

BECOMING OTHERWISE

Soheila Esfahani
Jessica Karuhanga
Imogen Clendinning
Behnaz Fatemi
Xi Jin
Racquel Rowe

Curated by Yijing Li

 artLAB

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge that Western University is located on the traditional territories of the Anishinaabek, Haudenosaunee, Lūnaapéewak and Chonnonton Nations, on lands connected with the London Township and Sombra Treaties of 1796 and the Dish with One Spoon Covenant Wampum.

With this, we respect the longstanding relationship that Indigenous Nations have to this land, as they are the original caretakers. We acknowledge historical and ongoing injustices that Indigenous Peoples (First Nations, Métis and Inuit) endure in Canada, we accept responsibility as a public institution to contribute toward revealing and correcting miseducation as well as renewing respectful relationships with Indigenous communities through our teaching, research, and community service.

The successful realization of any exhibition or artistic endeavour is often the result of collective effort and collaboration. As such, we would like to express our deepest gratitude to the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, the Department of Visual Arts, the Office of Indigenous Initiatives, Liza Eurich, Dickson Bou, Gregory De Souza, the artLAB attendants, and Parveen Grewal for their invaluable assistance in bringing this exhibition to fruition.

Curator: Yijing Li, PhD Candidate

Artists: Soheila Esfahani, Jessica Karuhanga,

Imogen Clendinning, Behnaz Fatemi, Xi Jin, Racquel Rowe.

Western University

artLAB Gallery | Department of Visual Arts

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Preface

I come to this exhibition not only as a curator but also as someone entangled in the very questions it poses. As someone who moved between China and Canada, my life has been shaped by a constant negotiation of in-betweenness—moving between languages, navigating across cultures, and reconciling multiplicities within myself.

It is through art, through image, gesture and trace, that I began to gather the pieces. I found in artworks what I could not name or define in myself. In learning to curate, I learned to listen, to feel, and to resonate. In curating this exhibition, I am not seeking resolution. Instead, I am asking how we make room for all that we are. How do we honour both our longing and our becoming, our inheritance and our transformation? How we can live truthfully in the complexity of our histories, our emotions, and our unfinished selves?

This exhibition is a continuation of that inquiry. It is a space to listen, to feel, and to gather new ways of being from the scattered pieces of what was, what is, and what could be.

We are not
what they named us
not in the borders
they drew
without our voice

We hold our root
in the ruin
To unbecome
the stories told for us

To gather
fragments
not as broken
but
as constellation

To return
not to the given
but to the long-forbidden
To our breath
steady and sovereign

Curatorial Statement

Becoming Otherwise is not a fixed state but a continuous, embodied process. It is an act of resistance against imposed categories and an invitation to imagine new ways of belonging. This exhibition brings together six artists—Soheila Esfahani, Jessica Karuhanga, Imogen Clendinning, Behnaz Fatemi, Xi Jin, and Racquel Rowe—whose works traverse memory, material, and migration to explore how identity is constructed, unraveled, and remade.

Across the exhibition, repetition and liminality emerge as shared strategies—temporal and spatial states that allow identity to be continually reimagined. Repetition becomes not a return to sameness, but a ritual of reconstitution: in Soheila Esfahani's cultural imagery, in Racquel Rowe's lingering shots of land and sea; and in Behnaz Fatemi's embodied gestures. These reiterations do not resolve identity but keep it in motion, gesturing toward something felt rather than fixed. Simultaneously, each artist navigates a liminal terrain—a threshold space where categories blur: between internal experience and external categorization (Jessica Karuhanga), knowing and seeing (Xi Jin), or human and machine, control and surrender (Imogen Clendinning). Here, liminality is not merely a condition of being in between. It is where becoming happens.

Together, these artists offer poetic articulations of identity in flux. *Becoming Otherwise* honours transformation as a vital process, where uncertainty and fragmentation give shape to new ways of being.

Soheila Esfahani,
Ducks, acrylic
& laser-etching
on collected object,
8x16 in, 2024,
photograph by
Toni Hafkenschied



Soheila Esfahani's two artworks, *Ducks* and *Loonie* explores stereotype as otherness. They also reflect Homi K. Bhabha's notion of ambivalence, which manifests as a split between appearance of an original and its expression as difference and repetitive. Her artworks question displacement, dissemination, and reinsertion of culture through the repetitive nature of stereotypical imagery. Esfahani resists fixed definitions, instead creating hybrid forms that reflect the layered negotiations of diasporic identity. This in-betweenness, where meaning slips, duplicates, and refracts, reveals identity as fluid and performative, shaped as much by translation as by rupture.



Soheila Esfahani, *Loonie*, acrylic
& laser-etching on collected wooden
object, 6x15 in, 2025



Soheila Esfahani, *Tags in My Corduroys: Canada*
Goose; H&M; Maryam, laser-etching on wood, 6x8
 in each, 2023

In *Tags in My Corduroys*, Esfahani brings consumer labels into focus—Canada Goose, H&M, and a personal name—revealing how national and cultural identifiers are recontextualized within global capitalism. When juxtaposed with other collected objects, a complex search for identity begins to unfold. The work prompts critical reflection: when the name of your country appears on the label of a consumer product, does it become a repetitive marker of “sameness” within a capitalist framework? Is identity itself being commodified and labeled? Is identity being used to signal diversity in ways that serve commercial interests rather than authentic representation? By reconfiguring everyday objects with etched motifs, Esfahani destabilizes cultural legibility and questions the processes of displacement, dissemination, and reinsertion that structure diasporic belonging in the contemporary world.



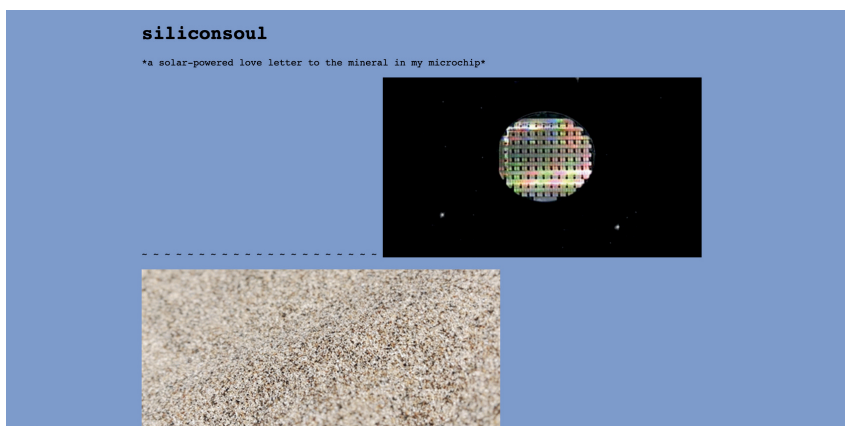
Jessica Karuhanga, Director of Photography: Manolo Lugo, Editor: Meeka McLean, Featuring Ahlam Hassan *Blue as the insides*, Single-channel video with sound, 15:18 mins, 2021

Jessica Karuhanga's film *Blue as the insides* quietly meditates on the interior lives of Black femme subjects and the complexities of visibility, solitude, and embodied selfhood. The film reflects on the porous boundary between private and public space. The subject, often averting her gaze from the camera, resists the performative demands of visibility while inviting a nuanced, contemplative intimacy. Viewers are made acutely aware of their position as observers. They witness moments that feel both sacred and mundane. This deliberate ambiguity destabilizes the binary of passivity and power, allowing for a reclamation of self on one's own terms. As the figure transitions from interior rooms to open landscapes, Karuhanga dissolves the imposed division between body and environment. The natural world becomes a site of autonomy, resistance, and care. It becomes a space where identity is no longer confined by societal projections but shaped through presence, movement, and ritual. In this unfolding, *Blue as the insides* affirms that becoming otherwise is a process of retreat, assertion, and redefinition through embodied knowing.

Karuhanga's work explores identity not as a fixed or external category, but as something deeply internal, emotional, and embodied. The solitary figure in the film engages in subtle acts of care, movement, and withdrawal that resist easy interpretation. The viewer's inability to fully access her inner world mirrors the experience of navigating identity in contexts where Black femme bodies are often overexposed yet misunderstood. Karuhanga's work inhabits liminality as a fertile in-between, where identity can be self-determined, fluid, and untethered from external categorization. In doing so, *Blue as the Insides* enacts *Becoming Otherwise* through the intimate, unspoken strength of occupying the margins.



Jessica Karuhanga, Director of Photography: Manolo Lugo, Editor: Meeka McLean, Featuring Ahlam Hassan *Blue as the insides*, Single-channel video with sound, 15:18 mins, 2021



Imogen Clendinning, *siliconsoul*, solar-powered server, found-footage video, 2023

siliconsoul's searching for a sense of self in the mineral heart of our machines is not only a love letter to quartz and silicon, but also a critique to the intertwined histories of extraction, colonialism, and technological longing.

Imogen Clendinning's layered narrative traces her journey to the Lake Huron dunes and Spirit Lake, where she seeks connection to the very matter that powers her digital life. Her writing shifts between geological observation, personal displacement, and cosmic speculation: she acknowledges herself as an "unsolicited guest" on Indigenous land, recognizing the colonial entanglement embedded in both her physical presence and the very materials of her device. The microchip becomes a site of reckoning, both for environmental degradation and the inherited histories that shape technological systems.

In this way, *siliconsoul* becomes an ecological and existential search for identity—one not grounded in national markers or human-centered narratives, but in mineral relations, solar time, and loops of interdependency. The work evokes a quiet negotiation between control and surrender—between what we can shape and what we must relinquish—as the sun that powers the piece does not always shine. Within this flux, Clendinning invites us to see identity not as fixed, but as a state of attunement: to interruption, to impermanence, and to the subtle, enduring rhythms of the earth beneath our digital infrastructures.

siliconsoul reframes identity as something mineral, relational, and speculative. It is a porous site of attunement to geologic time, colonial residue, and environmental precarity. In doing so, Clendinning's work embodies becoming otherwise: a refusal to separate the digital from the earthly, the technological from the ecological, the self from the systems we inherit and inhabit.



Behnaz Fatemi, *Traces and Erasures*. Performance drawings duration: 60 minutes. 2024. Photograph by Scott Lee.



Behnaz Esfahani, *Traces and Erasures*. Performance drawings, 2024. Photograph by Scott Lee.

Behnaz Fatemi's *Traces and Erasures* offers a meditative exploration of identity shaped by migration, memory, and loss. Her process-based practice draws from performative mark-making—acts of writing, rubbing, erasing, and layering—which become metaphors for the fractured and fragile construction of selfhood in diasporic contexts. The repetition and removal of marks across the surface speak to the impermanence of memory and the instability of cultural belonging. Rather than presenting a fixed image of identity, Fatemi engages in an ongoing process of unmaking and remaking, echoing the emotional labor of navigating between multiple cultural worlds. The acts of erasure do not signify disappearance but become poetic rituals of mourning, resilience, and reinvention. Behnaz's artworks suggest that identity, particularly for those negotiating diasporic or postcolonial subjectivities, is not a linear narrative but a palimpsest, one that bears the weight of loss while also holding potential for new inscription.



Xi Jin,
*the lexicon of uncertain
definitions,*
aluminum, found objects,
pleated blinds, 2025



Xi Jin's work foregrounds how language is rarely neutral. It carries with it the weight of colonial legacies, national borders, and cultural hierarchies. For many who live between languages or inherit a dislocated mother tongue, words become uncertain vessels—at once intimate and estranged, personal and politicized. By dismantling the dictionary's rigid structure and embracing ambiguity, Jin carves out space for multiple forms of understanding and self-expression that do not rely on dominant cultural grammars.

Her practice invites viewers to encounter language not as a fixed system of representation, but as an evolving process of becoming. Words, like identity, are shown to be unstable, context-dependent, and deeply felt. The act of naming, in Jin's lexicon, is not an end point, but a gesture toward something provisional and lived. She transforms the task of definition into an open-ended inquiry, resisting the impulse to resolve or conclude.

The lexicon of uncertain definitions creates a liminal space between interpreting and perceiving, knowing and questioning. Jin's work powerfully aligns with the theme of *Becoming Otherwise* by asking: What happens when we unmoor ourselves from standardized definitions? How might we come to know ourselves through the misalignments of language? Her Lexicon becomes a metaphor for identity as a lived archive—one that is constantly rewritten, overwritten, and left unfinished.



Racquel Rowe, *Landscapes in motion*, a series of videos, (2020-present)

Rowe's practice is the notion that place is not only geographic, but ancestral and emotional. Her video works were made during her repeated returns to her Caribbean homeland, linger on sand, sea, and sky as more than natural scenery; they are tactile sites of memory, continuity, and transformation. The slow pacing and immersive quality of *Landscapes in Motion* invite viewers to attune to subtle shifts in light and texture, suggesting that identity, like landscape, is constantly evolving, shaped by rhythms of return, loss, and reconnection.

Rowe's search for identity unfolds through layered returns—to home, to ocean, to nature, and to cultural practice. Her works ask: How can identity be shaped through sensory attunement, through the rhythm of waves, the repetition of gesture, and the embodied knowledge passed down in families?

Racquel's work resides in a liminal space: between home and diaspora, presence and distance, movement and stillness. By weaving together land, ritual, and memory, Rowe offers viewers an alternative cartography of belonging, one mapped not by borders, but by intimacy, care, and ancestral resonance.



Racquel Rowe, *Landscapes in motion*, a series of videos, (2020-present)

Artists Biography

Soheila Esfahani grew up in Tehran, Iran, and moved to Canada in 1992. She holds a BA in Fine Arts from University of Waterloo and a Master of Fine Arts from Western University. Esfahani is an award-winning visual artist and recipient of numerous grants from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Social Sciences & Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Region of Waterloo Arts Fund. She is a recipient of 2016 Waterloo Region Arts Awards and was nominated for the Jameel Prize at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, UK in 2015. Her work has been exhibited at the Aga Khan Museum, Canadian Cultural Centre Paris, Doris McCarthy Gallery, Cambridge Art Galleries among others, and has been collected by various public and private institutions including the Canada Council's Art Bank. Her coin design for the Royal Canadian Mint's Celebrating Canada's Diversity Collection was released in limited mintage gold and silver coins in 2024. She is an Assistant Professor at Western University in London, Ontario and is a member of the Red Head Gallery in Toronto.

Jessica Karuhanga is a first-generation Canadian artist of British-Ugandan heritage who addresses politics of identity and Black diasporic concerns through lens-based technologies, sculpture, writing, drawing, and performance. Karuhanga's work has been presented at venues including Warehouse9 (Copenhagen, DK), Sarajevski Otvoreni Centar (Sarajevo, BA), Mitchell Art Gallery (Edmonton), Robert McLaughlin Gallery (Oshawa), Nuit Blanche (Toronto), Onsite Gallery (Toronto), Remai Modern (Saskatoon), Pallas Art Projects (Dublin, IE), WNDX Festival (Winnipeg), ROM (Toronto), and Goldsmiths University (London, UK). Her work is also in public collections (Museum London, Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery). She holds a BFA (Western University) and an MFA (University of Victoria) and is an Assistant Professor at Western University.

Imogen Clendinning is a settler media artist and scholar who resides in the traditional lands of the Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee, Lūnaapéewak, and Attawandaron (or so-called London, Ontario). In their research, Clendinning develops DIY solar-powered web servers to hold digital archives and Internet Art. Recent projects include the Archive on Ice exhibited as part of Ice Follies Festival (Nbissing Region, 2021), siliconsoul exhibited in Mitra Fakhrashrafi's exhibition shadow work at InterAccess (Tkaronto, 2022) and Archivetemporal, a solar archive developed in partnership with the Centre for Sustainable Curating (<http://archivetemporal.com/archives.html>). Her writing has been published by BlackFlash, Off Centre and tba Journal of Art, Media and Visual Culture. Clendinning is currently pursuing a PhD in Art and Visual Culture, Western University, with a focus on critical infrastructure studies and sustainable practices in digital archiving.

Behnaz Fatemi is a multidisciplinary artist and PhD candidate in Visual Culture at Western University. Her research-driven practice spans durational performance, drawing, video, and installation, engaging with themes of Iranian diaspora, trauma, the politics of care, and resistance. Her work has been exhibited at the Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery, Idea Exchange, and Art Windsor-Essex. She has served as Kitchener's Artist in Residence, participated in the CAFKA Biennial, and is currently completing a two-month international residency at the Royal Over-Seas League (ROSL) in the United Kingdom. Her practice has been supported by the Region of Waterloo Arts Fund, Pat the Dog Theatre Creation, and the IMAE awards from the University of Waterloo.

Xi Jin(she/her) grew up in the heart of Beijing, China, and spent almost a decade studying, working, and living in Canada. She is a visual artist, printmaker, and poet. She holds a BFA from NSCAD University and an MFA from the University of Alberta. In 2024, Xi Jin begins a PhD program in visual arts(studio_based) at Western University. Xi Jin's experimental practice focuses on multimedia, print matter, robotic/coding, photography, and installation, which uses everyday objects and situations to shed light on language, power, thought, perception, experience, and reality. Her work also relates to the interdisciplinary study of sociolinguistics, universal communication, computational linguistics, artificial intelligence, and language in the realm of techno-utopianism.

Racquel Rowe is an interdisciplinary artist from the island of Barbados currently residing in Canada. She's exhibited widely across Canada and holds an MFA from the University of Waterloo and a BA in History and Studio Art from the University of Guelph. Her practice is continuously influenced by many aspects of history, matrilineal family structures, diasporic communities, and her upbringing in Barbados. Her work includes performance, video, photo, painting, drawing and installation. The artist would like to thank the Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Arts Council, and Ed Video Media Arts Centre for their continued support.

