

Artist Interview with Kelsey Pearson for the 'See daddy, I told you this was heaven' exhibition at Hoopla Press and Gallery. February 20, 2024.

Alejandro:

Hello, today is Tuesday, February 20th.
And we are here with artist Kelsey Pearson at Hoopla Gallery to talk about her exhibition entitled, See Daddy, I Told You This Was Heaven.
Just before we begin, I wanted to acknowledge that Hoopla Press and Gallery is located on traditional Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee territory. It is a privilege to make prints and think through print media on these lands.
How are you Kelsey?

Kelsey:

I'm great.
How are you, Alejandro?

Alejandro:

I am well.
Thank you for taking the time to answer a few of my questions about your exhibition at Hoopla.

Kelsey:

My pleasure.

Alejandro:

So we might as well get into it.
The first question, the topic is the influence of environment on artistic practices.
So how has your movement across Canada and its landscape from Halifax to Montreal to now Kingston?
How has it influenced the form and the content of your artwork, particularly in relation to the theme of landscapes shaping people?

Kelsey:

Yeah, yeah.
Well, from a very young age, I was connected to landscape.
When I was a child in Nova Scotia, we spent time on the water fishing and camping on the land

and going out whenever possible and leaving the city.
And then when we moved to Ontario when I was young,
that continued, that tradition continued with my family.
I come from a family of hunters and fishermen and rangers.
In fact, I became a ranger shortly after high school
at Bon Echo Provincial Park for three years,
where both my father, when he was my age and my aunt, when she
was my age, also participated as rangers.
So throughout my life, sorry, that was a little bit of a bit
of back story about me, but throughout my life,
I have had two great loves, which
is connecting to my environment and to my landscape,
and then connecting to people through art
and being able to explore and engage
with these connections through visual arts
has been fulfilling.
And it has given me a greater understanding
of my presence and my purpose in these environments.
Perfect.

Alejandro:

What a great answer, because in the works
that are in this exhibition, both in the form and in the content,
the viewers feel the authenticity.
And so it's interesting how your practice has come along taking into consideration your travels.
The second question is storyland's impact.
So there's two parts to this section.
Can you elaborate on how the experience at the abandoned
theme park storyland specifically influenced
the formal elements of your artwork,
such as color, texture, and so on?

Kelsey:

Yeah.
Yeah.
Well, I think storyland became a sanctuary for myself
as, well, during this coming of age,
in that I was able to revisit all of these images
and these colors and textures that shaped my childhood
and my basic understanding of the world,
I was raised as an only child and in a generation that
was raised on television.
I was exposed to some of my favorite shows
were Bananas in Pajamas, Big Comfy Couch,

The Adventure of Dudley the Dragon, and all of these moving sculptural,
soft puppets that taught me how to view the world
and how to make friends and how to address my emotions even.
It taught me how to be angry and how to be sad.
And then coming across storyland again
as a young adult or as a teenager,
I was seeing these bits and pieces of a childhood
that had been left behind.
And to be able to see them sitting there further
shaped by the environment because they were neglected
from their human creators, they brought on this new form.
And I was able to revisit those base ideas that were presented
to me as a child.
And see how these colors came up against and rubbed up
against these more natural colors.
And these man-made shapes got eroded by this weather
and by this environment reclaiming these ideas.

Alejandro:

It does.

It does.

It brings to mind a sense of cyclical nature.

You know, the spring, summer, fall, winter,

and what that does to surfaces, it

brings to mind your sculptural tent piece

in terms of the transitions of the day, dusk and dawn.

Kelsey:

Yeah.

I love these stills and these moments

and these characters that wear on them, this illusion of the passage of time.

And to be able to nod to that and show that this still

or this moment that you are experiencing

or that you were exposed to is not this is just so small

and so singular and it makes you feel small and grounded

in that you can see this history or this wear on their flesh

and on these objects.

Alejandro:

Or the absence of wear as well, for example,

the skin in the photographs.

It's untouched, right?

You can tell that it was covered.

Kelsey:
Yes.

Alejandro:
But then around them are other surfaces
that have accumulated growth onto them,
there is that duality.

Kelsey:
Yeah.
And that creates an unease.
There's something that isn't right, something doesn't belong.
And that is a common theme is these moments that clearly
have been affected.
But then you start to question who was in control
and what is in control and am I being deceived?

Alejandro:
Perfect.
Am I under the correct impression
that the title of the exhibition,
see, Daddy, I told you this was heaven,
it was influenced by an experience
or your reading or your research into storyland?

Kelsey:
Yeah, yeah, after I started visiting this abandoned space,
it became a bit of an obsession for me.
And I wanted to know more.
And this was for further context.
As a child, I would beg my parents to go whenever I saw it.
And I didn't understand why they didn't want to visit this park.
It seemed magical and perfect.
And so coming back as an adult or almost an adult,
I started to see it through another lens
and start to understand their perception of this space, which
was that it was honestly a little creepy.
It was decrepit and everything was an imitation
of something else.
So it had this sense of unease.
And it was in the middle of nowhere
and fabricated by an individual on this private property.
And so through my research, I started
going through old interviews with the founder of the park.

And I found this one where he was so vulnerable and genuine,
like his love for this space, this was a labor of love.
Yes, it was his livelihood.
It was his business.
But this clearly came from something deep inside him.
And he was quoting this little girl at this park.
And she was on this lookout overlooking the park.
And she turned to her father and said, see, daddy,
I told you this was heaven.
And that was so startling, beautiful, eerie.
And I started to replay that over and over and over in my head.
And started to explore the idea of what is heaven, what
is a utopia, and how does that shift from individual
to individual and from within an individual as they age
and as they change?
And how open-ended that could be.
And that excited me.

Alejandro:

Could you discuss the process behind incorporating
the water motif into your works, both formally
and symbolically?

Kelsey:

Yeah.
I do still need a little bit of a moment as I gather myself.
Water has always been a commonality in my work.
It is always present.
And I think it is a personal choice.
I know it's a personal choice because of my love of water
and the way that it can make your body feel endless.
And it makes sure it adjusts your movements so aggressively,
but also so seamlessly.
It feels both natural and unnatural
to be in the water as a land-based animal.
And I remember it was when I first
saw the work of Shook McDaniel and their bodies as ocean
series that I felt their art was describing this feeling
and I was experiencing any time I was in the water.
And in this body that is experiencing body dysmorphia
in a queer body that does not feel it fits in their reality,
I felt so connected to this new lens through water of form.
And the way that water can make your body that much more
malleable.

And it seemed to be so powerful and freeing.
And that seems like the proper avenue
to further explore this opportunity for change.
If water can make me feel this way
and it can make other queer bodies feel this way,
then why can't it trigger another greater
metamorphosis?
Why can't it have the potential for some otherworldly portal?
And that felt like the appropriate connecting
point between these two characters.

Alejandro:

Fantastic.

And with that in mind, a follow-up question,
you mentioned being influenced by other artists - are you able to give an overview
of the relationship between the queer body and performance, and working with photographer
you admire,

Kelsey:

Yeah.

So having a background in print, collaboration
is just embedded in the way that I perceive art.
You're always in a communal space.
You are always sharing ideas, sharing materials,
sharing presses.
So it always feels appropriate for me
to be working with others.
But I decided to work with three separate photographers
for this project and a filmmaker.
And that was to one work collectively
and not just have myself speaking to myself
and making sure that I had some other present,
but also because if I'm talking about changing
or differing perceptions of reality
or these personal fibrillations, then it makes sense
for these characters to be viewed through literally
and figuratively these different lenses
and from these people who view the world differently
from one another.
And Shoog was when they agreed to participate.
That was such an important jumping off point
because I felt so connected to their work.
And that we were using the same language and vocabulary
when it came to bodies and water.

And then working with William, another trans artist who is experiencing violence, more if you had that felt so important as well because even though their work isn't necessarily similar to mine, but they share similar internal feelings.

And then it just kept snowballing from there.

And this was a very intentional choice to work with these different artists.

And I think that their voices are present in this exhibition.

And I do hope that that comes close to the viewer.

Alejandro:

How do you not want your artwork, this exhibition, to be interpreted?

Kelsey:

Yeah, there's a lot comes to mind.

But I don't want this artwork to be interpreted as in genuine.

I want vulnerability to come across.

I don't want the viewer to mistake these characters from being separate from my physical form or from each other.

Although that can be true, I don't

want that to be where the understanding stops or where the reading stops.

I don't want my work to be viewed as crude or absurd for the sake of absurdity.

I don't want it to be taken too seriously.

I want there always to be an element of humor.

And I don't want the art to be perceived as a lecture or a singular, stagnant, illegitimate statement.

Alejandro:

In this exhibition, we have photograph, performance, video, sculpture.

How do you align the media available to you with ideas or topics for an artwork

Kelsey: Yeah, yeah, I am alone a lot of the time.

It is out of curiosity.

I spent a lot of time just working with a single medium

because I was so invested in learning that medium,

that I started to limit the possibilities within my own practice.

And I started to limit my ability to communicate effectively

within my work.
It wasn't as legible.
And then as soon as I took the pressure of that medium
off of my work, all of a sudden, it opened up.
And if that excited me so much that as soon as I thought,
had an idea, I just stepped my, I put my viewer shoes on
and thought of how would I like to perceive this?
How would this make sense to me?
Not what necessarily excites me as a medium.
Yeah, that's a huge part of it.
I love the possibility of fibers.
And but how do I see it in my head?
And not censoring myself that way
because I do a lot of self-censorship.
And I have.
And I also would often limit myself
because of lack of formal education in the media.
I'm like, oh, my discipline is print.
Therefore, I will make this print.
And that just kept getting in the way of my progress.
And as soon as I started challenging those voices,
more play came back into my art.
And then it just kept going and going.
And here we are.

Alejandro:

Are you able to elaborate about self-education, fine art and the role craft plays in your practice?

Kelsey:

Yeah, definitely.
Are we recording?

Alejandro:

Yes.

Kelsey:

Oh, awesome.
That's amazing.
That's awesome.
Yeah.
Oh, gosh.
I am going to have trouble being concise with this
because this has been a big personal battle for me
about this, ultimately, he pairs down

to this imposter syndrome that a lot of people experience.
But I remember I was thinking about the intersection
of craft and fine art.

And I was reading about this art credit
who had trouble speaking to craft because they believed
that functioned on the way of aesthetic value.

And when I read that, that infuriated me
because that just sounded so lazy on behalf of the critic
and the viewer.

And I reject that notion.

And as soon as I started thinking about that,
I started thinking about in my family history
and in my upbringing, I was raised by craftspeople,
by these people who did not perceive themselves as artists,
but who were creating these functional pieces that
had so much cultural significance.

And I started to think about my favorite artists
and the fact that at least 50% of my favorite artists
do not have a formal education in their chosen medium.

And I started, and I'm still in this process
of fighting that voice in my head that tells me
that I am not a fiber artist, that I am not a performance
artist, or I am not a photographer
because I did not study these media.

But instead, I just called my mom one day
and said, teach me how to knit.

Alejandro:

Or that's beautiful.

Kelsey:

And my education doesn't need to come
from this singular entity.

And I think, again, that was holding me back.

Alejandro:

So what's next for Kelsey?

What are your future plans?

What is going to keep you busy?

Kelsey:

Long-term plans.

I am working on an artist book about the intersection
of craft, domesticity, and fishing.

And I am going to be exploring the feminine and queer perspective of an array of fishing practices in North America and more specifically this region of Canada into the Atlantic provinces following my family's personal migration between Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, Quebec, Ontario, and Vermont. I am going to be working on another sculptural fibers performance piece this summer, reflecting on a childhood memory of the first moment that I ever felt. Like I had purpose in my community and in my new environment. And I am going to play and explore and learn. I'm going to be working with natural dyes. But short-term, I am going to complete my trapping course. I am going to make some maple syrup. And I'm going to probably just spend a lot of time in the woods.

Alejandro:

Well, Kelsey, Pearson, thank you so much for spending 41 minutes with me in this question and answer session. And I hope that audiences have benefited as much as I have as an artist and as an exhibition organizer that I've taken from your work as well. So thank you so much and good luck.