

is, language that is used to identify, categorize, and stabilize. This is the language that plucks us out of the oceanic and plops us down on *terra firma*. It is the language of pornography and western literature.

Although Christine's work uses a lot of talking and text, it uses a different kind of language, one where identity is speculative, and categories shift like the shoreline. This kind of language is closer to the language that you and I fumble with every day. Everyday language is less like a tool for dividing the world, and more like a gigantic organism, a gigantic ocean, an undivided world, in which our individual expressions float like phytoplankton or ribosomes. You and I are not in a gallery. We're also not at home, or inside our bodies, even if we think we are. If "you" and

"I" are anywhere, we are inside this organism of language. And if this language-organism-ocean were to speak to us, to its own insides, I am convinced it would sound like Christine's work in this exhibition. It would tell us that identity is nothing. It would tell us that true depth is unfathomable and so may as well be pure surface. It would tell us that we're less than handmaids to its own reproduction. And it would tell us that joy comes from disappearance into its own internal abyss. If this doesn't sound like joy to me or to you, Christine's work seems to ask us what it is in the here-and-now-and-us that we are so attached to? After all, the world is burning, millions are dying, my life doesn't matter to me, to you, to my government, and I can't even go see art in person at a gallery.

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CHRISTINE NEGUS is a multidisciplinary artist and writer who received the National Film Board of Canada's Best Emerging Canadian Video/Filmmaker award through Images Festival in 2008. Negus obtained her MFA from Northwestern University in Chicago IL and her BFA from Western University in London ON. Some of her notable exhibitions and screenings include: CROSSROADS, the8fest, Queer City Cinema, MIX NYC, Process Film Festival, Artists' Television Access, Dunlop Gallery, AKA artist-run, Milwaukee Underground Film Festival, Swedish Film Institute, Experiments in Cinema, Art Gallery of York University, and Kasseler Dokfest. She has had solo exhibitions at RPL Film Theatre, Forest City Gallery, Gallery TPW, gallerywest, Julius Caesar, The Pitch Project, and Modern Fuel. Her work has been reviewed in numerous publications, including *The Globe and Mail* and *Modern Painters*, and an interview on Negus' video practice appeared in the Spring 2016 issue of *BlackFlash Magazine*.

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NOTHING TO LOSE
BUT OURSELVES

BY C.W. CRAWFORD

I should begin by telling you that I won't see *it's what's inside that counts* by Christine Negus in person. And from what Christine tells me, due to public health orders, vaccine supply issues, etc., there's a good chance that you won't see this show in person either.

To only have a secondhand experience of these works is a loss. *it's what's inside that counts* is a show that would take liberties with our bodies. For you and I who don't or can't see the show in person, we're left only with a theoretical sense of physical intimacies. And this, again, is a loss.

But I should also tell you that this loss aligns with these works and with this time. The investment of *it's what's inside that counts* in our bodies is intimate, but also disinterested. As far as the works are concerned you and I could be—*are*—anybody. For the purposes of *it's what's inside that counts*, “you” and “I” are vectors, hosts, opportunities. Our movements irritate the artworks to speech. Our silent brains serve as a foil to their wit and dejection. Our lives serve as a target for their externally directed introspections.

However sentient these works are, they seem to feel no common cause with our species. However much they touch us, our insides don't count, or don't count for much. This means that the important inside, for us, and for the works in *it's what's inside that counts*, is elsewhere.

I can imagine an entrance: I/you/anybody moves from the sunny side of Richmond to the shaded side, walks through a door, passes through the salon lounge, and into a dark room. The three neon works are visible first. On the walls, they appear as bluish-white gestures—squiggles, really. Even if I recognize a letter form, I can't order it into a word or even a syllable until I see a component on the floor: dark acrylic cut into an irregular blob. In the reflections on the acrylic, the squiggles are inverted into clear words. I can at last find legible messages hovering in an abyss that is a mere 6mm deep on the floor. The messages themselves are succinct enough to transcribe here: *real fucking deep*, *door window wall*, and *unsymbolic misery*.

Each of these phrases seem to mock my hopes and expectations. Something that is *real fucking deep* is, despite our embarrassment around and suspicion of literary and artistic depth, what I still want from an art encounter. Similarly, *door window wall* brings to mind the metaphors used to explain, or explain away, paintings specifically and art more generally. But here it feels more like an inventory of this room—any room—as it would be without art. No art is needed for views, exit, entrance, transcendence, or blockage.

And as for *unsymbolic misery*, well what the fuck can I do with that? We seek out art and literature in large part because it operates as a kind of pornography that deals in sadness instead of sex. And just like pornography, western art and literature can excuse and justify our basest impulses to revel in the intensity of sensation and affect by claiming a symbolism that would put the world in an order that feels more manageable. I can look to western literature and art to confirm, for example, that Romeo and Juliet die for discrete reasons and due to discrete forces. I can imagine a sense of justice or injustice. With pornography, I can happily confirm that there are discrete categories of people, and that these categories are all DTF. I can indulge in a fantasy of stable categories. But a misery that I can't use for symbolic purposes, which is to say for *my* world-ordering purposes, is only ever someone else's misery. What can I do with someone else's misery? Even as the legibility of the work depends on me, my physical position, my degree of literacy, I could be—I am—anybody. My insides, in the sense of my interior desires and expectations, only matter to the extent that they are dismissed and put aside.

After being diminished and discounted in this way, I can imagine walking further into the gallery space. As I do, I trigger some kind of sensing apparatus and this in turn triggers a voice to speak from inside a shell-like ceramic. There are seven of these oceanic bodies arranged in a ring around the center of the gallery. Each one is spot lit in the dark room in a way that is specific to superstars and specimens. The bodies' surfaces and protrusions catalogue crusts, cracks, spots, ridges, and excretions in ways that remind me of my worst

expectations of my own body when an infection or irritation gets out of my control. In this catalogue of surfaces, however, the colours are shifted away from the bloody and mucus-y, and toward the attractive palettes of an aspirational suburban bedroom.

Each shell-like body has a different speech to recite. Some are short almost-jokes (“Now can I tell you about un-sacred geometry? A really long line going nowhere”) Some are accounts of poems or plays that the shell-like bodies have written. All are spoken in the first person, and nearly all address an explicit “you.” All, whether jokes, poems, or something else, reveal that the shell-like bodies share a collective consciousness. While each recitation deserves more time and consideration than I can give here, there are general themes of non-being, absence, and the awkward indigestibility of being a body that is not-yet, never-to-be, never-was, never-never.

I called these bodies “oceanic” earlier, and I want to return to this now. Not only because their forms refer to creatures that live in oceans and not only because much of their language concerns watery depths. I also want to use “oceanic” in the sense that hypothesizes a state of being that is not yet individuated, a state of being that creatures of language can only speculate about, before we were separated from our floating gestational worlds and when we were indistinguishable from the universe all around. No me, no you, not yet. No art, no exhibition in no dark room on no shady side of no Richmond, nobody, nothing, except for an unfathomable depth of being.

This state of being may sound like pure negativity, but it isn't. If you or I abhor something in the oceanic, it is not a vacuum. In the oceanic, everything is still there, just without the divisions that make language possible, and without the kind of thinking that language requires us to do. The seeming inexistence of the oceanic isn't the end of existence, just the end of individual existence. As one shell-body says, “The problem isn't my inexistence, but my arrival into this state of being. Coming into nothingness is a harsh transition: a sinking surfacing, up and down, nighttime plunge. It's the slope of hope.” The non-existence of these

bodies is not the problem. Rather, the problem is that oceanic existence is a freefall, an abysmal entrance, for someone (you/me) who thinks that they have a stable, autonomous self. This freefall happens when it is made clear to us, as has been made clear to you and me in the last 18 months, that far from being individuals with free will, we are little more than imaginary points on massive waves of DNA and RNA. You or me, we don't count, or we don't count for much. And the “inside” that the title of this show says *does* count is definitely not the mental “inside” of me that has appetites and hopes and dreams. Instead, the inside that counts is the inside that is absolutely indistinguishable from everything else. Indistinguishable from your insides, from our outsides, from a festering sore, from a conch, from a sponge, from a neon sign, a gallery, a virus. The inside of the world all around.

So here I imagine myself: In the middle of a dark room in a gallery, but clearly out of the spotlight, out of the center of the universe, nothing that can be called an “I” or a “you.” I am not different from any other art consumer. Nor, for that matter, is any art consumer different from a housefly, flying in fresh from laying eggs in shit. And if I make a move, if being indistinct is too uncomfortable to handle while holding still, I'm going to be talked at again by all these shells, and they're going to tell me again about the lack of self, the loss of personal power, and the impossible contradictions of being at all. It's a funny place to be. Feeling that little sinking sensation inside my stomach that tells me what, deep down, I've always known: I'm not shit. Or, rather, I am shit, but I'm also everything else except for “me.”

Many people who have had the privilege to write about Christine's work have mentioned that the work offers hope, and that this hope is most present in how funny the work is. And Christine's work is really funny. Often it is funny in cerebral ways that run around in your head for years, and often it is laugh-out-loud funny in visceral ways that you can pass off as your own joke when you're at the gallows. I want to add to this accounting, however, another opportunity for optimism and joy in Christine's work. The version of language that I invoked earlier is analytical language—that