

EXHIBITION REVIEW
LIZ IKIRIKO



THE SUNSHINE EATERS

Curated by Lisa Deanne Smith, OCAD University

Onsite Gallery, Toronto

10 January to 15 April 2018

THE MOUNTING WORLDWIDE injustice, corruption, and inhumanity perpetrated in the name of Western capitalism has become so commonplace that a very real Armageddon is now within reach. Even for the most conscious person, the past decade has bestowed a dizzying array of geopolitical, social, and environmental concerns wailing for attention. From a lack of clean drinking water on Indigenous reserves in Canada, increasing “food deserts” in low-income communities, to racist despots running (ruining) countries, these issues, along with global warming and floating islands of garbage choking the oceans, have become so commonplace that belief has been lost in one’s individual actions to truly change anything. *The Sunshine Eaters*, a 13-artist group show, renders work addressing race, class, gender, and Indigenous sovereignty as they intersect with ecological

FIG. 1 Ebony G. Patterson, *Bad Pickney from the Fambily* (2013). Mixed media on hand-embellished, jacquard woven tapestry with 56 fabric balloons. Dimensions variable. One from a series. Photo: © Ebony G. Patterson, courtesy of the artist, Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago and OCAD University Onsite Gallery.

concerns. According to curator Lisa Deanne Smith, the artists selected were those who use the natural world to “conjure hope in our day of global and local crises.”¹ By centering predominantly marginalized artists, *The Sunshine Eaters* calls into question Western hegemonic dominion over the global landscape. Deftly curated, the work depicts the many discordant and harmonious ways life exists on this planet.

With hope being a response to crisis, Smith intersects pluralities of expression from marginalized creators as they reject authoritative control. Finding oneself in *The Sunshine Eaters*, the fantastically drawn and intricately cut out details of Winnie Truong’s collages, the shiny technicolour of Nick Cave and Ebony G. Patterson’s productions, and the elegant humour of Shary Boyle’s ceramics emphasize what could be perceived as funda-



FIG. 2 Jessica Karuhanga, *being who you are there is no other* (2017). Still from two-channel video installation. Photo: courtesy of the OCAD University Onsite Gallery.

mental gestures of hope. But what could be more righteous in a society drunk on disaster and fueled by catastrophe than an exacting show of care? Legendary documentary filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin's film, *Trick or Treaty* (2014), plays in the front room of the exhibition. The documentary features David Kawapit, a Cree teen who, along with a few friends, lead an epic 1,600 kilometre walk from Whapmagoostui, Québec to Ottawa, Ontario, picking up 300 supporters along the way. The Journey of Nishiyuu began as support for Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence's protest of treaty relations between Indigenous communities and the Government of Canada. Kawapit discusses how what he began as a show of support became something much larger. In the documentary, he describes this transformative experience by saying: "Now I feel ... wanted. I feel loved." A clarion point of heartbreaking honesty, Obomsawin's documentary solidifies the necessity of belief and self-empowerment that underscores the exhibition.

At first, the newly-opened Onsite Gallery presents as a classic white cube space, which is at odds with the content on display. The exhibition proffers a focus on aesthetics—it uses rich navy blue and deep magenta

colours painted walls along with patterned wallpapers as framing devices for the installations, sculptures, and drawings. Jamaican artist Ebony G. Patterson's large jacquard tapestry, *Bad Pickney (Fambily Series)* (2013), commands attention. The huge 6'x9' woven hanging portrait of eight Black youth, intricately hand sewn, bejeweled, and sequined, presents a clash of ideas. The youth are shown playing off racist stereotypes by holding guns and presenting stoic power poses. Their stony expressions provide armour for a world that renders them incapable of morality. Yet, in Patterson's brilliant palette, meticulous detail, and candy-coloured bling, she delivers a celebration of survival by anointing innocence back to the youth depicted. While the full canvas is coated in decoration, stark absences exist—like the flowers in the tapestry, Patterson lays bare the children's skin, allowing their lives to be seen as natural as the magnolia blossoms. Taking notes from centuries of European tapestry narratives, Patterson creates the triumph and beauty of the natural world, though here she aligns it with the Black youth who have historically been denied their virtue. These often sidelined narratives now maintaining space within an academic arts centre provide a template for

showcasing inclusivity at an institutional level. Not only does this function as an educational model but also builds trust for communities who have historically been under-served in these spaces.

Work by highly regarded multimedia artist Nick Cave and Toronto-based performance artist Jessica Karuhanga (shown alongside Patterson's), expose similar challenges to the representation of Black lives within the natural world. Chicago-resident Cave collects and fastidiously hand-crafts and adorns costumes to make energetic soundsuits. Often faceless, these head-to-toe constructions become majestic protection for Black bodies that have been deemed a threat to dominant culture. Here he provides a sanctuary, freedom from judgment of class, gender, or race. In delicate contrast, Karuhanga's two-channel installation presents herself along with Ahlam Mohammed as they sway in rhythm like breath connected to the woods, the wind, and rivers they share. As Karuhanga noted in the exhibition publication, these scenes of organic, gentle movement between two Black women in a Canadian landscape beg the questions: "Who gets to experience, witness and revel on the earth here? In what ways can blackness as urbanity be called into question?"² At a point when news media chose to represent an 18-year-old Black boy, Michael Brown, shot by police as "no angel," simple acts of pleasure in earthbound revelry become sites of uprising. These three artists' work challenges notions of race formed upon an urban, predatory, colonial conception. A dominant framing often mistaken for truth denies an inherent relationship to nature that exists within everyone.

Ecologically-directed exhibitions and artists have frequently addressed the direness of the future. From Olafur Eliasson's *Your Waste of Time* (2006), in which he transported six tons of Iceland's oldest glacier (2,500 years old) to Berlin where the pieces were on view in a refrigerated gallery, to *Sandstars* (2012), an installation and photographic work by Gabriel Orozco comprised of collected detritus found in a whale mating sanctuary that also functions as an industrial wasteland, to the grand-scale photographic prints of Edward Burtynsky in which he travels the world documenting (via digital, large format film, and drone cameras) devastated geographies, these works proclaim humanity's vast capacity for destruction while at the same time adding to the carnage. At what point must each artist weigh the cost of

making an impactful environmental statement versus the massive energy footprint used for these exhibitions? Like the criticism voiced by Artnet critic J.J. Charlesworth about curator Okwui Enwezor's politically-themed 56th Venice Biennale, *All the World's Futures* (2015), what do the grand gestures of international exhibitions on ecological urgency do to change the real world?³

The personal, hand crafted buoyancy of *The Sunshine Eaters* offers local and conscientious precedent for the viewer as opposed to fatalistic lessons of certain global demise. It should come as no surprise that marginalized voices can identify with the natural world, as both (earth and people) have been subjugated by a capitalist patriarchy whose intentions are to contain. Through the works on view, control tactics are proven as futile as trying to stop the sun from shining. Individual moments of hope become nourishing affirmations, binding all back to spirit, people, land.

Liz Ikiriko teaches at OCAD University.

NOTES

- ¹ *The Sunshine Eaters*, exhibition brochure, Toronto: OCAD University Onsite Gallery, 2018. 6.
- ² *Ibid.*, 11.
- ³ J.J. Charlesworth, "Playing Politics: J.J. Charlesworth on Why Art World Hypocrisy Stars at the 56th Venice Biennale," Artnet.com, May 7, 2015, <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/56th-venice-biennale-politics-jj-charlesworth-295350>. Accessed February 15, 2018.