
Memories

of

the

Future

Aleesa Cohene and Bambitchell

Curated by Noa Bronstein and Katherine Dennis
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In 1833 architect Sir John Soane petitioned the British Parliament to have his home and his painting and sculpture collection preserved for study by students and the general public. Upon his death in 1837, his house was converted into a museum with the aim of keeping the interior intact “as nearly as circumstances will admit in the state.”ⁱⁱ London’s Soane Museum is reputed to be the first house museum. Throughout the mid-19th century and well into the mid-20th century, house museums proliferated as a way to preserve local, domestic, and official histories. A very specific institutional genre, the house museum personalizes encounters with history and interiorizes nationalistic accounts.

The Canadian house museum is typically focused on an individual, often a heroic male figure and political “forefather.” The justification

for the preservation of many house museums is predicated on this figurehead as well as on the architectural significance of the house and, to a lesser degree, the collection of the estate, if any remains.ⁱⁱ Many house museums, however, have been criticized for presenting uncritical and hegemonic histories and for evading discourses related to, for instance, the gender and labour divisions of these domestic spaces.ⁱⁱⁱ Further criticisms have rejected the linear and nostalgic view of history presented by many cultural institutions, most specifically by those focused on preserving heritage sites.^{iv}

Memories of the Future is an annual project that attempts to address these issues by inviting artists to respond to the history and development of house museums across Toronto. For the exhibition at the Campbell House Museum, Aleesa Cohene and Bambitchell

employ a range of approaches that uncover and interpret the layered narratives of the house. The exhibition takes as its starting point the location of the house in Toronto’s justice precinct and Chief Justice William Campbell’s role in presiding over the trial of the rioters who destroyed William Lyon Mackenzie’s printing press in order to draw attention to issues related to citizenship, social justice, and governmental policies and regulations. Using the visual language of the present and speculating on possibilities for the future, memories of the distant past are newly exposed, interpreted, and remembered.

Built in 1822, Campbell House is the oldest remaining structure from the original Town of York. The house was built by Campbell and his wife, Hannah, and is one of the few surviving examples of Georgian architecture in Toronto. With the house under

Memories of the Future, 2015, Campbell House Museum

the threat of demolition, the trial lawyers’ association known as the Advocates’ Society intervened and began the process of transforming the derelict building, then owned by Coutts-Hallmark Greeting Cards, into a functioning museum.^v In 1972 the house was moved from its original site to its current location at Queen Street and University Avenue, across the street from Osgoode Hall, a historic building that was originally a law school and currently houses The Court of Appeal for Ontario, the Divisional Court of the Superior Court of Justice, and the Law Society of Upper Canada.

Sir William Campbell is largely recognized for his career as a judge. Campbell ruled over the Types Trial, to which Campbell House Museum pays significant tribute. The now infamous case brought to trial the rioters who destroyed William Lyon Mackenzie’s

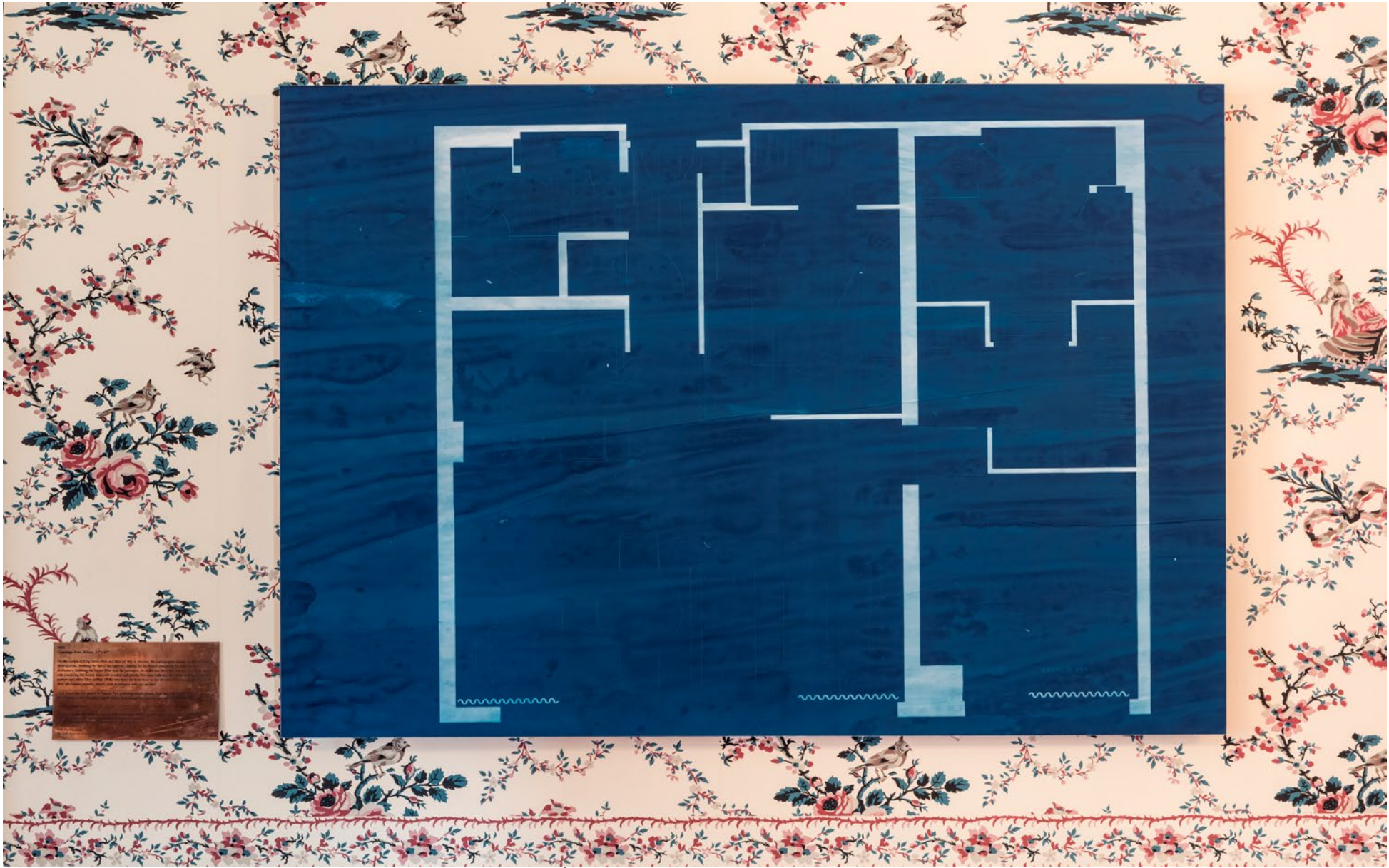
printing press after he attacked Tory politicians in his populist newspaper, the *Colonial Advocate*. In 1826 fifteen young men broke into the printing house in broad daylight and destroyed the press.^{vi} As destructive as this act might have been, it instigated a critical dialogue about freedom of the press in Canada.



Dioramas and
chart display at
the Campbell
House Museum

Amidst the landscape that once was, stood the trees, peppered across the coastline,
awaiting their fate.^{viii}

Throughout the exhibition, a series of five cyanotype prints replaces some of the typical portrait and landscape paintings hung on the walls of the historic house. The blue and white prints depict aerial views of a changing shoreline, an expanding city plan, and schematic cross-sections of a house not unlike the Campbell's home. Bambitchell's *Where the Trees Stood in Water* (2013) traces the historic and contemporary transformations of Toronto's Entertainment District through a mostly fictional retelling. Each print is accompanied by an engraved copperplate that reveals a winding account of the Cartographer, who bears witness to the changing physical and social landscape of Toronto's downtown core. This timetravelling character watches and occasionally participates in this anthropological survey, in which various scenes transport the reader from the 1787 Toronto Purchase, when land was illegally appropriated



Bambitchell,
*Where the Trees
Stood in Water*,
2013



Bambitchell,
installation view

from the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation to 2005 and the passing of the Civil Marriage Act in Canada. Through the Cartographer's perspective, we are introduced to different readings of colonization and industrialization and how the drawing and redrawing of boundaries affects how people occupy space and subsist within landscapes reformed by urbanization and gentrification. The Cartographer's chronicles call on fact and fiction, archival material and literature, history, and popular culture in order to dispel grand narratives. This strategy of subjective interpretation and subversive readings of history allows hidden and silenced pasts to resurface.

Much like the blueprints and maps in *Where the Trees Stood in Water* that chart various borders and boundaries, Campbell House is a pinpoint on a complex map of interwoven precincts.

Sitting on the borders of the Entertainment District and municipal seats of power, including City Hall and the courts, and various other topographical landmarks, Campbell House cannot easily be separated from this matrix. The house, like Bambitchell's project, also sits on the border between fact and fiction. House museums often bring together artifacts, archival documents, and fact with reproductions, restorations, and historical interpretations. As a result, these spaces, like the stories of the Cartographer, present composites of various materials culled from different perspectives, contexts, and time periods. By situating the prints throughout the museum, Bambitchell offers a reminder that the past is recreated rather than uncovered.^{ix} Nor can the past be hermetically sealed off from the present, in which it is continuously catalogued, justified, or rejected.



Bambitchell,
Sashay Away, 2015

A peace officer may arrest a...^x

For the second part of Bambitchell's project, *Sashay Away* (2015), the artists have inserted red and gold sashes that take on the appearance of those worn by judges throughout the space. Imprinted onto each sash are excerpts from the newly enacted Bill C-51 (now the Anti-terrorism Act of 2015). While somewhat stately in appearance, the sashes, which are excised from the wearer and separated from a courtly framework, are opened to other connotations (the sash, of course, being the domain not just of judges but of beauty queens). The placement of the sashes further undoes these typically emblemized textiles. Troubling the stillness of the historic displays by reproducing the typical untidiness and disorder of lived spaces, the sashes become what Bambitchell refers to as the "guts" of the house. Draped over chairs, haphazardly piled on the floor like dirty laundry awaiting the wash, or spilling

out from an overturned cup, the sashes become placeholders for the activity of the once dynamic home.

Conflating the pomp and circumstance of this judicial insignia with the somewhat kitschy and campy positioning of the sashes within the historic displays pacifies not only the sash itself but also the text imprinted onto its silky surface. Since its introduction in the House of Commons, Bill C-51 has received significant negative pushback from journalists and the general public, who have cited issues with provisions that give unprecedented powers to specific government agencies, such as the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS). Others have been quick to denounce the Act because it expands the authority of the police and courts to limit freedom of speech and the state's powers of surveillance and detention. There is growing concern that the

Bambitchell,
Sashay Away, 2015





recently passed Act creates unwarranted encroachments on the rights of Canadians. By distancing the Act from its original context and separating specific sections from the full text, *Sashay Away* allows us to look closely at the

problematic language of this controversial legislation and perhaps more fully understand its implications. As Bambitchell notes, by immersing the Act within the architecture and interior spaces of the historic site itself, the sashes expose

the ways in which the Anti-terrorism Act of 2015 limits the very freedoms that Campbell House seeks to represent.

Bambitchell,
Sashay Away, 2015



Aleesa Cohene,
All Right, 2003

Because you know nothing about Canada. I would not invest anything if I were you.^{xi}

Positioned within the domestic spaces of the 19th-century house, Aleesa Cohene's video *All Right* (2003) questions policy development in regards to Canadian immigration within a colonial context. *All Right* brings together found footage from diverse sources, including immigration-officer training videos, horror films, and sound clips from Canadian news broadcasts. The video highlights the terminology used around immigration, in which vague words like "rascal," "good," and "bad" determine who gets in and who does not. This composition provokes critical questions about, as Cohene notes, the hegemonic tenor of Immigration Canada's policies, a fear of the unknown, and collective expressions of apathy. These unsettling vignettes offer a disturbing image of the treatment of individuals within systems of power and regulation.

The film opens with an unidentified voice posing the questions: "Who's in charge? Is Canada going to be in charge of its borders?" Cohene responds through a series of visual clues—a small bug being squished against a windowpane, microbes moving and multiplying under the gaze of telescopic vision, and poignant images of people falling, hugging, and crying. The images become metaphors for the ways in which we consider or blindly ignore issues pertaining to immigration. Within the historic house, these images become especially potent. At one point in *All Right*, a female voice states that: "The truth is, most of Canada's immigrant ancestors wouldn't get in today. The irony is, most Canadians wouldn't either."^{xii} It is a particularly charged statement when viewing the video within the historic space of one of those ancestors.



Aleesa Cohene,
All Right (video
still), 2003.



Aleesa Cohene,
Ready to Cope,
2006

But of course the basic problem is that you cannot distinguish between the anxious guilty
and the anxious innocent...^{xiii}

Similarly, Cohene's *Ready to Cope* (2006) responds to the Act preceding Bill C-51, Canada's Anti-terrorism Act of 2001, which was passed in response to the events of September 11, 2001. The video addresses how concepts of security and safety are used, and often abused, in order to formalize and exercise power within the complex of the nation-state. *Ready to Cope* merges clips from horror and science fiction films with self-help guides and motivational instruction videos to evoke a sense of fraught tension. A montage of physical expressions of anxiety—images such as a tensely gripped hand and a child covering her ears and backing away from an unseen threat—are presented in uneasy succession. These bodily expressions of fear and concern are paired with omnipresent voices ambiguously discussing security, terror, and crisis. Mundane actions appear sporadically—someone takes a bath or walks down a hallway—yet we are jolted back to anxiety by the fast-paced runner escaping into the woods or various characters scrambling to get out of harm's way. Although disjointed from one another, the way in which Cohene sutures together the disparate clips forms a cogent narrative of apprehension. And while it is often difficult to discern provenance, the sequences of eerie images and voiceovers are innately felt.

Acts and policies such as those referred to in Cohene's videos are often introduced in the seemingly unbiased tone common in press conferences and newspaper articles. Through exaggerated cinematic gestures, Cohene unsettles this perceived neutrality. In both *All Right* and *Ready to Cope* there is a controlled build-up towards some unnamed, impending doom. The unknown, made visible in obscure or immediately recognizable found footage, is nonetheless related back to real events on the ground. Consequently, the videos convey to us something more about our current condition and feelings of collective anxiety about borders and control. As with *Sashay Away*, the images in Cohene's videos destabilize how the "museumization" of the law, of our rights and freedoms, too easily purges these decrees of their partiality and loaded and messy pasts.

Memories of the Future attempts to release house museums from a state of stasis, thus enabling these spaces to simultaneously speak to the present, past, and future. While historic houses often codify the memory of power, Cohene and Bambitchell reverse this paradigm to make legible the power of memory.^{xiv} History is revealed as in the making—as disputed, unstable, and knotted.



A NOTE ABOUT THE TITLE

Memories of the Future borrows its title from a controversial collection of essays by Ukrainian-born writer Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky. Written in the 1920s, Krzhizhanovsky's essays were originally thought to be subversive and were officially censored by the Soviet authorities. It was not until well after his death that his works were republished to critical acclaim. As the namesake suggests, the exhibition *Memories of the Future* offers a kind of cultural excavation that attempts to uncover and give voice to buried stories and forgotten histories.

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Bambitchell (Sharlene Bamboat and Alexis Mitchell) met in 2008 and have been fostering an artistic collaboration ever since. Their practice uses queer and feminist frameworks in order to reimagine borders, historical patterns of movement, labour, migration and memory. Working in various media (print, video, sculptural installation and performance), they explore these constantly shifting narratives through the use of images, architectures, language, sound and bodies. Bamboat and Mitchell both have independent art practices and they are members of the Pleasure Dome Experimental Film & Video Programming Collective.

Aleesa Cohene is a media artist who uses found footage and sounds to create videos and installations about human intimacies. Cohene has been making videos since 2001, and in 2010 completed a fellowship at the Kunsthochschule für Medien in Cologne, Germany. Cohene’s audiovisual collages are expertly edited, telling oblique, strongly atmospheric stories. The artist’s found footage tends to come from Hollywood films and TV shows popular during her childhood in the 1980s and early 1990s; one example is the 2008 three-channel installation *Something Better*, which showed at the 2009 Images Festival and later at the Power Plant’s 2011 exhibition “Coming After”—a look at younger queer artists who came of age during and after the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Cohene was longlisted for the Sobey Art Award in 2010, 2011 and 2012 and her work has also been shown at Oakville Galleries and Galerie Suvi Lehtinen in Berlin.

NOTES

i Soane Museum, accessed May 2, 2015, <http://www.soane.org/museum>.

ii Stephanie Karen Radu, “Making Ourselves at Home: Representation, Preservation & Interpretation at Canada’s House Museums”, University of Western Ontario - Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository, 2014, Paper 2361, 297.

iii See for example, Alison Oram, “Sexuality in Heterotopia: time, space and love between women in the historic house,” *Women’s History Review*, vol. 21, 2012, 533-551.

iv See for example, Christina Hodge, “A new model for memory work: nostalgic discourse at a historic home,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2011, 116-135.

v Campbell House Museum, accessed June 5, 2015, http://www.campbellhousemuseum.ca/?page_id=18

vi Frederick H. Armstrong and Ronald J. Stagg, “MACKENZIE, WILLIAM LYON,” Dictionary of Canadian Biography, vol. 9, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–, accessed July 19, 2015, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/mackenzie_william_lyon_9E.html.

vii Campbell House Museum, accessed June 5, 2015, http://www.campbellhousemuseum.ca/?page_id=43

viii Bambitchell, *Where the Trees Stood in Water*, 2013.

ix Monica Risnicoff de Gorgas, “Reality as illusion, the historic houses that become museums,” *Museum International*, vol. 53, no. 2 (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 10-15.

x Bambitchell, *Sashay Away*, 2015.

xi Aleesa Cohene, *All Right*, 2003.

xii Ibid.

xiii Aleesa Cohene, *Ready to Cope*, 2006.

xiv Magaly Cabral, “Exhibiting and communicating history and society in historic house museums,” *Museum International*, vol. 53, no. 2 (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 44.

