

Grasping at the Roots¹

Eugenio Salas, Debbie Ebanks Schlums, Serena Lee and Shawn Tse.

With video by Scott Portingale.

Curated by Christina Battle for the Mitchell Art Gallery, January 2020



Scott Portingale, *Corn seed roots* (video still), 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

*Our conversation, however, must begin with the obvious: the public is collapsing as an ideal within a political climate still driven by inequality, institutional unaccountability, and economic austerity. In other words, as the longevity of the top-down, public-welfare-state paradigm is in question today, we need urgently to search for alternatives, and to seek a more functional manifestation of public thinking and action. The question must be different questions if we want different answers.*²

Grasping at the Roots takes cues from mycorrhizae, mutually beneficial associations between fungi and plants. Fungi have the ability to enhance nutrient take up in plant roots, ensuring healthy development; in return, they benefit by absorbing the plant carbohydrates they require to sustain growth. This exhibition looks, not only to strategies artists use to support and sustain relationships with those they work with, but also to curatorial strategies that might in turn better support artists. *Grasping at the Roots* operates from the premise that this strategy of care has the ability to foster and develop community in sustainable and meaningful ways.

¹ The title *Grasping at the Roots* references Angela Davis, who defines radical as: “grasping things at the root.” Angela Davis, *Y. Women, Culture & Politics*. (New York: Random House, 1989), 14.

² Teddy Cruz and Fonna Forman, “Latin America and a New Political Leadership: Experimental Acts of Coexistence,” in *Public Servants: Art and the Crisis of the Common Good*, eds. Johanna Burton, Shannon Jackson and Dominic Willsdon, (The MIT Press, 2016), 73.

Artists in the exhibition privilege participation and work intimately with others as a critical part of artistic practice. In a time when many—especially those on the margins—face real life threats and challenges, these artists prioritize community-building and engaged relationships built on responsibility and care.



Eugenio Salas, *Breaktime/Overtime*, 2017 — . Courtesy of the artist.

Overall Framework:

Grasping at the Roots began with the critical question of how to represent works for the space of the gallery that were at their core performative, site and time specific. These works are in intimate relation with the participants they engage with, thus, strategies for presenting to others, seemed critical to consider. I wondered how to translate the urgency, energy and intimacy at the heart of each work into the space of the static, and how to ensure that each project's sense of site and community remained in central focus. I wondered: how should an audience come to these works? What nuances of engagement need to be provided in order to allow for an expansive reading within the space of the gallery?

As a way to navigate strategies for translation, my curatorial approach centered itself as one based on active and prolonged conversation. Not confined to the occurrence of this exhibition, conversation with each artist has been ongoing: they are artists I have shared conversations with before, shared meals with, watched movies with, viewed art together with, artists who I have collaborated with, and have curated before. These conversations will continue on into the future. By offering a modest budget, artists were provided the opportunity to re-imagine their

works anew for the space of the gallery. Through a series of discussions, both one-to-one and as a group, I saw this exhibition as an opportunity to strengthen ongoing relationships and work alongside artists while they thought through strategies for material representation.

Through *Grasping at the Roots*, I approached my role as curator as one who can support artistic practice—not only for the sake of the exhibition but into the future—and prioritized the opportunity as one to support artists as they made something new. Taking cues from mycorrhizae, the goals of this support were intended to reach beyond artists' individual projects and to expand into broader communities as well.

As one would expect from artists working beyond the confines of the gallery, each chose to activate their works by interacting with others through the development of a public event. By participating in these events, the hope is that audience members gain a broader understanding of the artists' individual approaches to community and practice, and where these approaches diverge and overlap.

Through these events, the difference in how each artist approaches community becomes clear, not only in terms of the different communities engaged with, but in strategies for approaching *the idea* of community as well. This difference in approach was made most visible to me through the development of a collective project I saw as a way to foster conversation between participating artists and myself. Developed as a curatorial strategy for considering how viewers might approach the exhibition overall, the project aimed to find a language that decentred my own role as curator and instead extended the overall 'voice of the exhibition' to the collective. Through a series of shared conversations (for which artists were compensated for their time and participation), we set out to come to agreement on what a collective project that built understanding within the space of the gallery while also extending beyond its walls might look like.

In fairness, this tactic of conversation as curatorial strategy was tested: by both our short working timeline and the realities of relying on technological mediation in order to converse across distance.³ As a working strategy, we decided to develop a series of prompts that could be offered to viewers as both entry point to the works while also generating a reciprocity of viewership. Prompts were seen as a way to encourage viewers to consider their own role and responsibility while engaging with the stories artists present on behalf of the communities they work with. It was through the development of these collective prompts where differences in approach became clearest to me. With each artist seeing the need for prompts to be taken up in different ways, the multitude of strategies for working with and considering the relationship of participation to artistic practice quickly became evident. I'm grateful to have had the experience, and think the exercises' failings illustrate the difficulty of the overarching categorization of 'social practice' as an umbrella to describe different understandings and strategies for what such work might entail, and for how it might be defined.

In the end, the decision was made to fold the prompts exercise back into the public programming that each individual artist was developing. Through these prompts I'd like to consider how the commonalities of practices engaging *the social* split apart and become

³ We tried a number of applications to help mediate our conversations including: Skype, Google Hangouts, Facetime and Google docs, with various levels of success (and many failures).

individual, and my hope is that viewers come to each event and consider how prompts offer unique ways to consider strategies for participation.



Serena Lee, *Doing the dishes*, 2017—. Courtesy of the artist.

Exhibition Specifics:

Grasping at the Roots began by asking artists to consider how they might materialize works that actively perform in public, for the space of the gallery.

A time-lapse video by Scott Portingale greets viewers prior to entering the gallery. Offered as a sort of introduction to the concepts connecting the exhibition as a whole, Portingale's capturing of corn plants taking root visualizes the connection and spread that artists in the exhibition engage with. Shot specifically for *Grasping at the Roots* over 32 days, I'm taken by how quickly the roots spread. Through Portingale's skilled framing, we are offered a close up view to that which tends to remain invisible and I'm in awe of the quiet connections and interweavings plant roots instinctively develop as a metaphor for the approaches artists within the gallery also cultivate.

Serena Lee's *Doing the dishes* (2017—) translates intimate encounters and dialogue into the space of the gallery using multiple strategies of performance. Meeting with single mothers or daughters of single mothers and doing their dishes, Lee's project creates connection by relating her own experience of being raised by a single woman. Taking on an otherwise personal task, the project considers how performance might engage intimately one-to-one. Inevitably, the act

of doing dishes for the women becomes a strategy for hearing their stories, both activities a gift from the artist that recognizes the invisible labour single mothers impart on a daily basis. Since participants come to engage with the project through word of mouth facilitated by gallery curators and staff, connections to artistic practice remain another link to Lee's own experience, and questions relating to "who 'gets to' perform what types of labour and who 'gets to' be creative"⁴ also weave across the project as she contemplates the negotiations single mothers necessarily make. Translating the experiences and conversations for the gallery, Lee shares with us a level of care that holds onto the personal while revealing the universal. Through an additional performative gesture, this time for an audience of many, Lee recounts her experience of doing the dishes in an activated artist talk and overhead projector performance. Weaving the stories together in ways that turn the encounters into something collective, we are provided insight into the responsibility and care involved in sharing and translating others' personal experiences. By considering embodied methods of storytelling, *Doing the dishes* frames the intimate encounters as impossible to translate within public space. Through this artwork, we are given insight into invisible labour that we often take for granted, and through Lee's retellings, the women's stories become seen.

Debbie Ebanks Schlums also translates personal stories into material form as a strategy for engaging with her community-focused *The Dwelling Museum* (2017—). In 2017, Ebanks Schlums met with a group who recently moved to rural Ontario along with their families from Syria. Working to share and translate their personal stories into delicate glass objects and audio recordings, the work gives us insight into their experiences of migration. Listening to the audio, the amount of time spent together and the intimacy of the relationships developed between artist and participant is also revealed. Through the building of sculptural objects to house and present both the handmade glass and audio interviews, Ebanks Schlums further personalizes the experience by shaping an intimate and one-to-one encounter with each story.

While in Edmonton, Ebanks Schlums will lead a five-day workshop with newcomers, where participants will share stories and make glass objects to be included in the exhibition upon completion. By extending the project into communities here in Edmonton, Ebanks Schlums connects participants in Edmonton with those in rural Ontario, making visible the breadth of experiences encountered by newcomers to Canada.

Eugenio Salas translates his ongoing *Breaktime/Overtime* (2017—) into a pop-up shop as both a reflection on the project and strategy to fund its next phase, while also addressing the larger issue of sustainability of socially engaged artistic projects. *Breaktime/Overtime* is a longitudinal collaboration with a group of immigrant women of colour with whom Salas worked for four years at a cake factory in London, Ontario. Making over 3500 cakes per shift in the day job they shared, the group came together after work over the course of a year to reimagine the production line and logic of the cake factory. Through their meeting, they produced *The Supercake*, a 22-foot long edible installation made for the public in 2019.

For *Grasping at the Roots*, Salas has designed and produced a small run of handmade aprons, tea towels, prints, and zines reflecting on *The Supercake* project, which are available in the gallery for a donation to the next phase of the project. *Breaktime/Overtime Merch Store* is an active and participatory strategy for expanding the project, not only in terms of reflection for an

⁴ With notes from an email exchange on January 2, 2020.

Edmonton audience, but also as a way for gallery visitors to engage with and directly support its next phase—a collectively produced cookbook interweaving stories of food, migration, and labour.

For the exhibition in Edmonton, Salas is also collaborating with a local immigrant baker to host a *Merienda (teatime)* for gallery viewers to engage with. A tradition that came from Europe to the Americas via Spanish colonization, the Merienda furthers opportunities for audiences to consider the complex political histories of food and food production. Providing prompts in the gallery during the Merienda and via the gallery's Instagram feed, Salas will help draw attention to these histories as we consider the role that contemporary food production holds in shaping our communities and experiences.

Started in response to the *Grasping at the Roots* exhibition, Shawn Tse's *Connecting Overseas: Safe & Secure* (2019—) offers members of Edmonton's community an opportunity to engage with those family and friends impacted by the current protests in Hong Kong. Working with four individuals to develop artworks by way of gifts for loved ones, Tse takes on the role of messenger—delivering the items to those in Hong Kong while also navigating and negotiating the tense climate of hypersurveillance and control.⁵ Taking time to meet, discuss and develop the artworks to be sent as messages with each participant, Tse's project illustrates the time and care necessary to develop and support communities across geographical borders, and the ways in which political struggle impacts beyond specific locales. A public event in the form of a sharing circle offers a strategy for further developing community in Edmonton as gallery viewers come together to discuss the project as well as the larger implications of the protests overseas.

⁵ Although Tse began working with five individuals, he recognizes the incomplete work through the naming of each artwork's creator: *Senders 1 2, 3, 5*. This deliberate omission of the number four is an important cultural signifier for Tse, as four is "commonly known as a cursed Chinese number (sounds like the Cantonese word 'death')." [with notes from an email exchange on December 30, 2019].



Debbie Ebanks Schlums, *The Dwelling Museum*, 2017—, *Courtesy of the artist.*

Final Thoughts:

Utilizing prolonged, ongoing conversation and participation as a curatorial strategy, *Grasping at the Roots* hopes to challenge the ways in which artists and curators work together: prioritizing collaboration, fair compensation and the strength of the collective model. A direct response to the urgent and critical time we live in, the exhibition sees itself as a necessary tactic, pointing toward, while simultaneously creating, a system of roots to continually build upon into the future.

I see the role of the curator as one who facilitates, one who supports artists in ways that can be individualized to their practice, and one who brings people together. I gain inspiration from the Independent Curators International: “We believe that curators create more than exhibitions—they are arts community leaders and organizers who champion artistic practice; build essential infrastructures, such as art spaces and institutions; and generate public engagement with art. Curators are, therefore, uniquely positioned to have an important impact on the artistic field, and on the communities they serve.”⁶ Throughout the development of *Grasping at the Roots*, I tried to remain mindful of this definition, continually adapting my role as needed. There were times when I thought the term ‘producer’ might be more appropriate to define my role, other times

⁶ Independent Curator’s international, *About*. <https://curatorsintl.org/about>.

‘organizer,’ often ‘collaborator.’⁷ The blurriness of these roles is important, and I continue to learn from and take note of strategies to incorporate into this type of work in the future.

I’m grateful to Debbie, Eugenio, Serena and Shawn for their work and thoughtful contributions to the exhibition overall, and for the time and care they spent taking part in multiple collective conversations. Their openness allowed for a curatorial experience that felt collaborative and I am continually reflecting on how we worked together to build connections that I know will extend beyond the walls of this gallery. With such inspired conversations it was easy to get ahead of ourselves; throughout the process I often found myself reminding everyone that “we can’t do it all,” and I’m taken by the ease with which it felt like we could. Of course when you try, you sometimes fail, but I hope that all will agree that any failures were simultaneously generative.

As a way to help think through what we might learn from the ways that plant roots grow and spread, since the start of the exhibition I have been growing a mycorrhizal inoculant to share with visitors to the gallery. Roots of the purple prairie clover and chive plants growing together work in beneficial relation with fungi present in the soil and, in early spring, packets of the inoculant will be available in the gallery as gifts. Like mycorrhizae, artists in *Grasping at the Roots* work experientially to support and sustain, and likewise, I hope that the experience of this exhibition continues to build mutually beneficial associations outside of the walls of the gallery and into the communities we all live.

Thanks to Carolyn Jervis for the invitation to develop the exhibition and for her support in seeing it into reality.

⁷ I’m grateful to Toleen Touq and Emily Fitzpatrick for a conversation about the blurriness of such roles one night on a visit to Toronto in November 2019.



Shawn Tse, *Connecting Overseas: Safe & Secure*, 2019—. Courtesy of the artist.

Artist Project Descriptions:

Serena Lee, *Doing the dishes*, 2017—

Doing the dishes is a way to have a conversation with other daughters of single moms, or single moms, while doing something together. It's an ongoing project that started in 2017 in Toronto and London, Ontario, where I began doing the dishes by word of mouth and with the curatorial support of Christina Battle. *Doing the dishes* happens in kitchens and in the public space of galleries, print and digital publication, finding form variously as conversation, performance, text, and visual descriptions.

This iteration of Doing the dishes was made possible by support from the Ontario Arts Council.

Debbie Ebanks Schlums, *The Dwelling Museum*, 2017—

The Dwelling Museum is conceived by and consists of a collection of glass objects made by immigrants, or children of immigrants, both new and old. Together, we coaxed objects out of clay—a controllable, recognizable, and tangible material—which contained embodied memories of home or the hopes and wishes of their new life in Canada. Represented in this iteration of the Dwelling Museum are the stories four Syrian women—Rania Mallah, Sabah Abdulkadir, Nisrin Elahmad, Islam Hariri—who came to rural Ontario's Simcoe and Dufferin Counties in 2015 and 2016 with their young families. Next to the objects are sensor-controlled speakers that activate when a body is in front of them. The speakers are designed for close listening to highlight the stories of these women, sometimes in their own voices and sometimes in mine if they preferred not to be recorded.

The Dwelling Museum was a way to continue to be *in relation with* these women after an intense one-year transition to living in Canada. The process of making a new home for their families was the structure by which we needed to work around. The objects and audio were made or recorded over a one-year period, in which we shared multiple tea times, drives, laughs and tears. DM workshops were storytelling possibilities; moments inhabited by activity geared towards themselves as individuals while working together with other women; opportunities to transfer important information.

Glass-casting is a multi-step process. Clay is soft and malleable. In order to hold on to the object that it represents, an inverse version of that object—the mould—must be made and the original destroyed. The final version in glass is a transformed version of the modelled clay; a fragile stand in; a memory. Moreover, the state of materiality of glass is undetermined; it never truly becomes a solid, but neither is it liquid anymore. Glass is, perhaps, some hybrid, inconclusive state comfortably holding multiple identities in suspension, a metaphorical process analogous to the experience of migration.

The Dwelling Museum was made possible through the generous support of the Reed T. Cooper Bursary of the Dufferin Art Council.

Eugenio Salas, *Breaktime/Overtime Merch Store*, 2017—

Eugenio Salas's *Breaktime/Overtime Merch Store* is the result of a collaboration with Christina Battle (Curator), Carolyn Jervis (MAG Director/Curator) and artist Alex Nutini. A small run of aprons, tea towels, prints, and zines will be available at MacEwan University Mitchell Art Gallery during the Grasping at the Roots exhibition. The artist is inviting audiences to participate by taking one of the pieces home.

Breaktime/Overtime is a longitudinal collaboration with a group of middle-aged immigrant women of colour with whom Salas worked for four years at a cake factory in London, producing over 3500 cakes per shift. Together they reimagined the production line and reconfigured its production logic as a way to reclaim artistic agency to produce, *The Supercake*, a 22-foot long edible installation.

In addition, he will collaborate with a local immigrant baker to host a Merienda (teatime), which is a tradition that came from Europe to the Americas via Spanish colonization.

Shawn Tse, Connecting Overseas: Safe & Secure, 2019—

Connecting Overseas: Safe & Secure is a socially engaged project where an artist develops four anonymous relationships in Edmonton and is the messenger delivering care to loved ones living amidst the Hong Kong protests. 'Senders' work with the artist to create space, dialogue, and art around caring for 'Receivers' overseas while negotiating how to navigate privacy in our increasingly monitored world.