

Stranger Within

Lumbering around the gallery with my back awkwardly bent with a wide gait carrying the surfaced with firm edges, others squished embedded with soil, sand, or flora—moving them around to pick the right place. Some of the forms feel like fussy babies I can’t quite manage to get a good grip on, heavy and delicate, smooth substantial masses with no right way to hold them. Making my way upstairs, I envision the moment of letting go. The dull thud as the wax lands and breaks. Not a smash or a shatter but a thud, so much like an ending. It’s not the end of the world—wax can be recycled, reshaped into other iterations of itself—and yet a loss, still, in that it will never have this particular form again.

Next, we arrange paintings. Leaning them against walls and balanced on Styrofoam—taut and vulnerable canvas stretched across wooden bars. Again, visions: my foot swings out in front of me, hitting a painting; knees buckle as I ascend the staircase and I fall forward onto the painting, damaging its surface, scraping away at the layers of paint. In each of these imagined scenarios, it is somehow not my fault; my body has betrayed me, limbs flail or muscles give out in treason against my true intentions. Somehow, even as my mind plays through reels of calamity, my ego refuses to allow me to take responsibility for these disaster fantasies.

Meanwhile, in the world outside my mind where my body exists, each movement I make while working with these objects is carefully considered. As I perform this slow awkward dance these intrusive thoughts continue to plague. Against these thoughts, I work to link my mind directly to each step my feet take, each bend of my knees, and each lift of my arms. These are not my objects to break.

Later, not knowing what to do with my body, I sit aimlessly in a chair as the artists continue their work. Katie asks me if I wouldn’t mind giving her some privacy while she gets started on her wall painting. I think of the readings we have done together—Anne Carson writing about Sappho, a poet who disappears in order to look. Carson explains, “*Greener than grass am I . . .*,” she says, *predicating of her own Being an attribute observable only from outside her own body. This is the condition called ekstasis, literally “standing outside oneself,” a condition regarded by the Greeks as typical of mad persons, geniuses, and lovers, and ascribed to poets by Aristotle.*¹ Threaded through this particular essay, there is an uncertainty, a disjuncture between mind and body of the three women she is writing about that articulates an embodied anxiety that feels familiar to carrying these objects alongside an unsettledness that threads the work in the exhibition together. Carson calls it *Decreation*, a pattern of placement and displacement, three people but only two chairs. Brisk movements inspired by drawings, rubbed slightly away with water and rags and fingerprints pressed onto drywall coated with orange oil. As always, proximity is vulnerable and precious, to touch is to be unsettled, to observe is to be displaced. When two hands touch, how close are they? What is the measure of closeness?² My hands are huge and clumsy, like heavy mitts that can’t seem to settle anywhere comfortably. When photographed they hover awkwardly, lightly clasped at my waist or floating at my sides. In moments when my mind wanders, they float to play with my curls. My mother warns me that I look like I’m not paying attention, which is true, I’m not. When I’m with my love I enjoy picking the sleep out from their eyes with my fingers, but I always end up poking them in the eye by accident.

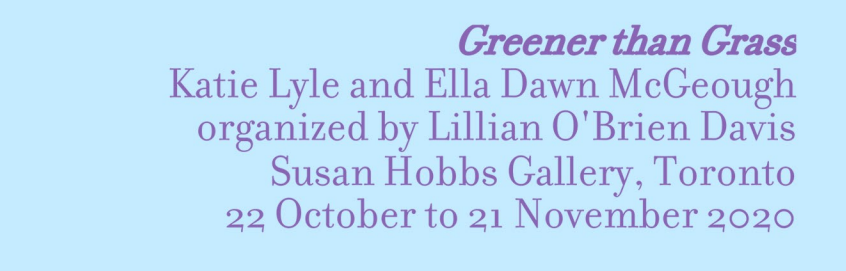
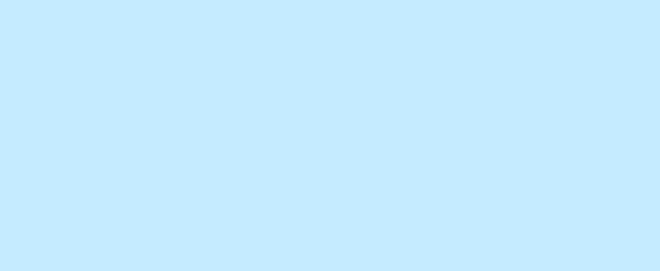
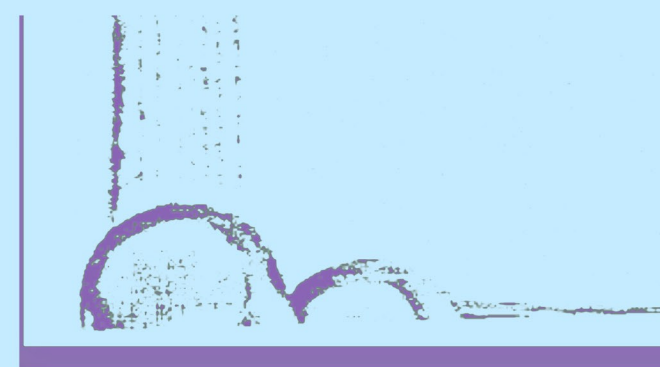
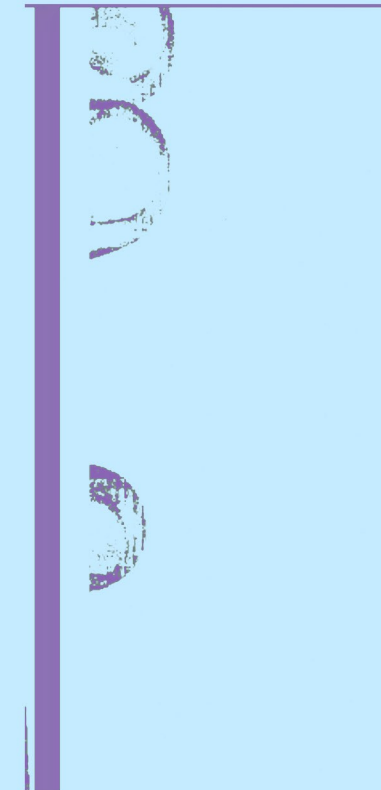
On some of the pages of my PDF copy of Carson’s text there are images of fingers that must have been scanned accidentally when the physical text was put online.³ Traces of another person with a purpose that has nothing to do with mine. Two fingers, extended to hold down the pages of a book, a book I cannot touch and fingers I cannot grasp, a virtual proximity. The fingers look eerie, dark uncanny creatures lurking in the corner of the scanned page. If you held the page in the same place, you could almost miss them. It is a strange feeling to have your fingers cover the virtual fingers of another. It feels romantic, a tender gesturing of comfort, an intimate moment. Akin to playing with my ringlets or noticing that we have been holding hands. And yet, here, I catch myself and recoil after a few moments with these two digits—*there is no one there!*

If only I knew how to disappear there would be a perfect union of love between God and the earth I tread, the sea I hear...

- Simone Weil

by Lillian O’Brien Davis

1. Anne Carson. “Decreation: How Women Like Sappho, Marguerite Porète, and Simone Weil Tell God.” *Decreation: Poetry, essays, opera*. Knopf, 2005.
2. Karen Barad. “On Touching—the Inhuman That Therefore I Am.” *differences* 23 (3), December 2012, 206–223.
3. Artist Andrew Norman Wilson explores this phenomenon in depth.



Greener than Grass
Katie Lyle and Ella Dawn McGeough
organized by Lillian O’Brien Davis
Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto
22 October to 21 November 2020