COMFORT/DISCOMFORT:
ALLYSON MITCHELL’S QUEER RE-CRAFTING OF THE HOME, THE MUSEUM
AND THE NATION

by

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Abstract

Through an exploration of Toronto-based artist Allyson Mitchell’s craft-art, this thesis investigates the complexities surrounding the functions and roles of public and private spaces; particularly the home and the fine art museum within Canadian society. I propose a reading of Mitchell’s art practice, activism, scholarship, and curatorial activities that focuses on a queering of both private domestic space and public social space through a conflation of the two. Mitchell’s textile installations make intimate and cozy the otherwise impersonal space of the public art museum, while Mitchell queers the heteronormative space of the family home by turning it into a public art institution, an archive and a classroom.

Mitchell’s bright textile enclosures, Hungry Purse: The Vagina Dentata in Late Capitalism and Menstrual Hut, Sweet Menstrual Hut, for example, visibly disrupt the sanitized and impersonal space of the art museum, disrupting the dominant ideological framework that privileges normative assumptions of sexuality and sexual identity, and exclusionary hierarchies of class, able-bodiedness and access. While Mitchell’s theatrical textile installation, Ladies Sasquatch, has predominantly been theorized as a queer critique of the myths of femininity, gender, sexuality, and the detrimental treatment of the female body within popular media; I present a reading of Ladies Sasquatch as a radical decolonizing spectacle that has the potential to interrupt larger nationalistic and colonial narratives reproduced by museums. Through these powerful interventions in public and private space, I suggest that Mitchell’s crafty installations offer playful acts of resistance that create counter narratives which function to decolonize our physical, psychic and emotional space, while also creating new imaginings that undermine the status quo.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

A “location,” in fact, is not a self-appointed and self-designed subject position, but rather a collectively shared and constructed, jointly occupied spatiotemporal territory. A great deal of our location, in other words, escapes self-scrutiny in that it is so familiar, so close, that one does not even see it. The “politics of location” consequently refers to a process of consciousness-raising that requires political awakening and hence the intervention of others. “Politics of location” are cartographies of power that rest on a form of self-criticism, a critical, genealogical self-narrative; they are relational and outside directed. This means that “embodied” accounts illuminate and transform our knowledge of ourselves and of the world.

– Rosi Braidotti

The seeds of this project were planted years ago, and if I were to be wistful and sentimental, I might say as far back as my childhood. When I was 13 I went to Europe with a group of 15 highschool students: we visited London, Paris and Barcelona. In Paris, I remember spending a day in the Lourve, wandering off by myself even though we were instructed to stay with our partners. At closing time, I exited through an underground shopping area and got horribly lost, unable to find my teacher and classmates. I walked for hours trying to find our small hotel, guiding myself strictly by the way I remembered the Eiffel tower looking from the window in my shared hotel room. I’m proud of my survival skills; I found my way in the end.

However, in truth, I had been lost hours before closing time; wandering from floor to floor through the endless chain of galleries that told a very specific triumphant story. I remember feeling small, at a time in my life when I felt self-consciously large. Lonely and isolated, I stared

at paintings I knew were important, because I’d heard the names of the artists before: Leonardo Da Vinci, of course, Raphael, Caravaggio, Goya. But without the art history I would learn later in my undergraduate survey courses their greater significance was lost on me, leaving me to consider and puzzle over their technique, their compositions, and their pictorial sensibilities. I stared at some of the paintings (I can remember specifically *The Coronation of Napoleon* by Jacques-Louis David completed in 1807) thinking to myself, “This is what good art is supposed to look like.” I felt absolutely crushed by this, thoroughly destroyed on the inside, and I couldn’t explain why at the time.

I blamed myself for being exhausted and out of energy, for my feet hurting, for being uncomfortable, for being hungry and thirsty, for needing to use the washroom, for feeling depressed and sad, for not being able to maintain my focus. My lack of stamina made me feel guilty, as though I was a bad art lover. I remember being both amazed and bewildered by paintings and sculptures, finding them lovely and exciting, or ugly, boring or incomprehensible. Yet at thirteen I feigned contemplative interest and stood before paintings I didn’t like so that it looked as though I was deeply engrossed by them. I thought that’s what you’re supposed to do if you liked art.

Only much later, when I first read Carol Duncan and Allan Wallach’s essay “The Universal Survey Museum” in my third year History of Collecting course, did I understand the nature of the tremendous feeling of destitution that I had experienced in the Louvre nearly a decade before. Finally, I understood that what I had felt in the Louvre was the result of a complex culmination of factors. I understood that the physical and mental discomfort experienced was an embodied response to the structuring of museum space that creates a specific
ritual to be performed by visitors.² I understood that the narratives presented in that space privileged and granted power to some while simultaneously silencing those at the periphery, and erasing colonized peoples all together.³ I wanted to be a painter, but I saw next to no women artists. The objects of desire displayed in paintings and revered in sculpture were often females, but somehow, I did not find solace in their presence. I would understand the implications of this deep inequity later in reading Griselda Pollock’s *Differencing the Canon*, and in becoming familiar with the activist work of the Guerilla Girls.⁴

In the third chapter of the thesis, I recount how in 2007, the way I conceptualized and understood gallery spaces dramatically shifted when I encountered Allyson Mitchell’s craft art for the first time at the artist-run Khyber Centre for the Arts in Halifax. *The Finger of Craft* was a textile environment commissioned by the Khyber that was installed in the entrance way of the gallery. For the installation, Mitchell covered the walls and ceiling with brilliantly coloured shag rug segments and crazy carpet pieces. She formed cushions with crocheted covers around plastic Halloween candy bowls, adhering them to the wall, describing them as herpes-sores or pimples.⁵ At the opening reception, instead of filing through the doors and heading directly up the stairs to see the artwork in the ballroom gallery, people clogged the entrance way and it became a congested space of wonder. People touched the walls, stopped to crane their heads in order to see the ceiling, and marveled in groups at the transformation of the space.

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³ Ibid., 449
For days after experiencing *The Finger of Craft* my thoughts returned to the crafty installation. The more I thought about it, the more I began ask questions: How does art function outside the gallery space? Is it the art that creates the gallery space, or the gallery space that renders something art? What happens when art ruptures the function of a space; just as *The Finger of Craft* transformed the non-descript throughway of a public institution into an aesthetic, sensual focal point? How do these ruptures of constructed space change the relationship visitors have to art work? How do these ruptures change the relationship visitors have to gallery spaces? What happens when people are allowed to touch the art?

Ever since encountering *The Finger of Craft* and beginning to read texts on institutional critique, my visits to art museums and galleries have been transformed into a continued reflexive exercise in deconstructing that space and my experience of it. I started paying attention to my feelings and thoughts; I observed how art museums and galleries controlled the elements of the space to illicit specific responses. I noticed that the lighting could affect my mood, and that spots on a specific artwork could create emphasis; I noticed how a small gallery space could push me to stand physically closer to an artwork, allowing me to notice fine details and perhaps evoke a feeling of intimacy; I observed that spaces with lower ceilings felt claustrophobic, while spaces with high ceilings felt light and open; I began to understand that colour themes on walls could be employed to enrich the aesthetic qualities of artworks and to elicit emotions; alternately, the white walls of contemporary art spaces proposed a vacuous, neutral space.

Similarly, the ideological function of art museums and galleries can be understood through an examination of the didactic information accompanying the artworks, the presence of security staff in the gallery spaces, the public programming tied into exhibitions, the
representation and coverage of certain exhibitions in the press, and the sponsorship of exhibitions by organizations and corporations.

Through an in-depth exploration of Toronto-based artist Allyson Mitchell’s craft-art, this thesis investigates the complexities surrounding the functions and role of art museums and galleries as cultural institutions within Canadian society. Beginning small with the micro, the second chapter is structured as a retelling of the interview I conducted in April of 2012 with Mitchell at her home in Toronto. During the interview, Mitchell took me on a tour of her house, showing me her various work spaces, her studio space, the Feminist Art Gallery space in her back yard, the way she stores, archives and maintains her art works, and how her practice overlaps and intermingles with the work of her video artist partner, Deirdre Logue. In the second chapter I also introduce Mitchell’s art practice and curatorial initiatives, establish her background, and ultimately frame a discussion about how Mitchell queers the private space of the home by conflating it with the public space of the gallery and the classroom. In the third chapter, I discuss how Mitchell’s crafted enclosures – *The Finger of Craft* is a good example – queer the public space of the fine art museum by making them domestic, intimate and embodied spaces. In this chapter, I offer an analysis of two of Mitchell’s best known ongoing, revisited textile enclosures *Hungry Purse: The Vagina Dentata in Late Capitalism* (2006–present) and *Menstrual Hut, Sweet Menstrual Hut* (2008-present). Here, I situate these two works as interruptions of the normative, public, white-cube gallery and its ideological framework, suggesting a simultaneously comfortable and uncomfortable experience for the gallery visitor. In chapter four, I propose Mitchell’s best known craft installation, *Ladies Sasquatch* (2005–present), as a decolonizing project that disrupts the larger nationalistic and colonial narratives created and instilled by art
museums and galleries. I suggest that these huge fun-fur lesbian monsters have the ability to engage visitors in a playfully ironic ritual that may ultimately shift the visitor’s politics and decolonize their imagination. The final chapter of this thesis, chapter five, is a brief conclusion that offers closing thoughts and a discussion which situates Mitchell’s art practice within the larger conversation about the theoretical practice of writing and responding to contemporary art.

Literature Review

In an effort to negotiate the complexities surrounding writing about a living, mid-career artist whose career is expanding and shifting rapidly, I decided to structure the second chapter as a retelling of the interview that took place in April of 2012 at Mitchell’s home. It is my hope that this decision offers an analysis of Mitchell’s craft-art, her art practice and her curatorial projects at a specific moment, while avoiding an authoritative, historicizing tone that would enact a violence on Mitchell and her work. As Mitchell is an incredibly self-reflexive artist and sophisticated academic, it is important to me that this text prioritizes her voice, and privileges her self-representation. In order to ensure this, chapter two takes the interview as its framework, allowing Mitchell to define her own practice and, in a manner of speaking, to introduce herself to the readers of this thesis. This approach is inspired by Rosi Braidotti’s Nomadic Subjects, from which the epigraph of this chapter is pulled.

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6 When Mitchell first displayed a few of her Sasquatch figures at her dealer Paul Petro’s gallery in 2005 the exhibition was titled Lady Sasquatch. However, for the exhibition which toured in 2009 through to 2010, Mitchell made more Sasquatch figures and the title was pluralized to Ladies Sasquatch. Throughout the thesis, I will refer to these figures and the installation as Ladies Sasquatch because the fourth chapter focuses on their specific installation configuration at the McMaster Museum of Art in 2009–2010. When I refer to these works and the installation, I am referring to that particular manifestation.

7 Rosi Braidotti, Nomadic Subjects, 16.
In conducting the interview I have followed oral history guidelines established by two scholars in particular: Lynn Abrams’ *Oral History Theory* and Patricia Lina Leavy’s chapter in *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*. Mitchell granted me the Interview after I emailed her in March of 2012, requesting to speak with her about her work, especially *Ladies Sasquatch*. Throughout the interview and after its conclusion I made every effort to be transparent and accountable to the artist; I asked permission to record the Interview and to take pictures while in her Home, and afterward, I provided Mitchell with the written transcript of the Interview and offered to send her a copy of the audio recording. I have omitted certain portions of the interview at Mitchell’s request, and have presented a draft of this thesis to her prior to defence and publication.

Ann Cvetkovich’s *An Archive of Feeling* is a book that I feel successfully utilizes and accountably presents oral history interviews. In her fifth chapter, which explores the legacy of AIDS activism through interviews with members of the ACT UP activist group, Cvetkovich wrote, “I’ve started by quoting at length from the interviews in order to give as much prominence as possible to the words of the activists themselves. The interviews have a life of their own, and both here and elsewhere I include long blocks of quotations without commentary…” Using Abrams’ text and the chapters in Hesse-Biber and Leavy’s book, as well as *An Archive of Feeling* as an practical model, I have often opted to include large segments of the interview unabridged.

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10 Ibid., 172.
and edited only for coherence (removing speech irregularities such as “ugh” or “like,” and broken sentences). While it might be more efficient to use clipped, to-the-point quotations as evidence in my arguments, I feel that it is important to present the larger context surrounding a point made in the interview in order to position Mitchell as the authority of her own art work and art practice.

An important aspect of the second chapter is the focus on alternative lesbian archives, and how Mitchell’s work represents and functions as an archive. Drawing again on Cvetkovich’s *An Archive of Feeling*, I contextualize Mitchell’s residency in New York, during which time she visited the Lesbian Herstory Archives.\(^{11}\) Visiting the LHA inspired Mitchell’s 2010 installation at the Art Gallery of Ontario entitled *A Girl’s Journey to the Well of Forbidden Knowledge*. Cvetkovich states that gay, lesbian and queer people require an archive for their history, an archive capable of gathering the unusual materials and accounts that express experiences of love, intimacy, sexuality, politics, activism, sorrow and trauma.\(^{12}\) What José Esteban Muñoz calls “an archive of the ephemeral.”\(^{13}\) Judith Halberstam writes movingly about the importance of gay, lesbian and queer archives, suggesting that “the archive is not simply a repository; it is also a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory, and a complex record of queer activity.”\(^{14}\)

Mitchell overtly represents lesbian archives in her work; the previously mentioned *A Girl’s Journey to the Well of Forbidden Knowledge* is an example. Her work also functions as a personal archive, referencing objects, materials or experiences from her childhood and adolescence; such as her original Girl Guide uniform and a heart-shaped pillow she stitched in her

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\(^{12}\) Ibid., 241.


Home Economics class (which she has since used to create a giant camel-toe as part of a costume for a performance). Mitchell’s use of found and reclaimed textiles, such as hooked rugs, act as an archive of the specific female creativity and crafty labour that resulted from the popularity of craft-kits in the 1960s and 70s.

Drawing on Josephine Mills’ essay in the *Ladies Sasquatch* exhibition catalogue, which treated the *Ladies Sasquatch* installation as an important work significant for its power in creating a lesbian visual language, I posit that alternative lesbian archives can be understood as a “survival strategy,” or a coping mechanism in a heteronormative world in which lesbians and queers are erased and made invisible. Mitchell’s installations offer not only an undeniable, in-your-face lesbian visibility enacted by the monstrous *Ladies Sasquatches*, but also a subtle queer undercurrent that intervenes in mainstream public spaces through hyper-kitsch aesthetics and reused, re-loved domestic textiles.

In suggesting that Mitchell queers the heteronormative space of the family home by turning it into a public art institution and a classroom, I rely on Genevieve Lloyd’s assertion that within historical modes of thought, especially continental philosophy, the post-Enlightenment home was constructed as the abode of the “Man of Reason,” who perpetually seeks to attain transcendence from inconsequential worldly worries. In this domestic arrangement, the wife becomes the keeper of worldly worries and the hearth; constructed as incapable of pursuits of “Reason” because of emotional flaws and a lack of brain capacity for complex intellectual thought. In contrast to such historical narratives and constructions of domestic spaces that

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15 Allyson Mitchell, Interview by Julie Hollenbach, April 18th, 2012 at the Artist’s Home.
actively oppressed women, the interview and tour of Mitchell’s home presents an intervention into the heteronormative household; disrupting not only the domestic space, but also the reproductive time that defines it. Here I draw on Judith Halberstam’s theorization of “Queer Time” as existing outside the “temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family”; and “Queer Space” as the “place-making practices” of queer subjects and the space created through the production of “queer counterpublics.” The home, stripped of its associations with reproduction and the inheritance of discipline through child rearing, becomes a queer space structured through queer time. In opening up their home to host receptions for FAG (Feminist Art Gallery) exhibitions; in having public viewing hours on the weekend made possible by a network of volunteers who are both friends and strangers; as well as holding talks and bringing Mitchell’s academic classrooms home; Mitchell and Logue make public the intimacies of their queer mode of being.

Where chapter two explores how Mitchell queers the private space of the home by merging it with the public space of the gallery, the third chapter suggests that Mitchell’s crafted textile enclosures queer the public space of the gallery by making it domestic and intimate. This chapter focuses largely on two of Mitchell’s textile environments; Hungry Purse: The Vagina Dentata in Late Capitalism shown at the Textile Museum of Canada in 2007, and Menstrual Hut, Sweet Menstrual Hut shown in the Union Gallery project room in 2008.

In discussing the formal and theoretical qualities of the art museum and gallery I look to Brian O’Doherty’s influential text, Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space. O’Doherty provides a clear examination of the modernist art space comparing it to the space of a

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18 Judith Halberstam, “Queer Temporalities and Postmodern Geographies,” In a Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives, 152.
church in which people behave in a specific way – with a reverential disposition, using hushed voices, making no exuberant movements, and performing no everyday activities such as eating or sleeping. Similarly, O’Doherty posits that like a church, galleries create a vacuous space that voids markers of time and the outside world, creating a supposedly neutral space in which the secular deity of art is not contaminated by the messy contingencies of the real world. However, as I mentioned at the start of this introduction, Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach have demonstrated that the art museum is a loaded space that inculcate and prescribe on to visitors the ideologies of the state.20 Brian Wallis wrote in 1986 that Art Museums had become spectacle spaces where in the face of dwindling funding museums began to look to corporate sponsors to support large blockbuster exhibitions which would pull a crowd.21 While blockbuster exhibitions can be quite sensational and extravagant, they are for the most part devoid of any controversial material or overt political agenda, thus ensuring that no scandal is attached to the corporation. Wallis points out that this can be understood as an insidious form of censorship that controls the content displayed in art museums. In chapter four I explore in more detail the ideological function of the museum and how museum spaces create their public, while simultaneously erasing and marginalizing those excluded from its ideological framework.

Because there are no published exhibition catalogues or essays that treat Mitchell’s textile enclosures, in particular: Hungry Purse: The Vagina Dentata in Late Capitalism or Menstrual Hut, Sweet Menstrual Hut, I rely on promotional material issued by the exhibiting galleries, popular culture media such as private weblogs, reviews posted online and in print form, and two youtube video interviews with Allyson Mitchell in which she discusses the work and her process

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20 Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, "The Universal Survey Museum," 463.
in general. Archival material from the Textile Museum of Canada surrounding *Hungry Purse’s* installation at the Textile Museum of Canada provided me with a sense of the logistics and problem solving that went along with doing such an intensive, enveloping textile enclosure, and the issues of display and reception that had to be considered.

Particularly helpful to me in my discussion of Mitchell’s enclosure *Menstrual Hut, Sweet Menstrual Hut* has been an interview with Mitchell conducted by Sarah E. K. Smith published in booklet form by the Union Gallery in 2008. The Union Gallery’s archival documents supporting Mitchell’s *Brain Child* and *Menstrual Hut* exhibition have been very useful in reconstructing the exhibition and understanding its installation specificities. Speaking with Jocelyn Purdie, director of the Union Gallery, has been instrumental to my understanding of the exhibition and the preparation process leading up to the installation.

My interview with Mitchell has been illuminating, allowing me to conceptualize her relationship to these two pieces, and how they grow and change with each manifestation of their display. The conversations I had with Mitchell where she described the bodily process of creating and installing the work, and the taxing physicality and the psychologically and emotionally heavy aspect of the work, were invaluable. Also invaluable were discussions regarding the display and reception of her works, her intended audiences, and the collaborative process of working with curators and institutions.

These dialogues are the foundation for my critical analysis of Mitchell’s textile enclosures. I have also relied on my own visual analysis of these two pieces extrapolated from visual documentation of the installations. Writing about artwork which has been largely unwritten about poses certain challenges; but it also allows for a rich and rewarding experience, allowing me to find my own voice, pushing me to really look at (and feel) the work.
In chapter four, I address Mitchell’s best known textile installation, Ladies Sasquatch (which was a major touring exhibition that travelled around Canada from 2009 to 2010). In the past, when critics and scholars have written about this installation of giant fun-fur lesbian monsters frolicking in a textile wonderland, they have generally focused on the work’s subversion of myths of femininity and female sexuality, heteronormativity, and fat phobia within mainstream culture. Examples of such critical appraisals include Sally McKay in her Canadian Art article, “Allyson Mitchell: the Fluff Stands Alone”; Helena Reckitt’s “My Fuzzy Valentine: Allyson Mitchell,” and Maria Elena Buszek and her unpublished essay, “Allyson Mitchell: Desire and Dissent.”22 Others writing about Ladies Sasquatch have concentrated on the work’s ability to convey a queered visual language, and perhaps more importantly, to make visible lesbian representation. Writings on this theme are predominantly drawn from the essays in the exhibition catalogue that accompanied the touring exhibition.23 While scholars and critics have theorized about the obvious feminist and queer critiques present in Ladies Sasquatch, few have explored the critique of colonialism and Canadian nationalism inherent in the piece. Chapter four presents Ladies Sasquatch as a powerful decolonizing project by theorizing its ability to interrupt the museum space, effectively denaturalizing privileged colonial narratives while simultaneously disrupting settler fantasies that erase Indigenous peoples.

In order to establish a critical reading of present day monolithic fine art museums in Canada I utilize the institutional critique of key scholars such as Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach,  


Ruth Phillips, Vera Zolberg, and Deborah Doxtator.24 As discussed already several times in this introduction, through an analysis of the spatial and visual configuration of museums, Duncan and Wallach established that museums function as national symbols that communicate certain beliefs and values, and that individuals who pass through the doors and move through the space enact a “ritual that equates state authority with the idea of civilization.”25 Building on this, Phillips discusses how these ideological spaces function to marginalize peoples based on a hierarchy of race and ethnicity, gender, and class; she writes that museums “create domains of inclusion and exclusion that continue to inscribe colonial attitudes about race, patriarchal ideas about gender, and elitist notions of class.”26 These domains of inclusion and exclusion effectively create a very striking impression of who is recognized as the ideal citizen, and who is cast outside of that configuration. Post-colonial theorist Sunera Thobani posits that, while citizenship includes some, promising to protect those individual’s rights, to grant them land and property, and most importantly the illusion of freedom; citizenship is directly tied to who is erased, and whose basic rights are not only ignored but actively violated by what citizenship promises to citizens.27

Drawing on Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities,” Vera Zolberg situates museums as institutions charged with the role of creating the “narrative of the nation.”28 Zolberg suggests that as institutions closely bound with the “collective memory of the nation,” museums function to represent and reiterate dominant narratives that are the basis for the “cultural matrix”

24 I am indebted to the discussions and material covered in Professor Lynda Jessup’s course, “Museums, Marginality, and the Mainstream.” This course was instrumental to forming the questions and museological analysis that are an undercurrent in chapter 4.
on which the imagined community of the nation is founded.\textsuperscript{29} In \textit{Decolonizing Methodologies} Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith critiques these dominant narratives, suggesting that Western histories are a modernist discourse rooted in Enlightenment philosophies and imperial ideas of the ‘Other.’\textsuperscript{30} She writes that history is “the story of the powerful and how they became powerful, and then how they use their power to keep them in positions in which they can continue to dominate others.”\textsuperscript{31}

With this understanding of history as an oppressive force that perpetuates the exclusion and erasure of marginalized peoples, I situate Mitchell’s textile installation, \textit{Ladies Sasquatch}, as an urgent intervention into not only the ideological space of the museum, but also into the dominant narratives that situate, structure and create the imagined community of the nation. In establishing the radical decolonizing potential of \textit{Ladies Sasquatch} through a queer critique, I draw on scholars such as José Esteban Muñoz and Scott Morgensen. Muñoz writes that to “perform queerness is to constantly disidentify, to constantly find oneself thriving on sites where meaning does not properly ‘line up.’”\textsuperscript{32} In the artist statement that accompanied \textit{Ladies Sasquatch} Mitchell articulated that the work was a reaction to the appropriation of the Indigenous folklore of the Sasquatch by white north American mainstream culture, as an “expression of the racist fears around the ‘otherness’ of native culture.”\textsuperscript{33} We can consider Mitchell’s gesture as a way of “disidentifying” with the popular culture representations of ‘Big Foot’ or the ‘Wild Man of the Forest,’ and understand \textit{Ladies Sasquatch} as a key articulation of cultural meanings that do

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
not “properly ‘line up.’” Mitchell not only queers racist stereotypes associated with indigeneity, but also queers the construction of the sexualized Indigenous body – perceived as wild, licentious and carnal – presenting fierce, larger than life lesbian monsters that address the intersections and disconnects between race and sexuality. Scott Morgensen posits that “modern sexuality arises in white settler society as a ‘contact zone,’ defined by attempting to replace Native kinship, embodiment, and desire with the hegemony of ‘settler sexuality,’ or the heteropatriarchal sexual modernity exemplary of white settler civilization.”

In my interview with Mitchell, the artist made a poignant comment about *Ladies Sasquatch* that really struck me as being at the heart of its decolonizing potential. She said,

...How can this imagining by a white woman, of gender and race outside of culture, which is articulated through these *Sasquatches as a queer idea of being* [emphasis mine]. How … can that be in conversation with a spiritual idea around the Sasquatch in a colonialized culture. I think that they aren’t necessarily opposites, there’s something that can be interesting to have a conversation between the two.

With *Ladies Sasquatch* Mitchell imagines race and gender at play quite literally outside of culture, in a textile wonderland with eerie shadows and mysterious, enchanting audio accompaniment that promise to transport visitors ‘out of this world.’ The scene of the ferocious lesbian goddesses gathered around the warm light of a primordial fire, suspended in a timeless

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34 Scott Lauria Morgensen, Introduction to *Spaces Between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 18. I am indebted to Professor Morgensen for his generosity and willingness to speak with me about this area of my thesis project. I am also appreciative of the engaged discussions on the topic of queer and two-spirit indigeneity within settler colonialism that took place in his graduate seminar course, ‘Feminist Methodologies.’ My understanding of the racial and sexual intersections present in *Ladies Sasquatch* developed through these seminar discussions and my early conversations with Professor Morgensen.

35 Allyson Mitchell, Interview by Julie Hollenbach, April 18th, 2012 at the Artist’s Home. Interview transcript and audio recording in the possession of the author.
moment, as if at the height of a ritual or ceremony, is a powerful comment on the intersection of
gender, race, sexuality, and spirituality, and what Mitchell termed “a queer idea of being.”

In allowing visitors to fine art museums to participate in this queer spectacle, Mitchell
combats the exclusionary practices inherent in museums’ ideological framework; ultimately
breaking down boundaries and creating habitable, queered spaces. In doing so, I suggest that
*Ladies Sasquatch* is a playful act of resistance that creates oppositional counter narratives that
function to decolonize our physical, psychic and emotional space, while also creating new
imaginings that undermine the status quo.
Chapter 2

Exploring the House, Exploding the Home, Experiencing a Practice

When I emailed Allyson Mitchell earlier this year to ask if I could speak with her at some point about her various projects and her craft art practice in general, she responded warmly and invited me to come to her home. The interview proceeded to take place a few weeks later on a sunny Thursday afternoon in the middle of April.36

As I parked the car I had borrowed from a friend for the day, I received a text message on my phone from Mitchell stating that she was running a little bit late because she had gotten a flat tire on the way home. While I waited for her, sitting on her front porch in a comfortable cushioned seat, I reviewed my notes and jotted down some last minute thoughts and questions. The neighbourhood Mitchell lived in was pleasant; the fresh spring sunshine filtered gently through the bare branches that arched over the street, sheltering the houses and the parked cars. People passed by occasionally, some were walking dogs, a few were jogging and two ladies power walked as they pushed strollers.

When Mitchell arrived, she greeted me in an easy and friendly manner and welcomed me into her home. As we walked through her living room, she introduced me to her cat, Alice, who would occasionally take to yowling insistently at odd moments throughout the afternoon, something that was due to her advanced age, Mitchell explained. We sat in the kitchen, and while

36 Allyson Mitchell, Interview by Julie Hollenbach, April 18th, 2012 at the Artist’s Home. Interview transcript and audio recording in the possession of the author. All the dialogue that this chapter contains occurred during the interview conducted on April 18th. The conversations in this chapter are chronological for the most part; if they are taken out of chronology I have made efforts to incorporate this information within the text. The dialogue has been edited for clarity by removing speech irregularities and broken sentences.
I organized my papers and set up my iPhone to record the interview. Mitchell made tea and prepared a snack plate with sliced apple, assorted cheeses and nutty cracker bread.

The interview proceeded in an easy conversational manner, flowing organically from point to point, requiring minimal coaxing. Only occasionally did I need to refer to my sheet of questions. After an hour, I asked Mitchell how she managed to control and maintain her works; how she stored her materials, how she organized her documentation, and whether she sold her installations in pieces or in whole, if at all. She responded, “The best way to answer that would be to do a walkthrough of my house with you, and show you some things.” As someone who is fascinated with the intricacies of people’s everyday lives and their intimate domestic spaces, I was thrilled. Mitchell also expressed an exhibitionistic delight, “I’ve always had really public studios. When my studio was at the Gladstone, that was a really public space, visible from the street. 37 It was my personal stuff on the bulletin boards. The public was through it all the time. And I kinda like that. … There’s a kind of exhibitionism to it that I really like. I like looking at people looking at my stuff. So, that’s why I’m like, ‘let’s go for a tour through the house!’ It’s the best way I can express what it looks like to actually have this practice.”

37 In a later correspondence Mitchell explained that she had a studio space at the Gladstone hotel from 2003 to 2008. The Gladstone Hotel is Toronto’s oldest continuously running hotel. In 2002, new ownership of the building and renovations saw the Gladstone transform from a divey flophouse to a successful hotel with a community minded agenda. What made the Gladstone especially unique was its focus on the social history of the hotel and its mandate to support the local art community. In reflecting this initiative to support the arts, project manager (and video/performance artist) Christina Zeidler commissioned artists to design and decorate 15 of the hotel’s 60 rooms (today, 37 uniquely designed and decorated rooms are available to let). Mitchell was one of the artists commissioned to decorate a room, and she created a whimsical space entitled Faux Naturelle (2005) that boasts a wall-sized fun-fur mural of bodacious babes luxuriating in a fantastical furry paradise. Quoted by Amy Gogarty in her essay which explores the transformation of the Gladstone, Mitchell describes her room at the Gladstone as a “woody retreat where lesbian separatist commune meets Storybook Gardens.” Amy Gogarty, “The Gladstone Hotel Renovations: A Case Study” (typescript of a conference paper given at the Universities Art Association of Canada, University of Victoria, BC, 2003), 7. For a further discussion on the Gladstone Hotel, see Michelle Veitch, (PhD diss., “Site Specific Practices and City Renewal: The Geo-Politics of Hotel Installations in Urban Areas,” Queen’s University, 2010).
As we stood up from the table, the first thing she pointed to was the enormous circular mirror that hung over her kitchen table. She explained that it was part of her recent exhibition, *A Girl's Journey to the Well of Forbidden Knowledge*, in the Young Gallery at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 2010 (Figure 2.1). “This mirror is the mirror that the two middle aged lesbians are standing on top of. How do you store that? You cannot store a giant mirror like that. That mirror cost $500 dollars. Somebody at the exhibition, when it was installed, stepped on it. My installation was in the restaurant at the AGO, right, I mean on the CV it’s a solo exhibition at the AGO, but it was in the gallery beside the restaurant. Which is great, has its own awesome things! It means it’s free. It means you can see it from the street. It means that any young person could go in and see this lesbian feminist library. So, that’s the most important thing.”

We moved from the kitchen through to the living room and up a set of stairs to a landing, before climbing another narrow set of steps up to an attic-like studio space. “This is Deirdre’s studio. But it’s also our collective media hub. So, she’s in the middle of packing her stuff to go on a three-month residency. She does video installation, so, keeping the film and video media controlled, one of the ways I do it is to have all of my film negatives, and rough work up here in this closet. So, mentally knowing this is where the media is helps.” The sun pooled through the windows. The sloped ceiling gave the room a close, intimate feeling. Situated by the stairway railing sat a drawing table, stacked with small boxes. As I faced a closet filled with large filing boxes, she said, “There’s boxes in there that I haven’t gotten into in a few years. There’s things I really need to go through, but I don’t have time right now.”

I remember turning slowly in place, trying to take in my surroundings.

“This is where I did all the drawings for the lesbian feminist haunted house. It’s a nice drawing table. It’s covered in crap right now.” Mitchell motioned toward the table and started
back toward the stairs, “Deirdre’s also in the middle of archiving her stuff, so, that’s what this is all about…”

As we descended, Mitchell pointed up at a poster that hung on the wall. “I did that when she was in a bad mood one day.” It was a poster made from tape, it read ‘I love DJ.’ Later, Mitchell explained that DJ was a term of endearment she used for her video artist partner, Deirdre Logue.

The stairs opened onto a landing which Mitchell moved through toward a doorway at the end saying, “This is our bedroom, which, I don’t think there’s any art action that is relevant in there. Except for, you know, the emotional engine…” We stood at the threshold and looked in but didn’t enter further. I remember feeling profoundly moved by the intimacy of the situation.

As I mentioned in the introduction, I discovered Mitchell’s textiles work in 2007, at the Khyber Centre for the Arts, in Halifax, where I saw her installation *The Finger of Craft*. It was the first time I had experienced art outside the traditional gallery space. With *The Finger of Craft*, the walls and ceiling of the entrance way leading up the stairs to the ballroom gallery were made over, completely covered with found textiles. Colourful afghans, crocheted throws, hooked rugs, shaggy carpets, and kitschy throw pillows engulfed the transitory thoroughfare. I remember touching the soft textiles and feeling like Jonah in the whale; for what had once been the nondescript institutional white walls had strangely been transformed into the sinewy, textile guts of an unimaginable leviathan.

After that marvelous experience, I began to familiarize myself with Mitchell’s oeuvre and started paying attention to her artistic activities. Since then, her diverse works have ruminated in my mind, their significance to my own politics and conceptualization of art and spaces, both

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38 Allyson Mitchell, Personal Correspondence, Email, August 17, 2012.
public and private, grew. As I have suggested in the Introduction, Mitchell’s work came to represent a key, if unconventional, methodological framework for me.

My personal history and relationship with Mitchell’s work struck me forcefully as I stood at the doorway of her bedroom. At that moment, a barrier collapsed, one which divided the public personage of the artist and their autonomous artworks from the reality of a specific individual person and their unique process of living and making art.

Mitchell turned away from the bedroom, and I followed. The landing was an open area, connecting the bedroom, the spare room, the washroom and the two stairways to each other. There were book cases against the walls, and a practical rubber maid set of drawers under a long, narrow window. There was a small, high work table. “This is my office. Where I did my preliminary testing of my giant photocopies of my drawings to make sure that it would work.”

I stood next to her, looking down at two large photocopied drawings washed with a gentle lavender, which had been stuck to the wall. I recognized them as being part of *A Girl’s Journey to the Well of Forbidden Knowledge*, “How did you put them on the walls?” I asked.

“I did a mix of flour, and white glue, and water. And then just washed the lavender—“

“Is it just normal paper? Or tissue? Or—”

“No, it’s just giant photocopier paper from the Kinko’s,” Mitchell responded. “And then I did the white washing and painting over top, and seeing what the lavender would do. I needed to have a try of what would happen when it was on a dry wall.”

I was reminded of Ann Cvetkovich’s book *An Archive of Feelings*, in which she wrote a chapter entitled “In the Archive of Lesbian Feelings.” In it, Cvetkovich demonstrates that the histories of gay, lesbian and queer peoples requires a radical archive suited to collecting unconventional materials that testify to experiences of love, intimacy, sexuality, politics in
tension, activism, sorrow, and trauma. This archive would catch the fragments otherwise lost or scattered, becoming what José Esteban Muñoz calls “an archive of the ephemeral.”

Judith Halberstam beautifully imagines what a radical queer archive would look like, how it would function, and what it would contain. She writes, “Ideally, an archive of queer subcultures would merge ethnographic interviews with performers and fans with research in the multiple archives that already exist online and in other unofficial sites. Queer zines, posters, guerilla art, and other temporary artifacts would make up some of the paper archives, and descriptions of shows along with the self-understandings of cultural producers would provide supplementary materials.” Most importantly, Halberstam posits, “the notion of an archive has to extend beyond the image of a place to collect material or hold documents, and it has to become a floating signifier for the kinds of lives implied by the paper remnants of shows, clubs, events and meetings.”

Cvetkovich introduces the Lesbian Herstory Archive in Brooklyn as an example of a radical grass roots lesbian archive. The LHA, which since 1993 has been located in a revamped residential house, is an odd hybrid of domestic comfort and institutionalized public space. Cvetkovich describes the interior layout of the LHA house: the entryway is an exhibition space, the living room serves as a cozy reading room, and the photocopier sits in the kitchen against a wall. A member of the LHA collective lives on the top floor. While some members feel that that space should be used to store more of the collection, others say that a permanent live-in resident

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42 Ibid.
gives the house its feeling of being a home, which they insist is an important aspect of the archive.  

I stood next to Mitchell and studied the photocopy pasted onto the wall. The careful drawing reproduced a single shelf of the LHA, showing the spines of books and their titles. I said, “I read An Archives of Feeling before I knew about your installation A Girl’s Journey to the Well of Forbidden Knowledge … what was it like to be there, and how long did you spend there?”

“It was amazing, I was in New York for 6 months. You know, back and forth. And I would just go there and, I don’t know, I didn’t really have a thing when I was in New York. I wasn’t working on this set of paintings, or this sculpture. I was really just exhausted. I kinda wanted to just let my mind go. So, I would go to the Herstory Archives. I maybe went about ten times. I also went to a bunch of salons that they had there. And, I just… it was wonderful.” She sighed with a smile, “have you ever been there before?”

I shook my head, “No.”

She continued emphatically, “It was really amazing, because it’s just so homey and you’re allowed to touch everything and as an academic, I understand the weight of the knowledge of the printed texts. They have beautiful bookshelves lining the walls in the first two rooms that overflow and …I just wanted to, you know, mark those. Because books are something that’s going away too, right.”

The impression which the bookshelves made on Mitchell is apparent when considering the installation of A Girl’s Journey to the Well of Forbidden Knowledge at the AGO. Behind two huge sculptures of lesbian librarians, Mitchell recreated the book shelves of the LHA by pasting

reproductions of the carefully drawn studies onto two adjoining walls (see Figure 2.1). Perhaps to suggest a sense of mystery, magic and playful fluidity, the shelves were gold and silver leafed, while in some places the vulva like pattern of the shelves’ wood grain was accentuated, and gentle washes of deep indigos and soft lavenders emphasized the spines of certain books. There is something intimate at play with viewing Mitchell’s drawings of the book spines, something that recalls the voyeuristic ritual of studying someone else’s collection of books or CDs, and speculating about that person’s tastes and interests. It begs the question, what do our collections say about us? Walter Benjamin wrote a beautiful essay describing the process of unpacking his personal library, during which he mused of the importance of a collection to its owner, and its hold over a person, and how a collection can come to mean so much more, embodying memories, places, and times.44

The recreation of the bookshelves found in the Lesbian Herstory Archive are a document chronicling a manifold of memories and experiences, desires, dreams, and fantasies; acts of resistance, eccentric modes of being, and radical perspectives. It is an important testament to queer subcultures roots and influences. Of A Girl’s Journey to the Well of Forbidden Knowledge, Cvetkovich wrote that recreations of “queer archives … bring them to affective life beyond the closed stacks and … create new publics.”45 Mitchell’s painstakingly detailed drawings honour a legacy of libraries, feminist presses, self-published projects, zines, journals, and women centered bookstores and community spaces. While the drawings record an archive dedicated to ensuring the visibility of lesbian history, as Mitchell articulated during the tour of her home, they also pay

tribute to the books as a printed medium facing depreciation. With the loss of feminist publishers and women’s bookstores, a vital place of meeting, sharing and community building is lost.46

At a later point in the interview, after the tour of Mitchell’s home had concluded, and we once again found ourselves talking in the kitchen at the table, I asked, “Do you imagine your practice in a way, as an archive?”

“Yes.”

I continued, “Because I think that, in a way, archives are about accumulating things for posterity. But, as much as it is about sucking in, the interesting part of archives for me, is about how they manage to proliferate out. So, your work, A Girl’s Journey—well, zine culture isn’t what it used to be, and it feels a little bit like a throwback, where it’s about referencing that kind of culture, but also, maybe not reinventing it, but, again—access. Giving access to those kinds of communications and expressions.”

“Yeah, but that’s the only thing I know, right.” Mitchell shrugged, “That’s the culture that I came out of. Once a Riot Grrrl always a Riot Grrrl. And that’s how I learned that I can actually contribute and make art. But I’ve never been a big zine-zeenie. I don’t have any training as an artist. I always say that my training came from Brownies, and also from queer cultural scenes like Riot Grrrl. Not Riot Grrrl proper, like Seattle or Olympia, or Washington, that kind of thing. More like nerdy, small town Ontario hearsay. But the archive, yeah, that is absolutely happening. I have everything, I mean, it’s a personal archive and I use elements from my whole life. I don’t throw stuff out very well, dumb material stuff, yes, but things that have an actual affective element, I can’t get rid of. And my mom can’t either. Whenever I go home, she gives me a box of stuff and is like; ‘take your stuff!’ And so, I have my original Girl Guide uniform. I

have the heart shaped pillow that I stitched in Home Ecc. in grade 7, which I’ve since used to create a giant camel toe in a costume for a performance. So, it’s a personal archive in that kind of way, it’s also an archive in that, you know, I think of thrift stores as an archive of women’s craft. Or maybe it was at one time, but isn’t so much anymore. There’s fragments of it in thrift stores, so, I’m kinda pulling those together. So, like, the ceiling of Hungry Purse becomes a kind of archive, the walls of the Menstrual Hut Cinema which are made from rug hookings are an archive of those middle class/working class craft kits from the 1970s. You know, and then A Girl’s Journey is a most obvious archiving— to do a drawing of those books. Alison Bechdel talks about that somewhere. About drawing objects as a way of holding them or saving them.”

Alison Bechdel is an American cartoonist, who, since 1987, has been drawing an internationally syndicated cartoon strip entitled Dykes to Watch Out For.47 The strip follows the adventures of despondent Mo and her lesbian, gay, queer and transgendered friends through 20 years of life, chronicling everything in real time from hook-ups, heartbreaks, friendships, and children, to career changes and cancer. Upon the release of the comprehensive anthology of DTWOF, Kathey Resmer interviewed Bechdel, who shared that drawing the strip started as a light hearted way of documenting a dynamic lesbian subculture.48 While being a reflection that was sensitive to the shifts and changes brought on by time, DTWOF also inspired communities to form, to get political, and to engage with various forms of activism. For the anthology, The Essential Dykes to Watch Out, Bechdel drew several introductory panels in which her cartoon self

declared, “By drawing the everyday lives of women like me, I hoped to make lesbians more visible not just to ourselves, but to everyone” (Figure 2.2).⁴⁹

Of the same sentiment, Josephine Mills laments the absence of lesbian representation in mainstream culture. In her essay, “The answer is two years spent baking vulva-shaped cookies or; On Understanding Lesbian Representation,” which was included in the Ladies Sasquatch exhibition catalogue, Mills shares the frustrations of doing a women’s studies MA, and the isolation she felt as a lesbian theorist writing about contemporary lesbian cultural production invisible in popular representation.⁵⁰ Mills struggled with the task of writing about that which she deemed to fall between the cracks; she writes, “lesbians do not exist in patriarchal language or we are not supposed to exist; we cannot represent ourselves as subjects or we are not supposed to be able to speak about ourselves.”⁵¹ Mills often makes reference to her personal intellectual archive which she has constructed, comprised of lesbian and feminist literature, books, poetry, music, and other popular culture sources.

It seems to me that personal archives, such as Mills’, become a mode of survival, a way of coping in a world in which you are invisible. In the sense that the world does not see you (Mills writes of people asking if she and her partner are sisters, instead of coming to the more obvious conclusion that they are lovers), and that you cannot see yourself in that world. There is nothing which represents your perspective, nothing to identify with. Alternative archives, such as Mitchell’s drawings of bookshelves, or Bechdel’s Dykes to Watch Out For, become as much markers of absence, as indicators of positive representation of lesbian livelihood. For the same reason, Mills celebrates Ladies Sasquatch as a work of monstrous proportions, so in your face

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⁵⁰ Josephine Mills, “The answer is two years spend baking vulva-shaped cookies or; On Understanding Lesbian Representation,” 21.
⁵¹ Ibid., 23.
and unapologetic, defying normative representations of women, their bodies and sexuality. Mills posits that the Sasquatches explode myths of femininity, and deconstruct ideas about good behavior and domesticated bodies. The hairy giantesses come as a sigh of relief to some people, like Mills and myself, because they make visible, in monumental scale, an alternative way of being.

Back on the second floor of Mitchell’s home, in her workspace, during our discussion of bookshelves and books, our eyes naturally fell onto her shelves and the spines of the volumes they held. “While we’re up here I’m going to grab you this,” Mitchell reached for one of the lower shelves, her hand hovered for a moment as she scanned the titles. She pulled out a thin book and handed it to me. It was a copy of the Ladies Sasquatch exhibition catalogue.

“This,” she handed me the poster style folded brochure that accompanied Brain Child, an installation shown at the Union Gallery, in Kingston, Ontario, in 2008. Mitchell then handed me a heavy, squat, soft cover book, “and this– I can’t give you one of these, but, I got to draw Eve Sedgwick’s bookshelf, after she died, for a special issue of GLQ.”

I turned the journal over in my hands. On the cover was a drawing of books on a shelf, “That’s amazing” (Figure 2.3).

“I’m gonna sneak over here, cuz there’s a couple things that I can give you.” Mitchell moved to the utilitarian plastic drawers to the left and sifted through the contents. “Okay, here’s another way that I try to organize and control my practice. This is a lie. I throw things in here that I know will be important. Like, mapping out of the lesbian feminist haunted house and trying to think through how to talk about it in an academic grant. So, …this kinda stuff.”

She showed me a few pages of drawings with notes written on the sides. “It’s like storyboarding almost,” I observed.
Mitchell unfolded a larger piece of paper. “And… I probably shouldn’t fold it but, that’s how it’s supposed to be, like that.” She refolded the drawing and put it into the drawer, before she closed it and opened the drawer below it. “And then I keep all my old invitations, in here. But, it was really organized for a while, but after a couple years it became a bit of a disaster. And this is just things that I have that are– things that have articles with me in them or something like that…” She trailed off, closed that drawer and opened the next. “I’m looking for a poster from the AGO… I can’t remember where I stuck them… Oh, these are the Sasquatch plans, here’s the map of how they would be set up.” She showed me a black ink line drawing, illustrating the configuration of the Ladies Sasquatch installation, each Sasquatch drawn in a loose, abstract manner, their names boldly written inside their bodies. “They asked me to do a thing for in the gallery that would indicate which ones were which, and where they were. So, Deirdre helped me draw this, she’s a way better drawer than I am, but– So, these are the actual Sasquatches and it points out to where– what the names of the little creatures are.” Mitchell was referring to the pink familiars that coexisted in the transformed textile woodland with the Sasquatches.

“Do you think I could take a picture of that?” I asked. I knew then that it would be helpful later when I was writing, trying to visualize the space.

“Yeah, for sure.”

I took a picture with my phone (Figure 2.4), which I had been dutifully carrying with me to document the discussion.

Mitchell folded up the drawing of the Sasquatches, “I should probably not fold it, someday an archivist is going to be like ‘what the!’” I remember shivering at the time, having a moment of foresight. I had been in numerous archives before to do research. In 2008, during an internship at the Mount St. Vincent University Art Gallery in Halifax, I had the task of writing
interpretative texts to accompany images for the creation of an online database of the Gallery’s permanent collection. I had sifted through artists’ notebooks, sketches, personal information, exhibition notes, and correspondences between artists and curators. Delicate pieces of ephemera much like the drawing I held in my hand. It felt like an extremely personal and intimate interaction with someone I would never meet in person.

I mused, perhaps one day in the future an intern would look at this fragile drawn map of Mitchell’s *Ladies Sasquatch* installation, while sitting in a windowless room, at a bare wooden desk, and wonder about its significance and its specific object history. As Mitchell placed the drawing in the drawer and closed it, it occurred to me that it might not make it to an archive for whatever reason. Perhaps it would be accidentally thrown away, destroyed in a moment of absentminded sifting, or lost in a move to another location. And like great works of art destroyed in fires, or stolen during periods of war and conquest, we would only ever know of them by their reflections, through manual or electronic reproductions, or the texts which made reference to them. I realized then, that even in our current digital, hyper documentos age of electronic reproduction, thousands of histories die in each moment unknown, while only a fraction filter to the surface, to be illuminated by a dominant history.

Mitchell opened the next drawer, and my thoughts evaporated. “I just wanna find for you one of the bloody posters from the AGO, because I think you’ll like them. …Oh, there they are. I’ll give you a couple of these.” She pinched the corners of a few posters, and with her other hand held the pages resting on top of the posters back, as she scooted the ones she wanted free. She placed them on top of the drawers and held one up so that we could look at it together. After a few moments, she flipped the poster over, revealing the reverse side. “This was the poster that was poster all over the city. It got ripped down really fast. And then on the back is the
bookshelves. They weren’t my favorite books. They were the ones that were done when the poster got made. You know, sometimes those are the decisions that— you get what you get. The promotion stuff kinda has to happen.” She replaced the poster on top of the others and then rolled them up.

Anticipating the need, I took a spare hair elastic from my wrist and handed it to her, to slip over the rolled posters. She handed them to me (Figure 2.5). “Oh, they’re so cool. Thank you,” I said.

She smiled and moved out of the office space, toward the stairs going back down to the main floor, “Okay, so, that’s the office action. Trying to control practice.” She paused at the top of the stairs and pushed the door open to the spare room, which was furnished with a sofa bed, covered by a brightly coloured throw. “And then, this is our guest room that lots of artists have stayed in. If you ever need a place to stay when you’re in town, you’re welcome to stay here.”

“Thank you,” I said gratefully, overwhelmed by the generosity of the offer. “Thank you.”

We descended the stairs and stood in the living room. On one wall, a colourful banner with black felt letters read “WE CAN’T COMPETE.” Along its top and bottom edges, rows of crocheted squares in patterns of warm reds, pinks, oranges and purples, line the mustard colour panel upon which the stark letters were attached.

Earlier in the interview, while we were still sitting in the kitchen, Mitchell had explained the banners: “Deirdre and I were asked through the Feminist Art Gallery to make work and present it at the Tate Modern in May. No Pressure. And so we’re doing a workshop and we’re doing a presentation and we made these giant textile banners that we’re working on. There’s four slogans: ‘WE CAN’T COMPETE,’ ‘WE WON’T COMPETE,’ ‘WE CAN’T KEEP UP,’ ‘WE
WON’T KEEP DOWN’ (Figure 2.6). And so, the idea of doing research about the actual numbers that show the inequity in the art world for women, people of colour, native people, in Canada in particular, that’s where those slogans really came out of. And then, also reading queer affect theory, and thinking about what it means to be a success or successful in this system, whether it’s in the general capitalist system, or within the specific system of art, seems to mean you generally have to be a fucking asshole who does not collaborate, who is super competitive, who is professional, quote unquote. All those horrible things that we do not aspire to be, and so that’s why the slogan ‘WE CAN’T COMPETE’ –How could we!? But also, politically, we can’t and so we actually won’t and instead we’re gonna do all these other things like nurture, mentor, collaborate, feed, all that kind of stuff, rather than compete. That’s just giving you an example of how the theory, the academic, the reading, the research, and the making all kind of come together.”

The display of the four banners took place in London at the Tate Modern on May 19, 2012 in conjunction with the “Civil Partnerships: Queer and feminist curating” conference. As well as showing their textile banners and presenting at the conference on their joint curatorial initiative, the Feminist Art Gallery, Mitchell and Logue were invited to do a workshop. For the ‘Axe Grinding Workshop,’ they decided to “share the power,” and invited eight of their artist and activist friends to take part in a queer show-and-tell, “to fuel the power of the feminist kill joy, and shine up the old battle-axe.” Toronto artist Christina Zeidler, with whom Mitchell has collaborated on video projects in the past, was one of the artists included in the workshop. In her weblog, Zeidler writes about her experience performing a piece called Rehearsal for an

*Endurance Performance of the S.C.U.M Manifesto, Ukulele Concerto in C* at the workshop, stating, “The ironic wink of scoring the manifesto to the ukulele is a way of letting the audience know that this interpretation of the radical feminist text is an inclusive third-wave understanding, people of all gender identifications should feel comfortable to sing along whilst they grind their axes.”\(^{54}\) The S.C.U.M. (Society for Cutting Up Men) Manifesto was originally written in 1968, by Valerie Solanas, who is infamous for attempting to kill Andy Warhol in the same year.

Logue and Mitchell’s strategy of inviting other queer artists from their community to share their work is an important tactic toward resisting absorption and undermining a hierarchical power dynamic that exists within postmodern cultural institutions. In writing about how queer subcultures are co-opted by the mainstream, Halberstam posits that within postmodernism, “dominant-culture scavengers” will pick up subcultural phenomena in the pursuit of newness, attempting to add fresh novelties to a relational system that quickly exhausts itself.\(^{55}\) However, in “sharing the power,” Mitchell and Logue resist being absorbed and tokenized as convenient examples of a contemporary Canadian lesbian subcultural product.\(^{56}\) Their artistic package is pluralist, collaborative, non-hierarchical, and non-elitist. They eschew the conventional prestige afforded to the artist by queering the traditional relationship between the cultural institution and the artist, taking the power for themselves to curate their representation. In opting to create a workshop/show-and-tell, Mitchell and Logue bring their radical curatorial strategies typical of the FAG to the Tate Modern, creating an art experience that functions as a multifaceted spectacle enabling dialogue and knowledge sharing.

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Adhered to the wall in the corner of Mitchell’s living room, near the windows that looked out onto the street, were an uneven, clustered collection of ‘HI, MY NAME IS’ stickers. We walked over to them, and I examined the names written on the labels. Mitchell explained, “This is part of the FAG project. Every time we have a FAG event, we ask people to put their name and the name of another politicized artist – however they define that – that they want people to know about. It’s a way to create a kind of an archive. To mark those people, and also, we actively use it. Through the FAG we do this thing called the BRAG, where we ask– we invite people who have written, you know, whatever artist’s name, to come in and actually present a show and tell on that artist. We’ve done that a couple times and it’s been really awesome.”

After studying the labels for a minute or two, we moved through the living room toward the kitchen. My eyes fell on a kitschy little figurine that sat on an end table next to the couch. It was a little wooden old woman, wearing a dress in muted colours, clutching knitting needles in her hands. Mitchell must have seen my glance, “There’s the patron saint of knitting over there. Which I found at a flea market. With her toothpick knitting needles. Been a bit of a working with guidance this winter. …And then, let me show you the corner of the basement.”

We descended another set of stairs to the unfinished basement. “Okay, this is how I try to control my practice. …Yeah, it’s in a bit of a disaster state. Normally, it’s a bit more organized than this, but we had a flood and had to move a bunch of stuff and pull up the carpet—”

I looked around and asked, “Was there a lot of damage?” There were big, clear plastic Rubbermaid containers pushed up against the wall, stacked on top of each other. Big bolts of second hand fabric were rolled and strewn on top. Poking out of containers, and the spaces between them, hand fabricated blankets and throws peeked out.
Mitchell answered, “No, it was just– everything is in Tupperware, everything was fine. But, I gotta get back in there and do some organizing. I also inherit a lot of materials, people who don’t know what to do with stuff give it to me. When Will Monro died I got a bunch of his material. I haven’t even had the heart to go through it. So, that is a way of the kind of–” While speaking, Mitchell had been walking along the wall of Tupperware, casually gesturing to this or that, absently touching material or pointing to fabric. “Okay, this is from the big installation I did at the Niagara Artist Center called *Christmas Scares Me*. And the idea is to eventually have the time to be able to go through– I weed through all the time, I collect really beautiful afghans or textiles when I find them, and then I weed them out. These guys are part of *Christmas Scares Me* (Figure 2.7). This is my really incredible storage of finished art pieces. Throw them on a shelf in a mildewy basement. It’s really good for textile artists to do that–”

I interrupted, “Do you mind– Can I take two pictures of that?”

“Yes of course! Absolutely,” She assured me before continuing with gentle sarcasm, “And then, over here, you’ll see the wonderful storage of the original art piece *Shebacca*, just like, folded up and shoved– at least it’s not on the floor. But, it needs to be properly stored. That is what I need help with, I need to get an assistant. I need someone to help me figure it out. And have the time to do the right thing.”

We poked around for a few more minutes, discussing which textiles and objects belonged to which piece, before we made our way back upstairs.

“You may want to put your boots on, because we’ll go outside.”

I got my boots from the front door and carried them through the kitchen, to the little reading nook that separated the kitchen from the back door to the garden, and Mitchell’s studio space that also acted as the FAG gallery space. While lacing up my boots I surreptitiously peeked
around the space. It was full of leafy green plants, and vines. A fullsized window looked out onto the back garden. This space belonged more to the outside spring garden where things were full of growth and nature, than to the interior sensibility of the house.

“Wow, this room is beautiful,” I mused as Mitchell patiently waited for me to put my boots on.

“Well, the plant stuff is all Deirdre. I am not a plant person.”

Once I had my boots on, we exited the house and walked through the rectangular backyard plot, to a separate wooden building. “So, this is the FAG. And also, our studio, which we’ve never worked in yet. It’s also a classroom. It’s where I taught my Feminist Cultures class from York last year–”

“This is amazing, …and it smells like wood. It’s just nice,” I breathed. It was essentially a large, open room with fresh smelling wood paneled walls and a concrete floor. More neatly organized Tupperware containers filled with textiles and odd bits filled the shelves that went up to the high ceiling (Figure 2.8).

Mitchell gestured absently to two large clear recycling bags in the corner, “This is pretty much the majority of Hungry Purse, right here. And those are the wall carpets, and the chair things. These just came back because I did an installation at the Gallery of York University using parts of it. For the Will Munro retrospective. There’s my stuffed cats, waiting to be made… There’s a couple good Sasquatchy ones here you might like. Eyes, teeth, fangs… There was one that said ‘Sasquatch Repair.’” She pointed at containers as she spoke (Figure 2.9).

I smiled and read the label on a container aloud, “‘Plastic Heads.’”

Mitchell continued, “So, this is after years of– It’s like the materials breath and expand and contract. There’s been times when there’s way more, and then I have to purge, and this is
sorta the most fine-tuned it’s even been. I’ve had a lot more shit. There’s the ‘Sasquatch Repair’
one. And ‘Sparkely Letters’ spelt wrong above it. That’s good. There’s some nice original art
work shoved against the wall, and you know, have some nice chairs shoved against it. With a
leaf stuck to it.” Mitchell plucked at the leaf that was clinging to the ochre coloured material.
“So, I’m showing you the kind of shameful way that I store my stuff and why it is essential, and
urgent that it gets somewhere. Because, it’s been worse than this.”

Mitchell moved to the middle of the room and pulled at a white sliding wall partition.
“These come across. This is the actual gallery space, this little space back here.” The partitions
effectively allowed the studio to be closed off from the clean, white walled end of the room,
which had a separate door that opened on to an alley-like road in the back. “And the door opens
here, and makes it a big social– you can also work on wet dirty stuff back here. And we thought
we had to be really stealth about it, but we found out recently that we’re allowed to have a
gallery, because this is the Queen West Gallery district. We thought we had to be all secret. But
now, we could put a neon sign out if we wanted to.”

“You should,” I said and then asked, “So, how does the FAG work? How do you… have
events? How do you–”

“Well, we opened last year around this time. And our first show was an artist– you can
see it all on Facebook. 57 Have you seen it on Facebook?” She asked.

I nodded, “Yeah. I sure have.”

“Well, that is pretty much the archive of what’s happened, because, the whole project
with FAG is meant to be easy for us, and do-able. And so we said we’d have three shows a year.
For political and practical reasons, we’re not applying for funding. We’re just experimenting and

seeing how it goes with doing it in this really Do-It-Yourself fashion. So, we said we were gonna have three shows in our first year, we had five. And the last one was a huge collaboration with the Art Gallery of York University and the Power Plant. We learned really quickly what is gained and lost with working with large institutions. And there’s lots on either side. And it was wonderful, and it was a really great experience for sure. And so the idea is to show work by artists that isn’t necessarily being seen. We’re really open to people approaching us and talking about projects that they want to work on. We have a board of directors, and we’re registered as a business, as a way to legitimize it. And also, because we’re asking people for money, to be matrons instead of patrons to the different shows that we have. Each show costs us, in theory, about a thousand dollars. In practice it’s more like fifteen hundred and we probably kick in five hundred of our own dollars into it. But we pay an artist fee of five hundred dollars, there’s materials that’s about three hundred dollars, and about two hundred dollars goes to costs for the opening. And we host a big dinner party here for the artist, their friends, people— and we explicitly ask them who they’d like to come, who they’d like to meet from the Toronto arts community. If we know them, and can connect them with them, as a way of creating these intentional queer networks that we’ve seen— we know happens all the time with other artists, and I’ve seen explicitly and been kept out of with white fag artist communities. That really— not all white fags, but a lot of them, that really intentionally help each other, so, a young artist will be purposefully invited to a dinner to meet an international curator. That kind of thing. And I haven’t had that experience. I haven’t seen that happening very much with feminist and dyke artists, for lots of reasons and not because of clichéd ideas about how women can’t get along or that kind of catfight bullshit. But, more about tiny, tiny pieces of pie. Scarcity. And that kind of stuff. So, we’re trying to intentionally do that.”
“That’s really nice,” I said. “Can you talk about why you’re not seeking funding. And what that allows you to do and—”

“Well,” Mitchell started. “Different reasons, partly, it’s because Deirdre works as an arts administrator where she writes grants for a living for V-tape. The video art distribution place in Toronto. And I work at York where there– it’s a great job, but there’s tons of administrative work associated with that. And we can’t, we can’t pile on one single thing more. Or, it means we would never be able to write a grant for ourselves, or anything like that. And because also, Deirdre especially, is very familiar with the actualities of how much of a grant goes to paying artists, and how much goes to administering the payment to artists. And, we don’t wanna have that, or do that. We also don’t wanna be reporting on what we do. We don’t wanna have to ask permission, or wait to have the perfect circumstances in order to be able to do what we want to do. It might not always be like this, we probably won’t run the FAG forever but when we decided we wanted to do this, it was an experiment to see what would happen if we said; ‘we’re just gonna do this, the circumstances aren’t perfect, but, it never ever will be.’ So, I mean, so far so good. And it’s been really interesting, the people who have been wanting to work with us, as far as artists, but also institutions. Like the Power Plant, I’ve not shown my work there, but they’re really interested in working with us through FAG. Or the Tate Modern.”

Mitchell led me out of the FAG/studio space and through the garden, back into the house. After taking off my boots and settling back into a seat at the kitchen table, Mitchell asked; “Do you want some water?”

“Oh, yes please,” I said and then asked, “Do you get a lot of help with FAG? Because it must create– you talked about creating– networking and matronizing the arts in a way.”

Mitchell filled two glasses of water and sat at the table. “Yeah, we do get a lot of help.”
There was a pause as we both drank from our glasses. After a moment, I asked, “What kind of a community, and what kind of involvement— I guess, what does it feel like? What are the organic aspects of that—”

“Well, part of the project or the experiment is about trying to break down— create intentional communities, help people, help ourselves, and also, to look at— to break down the binary between studio and gallery. Which is happening in that space. And also break down the space between home and social. When we have an opening where there’s 400 people, there’s people all coming through our house, which is a very strange experience. … When we have an opening, people have offered to volunteer to help us and we’ve built relationships through that, and a lot of times when people we don’t know, sometimes somebody will work the bar, we set up a bar right here, we have somebody in charge of a clip board, who is giving the name tags and asking people, and explaining what the project is, and filling out their names, or—just general dishwashing and that kind of stuff, we have that happening when the gallery is open. But also sometimes when we’ve had shows that actually are open for the public, so the opening is a big deal and that just requires labour help, but the gallery is also open to the public when there’s a show up, on Saturdays and Sundays from 1 to 5. And we’re not always here, we may have some obligation that we have to be somewhere, or some family thing. And so, we call on our volunteers to sit the gallery. Which can mean that a stranger has a key to our house. And to the gallery. A lot of this, the ginormousness of this project, is about trust. And faith. And just throwing it out there. Spreading open and seeing what happens. And so far nothing but amazingness has evolved back.” Mitchell smiled and continued, “You asked me how it feels to do that. And sometimes it feels really scary, but while it’s happening, and it’s a big event, it feels amazing, and I feel high from it. It’s like a big opening, it’s community, there are people I know,
people I don’t know. I’m meeting new people. Being implicated in a class system where because of my job, we can afford to have a house like this, then, I want it to be queered in a way that’s not—what’s that term? Domestinormativity? Trying to trouble domestinormativity by opening the space up, so that it’s not just two people living at home.”

“So, it becomes a very public space,” I mused.

“Yeah, to a certain degree,” Mitchell replied. “So, we were trying to figure out how that—and there’s moments where after a big weekend event, or a month long, tons of activities, I’ll just be like; ‘I am exhausted, we are finished with this. FAG is over! …I guess FAG only lasted one year, but that’s okay! I can’t take it anymore!’ So, there’s definitely that part too. I think that’s part of the thrill of opening up and then, you know, you get to the edge of something and then, I pull back, and re-gather and go back out again. …I know that sounds really woo-woo.”

I shook my head, “No, that sounds really nice.”

The feminist intervention into the gendering of domestic space is old and accepted by now. Almost 30 years ago, Genevieve Lloyd wrote about the maleness of reason in continental philosophy, tracing a patriarchal genealogy from early classical philosophers, through to modernist thinkers like Hegel. Of Dualism and the division of labour at the center of the ordering of domestic space, she wrote,

We owe Descartes an influential and pervasive theory of mind, which provides support for a powerful version of the sexual division of mental labour. Women have been assigned responsibility for that realm of the sensuous which the Cartesian Man of Reason must transcend, if he is to have true knowledge of things. He must move on to the exercise of disciplined imagination, in most of scientific activity; and to the rigors of pure intellect, if he would grasp the ultimate foundations of science. Woman’s task it to preserve the sphere of the intermingling of the mind and body, to which the Man of Reason will repair for solace, warmth and relaxation. If he is to exercise the most exalted form of Reason, he must leave soft emotions
and sensuousness behind; woman will keep them intact for him.\textsuperscript{58}

Indeed, and what happens to the home, that sphere of “solace, warmth and relaxation,” if the Man of Reason does not exist? Many lesbian feminists have theorized, written and dreamed varying degrees of utopian realities and landscapes. A radical lesbian feminist example is Valerie Solanas’, who I mentioned earlier wrote the S.C.U.M. Manifesto which called for the extermination of men and the dismantling of society and government.\textsuperscript{59} Slightly less extreme lesbian feminists have called for the creation of a separatist lesbian nation, opting to abandon rather than destroy the dominant societal structure. More mainstream examples of lesbian utopia range from the Michigan Womyns Music Festival, a women-only celebration which has been taking place every year since 1976, to JD Samson’s \textit{Lesbian Utopia}. Samson, who is the front woman for the popular political electroclash band Le Tigre, created an ironic collection of photographs shown at the Deitch Projects gallery in New York in 2005 (Figure 2.10).\textsuperscript{60} The collection of photographs depicted Samson and her friends as they toured gay and lesbian campsites throughout the United States, in search of a mythical lesbian utopia.

There is a strong utopian undercurrent which flows throughout Mitchell’s various works and projects. Whether it's a mythical glen full of voracious lesbian monsters, or woman-centric spaces such as the \textit{Menstrual Hut}, the idea of creating positive space, consciousness raising in a non-confrontational manner, affirming alternative modes of being, and advocating embodied experiences of our surroundings and interactions with people close to us, all factor strongly in Mitchell’s methodology. How do these goals and values effect the everyday lived environment of Mitchell’s home?

\textsuperscript{58} Genevieve Lloyd, \textit{The Man of Reason}, 50.
\textsuperscript{60} JD Samson, \textit{JD’s Lesbian Utopia}, Deitch Projects, \url{http://www.deitch.com/projects/sub.php?projId=179}. 
The domestic sphere of “solace, warmth and relaxation” is normatively constructed around the middle class nuclear family model and invested with the temporal structure of reproductive time focused on the transition from adolescence to adulthood, marked by such life events as marriage, buying a house, and having and raising children. But in Mitchell’s bathroom, where the Man of Reason’s razor might sit, instead, hang hand mirrors with bright, fleshy vulvas painted on their reflective surfaces. If we think of our homes as reflections of ourselves, our values and our tastes, we can understand that home is an ever shifting location of identity, which invariably fluctuates and deviates in response to the dynamic demands of social relations. Mitchell and Logue’s home is a self-reflexively constructed site of contestation; part public cultural institution, part classroom, part studio, and part dwelling. Here, notions of public and private, strange and intimate, queered and homogenous, decent and deviant behavior, all come to collide, upsetting class hierarchies and heteronormative expectations of domesticity.

Ruth Phillips and Christopher Steiner write that if the “public space of the museum is the site of art and artifact, then the private space of the home is the site of the commodity.” In the case of Mitchell and Logue’s home and the FAG, this divide is turned upside down, the commodities of the home become the artifacts of the gallery. The intimate keepsakes lining the mantel piece become the objects of curious scrutiny. But not in the sense of an abandoned static display, like a historical heritage house that was once lived in, but now is visited only by those wanting to gather a gleam of what life there used to be like. Mitchell and Logue’s home is a real live example of a “Queer space” existing in “Queer time.”

61 Judith Halberstam, “Queer Temporalities and Postmodern Geographies,” In a Queer Time & Place, 4.
62 Doreen Massey, “A Place Called Home?” Space, Place and Gender (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 169.
Halberstam explains that Queer time is a “term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance,” and that Queer space “refers to the place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics.”

By opening their tender, intimate “queer way of life” to a strange, unknown public, Mitchell and Logue rupture the gelatinous boundaries of our prevalent social structure in a manifold of ways. Their home becomes an example of a “willfully eccentric mode[s] of being.”

AIDS activist and artist David Wojnarowicz famously called for the bursting of the public sphere, demanding that the private intimacies of our personal lives bleed out messily into society, breaking what he called “the illusion of the One Tribe Nation.” In a particularly moving passage of his essay entitled “Postcards from America: X-Rays from Hell,” Wojnarowicz told of how other’s shared intimate accounts gave him hope and strength in facing the devastating AIDS epidemic and his own mortality, because it allowed him to feel less alone. He wrote, “the more diverse the representations [of “Reality”], the more I feel there is room in the environment for my existence; that not the entire environment is hostile.”

As Mitchell and I snacked on apple slices in the kitchen, we gradually moved on to a discussion regarding the dissemination of Mitchell’s work and how she imagined audience. She responded, “There’s something to be said for community based projects where it is a work for the

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64 Judith Halberstam, “Queer Temporalities and Postmodern Geographies,” *In a Queer Time & Place*, 6.
65 Halberstam draws on a quote by Foucault: “To be ‘gay,’ I think, is not to identify with the psychological traits and the visible masks of the homosexual, but to try to define and develop a way of life.” Ibid., 1.
67 Ibid.
community, but there’s also something to be said for having your work in a place where some kid who is here on a family trip during reading week with their oppressive family, stumbles upon something that they would never and could never happen on if it was just in my garage, or a smaller gallery, or something like that. That’s really exciting. It’s an ongoing discussion— and that’s part of what this conference at the Tate is. About what happens with feminist art when it ends up in the institution, and are the politics expanded upon, and disseminated to a much greater degree? Or are they watered down and co-opted?”

“Right, I’m sure that can be… disenchanting.” I sympathized, “In light of that, how invested are you with the response you get from people? From professionals? From artists?”

“I totally feed off of the responses that other artists and people have to the work,” she replied. “So, when I do an artist talk, and you know, three quarters of the audience can be totally bored because they have to be there and it’s their contemporary art history class and they’re like”—Mitchell paused and made a ‘barf’ noise, gesturing to her mouth with an extended index finger, the universal ‘barf’ gesture— “texting or whatever. But five freaky nerd, chubby, queer, weirdo girls come afterwards and talk to me, that’s all. I don’t care about winning over the texting jerks. That’s what it is, that’s what compels me. I know it sounds really cliché but it’s absolutely true.”

“Who do you think your audiences are?” I asked curiously. “For each of your different projects, I mean, there are different kinds of people that go to galleries— there are people who have an education in aesthetic appreciation, and then there are people who don’t at all, and so, I think your work is wonderful because both groups can engage with it, and take something really valuable away on their own terms, which is so important. That you’re not being told how— ‘This is what this art means! And this is how you’ll enjoy it!’ But, when you’re making it, who are you making it for? You just mentioned the nerdy, queer, fat chicks, and—”
“I’m kinda making it for them in a way, and also…” She responded thoughtfully. “It sounds really trite to say, but I also feel like I’m making it for me when I was thirteen.”

I smiled, I’d had this thought often too. “Sometimes I think back to when I was fifteen, and I wish I could just give myself a hug.”

Mitchell laughed, “I know! ‘It’s gonna be alright. You’re awesome. Go to the party! It’ll be great! Wear your tight pants, they look hot!’”

I smiled and laughed, “Yeah, exactly. That’s so great. So maybe you’re giving someone else a hug?”

“Yeah,” Mitchell’s voice was thoughtful, “it’s kinda for that—recognizing the hard work we do as feminists and queers and politicized peoples. I feel like it’s trying to validate that, in some ways. And saying that, ‘I get you, here’s a little token of my appreciation.’ But also like, an offering of an alternative way of being, of thinking, of seeing—to the ones who are already doing that but don’t have anyone telling them—but have every force in the world telling them that that’s a bad thing, or wrong, or gross, or—” Alice enters the kitchen, her insistent meowing interrupting Mitchell mid-sentence, “—Alice, come here.”

It felt like an organic moment to wrap it up, I said in way of conclusion, “I think that’s pretty much it for my questions.”

Mitchell picked up Alice and stroked her, “Cool.”

“Thank you so much,” I said, as I collected my sheet of questions and my phone, still recording the conversation. “I hope that if I forget something you would be open to letting me email you.”

“Of course, I hope you got that vibe, that I would be,” she said emphatically.

I smiled, “I did, thank you.” I stopped the voice recording on my phone, put my boots on
and left. It was still sunny outside as I drove down the street, my head full of wonder, my heart that much lighter.
Figure 2.1 *A Girl’s Journey to the Well of Forbidden Knowledge*, Allyson Mitchell, Art Gallery of Ontario, 2010.

Figure 2.2 Section detail from: Alison Bechdel, *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Court, 2008), xv.
Figure 2.3 Drawing of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s bookshelf on the cover of GLQ (17, no. 4 (2011)), Allyson Mitchell.

Source: Photograph by the author, April 2012.
Figure 2.4 Drawing of *Ladies Sasquatch* installation, Deirdre Logue.

Source: Photograph by the author, April 2012.
Figure 2.5 Posters for *A Girl’s Journey to the Well of Forbidden Knowledge* exhibited at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 2010. The posters were put up around Toronto.

Source: Photograph by the author, April 2012.
Figure 2.6 *CANT/WONT*, Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue, 2012.

Source: Katherine Mulherin: Contemporary Art Projects. 
Figure 2.7 Two Christmas elf figures from the *Christmas Scares* Me installation that was exhibited at the Niagara Artists Centre in January, 2012. They are pictured here in Allyson Mitchell’s basement.

Source: Photograph by the author, April 2012.
Figure 2.8 Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue’s studio space which doubles as the site of the Feminist Art Gallery, and also functions as a classroom.

Source: Photograph by the author, April 2012.
Figure 2.9 A Tupperware container storing miscellaneous materials for Sasquatch Repair. Located in Allyson Mitchell’s studio space.

Source: Photograph by the author, April 2012.
Figure 2.10 Promotional posters for JD’s Lesbian Utopia, exhibited at the Deitch Projects Gallery in December of 2005.

Source: Deitch Projects.
Chapter 3

The White Cube in Stitches: Hungry Purse and Menstrual Hut, Sweet Menstrual Hut

We touch things to assure ourselves of reality. – Annie Albers

After spending time considering Allyson Mitchell’s art practice, I begin to understand it not as specific constructed objects (such as the Ladies Sasquatch and Brain Child sculptures), collections of drawings (such as those displayed in A Girl’s Journey to the Well of Forbidden Knowledge), or crafted enclosures (such as the Menstrual Hut, Sweet Menstrual Hut), but instead as works of art that take on the dynamics of specific spaces. While some artists, such as Barbara Kruger, have used blunt feminist slogans to critique the exclusionary display practices of museums and galleries, others, such as Mitchell, use the subversive tactics of playfulness and irony to deliver their message (Figure 3.1). Visitors to galleries often shy away from and reject overtly feminist didactic messages. The strength of Mitchell’s intervention derives from its ability to engage visitors in a non-confrontational manner, through the use of familiar textiles, humorous themes and accessible content. In combining the physical, domestic comfort of crafted textiles with the challenging political messages that undergird each of her projects, Mitchell invites people to raise their consciousness on home turf. Where the second chapter of this thesis explored Mitchell’s art practice, and how she queers the private space of the home by conflating it with the public space of the gallery, the archive and the classroom, this chapter demonstrates how Mitchell’s crafted enclosures queer the public space of the fine art museum by making it domestic and intimate.

While Mitchell often exhibits one-off installations, such as Christmas Scares Me (which was displayed in January of 2012 at the Niagara Artist Centre in St. Catherines, Ontario), there

are some projects she revisits. Given that Mitchell’s textile enclosures must adapt to engulf the unique specificity of the space occupied, no two manifestations of an enclosure are ever identical. For the sake of an in-depth examination, I focus on two of Mitchell’s often revisited installations, *Menstrual Hut, Sweet Menstrual Hut* and *Hungry Purse: The Vagina Dentata in Late Capitalism*, and explore them as queer interventions into the ideologically modernist spaces they inhabit.

The White Cube

Mitchell’s domestic textile enclosures are a feminist gesture reminiscent of Faith Wilding’s *Womb Room in Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro’s* ground-breaking project *Womanhouse* (1972) (Figure 3.2). For *Womanhouse*, Chicago and Schapiro (co-founders of the California Institute of the Arts’ Feminist Art Program), along with over a dozen of their graduate students, fixed up an abandoned house slated for demolition, and converted it through performances and installations into a hyper feminine zone of exploded domestication. Each artist was given a space within the 17-room house to work with; for her space, Wilding created the nebulous *Womb Room* by crocheting a lacy webbed environment.

In *Womanhouse*, the gendered associations of home-making were emphasized in suffocating pink frilly bedrooms, menstrual bathrooms, and bridal staircases, taking domestic activities to the extreme. Chicago described the reasoning and motivation behind the *Womanhouse* project:

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What would happen, we wondered, if women took those … homemaking activities and carried them to fantasy proportions? Instead of making a pink-and-white, filmy, feminine but functional bedroom for one’s daughter, the space might become pinker and whiter and filmier and filled with more and more ruffles until it was a complete environment. Could the same activities women had used in life be transformed into the means of making art?70

*Womanhouse* is an early example of feminist artists twisting the roles of both the home and the institution, flipping their associations, conflating them, and breaking the boundaries dividing public and private space. In her Deep Lez manifesto, Mitchell speaks to the importance of not discounting second wave feminism and the significant work that was done. She writes,

> Deep Lez is right this minute and it is rooted in herstories and theories that came before. It is taking the most relevant and capable ideas and using them as tools to create new ways of thinking, while still clinging to more radical politics that have already happened but definitely aren’t over yet. … Deep Lez seeks to map out the connections between the second-position feminisms that sustained radical lesbian politics and the current third-wave feminisms that take apart the foundation on which those politics were built. … The objects and environments that I create are about articulating some of the ideas and imaginings of second-wave feminisms that were so foundational to me, while still remaining committed to an inclusive third-wave theory and practice.71

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the textile banner project *CAN’T/WON’T* Mitchell and her partner, Deirdre Logue, created for display at the Tate Modern in conjunction with the Civil Partnerships? conference made bold statements such as “WE CAN’T COMPETE,” “WE WON’T COMPETE,” “WE CAN’T KEEP UP,” and “WE WON’T KEEP DOWN.” In the interview I conducted with Mitchell, she explained that these banners sought to make visible “the inequity in the art world for women, people of colour, [and] native people” in Canada, in

70 Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist*, 104.
particular. The banners, as well as the ‘Axe Grinding Workshop’ Mitchell and Logue facilitated as part of their participation in the conference, recalls the interventionist tactics of such feminist artists and activists as the Guerilla Girls, with their polemic billboards, picket signs and open forum talks (Figure 3.3). This project, and indeed the entire Civil Partnerships? conference, investigates the relationship between museums and activist art. Kirsty Robertson observes that the museum’s inclusion of protest and dissent within its hallowed walls suggests a “compensatory visibility,” a term Robertson borrows from Kenneth Rogoff to express a type of disavowal. By acknowledging the inequity of cultural institutions in general, a specific museum may be able to look more progressive than others and suggest that it does not participate or contribute to the circumstances which occasioned the necessity for such activism in the first place, and that it is dedicated to reform. However, upon inclusion into the museum, oppositional forms of cultural production often enter into a process of historicization which neutralizes its politics and present moment vitality. Through the process of validation and canonization, the oppositional art form loses its potential for resistance. For many feminist artists, working with the museum is a

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72 Allyson Mitchell, Interview by Julie Hollenbach, April 18th, 2012 at the Artist’s Home. Interview transcript and audio recording in the possession of the author.
75 Ibid., 199.
76 For example, Barbara Krueger’s polemic artwork brandishing the slogan “I Shop Therefore I Am” (1987) has become almost trite.
paradox; while their work gains much from the platform it is given and the attention it receives, their work risks being co-opted by the institution for its own progressive agenda.

Many third-wave feminist artists resist this seeming inevitability; they attempt to move beyond early feminist critiques of the museum’s hegemonic display practices by including a critique of the affective capacity of the physical space. This struggle is not unique to feminists, and is shared by other minoritarian groups who resist invisibility and erasure just as they resist co-option and tokenization.

Andrea Fraser, for example, is a performance artist whose work focuses on drawing attention to the alienating effect of the museum’s ideological framework, focusing on even the most mundane of its functions, implicitly agitating that which is ignored or overlooked. *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk* (1989) is one of Fraser’s best known performances in which she posed as a museum docent and led groups around the Philadelphia Museum of Art. At one point in her tour, Fraser paused next to a drinking fountain and exclaimed, “A work of astonishing economy and monumentality!” (Figure 3.4). When passing by the museum’s cafeteria style restaurant, Fraser remarked, “This room represents the heyday of colonial art in Philadelphia on the eve of the Revolution, and must be regarded as one of the very finest of all American rooms.”

In teaching the public to distinguish between a stool and a painting, a rest room and a gallery space, Fraser poignantly revealed the role “culture-speak has in establishing elitist systems of value, and the role museums have in creating “civilized” publics.” Fraser’s performance also functioned to deconstruct the space in literal terms by drawing attention to the details that visitors were meant to ignore, such as the exit signs marking escape routes, or the guard in the corner of the room.

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78 Ibid., xxv.
Postmodernism has pushed museum spaces once governed by modernist ideologies of avant-garde elitism into spectacle spaces attendant to populist whims. While museums often provide an over-articulated educational rubric that attempts to render art accessible, and have made efforts to democratize the museum experience, museums continue to utilize and uphold certain modernist spatial strategies and display tactics. In his influential text, *Inside the White Cube*, Brian O’Doherty wrote about the fine art museum’s function as a vacuum, removing time and reality from the work of art, thus allowing it to exist in a neutral void, segregated from the complicated, oscillating banality of everyday life. He compared the environment of the gallery to that of a gothic cathedral; sterile and clean, without light-shedding windows though evenly lit, this minimalist space was dedicated to the adoration of culture’s secular deities. In the museum space, visitors behave in much the same way they do in churches. They generally speak in whispers and take on a reverential demeanour, they do not eat or drink, they do not scream, laugh, shout, run, play, or sleep. Just as Fraser established that the museum creates its ideal public, O’Doherty suggests that the museum goes further and disciplines the body by inculcating normative behavior.

O’Doherty also includes a chapter on ‘Opticality,’ the field coined by Clement Greenburg, attendant to theorizing the gaze of the viewer, and art as a purely visual experience. O’Doherty uses the installation shot as an entry point into a discussion in which he suggests that, in modernist gallery spaces, the art viewer becomes a greedy disembodied ‘Eye’ that consumes art works ravenously. A visitor, or ‘viewer’ as O’Doherty terms gallery-goers, looks at art, but

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81 Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 42.
does not perceive themselves as sharing space with art. They are not only removed from the objects they scrutinize, but are also suspended from their own embodied sensual corporeality. Caroline Jones has posited that this vivisection of the ‘Eye’ from the body is a violence that the museum enacts to ensure that the socialized subject is stripped away of ideological and political biases that might contaminate their interaction with the art work.\(^\text{82}\) Of Greenberg and his ‘Opticality,’ Jones is critical, depicting the critic as a technocratic hygienist who attempted to purify art of its dirty contingencies.\(^\text{83}\)

Today, monolithic fine art museums market themselves as spectacles akin to theme parks or fantastic geographical destinations.\(^\text{84}\) They receive sponsorship from transnational corporations to host one block buster exhibition after another, and as many of them celebrate bicentennials, in an effort to revitalize their image and rebrand, they hire star architects such as Frank Gehry to transform the museum itself into a sensational object.\(^\text{85}\) While so much has changed with the trajectory of artistic movements and cultural production, and while the site of the museum and its architecture increasingly becomes a signifier of a shift in the cultural economy, very little has changed in the gallery space itself. The windowless walls are still usually white, sometimes thematic colour schemes are employed to contribute a bit of vim to an exhibition, but the walls none-the-less remain austere and impenetrable. The ceilings are high, the lighting is even and clinical. The minimalist furnishings are still sparse, and most certainly uncomfortable to ensure that no one lingers. Visitors still lower their voices, and the watchful


\(^{83}\) Ibid., 15.

\(^{84}\) Brian Wallis, “The Art of Big Business,” 28.

eyes of guards ensure that they do not engage in any inappropriate exchanges with the work of art. The sanctity of the modernist white cube space is still, by and large, upheld.

**Hungry Purse: The Vagina Dentata in Late Capitalism**

I have already described my introduction to Mitchell’s textile enclosures through encountering *The Finger of Craft* at the Khyber Centre for the Arts, in Halifax, in 2007. It may sound overstated, but I cannot do justice to the jarring impression this work had on me. The entrance way of the artist run-centre – which is housed in an old, three story, red brick building on Barrington Street – was usually a grey, beige, non-descript space, cleaned up and sanitized to accommodate its role as a public thoroughfare to the beautiful ballroom gallery on the second floor. *The Finger of Craft* saw the walls and high ceiling covered in a brightly coloured mish-mash of found appropriated textiles. In an interview for *The Coast*, Mitchell offered insight into the inspiration of the installation, “The finger of craft—it’s supposed to be kind of gross. … It’s a play on the hand of Christ, and the naughty kind of finger-bang thing. But it’s also a play on touch—the finger of craft, it’s a magic spell: ‘I told you to decorate this place, the finger of craft is angry!’ And this building needs the finger of craft—a little love.”86 And what a magic spell! It was a stunning explosion of lush colours and soft tactility, and in response people stopped to touch the walls, clogging and crowding the small space. For this unassuming space to become a focal point was an important moment for me in which I began to ask questions such as: what defines a gallery space and makes it immediately recognizable? Why was art reserved for

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galleries and museums? Why weren’t more entrance ways full of art? What happens when art interrupts the function of a space? What happens when art disassembles and remakes space?

Several of Mitchell’s textile enclosures have a rudimentary similarity: they are all installations in which Mitchell covers the walls with reclaimed textiles. *The Finger of Craft* is an example, as are installations such as *The Granny Rec Room* (2005–present), and *Hungry Purse: The Vagina Dentata in Late Capitalism*. The latter most of these, *Hungry Purse: The Vagina Dentata in Late Capitalism*, was first shown in conjunction with the Toronto Alternative Art Fair International in 2006. Since then, it has been resurrected and revived numerous times, perhaps most significantly in 2007 at the Textile Museum of Canada, in Toronto.

If, as O’Doherty claims, the modernist museum space is the domain of the disembodied ‘Eye,’ that impatient entity that ravages paintings and ogles sculptures, then Mitchell’s *Hungry Purse* posed a formidable confrontation, pushing the ‘Eye’ back into the body, forcing it to inhabit the itchy finger tips of the visitor. Only once visitors had entered the space through the textile tunnel comprised of rose coloured quilted comforters, hot pink floral sheets, and frilly coral curtains, and had turned around, did they see that the doorway was a giant fabric vulva (Figure 3.5). While Wilding’s *Wombroom* imagined a magical primordial space full of dark intricacies comprised of sinuous webbing and delicate knots, Mitchell’s womb room encouraged a completely opposite experience. *Hungry Purse* was an explosive combination of textiles and colour; the walls covered by a patchwork of warm orangey-yellow shag rug, the floor a comfy beige long pile carpet, and the ceiling an overwhelming agglomeration of crocheted and knitted cushions. The pillowy ceiling is reminiscent of pleated waves surging and breaking against the rigid confines of the white walls, present still beneath the skin of shag carpet, obliterating their barrier (Figure 3.6). In fact, in one corner, the cushions spilled over, sliding down the wall to
pool on the floor, providing visitors with a dreamy lounging opportunity. In the adjacent corner sat a shaggy throne-like chair, two grey owls perched on branches peered out of the upholstered back. Taking residence next to the woodsy throne, two fluffy critters sat on pillbox seats, while on the wall directly above them, two pink goat-like creatures protrude from the shoulders up (Figure 3.7).

While taxidermied busts of slain animals are macabre trophies associated with masculinity and conquest, Mitchell’s furry fantastical creatures look as though they’ve stepped part way through a flaming shag rug veil, intact and animated. Busts of dead animals can be quite terrifying in their frozen verisimilitude of life, but Mitchell’s fluffy pink creatures seemed comforting as they preened bashfully as if caught mid-action. They had the potential to inspire in visitors a sense of fascinated jubilation, as though chancing upon an undocumented mythological creature somehow forgotten by bestiaries and storybooks. Mitchell’s pink busts were an ironic gesture; just as the iconic animal trophies are typically associated with the exclusively male space of the Victorian gentlemen’s smoking parlour or hunting lodge, Mitchell’s busts alternately suggest a female connection with animals and nature focusing on life instead of death, collaboration instead of conquest. In her installation, Ladies Sasquatch, Mitchell refers to the pink creatures that frolic and roam with the Sasquatches as familiars. The Ladies Sasquatch familiars bear a striking resemblance to the two Hungry Purse busts, and I suggest that by recalling one of the most stigmatized stereotypes of femininity in conjunction with nature – the witch and her familiar – Mitchell effectively queers the hyper-masculine trophy bust, adding to the vulvacentric nature of the space created in Hungry Purse.

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Not surprisingly, Mitchell cites the late Mike Kelley as one of her artistic influences.\(^{88}\) Kelley, an American artist, was famous for his interdisciplinary practice which included performance, video and installation art, as well as textile banners and found object sculpture. His most notorious found object sculptures were canvases covered in hand-made dolls and worn teddy bears, as well as masses of conglomerated stuffed animals of similar colours suspended from ceilings like punching bags. The similarities between Mitchell’s work and Kelley’s work are striking: both artists work with found second-hand craft and textiles, neither artist makes the crafts or textiles themselves, both artists use these materials because of their ‘everydayness’ to illicit a recognition and comfort in the viewer, and both artists make a comment on the economy of labour associated with handmade crafts.\(^{89}\) But, while Mitchell opts for the maximalist approach and kicks the kitschy craft aesthetic into overdrive, purposefully aiming to overstimulate the viewer and exploit the tactility of the materials she works with, Kelley expressed frustration when viewers failed to grasp the conceptual message behind his found craft object sculptures, focusing instead on the emotive qualities of the work. For example, one of Kelley’s most famous found object sculptures, *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* (1987), was about the object as commodity and the economy of handmade gifts (Figure 3.8). With this work, Kelley established that the notion of the ‘labour of love’ and the idea of making objects by hand to give as a gift are fundamentally working-class, suggesting that middle and upper-class individuals would instead equate how much money was spent on an object with how

\(^{88}\) Allyson Mitchell, Interview by Julie Hollenbach, April 18\(^{th}\), 2012 at the Artist’s Home. Interview transcript and audio recording in the possession of the author.

\(^{89}\) In an interview with Sarah E. K. Smith published for the *Brain Child* exhibition at the Union Gallery in Kingston, Ontario in 2008, Mitchell stated, “I position myself happily in between maker and viewer of the textile materials I use, … I work with [textiles] as found materials. I sculpt them and make them into objects. I rip them apart and sew them together, but like a painter doesn’t make her paint, or a film maker doesn’t make her film stock, I don’t make my raw materials.” Allyson Mitchell, “Brain Child: Interrogating Contemporary Feminisms,” *Brain Child*, interview by Sarah E. K. Smith, exhibition catalog (Kingston: Union Gallery, 2008), 5.
much love it signified.\textsuperscript{90} When the work was displayed, viewers interpreted the smorgasbord of hand stitched dolls and crocheted teddy bears lumped together as either a comment on ‘the perfect childhood’ or an idealized domestic space, or on the opposite end of the spectrum, as a work about trauma, broken homes or child abuse.\textsuperscript{91} Confounded, Kelley eventually stopped incorporating handmade kitsch and craft objects into his work and moved toward video, performance and installation art.

Kelley is an interesting artist to bring into a discussion of craft materiality and feminist material aesthetics because of his contradictory position. Where many feminist artists, Mitchell included, have historically opted to move through textiles and craft-based mediums to express their politics in art, Kelley resisted these associations, saying, “I’ve been accused of being just another man co-opting feminist art. Well, I refuse to say that knitting is only for women. That’s sexist. It’s just as much mine as theirs, because whether it’s men or women that are supposed to knit is [sic] totally random.”\textsuperscript{92} In contrast to the numerous feminist artists who were using textiles in their art to convey embodied experience and tactile knowledge sharing, Kelley aligned himself with the modernist tradition of taking a purely aesthetic approach to textiles and craft, following the example of modernist artists like Mondrian who lauded quilts for their geometric patterns and minimalist formal qualities, ignoring completely their sensual tactility and practical function.\textsuperscript{93} And though Kelley claimed to use found craft objects for their everyday qualities to appeal to the viewer’s sense of familiarity, he resisted the viewer’s interpretive prerogative, becoming sulky

\textsuperscript{92} Glenn Adamson, Thinking Through Craft, 160.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 5.
when his artistic intention was not privileged.\textsuperscript{94} Despite commenting on class and the degraded status of craft within cultural hierarchies, Kelley ascribed to the machismo stereotype of the 80s bad-boy artist, ultimately positioning himself as the creator of knowledge, and the viewer as the passive receptacle.

In \textit{Hungry Purse: The Vagina Dentata in Late Capitalism} and Mitchell’s other textile enclosures, she attempts to speak to the experiences of the visitor, recognizing that no one comes to art works empty of memories, biases and personal politics. And just as people have pasts that shape their interpretation of an art work, so too do objects have a past which informs the meaning of the work, and effects the relationship the visitor has with the space. Janis Jefferies writes beautifully about how everyday objects enchant us; she states, “objects which might appear to be common place have a history of particular times and places: the domestic space of childhood clutter and lovers’ mantelshelves, charity shops and car boot sales seduce me, at least, into intimate scenarios of memory and reminiscence.”\textsuperscript{95} Mitchell’s collection of textiles, with its past lives, may affectively enact the same fantasy of intimate recognition described by Jefferies, within the viewer.

In the previous chapter, I discussed how Mitchell’s work \textit{A Girl’s Journey to the Well of Forbidden Knowledge} fits into projects to create alternative lesbian archives that chronicle the broad spectrum of lesbian experience which might otherwise go undocumented. While \textit{A Girl’s Journey} can be understood as a direct reference to an archive that exists, Mitchell has repeatedly referenced the idea of alternative archives in many subtle ways in a number of her works. During the interview I conducted with Mitchell in 2012, she mentioned in passing that “the ceiling of


Hungry Purse becomes a kind of archive,” and that “the walls of the Menstrual Hut Cinema which are made from rug hookings are an archive of those middle class/working class craft kits from the 1970s.”96 Mitchell gathers her crafted textiles by scouring thrift stores and second-hand charity shops, rescuing half-finished or shoddily made projects, and reclaiming discarded and abandoned hand-made gifts. In an interview with the Haligonian newspaper The Coast, Mitchell discusses her reclamation of second-hand textiles:

‘It’s about the massive amounts of stuff, materials, products. I know that I can go into a thrift store anywhere in Canada and find things that people have discarded. Whether it’s Montreal or Halifax or Calgary, I know I can find some things that look like this,’ She says as she points to the pile on the table. ‘It’s about consumer practices, how much shit there is, but it’s also about domestic crafts. It seems really sad, too, because someone put all this time and effort and energy and it’s abandoned. I wonder if it’s because the person died or if the craft did what it needed to do. I think of lonely, isolated women in front of the TV making something like this.’97

Sarah Quinton, Curatorial Director at the Textile Museum of Canada, suggested that Hungry Purse: The Vagina Dentata in Late Capitalism was a comment on our societies’ shopping addictions, credit card debt, and glutinous consumption habits.98 In this way, Mitchell’s

96 Allyson Mitchell, Interview by Julie Hollenbach, April 18th, 2012 at the Artist’s Home. Interview transcript and audio recording in the possession of the author.
98 Quote by Sarah Quinton generously provided by Allyson Mitchell in an email correspondence, November 25, 2012. “From floor to ceiling, folds of large pink pillows, soft drapes and carpeting comfort and cocoon. At the same time, the installation creates feelings of unease as the participant confronts their fears of claustrophobia, genitalia, mortality and appetites. Hungry Purse refers to 21st-century addictions to consumption that result in credit card debt, over-shopping, and the lines of credit that swallow people up and overtax nature. Mitchell’s commitment to reworking found textiles and handicrafts is a comment upon the excessive availability of second-hand goods that are loaded with emotion and sentimentality, to erect an ‘other’ space from which the vagina dentata can be considered, accepted and literally moved through. Pinker than pink, the Hungry Purse is a symbol of the opposing virtues of femininity and ‘girl power’. It is a rumpus room and a vortex womb - an affirmation of the feminized body.”
commitment to recycling hand-made textiles can be understood as a disavowal of wasteful consumerism and the devaluing of handicrafts within a capitalist economy. There is also an emotional economy at work; through coming into contact with the repurposed mass-produced blankets, hand crocheted cushions, knitted blankets, afghans and stitched granny-square throws, visitors to Mitchell’s enclosures may have strong feelings of recognition and familiarity as they encounter these domestic, homey textiles. This tactile textiles collection acts as an embodied archive, referencing both the visitor’s unique sensual memories of encounters with textiles, and popular culture associations of these materials with ideas of domesticity and “home.”

Mitchell purposefully conjures the sense of familiarity through her materials. As stated in the introduction to this chapter, Mitchell’s use of everyday crafted textiles is a sophisticated strategy to coax gallery go-ers into engaging with the feminist content of the work. Mitchell states, “To be able to entrance someone to walk into a room that is a giant vagina requires a certain diplomacy, tactility, and cunning that textiles allow.” In affording visitor’s the space to engage with the playful material aspect of her work, Mitchell avoids turning people off and shutting people down to the radical message she suggests.

The balance between the familiarity and domestic comfort a visitor can feel, and the radical message that might challenge a visitor’s politics and lead to consciousness raising, is a delicate one. During my interview with Mitchell, I recounted an experience I had, in which I was talking about my project and my interest in Mitchell’s work with someone who was only superficially familiar with her oeuvre. The following section from the interview, which I will include here unabridged and at length, demonstrates the precarious nature of the comfort/discomfort balance in Mitchell’s work.

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Julie Hollenbach: I think what I really take away from your work is the accessibility. That people can approach it with no knowledge or with a lot of knowledge and still find things to take away, and that it can be on their own terms. And there’s a lot of interpretation that people can do a lot with. I was having a conversation with someone who didn’t really understand what I was talking about with queer craft and, was really lovely, but just really didn’t understand, and I was showing her images, and I was trying to articulate my thoughts, (I was talking a lot about domestic materials, and this idea of comfort and that we’re not used to feeling comfortable in galleries, that galleries are a structured space that I find incredibly uncomfortable, and so the idea of making these spaces into comfortable, habitable spaces is significant): And her response was, ‘but I think that I would be uncomfortable.’ That juxtaposition, that dynamic, between comfortable and uncomfortable and the challenge of having something comfortable, and tactile, and lovely, that you want to touch, be challenging and uncomfortable.

Allyson Mitchell: That’s the magic, if you can hit that sweet spot, that’s the thing. How I try to do that is by, you know, by the familiarity, so people immediately personalize that Hungry Purse ceiling. When people walk into that space, they immediately personalize elements of that installation. ‘My aunt had that pillow’ or ‘oh my god, my mom had that carpet.’ So, there’s that kind of thing that’s part of the accessibility, but trying to make it not be comfortable is about amassing, not only the form, (I don’t know if that’s the proper language to use when talking about art but), the content, that it is a giant vulva, or it’s lesbian feminist sasquatches, or it’s a menstrual hut cinema, so there the title is really important to point that this is what this is that you’re entering, and one place where the Hungry Purse was put up, on the identifier they just put ‘Hungry Purse, by Allyson Mitchell’ and I was like, ‘uh-uh’ (finger wag) you gotta put Hungry Purse: The Vagina Dentata in Late Capitalism. That’s the whole point. Anyway, part of the accessibility is the childish, toyish element, the colours are super bright, they’re not austere or severe.100

This segment concludes with Mitchell emphasising the important role that the title plays in the overall meaning and reception of the piece. In naming her work Hungry Purse: The Vagina

100 Allyson Mitchell, Interview by Julie Hollenbach, April 18th, 2012 at the Artist’s Home. Interview transcript and audio recording in the possession of the author.
*Dentata in Late Capitalism* Mitchell squashes any squeamish attempts that visitors may make to avert eyes or pretend that they are not standing in a giant womb room complete with a vaginal entrance crowned by a great, colourful textiles clitoris. The title also draws a link between the materials of the installation and systems of labour, as well as hand-made objects versus commodities in a capitalist culture where ‘used’ is a dirty word.

**Menstrual Hut, Sweet Menstrual Hut**

The tenuous juxtaposition between comfort and discomfort is present in another of Mitchell’s textile enclosures titled *Menstrual Hut, Sweet Menstrual Hut*. This work has been revisited several times over the years; however, in its first incarnation it was shown in the project room of the Union Gallery alongside Mitchell’s installation of her ‘femme savant’ ceramic girl army *Brain Child* in 2008 (Figures 3.9).

At first the pairing of *Brain Child* in the main gallery, consisting of two curly-que lines of cutesy ceramic girl sculptures marching toward a giant crocheted afghan brain, with the intimate close-quarters textile enclosure of *Menstrual Hut, Sweet Menstrual Hut* might seem odd. However, both of these pieces re-crafted phenomenons and associations that had been historically negatively attributed to females or femininity, and transformed them into a positive celebration, and an opportunity toward community building and empowerment.

Placed on the grey, concrete floor of the Union gallery, the chubby-cheeked ceramic girls marched in two lines that spiralled out; smaller at the outset and growing in size as they neared the looming, suspended afghan brain. Much like the processional line of the ceramic girls, the inspiration for *Brain Child* grew gradually. In an interview with Sarah E. K. Smith, Mitchell

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describes the process of finding these highly stylized, bonnet-ed, ceramic girls in thrift stores, and over the years amassing a collection that included numerous multiples of the same form, each painted uniquely.\textsuperscript{102} Mitchell elaborates on this process:

About a quarter of the ceramic girls in the \textit{Brain Child} installation were found in thrift stores. Women made them in the 1970s in home studios at a time when there was a surge of popularity in kit-based craft practice. It is interesting to me when everyday, working class people access creativity through mass-produced kits in predetermined shapes, forms and images. Specifically, I am interested in what they do within these parameters. Even if I have four of the ceramic girls that are exactly the same, the way their eyes are painted on and the way their dresses are done is completely different.\textsuperscript{103}

The 1970s were a tumultuous time (with the Vietnam war, the Civil Rights movement, and the Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement), and it is unsurprising that middle-America responded to this crisis of national identity with a strong emphasis on conservative family values and patriotism.\textsuperscript{104} The cutesy-kitsch ceramic girl figurines of \textit{Brain Child} were a product of the reactionary turn toward a nostalgic, idealized golden-age, resurrecting pioneer times as an idealized moment to serve as a conservative model.\textsuperscript{105} Innocent and naïve, the girlish figurines were debased and infantilized in their portrayal; holding baskets of food, knitting needles or other domestic objects, the following patronising saying comes to mind, “don’t you worry your pretty little head about it.” But Mitchell did just that. She powerfully ‘worried’ the infantilized representation of youthful femininity, insisting that those big bonnets weren’t full of air, instead suggesting that they covered super-brilliant big brains. In this installation, she created a separatist

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
secret society of girl-geniuses, powerful in their numbers, coming together in a mysterious ritual that celebrated the special, unique intelligence of girls and girl-culture.

Leading off the ceremonial space of girl-genius in the main gallery, *Menstrual Hut, Sweet Menstrual Hut* was an intimate soft environment constructed for down-time, bodily comfort and reprieve (Figure 3.10). Where *Hungry Purse: The Vagina Dentata in Late Capitalism* very literally referenced female genitalia in the creation of a womb-like vulvic space, *Menstrual Hut, Sweet Menstrual Hut* queered the historic phenomenon of the forced segregationist space of the menstrual hut. Mitchell acknowledged that while she was not a “menstrual hut scholar,” her intention with this work was to flip the negative associations that stigmatize menstruation as dirty, shameful or secret.106

While most women in North America and Europe are not segregated during their menstrual cycle, menstruating is still something of a taboo as evidenced by feminine hygiene products that market their discreet packaging by claiming it resembles candy, suggesting that now no one will suspect the ‘real reason’ for a washroom visit.107 In other parts of the world, such as the Indonesian province of Seram, Hualu women spend their menstrual cycles segregated in a hut on the outskirts of the town.108 The Hualu view menstruation as a blood pollution, and during the time of a woman’s menarche she is prohibited from preparing or eating big game, she is required to bathe separately and must not engage in intercourse. Menstruating Hualu women congregate

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and spend their days in a special hut, which men must not enter, touch, or look in the windows of.\textsuperscript{109} This means that menstruating women build and repair the hut, clean it, furnish it, cook in it, sleep in it and give birth in it. Men often articulate begrudging contempt, and suspicions that their wives and daughters are exaggerating the length of their menstrual cycles in order to avoid chores and duties, and fearful that their wives and daughters are laughing at them behind their backs.\textsuperscript{110} While this space is viewed as a quarantined area, and menstruating women are treated by men with suspicion and fear, the time spent inside the menstrual hut for a woman is often pleasant, and comes as a welcome reprieve filled with singing and storytelling.

Similarly, Mitchell’s \textit{Menstrual Hut, Sweet Menstrual Hut} was meant to be a space of gentle comforts, easy lounging and meaningful social interactions. Just as with \textit{Hungry Purse: The Vagina Dentate in Late Capitalism}, the white walls were bombarded with textiles, and the gallery space was transformed into a hooked rug lair. The ceiling of the \textit{Menstrual Hut} consisted of a mish-mash of crocheted afghans which were stitched together. The light fixtures above were concealed, though light delicately punched through the lacy holes of the afghans, creating a half-lit space lined with patterned shadows. Cushions and pillows, displaying a clash of colours and patterns, covered the entirety of the back wall. In the centre of this back wall, surrounded by a dusty teal frill, a shaggy calico kitty face peaked out. Along the back wall, and the wall on the right, more cushions and pillows rested on the beige and brown long-pile carpet, begging to be arranged into a comfortable nest. These pillows faced the left wall, which was a patch-work collection of hooked rugs all depicting scenes or objects, their materiality displaying a variety of skill levels. Set in the middle of the wall, a flat screen TV interrupted the hooked rugs and displayed Mitchell’s video piece \textit{Afghanimation (2008)} on loop.

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 319.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 324.
Inspired by Joyce Wieland’s anti-war video *Rat Life and Diet in North America* (1968), *Afghanimation* shows Mitchell slowly covering an Afghan war rug depicting a kneeling girl, grenades, bombs and tanks (Figure 3.11). Mitchell works to cover the intricate war rug with crocheted granny squares, accompanied by thematic music from MIA (*Paper Planes* (2008)) and the Cranberries (*Zombie* (1994)). Throughout the video, propagandist phrases flash on the screen. This piece critiqued how Canadians were complicit to acts of violence carried out by their government, allowing the media to create a palatable, cushioned account of the war. The act of slowly covering the war rug – with its representation of weapons and its suggestion of violence – was described by Mitchell as a metaphor for suffocation of the real lived stories of the people who were being devastated and effected by the war. The inclusion of this challenging video in a space so contingent on bodily comfort and leisure is poignant, it emphasises the reality that the viewer, in order to watch the video, is in a comfortable, resting position. It becomes hard not to take Mitchell’s critique to heart.

Of the hooked rugs on the left wall one showed a rainbow with a sinewy coniferous tree beside it, another depicted a girl sitting on a stool, while another presented an upside down grandfather clock with golden swinging pendulums. This last hooked rug, depicting an upside down grandfather clock, is a poignant metaphor for the queering of space engendered by *Menstrual Hut, Sweet Menstrual Hut*. Here, the patriarchal domestic symbol of the grandfather clock is turned on its head, signalling that in this domestic, homely space, a different order of power was at work. While Mitchell’s *Menstrual Hut* was not an exclusionary space; and people of all genders were welcomed inside, it powerfully challenged the patriarchy of the conservative

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112 Ibid., 14.
plutonic family house-hold, and by extension, the modernist gallery space, supplanting the hetero-patriarchal structure with the belly-laugh of a matriarchal framework.

This blurring of gendered divides is an important link between *Brain Child* in the main gallery and *Menstrual Hut* in the project room. Mitchell laughingly draws a comparison between the ceramic Brain Children and Utah polygamists with their long skirts and bonnets, creating a segregationist secret society built around innate female intelligence. These little girls made to appear so dependent and small in their singular-ness, or to use Mitchell’s metaphor, these polygamous wives, have been freed from their patriarchal binds and now find comfort and community in each other. The allusion to a utopian lesbian segregationist society certainly exists. Unlike many utopian female-only spaces that draw a line excluding non-biological women (such as the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival), Mitchell envisions the *Brain Child* secret society as “joining allied forces with their transgendered and transsexual sisters in a community based on subversion.” But Mitchell complicates things further; instead of creating an easy and linear didactic message about female empowerment, she opened *Menstrual Hut, Sweet Menstrual Hut* to people of all genders. With these two gestures – *Menstrual Hut, Sweet Menstrual Hut* and *Brain Child* – Mitchell queers boundaries of cultural taboos and expectations, uniting women across the boundaries of biological and cultural gender, and sexual preference. Regarding this, she said:

> I doubt it occurs to people that they are in a menstrual hut until they read a sign that I posted by the door reading ‘*Menstrual Hut, Sweet Menstrual Hut.*’ So it is not until you are actually in the menstrual hut and turned around that the meaning of the space is revealed. Then you can make the decision to stay in this symbolic female-only space or get the hell out – but even if you get out, you’ve still been inside, so it’s too late! It works like a Trojan horse. I feel that an experience like this can break down

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113 Ibid., 8.
114 Ibid.
boundaries of social appropriateness. The Hut can open up people’s ideas and minds in a sense, and laughter is a great leveller. Humor cajoles people to respond – even the grumpiest person. That is the best kind of effect I could imagine.\textsuperscript{115}

This quote ends by discussing how humour functions as a destabilizing tool that gently and painlessly allows people to renegotiate their politics. Many people who visited the Menstrual Hut may have gotten cozy in the child-fort space, watched Afghanimation, giggled at the absurdity of a hyper-textile space on over-drive, lounged and lingered amongst the cushions, or even talked to perfect strangers. In doing so, they would have participated in a very unusual, anti-modernist, un-white cube experience in a gallery space. While visitors may or may not have taken on board Mitchell’s political messages, the simple appeal of the tactile, haptic environment, effectively erasing the white cube vacuum, would have been an impressive spectacle worth remembering.

This returns us to the important topic of comfort and discomfort, the familiar and intimate opposed to the foreign and challenging. As I’ve demonstrated through my discussions of Mitchell’s bright and vibrant environments in this chapter, her work functions to ‘make at home’ the gallery visitor; easing them with soft comfort, exciting them with bright colours and playful imagery, and enchanting them with the opportunity to participate in a playful space where adults (and children) can creatively imagine themselves out of ‘the real world.’ While Mitchell’s work is lovely and accessible, she does not simply propose glossy celebratory messages that smack with a sticky-sweet positivist aftertaste – messages such as; “Fat is Beautiful!” or “Gay is Great!” These catchphrases, emblematic of Pride politics, fall short of a fleshed-out critique that challenges the oppressive power structures within our society that create phobic, intolerant

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 9-10.
circumstances. These catchy slogans are too good to be true, and all too easy to dismiss. Mitchell comments on this directly, saying,

Pride politics … fall flat because the sentiment is too singular. I think that if you really want to create significant social change you have to recognize that with pride comes shame. I like being really open about that shame in my practice. There is a pride and shame whirlpool encompassing queer fat bodies for me. The beautiful exists simultaneously with the ugly.\(^{116}\)

The pride and shame whirlpool articulated here by Mitchell, goes hand in hand with the comfort and discomfort paradox present in her work.

When I spoke with Mitchell earlier this year about *Menstrual Hut, Sweet Menstrual Hut* and *Hungry Purse*, as well as her other enclosures, I came with preconceived notions of the bodily experience of making and installing the works as cathartic rituals that exorcized dark, murky feelings. Feelings such as anger, sadness, hopelessness, frustration and a deep dissatisfaction. In talking to Mitchell, it became clear that these feelings were my own, and that her works dealt with queerness and fatness from a place which moved beyond the reconciliatory notion of catharsis as a healing or reparative gesture, toward politics which understood the “dark shit” as being intrinsic to effervescent, radical destabilizing actions. Because this point is so important, I would like to share the main section of that conversation at length here, before drawing this chapter to a close.

Julie Hollenbach: Is it safe to say that there’s a heavy element of nostalgia in your work?

Allyson Mitchell: Yeah, it’s very heavy. And the heavy element is the thing that’s horrific. So, when you say, ‘Is there a heavy element?’ The heavy part is the part of sadness, depression, eating disorders, disappointment and failure. –I feel like that’s the heavy, even though there’s all these manic bright colours,\(^{116}\) Ibid., 6-7.
and this tactility that is soft to the touch, but it’s also, what Ann Cvetkovich sort of coined my phrase in that essay in the *Ladies Sasquatch* [catalogue] is ‘touching the monster.’ It’s not a nostalgia that’s about protection, it’s a nostalgia about– or, I don’t even know if nostalgia is the right word, but, it’s a tactility that allows you to go there. To deal with the shit of queer shame, the shit of eating disorders, all that shame stuff. The shame of privilege. The shame of implications of power structures. Not just victim-y things, but being the perpetrator.

**JH:** Being on the other side. So then, because it’s time consuming labour, and it’s labour with your hands, I feel as though–

**AM:** It’s super time consuming. And it’s physically exhausting– it also hurts my body. You know, like, stitching that ceiling for the *Hungry Purse* meant– well, before when I first did it, it was pillow case staple gunned to the ceiling, which meant standing on a ladder for six hours staple gunning with my hand above my head– I would wake up in the middle of the night with a fist of steel. It’s painful. Or working on that ceiling, the only way I can– you can get a table big enough, it has to be stretched out, pull out and staple the edges onto the floor and sit on the ground, on the cement ground, stooped over for hours sewing it together. So, I feel it in my hips, in my butt, in my calves, and– but I am compulsed to do it. I love doing it. Sometimes, I require distractions; sometimes I listen to *This American Life* podcasts, or something, because it’s too much.

**JH:** Sometimes with heavy things, like that heavy nostalgia that we’re talking about, if it’s in kind of, and maybe trauma’s not the right word, but, dealing with depression or those sort of heavier–

**AM:** Scary.

**JH:** –Scarier things. Is it cathartic then to feeling that, or to be– is it kind of a cleansing?

**AM:** That’s a really good question, and I would have thought… and I might have said yes, a few years ago, but I really think no, it’s not cathartic. I don’t really think there is such a thing as catharsis, where you do something and it purges it out of you. I don’t think that goes away. I think it all stays with you, all the time. And I think that, when I first started doing Pretty Porky and Pissed Off, it was an attempt to cathartically work through a lot of issues around body, and shame, and food, and agony, and family, and all that kind of stuff, and I don’t think it made
anything go away. It changed things, it certainly changed things. Politicizing something, changes it. Moving it into a community – rather than an individual, isolated experience – changes it. And then I thought that if I work on my dissertation, as an academic, if I delved into this issue around looking at how bodies are theorized, and experienced, and known– after I write two hundred pages in a dissertation, then maybe I’ll have figured out– I wove myself into it, I came out about having an eating disorder, I talked about Pretty Porky and Pissed Off, theorized that, and thought ‘Okay, when that’s written, it’s gonna go away.’ And, yes, I mean feel better, yes, that happens all the time, but it’s not this linear progression of ‘it’s getting better, it’s getting better, it’s getting better.’ It’s more like it just moves to different places, or explodes in a different area, or comes up out of the ground somewhere else. I don’t think that the narrative of catharsis, or ‘it goes away,’ …I don’t know if I believe in that anymore.117

Here, Mitchell touches on deep seated fears and shames; the shame of eating disorders, the shame of the unruly fat, queer body, the shame of victimization, and the shame of perpetrating oppression. There is no straight forward self-victimization, instead, Mitchell expresses a complex, layered queer subjectivity implicated in the oppressive structures that simultaneously enact a violence on her. She points to the physicality of her work, the punishing toll it takes on her body, but refuses the reading of such arduous labour as cathartic and redemptive. She complicates her relationship to the materials of her work, suggesting that her material process requires attention while also demanding mental distance and escape. This is no happy hobby pastime that relieves her or makes her feel better. These textile enclosures are not to be read as a labour of love.

In conclusion, I’d like to draw on a discussion Judith Halberstam has about failure and “conventional understandings of success” in the introduction to her puissant book; The Queer Art

117 Allyson Mitchell, Interview by Julie Hollenbach, April 18th, 2012 at the Artist’s Home. Interview transcript and audio recording in the possession of the author.
In her text, Halberstam suggests that losing, forgetting, undoing (and other facets of failure), offer opportunities to live creatively outside the lines drawn for us. In the second chapter of this thesis, I discussed Halberstam’s ideas of ‘Queer Time’ and ‘Queer Space’ as concepts in opposition to the hetero-normative structuring of reproductive time which drives the societal impetus to accrue the symbols of a successful life: money, houses, spouse(s), and child(ren). In letting go of expectations of ‘success,’ in allowing ourselves to slip out of the strait-jacket of normative societal standards, and in embracing failure as a disavowal of postmodern, neo-liberal subjectivity, we open ourselves up to surprising, unpredictable modes of being.

Mitchell stated above that “Politicizing something, changes it. Moving it into a community – rather than an individual, isolated experience – changes it.” In sharing her pride, and its dark other shame, Mitchell dismantles the idea of the successful artist as genius, the impersonal public figure as representative of correct achievement, and the queer subject as politically-correct token within our conservative society. Mitchell gifts the visitor with the opportunity to not only enter into a conversation with themselves about personal politics and ideologies, but provides an opportunity to do so in a soft space that others might share; creating a potentially spontaneous collaborative, cooperative consciousness raising event. In giving shame a place that is both beautiful and garish, and in making the humanity of failure a lovely expression of growth, Mitchell queerly crafts spaces that interrupt the triumphant narrative of success espoused by museum and gallery spaces, ultimately facilitating a comfortably uncomfortable or uncomfortably comfortable experience.

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119 Ibid., 6.
Figure 3.1 *Your body is a battleground*, Barbara Kruger, 1989.

Source: Barbara Kruger’s Website.
Figure 3.2 *WombRoom*, Faith Wilding. Here recreated in 1996 at the Bronx Museum, New York.

Source: Faith Wilding’s Website.
http://faithwilding.refugia.net/wombroom.html.
Figure 3.3 *Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?* The Guerilla Girls, Billboard, 1989.

Source: Guerilla Girls Website.
Figure 3.4 *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk*, Andrea Fraser, Performance, 1989.

Source: WhiteHot Magazine.
Figure 3.5 Doorway Detail: *Hungry Purse: The Vagina Dentata in Late Capitalism*, Allyson Mitchell, Textile Museum of Canada, 2007.

Source: Digital Media Tree Blog.  
Figure 3.6 Hungry Purse: The Vagina Dentata in Late Capitalism, Allyson Mitchell, Textile Museum of Canada, 2007.

Source: Digital Media Tree Blog.  
Figure 3.7 Detail: *Hungry Purse: The Vagina Dentata in Late Capitalism*, Allyson Mitchell, Textile Museum of Canada, 2007.

Source: Digital Media Tree Blog.
http://www.digitalmediatree.com/sallymckav/pageforward/42756/.

Source: Phaidon.  
Figure 3.9 *Brain Child*, Allyson Mitchell, Union Gallery, 2008.

Figure 3.10 Menstrual Hut, Sweet Menstrual Hut, Allyson Mitchell, Union Gallery, 2008.

Source: Jocelyn Purdie (Director), Union Gallery, Kingston, Ontario.
Figure 3.11 Still from: *Afghanimation*, Allyson Mitchell, Video, 2008.

Source: Canadian Art Magazine Online.
http://www.canadianart.ca/see-it/2009/11/05/war/.
Chapter 4

Ladies Sasquatch: Decolonizing Our Imaginations

[Allyson] Mitchell’s brilliance lies in a critical ability to engage our senses and emotions in a seductive enchantment with the visual and tactile at the same time as she is able to fill that seduction with the empowering dialogue of history and theory.
– Carol Podedworny 120

Allyson Mitchell is best known for the large scale installation of her monstrous textile sculptures, \textit{Ladies Sasquatch}. Opening at the McMaster Museum of Art in March 2009, the major touring exhibition traveled to the Winnipeg Art Gallery in Manitoba, the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery in Alberta, and concluded at the Art Gallery of Peterborough in Ontario, in March of 2010. Because \textit{Ladies Sasquatch} is an ongoing project, and its display configuration changes each time it is shown, this discussion of the work focuses on its 2009-2010 touring manifestation.

Many scholars and critics have written about \textit{Ladies Sasquatch} focusing on the work’s subversion of myths of femininity and female sexuality, heteronormativity, and fat phobia within mainstream culture.121 Others have concentrated on the work’s success at creating a queered visual language, and more importantly, making visible lesbian representation.122 While many have theorized about the obvious queer critique present in the work, few have investigated the critique of colonialism and Canadian nationalism inherent in the piece. This chapter positions

Mitchell’s *Ladies Sasquatch* as a powerful decolonizing project by theorizing its ability to interrupt the museum space, effectively denaturalizing narratives that privilege colonial heteronationalism and interrupting settler fantasies that erase Indigenous peoples. I discuss the institutional critique of scholars who establish and define the ways in which museum spaces are complicit in colonialism and nationalistic agendas. Ruth Phillips, for example, writes that museum spaces “create domains of inclusion and exclusion that continue to inscribe colonial attitudes about race, patriarchal ideas about gender, and elitist notions of class.” In combatting the exclusionary tactics of the museum space and the ideological frameworks which create them, I suggest that *Ladies Sasquatch*’s potential to break boundaries and create habitable, queered spaces that facilitate community development. In doing so, I propose that *Ladies Sasquatch* is a playful act of resistance that creates oppositional narratives that function to decolonize our physical, psychic and emotional space, while also creating new imaginings that undermine the status quo.

As a non-Native queer scholar writing about a non-Native lesbian artist’s critique of settler society’s appropriation of Indigenous imagery, I am aware of both the art work’s and my chapter’s dangerous potential to further anthropologize Indigenous cultures. Indigenous curator Deborah Doxtator has warned that non-Native allies to decolonizing projects must resist the urge to display or present Indigenous peoples and cultures, even when it is meant as a positive, affirmative gesture, desiring to showcase Indigenous culture. Doxtator suggests that this action further perpetuates colonial violence by compartmentalizing Indigenous culture within a settler

framework. Andrea Smith calls this the “ethnographic imperative” in which non-Natives attempt to make Indigenous communities knowable. In her book *Native Americans and the Christian Right*, Smith defines her project as a strategic looking away from Native peoples as her subject; instead she focuses on explaining and transforming our world as it is defined by settler colonialism. In this vein, Doxtator insists that it is the responsibility of non-Native people, and settler society as a whole, to educate itself and examine its colonial legacy. I hope to engage with Mitchell’s *Ladies Sasquatch* in a manner that turns the focus away from the Indigenous folklore that the piece references, and focus on the way in which settler society appropriates images of Indigeneity to perpetuate specific nationalistic narratives.

**Ladies Sasquatch**

When I met with Mitchell in April of 2012, I asked her about the inspiration behind *Ladies Sasquatch* and what the creation process was like. Viewing a chronological survey of Mitchell’s work on her website led me to create a neat narrative in my mind that placed ‘the beginning’ of the Sasquatches with the first appearance of the Lesbian monsters in Mitchell’s furry and deliciously colourful two-dimensional works. This turned out not to be the case. In fact, the process of their inception was multifaceted and simultaneous. In the early half of the 2000s, Mitchell was creating two-dimensional images, such as *It Ain’t Gonna Lick Itself* (Figure 4.1), which were representations of fat, sexy, Sasquatches at play, made from vividly coloured fun fur

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126 Deborah Doxtator, “The Implications of Canadian Nationalism for Aboriginal Cultural Autonomy,” 60.
and shag rugs, at the same time as she building her first large scale sculpture, a fuzzy orangey-brown carpeted woman entitled *Big Trubs* (Figure 4.2). These early works display Mitchell’s propensity to engage playfully with queer and Lesbian issues, questioning normative constructions of gender and sexuality in Western society, while also critiquing popular culture’s narrow palette in putting forth white, thin, hairless bodies as the only sexy, desirable bodies. These early works clearly show Mitchell’s puckish subversion of the *Playboy* centrefolds which she took her inspiration from.

The Sasquatches were created slowly over the next five years until there were six in total; the final Sasquatches were created especially for the 2009 touring exhibition. Constructed from an amalgamation of reclaimed textiles such as furniture upholstery, shag carpets, curtains, afghans, and of course, fun fur, Mitchell used chicken wire, Styrofoam, wood and a variety of other materials to create her larger than life Shebaccas.

Each Sasquatch is individually named and crafted; each has its own personality and unique physical attributes. *Midge* squats, legs spread, her arms raised in dynamic motion, her delicately teased blonde tresses created from an assortment of polyester wigs (Figure 4.3). The statuesque *Silverback* meets your eye as she is caught mid-stride (Figure 4.4). She looks as though she has stepped out of the famous short film shot by Roger Patterson and Robert Gimlin in 1967, in which the pair claims to have spotted a real Big Foot. Silverback’s body is covered in patches of slate, black and long haired white; her rows of nipples are hidden beneath a snowy layer of fuzz. *Tawny* stretches her cream and caramel furry figure, her arms raised, her sharp toothed muzzle open in a full roar that almost can be heard (Figure 4.5). Looming close to the fire, *Maxy’s* hands hang by her sides, as a bushy, dreaded fabric mane hangs heavily on her

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shoulders (Figure 4.6). Her furry coat is comprised of thin strips of fun fur: leopard print, chestnut and creamy browns, blacks and wiry greys. Meant to appear as a tattoo on Maxy’s shoulder, Mitchell has a sewn on a delicate embroidery of two doves enshrouded with ribbons and foliage. Clambering on all fours, Oxana throws back her head in a howl and bends her knee, her buttocks are pushed into the air proudly presenting her pink plush vulva; lovely pink shag sprouts from her armpits (Figure 4.7). Standing in a coquettish pose, Bunny wears a platinum blonde wig coaxed into a sleek bob; her legs are covered with a shaggy white fur, while the twin globes of her butt are two mustard–coloured velour cushions (Figure 4.8). The fur on her back displays a large flower, each of the many petals is a different shade of brown.

Each Sasquatch is made unique and individual by Mitchell’s attentive handiwork; details such as the plaid–patterned palms of Maxy, or the fluffy clawed feet of Bunny, rows of wooden nipples on hairy or protruding breasts, proud cushiony bellies, pillowy plush asses, luscious vulvas, taxidermy accoutrements, glass eyes, fangs, claws and wet looking snouts all make these monstrous ladies so enchanting. Some of the Sasquatches pay homage to a variety of inspirational sources; for example Bunny, while being a play on the Playboy Bunny, is also a tribute to the activist and burlesque dancer Heather MacAllistair who died in 2007; Maxy was inspired by Max Airborne, and Oxana references the feral child raised by dogs, found in Ukraine in 1991.128

Visible throughout the transformed textiles landscape and all over the bodies of the Sasquatches, fuzzy pink creatures called Familiars can be seen peeking out of cupped hands, sitting precariously on heads and shoulders, and dancing in between feet (Figures 4.9 and 4.10). Just as the Sasquatches are individually named, so too do the Familiars carry their own title. Here

again, each adorable yet strange little creature bears its own individual appearance and temperament. In this other worldly place, the Familiars are wild mischievous characters who remind us of our childhood hamsters and favorite petting zoo attractions.

At this point in time, simultaneous to creating the first Sasquatches, Mitchell was also working toward finishing her Women’s Studies PhD at York University, and energetically participating in Pretty Porky and Pissed Off, a fat activist performance group. When Mitchell describes this early period it becomes clear just how important, inseparable and influential the different aspects of her life were to her art practice. When she spoke about this in the interview, I got a sense of the depth and the complexity involved in the early part of Mitchell’s artistic career. The following excerpt from the interview provides insight into the circumstances that surrounded the creation of Ladies Sasquatch, and is worth quoting at length:

With the Sasquatches, that was a further articulation of reading for my comprehensive exams, I was reading two large bodies of work: feminist geographies and feminist theories about the body. And in the feminist theories about the body, some of the theoretical work that really blew my mind was the stuff about abject bodies by Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror. The idea of monstrous bodies. The experience of reading that work and the experience of working at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival and doing the Pretty Porky and Pissed off work, all came together in this creation of a Sasquatch clan, and it just all made sense. … In retrospect I don’t see it as procrastination but an attempt to articulate these really interesting ideas in a format that’s different than the written word, so to make a sculptural piece that’s viewed in the round, or a performance piece that’s public and democratic in a way that it’s not on a library shelf or in a journal that 20 people read, that potential for a larger audience, I mean, if feminist theory is about trying to not just understand the world, but also make change, then— that’s what I was trying to do, that’s what I’m still trying to do.  

129 Allyson Mitchell, Interview by Julie Hollenbach, April 18th, 2012 at the Artist’s Home. Interview transcript and audio recording in the possession of the author.
This excerpt also highlights the emphasis Mitchell places on the accessibility of her work, her mindfulness toward the dissemination of ideas and theories in a multiple formats, and her desire to make work which is positive and meaningful.

**Reimagining Space**

During the 2009–2010 touring exhibition, instead of the usual high art, white cube experience of stark windowless walls, bright lights, high ceilings, minimalist uncomfortable furnishings, and muted carpets or sterile concrete floors, visitors chanced upon a wholly unprecedented spectacle. At the McMaster Museum of Art, and all the other hosting institutions, the exhibition space was darkened, the white walls disappearing altogether. Lit dramatically on a raised, carpeted, undulating lily pad-like platform, the Sasquatches formed a circle, enclosing a fake flamed, teepee shaped fire. Light from within the circle illuminated the imposing monumental figures of the Sasquatches and cast eerie shadows against the walls (Figures 4.11 and 4.12). The installation was accompanied by a fifty-nine minute long looped soundtrack created especially for the exhibition by Moodymann, a Detroit techno and dance musician.  

Moodymann is known for sampling various pop culture sound bites in his work, and his accompanying track was no exception. There were riffs from Eminem’s *Real Slim Shady* (2000), a haunting rendition of *Teddy Bear Picnic* sung over swampy noises and frogs croaking, and a recording of Mitchell’s niece’s elementary school ukulele recital. The sounds slid together in an audio collage blending bestial growls with witchy glockenspiel tinklings, cartoony musical scores...

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130 Allyson Mitchell, Interview by Julie Hollenbach, April 18th, 2012 at the Artist’s Home. Interview transcript and audio recording in the possession of the author. The artist has generously provided the author with a copy of Moodymann’s audio piece which accompanied the exhibition.
with the campy dialogue of two Big Foot seekers, all interwoven with rhythmic hip-hop beats and an assortment of nature noises.

The dramatic lighting and its accompanying sound element created the illusion of a habitat and natural spectacle. In its installation, Ladies Sasquatch is strikingly similar to displays in natural history museums and roadside tourist attractions. In this way, Mitchell intentionally referenced display practices used to frame Indigenous peoples and cultures, in the same way that animals and other natural phenomena have been and continue to be treated. Mitchell’s critique highlights the problematic manner in which Western cultural institutions frame Indigenous peoples and cultures, as uncivilized and primitive, or as disappearing relics associated with wild, unknown frontiers in the romanticized settler fantasies about the glory days of colonial exploration and expansion. Ladies Sasquatch specifically targets Western society’s appropriation of Indigenous culture; in the artist statement that addresses the work, Mitchell writes,

Buried in the memory banks of our collective popular culture is the mythical creature called Sasquatch. Aboriginal folklore about the Sasquatch, 'Wild Man of the Forest' or Big Foot (as he is referred to in the US) has been appropriated by the white Canadian mainstream - arguably an expression of the racist fears

131 In the artist statement accompanying Ladies Sasquatch, Mitchell writes: “The exhibit also includes giant sculptural sasquatches in a diorama setting that evokes the natural history museum or roadside attraction.” Allyson Mitchell, Ladies Sasquatch, Artist Statement, http://www.allysonmitchell.com/PDFs/Lady_Sasquatch.pdf.
132 It is important to note that while many of Mitchell’s other works have been shown at the AGO and the National Gallery, Ladies Sasquatch, her best known work, has never appeared there. I argue that this is for the very reasons discussed here. That including this work which critiques narratives of settler colonialism, and Canadian nationalism specifically, would force the institutions to recognize its complicity in colonial legacies, forcing them to become accountable in ways that would disillusion grand national narratives, and put them in tension with the state. In a personal correspondence (May 29, 2012), Mitchell shared that her previous art dealer, Paul Petro, offered Ladies Sasquatch to the National Gallery for acquisition, and that the work was declined. The express exclusion of the work from these national and provincial level museums is significant, and points to the potency of the work’s critique.
around the "otherness" of native culture - and by default - nature in general.\textsuperscript{133}

Canada has a long history of tokenizing Indigenous imagery and culture, using it to brand the Canadian state as specific and unique from other states. In our age of advertising and economic globalization, it is apparent that national identity is meticulously manufactured and crafted.\textsuperscript{134} Potent examples of cultural appropriation used to this end, can be seen on an international scale, for example, in the use of the Inuit Inukshuk as the symbol for the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics, and on a more localized, insidious scale, in the gift shops of even the smallest airports in Canada where travellers can buy souvenirs of miniature totem poles, leather beaded moccasins or Inuit stone carvings (most made in China).

Ruth Phillips addresses the implications of this kind of Indigenous cultural appropriation in service of building national identity on the international stage in her critical recounting of the controversy surrounding the 1997 Asia Pacific Economic Community (APEC) summit held at the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver. She describes how the Museum of Anthropology was selected by federal officials as the site for the summit because of its strong visual symbolism, embodying a plethora of Canadian clichés in a tidy package: a dramatic landscape of sea and sky, Canadian Mounties in full regalia, and the Indigenous objects of the Museum set in a controlled, pristine modernist space. Phillips summarized that “the federal government used the museum of anthropology as a stage for the enactment of a pageant that reinscribed a hoary settler-colonial image of national identity.”\textsuperscript{135} The controversy existed around the cancellation of the welcome speech given by an Elder from the Musqueam First Nation, upon whose land the Museum sits,

\textsuperscript{133} Allyson Mitchell, \textit{Ladies Sasquatch}, Artist Statement.
\textsuperscript{134} Brian Wallis, "The Art of Big Business," 30.
and the opening remarks of Museum officials that would have “articulated a postcolonial rhetoric of native sovereignty and distinct local identity before an audience representing the new transnational rhetoric of globalization.”

This poignant example shows the way cultural institutional spaces can create and instill narratives that perpetuate the illusion of a cohesive and benevolent state, establish a unique national identity, and function to create rituals of citizenship which inculcate myths of the ideal citizen while erasing the legacy of colonial violence.

In her discussion of how museums play a pivotal role in “constructing the narrative of the nation,” Vera Zolberg draws on Benedict Anderson, who suggests that museums function as easily recognizable symbols that represent the ideologies and politics of the state. Zolberg elaborates by writing that, “museums of natural history or ethnology play [a] … fundamental part in creating the cultural matrix on which the symbolic community is founded.” This is significant, because Anderson postulates that nations are one of the largest examples of an imagined community, in that at no point will a citizen of that nation ever know all the other citizens of that nation, and therefore, the nation exists as an imagined construct in the mind of the citizen. The national construct imagined by the citizen is carefully constructed through rigidly governed institutional spaces such as schools, libraries, government buildings, monuments, and museums, as well as widely circulated media such as newspapers and nationally syndicated radio broadcasts. It is because of this, that it is so important to critically address the messages prescribed by museums. As Zolberg articulates, “After all, it is they that define the categories of

136 Ibid.
137 Vera L. Zolberg, "Museums as contested sites of remembrance: the Enola Gay affair," 76.
138 Ibid.
the ‘human’ as opposed to the ‘nonhuman.’ In this way they reinforce conceptual categories as to who are to be the included, and who the excluded from the national body.”

Museums and other cultural institutions are laden with a complex framework of politics and ideologies that produce and support their position in Western society. Museums must function simultaneously as mimetic mirrors and as promethean laboratories – displaying and creating culture in order to remain significant and survive as more than storehouses filled with art and relics. In their ground breaking text, *The Universal Survey Museum*, Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach have determined that museums are institutions that through their evolution from princely collections in Europe, have become representative of the republican states which today constitute the West. They write that the “museum’s primary function is ideological. It is meant to impress upon those who use or pass through it, society’s most revered beliefs and values.”

While museums in Canada reflect events and political shifts, they also reinscribe the values and ideals of mainstream society and settler colonialism. With this in mind, museums may be understood as authoritative spaces that prompt visitors to perform rituals of citizenship in which visitors identify with the state and form an attachment to it in exchange for spiritual wealth and inclusion in the national body. In *Exalted Subjects*, Sunera Thobani writes that “Canadian citizenship … represented an assault on Native peoples, a drive towards their cultural and political elimination; it articulated relations not only between citizens and their state but also between citizens and Aboriginal peoples as Indians and, hence, as non-citizens.” Daily we are called upon to reaffirm our citizenship through rituals, some as overt as singing the national

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140 Vera L. Zolberg, “Museums as contested sites of remembrance: the Enola Gay affair,” 76.
141 Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, “The Universal Survey Museum,” 450.
142 Ibid., 449.
anthem in schools or at sporting events, some as innocuous as using currency decorated with national symbols and historical figures. Thobani’s point is significant because, while citizenship includes some and purports to protect the rights of the citizen, it is directly correlated to who is erased by citizenship, and whose basic rights are not only ignored but actively violated by what citizenship promises to citizens (land, property, freedom).

The colonial legacy lies deeply entrenched at the heart of Canadian nationhood; museums attempting to treat Canadian content and history have tended to either directly display Indigenous culture and materials, or surreptitiously reference indigeneity as settler colonialism’s primitive other. Some museums present linear, literal historical chronologies, perpetuating narratives of an ethnographic present, while palatably underscoring, if not ignoring completely, Canada’s history of colonial violence and genocide. This settler colonial narrative culminates in the triumphant present day, establishing the state as the rightful governing body over the nation’s subjects, which exclude Indigenous peoples on principle. Alternately, there are some museums that present Indigenous materials as fine art, adopting modernist display practices that place the object in austere, stark arrangements which highlight the aesthetic quality of the piece while simultaneously vivisecting it of its specific socio-cultural significations. Many institutions, from monolithic natural history museums, such as the Royal Ontario Museum, to smaller, local history road side attractions, such as the Greater Vernon Museum and Archive in rural British Columbia, employ diorama’s to tell stories that attempt to conjure a pre-contact moment, placing

145 James Clifford, “Four Northwest Coast Museums: Travel Reflections,” in Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Levine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 216. An example of this kind of museum is the Royal British Columbia Museum, in Victoria, BC. In this text, Clifford compares and contrasts the treatment of Indigenous materials and cultures in four different British Columbian institutions: the Royal British Columbia Museum in Victoria, the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver, the Kwagiulth Museum and Cultural Center on Quadra Island, and the U’mista Cultural Centre in Alert Bay.

146 The Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver and the Art Gallery of Ontario are two examples of institutions that employ this strategy in their display of Indigenous materials.
Indigenous bodies in ‘their natural habitat’ – which can be read ultimately, as the past. These displays draw on historical narratives that construct the Indigenous subject as monstrous, wild, primitive, and carnally excessive. Jo Anna Isaak summarizes this point,

They habitually describe Natives’ bodies as monstrous, riddled with all manner of libidinal excess—a people *sans roi, sans loi, sans foi*; in short, just what the Europeans unconsciously wanted to be. The agenda of the narratives of discovery was to inscribe these people in Western systems of representations, a project that had something of a missionary aspect to it, as if the very act of encoding them would bring them into the realm of ‘normalcy’.

When the ROM underwent major renovations and overhauls in 2005, one of the big changes was the creation of a permanent exhibition space dedicated to the representation of Indigenous culture in Canada.

In a review of the first exhibition to be held in the space, Cory Willmott shared her experience of attending a members-only preview and receiving a tour of the ROM’s *Gallery of Canada: First Peoples* exhibition with curator Trudy Nicks. In her review, she pays particular attention to overheard conversations and comments made by members that illustrate that despite revisionist curatorial strategies, generations of museum goers have been educated to expect the performance of certain narratives in ethnographic spaces. One frustrated member was overheard complaining, “I’m not here to learn about white people. I am white! I want to know about Natives. Where does this tell us about Natives?” This comment is telling for a number of reasons: it points to the reality that museum visitors are educated (often times, starting at a young age) through these displays to gaze upon Indigenous bodies, which they then come to identify as

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149 Ibid., 6.
exotic and other. It also suggests that the gaze is contingent on distance from the subject, a
distance that denies “intercultural interaction,” and makes it impossible for the Indigenous subject
to co-exist in space and time with the non-native museum visitor.\textsuperscript{150} The overheard comment also
indicates a sense of settler entitlement, which Scott Morgensen attributes to settler society’s
entitled view of its rightful inheritance of not only land but also Indigenous authenticity.
Morgensen writes:

Settler colonialism is naturalized not only in Native people’s
seeming ‘disappearance’ from a modern, settled landscape, but
also in indigeneity’s recurrent appearance within and as settler
subjectivity. Whether erasing or performing indigeneity,
omitting or celebrating it, settlers practice settlement by turning
Native land and culture into an inheritance granting them
knowledge and ownership of themselves.\textsuperscript{151}

Museum spaces create narratives which inculcate visitors by teaching them which subjects are
exalted and which are abject; what is acceptable behaviour and what is deviant behaviour; who is
included and who is excluded; who looks and who is looked upon. These frameworks are the
foundation upon which privileged modes of being are based, they enable and normalize racism,
classicism, sexism, ablism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination. In order to disrupt
and decolonize these spaces, the discourses and narratives which privilege them must first be
interrogated and unpacked.

In her pivotal book, \textit{Decolonizing Methodologies}, Linda Tuhiwai Smith critiques the
modernist project of Western history. She problematizes the discourse, agitating its claim to be a
totalizing grand narrative that represents and includes all knowledge as a coherent whole which
represents the values and truths of all cultures and societies.\textsuperscript{152} She points out that Western

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 6, 7.}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{151} Scott Morgensen, \textit{Spaces Between Us}, 18.}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{152} Linda Tuhiwai Smith, \textit{Decolonizing Methodologies}, 30–31.}
\end{footnotes}
history and other such grand narratives are only ever told from the perspective of the triumphant victor, and fail to take into account the conflicting perspectives of the conquered and colonized. Most importantly, once gained, history is about maintaining and exerting power. Museums are about history and portraying the past, and it is through these institutions that privileged dominant narratives are disseminated broadly to the national body. Recalling my earlier discussion on Anderson and his postulation that nations are imagined communities, we can recognize that museums are potent sites that perpetuate historical legacies and manifest nations while marginalizing other communities.

**Queer Interventions in Space**

In a course I recently took, *Museums, Marginality and the Mainstream*, a resonating discussion occurred, which has stayed with me, centred on the question: what occurs first? Does mainstream society and culture have to change in order for institutional spaces, such as museums, to be more inclusive and progressive in their display strategies and ideological framework? Or, does change begin with interventions in these spaces? The effects of which slowly trickle outward, gradually deconstructing the exclusionary ideologies and politics which structure the space, and steadily dismantle privileged hierarchies of power and settler colonial fantasies.\(^{153}\)

The answers to these questions are not straight forward. However, I believe that interventions into museum spaces challenge dominant narratives and are an important element to decolonizing not only cultural institutions, but also the individual imaginings which construct our

\(^{153}\) The discussions and material covered in Professor Lynda Jessup’s course, “Museums, Marginality, and the Mainstream,” were invaluable to forming the questions and museological analysis that are an undercurrent in this chapter.
individual world views, and our imagined communities. Mitchell’s Ladies Sasquatch is a potent example of just such an intervention.

By referencing the diorama-like displays popular in natural history museums, Mitchell presents the Ladies Sasquatch as a dark parody of the displays that depict Indigenous bodies in their ‘natural habitats.’ Mitchell queers the construction of the Indigenous body in these displays (as primitive, wild, and carnal) by presenting fierce, larger than life lesbian monsters which address the intersections of race and sexuality. With Ladies Sasquatch, Mitchell negotiates her troubled relationship as a white queer woman operating within a hostile colonial culture. In a heteronormative society, her body is constructed as racially perverse to normative whiteness through its queerness – placing it in conversation with the Indigenous body, based on racist colonial stereotypes that cast the Indigenous subject as savage, licentious and crude. Her conscious treatment of this tension is significant because the white queer body within a colonial heteronormative patriarchal society remains negatively constructed as a sexually and racially perverse location. Any attempt to reverse or challenge that sexual perversity will, at some point, play on the body’s racialization as not-quite-white enough.

It is important to stress that white queer bodies and indigenous queer bodies are not read in the same way. White queer bodies are read as problematic to whiteness, because they code as being white except for the deviation of their non-normative sexuality, whereas queer indigenous bodies are problematic to whiteness first because of their indigeneity, and secondly for their queerness.

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154 I am indebted to Professor Scott Morgensen and the discussions that took place in his graduate seminar course, “Feminist Methodologies,” which helped me develop my analysis of Ladies Sasquatch, and theorize Mitchell’s relationship as a queer non-Native woman to queer/two spirit indigeneity.

When addressing the intersections of race, sexuality and colonialism, the queer art of a white artist cannot be read in the same way that the queer artwork of an Indigenous queer or two-spirit artist can be read. Here, it is important to recall the discussion at the beginning of this chapter which argues that white settler critics must turn away from the impulse to anthropologize Indigenous culture and Indigeneity, and instead examine settler colonial legacies and institutions of power which perpetuate colonial violence and the subordination of Indigenous peoples and culture. *Ladies Sasquatch* functions as a dynamic decolonizing project because it points to settler society’s inability to critically and honestly represent its problematic colonial history.

During my interview with Mitchell, she spoke of how *Ladies Sasquatch* critiques the co-opting of the Indigenous Sasquatch folklore by popular culture, explaining how the work agitates the settler fantasy surrounding the Sasquatch by queering it with fierce Lesbian monsters. The following excerpt from the interview demonstrates the importance Mitchell places on *Ladies Sasquatch* as a work in conversation with Indigenous communities, and is therefore worth quoting at length.

Allyson Mitchell: … I would have loved for *Ladies Sasquatch* to go to Thunder Bay. I really wanted it to go where there are large Native populations. There’s been some talk of trying to make that happen. I don’t know if that was strategic or not, having it be at Universities. It was more about the right people, who would be engaged with the work, who would fight for it.

Julie Hollenbach: Can you talk a bit about why you wanted it to go to places with larger Native populations?

AM: Well, because of the Sasquatch implications. It’s a folklore– In white culture, our colonialisit settler culture, it’s seen as kind of a folkloric character. Right, the Sasquatch. That was my exposure to sasquatches as a kid, was through pop culture. There was a Sasquatch episode on the Six Million Dollar Man,

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156 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 78.
there was a Sasquatch episode on, I don’t know, a couple TV shows that I saw when I was a kid. That was my only exposure, but, as an adult, I now understand that it’s actually a really important figure in many different Native cultures, and it doesn’t mean the same thing in one particular—it doesn’t hold the same meaning across all those cultures, or even within some populations within the same Native culture, it may have different meanings. Some people may see it as the Sasquatch as this harbinger of doom, or this figure that indicates something bad is going to happen, to other people it’s like a good luck thing, it’s something that’s about protection, or something good is going to come to you, or somebody is looking after you. I really wanted to have that engagement, have that conversation. You’ve read some of my theoretical background ideas about the Sasquatches and how they come out of this idea of a feral female sexuality, which I’m not making that connection to Native culture as being uncivilized or anything, that is not the connection I’m making at all. It’s more like, how can this imagining by a white woman, of gender and race outside of culture, which is articulated through these Sasquatches as a queer idea of being. How does that—can that be in conversation with a spiritual idea around the Sasquatch in a colonialized culture. I think that they aren’t necessarily opposites, there’s something that can be interesting to have a conversation between the two [emphasis mine]. And when the work was in Winnipeg, one of the public programming events was to have a panel discussion with me and two women from this organization called APES (Aboriginal People Enthusiastic for Sasquatches) and they’re also artists. And they’re these two women who go out and look for Sasquatches, one was writing a kids book, and they’re Native and they—so, we had a panel discussion, and that was really great. But the best thing about the work being in Winnipeg was that there’s an alternative high school that has a special class for girls—if I understand it properly, how I’ve heard it—for girls who get pregnant in high school. Which in Winnipeg, partly because of the demographic of the town, a lot of those young women are Native girls, and they have—part of their class, which seems kind of weirdly old fashioned to have ‘preggers girl class,’ anyway—there’s also something to be said for separatist culture that takes people, people can protect each other and learn alternatively and all that. They had a self, like an alternative health hour once a week or something, they held it, once a week in the Sasquatch exhibition. So they sat around the fire and had their pregnant teenage girl ‘I gotta look after myself’—

JH: That’s so great.
AM: I know. I can hardly stand it! It feels like all the labour that went into making that work was worthwhile. For that one thing to happen.

JH: It’s nice to hear about when art can facilitate community building, or when institutional public spaces, gallery spaces, can actually become a space where people dwell, and stay, and linger, and form really meaningful connections with other people.\(^{157}\)

While the excerpt began by emphasising the importance of connecting *Ladies Sasquatch* with Indigenous communities as a way of accountably commenting on the appropriation of the Sasquatch folklore, it finishes by leaning toward a conversation which examines the power that art works – and the spaces they create – can have in creating communities. Indeed, the art and its space can be the event which facilitates the convergence of peoples, it can also be the event that reimagines narratives, performances and new rituals which decolonize the museum space and our cultural imaginations.

With *Ladies Sasquatch*, the potential for visitors to be transported to an alternative, queered space was realized. Mitchell agitated the usual relationship visitors had with ethnographic displays; instead of presenting detached scenes that were easily fetishized, *Ladies Sasquatch* invited the visitor to engage with the work on an emotional, sensual, affective level. The tactility of the textiles, the everyday-ness of the found materials, the detail of the craftsmanship, the enveloping scale, the bright luscious colours all create an enchanting experience that a visitor might find difficult to distance themself from. This is important when combatting the dangerous divide present in ethnographic displays, the divide between ‘us’ in the ‘now,’ and ‘them’ in the ethnographic present.

\(^{157}\) Allyson Mitchell, Interview by Julie Hollenbach, April 18\(^{th}\), 2012 at the Artist’s Home. Interview transcript and audio recording in the possession of the author.
Decolonizing Rituals and Performing New Imaginings

Adrian Stimson (Blackfoot) is another artist whose performative work functions to decolonize settler fantasies, while critiquing the appropriation of Aboriginal culture by mainstream society. In his performance work, Stimson creates characters that play on stereotypes of ‘Indianness,’ exposing the overlap of these fictitious clichés with false ideas of Indigenous authenticity.158 Stimson is most notorious for his persona Buffalo Boy: a camp play on Buffalo Bill in fishnets, bison G-string, buffalo skin corset and disco cowboy hat (Figure 4.13). With Buffalo Boy Stimson powerfully queers colonial narratives of the Wild West and the colonization and settlement of the frontier. While Buffalo Boy is playful and puckish, another of Stimson’s characters, The Shaman Exterminator, is an imposing figure with a darker purpose. Reminiscent of a harbinger or the grim reaper, The Shaman Exterminator is scarcely clad, wearing a bison hide loincloth and moccasin boots, he is a shadowy silhouette wrapped in a buffalo skin with the horns pointing dangerously skyward (Figure 4.14).

During a visit to Queen’s University in the spring of 2012, Stimson gave an artist’s talk in which he described the role of The Shaman Exterminator a foreboding warrior on a mission to bust up and expose all of the New Age, kitschy, settler appropriations of Indigenous spirituality.159 Examples of the kind of non-Native consumerist appropriations targeted by The Shaman Exterminator include dream catchers cheaply made in China, three hour sweat-lodge spa treatments and vision quests, and medicine bags as fashion accessories. The powerful irony of The Shaman Exterminator tests with Stimson’s co-opting of Hollywood stereotypes of dark vanquishing heroic characters on missions to right wrongs, settle scores and set the record

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159 Adrian Stimson, Artist Talk, March 21, 2012 at Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario.
straight. The performance of *The Shaman Exterminator* has the power to disrupt the status quo by proposing counter narratives that promote a decolonization of the imagination.

I bring Stimson and *The Shaman Exterminator* together here because I believe that *Ladies Sasquatch* functions in a similar manner. While *Ladies Sasquatch* is a static sculptural textile installation viewed in a gallery and *The Shaman Exterminator* is a performance enacted in numerous scenarios and locations both use performance to create transgressive strategies of resistance, pushing the viewer to question and challenge their ideologies and politics. Stimson’s performance charges viewers to become witnesses to a conflicted and complex decolonizing ritual, whereas Mitchell’s imposing Sasquatches are the witnesses as viewers have the opportunity to perform a decolonizing ritual through their engagement with the Sasquatches and the dramatic space they create.

But can the stationary statuesque Sasquatches be considered performative? And how can the visitor’s engagement with the piece be understood as a performance? In recalling my earlier description of the installation of *Ladies Sasquatch*, with its dramatic lighting, playful soundtrack, and tableau-like staging, the comparison with theatre-in-the-round can be made. During the McMaster touring show, visitors encountered *Ladies Sasquatch* as voyeurs happening by chance on a rare primordial spectacle in a mythical woodland glen; an enchanted textiles wonderland. When they entered Mitchell’s queered alternative reality, visitors initially faced the shadowy backs of the imposing giantesses. In order to get a better look at the illuminated faces and bodies of the monstrous ladies, visitors had to duck into the circular gathering and become part of the spectacle. This is a significant strategy within the work, Cvetkovich writes that “Queer performance creates publics by bringing together live bodies in space, and the theatrical experience is not just about what’s on stage but also about who’s in the audience creating
community.” The visitor’s impression of the piece was created through the act of walking around the work, moving in and out of the lily pad-like platforms, standing between the different figures, and getting close enough to see stitches. Visitors, often used to being detached viewers of art, may have been jarred out of their complacency, unwittingly cast in a role along with the furry pink Familiars and the gargantuan graces; in this work visitors could become expressly implicated in the resistant gesture that the space proposed.

The following is a conversational exert from the Interview in which I explained Adrian Stimson’s performative work and explored the connection between The Shaman Exterminator and Ladies Sasquatch. Mitchell responded by describing the performative element of Ladies Sasquatch and discussing the importance of the audience’s interaction with the work in order for it to function successfully as an oppositional narrative.

Julie Hollenbach: … during [his] artist talk, Adrian was talking a lot about how he creates characters. He has Buffalo Boy which is sort of the queer, Native subversion of Buffalo Bill who is chasing down the disappearing frontier, and– but his one character that was really intriguing to me was called The Shaman Exterminator and he shows up in his different works, in different ways. But that character is basically amazing. –covered in a buffalo hide, with these huge horns, and the face is totally dark, and he’s just wearing– and he walks very ominously with a giant pole/stick, and that character is sort of hunting down all Western colonial bullshit– appropriations of Indigenous and Native culture, especially in New Age spirituality where, you know–

Allyson Mitchell: Dream catchers…

JH: Yeah, exactly. And so, the ways that– a lot of his characters usually show up with each other in tandem, through video, or through performance, or, you know, and play with each other, and I felt like there was a kinship between the Shaman Exterminator character and Ladies Sasquatch in a way, in that they’re both creating narratives in a way that supplants the things

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that we’re– the stories that we’re told as kids, and the way that we construct society, and our culture, in terms of white privilege and settler inheritance, and how our society is predicated upon the idea that this is rightful occupation of land. –in contrast to the idea of a necessarily disappearing Native culture. That we have a responsibility to keep it safe, or something strange. I know that in one of the essays in the [Ladies Sasquatch] exhibition catalogue there’s talk about the performative aspect of the Sasquatches. I’m wondering whether you thought a lot about that, or if that’s something that ended up happening.

AM: What do you mean, the performative aspect?

JH: The aspect of, in one sense that they’re actually performing the space, in that they’re in the round, and it’s almost as if you’re walking in on a scene. There’s an essence of performance, where you are part of a performance of space.

AM: Right.

JH: And then the other aspect being, like, a narrative– performing a narrative, or telling a story which then continues on– which you take away when you leave the space. You’ll sort of walk around, you’ll engage with these figures and maybe it’s just me, but I tell myself a story about art, like, I go in and I feel, and I react, and I take, and then it becomes a story in my head where these– What are these Sasquatches doing in this space? What is their relationship to each other? You know, that is a story. And then when I go, that story keeps going, or is being retold, or reinterpreted in my head, and that’s a different kind of performance. And I was just wondering what elements of performativity you had in mind?

AM: Well, part of it is that the soundscape is meant to create another element to the work. Another element around the performativity, or the performance, is that, you know the way that the platform is undulating? So, it means that people who come into the space, actually walk into the sacred circle. So, they’re implicated in the politics of the circle. No matter how they read it, they become a part of that circle. No matter how much they may distance themselves from the politics that are articulated, in my mind, I don’t know if that carries through or not, they become a part of it. And they can’t help but become a part of it, because they’re curious, they want to see the front of the sasquatches, they want to get closer to them, and see in more detail. So, they come into those little lily pad platforms, and
they’re another member in the circle. They’re smaller. They’re like a third element between the Sasquatches and the small pink creatures, and then you’ve got these human observers who are no longer just observers, but are actually a part of it. I don’t know if that answer’s your question, but, that’s how I think about it. That they’re drawn in by all the things that we’ve been talking about, and then they’re there. It’s like when you’re consciousness has been raised, you cannot return to that space of not knowing what they know. I don’t know what they know from being in there, but I try to direct it through the didactic, it talks explicitly about what the work is, what they are– but even if somebody didn’t read that didactic, it doesn’t matter. You still get the title, is Ladies Sasquatch, and so there’s something happening that’s unexpected around ‘Ladies’ and ‘Sasquatches,’ when you’re in that– so, I don’t know– it would be a great project to interview people, and ask them, what they think or what they feel, in relation to it.

JH: Their reactions…

AM: Yeah, we talked about this a little bit at the beginning, about how the work is about involving people in the actual art work. I rarely, rarely had negative responses, to somebody being in a giant vagina-doorway, or The Menstrual Hut– But people don’t, in art worlds, people don’t usually say negative things to your face anyways, so, I’m sure there’s all kinds of mean talky-talks going on. There’s that element. But then there’s also people being like, ‘WHAT!! Lesbian feminist sasquatches!?? Why I never!!’ and turning on heel and running out– I’ve never experienced that– or people protesting or, you know…

Mitchell’s ability to create accessible work that is exciting and joyful is the key to challenging people’s assumptions without offending them or turning them off the politically charged critique inherent in her work. In the previous chapter, I explored the tenuous juxtaposition between comfort and discomfort present in Mitchell’s work. And just as in Menstrual Hut, Sweet Menstrual Hut and Hungry Purse, in Ladies Sasquatch it is the embodied tactility of the work, the comfort associated with the materials used, the familiarity of the

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161 Allyson Mitchell, Interview by Julie Hollenbach, April 18th, 2012 at the Artist’s Home. Interview transcript and audio recording in the possession of the author.
domestic textiles that bridges individual prejudice, ignorance and apathy. People visiting Ladies Sasquatch may have emotionally connected with the materials, they may have playfully interacted with the figurative sculptures; all while simultaneously grappling with the heady subject matter and pointed critique dished out by the work. Caught between comfort and discomfort, visitors could experience a range of emotions and reactions. But Mitchell is correct, once a visitor’s consciousness has been raised, they cannot turn away from that new awareness.

The counter narrative continues on in our minds, the coven of Lesbian Sasquatches romps through our imaginations, challenging institutions of power, dismantling hierarchies that privilege some while erasing others, and allowing us to imagine resistance with a vivid fun-fur face.

Engaging with Ladies Sasquatch has the potential to be a transformative experience, inspiring the decolonization of our minds, and perhaps the beginning of the decolonization of the cultural imagination.
Figure 4.1 *It Aint Gonna Lick Itself*, Allyson Mitchell, 2005.

Figure 4.2 *Big Trubs*, Allyson Mitchell, 2007.

Source: Give Us A Kiss Blog.  
Figure 4.3 *Ladies Sasquatch*, Detail: (Left) *Midge*, (Right) *Tawny*, Allyson Mitchell, McMaster Museum of Art, 2010.

Source: Allyson Mitchell’s Website.  
Figure 4.4 *Ladies Sasquatch*, Detail: *Silverback*, Allyson Mitchell, 2005.

Source: Allyson Mitchell’s Website.
Figure 4.5 *Ladies Sasquatch*, Detail: *Tawny*, with *Christina* and *Deanne* in the foreground, Allyson Mitchell, McMaster Museum of Art, 2010.

Source: Allyson Mitchell’s Website.  
Figure 4.6 *Ladies Sasquatch*, Detail: Maxy, Allyson Mitchell, McMaster Museum of Art, 2010.

Source: McMaster Museum Art Blog.  
http://mcmastermuseum.wordpress.com/2009/02/
Figure 4.7 *Ladies Sasquatch*, Detail: *Oxana*, Allyson Mitchell, McMaster Museum of Art, 2010.

Source: Microrevolt Blog.  
Figure 4.8 *Ladies Sasquatch*, Detail: *Bunny*, Allyson Mitchell, McMaster Museum of Art, 2010.

Source: Allyson Mitchell’s Website.
Figure 4.9 Ladies Sasquatch, Detail: Chelsea (with Maxy and Tawny in the background), Allyson Mitchell, McMaster Museum of Art, 2010.

Source: Allyson Mitchell’s Website.
Figure 4.10 *Ladies Sasquatch*, Detail: *Gretchen* and *Angus*, Allyson Mitchell, McMaster Museum of Art, 2010.

Source: Allyson Mitchell’s Website.
Figure 4.11 *Ladies Sasquatch*, Installation view, Allyson Mitchell, McMaster Museum of Art, 2010.

Source: Allyson Mitchell’s Website.  
Figure 4.12 Lady Sasquatch, Installation view, Allyson Mitchell, McMaster Museum of Art, 2010.

Source: Blog of Stephanie Vegh.  
Figure 4.13 *Buffalo Boy*, Adrian Stimson, Performance at Burning Man, 2007.

Figure 4.14 The Shaman Exterminator, Adrian Stimson, Performance at Burning Man, 2007.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

In choosing to focus on the quirky craft artwork of Allyson Mitchell for the topic of this thesis, certain challenges have necessitated an unconventional and exciting approach to writing and thinking ‘about’ art. This has called for a reevaluation of my understanding of the relationship between contemporary artistic production and the art criticism and art history which attempts to address and situate it. Previously, I operated under the misapprehension that art criticism and history simply responded to art and that if art was affected by these discourses, it was through the process of progressing away from an established canon in the name of innovation. This project has offered me an invaluable opportunity to work through some of the theoretical considerations intrinsic to the process of writing about/to/with art in a playful hands-on manner.

Jane Rendell’s *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism* provides a guide to conceptualizing the complex, layered task of responding to artworks and their sites. In describing her early attempts to understand her motivations for writing about architecture, Rendell writes,

> In an early attempt to define the intentions of *site-writing*, my own impulse was to ‘write’ rather than ‘write about’ architecture, aiming to shift the relation between the critic and her object of study from one of mastery – the object *under* critique – or distance – writing *about* an object – to one of equivalence and analogy – writing *as* the object.  

I can relate to these sentiments, having felt the need and desire to enter into conversation with art on an even ground, privileging the object as a participant in the performance of interpretation.  

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In retrospect, I can also appreciate the irony of exploring how to write about art and its ‘spaces’ through an engagement with an artist who sophisticatedly challenges the ideologies of the art museum as a site that perpetuates the status quo through a literal disavowal of the gallery space. Perhaps more than any other text I have come across, Site-Writing, in addition to being a guide, is a rich and vivid example of how art can be responded to and interacted with. Rendell writes that it is “differences in interpretative attitudes and their performative manifestations that interest me[,] … produced as they are according to the distinctive locations of interpretation and the varying distances and conditions of responsibility interpreters and performers have in relation to authors and audiences.”\(^{164}\) In this vein, Site-Writing proposes an intimate, embodied reading of art and its ‘site,’ taking into account and investigating the relationship between the artist and the art-viewer, the artwork and the art-viewer, the artwork and the art critic, the artist and the writings on art.

This is reminiscent of Rosi Braidotti’s call for embodied accounts which find their root and core in their location. Braidotti understands a ‘location’ not as a “self-appointed and self-designed subject position, but rather a collectively shared and constructed, jointly occupied spatiotemporal territory.”\(^{165}\) This conception of ‘location’ is central to my analysis of Mitchell’s crafty environments and her textile installations because it places an emphasis on how space is complexly constructed through a simultaneous process of receptive interpretation by individuals, projection of specific subject positions onto spaces by individuals, and the individual’s participation in inscriptive ‘rituals’ of the beliefs and values held by cultural institutions. I argue throughout this thesis that in some respects art museums can be considered *dis-located* through


distancing and displacing strategies (such as the complete lack of windows to the outside world, and the attempt to create a neutral, vacuous space) which alienate visitors in that space. The power of Mitchell’s playful textile environments and installations is derived from its familiar and domestic materiality, its soft tactility, its haptic sensuality, its clever and ironic humour, and its everyday accessibility.

The importance of this thesis and its attempt to critically situate the craft-art of Allyson Mitchell rests with the fact that my criticisms occupy the same “location” as the artworks – the same “spatiotemporal territory.” Mitchell’s artwork is vitally significant at the present moment for the way it responds to numerous larger societal and political issues, many of which I have touched on throughout this thesis. These include: the decolonization of dominant narratives and discourses toward an equitable future that recognizes the violent colonial legacies embedded in public spaces such as art museums; the disavowal of the status quo through public displays of private intimacies; the importance of alternative, embodied archives to the vitality of disparate communities; the significance of resistant acts in creating counter narratives that disrupt oppressive power structures; and the potential of playful creativity and imagination to effect change and bring about raised levels of consciousness.

Mitchell’s craft-art has the potential to change people’s minds, and I mean this in a two-fold sense; to literally experience a ‘change of mind’ through the challenge to one’s assumptions, beliefs or ideas which moves that individual to arrive at new understandings; and mind-changing in a broad sense, through the experience of something exciting, singular, unique, sensational, lovely, daunting, overwhelming, curious, perplexing, or magical. Mitchell’s quirky, maximalist works function as potent, Trojan horse-esque acts of resistance that intervene in public and
private spaces by challenging and dissolving the boundaries between the two and making room for important decolonizing imaginings and playful, radical embodiments.
Bibliography

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Mitchell, Allyson. Interview by Julie Hollenbach. April 18, 2012 at the Artist’s Home.


Online Sources


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