

ARTFUL NATURALISM



JANUARY 17-FEBRUARY 22, 2026

EXHIBITION AT REDPATH MUSEUM,
MCGILL UNIVERSITY, MONTRÉAL

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

McGill University is on land which has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst Indigenous peoples, including the Haudenosaunee and Anishinabeg nations. We acknowledge and thank the diverse Indigenous peoples whose presence marks this territory on which peoples of the world now gather.

The Redpath Museum was founded with funds from the Redpath family's sugar business, built on the labor of Caribbean people whose ancestors had been enslaved or indentured. Its collections include Indigenous artifacts. They also consist of the bodies of hundreds of nonhumans—mammal, bird, insect, plant—that are preserved, stuffed, and pinned.

TERA COLLECTIVE

TERA (technology/ecology/religion/art) is a transnational collective of two artists and five scholars. Convened by Hillary Kaell in 2021, it counts Nadia Huggins and Gabriel Dharmoo among its members. TERA's work is loosely inspired by John William Dawson (1820–1899), a geologist and former principal of McGill University. Dawson was a life-long defender of Protestant Christianity, president of Montreal's Natural History Society, and founder of the Redpath Museum in 1882. Merging religion and science in ways that may seem surprising today, he insisted that scientific discoveries revealed God's wondrous design.

TERA also creatively reimagines boundaries between categories—technology, ecological science, religion, and art. Our first collaboration, a new Natural History Society, met online for a year to share “artifacts” and reorganize them in our own version of phylogenetic trees. As a group of non-White and female members, we recognized that none of us could have joined Dawson's Victorian-era society. Situated between mimicry and refusal, TERA critiques early natural and social sciences and reclaims part of this history.

Other TERA collaborations include the interactive website www.teracollective.com and an experimental volume called *The Artful Naturalist*.

ARTFUL NATURALISM: THE EXHIBIT

In Winter 2026, the Redpath Natural History Museum in Montreal, Canada, hosted Artful Naturalism, an exhibit that integrated contemporary art into the Museum's permanent displays. It featured works by TERA members Nadia Huggins and Gabriel Dharmoo, along with an installation by a McGill university team led by Hillary Kaell.

History of the Exhibit

In 2021, Hillary Kaell received a William Dawson Research Chair to work on religion and ecology. It prompted her to explore the legacy of William Dawson (1820–1899), Principal of McGill University, a prominent geologist, president of Montreal's Natural History Society, and founder of the Redpath Museum in 1882.

Dawson was a leading natural scientist, as well as a committed Christian who believed the Bible contained immutable truths. Merging religion and science in ways that may seem contradictory today, Dawson believed that studying nature revealed God's ordered design.

While Kaell's work differs from Dawson's, she also explores the places where spirit and nature meet. Inspired by Dawson, she organized the TERA Collective—both a tribute to and a critique of Victorian natural history societies, like the one Dawson led in Montreal.

The Artful Naturalism exhibit extended the relationships formed through TERA, just as the Redpath Museum grew from Dawson's networks in the Natural History Society, whose collections helped shape its early displays.

Exhibit Description

Loosely inspired by Dawson's blending of science and spirituality, the artworks in *Artful Naturalism* rethink boundaries between natural and unnatural, human and animal, spiritual and earthly, this world and others. *Dawson's Desk* recalls the Victorian era, while works by Nadia and Gabriel explore these questions in contemporary ways.

Nadia reimagines water as a transformative space that dissolves social categories and even potentially the line between human and nonhuman life. In the underwater world, material presence is unsettled. The traces of bubbles left by bodies become—as Nadia puts it—remnant figures that take on mythical shapes.

Gabriel's ongoing series *Portraits* creates dreamlike scenes with vividly coloured figures set against a stark white backdrop. The work plays with the limits of humanness: what is natural, imagined, of this world, or another? Through video and sound, Gabriel's drag and vocal performances introduce visitors to unfamiliar species—and perhaps new deities.

These ideas differ sharply from Dawson's views. He believed humans were uniquely created in God's image and set apart from the rest of nature. He also believed the earliest humans were monotheists and that polytheism represented a decline.

Yet the very gap between Dawson and the work in *Artful Naturalism* raises important questions that are echoed throughout this website: How is knowledge constructed, undone, and reshaped over time? How are *we* also knowledge makers and shapers?

CURATORIAL STATEMENT

Artful Naturalism, an exhibition that integrates contemporary artworks into the permanent displays of the Redpath Museum, invites the public to reconsider how we perceive living beings. It features photographs by Nadia Huggins, video performances by Gabriel Dharmoo, as well as an installation created by Professor Hillary Kaell and a team of students from McGill University.

Through a fragmented pathway, the exhibition encourages reflection on the ways we conceptualize nature. Dawson's Desk offers a critical perspective on the scientific legacy of Sir William Dawson and his influence on the circulation of knowledge in Montreal and beyond. In response, Huggins imagines water as a transformative space where social categories dissolve, connecting marine and terrestrial organisms. Dharmoo invites visitors to encounter new "species" through drag and vocal performance, intentionally blurring the boundaries of humanity.

These works raise essential questions: Has our understanding of the living world changed? What values shape our interpretations of cultural objects and natural specimens preserved in the Museum?

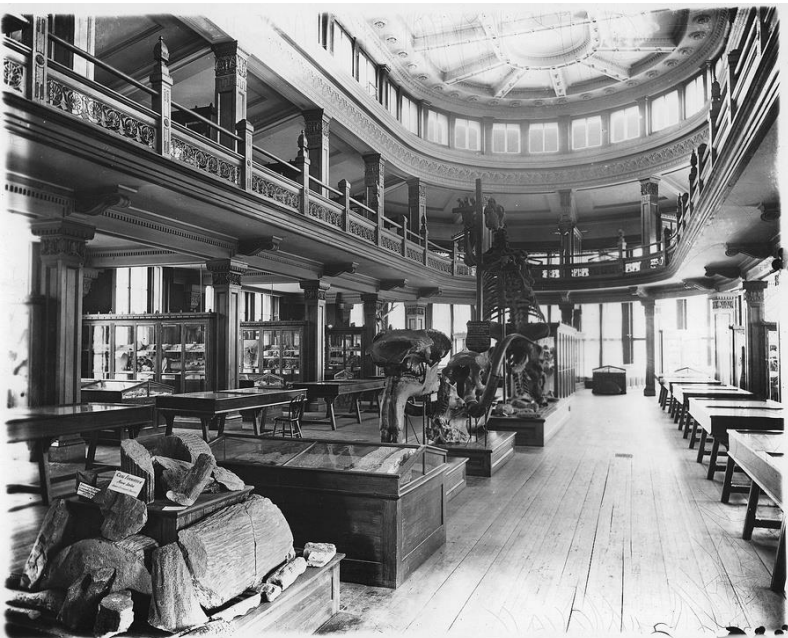
As we navigate significant social and environmental upheavals, Artful Naturalism encourages a reconsideration of how we understand nature. Inherited from the Victorian era, our worldview relies on rigid and binary classifications—human/animal, culture/nature. The artists brought together here instead propose more fluid relationships, where humans, animals, plants, and landscapes intertwine within an interconnected and ever-changing world.

– Geneviève Wallen, Curatorial Assistant

REDPATH MUSEUM AS OBJECT AND SITE

The historic Redpath Museum retains much from its Victorian foundation. In his own day, Dawson hoped the exhibits communicated something important about the Christian faith.

For Dawson, the museum's carefully ordered collections demonstrated the Creator's intentional design. He believed all life began in a single act of creation described in the Bible and rejected the idea that species—including humans—evolved over time. He placed human artifacts alongside animal fossils from different eras to challenge evolutionary theories of successive stages. He only included human artifacts from non-monotheistic cultures, reinforcing their difference from Christianity. While other religions could be studied in the context of natural history, Christianity structured the meaning of life itself.

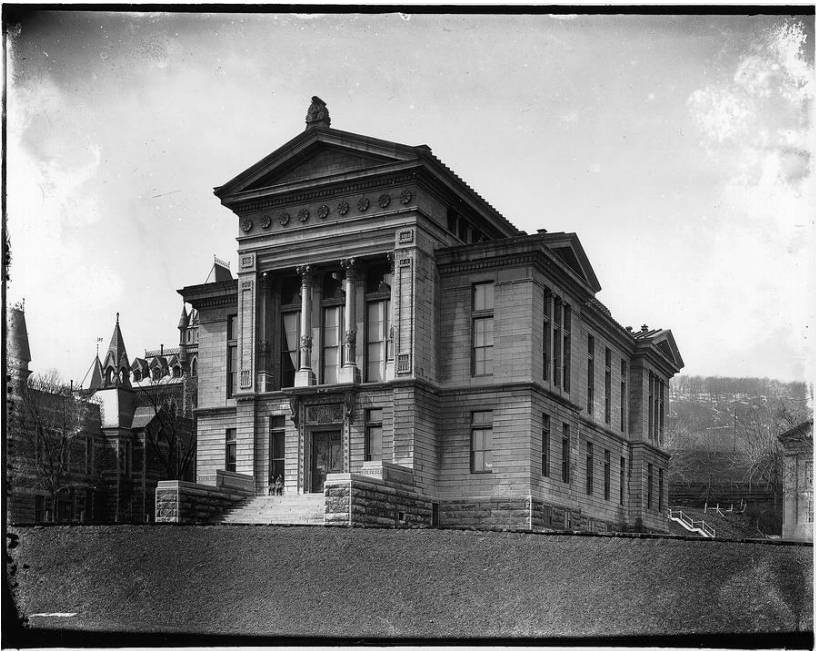


Interior Redpath Museum, McGill University, Montreal, QC, about 1910

Photo by Wm. Notman & Son, courtesy of McCord Stewart Museum Montreal

Funding for Dawson's museum came from the Redpath family, which made its fortune importing raw sugar from plantations in the British West Indies. Gabriel's paternal ancestors were Indian indentured labourers on British-owned sugar plantations in Trinidad. Nadia, a Black person with ancestry in Spain, India, and West Africa, comes from St. Vincent, where enslaved Africans powered the sugar economy.

Their work enters into conversation with the museum's collections—and with the histories that made them possible.



Redpath Museum, McGill University, Montreal, QC, about 1910

Photo by Wm. Notman & Son, courtesy of McCord Stewart Museum Montreal

DAWSON'S DESK, OR THE SOUL OF SCIENCE



Photo Credit: Laurence Poirier

Based on archival research, *Dawson's Desk* invites viewers into Dawson's mind. Biblical verses on the desk are those he cited. The globes evoke aspects of his writing and sketches, along with the fossils and plants he collected. Note the representations of ice crystals, microscopic "animalcules," and coal—wonders he believed displayed God's design.

William Dawson lived in a period of extraordinary change. As a natural scientist, he made cutting-edge discoveries while also insisting on the Bible's immutable truth.



Photograph by George Mercer Dawson
Dawson-Harrington Families Funds MG 1022,
Series 6, McGill University Archives

Dawson's Desk reinterprets sculptor Alexander Calder's "mobiles" and "stabiles"— objects that move and those that do not. The wooden desk is covered with Bible verses, which Dawson saw as a stable guide. The hanging globes represent ideas in motion: species he catalogued, new scriptural interpretations, and Darwinian science. He spent his life trying to align these shifting ideas with the Bible he had known since childhood.

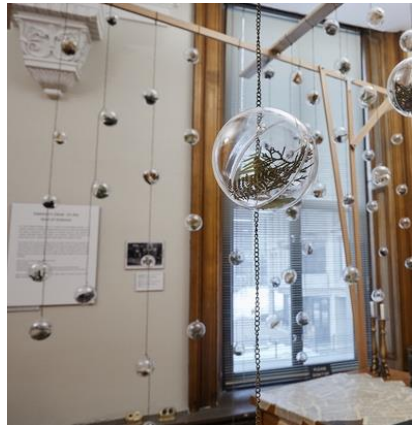


Photo Credits: Laurence Poirier



Photo Credits: Laurence Poirier

Concept and Design: Katie Khatereh Taher, Marty Miller, Sophie Ji,
Danika Brockman, and Hillary Kaell
Carpentry: Alexis Giard

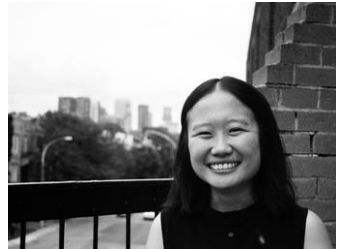
DAWSON'S DESK CREATORS



Photo Credit: James Ricks

Danika Brockman is a PhD candidate in the Department of Anthropology at McGill University. They study the experience and formation of multispecies relationships in contexts of climate change, modernity, secularity, and religion, especially Catholicism.

Sophie Ji recently graduated with a MA in Anthropology from McGill University. Her research explores youth involvement in Montreal's Chinatown and Chinese-Quebecer experiences through theatre.



Dr. Marty Miller is a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Anthropology at McGill University. He received his PhD in Anthropology from New York University. His research and teaching explore the intersections of science, religion, and ecology, with a particular focus on human-soil relations.

Katie Khaterah Taher is a PhD student at McGill's Department of Anthropology studying religious ecology, utopian imaginaries, and yoga intentional community responses to climate change.



Dr. Hillary Kaell is an Associate Professor in the School of Religious Studies and Department of Anthropology at McGill University, where she holds a William Dawson Research Chair.

NADIA HUGGINS



Photo Credit: Zaina Mahmoud

Nadia Huggins is a self-taught visual artist based in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. She works primarily with photography and co-founded the visual arts publication *ARC Magazine* (2011). Huggins was awarded the Festival Caribéen de l'image du Mémorial ACTe Jury Prize in Guadeloupe in 2015. Recent notable exhibitions include: *otras montañas, las que andan sueltas bajo el agua*, Ocean Space, Venice, Italy, 2024; *The Future is Present the Harbinger is Home*, Prospect 6, New Orleans, US; *Coral & Ash*, KJCC, NYU, NY, US, 2023; *RE/SISTERS*, The Barbican Art Gallery, London, UK, 2023; *Fragments of Epic Memory*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Canada, 2021.

TRANSFORMATION (2014-2016)

Nadia Huggins, *Transformation No 2*, from the photo series *Fighting the currents*, 2015.

Transformations is a series of diptychs that explores the relationship between my identity and the marine ecosystem. During my daily swim, I became preoccupied with the changes I saw happening before me, with the deterioration of coral reefs that were once alive. I created these transfigured portraits by using collage techniques to bring together self-portraiture and my documentation of marine organisms. By juxtaposing these images with a space in between them, each portrait is on the cusp of becoming a single image. In the sea, as a woman who identifies as other, my body becomes displaced from my everyday experiences. Gender, race, and class are dissolved because there are no social and political constructs to restrain and dictate my identity. These constructs have no place or value in that environment.

– Nadia Huggins

CIRCA NO FUTURE (2014-2021)



Nadia Huggins, *North is not the same as up*, from the photo series *Circa no future*, 2019.

Believing there to be a link between an under-explored aspect of Caribbean adolescent masculinity and the freedom of bodies in the ocean, I set out to document boys' interaction with the sea. Beginning in 2014, these photographs capture manhood, snippets of vulnerability and moments of abstraction that often go unrecognized in the day-to-day.

The ocean itself takes on a personality – that of the embracing mother providing a safe space for being – which is both archetypal and poignant. The boys climb a large rock, proving their manhood through endurance, fearlessly jump, and become submerged in a moment of innocent unawareness. They emerge having proven themselves. The relationship between the boys and me is also explored within this paradigm. They are aware of me while posturing, but lose self-awareness when they sink into the water.

– Nadia Huggins

DISAPPEARING PEOPLE (2016-ONGOING)



Nadia Huggins, *Untitled*, from the photo series *Disappearing People*, 2016.

This series is an exploration of presence through absence, specifically in relation to the human body. By observing (and capturing at specific moments) the dispersal of water bubbles that form when the body comes into contact with the sea, the remnants of each figure take on almost mythical shapes.

This is unlike what happens above the surface with air, which is only visible when it comes into contact with a physical object, be it dust, the leaves of a tree, water, or when it touches your own skin. While the opacity of water and air can be considered similar in some ways, in the ocean, you are able to see the traces left by movement. Human bodies, birds, big and small fish, leave their mark in the water, and these traces remain.

– Nadia Huggins

CORAL SURVEY (2016-ONGOING)



Nadia Huggins, $13^{\circ}08'06.5''N$ $61^{\circ}12'22.6''W$, from the photo series *Coral Survey*, 2021.

Coral Survey is an effort to document the marine environment through a citizen science approach – it is an attempt to create an ecological archive as a way to show visible changes that are happening within the marine environment over time. Both coral deterioration and regeneration are in constant flux. It is primarily focused along the coastline of St Vincent island, with a specific focus on the marine organisms at Indian Bay Beach.

– Nadia Huggins

IN SITU



Photo Credit: Laurence Poirier

Placed among displays of mammals, birds, and fish, Nadia Huggins's diptych *Transformations* pairs a portrait of the artist with a portrait of a marine organism. Nadia suggests that social categories such as gender or race dissolve underwater—and perhaps the boundary between human and coral as well. Drawing attention to the gap between the portraits, she writes: “The transformation exists within the space between photographs. It is in this moment that the viewer decides whether the two worlds remain separate or merge.”



A third portrait from her series *Circa no future* documents how boys perform “manhood” by jumping into the ocean, briefly becoming innocently unaware as they hit the water. Here too, social categories dissolve in the movement between terrestrial and marine worlds.



Photo Credits: Laurence Poirier



Photo Credit: Laurence Poirier

Overlooking display cases filled with corals, shells, and rocks, images from Nadia Huggins's series *Disappearing People* invite viewers to consider presence through absence. Unlike in the air on land, all movement creates a trace under water. The bodies of humans, birds, and fish leave bubbles in their wake. Where does materiality end and memory begin? As Nadia writes, "The remnants of each figure take on almost mythical shapes."

GABRIEL DHARMOO



Photo Credit: Curtis Perry

Gabriel Dharmoo's interdisciplinary artistic practice includes composition, vocal performance, drag, and research. Vocal exploration grounds his practice, along with notions of mixed-identity, brownness, queerness, imaginary culture, and satire. Dharmoo is the recipient of multiple prizes, such as the Canada Council for the Arts Jules Léger Prize (2017) and a Conseil Québécois de la musique Opus Award (2018). His solo show *Anthropologies imaginaires* was awarded at the Amsterdam Fringe Festival (2015) and the SummerWorks Performance Festival (2016). Merging music, drag and theatre, his show *Bijuriya* has been performed across Canada since 2022.

PORTRAITS (2020)

Gabriel Dharmoo, *Bymnef*, from the *Portraits* series, 2020, video still.

A series of 4 portraits of fictional characters, brought to life through voice, body and makeup. Created one week apart in August 2020, each video depicts a fictional character seemingly from another world, by virtue of both their appearance and their unusual vocal style.

- 1. Qülps:** Mischievous, inquisitive and agile, Qülps is an otherworldly being who transcends binaries. Their vocal lexicon includes an array of effervescent coos, clicks and pops.
- 2. Rwohg:** Witness to centuries of unrest, Rwohg has developed a self-preserving and farouche nature. Recluse and moody, their vocalizations ward off unexpected visitors.
- 3. Bymnef:** Benevolent and altruistic, Bymnef is appreciated for its tenderness towards all beings. Seemingly lost in fanciful states of daydreaming, they are actually connecting with benign energies that hover beyond the physical realm.
- 4. Daçji:** Bold and majestic, Daçji is a captivating yet elusive entity. Their effervescent and erratic songs reflect life's unpredictable nature.

Portraits was made possible through the Canada Council for the Arts | Strategic Funds and Initiatives: Digital Originals.



Gabriel Dharmoo, *Daçji*, from *Portraits*, 2020, video still.
Photo Credit: Jonathan Goulet

Concept, Performance, and Makeup: Gabriel Dharmoo
Video and Editing: Jonathan Goulet
Styling (Daçji) : Laura Sasseville

GULABRR (2024)



Gabriel Dharmoo, *Gulabrr*, 2024, video still.

Gulabrr features a playful, curious, majestic and unsettling character whose material, vocal and corporeal boundaries are porous. Bathing in a sound design made entirely of acoustic vocal sounds, the character moves through dreamscapes and melts into quivering, malleable, syrupy and sparkling textures.

Concept and Performance: Gabriel Dharmoo

Video and Editing: Jonathan Goulet

Costume : Julie Pichette

Makeup: Gabriel Dharmoo

Sound Design and Voice: Gabriel Dharmoo

Sound and Mix: Nataq Huault

Movement Consultants: Julie Pichette, Bettina Szabo

Colour Correction: Olivier Séguin-Dang, Division Couleur

IN SITU



Screened among stuffed mammals and dinosaur fossils, Gabriel's video series *Portraits* cycles through four characters that communicate with coos, clucks, and growls. Neither animal nor human: are they speaking to us? Their brightly colored features vibrate against a stark white background—otherworldly beings transported into natural history.



Photo Credits: Laurence Poirier

IN SITU



The museum's top level displays artifacts from human cultures. There, *Gulabrr* inhabits a display case. To the right is a case of musical instruments. To the left, a statue of the Buddha in a lotus position on his path to spiritual perfection. The placement is fitting. Both playful and unsettling, *Gulabrr* sits between human-made art and spiritual mystery. Bathed in layered vocal sounds, the character moves through dreamlike scenes that melt into shimmering, syrupy textures.



Photo Credits: Laurence Poirier

PERFORMANCE



On February 21st 2026, Gabriel Dharmoo capped the *Artful Naturalism* exhibit by giving an interactive performance where visitors contributed to the creation of a new being by choosing its dress, vocalizations, and name.

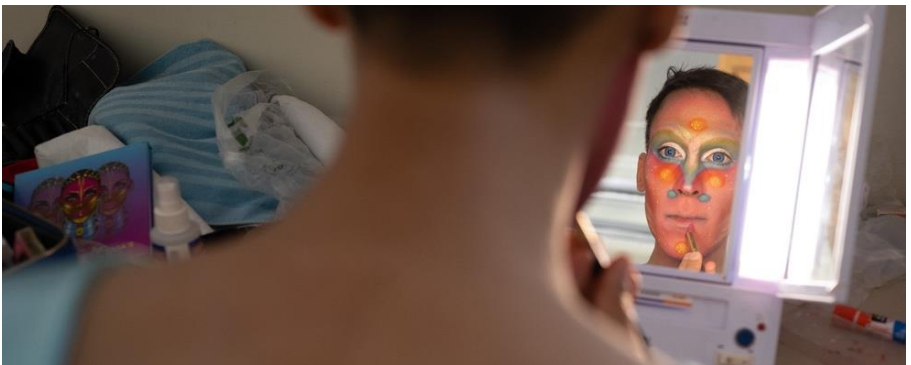


Photo Credits: Philippe Latour



After the performance, this being was loosed in the museum galleries, wending its way through the Victorian architecture, pondering the multitude of other entities in the space, including *Gulabrr*.



Photo Credits: Philippe Latour

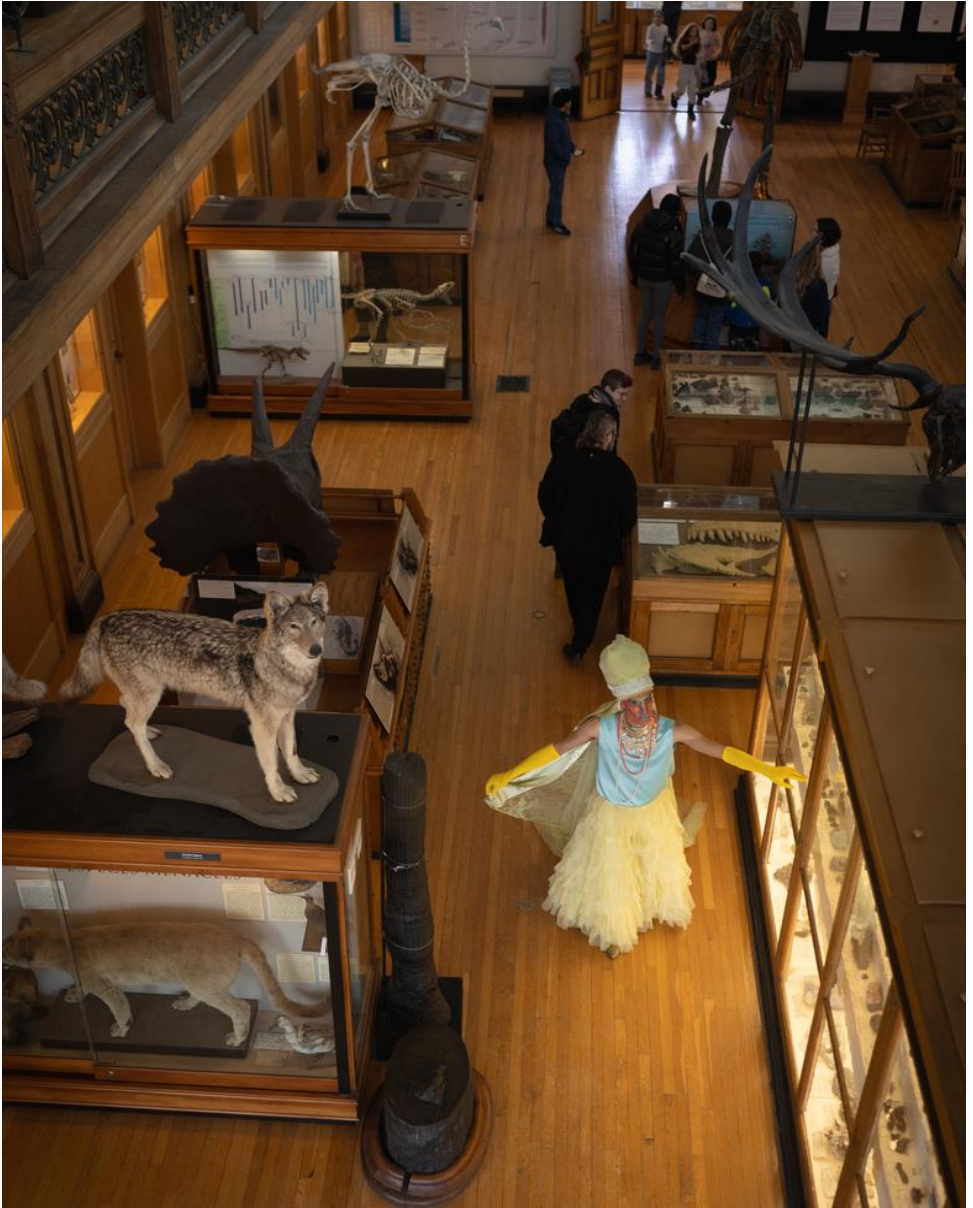


Photo Credit: Philippe Latour

HILLARY KAELL



Photo Credit: Jesse Shapiro

Hillary Kaell is an Associate Professor in the School of Religious Studies and Department of Anthropology at McGill University, where she holds a William Dawson Research Chair. Her publications include *Everyday Sacred: Religion in Contemporary Quebec* (McGill-Queens, 2017) and *Christian Globalism at Home: Child Sponsorship in the United States* (Princeton, 2020), which won the Schaff Prize from the American Society of Church History. Her latest monograph, *Artful Naturalism*, co-written with Alejandro Escalante and Judith Brunton, is forthcoming with McGill-Queens Press. Her current research explores human relationships with spirits and other species amid ecological and economic change.

GENEVIÈVE WALLEN



Photo Credit: Laurence Philomene

Geneviève Wallen is an award-winning independent curator whose curatorial practice is rooted in the territories of Tiohtià:ke/Mooniyang (Montreal) and Tkaronto (Toronto). Intersectional feminism, intergenerational dialogues, and alternatives to neo-liberal definitions of care inform her curatorial vision, administrative ethics and pedagogy. Wallen also produces and hosts the podcast *The Conversations that Carry Us/ Ces conversations qui nous soutiennent*. She is part of the YTB Gallery collective, a member of the advisory board for the Centre for the Study of Black Canadian Diaspora, and serves on the board of Vie des arts.

ARTFUL NATURALISM TEAM

CONCEPT AND ORGANIZATION

Hillary Kaell | www.hillarykaell.com

CURATORIAL ASSISTANT

Geneviève Wallen | https://www.instagram.com/wallen_curates/

ARTISTS

Gabriel Dharmoo | www.instagram.com/gabdharmaoo

Nadia Huggins | www.nadahuggins.com

DAWSON'S DESK ARTISTS

Katie Khatereh Taher |

Marty Miller |

Sophie Ji |

Danika Brockman |

Hillary Kaell | www.hillarykaell.com

CARPENTRY

Alexis

Giard

EXHIBIT PHOTOGRAPHY

Laurence Poirier | www.lapoirier.com

GABRIEL DHARMOO PHOTOGRAPHY

Philippe Latour | www.philippelatour.ca

REDPATH MUSEUM TECHNICIAN

Caroline De Roy

REDPATH MUSEUM CURATOR

Catherine Turgeon

Pamphlet text written by Hillary Kaell, unless otherwise stated.

Cover photo: Nadia Huggins, North is not the same as up, from the photo series *Circa no future*, 2019.