

Arts

The pandemic deserves a special 'plate' in hell

Riffing on images of the bubonic plague, Lindsay Montgomery is telling the story of COVID-19

[Leah Collins](#) · CBC Arts · Posted: Apr 06, 2021 11:30 AM EDT | Last Updated: April 6, 2021



A scene of things to come? This detail from *Garden Banger*, a ceramic plate by Lindsay Montgomery, imagines the ultimate post-vaccine party. (Lindsay Montgomery)

Perhaps nothing can fully prepare a person for a global pandemic, but [Lindsay Montgomery](#) has become something of an expert on plagues, or at least the way they're depicted — a quirk of researching Italian art from the 16th century. It was an era when the Black Death was still taking laps around Europe, and since 2015, Montgomery's been producing ceramics that are her contemporary take on something that was all the rage back in the bubonic day: decorative plates and vessels that tell the stories of our times.

Typically, she's riffed on popular images from the Renaissance and middle ages, particularly the claustrophobic torture chambers of Dante's circles of hell. ([This plate from early 2020](#) throws a coven of Central Park Karens into an eternal hot tub of fire.) A major part of the process, she explains, is simply mining museum websites for inspiration, and over the years, she's collected a thick file of plague pictures. Given the current state of the world, that material is, unfortunately, feeling fresh again — and she references plenty of it in her latest body of work, now appearing at [Galerie 3](#) in Quebec City to April 18.

The exhibition collects ceramics Montgomery made from her home studio in Toronto during the first year of COVID-19. The scenes she's painted are occasionally complicated and often familiar. "I feel kind of torn — like, back and forth — about this work," says Montgomery. "On the one hand, a lot of the pieces are dealing with the really difficult and tragic realities of the pandemic, but on the other side, there's also this private kind of personal joy that I've experienced in just being able to be at home for an entire year." And reflecting those mixed emotions, the imagery switches between pestilent hellscares and giddy garden parties. (Not so coincidentally, gardening is one of the artist's favourite pandemic pastimes.)

Here, she tells the story of some of her plague-time pieces.

She-cession



Lindsay Montgomery. *She-cession*, 2021. (Lindsay Montgomery)

"One of the pieces that directly uses the 16th century plague imagery is the piece *She-cession*."

"Feminist imagery is always something that comes up in my work, and this seems like a really opportune image to illustrate this idea that women, and especially women of colour, have been removed from the progress that they've made in the workplace through this event."



Lindsay Montgomery. Detail of She-cession, 2021. (Lindsay Montgomery)

Toxic Rain



"The pieces that I made before there was a vaccine are a lot darker. It was this moment of like, 'What the hell is going to happen?!' This was definitely one of the first pieces that I made."

"I was taking [inspiration] from a medieval manuscript illustration where it's a pile of people and these demons — and there's fire and brimstone raining down upon them — but I changed it to the virus. Again, it's one of those simple flips to try and make it contemporary."

"I usually make plates because it's an easy way to make a painting, but I returned to making vessel forms because it felt appropriate for the time. Like, there are all these kinds of funerary objects: there's urns, there's potion bottles, there's flower baskets, there's drug jars. [Note: This particular piece is a basket for funeral flowers.] Every form has a relationship to this idea of the pandemic or a kind of magic in medicine."

Dark/Bright



Lindsay Montgomery. Front view of Dark/Bright, 2021. (Lindsay Montgomery)

"I describe [this cauldron] to my friends as a treatise on the destructive and creative nature of feminine power, which is, I think, another theme that I constantly am working with."

"I was thinking a lot about how much we talk about Mother Nature as this feminine entity, this feminine power, and the sort of extreme destruction that can be manifested through this power. I think the pandemic is a great example of that sort of feeling — of the power of nature coming down on us in a really negative way."



Lindsay Montgomery. Back view of Dark/Bright, 2021. (Lindsay Montgomery)

"And then on the other side [of the cauldron], it's sort of the reverse. The other side is an adaptation from a 15th century French tapestry. So, going from hell to the garden, it's illustrating the sort of quiet, creative power of motherhood."

Mother



"I was feeling a lot of sympathy for my friends that were young mothers at this time, and how difficult it was for them to be homeschooling and just dealing with the idea of childcare. It goes back to the idea of the she-cession."

"I think the pandemic has really revealed a lot of the realities about all the unpaid labour that women are expected to do. It was already bad before the pandemic happened. And now it's just been intensified to a point where I just feel like so many women are at a breaking point, trying to figure out how to get through this. That was kind of at the front of my mind making this work."



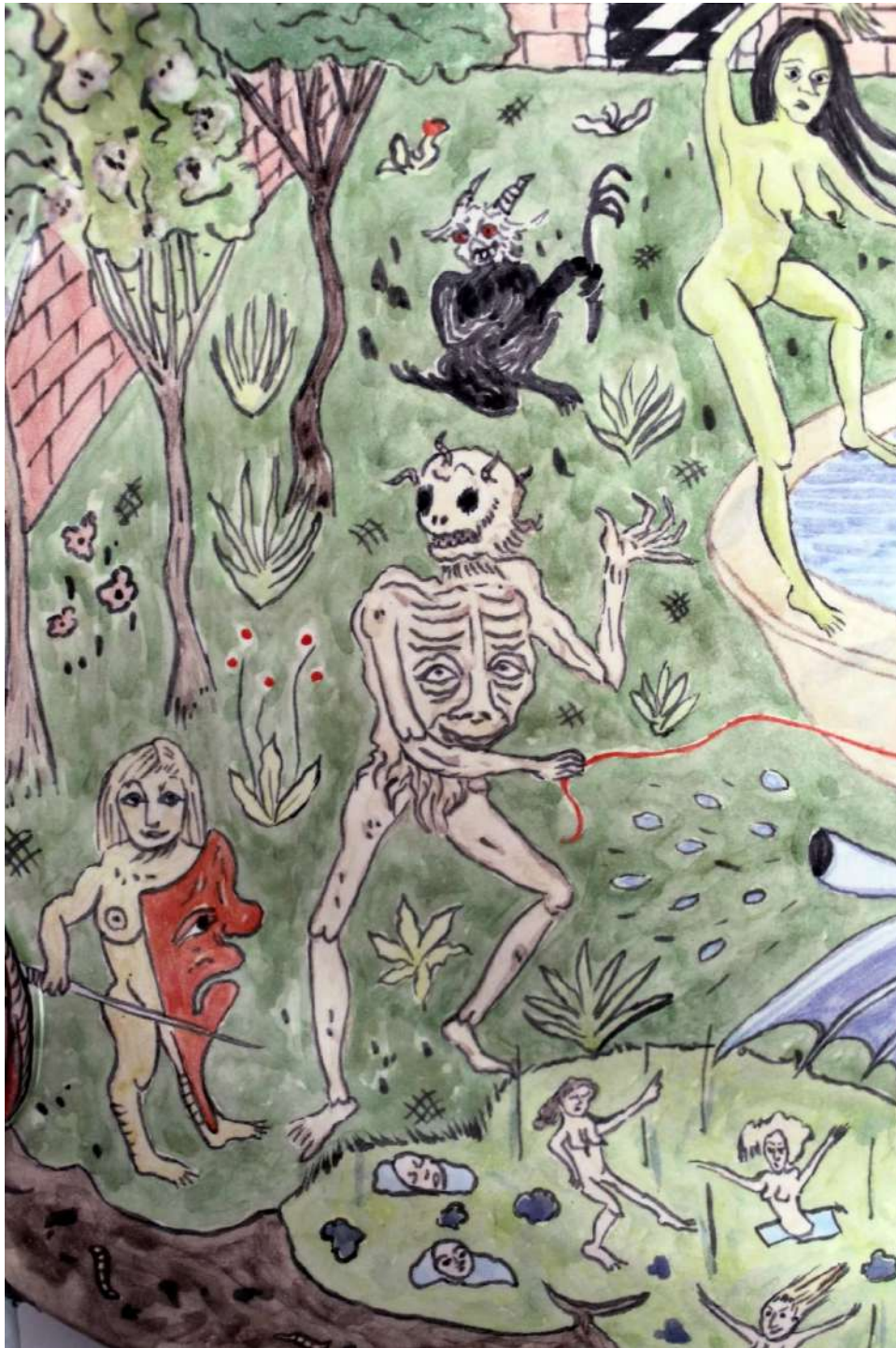
"I'm not a mother myself, and yet I feel this really intense sort of maternal energy that I put toward other things. The monkey platter is like an ode to interspecies motherhood, and how we as women, or as people who identify as female, apply that sort of maternal caring and creative force in a variety of ways that go beyond actually having and rearing your own child."

Garden Banger



Lindsay Montgomery. Garden Banger, 2021. (Lindsay Montgomery)

"This piece is totally fantasizing about a gross, sweaty germy orgy that can happen after we're all vaccinated and such things are possible again. [...] It's kind of like, 'What would be the ultimate party situation to imagine post-COVID?'"



Lindsay Montgomery. Detail of Garden Banger, 2021. (Lindsay Montgomery. Detail of Garden Banger, 2021.)

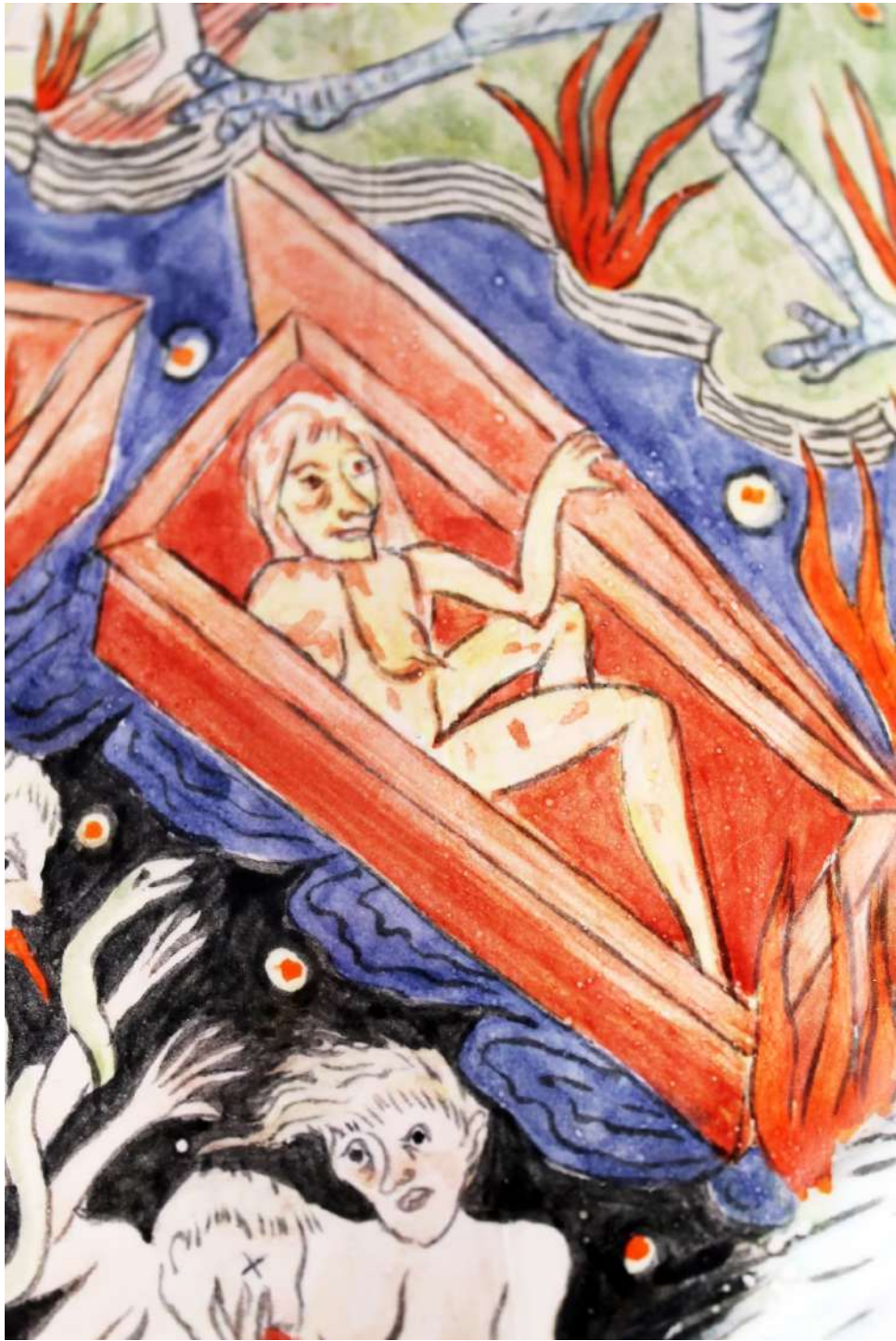
"Within medieval imagery, the monster is metaphor. And so all of these creatures have this kind of 'Other' identity. I like to think of my work as being this way of bringing the sort of Other world up into the focused space: the demons, the witches, the freaks."

Pilgrim Flask



Lindsay Montgomery. Pilgrim Flask, 2020. (Lindsay Montgomery)

"The imagery for this piece really [connects back to the work I did at Medalta](#), and imagery of the eight circles of hell from Dante's *Inferno*. But it's subtly changed to sort of reflect another circle of hell that's about death and disease and the spread of disease and germs. There's a lot of little floating heads kind of coughing and spewing gross stuff. So I kind of updated the imagery, in that way. There's all this stuff that kind of feels relevant to this moment: people floating down rivers in coffins, and there's over 200 figures in this piece. It's one of the grandest pieces that I think I've ever made."



Lindsay Montgomery. Detail of Pilgrim Flask, 2020. (Lindsay Montgomery)



Lindsay Montgomery. Detail of Pilgrim Flask, 2020. (Lindsay Montgomery)

"A Pilgrim Flask is actually what it's called historically. [...] It was probably more of a decorative piece, a really great form to hold imagery. But for me, when I was looking at images to start this body of work, it just kept coming up. I kept thinking it was from [a time] before we had any vaccines, and so it symbolized this idea that we were looking for a magic potion to get us out of this situation, instead of maybe reflecting on all the myriad reasons why we found ourselves in this moment as a planet."

Lindsay Montgomery. Year of the Flood. To April 18 at Galerie 3, Quebec City.
www.lagalerie3.com

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