

PROPPED



MUTE OBJECT, LOUD OBJECT

GABRIELLE MOSER

Mute Objects

The prop table is a space of limitless potential for objects. Tucked offstage, waiting in the wings, the table supports the things that constitute the “theatrical properties” of a film or play, their positions marked in carefully drawn outlines. Unlike costumes or elements of the set that do not move, props are defined by their activation by human subjects. They are objects essential to the unfolding of the action on stage that must be handled or picked up, only to be returned to the table at the end of the drama. While some props suggest obvious outcomes of the Shakespearean (or Shonda Rhimesian) variety—a loaded pistol, a vial of poison, or a dagger—others are more ambiguous in their potential meaning. A hat, a bell, a book, or a bicycle pump each seem innocuous enough when waiting patiently on a prop table but suggest a host of possibilities once they appear in the viewer’s line of sight.

As “things” that gain meaning through their use, props are mute objects. But even in their muteness, they fulfill a vital role for the viewer’s experience of the drama. As theatre studies scholar Alice Rayner writes, “Stage props, as paradigmatic objects, constitute the worldliness of the stage and in a sense are owned by the stage; properties in all senses, they give their material attributes to an otherwise empty space.”¹ This is what distinguishes a prop from a sculpture or an installation: while sculptures are autonomous works, and installations evoke a total environment for the viewer to enter into or contemplate, the prop blends qualities of each of these categories. It has innate material properties but its significance is entirely contingent on its placement and use in the drama.

Artists have long understood the power of objects to carry the material residues of the external world with them: the ability of a precisely placed thing to teleport the viewer back into a historical moment or to tether an alternative world firmly in the conditions of the present. The exhibition *Propped* investigates the unique position of the prop in contemporary artistic practice by tracking its deployment by eighteen Canadian artists. In modes that are at turns theatrical and understated, wryly funny and deadly serious, these artists explore the multifaceted meanings of the prop, connoting not only stage props, but also properties, propositions, proposals, projectiles, supports, poles, and boundaries.² Through strategies of archival research, re-enactment, staged photography, stand-up comedy, collage, and assemblage, the artists featured in *Propped* frame props as highly charged objects that mediate people, history, politics, and the landscape. In so doing, they ask us to consider how the things that surround us allow us to make and shape history.



A prop table works to defamiliarize everyday objects by separating them from their routine uses—a strategy several of the artists in the exhibition also adopt to draw our attention to the ways non-human things function as supports for human ideals, activity, and well-being. In Maya Ben David's video, *Insert Coin* (2014), for instance, the landscape itself is made into a prop for human action. By excising the backgrounds from 1990s Super Nintendo arcade games, Ben David creates a montage of tranquil landscapes that form the worldly “properties” of these 16-bit realms. With all characters and signage removed, the footage slowed from its original speed and paired with a cinematic score, the work presents a video game *terra nullius*: a mythical series of undeveloped tracts of land that await the activation of unseen protagonists, ready to enter the scene at the drop of a coin (another kind of prop).

Literally propped up against the gallery walls, Duane Linklater's sculpture, *Id* (2016), also addresses the human use of natural resources. Constructed from supplies purchased at Home Depot, *Id* continues Linklater's ongoing research into the global market for gypsum,

Installation view of Maya Ben David, *Insert Coin*, 2014, video, 4 minutes 5 seconds. Oakville Galleries, 25 June – 2 September 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Vtape, Toronto. Photo: Toni Hafkenschheid.



the crystalline mineral mined in Canada—one of the largest pits is in Halifax, Nova Scotia—and around the world that is used to make drywall. Working from architectural plans from the Art Gallery of Alberta, where this work was first shown, Linklater has modelled the plywood, gypsum, and steel-ribbed panels after a cross section of the gallery walls, dissecting the institution as though it was a specimen.³ These ubiquitous construction materials then shelter a pair of moose-hide moccasins handmade by the artist. The juxtaposition of mass fabrication and skilled craftsmanship mirrors the ways museums extract, export, and contain Indigenous cultural practices as artifacts, but the title of the work suggests a more personal resonance. Evoking the psychoanalytic term “id”—from *das Es*, or “it,” in German—the title suggests a current of unconscious psychic energy that drives our basic urges, needs, and desires, but also resonates with ID, or identification. In this way, *Id* triangulates

Installation view of Duane Linklater, *Id*, 2016, handmade moose hide moccasins from artist, clay, brick, feather, gypsum, wood, steel. Oakville Galleries, 25 June – 2 September 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver. Photo: Toni Hafkenschied.



the competing economic, cultural, and psychic currency of the materials Linklater is working with, making these quiet props speak to the broader systems of valuation they are entangled within.

Long interested in the ways humans harness the natural world—particularly plants and animals—for their well being, Abbas Akhavan presents a newly commissioned work that considers the ways animals function as emotional supports, or props, for people. Every day the gallery is open, dogs from the St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program are in attendance in the central gallery of Gairloch Gardens. A volunteer-run service typically offered in schools, hospitals, community centres, retirement homes, and as a therapeutic tool for survivors of trauma, the program provides an opportunity for visitors to interact with the volunteer and the dog. They can also pet and cuddle the dog, receive unconditional love from the dog, and carry out an activity in the presence of the dog.⁴

Another gesture of hospitality and care is offered to the viewer in Mark Clintberg and Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay's collaborative project, *For the last guest* (2014). Consisting of a

Installation view of Abbas Akhavan's work. Oakville Galleries, 25 June – 2 September 2017. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.

bouquet, or single flower, wrapped in a silkscreened print made by the artists and supported by a vase, the work rests on a plinth near the gallery entrance, awaiting activation. At the end of each day, the last visitor is invited to take the arrangement home with them. Much like Félix González-Torres's takeaway poster works and candy spills, the bouquet acts as an object of transference, crossing the boundary between domestic and public spaces. It is a prop that makes the circulation of affect palpable, creating a subtle intimacy between strangers.

For other artists, props are vital to processes of self-definition, as is the case with Vincent Chevalier's "PROPS," a series of participatory film screenings that ask audiences to help identify the theatrical properties that are used to shape subjectivities in iconic queer films. As though pilfered from the back of a prop truck, Chevalier's installation *The Still Living End (Gun, Fag, Skull, Thirst)* (2017) presents four items central to the plot of director Gregg Araki's 1992 road trip movie *The Living End* as a limited edition set of tarot cards, emblazoned with a cigarette, a skull, a bottle of Gatorade, and a gun drawn by illustrator Eric Kostiuik Williams. While these objects might at first seem commonplace and unremarkable, in the context of the film they signal fatalistic excess in the face of existential and social crisis: attitudes often associated with practices of queer world making. As Chevalier writes of the film, "Araki's world is one of alienation set amongst the objects and ephemera of 90s consumer culture; his characters exist in a world saturated with reminders of their own mortality."⁵ Laid out on a table as though mid-reading with a psychic, the cards become charged symbols that suggest a tension between agency and fate, opportunity and violence.

Props can also transform profane materials into something more sacred, as Aaron Jones does in his series of small-scale collages. Much like Christian saints or Greek gods and goddesses, Jones's figures are defined as much by their attributes—the objects they carry or wear—as they are by their physical appearance. By recombining images from newspapers, advertisements, photojournalism, and product and fashion photography, Jones probes the construction of the self in an era in which viewers are flooded with images. While several works are clearly self-portraits, others celebrate the figure of the matriarch, in both their subject matter and their profoundly domestic source material: the children's workbooks and copies of *National Geographic* and Oprah magazines, which the artist describes as the props of his mother's living room.

The props of domestic spaces are also reconfigured through the works of Eleanor King, Oliver Husain, and Geoffrey Farmer. Responding to the architecture of Gairloch Gardens, King reprises an earlier work by installing a cathode ray tube (CRT) television into the fireplace that continuously plays footage of a crackling fire. King's faux fireplace might bring to mind other acts of transmutation that take place in interior decor—the masquerading of

Overleaf: Installation view of Mark Clintberg and Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay, *For the last guest*, 2014, silkscreened print on glassine, flowers, vase. Oakville Galleries, 25 June – 2 September 2017. Courtesy of Mark Clintberg (courtesy of Pierre-François Ouellette art contemporain) and Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.



green plastic as house plants, or the flickering of light emitting diode (LED) lights in the shape of candle flames—but the installation also recalls the Yule log broadcasts that have appeared on network television, without commercial interruption, since the 1960s. This feel-good holiday programming offers an opportunity to see television as an object, rather than a medium, and ironically provides a brief respite in which it can function outside of capitalist interests.

Husain's 16mm film *Rushes for Five Hats* (2007) similarly intervenes in the rules of the game by making people the support for props, rather than the other way around. As the title announces, the film is screened *for* the five sculptural hats worn by audience members, rather than the human beings beneath them. And the content of the screening—composed of a sequence of short takes of a woman in front of a paint-splashed backdrop, posing in an elaborate hat while feathers, confetti, and wind chimes float through the scene—seems a fitting filmic fantasy for a group of inanimate viewers regularly perched atop human heads. Operating as traces of the screening, the *Five Thinking Hats* worn by audience members are scattered throughout the galleries as fellow visitors to, and viewers of, the exhibition.

Left: Oliver Husain, *Five Thinking Hats*, 2007, felt, wooden dowels, Styrofoam mannequins, light stands. Courtesy of the artist and Susan Hobbs Gallery. Right: Eleanor King, *Fireplace*, 2017, video, firewood. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.



The list of materials that make up Farmer's installations often sound like prop lists for a particularly ambitious Elizabethan comedy.⁶ In *I'm Not Praying, I'm Just Stretching* (2008–9), the encyclopedic tally of source materials includes a book about nocturnal animals published at the turn of the century, a Quaker-style chair, a branch from a tree used for public hangings, and a 1918 photograph of hundreds of people posing as the Liberty Bell. Taken together, these objects index two of the artist's long-term research projects into Quaker communities in Boston Common and the rights and freedoms associated with the Liberty Bell. Bells are a fixture in Farmer's work, not only as an object and sound to work with, but as one of many props used by the Hunchback of Notre Dame, a recurring figure that appears across his practice. In an earlier work, *Hunchback Kit* (2000), for instance, Farmer built an eleven-foot-tall carrying case for sixty props that would be useful for someone attempting to study or restage Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1831). By perching, suspending, and piling his objects, Farmer's assemblages operate as a trace of the absent body: they remind the viewer of the human subject that had to be there in order to prop them up in the first place.⁷

Installation view of Geoffrey Farmer, *I'm Not Praying, I'm Just Stretching*, 2008–9, candle snuffer; abandoned Quaker style chair, taken from the streets of Boston; book: *Among The Night People*, by Clara D. Pierson borrowed from the Library of The Beacon Hill Friends House; photograph: *The Human Liberty Bell*, 1918; branch from the Boston Commons from a tree used for public hangings; light socket with the embossed words "Proclaim Liberty Throughout The Land"; found bell inscribed with the date 1991; a bell clapper/moth feeder made from a cotton ball soaked in a solution of sugar derived from a candy taken from a Felix Gonzales-Torres work; drinking glass; antique bottle; with lights; various notes. Oakville Galleries, 25 June – 2 September 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.



Loud Objects

Not all props are quiet objects, however. Some, like Farmer's bell, are waiting to be made loud.⁸ These noisier objects often refuse to stay in their places. "Disobedient objects," as curators Catherine Flood and Gavin Grindon describe them, work to "disclose hidden moments in which, even if only in brief flashes, we find the possibility that things might be otherwise."⁹ Several artists in *Propped* take up the unruly dimension of the prop, treating objects as the supplementary materials of politics and statecraft: the things that set the stage for histories to be written and rewritten.

Public Studio's photographs in the *Toronto Purchase* (2015) series, for instance, visualize the materials exchanged between colonial bureaucrats and the Mississaugas of the New Credit when the land that Toronto currently occupies was "purchased" by the British government in 1787. Made in collaboration with Lili Huston-Herterich, whose gloved hands often place the scissors, hats, rifles, and other supplies in front of the camera, these images undermine the apparently neutral status of these objects. In a year that marks the sesquicentennial of Canada, Public Studio's invented documents remind us of the timeliness of the history of colonial contact on this land. Like many treaties signed with Indigenous peoples across the country, the terms of the so-called Toronto Purchase have been under dispute since its inception.

Installation view of Public Studio with Lili Huston-Herterich, *Toronto Purchase*, 2015, digital archival prints. Oakville Galleries, 25 June – 2 September 2017. Courtesy of the artists. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.



In 1986, the Mississaugas initiated a land claims process with the Government of Canada, which was settled in 2010 with a payment of \$145 million.¹⁰

Nearby, works by Linklater and Bev Koski invoke similar histories. Linklater's *The state that I seek to name* (2014) explores the shifting cultural value of fur as both a material for self-fashioning and a resource for Indigenous sovereignty. The pelt of a fisher—a mammal indigenous to North America that has figured in the fur trade since the eighteenth century—hangs from a garment rack, while a fur coat is hidden from view in a bag pinned to the wall. By revealing one object while concealing the other, Linklater treats these commodities as props vital to the ongoing drama of colonial contact and exchange. The photographs in Koski's *Beaded Figure Project* (2002–ongoing) engage in a similar strategy of concealment. By elaborately beading over kitschy representations of “Indian-ness,” Koski reveals the ways that Indigenous bodies have been made into props for the Canadian settler colonial imagination. Presented as larger-than-life photographs, the images have titles that point to the locations where the objects were collected and suggest the ubiquity of the stereotypes they depict.

Installation view of *Propped* at Oakville Galleries at Centennial Square with works by Bev Koski, Abbas Akhavan, Oliver Husain, and Duane Linklater. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.



Divya Mehra's sheet cake, which sits on an antique parlour table and gradually rots over the course of the exhibition, also nods to the unfinished project of drawing borders and actualizing sovereignty. Decorated with a map of Kashmir rather than a standard birthday greeting, *There's just not enough to go around* (2011) considers the unresolved future for the territory it represents: a northern region in the Indian subcontinent that was once part of the British Empire but is now a disputed territory administered by India, Pakistan, and China. Recalling the ostentatious settings in which imperial powers divided up colonial holdings over the last two centuries—and the recent story of U.S. president Donald Trump's aide sketching the proposed partition of Libya on a cocktail napkin¹¹—Mehra's sculpture draws our attention to the aesthetics of these supposedly "civil" environments and how readily they are adapted for nefarious purposes.

Akhavan's *Stress Positions* (2009/2017) addresses the duplicity of materials from another angle, setting up a platform in the style of a Speakers' Corner soapbox that visitors are invited

Installation view of Divya Mehra, *There's just not enough to go around*, 2011, white cake with fruit, custard filling and whipped topping, mahogany British parlour table circa 1890. Oakville Galleries, 25 June – 2 September 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Georgia Scherman Projects, Toronto. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.



to climb. At the top, a didactic panel reveals that the structure is built for the use of a white man who will appear each day to host conversations about accountability and reconciliation. The viewer is left waiting, however, as the work involves no official performer. Instead, it is part invitation, part trap, designed to generate speculation and discussion among viewers about whose responsibility it is to initiate these difficult conversations about our respective roles in the histories we have inherited as Canadians.¹²

A suite of drawings by Hazel Meyer offers one set of tools to help us work our way out of the binds of the present. Originally created as illustrations for an article published in the journal *No More Potlucks* and co-authored with Cait McKinney,¹³ *Tools for the Feminist Present* (2016) proposes a list of imaginary objects—such as “Persistence Chisels” and “Headphones of Refusal”—necessary for building a collective feminist response to contemporary political conditions. Presented on a pegboard background and mimicking the layout of a Lee Valley hardware catalogue, the drawings pay homage to *The New Woman’s Survival Catalog*, a 1973 newsprint publication that advertised do-it-yourself strategies for self-care and activism for second-wave feminists. In this way, Meyer’s work points to the future by drawing on the unrealized potential of the past.

Left: Bridget Moser, *Asking for a friend*, 2013, video, 9 minutes 56 seconds. Collection of Oakville Galleries, purchased with the support of the Cleeve Horne Award, Ontario Society of Artists, 2015. Right: Hazel Meyer, *Tools for the Feminist Present*, 2016, graphite drawings, printed on newsprint. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.



Finally, in the works of Chris Curreri, Bridget Moser, and Walter Scott, props take on a life and meaning of their own, acting *on* human subjects rather than being activated by them. For these artists, identities are constructed through the subject's interaction with and relationship to objects, in configurations that are often as convoluted and contorted as they are nuanced, and suggest an implicit physical violence in formations of the self. Curreri's photographic work often troubles the divide between bodies and things, staging uncanny scenes where their openings meet. In an early work, *Puppet* (2008), a dancer contorts his body around an oversized red vase—one from a collection of hundreds the artist has amassed over the last decade. The scenarios captured by the camera envision the vase as more than mere prop and question its autonomy as a fellow photographic subject, imagining it as a prosthetic limb, an object of worship, or an orifice. In *Asking for a Friend* (2013), a work selected from the Oakville Galleries permanent collection, Moser culls all of the questions from her

Installation view of Walter Scott, *MFA Application 2018*, 2013, wood, human hair, vinyl, string; *Night Out*, 2013, wood, human hair, fabric, string, tic-tac box. Oakville Galleries, 25 June – 2 September 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Macaulay & Co. Fine Art, Vancouver. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.

previous performances and uses them as the prompts for a montage of encounters with the commonplace things found in the gallery where the video was filmed. Folding chairs, a microphone stand, a patio umbrella, a wooden bench, and a bicycle pump become extensions of the artist's body, and sometimes wilful interlocutors, as Moser poses increasingly ridiculous questions to the audience, to herself, or to unseen—and possibly omnipotent—forces in a seemingly relentless quest for self-improvement.

An astute ability to activate the comedic aspects of existential crisis is also at play in Scott's interdisciplinary practice. Combining found objects with his distinctive graphic style, Scott's stick-figure characters are at turns wryly funny and achingly vulnerable. *Night Out* (2013), for instance, transforms a banner of fabric into a spare human face, with eyes on one side and a frowning mouth (or perhaps a crescent moon?) on the other. A box of Tic Tac mints and a belt tethered to the base are the props that hint at the aftermath of a wild evening out. In *MFA Application 2018* (2013), the figure's face is replaced by another prop: a sealed envelope balanced atop a head of shaggy blonde hair. Much like the protagonists in Scott's popular comic strip, *Wendy*, objects work to personify these characters, expanding the definition of the prop to include properties in the sense of an essential or distinctive quality belonging to a thing or person.¹⁴

Appearing as tools for historical research, as gifts, furniture, and pets, in the form of self-portraits and inedible cakes, the props included in *Propped* speak to the ways objects resonate differently as they move in and out of our field of vision. They emerge as tools for proposing alternative histories and new futures for objects, and reveal the unexpected power everyday things wield.

ESSAY NOTES

¹ Alice Rayner, "Presenting Objects, Presenting Things," in *Staging Philosophy: Intersections of Theater, Performance, and Philosophy*, ed. David Krasner and David Z. Saltz (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 181. ² As both a noun and a verb, the word "prop" shares an etymological root with all these terms, and others, including the more recent slang usage, to "give props [proper recognition]" to someone. See *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "prop," n. 1–6 and v. 1–3, accessed 9 June 2017, <http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/11125>; and Maeve Connolly, "Céline Condorelli: Permutations of the Prop, Part 2," *The Exhibitionist*, 1 March 2016, <http://the-exhibitionist.com/celine-condorelli-permutations-of-the-prop-part-2/> (accessed April 5, 2017). ³ Agnieszka Matejko, "Duane Linklater and Tanya Lukin Linklater, 'A Parallel Excavation,' Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton, April 30 to September 18, 2016," *Galleries West*, 26 May 2016, <http://www.gallerieswest.ca/art-reviews/exhibitions/duane-linklater-and-tanya-lukin-linklater-a-parallel-excavat/>. ⁴ See "Therapy Dog Program," St. John Ambulance, accessed 10 June 2017, <http://www.sja.ca/English/Community-Services/Pages/Therapy%20Dog%20Services/default.aspx>. ⁵ Vincent Chevalier, "Props: The Living End," 5 July 2017, <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/props-the-living-end-tickets-35202540747>. ⁶ Philip Henslowe, a theatrical

entrepreneur during the Elizabethan era, inventoried “all the properties for my Lord Admiral’s Men,” in his diary on 10 March 1598:

“Item, 1 rock, 1 cage, 1 tomb, 1 Hell mouth ... 1 bedstead.

Item, 8 lances, 1 pair of stairs for Phaethon.

Item, 1 globe, & 1 golden sceptre; 3 clubs

Item, 1 golden fleece, 2 racquets, 1 bay tree.

Item, 1 lion’s skin, 1 bear’s skin; Phaethon’s limbs, & Phaethon’s chariot, & Argus’s head.

Item, Iris’s head, & rainbow; 1 little altar ...

1 ghost’s gown; 1 crown with a sun.”

See Eric Hart, “Shakespeare’s Props,” Prop Agenda, 24 April 2009, <http://www.props.eric-hart.com/education/shakespeares-props/>.⁷ See Vito Acconci on the function of the gesture of propping to signal the trace of the artist’s body in his writing on Richard Serra’s series of prop works (1968). Acconci quoted in Connolly, “Céline Condorelli.”⁸ *Loud Object* was the working title of an earlier version of Clarice Lispector’s *Água Viva* (1973), an experimental novel that relates the author’s interior monologue through a stream of impressions, recalled dreams, and relationships with objects.⁹ Catherine Flood and Gavin Grindon, introduction to *Disobedient Objects*, eds. Catherine Flood and Gavin Grindon (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 2014), 8.¹⁰ See John Allemang, “New Credit First Nation Gets a ‘Thank You’ 200 Years Later,” *Globe and Mail*, 21 June 2013, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/new-credit-first-nation-gets-a-thank-you-200-years-later/article12758245/>.¹¹ Stephanie Kirchgaessner and Julian Borger, “Trump Aide Drew Plan on Napkin to Partition Libya into Three,” *Guardian*, 10 April 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/10/libya-partition-trump-administration-sebastian-gorka>.¹² Akhavan quoted in Gabrielle Moser, “Abbas Akhavan: Every Artwork Is a Trap,” *Canadian Art*, 15 December 2015, <http://canadianart.ca/features/every-artwork-is-a-trap/>. The title of the work is, somewhat tellingly, borrowed from the euphemistic term applied to interrogation practices that use torturous body positions to force detainees to cooperate.¹³ Hazel Meyer and Cait McKinney, “Tools for the Feminist Present,” *No More Potlucks* 44 (May/June 2016), <http://nomorepotlucks.org/site/tools-for-the-feminist-present-hazel-meyer-and-cait-mckinney/>.¹⁴ Vivian Sobchack, “Chasing the Maltese Falcon: On the Fabrications of a Film Prop,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 6 (August 2007): 232, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1470412907078566>.

This electronic publication was produced in conjunction with the exhibition *Propped* curated by Gabrielle Moser, and presented at Oakville Galleries from 25 June to 2 September 2017.

Editing: Meg Taylor
Copy-Editing: Ruth Gaskill

Propped would not be possible without the participation of the volunteers in the Oakville, Milton & Halton Hills branch of the St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program, and the support of Clara Halpern, Matthew Hyland, Frances Loeffler, Carmen Schroeder, Esther Simmonds-MacAdam, and curatorial assistant Sylvia Evans.

Cover: Public Studio with Lili Huston-Herterich, *Toronto Purchase: Fire steel, Five gross, at 5/6 per gross*, 2015. Courtesy of the artists.

Generously supported by:



Conseil des Arts
du Canada



Oakville galleries