.

I am certain, however, that any paying member of the public not sporting evidence of a media connection would find walking out the front door with museum property on their head far less easy. But this is a concern for POLIN to work out, not Nemerofsky.

Once you are outside, another world is revealed. A buried world, in all senses. Nemerofsky tells the story of a lost painting, a great romance, a transcendent, and defiant, act of gender variation and a possible horticultural miracle. I won't spoil the story, and will simply say that as Nemerofsky guides you around the POLIN building, across the pretty lawns and across the street into an abject apartment block's concrete courtyard, you gradually come to realize that everything Nemerofsky is telling you is true and that nothing Nemerofsky is telling you is true.

Mixing historical "fact" with mythology, art history, Jewish folklore, the history of the erased Jewish neighbourhood that POLIN now sits atop and his own dreamy imaginings, Nemerofsky affirms the power of narratives to heal while wondering aloud when and if narratives can ever be trusted. "Some say," Nemerofsky repeats as he introduces each new chapter of his curious tale, a reminder that nothing on offer is verifiable—a puckish stance to take when one considers the audio guide was created as part of a residency for a history museum.

Nemerofsky's fabulist reportage undermines the very premise of information sharing as it is understood by museology, which is not to read his audio guide as a critique of POLIN in particular, but of all hubs and archives, meeting points and gossip exchanges, that purport to convey complete understandings. And, again, one participates in Nemerofsky's journey into alternate histories outside the museum walls—a blunt positioning difficult to set aside.

As if that cultural tightrope walk were not enough, one must consider the larger context of presenting a work founded in a conception of narrative as inherently unreliable within the very loaded context of Poland's largest Jewish museum. Jewish life in Poland was never easy. During the Second World

War, nearly half of all Jews murdered by the Nazis came from Poland. Today, trinket sellers in Warsaw make tiny, gnome-like statues called “Lucky Jews”; miniature Hasidic men carrying bags of money or coins. I kid you not. To say Poland has a complicated relationship with its past and present Jewish population is to say very little, and to note that Poland, and Europe in general, is still too fond of the ugly lies generated by Holocaust deniers is to not do enough. In this fraught climate of fading memories and active erasure, Nemerofsky does the opposite of what safe art does—he further complicates, he equivocates, he speaks in parentheticals.

One could argue that by taking anything less than an absolutist stand with any material generated for POLIN, especially during such times as ours, when anti-Semitism is on the rise again throughout the world, is utterly foolhardy, even endangering. But I would argue the opposite: only by recognizing that all narratives are dappled with asterisks, with doubt and side notes, can we come to a full and necessary understanding of our own condition and of the lives of others.

Words and stories have power, a sometimes dangerous power, but unquestioned words and stories are always lethal.

à corps perdu / sharing madness

Julia Skelly

Galerie de l'UQAM, Montréal
September 9–October 22, 2022



corps perdu | sharing madness, exhibition views,
Galerie de l'UQAM, Montréal, 2022.
Photos: © Galerie de l'UQAM, Montréal

The exhibition *à corps perdu | sharing madness* is an elegant bringing together of pleasure and politics—or perhaps, more accurately, an elegant “moving together,” a phrase that is important to understanding this performative exhibition, beautifully curated by Florence-Agathe Dubé-Moreau and Maude Johnson¹. The show, which was inspired by the affective consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the limitations that it imposed on public performances, brings together Canadian and international performers Amrita Hepi, Hanako Hoshimi-Caines, Ligia Lewis, Lo Fi Dance Theory, Benny Nemer, Andrea Peña, and Andros Zins-Browne. As a whole, the exhibition demonstrates how videos of dance performances can fill a gallery wall—indeed, a gallery space—with powerful messages on a range of topics, including racism, colonialism, and empathy.

Benny Nemer, a Montréal artist currently based in Paris, began working on *Tunings* in 2020 and chose to film the piece instead of performing it live. The exhibition includes images from rehearsals for *Tunings*, but much more impactfully, screens

show the video recording of the performance from 2021. Combining an interest in botany, queer desire, and art history, the performance involves Nemer ornamenting his two male dancers first with a long, thin, clear tube, and then with branches and tulips, as a flautist plays. This ornamentation seems spontaneous rather than choreographed, and the slow, mindful movements of the two dancers, whose goal is to keep the tube and plants afloat on their shoulders and limbs, also seem organic. The performance is gorgeous to look at and watch, but it is also a master class in corporeal empathy, led not so much by the dancers but by Nemer. As he was decorating his dancers, he was clearly speaking to them, and he often smiled, bringing viewers a momentary sensation of joy. This unexpected affective element, combined with the visual pleasure of the performance, made for a memorable viewing experience.

à corps perdu | sharing madness is inevitably haunted by those who have died in the last two and half years, as hinted at by the French portion of the exhibition's title. But it would be inaccurate to suggest that these performances, and by extension the exhibition, are concerned solely with tragedy. The curators and performers have created and brought together moving (in both senses of the word) artworks that can be appreciated for their aesthetic beauty, as showcases of physical strength and ingenuity, but also for their rapier-sharp awareness that beauty, pleasure, politics, and pain are not mutually exclusive concepts or experiences. By bringing multiple dance(r)s into the gallery space, the exhibition reminds us that we are not alone in this mad world.



Benny Nemer
Tunings, 2021, installation views
Galerie de L'UQAM, Montréal, 2022.
Photos: © Galerie de l'UQAM, Montréal