

visual arts news

Heather Anderson
11 Sims Ave
Ottawa, ON
K1Y 3J9

TYSHAN WRIGHT
THE QUILL SISTERS
THE BARONESS ELSA
PROJECT

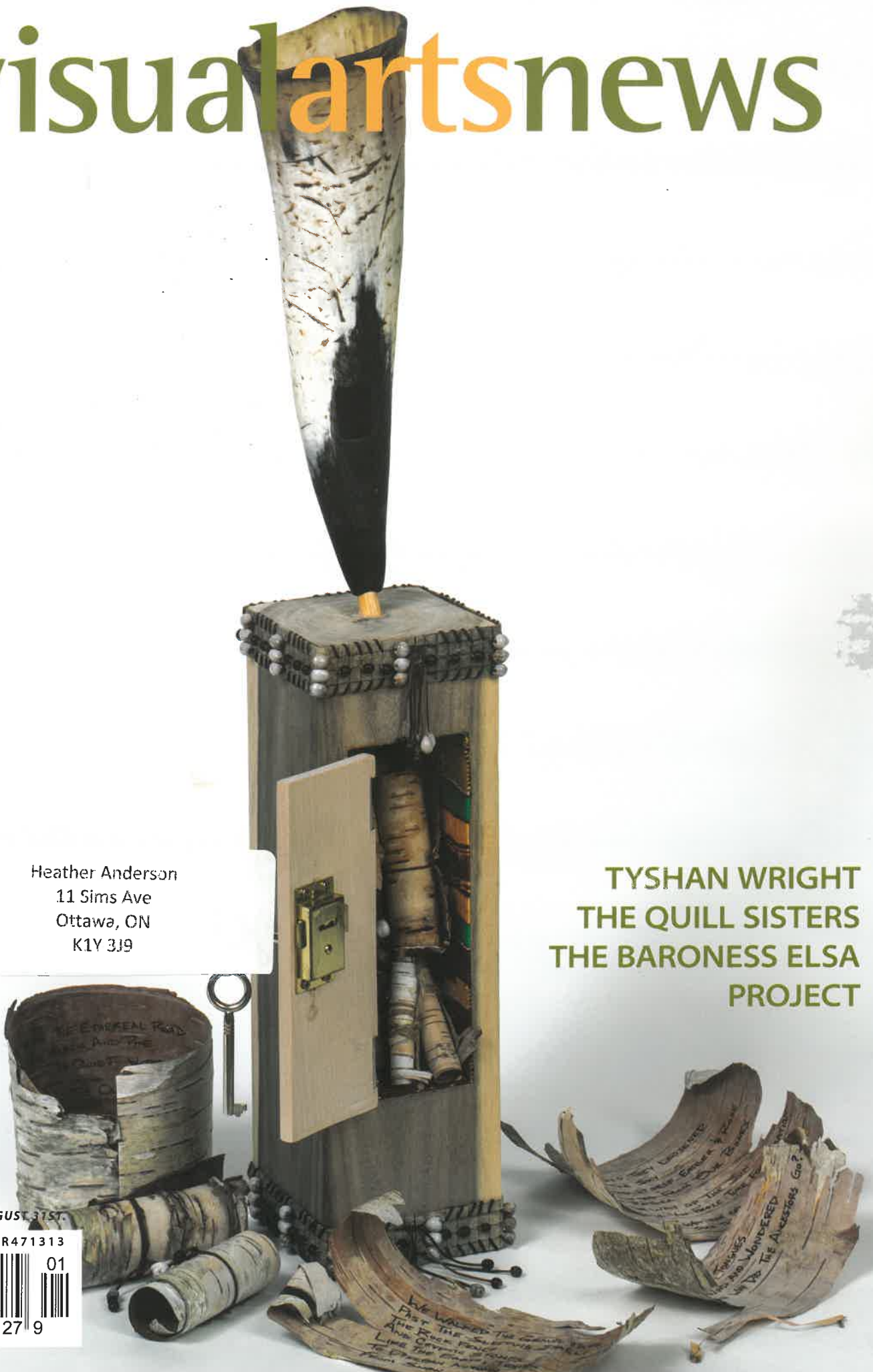


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Wit López, *Don't talk to me or my sons.*

The Baroness Elsa Project at Owens Art Gallery

BY AMY ASH

The Baroness Elsa Project celebrates unbound bodies, queerness, and bold existence at the Owens Art Gallery February 18–April 10, 2022. Curated by Heather Anderson and Irene Gammel, the exhibition rebels against time, and male-centred historical art narratives, by positioning Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven (*The Baroness*) at the epicentre of a conversation—about bodies, boundaries, defiance, and hybridity—that is surprisingly radical, even now, nearly a century after her death.

A significant but largely unknown artist, poet, and radical thinker, *The Baroness* thrived at the edge of, or just beyond, the boundaries of expectation. In her poetry, she is known for subverting meaning by playing with the hybridity of language—double meanings, hyphens versus dashes, etc. As for her artwork, she lived it, she wore it, and she became it, which eliminated the line between herself and her art.

In their curation, Anderson and Gammel nurture a



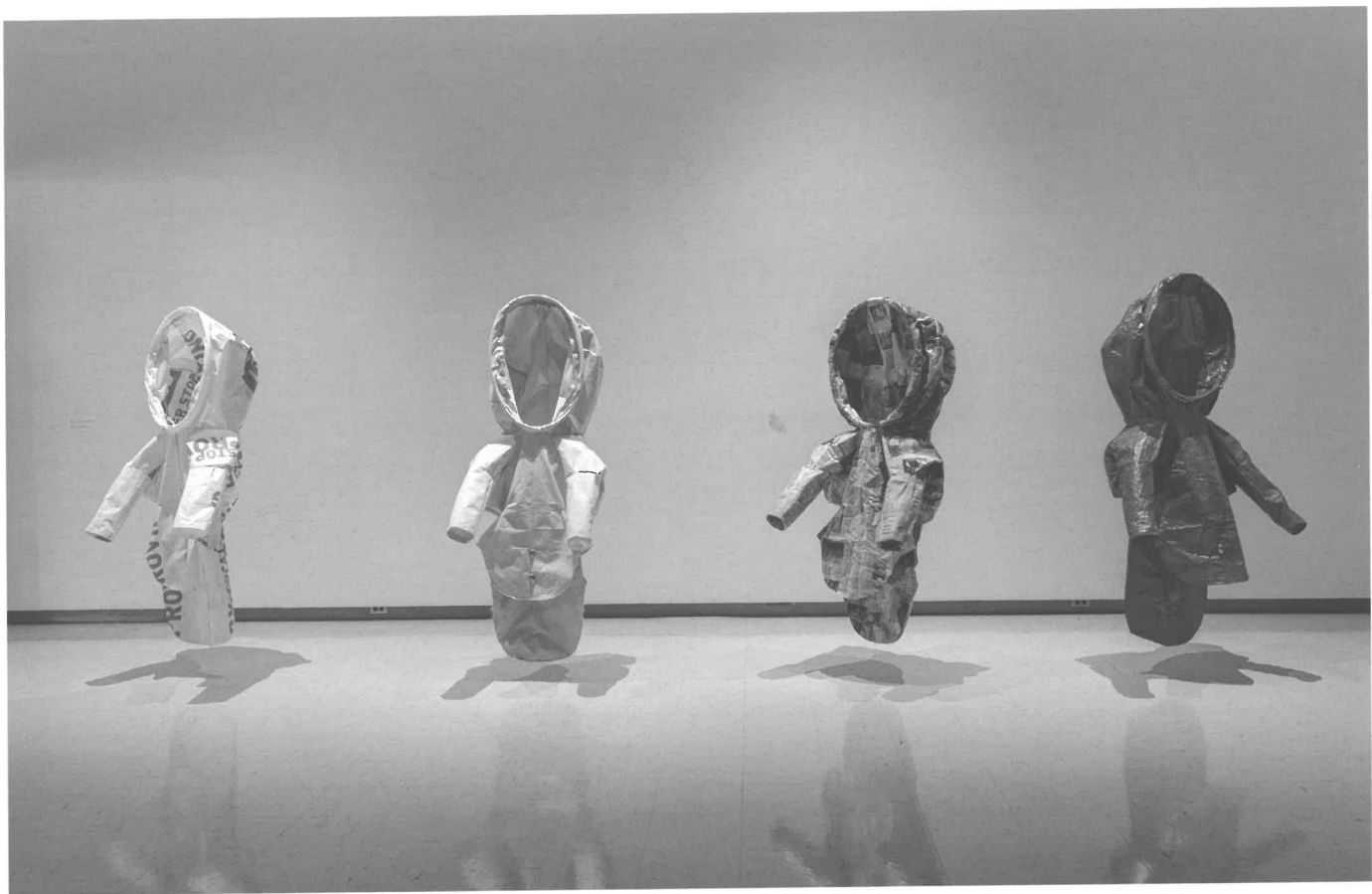
Dana Claxton, *Headdress*.

dialogue between eight contemporary artists who commune with the legacy of *The Baroness*, particularly within the scope and exploration of identity, embodiment, history, and the shifting scales of power. Together, Dana Claxton, Sheila Restack, ray ferreira, Wit López, Taqralik Partridge, Cindy Stelmackowich, Carol Sawyer, and Lene Berg frame the context of the intersectional present while, like *The Baroness*, offering a glimpse of the future.

The exhibition spans three gallery spaces with a trio of short publications, which include texts by Phoebe Sampsey, Irene Gammel, and Heather Anderson to provide additional context. These are thoughtful and subtle pedagogical offerings,

especially valuable given the exhibition's position occupying university galleries.

At the entrance of the Owens Art Gallery, there is a pull of light and colour on the left where three images from Dana Claxton's *Headdress* portrait series are aglow in their light boxes. A constellation of three stars, the womxn¹ in Claxton's photographs are so vibrantly and bountifully adorned, decorated with beaded cultural belongings, that their faces are obscured. Defying regular portraiture conventions, the photographs prompt a flurry of associations, from questions surrounding the ways we assert physical aspects of belonging to autonomy and protection from an unwanted gaze.



Taqralik Partridge, *Build My Own Home*.

The colourful beading can be read as a nod to the museological collection of countless handmade cultural objects, without context or credit to their maker. Yet, the exhibition's publication cites the bold adornments also reflect "networks of kinship," as many of the pieces were made by or gifted to the individuals in each photograph. The beaded objects begin to seem beautifully disobedient, not for obscuring the faces of the womxn in Claxton's images, but for rising to taunt the institution from within.

Sheilah Restack's installation is grounding and calm. A collection of six sculptural and photographic assemblage pieces that effuse a visceral intimacy, her work somehow seems both heavy and ethereal. Materially, they comprise found objects (a leather saddle, a red tarp, and rubber bands, for example) deconstructed and rebuilt, layered with stitching and manipulations. Each piece includes a "fleece photo blanket," which is as tactile and inviting as one might imagine.

Each fleece photo blanket is sandwiched between plexiglass, with various iterations of thread, hair, and found objects. In some cases, they billow beyond the confines of the plexiglass, begging for touch. The wall-mounted works are each perched on a cement wedge support. It's easy to be drawn in by the materiality of the pieces; their construction and the crevices that their odd angles generate invite viewers to peek behind the surface. Five works are mounted to the wall, but the single freestanding piece, *Hold House*, sits like a body itself. It's

anchored by rock, iron, and a bag of swampy water holding unidentifiable foliage—heavy and malleable, yet delicate.

Stepping into a dimly lit space with vast ceilings, we feel the metallic words linger. From a mesmerizing blue screen to the right, a voice sounds out, calmly but purposefully, "paraknown abilities emerge³...." The voice continues, each word fluttering on the screen with the same rhythmic fluidity as the watery imagery beneath. The work, *benthibitchfantasy*, an infinitely looped digital video by ray ferreira, is like a trick of the light itself; words echo with associations vast, flowing, and pluriversal⁴. The voice airs watery evocations from "spiritual female figures who make their home in the water." These figures teach us with slippery language that bodies and identities are fluid, deep, and unbound entities.

Deeper into the gallery space, two of ferreira's sculptural works—mannequin heads adorned with crystals, wigs, and flowers—are situated on plinths. She has imbedded each with signifiers of trans experience.

Red Yellow Green Purple, by Wit López, is welcoming in its vibrantly celebratory queer glory. The scale is monumental, as it should be, and features collaborative portraits of the artist, their friends, and peers, projected onto an oversized quilt. At the base of the projected images are colourfully knitted objects, like fallen confetti, that are also found in the portraits. The materiality of the patchwork quilt and soft textiles nods to the labour and comforting reward of collective care. The work



Cindy Stelmackowich, *Shell Shock*.

celebrates the identities of all involved, as disabled artists, peers, and community, and signals chosen family. López's work is joyful and proud in its playfulness, collaboration, and care.

Also in the exhibition space is Tarqralik Partridge's *Build My Own Home*, a collection of four amautiit (women's parkas). The parkas are disquieting in their floating life-like stature, as they loom and drift slightly, suspended from the ceiling. Recalling the detritus costumery of the Baroness, Partridge's four coats are fabricated of a motley collection of materials, from Tyvek and canvas to newsprint, dental floss, and hula hoops, adorned with small silver spoons. The work encourages contemplation of both the precarity and resourcefulness of the body.

Cindy Stelmackowich's installation *Shell Shock* uses found WWI era splints to cast layered shadows. Ghosts of bodies in distress fall along the back wall of the gallery, the distortion a chilling reminder of the devastation of war and the risks of inhabiting a body. The connection to the corporeal is unmissable with the artist's use of wax, red pigment, gauze, and bandages on the mesh of the metal splints. However, it seems as though the bodily elements—the fleshy pink and red wax, the gauze—are perhaps giving form to the splints, rather than the other way around.

The final gallery space is a brightly lit dedication to Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven herself. Carefully

laid out artefacts, objects, and texts, both by and about The Baroness, offer glimpses into her humour, innovation, and queer-centrism, as well as her belief in inhabiting and celebrating her body and art into full and “non-discrete” co-existence. An image of a small sculptural object titled *Limbswish* exemplifies The Baroness's playful but boundary-pushing ethos and the dissolution of any line between her art and life.

Irene Gammel writes of the small curtain tassel caged by a metal spiral: “The curtain tassel within the metal spiral in this piece was worn performatively by the Baroness at her hip, such that it would swing as she walked. The sound of this object on the body (the limb swish) provided inspiration for its name, yet the object also speaks to her queered aesthetic, as the term “swishes” was often used to describe publicly gay men. This kinetic, whip-like device also evokes reference to the whip used as an erotic tool, giving dual meaning to the title's pun (the Limb's wish).”

Situated in the same space are two video works with headphones for intimate viewing. *Subjoyride*, by Carol Sawyer, channels post-WWI era America, where a hopeful capitalist dream emerges. The video is composed of rhythmically spliced together archival footage played to the sound of Sawyer performing The Baroness's poem of the same name. Mechanical sounds seamlessly add texture, as Sawyer's voice and The



Lene Berg, *Shaving the Baroness*.

Baroness's words sling together readymade⁷ capitalist slogans and consumerist language, much of which, like "just rub it on..." references the body.

With Bessie Smith playing through headphones, a black and white video on a loop shows a nude woman shaving her pubic hair, while another character lathers and fawns over her. The work, *Shaving the Baroness*, by Lene Berg picks up where *Elsa, Baroness von Freytag-Loringhoven, Shaving Her Pubic Hair* (1921) left off. The latter, a film made in collaboration with Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp, was destroyed before its inaugural screening. The image of a woman shaving her pubic hair pushes at the boundaries of eroticism, vulnerability, and risk surrounding the unveiling and queering, or transformation, of the body, even today. And what could be more fitting for a person about whom Marcel Duchamp stated, "[The Baroness] is not a futurist. She is the future."⁸?

In nurturing these new works by eight strong contemporary artists—and encouraging speculative dialogues about potential new futures—curators Anderson and Gammel welcome The Baroness into the present (and, in fact, also the future) to take up her rightful place in art history as not only a matriarch of Dada but also a proud queer icon and defiant champion of freedom of the body. ■

[1] Womxn is an intersectional term intended to signal the inclusion of those who have historically been excluded from white feminist discourse: Black women, women of colour, and trans women. The term has been in use since the 1970s. More recently, the term has also been used, sometimes contentiously, to include nonbinary people. With the removal of man or men at the end, womxn is empowering to some as it's not defined in relation to men.

[2] The Baroness Elsa Project exhibition publication.....

[3] ray ferreira, benthibitchfantasy 2019; 2021.

[4] The term pluriversal is derived from philosophies of pluralism and imagines the world as lacking in uniformity, thus deconstructing hierarchies to honour and value many realities, and ways of being, simultaneously. For additional research see: Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*, Duke University Press, 2018.

[5] The Baroness Elsa Project exhibition publication.

[6] ray ferreira, benthibitchfantasy 2019; 2021.

[7] The term readymade is attributed to Marcel Duchamp who used it to describe the works of art he made from manufactured objects. In this text, the term "readymade" is subverted to refer to familiar capitalist slogans, rather than objects.

[8] This quotation can be found across the web, and is also included in The Baroness Elsa Project publication .

Amy Ash (she/they) is a queer interdisciplinary artist engaged with collective care through processes of shared meaning-making. Her practice flows from curatorial projects and writing to teaching, socially engaged action, and hands-on making. Amy has exhibited and curated programmes internationally, with projects commissioned by the National Gallery London (UK), the NB International Sculpture Symposium, and the Beaverbrook Art Gallery (NB). She is a recent guest editor with CreatedHere magazine (March 2022), and also an instructor with the New Brunswick College of Craft and Design.