

NYUGEN E. SMITH

What if smooth seas made a skilled sailor?

Through sculpture, painting, works on paper, music, and performances, interdisciplinary artist Nyugen E. Smith interrogates the trauma, celebrations, beauty, and memory inherent in the culture of the Pan-Caribbean diaspora. All of Smith's work is part of his larger practice that he calls Bundlehouse. This body of work draws aesthetic and conceptual inspiration from the ad hoc constructions built by people who are forced to flee their homes due to societal or environmental destructive forces.

For his installation in *In the Adjacent Possible*, Smith designed and populated a literal bundlehouse. His structure combines architectural elements inspired from sacred and secular buildings across the Caribbean and materials from his travels there. The large rose window in the front was inspired by the rose windows from the Cathedral of Our Lady of the



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This Gothic cathedral was destroyed in the earthquake in 2010. The tile floor pattern and some interior architectural elements of the installation were pulled from the Boissière House in Trinidad and Tobago, a historic structure that was purchased in 2015 by an Indo-Trinidadian family who plan to restore it. Chickens and guardian busts guard the exterior of the structure, establishing this space, like many Caribbean homes, as a site for sustenance and care.

The interior of the structure is occupied primarily by an altar, which holds elements that were used in Smith's past performances. Of particular note are the empty baby powder bottles, the contents of which he used to conceptually move between the physical and spiritual worlds. In addition, his wallpaper design presents a radial pattern of the crown crane and the blue verbena plant, both of which nod to his own Caribbean heritage.

In the Adjacent Possible

April 5, 2022–March 26, 2023

"...imagine and craft the worlds you cannot live without, just as you dismantle the ones you cannot live within."

—Ruha Benjamin, sociologist

In the Adjacent Possible is a constellation of immersive installations created by five artists responding to Benjamin's suggestion. The artists provide a vantage point for viewing the many potentialities that lie just beyond what we know.

Each conjures a world that is not quite here, yet is within our grasp. Each places us in a space where we can dream alternative ways of being in the world.

Engaging issues of colonialism, feminism, queerness, identity, and stereotypes, *In the Adjacent Possible* explores the infinite horizon of opportunities at the boundaries of our reach and suggests ways we can reimagine the present. Some of them are just past the threshold of the next door.

Kaytie Johnson, Senior Curator
Laura Bickford, Curator



**John Michael
Kohler Arts Center**

IN THE ADJACENT POSSIBLE



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JESSICA CAMPBELL

What if we all had access to the time and space for rest? A space of our own for quiet, solitude, contemplation, beauty?

A longing for a world where all of our basic needs—food, shelter, safety, and health—are met by societal structures, allowing us time for leisure and rest, is at the heart of Jessica Campbell’s comfortable domestic space. Titled *Mensdagis dei Misteri (Refuge in Refuse)*, or “Man Cave of Mysteries,” it is a room inspired by the man caves frequently found in Midwestern garages, spare bedrooms, and basements.

The walls of Campbell’s retreat are covered with overlapping, sound-absorbing layers of crocheted afghans and hand-tufted and collaged rugs that replace the neon beer signs, flags, sports memorabilia, and posters that typically adorn these gendered domestic spaces. Their arrangement references the Fourth Style of Roman wall painting, which was popular in the mid-first century CE and frequently found in sumptuous villas in Rome and Pompeii. Campbell’s reinterpretation of traditional Swedish design is also reflected in many of the installation’s textile-based components. These honor her Swedish grandmother, who taught Campbell how to knit and made fiber works for most of her life.



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SUCHITRA MATTAI

What if we shed our biases, embraced everyone with empathy, and came together to create the world(s) we dream of?

Multidisciplinary artist Suchitra Mattai mines memory and myth to create mixed-media works that unravel and reimagine the legacies of colonialism, speak to the complexities of identity, and consider ever-changing definitions of home and belonging. She centers the long-ignored voices and experiences of women, particularly those from the South Asian diaspora, by using practices and materials associated with the domestic sphere to address contemporary issues surrounding gender, family, and labor.

Found objects, as well as craft-based processes and materials, play an essential role in Mattai’s practice. She is interested in the potentialities that arise from materials with forgotten or erased histories. A skilled storyteller, she creates visual narratives that draw from her personal history and Indo-Caribbean heritage to address broader cultural, social, and political issues, such as the exploitation of colonized people, indentured labor, and the immigrant experience.



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Within her installation, Mattai creates a space where time and history collapse, and a more universal and intercultural form of folklore is formed, one that revisits the past in order to speak to the present. It is a place of remembrance and resistance where we can imagine worlds different from the one we know.

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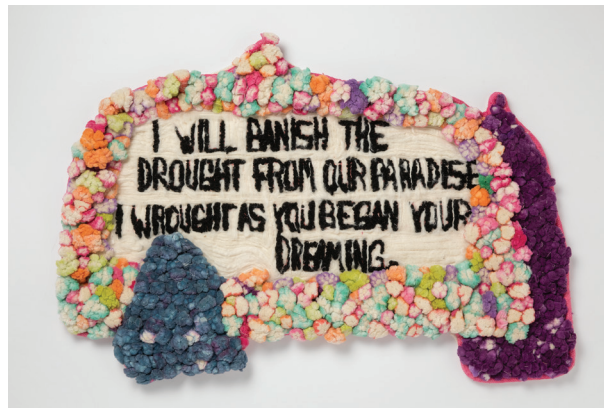
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1 *In the Adjacent Possible* installation view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2022; works by Nyugen E. Smith. Courtesy of the artist.
 2 *In the Adjacent Possible* installation view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2022; works by Suchitra Mattai. Courtesy of the artist and Kavi Gupta Gallery.
 3-4 Jessica Campbell, *Mensdagis dei Misteri (Refuge in Refuse)* (installation view, John Michael Kohler Arts Center), 2022; recliner, car wash mitts, felt, tufting cloth, carpet, edging, polyurethane foam, and found afghans. Courtesy of the artist and Western Exhibitions.
 5-6 *In the Adjacent Possible* installation view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2022.
 7 Haleigh Nickerson, *Waiting 2 Exhale / Breathe Now... Breathe Easy*, 2020; video: duration 45 seconds. Courtesy of the artist.
 8 Nyugen E. Smith, untitled (House and Land) (detail), 2022; installation; research assistant Joshua Lue Chee Kong. Courtesy of the artist.

YASMINE K. KASEM

What if new growth was built upon healing? If liminal space was recognized as a refuge against the hostility of daily life? What if defiance is the only portal to thriving?

Yasmine K. Kasem’s art focuses on the precariousness of identity and materializes her lived, intersectional experience as an Egyptian-American, Muslim, and queer woman. Drawing from her personal history, she creates mixed-media works that articulate her feelings of liminality, or in-betweenness. For this exhibition, Kasem created a restorative sanctuary suffused with love and compassion—a space where healing is visualized. Prayer rugs made from deconstructed and dyed cotton piping—all featuring Quranic verses and snippets of poetry—are placed on the walls and function as sites for meditation, focus, and serenity. Kasem likens their fabrication to the act of prayer.



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A series of salt-encrusted wood sawhorses—some bearing saddles, others with wings, all with faces resembling Kasem’s—represent Buraq, the mythical part human, part animal creature that transported Muhammad from the earth to the heavens during his Night Journey. The steed is a frequent

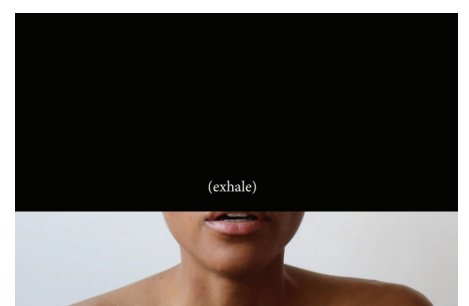
motif in Kasem’s work, representing hybridity and change. Doorways with Islamic-style pointed arches provide entry to the installation. These act as portals to a space where healing can take place, individual and collective traumas can be transcended, and new worlds can be visualized.

HALEIGH NICKERSON

What if we Exhale?

Haleigh Nickerson examines Black female identity through sculpture, performance, video and film, photography, and installation. Most often, she seeks to challenge, and affirm, the idea of a “strong Black woman” by creating sets or stages where this stereotype is often employed. She then takes on the identity of a character in these environments to complicate the presumed one-dimensional dynamic of these personas. This has taken the form of a track and field athlete at the starting blocks, a caped-clad superhero taking a break, a hip-hop performer awash in gold and velvet, and a woman lounging at the beach.

It is key to Nickerson that she use herself in these character displays to further explore the depths of the ways these expectations have constrained her own life. Many of her performances, including the work in *In the Adjacent Possible*, are endurance performances in which the artist goes through some hardship including pain, solitude, or exhaustion. She says, “The use of endurance is rooted in the way I envision my Blackness and experience as this strength in pushing through limits. There are points when you think you’re not going to make it, but your body just continues to push through. That is how I understand Blackness. The will and perseverance to move through things.”



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In the work shown here, her struggle for breath resonates with the larger national protest chants of “I Can’t Breathe” emanating from the Black Lives Matter movement and from her own struggles with anxiety and nerves. She collectively asks everyone to breathe out, to release a bit of the pressure, to prepare to move forward with intention.

9 *In the Adjacent Possible* installation view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2022. Yasmine K. Kasem, (from left) *Sweat Until I Am Soaked* (detail), 2022; wood sawhorses, salt, cotton, and dyed cotton piping. *Intentions* (detail), 2022; cotton piping and yarn on monk’s cloth. Courtesy of the artist.
 10 Jessica Campbell, *Mensdagis dei Misteri (Refuge in Refuse)* (installation detail, John Michael Kohler Arts Center), 2022; recliner, car wash mitts, felt, tufting cloth, carpet, edging, polyurethane foam, and found afghans. Courtesy of the artist and Western Exhibitions.
 11 Yasmine K. Kasem, *Intention 2*, 2022; cotton piping and yarn on monk’s cloth; 22 x 37 in. Courtesy of the artist.
 12 Suchitra Mattai, *siren song* (detail, installation view, John Michael Kohler Arts Center), 2022; vintage saris, fabric, and digital projection. Courtesy of the artist and Kavi Gupta Gallery.
 13 Haleigh Nickerson, *Waiting 2 Exhale / Breathe Now... Breathe Easy*, 2020; video still. Courtesy of the artist.