

(To see the world in a grain of sand)  
(Aug 7 – Sept 29, 2025)

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(Curated by Gladys Lou)

(Noni Kaur, Ryan Kelln, Chris Myhr)



This publication is made on the occasion of the group exhibition, *To see the world in a grain of sand*, curated by Gladys Lou, featuring artists Noni Kaur, Ryan Kelln, Chris Myhr. On view at Factory Media Centre from August 7<sup>th</sup> – September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2025.



# Holding Infinity

by Gladys Lou

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*“To see a world in a grain of sand  
And a heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand  
And eternity in an hour.”*

— William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*

*To see the world in a grain of sand* is a multisensory exhibition that explores sand as a medium of communication, in an attempt to bridge the physical and the digital, the natural and the artificial, and the past and the future.

In Buddhist cosmology, every being is likened to a grain of sand – seemingly insignificant, yet essential to the infinite cycles of the universe. As both building blocks and residue, sand underpins human development, from construction and glass-making to silicon-based computing and digital infrastructure. How does the growing demand for sand in technology shape contemporary discourse on resource extraction, environmental degradation, and global inequality? And how might sand, like the hourglass, capture and reverse time?

Drawing inspiration from William Blake’s poem, *Auguries of Innocence* (1863), the exhibition reflects on how the smallest particles of matter encode vast cultural, ecological, and geopolitical significance.

Unlike dust, which disperses and dissipates, sand retains a quiet agency, shifting, migrating, and accumulating. Malleable and mutable, it exists as a site of alchemical transformation, deeply embedded in mythology, magic, and folklore. Just as humanity is unified as a species, yet each possesses individual memories and characteristics, each grain of sand documents and preserves its own history and tactility. Defined by its size rather than its material composition, sand becomes a metaphor for differences within sameness: a cosmos of distinct substances collectively categorized as “sand.”

In the making of sand mandalas, millions of grains of sand are meticulously arranged and charged with spiritual blessings, only to be ritually dismantled and returned to nature, marking the impermanence of life. This cyclical understanding of time echoes Nietzsche’s concept of the eternal return, where events endlessly recur in an infinite loop. This philosophy also resonates with Vasari’s understanding of art as perpetual cycles of origin, flourishing, and decay, and reemerges in literature such as Jorge Luis Borges’s *The Immortal*, where immortality is imagined as a state of living in the realm of the collective unconscious. *To see the world in a grain of sand* extends this intellectual lineage, foregrounding artworks that trace the duality of the eternal and the ephemeral, merging ancient practices with futuristic visions.

The exhibition brings together artworks across diverse media, ranging from an AI installation with interactive sand, backlit lightboxes featuring magnified photographs of microplastics, to desiccated coconut compositions that evoke the biospheric terrain. Together, the selected works stimulate a range of sensory experiences conjured from the material, symbolic, and spiritual dimensions of sand. The exhibition draws attention to the interconnected systems, both visible and invisible, that live within the smallest of things, drawing visitors closer to the elemental units that shape the worlds we build, inherit, and imagine.

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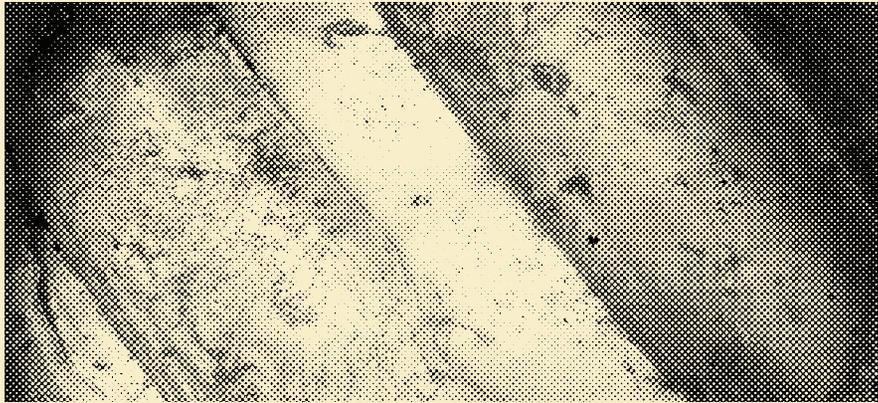
*Ab-Solutes: Lake Ontario* is a series of macro photography by Chris Myhr capturing microplastic contaminants collected along the shores of Lake Ontario. These industrial pollutants, typically 3–4mm in size, are nearly indistinguishable from sand to the naked eye. By magnifying these particles, Myhr confronts viewers with an eerie sublime: pollutants reimagined as haunting yet enigmatic artifacts of human excess, suspended within the hydrosphere. Travelling through global water systems, these contaminants ultimately accumulate within human and non-human bodies. By referencing both microscopic and telescopic imaging, the work distorts scale, presenting minute pollutants on planetary levels, transcending binaries such as micro versus macro, and local versus global.



Created using photographic techniques that employ precise lighting and specialized lenses, these images reveal intricate textures, colours, and forms that evoke cell structures, volcanic rocks, or celestial bodies – moons, planets, and galaxies. Iridescent surfaces shimmer under backlit films, folding into smooth and jagged creases etched with scars, appendages, and traces of chemical rupture. Each photograph is titled using the international protocol for naming new planets, and bears the traces of natural phenomena such as corrosion, compression, condensation, and sublimation.



Despite their lethality, these microplastics appear almost like pearls, crystals, and precious stones, each with a distinct aura – as if alive, sentient, and sacred. Myhr presents to viewers this paradox of sublime beauty and toxicity, where what appears seductive and pure on the surface may in fact be deeply hazardous. This irony invites reflection on the dangers hidden in seemingly benign aspects of industrial production and consumer culture, which erode ecosystems and accelerate environmental degradation.



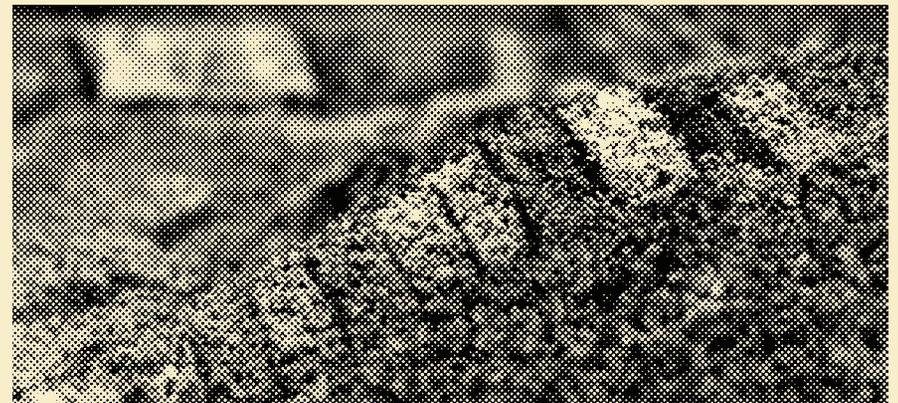
The project's title, *Ab-Solutes*, plays on the prefix ab-, denoting absence or abnormality, and solutes, materials dissolved in a solvent. It turns the lens toward what resists dissolution or resolution, what refuses to be forgotten. The title also draws from philosopher Hent de Vries' idea of the "absolute": that which cannot be fully known or absorbed into systems of human knowledge. In line with Jane Bennett's theory of Vibrant Matter, these pollutants are framed not merely as waste, but as active, enduring agents, residues of human activity that persist beyond human lifespans, haunting the environments they infiltrate.

*Ab-Solutes: Lake Ontario* is part of an ongoing body of work exploring "land-water interfaces," zones where terrestrial and aquatic systems collide, resulting in unexpected ecological entanglements. Other sites currently explored in the *Ab-Solutes* series include Lake Erie (Ontario), the Athabasca River (Alberta), and the waters of the Canadian Arctic.

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Ryan Kelln's *Experimance* is an interactive installation featuring AI-generated imagery projected onto a ceramic bowl filled with sand. The bowl symbolizes a miniature Earth, a specimen on a Petri dish, a planet shaped by human agency. Tactile and playful, the work invites viewers into an immersive journey through the rise and evolution of human civilization, from primordial wilderness to post-industrial futures. A video iteration of the work is projected skyward onto the gallery ceiling, transforming the industrial factory space into a planetarium. The work invites viewers to gaze upwards and imagine looking toward another planet, while its inhabitants watch over us from a distant realm.

Kelln draws on visual references ranging from Edward Burtynsky's aerial photography, Gerhard Richter's abstract painting, insular art from illuminated manuscripts to the geometries of microchip design. The projected imagery recalls the patterned wafers of silicon processors and satellite cityscapes on Google Earth. The top-down, omniscient view, akin to climate modeling, surveillance systems, and the god's-eye perspective in video games, is both powerful and flattening. What feels like control may, in fact, blind us from deeper truths.



As visitors touch and move the sand, a depth camera detects shifts in its topography, responding to gestures and movements with a pulsing pattern that resembles a heartbeat. Changes in height and gradient activate a generative AI system to create new imaginary landscapes in real-time. The imagery evolves across eras: from prehistoric settlements and agricultural



zones to expanding metropolises. Roads multiply and overlap. Cities rise and fall. Buildings deconstruct and rebuild – in cyclical patterns. The visuals, at once hyperreal and absurd, are generated through machine learning and text-to-image prompts. Every granular adjustment creates a new, evolving world.

*Experimance* reflects on the environmental consequences of uncontrolled urban development. As Indigenous scholar John Borrows wrote, “To be alive is to be entangled in relationships not entirely of our own making. These entanglements impact us not only as individuals, but also as nations, peoples, and species, and present themselves in patterns.” If the viewer handles the sand gently with care, the projected world blossoms into a peaceful, biodiverse terrain, a harmonious vision of sustainability. On the other hand, aggressive or hasty gestures would morph the scene into a dystopian, post-apocalyptic wasteland, mirroring the destructive speed of industrialization and the chaos of climate change. The installation becomes a mirror of human impact and responsibility, a call to reflect on how every action, even the smallest touch of the fingertip, could lead to profound changes to the future to come.

An AI voice assistant, powered by GPT-4o, responds to verbal questions from the audience. Initially light and welcoming, its tone gradually shifts to more philosophical and introspective, echoing Kelln’s own reflections on artificial intelligence in his writings. As he wrote,

“ I am filled with hope, dread, and guilt about the human experimentation on our world and the accelerating pace of technological change that is our children’s inheritance. This recklessness now extends to AI, as we rush toward machine intelligence, ushering in new species, tools, and ways of thinking. It reminds me of flying over a vast city – marveling at what we have built, while grappling with its bloody price: our past, present and future sacrifices. My work is about knowing – and the awe and horror of that knowing.



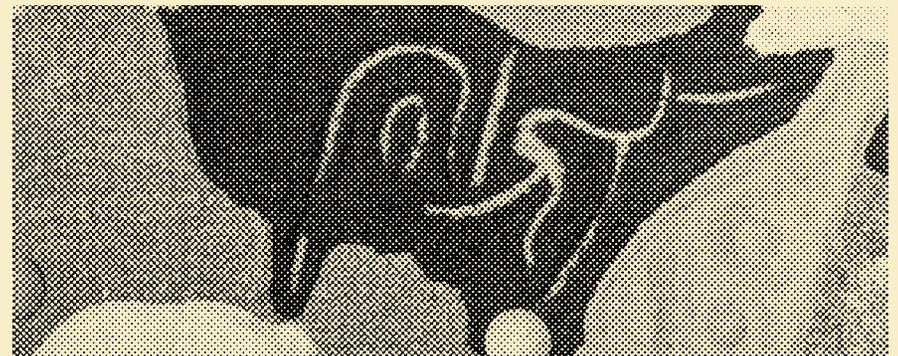
In this speculative archive of humanity, Kelln crafts a digital document of civilization, rendered in code and preserved in sand. If the world as we know it becomes unrecognizable, Experimance endures as a witness to present Kelln's memory, warning, and gift to future generations. Dedicated to his partner Laura, daughter Molly, and newborn son, the work stands as both a love letter and a lament, an intergenerational offering to a world in flux.

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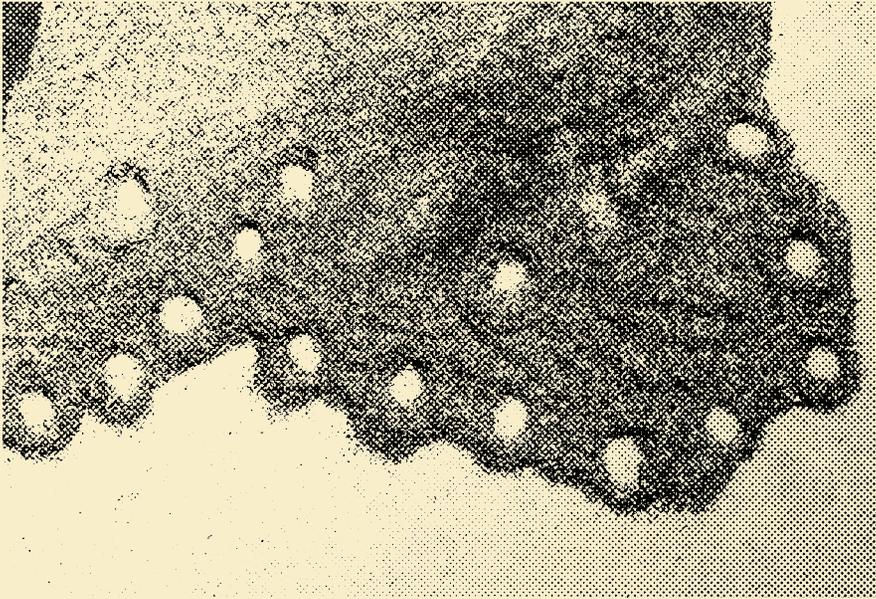
*Sniff ...2.0* Working with hand-dyed desiccated coconut, Noni Kaur creates floor-based installations rooted in the sacred tradition of *Rangoli*, practiced in India, South Asia and Singapore during festivals and communal gatherings. As a Singaporean Canadian woman of Punjabi descent, Kaur transforms this domestic craft, traditionally made from powder pigments, flowers, or rice, and associated with nourishment, healing, and care, into a medium that investigates cultural history, materiality, and spirituality.

Kaur's installation takes the form of a topographical mandala, resembling a cell nucleus radiating outward in spirals and floral gradients of fuchsia pink, magenta, saffron orange, blood red, burgundy, crimson, and canary yellow. These hues are charged with cultural symbolism, where red evokes fertility and passion, yellow suggests spirituality, pink symbolizes celebration, and white connotes purity. Together, they recall the raging fire of feminine energy and life-affirming sexuality.

For Kaur, the work is a somatic extension of her body, a mark of the artist's continuous presence. The act of dyeing, processing, shaping, and layering coconut by hand is simultaneously a sacred and intimate experience and a meditative, labour-intensive ritual – an embodied performance of care. The resulting forms, reminiscent of cellular structures or speculative maps, recall both human and non-human systems that encapsulate microbiomes, city blueprints and ancestral memories. As the coconut decays over the course of the exhibition, the work mirrors the cycles of life, death, and renewal. Kaur embraces entropy as a mode of infinite energy circulation, where spiritual energy is gathered and eventually dispersed, returning to the natural world to enter the next cycle.







On the floor, Kaur's installation juxtaposes Kelln's AI-generated landscapes projected onto the ceiling above. While Kelln's imagery stems from code and machine learning, Kaur's work is grounded in the handmade and organic, highlighting the contrast between technological acceleration and the tenderness of bodily labour. Her gestures, slow and deliberate, center the human body as a site of knowledge and resistance to the speed of generative algorithms, which can render infinite image variations in seconds. Her work insists on a return to the senses, inviting viewers to smell, to breathe, to pause – cultivating a calm, sacred space for contemplation.

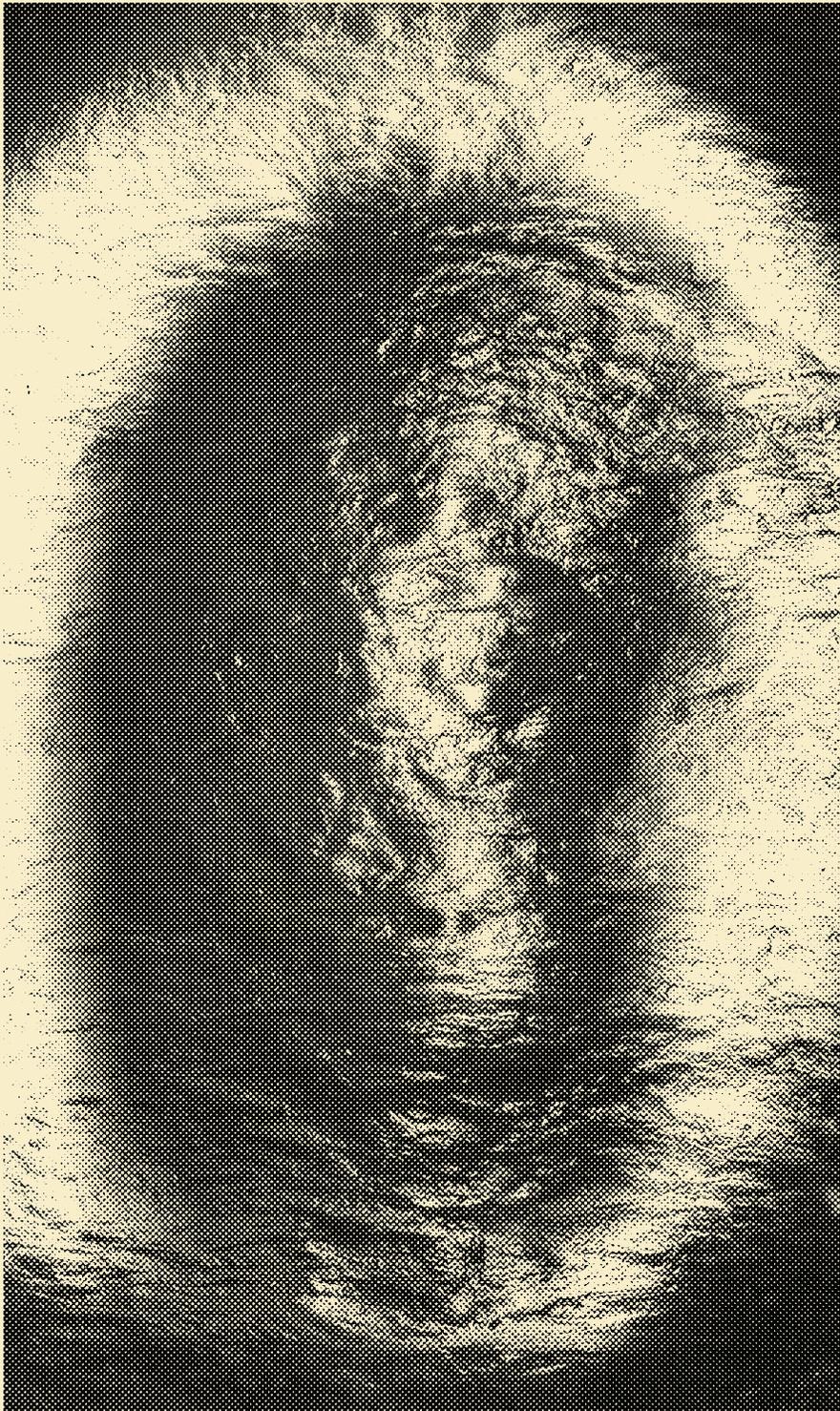
Kaur's site-specific installation responds to its surrounding environment by attuning to its rhythm, climate, and energy. Each iteration, past or future, is unique and unrepeatable. The coconut grains serve as vessels for her lived experience of migration and diaspora, drawing a parallel to microorganisms adapting to unfamiliar ecosystems. The visual pattern adopts a grid structure that appears systemic and formulaic, echoing the hidden rules and social frameworks that are woven through our lives. Kaur's installations map the biosphere as a shared fabric of interconnections. Each grain of coconut powder becomes a container of life, scattered in patterns that reveal sacred geometries and unseen logics pulsing between visible and invisible worlds.

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*To see the world in a grain of sand* invites viewers to pause, to slow down amid the relentless velocity of progress and productivity, and to pay attention to the granular forces that shape our world. The exhibition space becomes a site of discovery, gathering, and introspection. Within the bounds of the gallery walls and the finite lifespan of technologies destined to become obsolete, one might, if only for a moment, glimpse eternity held in a grain of sand.



# Cicatrix

by Nehal El-Hadi

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Sand builds our world, and yet our need for sand is destroying our world. The harms caused by sand extraction — destroying ecosystems, worsening the impacts of climate change, disturbing wildlife, contributing to flooding, affecting watersheds, and altering natural landforms — are escalating due to growing urbanization and aging infrastructure. This is a global issue, identified by the United Nations Environment Programme as one of the most urgent environmental crises of our time.

According to the Ontario Stone, Sand & Gravel Association (OSSGA), approximately 164 million tonnes of sand, gravel and clay are extracted in Ontario each year for infrastructure construction, building maintenance, and landscaping. Of this, 40 per cent is consumed by the Greater Toronto Area alone.

Most of the sand used in building Ontario's cities is sourced from sandpits across the province, extracted by over 300 aggregate mining companies represented by the OSSGA. After these sites are depleted, many are reclaimed for public or recreational use, a growing trend across the province. Some popular tourist destinations, such as the golf course at Wasaga Sands and the swimming hole at Elora Quarry, are former sandpits given new life through reclamation. As sand is heavy and costly to transport, the materials used to build cities are often drawn from nearby sites, leaving lasting marks on the surrounding landscape.

In the summer, Toronto's Christie Pits Park bustles with activity. Families picnic on the grass, baseball and soccer teams train and compete, youth groups and summer camps congregate, and the city's diverse ethnic communities gather and celebrate. Walking north from Bloor Street, the land slopes into a large bowl taking up more than half of the park, big enough to contain a community centre, baseball diamonds, a playground, splashpad, picnic tables, and more.

On the southeast corner of the park, 22,000 orange-and-white neon lights make up Baekho, a blazing tiger who sits at the park's entrance from Koreatown, guarding against the dark of the winter.

Christie Pits is a place defined by both the history of its formation and its many social lives. Before it became a depression (a low-lying area surrounded by higher ground), the pit was filled with sand, gravel and clay. The park's name comes from the sunken large bowl in its northern section formed by sand mining. From the mid-1800s to early 1900s, the Christie Sand Pits company excavated aggregates (sand, gravel, and clay) to build Toronto. The City of Toronto acquired the park in 1907, and today, the edges of the former pit are a popular tobogganing destination in winter. (The park's pit isn't the only terraforming project that occurred at that site: buried underneath Christie Pits, corralled as a storm sewer, runs Toronto's once-surface waterway, Garrison Creek.)

Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan writes that "space is transformed into place as it acquires definition and meaning." The 22 acres of land that Christie Pits Park occupies have been the site of significant events that contributed to Toronto's becoming and self-understanding. Its surprising and unexpected

landscape, formed through removal and excavation, now contributes to Torontonians' quality of life and wellness. Yet the park is also implicated in unpleasant moments in Toronto's past.

From race riots to garbage strikes, the negative space formed by extractive city-building practices provided an atmosphere for community activities of all stripes.

Instigated by antisemitic actions during a baseball tournament, the violent 1933 race riots at Christie Pits Park scarred the city's memory and resulted in the municipal government of the time banning the swastika. And in 2002, Christie Pits Park became a garbage dumping ground during the Toronto city workers strike, which lasted for 22 days.

Excavation sites are rare within cities, where land is typically reserved for more practical or profitable uses. In Toronto, the depressions and bowls found in some parks, such as Cedarvale Park, are naturally occurring; in others, like Trinity Bellwoods, the natural shape of the ravine was altered by the construction of underground sewage systems that buried Garrison Creek, along with the removal of sand and soil to build subway tunnels.

Something cannot be built from nothing. Excavations — mines, quarries, pits — wound landscapes to extract resources. Cities come into being through the transmutation of these raw materials into buildings, roads, infrastructure, houses, and transit systems. Yet the extraction, transportation, processing, and use of these materials — especially at our current scale of urban development — carry significant environmental and ecological consequences. The traces of these extractions remain in the land, reforming topographies and futures. While reclamation projects may provide environmentally beneficial futures, every excavation raises the questions: What existed before these hollow-out absences? And what will emerge in the spaces left behind?

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# About<sup>the</sup>Curator

**Gladys Lou** (she/they) is a Hong Kong-Canadian curator, writer, and artist currently pursuing an M.A. in Curatorial Studies at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College in New York, with a B.A. in Art & Art History and Psychology from the University of Toronto and Sheridan College. She was awarded a Fulbright scholarship with a placement at the University of Washington, where she studied Digital Arts and Experimental Media in 2022. Her research focuses on experimental media and new technology, including video, sound, and new media, to investigate and challenge the boundaries of sensory perception. She explores visual phenomena and shifting perceptions of light, colour, and space to create immersive, interactive experiences.

Lou was selected as the IA Current Curator at InterAccess in 2023. She has held positions at Vtape, the Blackwood Gallery, Ontario Culture Days, the National Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C.) and the Whitney Museum of American Art. Her critical writing has been published by ArtReview Asia, Impulse Magazine, and the AMP in New York, as well as Public Parking, Studio Magazine, Femme Art Review, Ornamentum, PhotoED Magazine, Pleasure Dome, and Hamilton Artist Inc. in Canada.

# About<sup>the</sup>Writer

**Nehal El-Hadi** is a researcher, writer and editor based in Toronto. Her work explores the relationships — with materials, sites, technologies, and non-human life — that inform our understanding of what it means to be human.

# About the Artists

**Noni Kaur** is an award-winning multidisciplinary artist, and educator. Noni explores potentialities of expression, as a loom between cultures, through immersive, reactive, multi-sensory ephemeral installations that bridges the gaps between gender, culture, the body, and the non-human world. Kaur's bold and sensuous canvases and ground sculptures stem from her heritage as a Singaporean woman of Punjabi heritage. Kaur's works are an embodiment of her response to intersectional identity in communities and the construction of body prints and cell mapping on paper, stemming from her cultural history.

Kaur's work has been featured in international venues across North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia, including: the Havana Biennale, Cuba; the Asian Art Biennale, Dhaka, Bangladesh; the Fukuoka Triennale, Asian Art Museum, Japan; White Columns, New York; and the Henie Onstad Kunstenter, in Oslo, Norway. She is a full-time faculty member in the Arts Foundation and Visual & Digital Arts Programs at Humber College, Toronto.

**Ryan Kelln** (he/him) is a software artist based in Tkaronto/Toronto, with over twenty years of experience spanning game and web development, interactive installations, and machine learning. A passionate advocate for open source and the Creative Commons, Kelln crafts art that celebrates themes of sharing, community, and creativity. His work is realized through ongoing projects that have evolved over 15 years, live performances with musicians and dancers, and installations featuring custom software and AI.

Kelln critically addresses technology while envisioning and advocating for inclusive, emancipatory systems. Beyond his artistic contributions, curation of generative art, and advocacy for art-making, his expertise in machine learning enables him to mentor emerging artists and educate the public through lectures and workshops.

*Technical Assistance* by **Benjamin Lappalainen** a Toronto-based creative technologist, educator, and multidisciplinary artist creating interactive installations that blur the boundaries between digital and physical experience. His work explores how emerging technologies can foster new forms of human connection and creative expression, often incorporating computer vision, AI, and algorithmic processes into innovative interaction design. He has recently stepped into the role of XR Development Lead at UKAI Projects - a non-profit cultural organization with the mission "culture for what's coming".

*Music* by **Daria Morgacheva aka Garden of Magic** a sonic world by Daria Morgacheva, where experimental electronics, ambient textures, and field recordings converge. Drawing from her background in physics and biology, she often returns to questions of nature and technology.

**Chris Myhr** is a media artist based in Hamilton whose work deploys photography, video, sound, and media installation. Myhr's studio practice seeks intersections between art, science, and ecology. For the past decade he has developed an extensive body of work that investigates the complex interrelationships between humans, nonhumans, water, and land. Projects have explored the floodplains of post-Touhoku Earthquake Tokyo; South Korea's Nakdong and Han rivers; shipwreck sites off the coast of Nova Scotia; as well as hydrocarbon, methyl-mercury and plastic contamination in the Athabasca River (Alberta), the Great Lakes (Ontario), and the waters of the Canadian Arctic.

Myhr studied English literature at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver; Interdisciplinary Art at the University of Lethbridge; and completed graduate work at NSCAD University in Halifax. Myhr's work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, and in 2021 his photographic portfolio was awarded the inaugural Prefix Prize.

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Photo by Eli Nolet.

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Photo by Benjamin Lappalainen.



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**Factory Media Centre** is Hamilton's not-for-profit artist-driven resource centre for film, video, new media, installation, sound art, and other multimedia art forms.

Factory Media Centre acknowledges that many Indigenous nations have deep-rooted relationships with the land of present-day Hamilton. We recognize our presence on the shared territories of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Aanishnaabe and the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation. We acknowledge the long history of First Nations, Métis and Inuit Peoples of Canada. We hope that we can move forward both individually and as an institution by recognizing the colonial legacy on which Canada was founded and still operates under, and furthermore, actively work together to create societies that equitably benefit all parties.

Writing: Gladys Lou and Nehal El-Hadi  
Design: Eli Nolet



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