



Main Space

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The Grotto curated by Avalon Mott

Abby Kettner, Danan Lake, Ramolen Laruan, and Ghislan Sutherland-Timm
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Somewhere between here and there, near and far, north and south, east and west, nowhere and somewhere,

The Grotto exists.

An obscured enclave cloaked in darkness, it is elusive, relying entirely on Soft Architecture¹ to gesture towards elements of life that feel familiar. A movement or form or sound or visual. It does not hold a solidified shape or form and does not have geographical coordinates that can be plotted. *The Grotto* begs to engage tension, the feeling of the uncanny that reveals itself when the intersection of waking life and a dreamed world is held in paralysis. Within this in-betweenness of a walking dreaming state, *The Grotto* can operate as a space of potential and play. It becomes an arena where we ourselves become questions rather than pillars, and curiosity and imagination are encouraged as thoughtful ways of evaluating our surroundings that prioritize curiosity over a definitive sense of knowing.

¹ Lisa Robinson uses the term soft architecture to describe the incorporeal aspects of architecture like memory, light, form, colour, furnishings, social space, etc, in her essay *Seven Walks from the Office of Soft Architecture*.

The Grotto is not a fixed event. It can reimagine and remerge in continuum, and reveal new questions and inquisitiveness with each unfurling. This iteration engages the works of four artists, Abby Kettner, Danan Lake, Ghisland Sutherland-Timm and Ramolen Laruan to provide a latticed network of anchor points that usher the viewer in their experience of *the Grotto* on display.

Upon entering the gallery space the viewer is immediately met with an ask for participation in Danan Lake's work, *Floor Harp*. This work consists of five constructed pallets laid in a line which form a nod towards a walkway or platform. The ramp of the first pallet invites the viewer on to the slightly elevated structure, and as the viewer moves along, the sound of their movements amplify and augment. Unknown to the viewer but hinted to by the three amps surrounding *Floor Harp*, Lake has strung the pallets as if they were a stringed instrument which allow the viewer's movements to 'strum' as they progress along the work. This relationship between full bodily movement and strumming is not something that is common-place, and therefore, the two gestures are perceived as non-relational during a moment of suspended reality for the viewer. In pairing these unlikely actions together - progression along *Floor Harp* resulting in strumming - Lake encourages the uncanny. As the viewer descends from the linear platform, they are greeted with an opportunity to stand on a dock constructed of one ramp and one pallet. From the dock the viewer's shadow becomes visible alongside Lake's video work, *An Excerpt of the Story of the Inexperienced Ghost*. In this piece, played on a loop, a turn signal of a motorcycle embedded in a pannier from a from a 1982 Honda Goldwing blinks the story of "The Story of the Inexperienced Ghost"² by H.G. Wells in Morse code. In contrast to *Floor Harp*, this video omits no sounds and gives the viewer nowhere to trace the blinking light as only the metal exoskeleton of the pannier mount accompanies the pannier and turn signal in the video. Whereas the sound in *Floor Harp* harnesses the uncanny, it is in the soundlessness of *An Excerpt of the Story of the Inexperienced Ghost* that it emerges. The video is projected onto the landscape of the gallery, across two bathroom doors and spanning a corner to fill two adjoining walls. This impedes the viewer's ability to view the video, as does their shadow which follows them as they move around

² In speaking with Lake, he noted that he read ghost stories as part of his research for *An Excerpt of the Story of the Inexperienced Ghost*. He was drawn to "The Story of the Inexperienced Ghost" by H.G. Wells specifically because of the ineptitude of the ghost. The story centers on the prospective haunt-ee comforting the ghost and giving him advice on how to be a better ghost because the ghost is terrible at haunting and unable to produce a reaction of fear.

the dock. They are never able to fully obtain an unobstructed view as the trace of the viewer is always present alongside the video.

In contrast to Lake's work which centers physical hints and gestures of the viewer - their weight and gate and shadow - Abby Kettner's work *The notion of memory is a chimerical dream* engages the viewer's memory in a task of reconciling. Her collection of bioplastic sculptures laid across the floor of the gallery provide an abstracted and distended outline of ubiquitous objects. As individual sculptures, these forms represent things that can be found in the artist's home and surrounding environments. As an entire collection they represent two years of the artist's life that is specific to them, but available to all that view the work as these objects may be found in the viewer's life as well. *The notion of memory is a chimerical dream* plays into the trope of memory and how it can reimagine things as they never were, or forget how they once existed. This is furthered by the secondary landscape of shadow that the objects form as they are lit directionally to encourage their trace. Kettner notes that 'forgetting is not a glitch in our memory, but a distinct and powerful force'³. The materiality of *The notion of memory is a chimerical dream* allows the sculptures to embody memory and act in a way that reflects it. Just as memories do, the bioplastics will eventually deteriorate into words and accounts of viewers that encountered the piece. The amalgamation of sculptures that make up *The notion of memory is a chimerical dream* will cease to exist taking their landscape of shadows along with them.

As the viewer progresses through the gallery's main space hallway, they are met with Ghislan Sutherland-Timm's series of ephemeral lens-based collage works, *your presence isn't here*. Adorning the hallway walls, the installation consists of a selection of twelve images of various sizes that depict obscured college bodies which have been wheat pasted to the gallery walls. For Sutherland-Timm, this act of wheat pasting entangles the wall as part of the installation, rather than allow it to act as a canvas, and implies site-specificity. The images have been further grounded in the gallery by Sutherland-Timm's intervention of overlaying the collages with ephemeral material such as salt, moss, sugar, and earth. The earth and moss, and branch, that have been brought into the gallery by Sutherland-Timm have all been organically collected rather than taken and therefore lend a direct trace to her body in the environments that they were gathered from; her presence was recorded by the materials collected. Like Lake's work which

³ Abby Kettner. Avalon Mott. Toronto. January 2024.

requires the viewer to move along *Floor Harp*, Sutherland-Timm is implicating the viewer's body by asking them to add their touch to the work. This gesture is asked for directly by the text 'touch me' stamped in fine font on to the gallery walls throughout the installation. The viewer's touch is linked to the fleeting nature of the series as its chemistry, in tandem with the organic matter, creates a natural environment for undetermined decay. This temporal stability, along with the collaged images that do not give a site for the eye to settle as they are intentionally blurred and obscured, provide an apex of tenseness between the viewer and the work. It is in this intentional unease and holding of instability that a letting go occurs. The viewer is able to move past what they thought they originally saw to make way for a reimagined interpretation of their surroundings.

Past Sutherland-Timm's work towards the back of the main space gallery, cloaked in a corner of black against a wall-sized vinyl backdrop depicting lush foliage, Ramolen Laruan's water based sculpture *bomba/groundwater* trickles monotonously. The lush imagery on the vinyl backdrop presents as a unified image at a distance, but as the viewer moves towards it the image reveals that it is composed of multiple photographs of greenery from numerous depictions of a Philippine landscape that have been collaged together. The three fountains of Laruan's work, consisting of vertical arrangements of Tabòs⁴, draws the viewer towards it by way of the harsh direct superficial lighting mimicking a fountain lit at night. Spectacle is promised, but the ever constant movement of the water through the fountain provides a meditative space. This misalignment between the desire of spectacle and call to tranquility, alongside the simultaneous flattening and dimensionality of the vinyl image, provides an ever present juxtaposition in the work that invites curiosity. And it is from this place that *bomba/groundwater* is able to offer a metaphorical space where the viewer can question reciprocity and exchange in relation to movement, power, resource scarcity and legacies of colonialism.

As the viewer has moved throughout the gallery, their interactions with the works on display have informed their experience of *The Grotto*. It is not the intention of this exhibition to invite a fixed understanding of the works or a sense of stability, nor does it endeavor to provide a uniform experience for every viewer. Rather, the ambition of *The Grotto* is to encourage a dynamic and

⁴ The Tabò is a traditional tool used primarily for cleansing and cleansing in the Philippines. The modern Tabò is a part of the Americans' introduction of plastic to the Philippines. It has since become mass-produced and sold everywhere from the market stalls to stores, both in the Philippines and around the world.

ever changing relationship to the exhibition that is deeply personal. It seeks to acknowledge the individual and prioritize their own understanding and relationship towards space, place and environments. Over the course of the exhibition run viewers are encouraged to come back to the gallery to spend time in *The Grotto* on a different day, at a different time; what will emerge is a new movement or form or sound or visual. Be curious, ask questions, and explore all that is available in this effervescent site.

- Avalon Mott