

Armour + Ornament: Thoughts on Adapt and Pivot at Patel Brown Gallery

Written by Jenna Faye Powell

Adapt and Pivot

Shary Boyle

Vanessa Brown

Nicholas Galanin

Alexa Hatanaka

Anique Jordan

Rajni Perera

Nep Sidhu

Naama Tsabar

Howie Tsui

The title of Patel Brown Gallery's inaugural exhibition, *Adapt and Pivot*, was initially chosen as a loose thematic to illustrate key tenets of the new gallery's mission — that it commits to being vigilant and flexible in order to best address topical moments while weathering cursory trends. The exhibition title was also intended as an optimistic nod to how artists were adapting to new realities that emerged due to the global pandemic. With stay-home orders, many found themselves looking inward to better digest and understand what was happening in the world.

In June 2020, with growing awareness and widespread action confronting anti-Black racism, it is now more apparent than ever that our collective gaze, thoughts, and energy must also be directed outward to create meaningful change. This meditative movement spanning inner contemplation, unlearning, and outwards action is a necessary shift that represents collective recognition and the will to change for the better – to *adapt and pivot*. The discourse surrounding both historic and recent racialized injustices against Black and Indigenous communities is not new, but is at the forefront of our thoughts and actions. We are reminded that no art is apolitical, especially now, and artists have been long-present in the campaign against racially-based inequities, foreseeing and setting into motion this overdue reckoning with racism.

With the fundamental belief that art can open, disarm, and expand our perspectives, Patel Brown Gallery developed this inaugural exhibition to honour the very human capacity to evolve, with artists who embrace moments of transformation. Adaptation, in this exhibition, can be seen in various ways: in vigorous material explorations, in embedded narratives of resilience, in calls not to adapt but to revolt, and in each artist's unwavering commitment to create. *Adapt and Pivot* can be viewed as a unique coalescence of intentions, histories, and politics as projected onto new and previously produced works.

The exhibition can also be interpreted as a call to action: *Adapt! Pivot!*

Nine Canadian and international artists present a lexicon of marks, medias, and imageries that are uniquely their own, offering varying perspectives of adaptation and transformation. Artworks in *Adapt and Pivot* put forward the question, 'What comes next?' The replies are refractions, prompting more questions and considerations: How will societies reorganize to suit changing social and economic

realities? How will our bodies adapt to governments at odds with our basic needs? To climates at odds with our basic needs? What will we create for armour and/or ornament? Will traditions and rites of passage be upheld, or must new ones be forged? Discouraging passivity, *Adapt and Pivot* asks us what we are adapting towards (or from), while also acknowledging the privilege of having the agency and resources to change. Whatever answers are yielded, and whatever their processes might entail, we all find ourselves at the beginning of something new.

Every so often things are too wrong or too unjust to adapt to. In these moments it's best to thoroughly and exhaustively start from the ground up: a controlled burn. What we leave behind, buried under inches of dust and destruction, will be analyzed by future scholars looking to understand how our epoch played out. Howie Tsui's *Fossil Mech #1*, *Fossil Mech #2* and *Literati Mech #1* (apecore) (pictured right) exist in states of temporal compression. In these works we are looking at past, present, and future simultaneously. I view them as relics: reminders of former atrocities, road maps of 'what not to do,' and promises of something better if we choose to heed past warnings. I find myself imagining these works as artefacts pulled from Tsui's expansive animation, *Retainers of Anarchy* (2017), a work filled with violence, unrest, and dystopic drama that makes contact with the civil unrest in present day Hong-Kong.



In Naama Tsabar's sound art sculpture, *Work On Felt* (Variation15) *Black*, we are similarly reminded of tension — here, between the visual and the sonic, and the transformative places between. Sensuous and tactile, Tsabar's installation invites activation. *Work on Felt* makes contact with the history of minimalism while offering functional, instrumental modifications to the iconic black cube shape. Evoking a sound stage complete with microphone cords and darkly felted void, Tsabar's work acts as an amplifier to consider our individual capacity to respond to the opportunity in front of us.

As a generation rightfully on guard, we are hyper-aware of how our aesthetic choices are indicators of our values and intentions. Uniform and ornamentation can be strategically employed to send messages of power, intimidation, hope, and harmony. This is seen in Nep Sidhu's ceremonial wear *SHE in Mud Form*, from the artist's *No Pigs in Paradise* series — a body of works formulated in collaboration with fellow exhibitor, Tlingit/Unangan multi-disciplinary artist Nicholas Galanin. *No Pigs in Paradise* functions as the artists' response to ongoing dialogue and outrage surrounding missing and murdered women in contemporary North America (Turtle Island) and India. Sidhu and Galanin's works are striking aesthetic reactions that resist any romanticization towards continued violences against people of colour (specifically women) and Indigenous cultures. *SHE in Mud Form* offers a hybrid garment of resilience: the survivalist functionality of a down puffer coat meets with materials evoking ceremony and sacredness. Emphasizing the power of ornamentation beyond decoration, Galanin's *Native American Beadwork: Rape Whistle Pendant* (pictured below, left) aims to simultaneously protect and adorn. It confronts the viewer with the reality that many Indigenous women must continually negotiate states of fight or flight. Galanin's beadwork connects with the medium's colonized past, illuminating the invisible labor of



women's work, while subtly engaging affiliated concerns of sexual violence, slavery, and genocide.

Rajni Perera's mixed media works, *Storm and Flood*, emit a vibrancy and urgency that harmonize on pitch with numerous works in *Adapt and Pivot*. Perera's imagery plays with futurism and mythology to present protagonists in action: a buffeted but enwrapped figure wields agency and force. With restorative power, her heroes traverse volatile environments in search of a more hospitable home. Having one foot off-planet and another firmly planted in the now, Perera's warrior dons an adorned, protective face mask — an image that resonates all the more amidst the airborne COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Alexa Hatanaka's handprinted sculptural linocuts stand poised, present, and on guard. Exploring both materiality and her

Japanese-Canadian heritage through relief printing, Hatanaka describes "learning the process of Momigami, a traditional Japanese process of naturally starch-strengthening washi." The washi papers are then sewn into three-dimensions. This act, states Hatanaka, "gives me a deeper appreciation of the resiliency of the paper itself." Painstakingly made and multi-faceted in their beauty, the works capitalize on contradictions embedded in her chosen materials and methods. These emblems are simultaneously ancient and contemporary, imperishable and immediate.

Through exaggeration of scale, Vanessa Brown's sculptural earrings activate a space of reverie and refraction. On a lower frequency, Brown's work susses out the gendered history of both metal-work and stained-glass production. Historically synonymous in the West with male dominated and military-based industries, steel is also commonly used as base material for jewelry. In this vein, stained-glass and jewelry making can seem dualistically gendered: rooted in "masculine" metal-work, but producing objects traditionally associated feminized bodies. Brown's work agitates perceived hierarchies embedded in her materials of choice to remind us that gender is, decidedly, a social construct. Exploring affect and light through painting processes and stained-glass, *Through the arch, out the sky. Inner heart and Semaphore*, imbue underlying fantastical feelings that murmur throughout the exhibition.

The uncanny leanings of *Adapt and Pivot* are further intensified by Shary Boyle's porcelain works. *Prayer Shawl* (pictured right) and *Red Rope* depict sympathetic creatures frozen in moments of negotiation, repression, and claustrophobia. In these works a snake and rope act as objects of bondage that speak to individual tensions and constraints rooted in one's self. These binding forces symbolize pressures that we vigorously seek to free ourselves from. Notably, Boyle's creatures actively resist simple categorization. Their mismatched heads nod to the 'unknowable self': an affirmation that our interior experience can't be witnessed or comprehended by others.

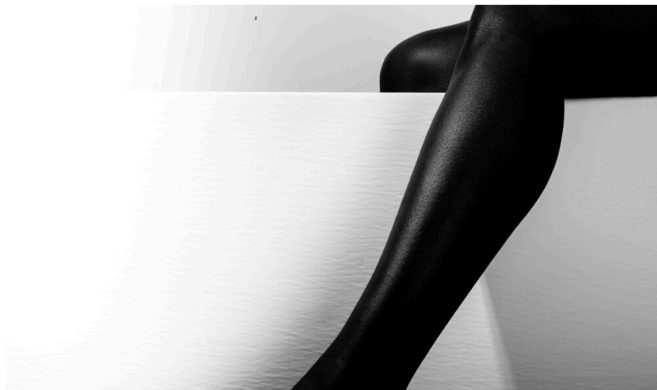


Boyle's suspended work, *White Privilege*, offers an emblematic moment of tension and fragility. Conjuring the bodily, the lone red link is meant to suggest blood and in the artist's words, "a false biology that has been used to create myths about human separation". Boyle affirms that this particular work is a

metaphor for the “preposterous social and systemic constructs that have created the hierarchy of race in North America. The tense suspension of something so fragile, weighted by the hand of a child, is meant to convey how frail power and privilege truly is, and evoke the potential relief we might feel by the whole thing smashing.” Boyle’s works are stark reminders of the absurd and cruel constructs that have historically defined our relationships to one another.

These aforementioned contexts allow me the opportunity to broach some admissions I offer in the afterword of this essay — vocalizing my earnest hope that the privileges I have benefitted from, as a cisgendered, white woman, haven’t entirely hindered my capacity to fathom the importance of presenting this exhibition, at this time. I would be remiss not to bring up the real dangers of limited empathy and the toxic affects of the white gaze on artworks created by people of colour. The meaning of an artwork, to audience and artist, is malleable and can drastically shift, or reorient completely, based on who is viewing it.

In *Darkie*, a pivotal series of photographs by Anique Jordan, the artist employs theories of hauntology to reexamine historical narratives into contemporary contexts, bringing to light themes of invisibility, class aesthetics, generational trauma, and self and community healing. Jordan’s work adheres to a number of self-imposed responsibilities and accountabilities (to both her community and practice) imbuing her work with real-world power, impact, and vulnerability. Faced with this series, I am reminded that so much artwork is *haunted* — not by searching to represent an idealized form or idea, but patronized by what



cannot be represented. And, by what is so often lost to certain audiences. Staggering in its affect, this photographic series is best considered through the voice of the artist, who was invited to reexamine what this project means today. Jordan offers: “It feels like I have to sit and try to understand this series again within the context of the current uprising... within the context of trying to find the balance between armour, protection, vulnerability and love. It’s very difficult because I am cautious of who is viewing the work. It makes me think carefully about who it

is intended for. Perhaps what the work means, even to myself, shifts based on who is viewing it. When it was first exhibited, I walked into the opening, and I felt like I was on display for all of these white people. It was truly uncomfortable, I wanted to seek out space for protection. But at the same time, I am actively striving to find a place where that same body can still be vulnerable, fragile, soft, happy... all of the things a body can’t be when it feels like it’s always at war.”

Jordan continually weighs the experience of feeling both affirmation and disassociation when exhibiting these works. In imagining a space beyond necessary defensiveness, Jordan gives vital form and stakes to the earliest impetus behind *Adapt and Pivot*. Initially, this exhibition embodied a hope that, moving forward, we might all be equipped with a better sense of when to adapt, when to pivot, and when to burn it all to the ground in order to start again. Optimistic but undirected, we now have our bearings and a corresponding hope: that after the dust settles — once we find ourselves in a more just, fair, and

unpoliced world — the meanings, affections, questions, and challenges of these works might solidify and give rise to yet more powerful feelings.

Artworks in *Adapt and Pivot* are not answers to our aforementioned questions, but vehicles by which we might traverse our ever-changing reality towards more imaginative, caring, and equitable ones. Or viewed another way, this exhibition does not propose a solution — it offers instead loose threads for pulling, unraveling, remaking.

Afterword

Adapt and Pivot was initially devised in early February 2020. Exhibiting artists were *not* prompted to create new works in response to present day happenings, and yet, *Adapt and Pivot* engaged the many political happenings of 2020, and responded in kind with further questions of responsibility and authenticity. The exhibition and essay required their own substantial adaptations to better mirror — or at least address — the global health crisis and numerous, monumental social movements.

It feels salient to note my complex feelings towards writing this essay: during a quarantine that hindered the opportunity to view the exhibition in person and during a series of historic human rights crises and an international anti-racism movement. I have undoubtedly benefited from a multitude of privileges, that have afforded me the scope to consider systemic racism and oppression, instead of actually experiencing it. I extend aspiring allyship to the Black Lives Matter movement and strongly advocate for sincere and substantial reparations to Canada's Indigenous communities. I'm incredibly grateful to the artists, and Devan and Gareth, for the time and energy they afforded me in helping to navigate this distinctive collision of exhibition, unhealth, and unrest.
