READY

Sonny Assu &

PLAYER TWO

Brendan L. S. Tang

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Curated and edited by
Laura Schneider

the reach
GALLERY MUSEUM

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FOREWORD

Laura Schneider

Ready Player Two was born of sidebar conversations, inside jokes, and what-if musings. I have often likened my role as curator of this project to that of an extra in a buddy comedy, unwittingly drawn into a plotline that is at once carefully scripted and profoundly improvisational. More than a two-person exhibition, *Ready Player Two*—from its "what-if" beginnings, to its original presentation at The Reach Gallery Museum in Abbotsford, BC, in 2017, to its subsequent restaging in five destinations across Canada between 2018 and 2020—has been a uniquely collaborative experience from start to finish.

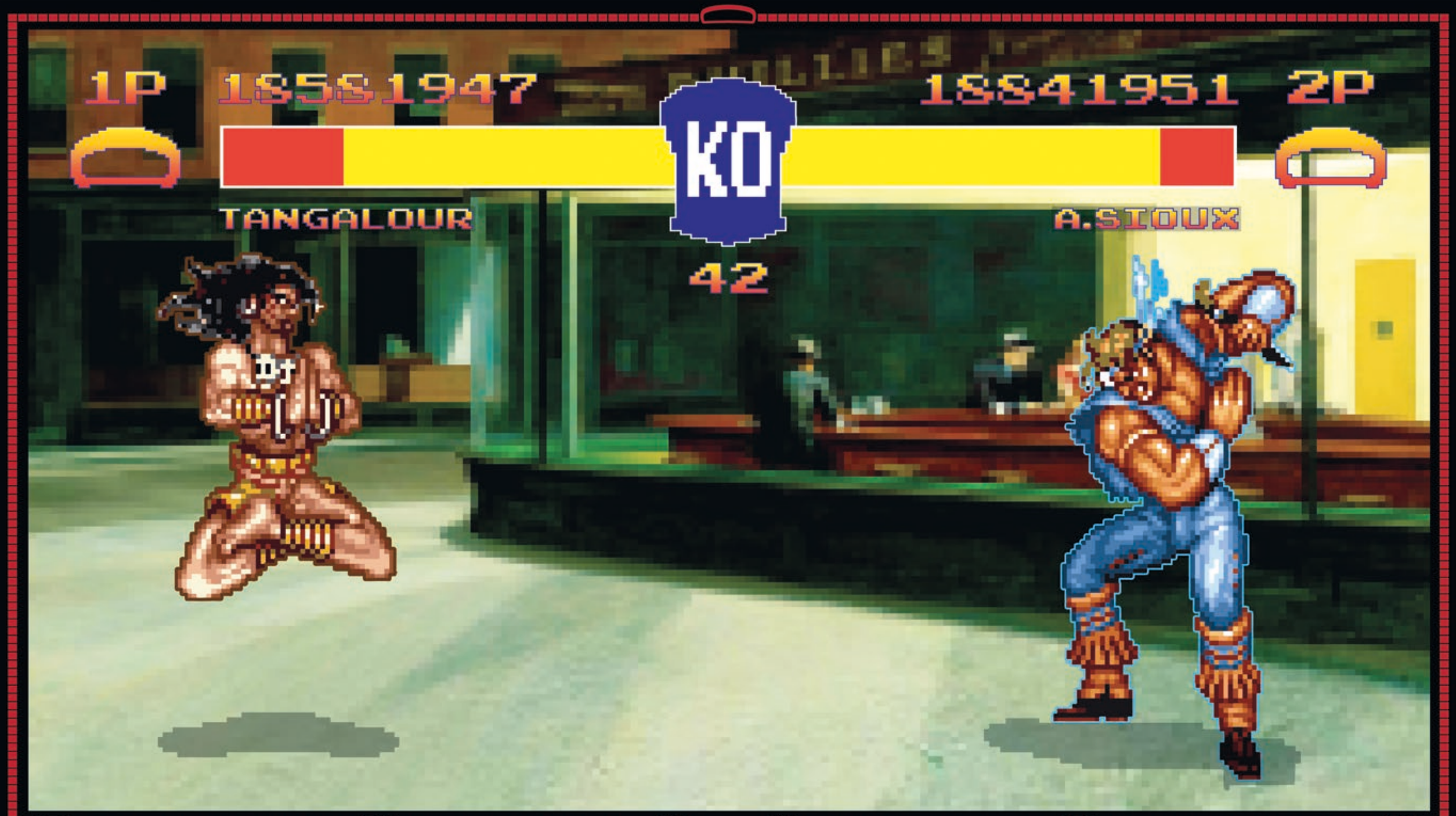
The exhibition exhumes what might be described as the final decades of homogeneous mass culture: the 1980s and '90s—just moments before the internet and user-generated content splintered the consumption of popular culture en masse. *Ready Player Two* is a quasi coming-of-age story that follows its artists, Sonny Assu and Brendan Lee Satish Tang, through gallery spaces reframed as the sanctuaries of their youth: the Kitchen, the Basement, the Arcade, and the Comic Book Store. These spaces contain a mashup of found objects, works from earlier in the artists' careers, and newer pieces created specifically for the exhibition.

When *Ready Player Two* opened at The Reach, it was not planned to tour. Although the artworks and concept were developed well in advance, its realization was somewhat extemporaneous in that its final form truly developed on site over the course of installation. Like improvisational theatre, making this exhibition required us to remain open and responsive in the assembly of objects, ideas, and environments, and the results were even more cohesive and exciting than what the artists and I had imagined at the outset. It came as a pleasant surprise when, shortly after the exhibition opened, we received inquiries from a handful of galleries interested in borrowing it. Though we were uncertain about how it would translate to a touring project, we embraced the first rule of improv theatre and replied with: "Yes, and . . ."

Re-envisioning the exhibition as a touring project allowed us to test the possibilities and limitations of our improvisational, collaborative approach and fostered the emergence of regional nuances in the found objects that each gallery included in its presentation of the exhibition. Each borrowing gallery was asked to source its own period-specific furnishings and ephemera for the Kitchen and the Basement spaces, just as we had at The Reach. To find all the appropriate elements, our partner galleries turned to local networks of second-hand stores, classified ads, furniture shops, theatre companies, and yard sales. Rather than being a standard "plug and play" touring exhibition, *Ready Player Two* exists as a series of variations, each presentation an extension of the adaptive, location-specific spirit of the project.

In keeping with Assu's and Tang's individual practices, the exhibition is a confluence of wit, warmth, and incisive criticality. At its simplest, it is an homage to the "geek culture" of the artists' respective youths—vestiges of which persist in the works they create to this day. At its deeper levels, the exhibition provides a thorough and thoughtful examination of the direct relationship between popular culture, consumerism, and identity. Fundamentally, *Ready Player Two* is an exploration of the tension between immersion and spectatorship and of the analogous friction between the embodiment and fetishization of racialized identities as they are constructed and reinforced through both popular culture and contemporary art.

Of course, it is also an exhibition about memory and nostalgia. In each of its spaces—the Kitchen, the Basement, the Arcade, and the Comic Book Store—Assu and Tang engage in processes of remembrance, mimesis, problematizing, and reimagining. The writers who have contributed to this catalogue reflect many of these same processes in critical and creative responses to the exhibition, which are also informed by their respective scholarship and lived experiences. I am grateful to the curators at the borrowing galleries—Mary Bradshaw from the Yukon Arts Centre, Arin Fay from Touchstones Nelson, Stephen Remus from the Niagara Artists Centre, and Emelie Chhangur from the Art Gallery of York University—who have provided short reflections on the spaces and themes that comprise the exhibition, and to our commissioned writers, Amy Fung, Elizabeth LaPensée, and Troy Patenaude, for engaging with the ideas in the exhibition with intelligence, humour, and sensitivity.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SONNY ASSU AND BRENDAN LEE SATISH TANG IN CONVERSATION WITH LAURA SCHNEIDER

Laura Schneider: Let's begin at the beginning: How did you two meet, and what was the impetus for this collaboration?

Brendan Lee Satish Tang: In 2009, at BC Scene, which is a big festival in Ottawa that features creative types from British Columbia, Sonny and I were in a show together called *Blue Like an Orange* at the Ottawa Art Gallery. I got there a little bit before the whole event, and Sonny was there early for the exhibition *Beat Nation*, so I was hanging out with him and we got on like a house on fire, just making each other laugh.

Sonny Assu: A collaboration between us was something we had been talking about for a while. I think we started talking about it at my place in Vancouver, about a year after the 2009 show. And then we forgot about it.

BLST: The idea came back around when Sonny was asked to work with the Emily Carr collection at the Vancouver Art Gallery, and he saw the ceramic works that Carr had done under the pseudonym Klee Wyck, which he asked me to make a few pieces in reference to. We started talking about "blind box" collectables and the relationship between the objects that Emily Carr was making specifically for the tourist market and drawing parallels to consumer geek culture and art collecting culture, and we got really excited about that, because we are both self-proclaimed members of the geek community. I think our worlds were colliding, and that's what spurred us on to this show. It's been interesting to collaborate for *Ready Player Two*, because when you have a solo practice, you get used to your own proverbial guitar licks. But in collaboration, you're constantly responding, so it becomes a bit more of an improvisation.

SA: Laura, I think that you and I had been talking about this show for a while, before the Vancouver Art Gallery show came up, and I had all these ideas about constructing these spaces, like the basement where we hung out as kids. That's probably the first place—for me, anyway—where I felt safe and secure as an individual who was into geek culture. I was never into sports or any of those other things that you might do in high school. The basement is where I would hang out with my friends and my cousins. The Basement section we ended up creating for the exhibition reminds me so much of the kind of place I would've hung out in as a kid. Even my buddy from high school who came to the opening at The Reach said, "This is the exact basement we hung out in."

LS: You use that term a lot: "geek culture." Maybe you could explain what you mean by that for the uninitiated.

BLST: I think it's a much more prevalent thing now with all the Marvel and other superhero movies that are coming out every summer. Geekdom has become such a mainstream thing, but when we were growing up in the '80s and '90s it was very much a marginalized part of culture. If you hung out at comic book stores, you were considered a nerd or a geek or whatever. You weren't part of the popular crowd. It's kind of amazing now—if you had a time machine or a DeLorean, you could go back and tell yourself, "Don't worry, they're going to make an amazing version of *Batman* and *Thor*." Your young self would never believe it.

SA: Actually, the best version of *Batman* was made in 1989, and Thor made an appearance in *Adventures in Babysitting* in 1987.[1]

BLST: (audible silence)

SA: So yeah, back then it was counterculture for sure. It was under the radar, but in hindsight, it was consumerism at its finest, but it wasn't really mass-marketed in the way that it is today. Comic conventions have gone from community halls to entire convention centres full of people in cosplay gear. For me, my participation in geek culture is not separate from my Indigenous cultural identity. Often when we think about Indigeneity, it's about being from a specific Indigenous group and using that particular aesthetic language, and not necessarily the other elements of our lives that inform our cultural experiences. Being able to mix these aspects of my identity for this exhibition has created something that, I think, is interesting and unique—and fun.

LS: The title of your exhibition refers to the novel Ready Player One *(2011) by Ernest Cline, which also layers references to popular culture of the 1980s into the narrative. In the exhibition, the addition of found objects from this era compounds the meaning of the art objects. Was the decision to include these objects deliberate from the outset, or did the project just sort of unfold that way?*

BLST: The found objects in the space take viewers back to that era—or if they weren't alive during that time, give a sense of it. I think that these objects became a bit of a shorthand for us, and their use was definitely deliberate. It is a way to quickly put the audience in a particular mindset. There's an old cartridge from an Atari gaming system, VHS tapes, old magazines, and books from

that era. It's a way of getting people to participate in the powerful experience of nostalgia using the "real thing," which makes their encounter with the mimetic objects more challenging or interesting. Those clues or nostalgic references have a much stronger presence at the beginning of the exhibition, in the spaces set up as the Kitchen and the Basement. And that was also done to alter the viewer's perception a bit. If it is a bit heavy-handed at first, it almost disappears as visitors walk through the other two spaces, the Arcade and the Comic Book Store. It's analogous to the idea that, in the domestic space, you are still under your parents' roof, and so in that sense are sort of immersed in their world, surrounded by their stuff; but as a young person in those other spaces—the comic book store and the arcade—you are an independent individual, spending your own money, using your own agency.

SA: Although there are a lot of these hints in the exhibition, we didn't want to overload people with nostalgia. We didn't want that to be the main instrument to engage people with the work. For me, what has been interesting throughout making this exhibition is that my work is so often concerned with the political, whether it has to do with Indigenous identity or our relationship to government historically and today. It's been nice to think about work from another perspective, and one that invites such a different way of making art. It's been fun to get back to the joy of making, and for Brendan and I to just call each other and riff off what the other was doing. It's interesting to me that when you get to a certain point in your career as a professional artist, it's like you're not really supposed to have fun anymore (laughs). It's like you have to have your message down like a script. And in this case, there was just a lot of joy in making these things. It's been nice to make the work first, and think about it after.

LS: In addition to the found objects, some of the works in this exhibition self-consciously stand in for real objects. For example, Brendan's watercolour VCR and Nintendo console, or, Sonny, your arcade cabinets. In other cases, where the work is more hybridized—like the Manga Ormolu *series (2007–) or the comic book collage paintings, like the* Giant Sized Spectacular *series* (2017)*—these objects are truer to your respective practices as audiences may be most familiar with them. In that sense, the latter can read as more substantial in terms of their authorship. Various ideas of authenticity come up time and again in this exhibition.*

BLST: The *Manga Ormolu* pieces began as a way to think about cultural appropriation—how French culture appropriated Asian traditions. I wanted to recreate and contemporize the gesture of appropriation while also considering class distinctions between the highbrow tendency to collect "exotic" porcelains and lowbrow culture as expressed by the manga robots. That became its own meditation on culture and identity. The watercolours of the VCR (*Momento Mori: VCR*, 2017) and Nintendo console (*Momento Mori: Nintendo*, 2017) for me were about fetishizing those objects, imbuing them with what the philosopher Walter Benjamin calls an "aura." Nintendo and Game Boy were things that I fetishized as a kid, and the VCR was one of the ways that we, as kids, had access to things that were forbidden to us, like nudity. So these things vibrate on the same frequency for me—the idea of an end of innocence. They are interesting objects that, to my mind, deserved a kind of homage, and one made from a delicate, unexpected material.

SA: Comic books have a similar kind of status for me. But I've dealt with them in a different way for this exhibition. When I collected comics in my youth, they were precious—I spent every penny I had on them. I put them in bags with boards and into long boxes to keep them safe. In the *Speculator Boom* series (2017), I'm actively destroying them. Which, oddly enough, became a cathartic experience. To take them apart, cut them up and stick them to a surface, paint over them, and collage with them helped me to reconnect with them and the memories that they held. I specifically chose issues or series that I felt strongly connected to, which were mostly from the various *X-Men* titles. The *X-Men* are mutants, they are different, and they are outsiders. I think it's easy to see the parallels between Indigenous struggle against colonial subjugation today and the kinds of narratives available in those stories.

LS: In the Ready Player *Two exhibition, you have attempted to create four distinct spaces, each of them fashioned after a place that was meaningful in your adolescence. The first spaces, the Kitchen and the Basement, are perhaps the most literal, but also deliberately imperfect in their attempt to recreate or simulate a memory. As visitors move through the exhibition, into the spaces meant to emulate an arcade and a comic book store, this illusion seems to dissolve. Or, put another way: we become increasingly aware of the illusion. Brendan, you touched on this earlier—can you say a bit more about this, and why the transition was conceived in this way?*

BLST: I think we were interested in exploring the fallibility of memory in this exhibition. The spaces we've recreated are not perfect. The illusion is coming apart at the seams. The wall moulding extends past its logical point of termination and onto the white wall of the gallery; the edge of the carpet doesn't meet the wall, so we see the exposed gallery floor. The mise en scène bleeds back into the gallery space. I've heard that memories are not based on actual events, but rather based on the last time you had that memory. So as memory decays, it is replaced with something else, something artificial or conjured—perhaps with storytelling. I think that gaming and comic book culture are like that, too. When I was younger, these forms of culture and the places where I engaged with them gave me the opportunity to play with ideas of who I wanted to be.

SA: I think it's about coming of age and about autonomy as well. When I was young, the basement was a place where you could be alone with your friends and test ideas about your identity through avatars, whether analogue or digital. Then, as you got older, you could leave the house and go to places like the arcade and the comic book store and test your autonomy in different ways. Of course, autonomy in those places is also linked to your identity as a consumer, whether you're pumping quarters into a machine or buying a new comic book. There is a social aspect to these places as well, but you're still safe in spaces where you're meeting like-minded people who have similar interests, and so this idea of navigating your newfound independence is still occurring within the confines of a fairly prescribed set of economic and social parameters. I think this plays out in the exhibition where, in the first rooms, the Kitchen and the Basement, it is harder to distinguish who made what. As you move into the Arcade and the Comic Book Store, our individual practices, our identities as artists, become much more visible, and this is taking place in a space that begins to resemble a gallery. This reflects our current reality as artists: the setting has changed, but the basic framework of social and economic circumstances remains.

LS: Avatars are an interesting way to explore identity, and they become a kind of subtext in this exhibition. Can you talk about how this concept comes through for you?

BLST: In *Dungeons & Dragons*, I never played as a human character, because humans were always default white in my mind. So I would play halflings, or I would be an orc, or more often than not, an elf. I did not want to be the white character—I was looking for the kinds of players that allowed me to try out another voice. I think I was looking for my reflection in popular culture, and when *Street Fighter II* came out, there was a South Asian character named Dhalsim. It was a game-changer to have this strong warrior character, rather than the Peter Sellers version of an Indian man,[2] who's basically a bumbling idiot. In *Clayfighter* (2017), I took the *Street Fighter* character and indulged my inner child. So not only is the character I created for that work an avatar that I can identify with racially, I wanted him to actually resemble me. I had really long hair at the time, so I painstakingly drew long, black hair and a goatee on the separate animations. In the video, rather than fight another avatar, I depict him going through all the steps of wheel throwing. And there's the failure part of it, which is a big part of working in ceramics. But, ultimately, in round three of the fight, he succeeds. Maybe it's just taking self-portraiture to a really ridiculous new level.

SA: For about fifteen or twenty years now, I've been collecting ephemera from a time when stereotypes of what an "Indian" should look like were in heavy circulation, which are really iconographies of racism. When I became more aware of my Indigenous heritage, that's the default image that I had in my mind, but it didn't really align with my experience or with my family, so it became laughable. But it's not really funny, because those images are powerful stuff, and it's the kind of thing that shapes how white society thinks an "Indian" should be. I think that when people see my work, they have this idea in their head about what I should look like, but when they meet me in person, the way I look doesn't fit their expectation, and so they don't really know how to respond. I think that kind of stereotype, the "Imaginary Indian," is alive and well in Canada.

LS: In your individual practices, you are both interested in the cultural and economic status of the object, how both kinds of value are ascribed, and how this can shift and change during the life of an object. In this exhibition, particularly in the Comic Book Store, there are notable parallels between the kinds of values associated with gaming culture and with the art world.

BLST: We were thinking about artworks as collectible objects, but owning art isn't accessible to everybody. I think Sonny and I straddle both worlds, as many artists do. We are genuinely excited about popular culture but we're equally excited about "highbrow" culture. We saw this exhibition as a way to draw out the fascination with collecting in general—which can whip people into a lather on both fronts, collecting art and collecting toys. If you look at "blind box" collectibles—you know, the kinds of toys that come in packaging with no window or label to let you know exactly what you're getting inside—they're an example of collecting culture in differing economic strata. Blind box collectibles are accessible to a broader range of people than, say, rare comic books. Value also comes out in other ways. In my piece *GIPoC* (2017), the plastic display sign says "21% off," which is a reference to the lack of parity in pay for work between the white labour force and people of colour. So ideas about race, given that the only figurines in that display are the characters that represent visible minorities, are related to notions of value, especially because the G.I. Joe figurines used in this work are now also collectibles.

SA: In the 1990s, there was a time now known as the "speculator boom," which is what I titled one of my series for this exhibition. At that time, comic book companies were flooding the market with as many books as they could. Re-releasing issue number ones or variant editions with multiple reprints of the same issue, but with different covers, like with a foil seal or glow in the dark. Some were specially bagged with a collectible sticker or card or whatever. So, in some cases I would buy ten different versions of the same issue. In the end there was really nothing special about them. And the speculator boom nearly tanked the industry. But my series *Speculator Boom* (2017) isn't about the industry—it's about how I was duped into thinking that these "special" issues would be a nest egg. That they'd eventually be worth something. But they aren't, because everyone has them. Issues that I thought would be worth hundreds of dollars can now be found, in some cases, for cheaper than the cover price from the '90s! And it's funny to see history repeat itself with the industry today, with rampant repackaging and marketing of what is ultimately the same content. But, in some cases, I think what they're doing with the content is actually good, like having familiar heroes change. Like Spider-Man being a Black Latino boy, or making Thor a woman. The industry is doing some much needed diversifying. Reimagining or introducing BIPOC,[3] women, and LGBTQ+ people as central figures in these stories is important. But you have some people bellyaching about it, saying the industry is just trying to make more money, or ruining the "essence" of the character, or not being true to the character's history. Whatever—I think it's great and, frankly, about time. It would've been great to see that back when we were kids, instead of seeing the usual tropes represented.

LS: Thinking about this show, one of the criticisms against it might be that it feels self-indulgent. Even though the content is really quite critical, the fact that some of the subject matter is relatable or accessible could lend it to a superficial reading.

BLST: But all art practices are self-indulgent. Everyone who makes art is scratching an itch. I think that we live in a culture that believes we must suffer for what we do, that in order to be making honest work, the struggle has to be real and present. For this show, the struggle was easy to move through, because it was enjoyable. One of the things I've been thinking about is what separates this exhibition from fan art, which is just replicating what you're consuming; the answer is, it's the level of criticality. In some cases it's pretty concealed, and in others it's right there on the surface, like with *GIPoC*. Maybe the parts that feel accessible act as a foil for the fact that a lot of this work talks about things that people would rather not address.

SA: A lot of the issues that we are talking about may feel like they're under the surface for mainstream Canada. I think that, because these works operate on a few levels, they allow people multiple ways into the exhibition. I think it's really important for people to find a way into this work—and all art—without needing an expert to explain to them what it means. Hopefully in drawing people in, we can bring some of these more critical ideas to a broader audience. Besides, this is what we do for a living: we make art. If we don't take joy in making it, what is the point?

[1] In the movie *Adventures in Babysitting*, one of the babysitting charges, Sara (Maia Brewton), is obsessed with the Marvel Comics series *The Mighty Thor* (1967–). When the Adventurers get a flat tire, Sara meets a mechanic named Dawson (Vincent D'Onofrio), who, with his sledgehammer and long blonde locks, reminds her of the superhero. The cost of the tire repair is $50, but they are $5 short. Sara gives Dawson her prized Thor helmet to make up the difference.

[2] Tang is referring here to the popular 1968 film *The Party* in which Peter Sellers appears in brownface as Bakshi, a helplessly clumsy Indian man who is inadvertently invited to an important Hollywood party.

[3] Black, Indigenous, and people of colour.

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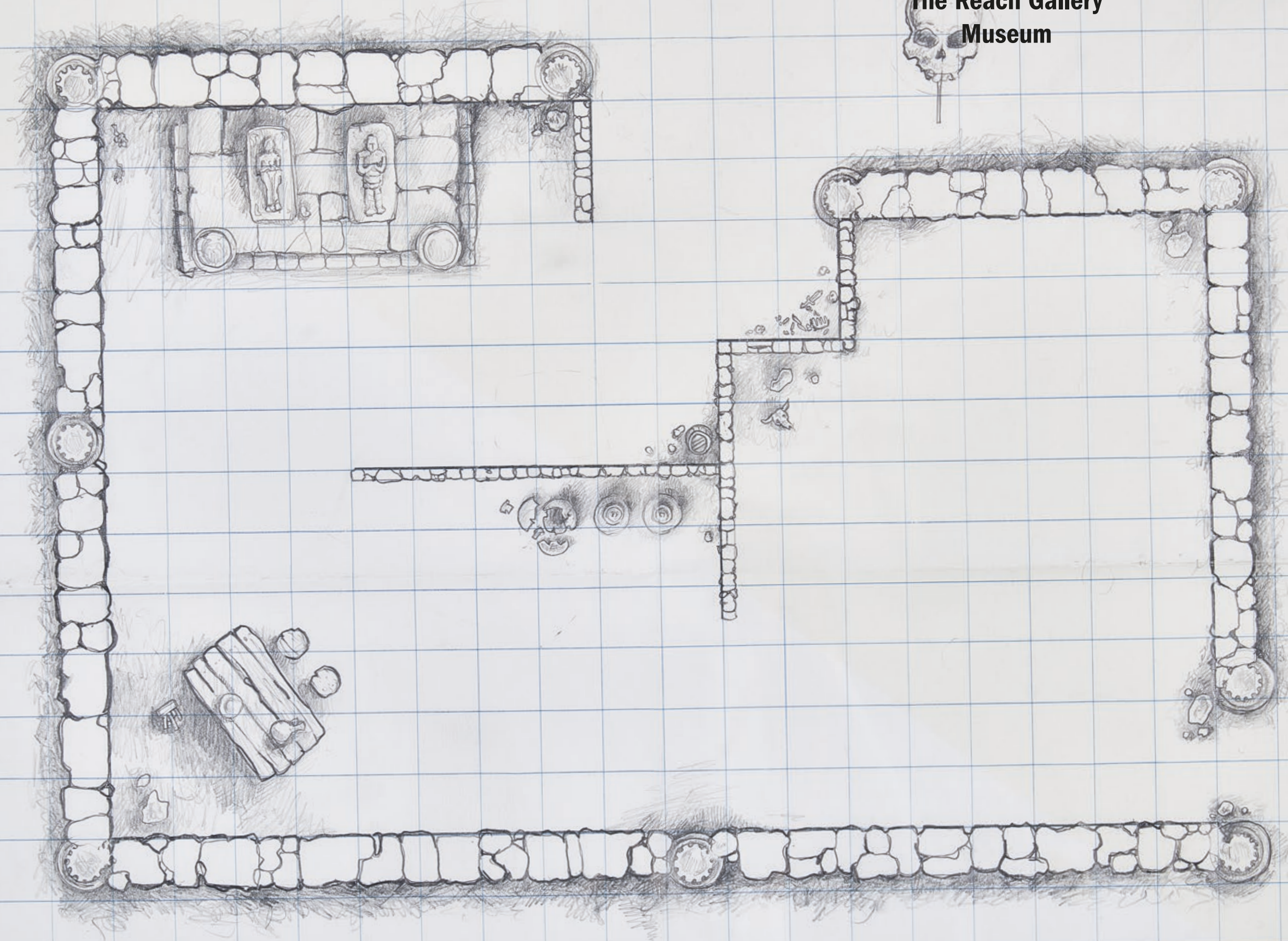


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THE KITCHEN

Arin Fay

The Kitchen is delineated by a *Tetris*-esque foundation of vinyl flooring, which puts into question the mediocre beige-and-blue aesthetic of wainscoting and chintz wallpaper. It is these observable and "ordinary" facets that are challenged and set into purposeful juxtaposition for those willing to adjust their gaze and see the complex, symbol-centric world that Sonny Assu and Brendan Lee Satish Tang have so carefully constructed. The trappings of 1980s and '90s status quo are turned against themselves in irreverent and sobering ways. The scaffolding of the scene illustrates the highly manufactured nature of the barriers between the natural, social, and cosmic currents that hold sway over our human world, especially within the remembered landscape of youth. Once the fourth wall is removed, it is possible to see the accoutrements that complicate and characterize these practical spaces and how cultural realities are reflected within them. The Kitchen accomplishes this with fabulous familiarity, and for all the cuckoo-clock conventionality, the scene holds a clash of both nostalgia and provocation. Irreverent social satire and carefully constructed works of art collide with found and fabricated objects to commemorate the formative years and current careers of two artists of monstrous ability—a motley but fascinating crew that illustrates decades of decadence and destructive denial.

The hot-pink ovoid that hovers like a UFO over the bucolic clapboard house pictured in the thrift-store painting speaks volumes about the arrogant and unjust history of the colonization of Canada, a story of ownership and invasion that is not easily contained within white picket fences. *Doesn't look like anyone lives here. Let's live here!* (2014) is the title of Assu's interventionist work, and it is compelling how many levels of meaning exist in this one work, especially in this "middle-class" kitchen setting, which extends out into the gallery in which it is contained—a likewise colonial and therefore complicit institution. The messages operate metaleptically: "a paradoxical contamination between the world of the telling and the world of the told,"[1] a ripple effect that revels in restorative and fantastic reversals.

Dungeons & Dragons (*D&D*) paraphernalia is spread out on the gold-flecked Formica table, dice and figurines sitting on top of Tang's intricate pencil drawings of past and present gallery spaces reimagined as "dungeon maps." *D&D*, which has been described in gamer literature as "one of the Trope Codifiers of the modern era" (yes, gamers do talk like that), carries and connects the kitchen with the world of subtext and subterfuge, a place where small children would eat sugary cereal out of Princess Di commemorative china but also slay dragons and save the world—which really sums up the role of the artist: to both create and kill the dragons that no one else sees.

One trope to rule them all . . .

A *D&D* group waged a campaign in this constructed kitchen late one night, to honour and activate the exhibition space. The campaign raged for hours, and it was a wonder to witness how the players were transported in time and place and yet were entirely symbiotic to the scene. A truly emancipatory degree of creative licence permeated the game being played, a world unbound by gender, social status, or history and an overall "good source of trickery," which echoed the many versions of altered and reimagined reality within the gallery. There is something to be said for the battles that are fought by basement dwellers, nerds, activists, and artists of all stripes, and how the truths that need to be told can be quiet riots or deafening assaults on the senses.

[1] John Pier, "Metalepsis," in *Handbook of Narratology*, ed. Peter Hühn, John Pier, Wolf Schmid and Jörg Schönert (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter), 190.

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TANGALOUR

THE BASEMENT

Mary Bradshaw

Is there anything more transporting than stepping into your parent's basement rec room? The one that hasn't changed in decades. That glorious mishmash of furniture that has somehow migrated downstairs and from yard sales over the years. Where the old TV with knobs is still running that late-night onslaught of endless ads, almost reaching the end-of-night signal.

With so many of the pieces included in Sonny Assu and Brendan Lee Satish Tang's Basement installation at the Yukon Art Centre donated and shared by Whitehorse residents, it created a space that feels like home in the North—a place where, ironically, permafrost prevents basements from being the standard architectural feature that they are in most warmer climates. Unlike many of the other venues on *Ready Player Two*'s tour itinerary, the Yukon Art Centre doesn't have easy access to big-box stores or even secondhand stores. Instead, our team put out a call on our local arts listserv, an email list that reaches almost five hundred people in the Yukon, asking for wood panelling, a couch, a rug, a coffee table, and the like. Pieces that they imagined might have been in their childhood rec rooms. We had an enormous response. My favourite was related to the wood panelling. We received a voicemail that exuberantly proclaimed, "Oh, do I ever have the panelling for you—it is the *real deal*. I remember helping my dad put it up in our basement in the mid '70s!" We also had a magnificent plaid couch arrive almost immediately, along with afghans to drape over it. Our local theatre company, the Guild, also offered up items such as lamps and a rug. One of our staff convinced her parents to lend us their big old TV cabinet and gorgeous—and very heavy—wooden coffee table from decades ago.

The Basement of *Ready Player Two* is almost a vortex. Visitors sit on that plaid couch and are absolutely sucked into the endless advertisement jingles that everyone somehow knows inherently. We have no idea they are still in our memories, yet we can recite every word of those songs. The space is so comforting and welcoming that it takes a moment to even discern which of the items Assu and Tang have created for the space. The hand-painted facsimiles of a television, a VCR, and an old Nintendo, along with the bowl of ceramic Cheezies, are noticed only on second look. Even more hidden is Assu's very first art school painting—a gift to his grandmother—tucked behind the couch. These specific, personal, and nostalgic pieces ground the room.

In fact, nostalgia *permeates* Tang and Assu's Basement, seeping into every corner and each sofa cushion. Nostalgia has a long, tumultuous history and is often viewed as a sign of depression, but recent studies have proven its positive, restorative impacts on individuals.[1] Although bittersweet, nostalgia centres you in a narrative that builds a sense of social connectedness and fosters perceptions of continuity between past and present. This, to me, sums up the experience of the Basement installation: you enter Tang and Assu's basement, but you sit down on the couch of your youth. It is transformative. Visitors' excitement about this transportation back into a specific moment of time that they hadn't thought about in years has moved several people to come banging on the door to my office before leaving the gallery, just to tell me about their experience. They might sing me part of a song or recount falling asleep in front of the TV and waking up to that drone of the end-of-the-night colour bars. By presenting us their youth—a period of our lives that frequently feels alienating—Assu and Tang bring us along into it and, in this space, reveal our shared experiences and connectedness.

[1] Tim Adams, "Look Back in Joy: The Power of Nostalgia," *Guardian* (UK), November 9, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/nov/09/look-back-in-joy-the-power-of-nostalgia.

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NOSTALGIA AS REMEMBRANCE AND FUTURISMS IN READY PLAYER TWO

Elizabeth LaPensée

"Being human totally sucks most of the time. Videogames are the only thing that make life bearable."
—*Anorak's Almanac*, chapter 91, verses 1–2[1]

It's sometime in the '90s. The neighbour kids and I are hanging out in a wood-panelled basement, hiding from adults during a costume party. We're taking turns playing *Super Mario Bros*. Rules are, if you die, you have to pass the controller over. No one expected me to make it to Bowser's castle, but here I am, dominating the controller, level after level. This time, though, unlike all the other times I've played, I'm feeling the intensity of the heat radiating from the lava, because I've gone all out with my costume. Dressed as a seal, done up in face paint, and strapped into a full-body wetsuit. Turns out that wetsuits are not great for vigorous indoor gaming. I feel the sweat dripping inside the suit, but it doesn't matter. No one knows, and besides—I'm the one who brought the NES,[2] so I'm the cool kid today.

I mess up during the fight with Bowser because the fireballs feel too real.

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Before even seeing the exhibition *Ready Player Two*, its title had me primed for the kind of extensive intertextuality that characterizes its namesake: Ernest Cline's 2011 novel *Ready Player One*. The book is a complex, interwoven curation of geek culture that includes references to video games, analogue games, and comics from the 1980s. In the story, a young man grapples with escapism and ambivalence toward his dystopian present while seeking a better future through the OASIS, a massively multiplayer online game that immerses players in a virtual world. Much like the exhibition, which is filled with nostalgia-evoking cues, Cline's OASIS contains Easter eggs—hidden game features—that the novel's heroes must find in order to win the game and the ultimate prize: ownership of the OASIS. The journey speaks to the dreams of so many who grew up in the '80s, empowered by home computers and eventually internet access, to create and play in their own realities.

My own youth was spent in this way, escaping reality and entering one of my own making. I was a kid who joined the internet through AOL 1.0. Four-letter screen name for life. When I wasn't online, I was surrounded by storytelling, books, and films that exemplified how Indigenous ways of knowing can be expressed and colonization can be addressed through science fiction. I often found myself sitting on the floor in front of a VCR, cueing up tapes for my mama's courses. As an English professor who had fought for her work to be acknowledged by her institution, she was on the cusp of coining the term "Indigenous Futurisms" and at that point was still years out from becoming the first-ever professor tenured in science fiction.[3] From the couch, surrounded by stacks of books that seemed to cover every surface of our living room, she'd talk in circles about how movies like *Dead Man* (1995) and *Blade Runner* (1982) are related, while I was tasked with fast-forwarding, rewinding, and pausing tapes for her to play in her lectures as she filled the margins of her books with handwritten notes.

The first galleries of *Ready Player Two* feel like being home. From the central position of the TV set, to the bright-orange cheese-puff dust that we'd have to brush off onto our clothes to keep our NES controllers working, to the comforting wood-panelled walls that make a room feel like a cave, the exhibition's Basement space welcomes anyone who was a kid in the '80s. The place to get away. Except that here there are little reminders of the awkwardness of the outside world—a world where geeks like me had few Indigenous representations to look to in what we loved. Alongside bowls of Hawkins Cheezies, Blockbuster Video cards, top-40 cassette tapes, and hand-crocheted blankets are culturally appropriative books, questionable interpretations of Indigenous art, and a stream of problematic commercials reinforcing white representations of the racialized "other" looping on the TV. These elements draw attention to the limitations of the past. Like many, I often found myself excited to see any kind of Native character in a video game at all, even if they were exclusively pan-Indian mashups with descriptions like "The Keeper of Their People" or "The Protector of Their People," with no real sense of who "their people" were. The reality was, for Indigenous kids in the '80s, we were in our basements fighting the boss alongside everyone else.

In Cline's novel, James Halliday is the creator of the OASIS, the vast alternate reality woven through with homages to popular culture. In *Ready Player Two*, Ligwiłda'xw Kwakwaka'wakw artist Sonny Assu and Brendan Lee Satish

Tang, an artist of diasporic Asian heritage with Caribbean origins, emulate this desire to build a world populated by nostalgic references to their youth while also contributing to the growing discourse of Alternative Futurisms, a burgeoning response to the imperial gaze informed by Afrofuturism and Indigenous Futurisms. Building from Afrofuturism, which merges African diasporic cultural aesthetics and science largely within the context of science-fiction literature and film, the term "Indigenous Futurisms" was coined by Anishinaabe scholar Grace L. Dillon (a.k.a. my mama) in 2003 to articulate how Indigenous expression in science fiction conveys Indigenous ways of knowing.[4] It involves honouring the past and living fully in the present to envision and enact futures for the next generations. While Indigenous Futurisms focuses on Indigenous perspectives, the collaborative nature of *Ready Player Two* supports the growing body of work in Alternative Futurisms at large, which recognizes diasporic communities and global intersectionalities across those who have experienced colonization. Like Assu and Tang, Alternative Futurisms look to the past in tandem with emergent futures.

The travelling exhibition traces a similar timeline. Visitors move from the nostalgic—and at moments, troubling—spaces of youth into spaces like the Arcade and the Comic Book Store, which, despite their names, more openly reference the visual logic of contemporary art galleries and highlight the artists' individual works—tracing their/our presence from past to present to future. In alignment with the concepts of Indigenous Futurisms and, by extension, Alternative Futurisms, Assu's and Tang's work entails a returning to the self, which "involves discovering how personally one is affected by colonization, discarding the emotional and psychological baggage carried from its impact, and recovering ancestral traditions in order to adapt in our post-Native apocalypse world."[5]

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I spent more of my time in community college playing arcade games in the abandoned cafeteria than I did in classes. *Street Fighter II* was my go-to game, tossing in coin after coin, playing by myself against the system. I longed for a character I could identify with, but I just wasn't going to see a badass Anishinaabekwe character in a 1980s game. *Ready Player Two* moves these dreams closer to reality with beautifully made arcade cabinets crafted from maple with copper highlights. For Anishinaabeg, copper is sacred and maple trees are sustenance. My family is from Sugar Island in Baawaating, the sugaring place where people gathered to tap trees for sap and boil it down into glistening syrup. These arcade cabinets share the same gleam, and simultaneously call out colonization in their game titles: *Broken Treaties* (2017) and *Wreck-Conciliation* (2017). These names are a poignant reminder that, although it is possible to win representation in our geekdom, we are still living with the reality of the impacts of stolen land and displaced communities. The falsehood of the idea of "reconciliation" is challenged. Reconciliation is a problematic approach because it yet again positions both Indigenous Peoples and their concerns in the past, and it presumes that simply knowing history—but not striving for change into the future—is enough in settler society. It has resulted in empty apologies and troubling responses that continue to put Indigenous people on display for the imperial gaze.

The "games" that play out in the maple-and-copper consoles equally recall the past and imagine possible futures. In the *Broken Treaties* cabinet, Tang's animated *Clayfighter* (2017) reclaims identity in *Street Fighter II*, while in *Wreck-Conciliation*, Assu imagines a blinking game screen as a portal that mirrors whoever stops to look within. While I was working on the social impact game *Survivance* (2011), named after the work of Anishinaabe writer and scholar Gerald Vizenor, I collaborated with Haida Elder and storyteller Woodrow Morrison Jr., who frames all games within a Northwest Coast Indigenous lens. He defines games as "ts'ahl," which refers to a manner through which to pass into another reality. It can refer to the bark of a tree eaten during ceremony or to the sinker that pulls a fishing line down into the water, which is perceived as another reality. Assu invokes ts'ahl by showing the game screen as a portal through which one might see oneself reflected in another space or reality. Like Wade Watts, the protagonist in *Ready Player One*, the artists have recreated imaginings of themselves through screens and pixels and, in doing so, have reclaimed self-representation for '80s gamers.

By combining playfulness with a necessary call-out, the arcade games shift from being "quaint antiquities" to "hallowed artifacts," as Wade would say about the retro games that OASIS designer Halliday describes to him.[6] Similarly, the Easter eggs in this exhibition are important messaging wrapped in nostalgia.

• • •

Like Assu and Tang, I have spent most of my life moving between spaces as self and avatar. Whether in the basement of a rental as a teen bumming off my parents' internet or as a student tucked into a crevice between the walls of competing coffee shops on the streets of Vancouver to access free Wi-Fi, as long as I had my laptop, I could travel. I would enter other worlds through games, both single-player video games and massively multiplayer online games (MMOs). Some games even made it possible to *create* those worlds.

Before MMOs, there was *Dungeons & Dragons*, a tabletop role-playing game of paper, pen, and dice, where dungeon masters create the worlds within which players go on quests. Assu and Tang reveal their roles as game masters of *Ready Player Two*, both as curators of their childhoods and as present-day artists in a series of dungeon maps (based on the layout of the galleries the exhibition is presented in), character sheets labelled "Galleries & Curators," and companion polyhedral dice.

In order to be truly sovereign amid ongoing colonial domination—according to the way I was raised and how I understand it—there must be restitution. Denied the return of physical lands, I was able to use games to reaffirm connections to land by creating worlds mirroring Aki (Earth) where I felt safe. When I played *Dungeons & Dragons* with a motley crew of nerds in a mobile home, I too designed maps and determined trajectories of movement, even if I never jumped in as a dungeon master myself. The dice in *Ready Player Two* are similar to those described in Cline's novel and featured in Halliday's music-video will. In a quintessentially '80s twist on estate planning, the music-video will plays automatically after Halliday's death and challenges the players of the OASIS—who are otherwise trapped in the real-world dystopia of climate crisis—to find the game's Easter eggs. The first to find them all will inherit both Halliday's massive wealth and control of the game. Wade Watts, a poor kid living in a trailer occupied by fifteen people, is thus incited to journey for the win. What a reward—to have complete sovereignty over a space and to support the people journeying throughout it. Indigenous people take on this quest every day as they strive for sovereignty for the sake of a collective, balanced future.

Hope for a transformed future aside, the need for money is currently our reality. Just as Wade pursues Halliday's Easter eggs in hopes of freeing himself from his dystopian reality, Assu in his youth amassed a personal archive of comic books in the hopes that someday they would be a ticket to wealth and its attendant freedoms. While that never panned out—at least not in the way he anticipated—another opportunity sprang from his success as an artist in the parallel universe of art collectors and speculator markets. Chopping up and rearranging the trove of comic books he collected in the 1990s, Assu reworks these busy illustrations into a series of candy-coloured Kwakwaka'wakw paintings, with panels of action and dialogue popping and fading among his formline designs. Through this transformation of comic books into works of art, Assu's childhood collection holds value in a form that can help him support his growing family.

Nearby, in the final gallery, long white cardboard boxes for storing comics form the base of a custom plinth, propped up by bricks reminiscent of those found in *Super Mario Bros.* and topped by a single white cloud sculpted by Tang, which bursts open to pour coins. Devotees of *Super Mario Bros.* will recognize the promise held in bricks and blocks in the game. Headbutting or slamming down on these forms during gameplay, as avatars Mario or Luigi, produces coins that add up to the reward of extra lives. Tang's cloud is split in half, with abundant bullion pouring forth, seemingly multiplied by the mirrored surface that tops the plinth. So often, artists with minds filled with dreams and creativity hope to one day achieve the commercial success required to convert their artworks into money. As willing players in this space, which is described as the Comic Book Store but is most reminiscent of the white-cube gallery, Assu and Tang suggest that their heads may still be, quite literally, in the clouds. This is where we, as artists, can reflect on ourselves in our real-world form, pulled between realities and modified into forward-facing avatars, caught in a place where ultimate success is still

measured in monetary value.

Whether space-time travelling through video games, tabletop games, or comics, gamers' experiences are genuinely real. They complicate the definition of the "real world." We feel these experiences, we remember them, and we recount them throughout our lives and through our work. *Ready Player Two* is an exhibition that reflects Assu's and Tang's ways of relating to their respective upbringings and to the interrelations of family, friends, community, and space in resistance to the imperial gaze, while also inviting the audience to bring forward their own memories. Paralleling Alternative Futurisms, we collectively reflect on geek culture as an intersectional space to better understand our pasts and how they influence the present and our hopes for the future.

[1] Ernest Cline, *Ready Player One* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2011), 11.
[2] The highly popular Nintendo Entertainment System was launched in North America in 1986.
[3] Grace L. Dillon was tenured at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon.
[4] See Grace L. Dillon, ed., *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012).
[5] Dillon, introduction to *Walking the Clouds*, 10.
[6] Cline, *Ready Player One*, 13.

UNSTUCK IN THE PAST

Stephen Remus

Niagara Artists Centre (NAC), in St. Catharines, Ontario, was the smallest outpost on the *Ready Player Two* tour. As an artist-run centre, we have modest digs. When all those crates touched down with a thud, there was no mistaking that we were about to present one of our largest exhibition projects ever. We gave the show the run of the entire place—we had to. The Comic Book Store and the Arcade took over our main gallery, the Basement invaded our members' gallery, and the Kitchen filled up our storefront windows. We didn't exhibit *Ready Player Two* so much as it occupied NAC. It was everywhere. When you entered our building, you couldn't help but soak it in. Or maybe, soak in it.

What, exactly, were we all immersed in, though? Some of it was a sort of icky sentimentality—particularly with the signifying decor of the Basement and the Kitchen. If I'm not a huge fan of sentimentality, it's probably because we're so often played by it, sucked into a narcissistic loop: share a wink about the past, trigger nostalgic feelings, feel good about having feelings, repeat. *Ready Player Two* has loads of that sentimental weight and NAC staff helped to pile it on. We found some crappy wood panelling at Home Depot (they still make that stuff?) and sourced a chunk of hideously patterned used carpet from the 1980s. When NAC members Katie and Adam spotted a coffee table on some guy's lawn—it was moving day—they decided it was perfect for the exhibition. Only thing was, his brother had made it and it wasn't for sale. But money looks sentimentality straight in the eye, especially in Niagara Falls—it's a whole town built on selling your memories back to you, after all—and so the table joined the exhibition tour.

Ready Player Two forced a second take on the flotsam of nostalgia. What are these objects that Sonny Assu and Brendan Lee Satish Tang made, collected, and arranged? How can a rampaging buckskin-clad Indian and a porcelain Chinaman be part of initiating warm and fuzzy sentiment? We have the idea that feelings, because they're mysterious and beyond our control, are authentic. And because they're authentic, they must be good. *Ready Player Two* lays bare how foolish a notion this is. It's never enough just to feel—we have to reason why our feelings are coming to be.

The cultural artifacts and artworks of the exhibition, laser aimed at a time and place that our audience could easily "get," make us realize how flat the world's been made. How homogenized and hypernormalized it all is. The pancake topography of life—thanks, TV and social media, and thanks, department stores, box stores, shopping malls, and Amazon—is a large part of the tension that pulls between the value of the individual's experience and the value of experience within the group. We want both somehow. We want to be part of something but we don't want to disappear into the wallpaper. More and more, we distinguish our identities through the groups that we're in—religious, racial, political—and, of course, by what we consume.

What Tang and Assu have done so wonderfully with *Ready Player Two* is to explore the things they have in common while asserting their individuality as artists and people coming from different backgrounds. We need more of this intertwining and sharing and celebrating. We need it in tonne measures.

Somewhere along the line, NAC booked the instrumental rock band Shadowy Men on a Shadowy Planet for a "Savvy Show Stopper" on our roof deck. But the weather didn't cooperate and we hastily moved the show downstairs. We shuffled some things around and set the band up against the backdrop of Assu and Tang's rec room tableau. The Shadowy Men are a bit of a throwback themselves, so the performance seemed very right in that space. It was a time warp to be sure, but there was another feeling, a rarer one, that permeated the space. The art, the vignette, and the music drew us together into a group, for just a little while, and we moved forward together. The clutter of our past was still trailing behind us (it really has nowhere else to go), but it wasn't going to hold us back.

Niagara
Artists Centre

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READY
PLAYER TWO
SONNY ASSU
BRENDAN TANG


PHILIPS


AUTOMATIC
CAUTION
DOOR
ACTIVATE SWITCH TO OPERATE
PLAY


SHADOWY MEN ON A SHADOWY PLANET

GAMING IN THE UPSIDE DOWN

THE GENERATIVE VISION OF THE READY PLAYER TWO ARCADE

Troy Patenaude

In the first episode of season two of Netflix's *Stranger Things* (2016–), the young heroes visit the Palace Arcade. Will, Mike, and Lucas excitedly huddle around Dusty as he plays the game *Dragon's Lair*, but Dusty worries about his character's fate: "Aww, Jesus, I'm in uncharted territory here, guys." Dusty does indeed lose, an argument ensues, and Will then blinks into a vision of the Upside Down—a sinister, parallel dimension controlled by the Mind Flayer. The lights zap out around him, everyone else disappears, and Will cautiously inspects the apocalyptic arcade as an unearthly storm rages outside.

Like Will in his vision of the Upside Down, I am seduced by the Arcade in Sonny Assu and Brendan Lee Satish Tang's exhibition *Ready Player Two*. Their arcade is spacious, calm, and curiously empty. Rather than being ominous, though, this space is life affirming. No rows are crammed with games, no aisles are crowded with people, no flashing lights and digital sounds vie for my attention or my quarters. For me, this space reflects the vast creative territory of antiracist and decolonial potential that is still available to Canadians. Assu and Tang's Upside Down is not home to a Mind Flayer, but rather it is a space where the lived realities of Indigenous people and people of colour strip down the facades of inclusion and egalitarianism that obscure other truths. For settler-colonial Canadians, this kind of vision can feel worrisome, even apocalyptic. In the hands of these artists, however, it promotes life: like a cocoon from which a butterfly will soon emerge. Familiar objects in the Arcade bend into uncharted territory. A storm may rage, but it also bursts forth with a generative rain.

The first of two upright gaming cabinets in the Arcade sets the stage. A collaboration between Assu and Tang, it presents an Upside Down version of the game *Street Fighter II*. This version is called *Clayfighter* (2017), a work by Tang housed in Assu's arcade console, *Broken Treaties* (2017). In it, Tang, who is of mixed Asian heritage with a family history of intercontinental migration, has created an avatar version of himself based on the *Street Fighter II* character Dhalsim. Apart from the long hair, this alternate Tang-as-Dhalsim character evokes the original in almost every way, except that his attack moves are not directed toward another character. Instead, they channel Tang's work as a ceramics artist and his kicks, punches, head butts, and fire breathing pound and bake clay into vessels. Tang-as-Dhalsim is not a fighter of people but rather someone who fights to create something new—like an Upside Down version of treaty processes in Canada. And as the pixelated cloud sculptures hanging from the Arcade's ceiling remind us: even inside this fictional arcade, we are part of the larger story going on around us.

The Canadian government used treaties to take lands from First Nations, claiming they would benefit everyone equally, yet it continues to interpret them in miserly ways. This pressures First Nations to conform to Euro-Canadian ways of life, which pits these ways of life against Indigenous ones. This kind of "treaty" is more like the original Dhalsim's person-against-person fighting. *Broken Treaties*, however, indicates an alternate reality where non-colonizing wisdom facilitates a more creative outcome. First Nations Knowledge Keepers have repeatedly stated that these treaties were meant as peace treaties—agreements to *share* the land, not *own* or *surrender* it. Some also talk—creatively—about *making* treaty, not *signing* them.

The artworks on the walls of the Arcade also reflect the life-affirming quality of Assu and Tang's Upside Down. Assu, Ligwiłda'xw Kwakwaka'wakw from the We Wai Kai village on Quadra Island, has replaced typical arcade decor, like neon lights and decorative stripes, with colourful Northwest Coast–style ovoid shapes and other formline work across digital art, painted hide drums, and wood panels. The large panels are shaped like Chilkat blankets and fill one wall. At first glance, another of Assu's creations looks like a PlayStation 3 advertisement, but

is in fact a formline poster announcing the "Potlatch System 3." Together, these works envision an arcade not beholden to the capitalist and consumerist forces that continue to subjugate Indigenous Peoples and lands today. The Potlatch—in which highly valued Chilkat blankets play prominent roles for some nations—is a ceremony integral to traditional economic redistribution, kinship structuring, and relationship building. It was banned by the Canadian government through the Indian Act between 1884 and 1951. Assu's works invite us into a reality where that did not happen.

The Arcade's second upright game is called *Wreck-Conciliation* (2017). Its screen is just a flickering white light, as though no game has been loaded. "Reconciliation" has become a buzzword in our society—its intention obstructed by operations sharing too many features with the colonial structures they seek to overcome. For many Indigenous people, it is a malfunctioning, dooming process: an "invitation from Canada to share in the spoils of our nations' subjugation and dispossession." As it currently exists, "reconciliation is recolonization."[1] Assu's flickering screen characterizes an alternate version of reconciliation, one that is irrelevant and illogical in a life-affirming place. This is where the ultimate power of the Arcade emerges. Assu and Tang demonstrate that even the most innocent of places, like arcades, can be embedded with oppressive, Eurocentric social infrastructures. The artists show us a vision of another reality, one where all peoples' knowledges contribute to our well-being. As the exhibition's title suggests: they are just waiting for other players to join in.

[1] Taiaiake Alfred, "It's All About the Land," in *Whose Land Is It Anyway?: A Manual for Decolonization*, ed. Peter McFarlane and Nicole Schabus (Vancouver: Federation of Post-Secondary Educators of BC, 2017), 11, 13.

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WHAT IF?

FABULATION IN THE COMIC BOOK STORE

Emelie Chhangur

What if you put a comic book store into an art gallery or, vice versa, put an Art Gallery™ into a Comic Book Store®? *Shazam*!

The third "adolescent sanctuary" that Brendan Lee Satish Tang and Sonny Assu recreate in the exhibition *Ready Player Two* is more than just a display system for artworks inspired by consumer "geek" culture of the 1980s and '90s. I read the Comic Book Store itself as an artwork: an object that can invest and invent.

Constructed through the confounding of spaces and the conflation of consumer goods with the "highbrow" (e.g., action figures as artworks), Tang and Assu's Comic Book Store turns speculation into an operative concept that makes storytelling—that is, fabulation—a mobius strip–like means through which to articulate what is at stake for them in current models of cultural production. In doing this, they potentialize difference itself as an embedded form of critique. In the exhibition's presentation at the Art Gallery of York University (AGYU) in Toronto, where the gallery's ceiling height exceeds eighteen feet, this scenario was particularly poignant. Whereas the Basement and the Arcade sections of the exhibition read as contained models or temporary staging—dioramas set within the overarching mise en scène of the white cube—the Comic Book Store is like camouflage, becoming a reflexive mise en abyme: nestled narratives, images within images, comics within comics, galleries within galleries. The comic book store-cum-art gallery fabulates a form of critique that operates from within the very systems the artists are calling out.

Speculative Finance Faces Off against Speculative Fiction

It might require some special specular superhero goggles to see this superimposition stereoscopically—to get swept up in what the *exchange value* of reading the comic book store-cum-art gallery and vice versa fabulation entangles. But while speculation might rely on financial assets, whose value is derived from a claim of what they might, in future, represent, the gallery by contrast can be said to retroactively retain this value through modes of representation that—not unlike financial speculation—are also composed of fictions (artworks) that experiment with the real (the sociopolitical context in which a work is made). For our purposes, what matters is *how* Tang and Assu interpret the *real* comic book store by making it a work of art and how, in doing this, they make the gallery an object of critical engagement within the gallery's own systems of representation. That is, how they take risks on behalf of their own cultural investments with hopes of paying forward cultural currency of entirely different kinds in order to influence still other forms of world making.

Speculation is a well-known story in the world of comics and comic book collectors. The 1990s witnessed what is now known in the sector as the speculator boom. It was during this boom that a young Sonny Assu bought twenty-one copies of the same issue of the popular comic book *X-Force*—ten to read, ten to save, and one extra-special edition—hoping to one day cash in on their projected value and pay for college. While comics might have influenced Assu's decision to become an artist, they didn't end up paying for his art school training. The Comic Book Store includes both his *Speculator Boom* series (2017) and *Giant Sized Spectacular* (2017), works in which Assu recollects the comic books of his youth only to "destroy" them as a form of understanding "the attribution of wealth by the deconstruction of something sacred to create something new."[1] The forty-two copper backing boards made for the Comic Book Store are also an intervention into the Western systems of accumulation and wealth that seduced Assu as a young comic book collector (much like how

Tang's *Punching Clouds* (2017) operates in relation to video gaming). For the artist, these copper backing boards make reference to Potlatch as a way to "shame the comic book industry" for leading him "astray in his youth":

> The conceptual record of the copper the Chief holds . . . records an oral narrative behind a specific piece of copper. But the copper can also be used as a form of justice, a way to shame someone who's done you wrong at some point, where you actually break off a piece of your copper and offer it to the person who has shamed you. Then they need to repay that shame by breaking off a bigger or equal piece of copper and have a Potlatch. This is always something in your repertoire.[2]

Thok! Thok! Thok! But with Moves Like That, You MUTANT HUNTERS Ain't Just Chumps[3]

Meanwhile . . . It would be naive to suggest that Tang and Assu are merely anticapitalist provocateurs in the service of societal sea change, even if they certainly use the capitalist system—vis-à-vis the Comic Book Store—as a way to call in the exclusionary nature of its operations. For Tang and Assu, these operations relate not only to commodity exchange but also to cultural exchange. The Comic Book Store suggests belonging through confounding: bringing things together in fictional ways so as to articulate alternative worlds (not speculative futures) through acts of difference. So, when, in the middle of installing *Ready Player Two* at AGYU, Tang's *Manga Ormolu 4.0x* (2016) was sold to the Bank of Montreal, we simply . . . changed the stock!

Even if this real-life scenario underscores the parallel between comic book speculation and the art market, "changing the stock" doesn't make Tang paradoxically complicit nor does it insinuate that the serial nature of his work makes it more commodifiable—as if art needs to stay *outside* of that which it comments on. The Comic Book Store is more messy, implicated, and entangled. It's mixed. Conquering a commercial system with works that immanently critique the systems of representation that have traditionally propped up market value *is* Tang's superhero power! *Ka-pow*! Like Assu, Tang mixes references, techniques, and concepts and, in doing so, founds new futures by inhabiting that third space of creation, production, and dissemination, blurring the binary of good and evil. Neither artist is looking to prevent the future or contribute to the inevitable—these are the tropes of '90s speculative fiction. Assu and Tang are concerned with "otherwise" world making.[4]

It is the relationships Tang fabricates between ceramics tradition (Chinese Ming dynasty vessels), art history (European Rococo), and techno-pop art (Japanese anime) that makes his objects so desirable and so subversive. Tang's *Manga Ormolu* series (2007–) is an expression of the artist's own hybridized identity—itself a form of liquidity!—that "highlight[s] the evolving Western experience of the 'Orient'" and makes space for mixed-race cultural intercessors.[5] It's super cheeky to sell a *Manga Ormolu* to a Canadian banking institution! Futuristic and ornate, the works in this series also *keep it real* by not taking themselves too seriously either: Tang isn't "taking back" cultural references taken away from him; he's juggling the tensions and contradictions implicit in a globalized contemporary culture, which is a way to enact commentary and point to the fabulative function of art making. We might call this "legending":

> The futuristic ornamentation can be excessive, self-aggrandizing, even ridiculous. This is a fitting reflection of our human need to envision and translate fantastic ideas into reality; in fact, striving for transcendence is a unifying feature of human cultural history. . . . *Manga Ormolu*, through content, form and material, vividly demonstrates the conflicting and complementary forces that shape our perceptions of Ourselves and the Other.[6]

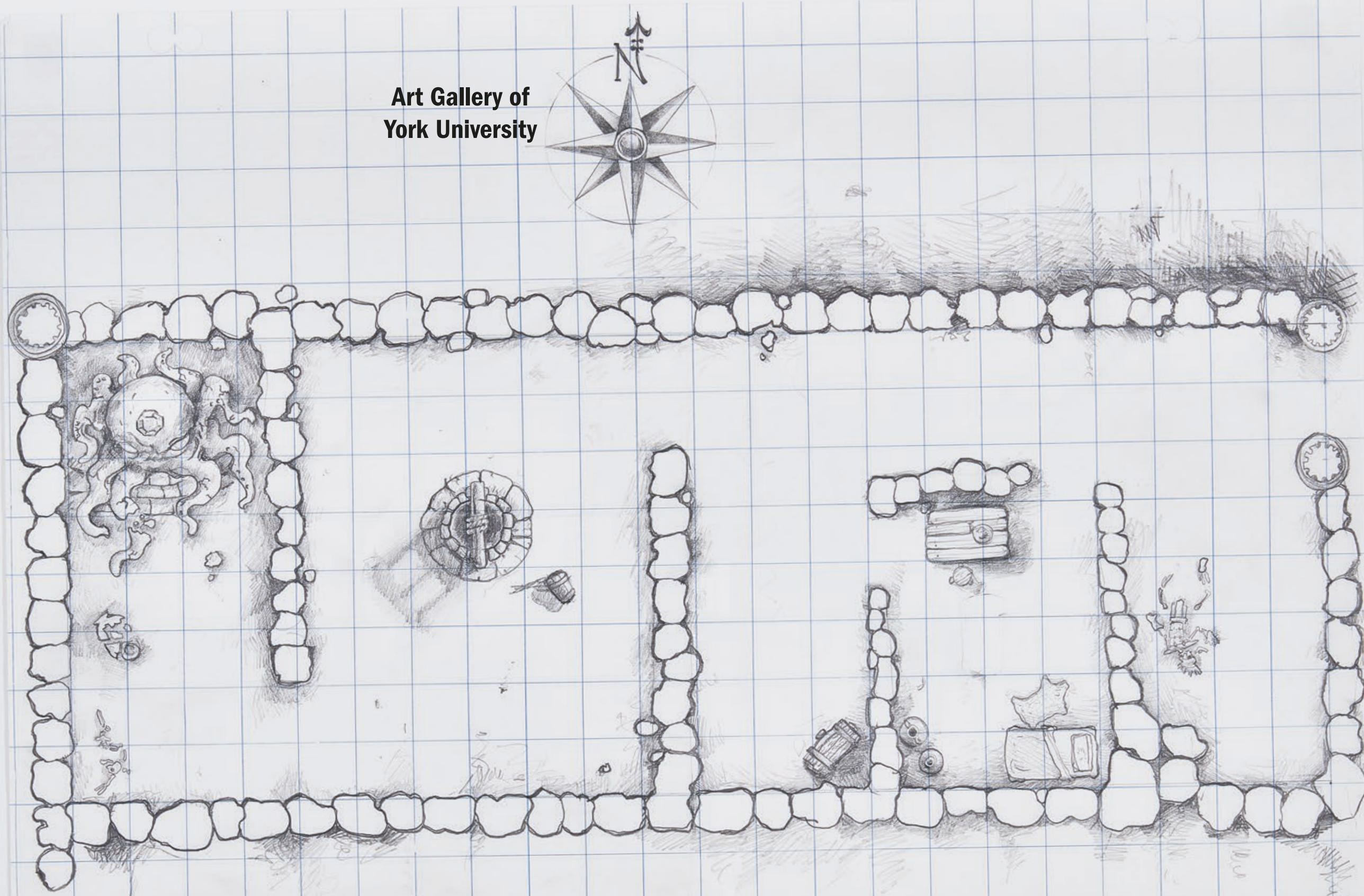
Perhaps we can view the *GIPoC* (2017) action figures Tang created for the display cabinet in the Comic Book Store as another form of legending. They certainly are cultural intercessors—much like Tang's *Clayfighter* (2017). Through this display cabinet, we understand what Tang and Assu unearth between the excavations of their adolescence and the renovations of a dominant contemporary cultural imaginary: their own invisibility. Their set of "blind box" collectables—figurines and trading cards bought sight unseen, in opaque wrappers—provide ironic commentary on this form of consumption. Tang and Assu already knew what they *weren't* going to get in those blind boxes! Identifying with superheroes is one way to increase one's own sense of value, including one's ability to achieve success in comic book narratives. The latter quite often mirror reality through forms of embedded critique similar to the kind Tang and Assu deploy in their Comic Book Store. It is with this lens that we might view Tang's ceramic works in the Comic Book Store—also presented in display cases—as three-dimensional comic books, mixed-race action figures, and transhistorical heroes that reveal a culture of remix, a culture where "people of colour are people of power in popular culture."[7]

Poof!

Or, in the words of investing guru Doug Casey: "Bubbles inflated with hot air are in constant search of a pin."[8]

[1] "Speculator Boom," Sonny Assu's website, n.d., https://www.sonnyassu.com/pages/speculator-boom.
[2] Sonny Assu, in Brendan Tang and Sonny Assu, "RP2 Artist Talk," Art Gallery of York University, Toronto, January 17, 2019, http://agyu.art/project/ready-player-two-artist-talk.
[3] Found comic book quote included in one of Sonny Assu's *Speculator Boom* works.
[4] "Otherwise possibilities exist alongside that which we can detect with our finite sensual capacities. Or, otherwise possibilities exist and the register of imagination, the epistemology through which sensual detection occurs—that is, the way we think the world—has to be altered in order to get at what's there." Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 2.
[5] "Manga Ormolu (Selected Works)," Brendan Lee Satish Tang's website, n.d. http://www.brendantang.com/#/new-gallery-5.
[6] "Manga Ormolu (Selected Works)."
[7] "Clay Fighter," Brendan Lee Satish Tang's website, n.d., http://www.brendantang.com/#/clayfighter.
[8] Doug Casey and John Hunt, *Speculator* (US[?]: HighGround Books, 2016), 188.

Art Gallery of
York University




Lucky Beads
CONSPIRACY
Clue
RISK


MB
8-Adult
C4202
National Espionage
Intermediate
OPERATOR


MISS SCARLET


WRECK-CONCLAVE


BROKEN TREATIES

Sonny Assu (left) and Brendan Lee Satish Tang deliver an artist talk at the Art Gallery of York University, Toronto, January 2019.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EVERYONE WANTED TO BE CHUN-LI

Amy Fung

"Everybody was kung-fu fighting
Those kicks were fast as lightning
In fact it was a little bit frightening
But they fought with expert timing"[1]

Part 1

Everybody wanted to be Chun-Li. X, Y, and me. Even X and Y's little brother, Z, would whine if he couldn't be Chun-Li for even *just a little while*. Even among prepubescent children, Chun-Li's thighs were an hours-long topic of discussion. We knew she had the power in those thighs to crush her enemies, as well as our hearts. Not only was she the first female fighter in the history of Capcom's *Street Fighter* video game franchise, but Chun-Li was also the first Asian female fighter our little brains had ever seen. She was a total enigma in our childhood. Her backstory is that she's an Interpol operative and martial arts specialist seeking to avenge her father's death. She's enacting a kind of ultimate filial duty, which gives her an aura of empathy instead of being just a cold-blooded killer. But we would have adored her either way. Besides Ms. Pac-Man, we had never even seen another female character in the arcade who didn't need rescuing.

Delving into the backstories of our on-screen personas was always my favourite part of these fantasy worlds. Chun-Li along with Ryu, Ken Masters, and even Vega were not just killing machines with catchy slogans—they were fleshed-out characters with backstories and lives. Video games and comics do not always provide the most richly detailed character development, but they know that our imaginations will do the rest. We just *knew* that E. Honda had a crush on Chun-Li, but that Chun-Li was secretly in love with Ryu, who was potentially in a secret relationship with Ken. As children, we thought every Ken, including Barbie's, was a gay dude. Barbie was for sure his beard. We were obsessed with Chun-Li, but she just couldn't catch a break in the social hierarchy of *Street Fighter*.

With her hair always done up in traditional Chinese ox-horn buns and donning a perfectly fitted qipao from the waist up, Chun-Li is a mix of soft and hard, feminine and masculine, classic and modern. For those of us who were made fun of at school for looking different, Chun-Li offered another possibility. Admittedly, she looked a little too Asian for any of us to try and imitate her for Halloween. Only our blonde classmates felt confident enough to dress up as Chun-Li to go out trick-or-treating. They would be the same classmates who, in the years to come, would go as Pocahontas or Mulan or a geisha, because they never imagined they couldn't. Meanwhile, we went as the usual dollar-store witches and plastic-masked Ninja Turtles—if we were lucky enough to convince our parents to buy us disposable costumes for a frivolous nonsense holiday. Playing dress-up for free handouts was not what they had imagined for us. Being made to feel that we would never belong was also not what they could have imagined for any of us. But in the privacy of our suburban basements, we huddled around the warmth of the TV screen to inhabit another reality.

Our fascination with gender roles and sexuality was nothing unusual. We did not yet understand the overlapping intersections of race, class, and violence with sex and gender. We went to school by day, and by night we watched the evening news about the Oka resistance and felt confused about where and when this was happening. We overheard adults everywhere lapping up the scandalous details of Karla Homolka and Paul Bernardo's killing and raping spree. When football star O. J. Simpson was acquitted of murdering Nicole Brown Simpson and Ron Goldman, our entire school was put on hold, with the principal playing the verdict live over the intercom. My homeroom teacher cheered. So, we all cheered.

The role of violence in our everyday lives was mere spectacle. Our cultural values were not around safety and protection but around surveillance and punishment. *Street Fighter* and single-player fighter games placed the responsibility of personal safety on the individual. Neoliberal to the core, *Street Fighter* reflects a world where the state is no longer available or trustworthy to protect you and your family. That responsibility fell into each of our own hands.

Chun-Li wasn't part of the original *Street Fighter* roster, whose main stars are Ryu and Ken. These two best friends with boyband looks were also rivals in the universe of Capcom, because, in common logic, there could be only one ultimate champion. Ryu is supposed to be Japanese American, but if we hadn't looked up his backstory, we would have assumed he was a brunette white man. Ken, with his blonde hair and blue eyes, is supposed to be your typical Aryan surfer bro. Ryu and Ken were childhood friends, spending their entire lives training together. Eventually they both trained under Master Gouken, who developed his own branch of martial arts. Finding camaraderie in each other, even though their respective techniques are different, Ryu and Ken are the heart and soul of the *Street Fighter* franchise.

When *Street Fighter II* expanded the cast of fighters, what at first appeared to be a mere diversity initiative turned out to one of the most popular video games of all time. Besides Chun-Li's thighs of steel, Dhalsim and E. Honda emerged as popular characters alongside more racially ambiguous characters such as Vega and Blanka. *Street Fighter II* was corporate multiculturalism at its best, and we willingly lapped it up.

"Load up on guns, bring your friends
It's fun to lose and to pretend
She's over-bored and self-assured
Oh no, I know a dirty word"[2]

Part 2

I became friends with X in 1992. I was the new kid in class until she showed up one day. Mrs. C, our grade-three teacher, introduced X to me and told us we would be working together that year. X was shy, like me, had long dark hair, like me. A lot of kids and teachers often confused the two of us. I had presumed this pairing and ensuing confusion was because X and I were both new, but, looking back, we were also the only two Asian girls in the class. X was slightly darker than me, and she wore her hair down while I wore my hair up. No one would have ever thought we were sisters, but somehow in this school we were twins. It's hard to say if this was behind Mrs. C's plan to have us work together. X and I could not have been more different, but when you're the only two, you learn to stick together.

X had an older sister, Y, and a younger brother, Z. They moved in just down the block from me, in our sleepy and secluded suburban neighbourhood in a nondescript Canadian city. Long, winding blocks of empty sidewalks stacked with post-1970s housing. Small frontyards gave way to big backyards filled with trampolines, swing sets, and apple trees. Four-level splits next to bungalows next to two-storey Tudor-style facades struggling to keep their tiny front lawns green in a dry and dusty climate. Our residential street was buttressed on one end by a neighbourhood strip mall, anchored by a pub and a convenience store, and by a gas station on the other. Kids from all different backgrounds learned to play together in parking lots and soccer fields. Roving gangs of three or four prowled the neighbourhood, interrupting their patrols only for candy stops and slushies.

Low skies and wide open fields surrounded our streets. My family moved here because there was space to breathe. A few years earlier, my mom had emigrated with her kids from another country. Around the same time, X's dad had left his home country with his kids, too. If this was a different story, our parents would have met, fallen in love, and our blended family would have become some kind of newcomer Canadian love story. Instead, this is the more realistic story, where my Chinese immigrant mother did not trust a single man, of any background, in a foreign country. X's father never said much when our families saw each other, usually mine in our Ford Taurus driving by and him on a day off mowing the lawn or relaxing on his front porch. X's father was rarely around, anyways. He worked night shifts and would sometimes be gone from six at night to six in the morning. This gave X, Y, and me a lot of time to perfect our video game techniques and embark on all-night TV binge marathons.

Between Blockbuster rentals of horror films and rounds of playing Bloody Mary in the bathroom mirror, we channel-surfed through their dad's satellite TV stations. Y wanted to grow up to be famous and on TV, but I never wanted that. I just couldn't imagine it. She wanted to be just like Vanna White, with her blonde hair and blue eyes and perfect teeth and posture. Y even made us watch the 1988 TV movie *Goddess of Love*, where White plays Venus, daughter of Zeus, sent down to Earth to find her true love. It was softly pornographic, or at least that's how I remember it, and so we watched it multiple times.

During the long winters, when the sun went down by 4 p.m., X, Y, and I would settle in to our designated seats along the shag carpeting, with the chesterfield at our backs. Between epic battles on *Street Fighter II* and *Super Mario Bros.*, we happily ate ranch-dressing sandwiches and dry packets of instant noodles washed down with Big Gulps. Sometimes, when I got on a winning streak, I would almost stop blinking altogether. When my character jumped on screen, my whole body would also jump. If my character veered left, I veered left. We became one with our on-screen personas.

During these times, X and I rarely spoke about anything except what was happening in the game. We never talked about what was going on at school or with our families, or where we each of us came from. I was starting to forget my mother's language. My father's face. My grandfather's voice. X sometimes talked about her mother. A memory of shopping together at the mall. Watching her prepare dinner. X held on to those memories and repeated them once in a while aloud, aware that she too was starting to forget.

By grade six, we had graduated from basement gaming marathons to meeting above ground, at the arcade. X gave all her comic books and Marvel cards to her younger brother, who overnight became popular with his new stash of tradeable collectibles. I held on to mine, as I wasn't able to let go of those stories quite yet. Y was in junior high school by then, and no longer available to hang out with us elementary school babies. But we didn't feel like babies anymore. We were old enough to take the bus by ourselves, shoplift candies for ourselves, and roam endlessly around the mall by ourselves. Our classmates weren't confusing X and me for one another as much anymore, but, when they did, or when one of the more brash ones would pull their eyes back and make faces at us, X would lose it on them. She learned to pummel her opponents before they even knew they were in a fight. X was tired of being made to feel different. Her shyness morphed into outbursts of anger and fire. She developed an after-school scam for us at the mall where we told strangers we were lost and asked them for quarters to call home. When we had enough change in our pockets, we would sneak into the casino to play the slots until we got kicked out. Sometimes, we won big enough to treat ourselves to TacoTime or McDonalds, but usually we were just passing the time.

As we entered junior high, our interests diverged. X preferred hanging out with the meathead jocks, and I preferred hanging out with the freaks. I spent most of my free periods in the art and computer studios. Everyone in the studios agreed to rotate our music selection so that we would go from Slipknot to Blur to the Tragically Hip week to week. Whoever showed up first made the music selection. X didn't have the attention span for studio art, but she was talented at drawing. I wasn't really sure what she did during her free periods. The fact was, the same boys who used to make faces at her were the ones who now stared at her in class and in the halls. She would sometimes hold hands and trade notes with one of these boys for a week, before getting bored and swapping him out for another. The overlap between our social circles became the hockey players, who secretly also liked to draw superheroes in their spare time, along with the loner types, who reliably produced an endless supply of contraband like porno magazines, Mike's Hard Lemonade, and menthol cigarettes at our request. X and I would sometimes still meet up at the mall, but I was more interested in sneaking into R-rated movies, whereas she was more interested in meeting boys in the food court. She loved Ace of Base while I loved Nirvana. Our differences were becoming irreconcilable.

"Another turning point
A fork stuck in the road
Time grabs you by the wrist
Directs you where to go"[3]

Part 3

The first time I saw a face like mine in Canadian media was when I first watched *Street Cents* on CBC, with Benita Ha as one of its original hosts. I had never seen or heard of the show until an older kid at the bus stop pointed at me and shouted, "Hey, *Street Cents*!" I had not yet aged into the show's targeted demographic of mid to upper teens, but I was curious to know if Benita Ha and I were anything alike. Ten minutes in, I knew we were not. Benita was also unlike any other Asian woman I had ever seen before. She was the first alternative Asian punk I ever saw, on TV or in real life, before Sook-Yin Lee's reign on MuchMusic, before I discovered the literature of Larissa Lai, and long before I got my first piercings and tattoos. From the outside, Benita and I were interchangeable stock characters, a comparison that never fails to be dehumanizing. Like X and I, we were reduced to the same because of our difference. Over the years, X's and my differences only deepened, until they became unavoidable.

By high school, X and I drifted even further apart, as if our lives had always been set in different directions. We no longer lived in the same cul-de-sac, and we no long shared any overlap in social circles. We were more interested in individually driving around our different versions of suburbia, listening to our own mixes of Green Day, the Spice Girls, and Eminem.

At my new high school, I encountered an entirely new type of hierarchy that was class based. Brand-new designer jeans strutted down the hallways and Benzes and Hummers lined the student parking lot. My family vehicle also went from a tan minivan to a tan SUV. I still couldn't drive it by myself anywhere, but that was only one of the reasons why I saw less and less of X. Her schedule became unpredictable, with her on-again/off-again boyfriend crashing in her dad's basement on the weekends. He was a couple years older and lived just north of town. He often stayed with X while looking for work in the city. He was sweet to her when he wasn't running around with other girls behind her back. It was messy and it was love and I didn't understand it one bit.

During spring break in grade ten, X called me from a payphone to tell me she was two months pregnant. I fell silent. I could hear in her voice how happy she was, and I didn't want her to hear the fright in mine. X hadn't seemed this excited about anything since we were kids. But we were *still* kids—barely sixteen. We were fertile by biological standards, but she was the first girl I knew to get pregnant. Her boyfriend initially wanted her to get rid of it, but he changed his mind when she threatened to dump him for good. Over the course of several phone calls, I asked her how she was feeling, and who else knew, and who she still needed to tell. X was waiting to tell her dad after he had had a stretch of days off. She wanted him to be fully rested when he heard the good news. She believed the situation would bring them closer together after all these years. I felt terrified for her, but she wasn't worried. She was never worried.

During the early months of her pregnancy, we went back to what we knew best: talking on the phone and meeting at the mall. In our maturity, instead of stealing candy or makeup we were now eyeing baby clothes and toys. She hid her belly easily for the first six months with baggy shirts—her pregnancy fell during our collective grunge period—but as soon as her classmates and teachers became suspicious, X made the decision to leave high school altogether. She didn't want the hassle or the looks. She still dressed like a teenager, and wore her hair and makeup like one. But people stopped looking at her like one. Older women smiled with worried expressions behind their eyes. Older men glared disapprovingly, judging or lusting, or both.

A beautiful baby boy was born in the late fall, in the first semester of grade eleven, and X instantly became a great mom. And she was right about her dad. After an initial period of hostile anger, he became very loving toward her and his first grandchild. They grew closer than they had ever been. By the time the baby was crawling, I was preparing for university by taking AP courses and loading up on extracurriculars to fill out my résumé. X had lost interest in school long before her pregnancy. She had never been interested in going to university. I can't say I was much interested either, but not going was never presented as a choice in my household. I lived at home throughout my undergrad, and X lived at home along with her baby and fiancé. Their child was going to grow up in the same neighbourhood that we had, attend the same elementary school that we had, and we wondered if he was going to learn the same things we had.

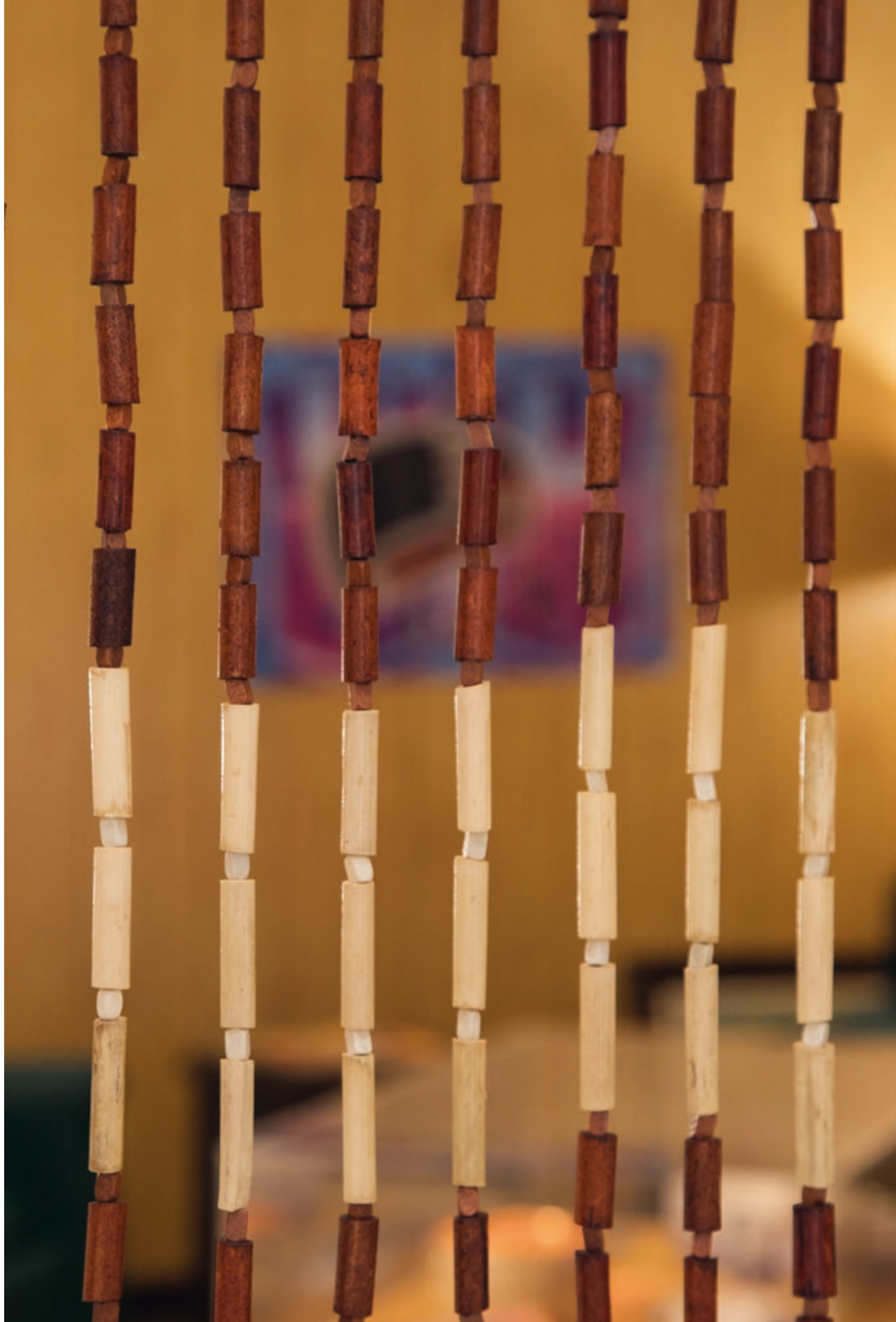
Our nondescript Canadian city had a lot of space, but not a lot of people to fill the void. Everyone knew everyone else, and if you didn't yet, you soon would. People you went to school with would pop up again in cafés and restaurants, at various movie theatres and shopping centres. For a city where most people spent the majority of their time in their cars, you somehow always ran into the same people in the same places. Except, I never saw X again after finishing university, moving downtown, and working in an office by day while freelance writing by night. We had tried to keep in touch for birthdays and for Christmas, but our lives took us too far from the basement video game world we once shared. By the time I finished my undergrad, the baby was six and starting grade one at our old elementary school. X and I were always really different people with completely different backgrounds, but growing up visibly different from everyone else brought us together for a time.

The chunky, glitchy graphics of our childhood now seem quaint compared to the hyperrealism offered by today's consoles, but that obvious 16-bit line between fiction and reality was a boundary I appreciated. Chun-Li is also no longer an anomaly, which feels bittersweet. There are now multiple Asian women characters in video games, but their Hollywood versions are still played by white actresses. Would we still have wanted to be Chun-Li if she looked like everybody else?

During one of our last lunches, X insisted on remembering the good old days. She fondly reminisced about all the bullshit we got into, and I couldn't tell if she missed those days or if she was in awe of them. X had recently cleaned out a corner of the basement and found a bunch of old gear, including the Nintendo. X told me she wanted to teach her son the classics. I hope he learned everything we did and more.

All characters in this piece have been fictionalized to reflect the experience of growing up in a random Canadian suburb during the 1990s. This text was written on the occasion of Brendan Lee Satish Tang and Sonny Assu's Ready Player Two *exhibition, which inspired its premise.*

[1] Carl Douglas, "Kung Fu Fighting," released 1974.
[2] Nirvana, "Smells Like Teen Spirit," released 1991.
[3] Green Day, "Good Riddance (Time of Your Life)," released 1997.



EYE OF STORM...

KTNK

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH--

SKA-ROOM

NOISES GOING UP THE STAIRWELL...

--BUT NOW I GET REAL PRO-AC

CLEAR OUT, FISK

WHO...? S THE RY ...?

AKK!

BUDDA KOOW

UHFF...

TING

CERTAINLY HELPS TO BE SMARTER, FASTER, STRONGER...

PRACTICAL ATTIRE IS A PLUS, BUT EVEN KEVLAR CAN ONLY DULL THE PAIN--

TING

TING

--OF GLANCING BULLETS.

DOUBT YOU'LL SURVIVE A POINT-BLANK BARRAGE, BLOOD ROSE.

OUR SYNDICATE'S BEEN IN PIECES SINCE YOU MURDERED THE BOSS--

Brendan L. S. Tang
In Lieu of Expansion and Fear I Choose to Take My Chances and Roll the Dice
2017–20

Sonny Assu & Brendan L. S. Tang
Detail of the Kitchen installation
2019

Sonny Assu & Brendan L. S. Tang
Detail of the Basement installation
2019

Sonny Assu & Brendan L. S. Tang
Detail of the Basement installation
2019

foreground

Brendan L. S. Tang
Pareidolia #2
2016

background

Sonny Assu
Let's Dance
2018

Sonny Assu
Transwarp Threshold (top), *Chinook Jargon* (middle), *Spool up the FTL* (bottom)
2016

Sonny Assu feat. Jerome Baco
Wreck-conciliation!
2017

Sonny Assu and Brendan L. S. Tang
Detail of Comic Book Store Display Case
2019

Brendan L. S. Tang
GIPoC
2017

Sonny Assu
The Speculator Boom
2017

Brendan L. S. Tang
Manga Ormolu Prototypes 1 and *2*
2014

Sonny Assu
"... Do you see the end of the universe ..."
(left), *Quantum Warp Theory* (right)
2017

BIOGRAPHIES

ARTISTS

Sonny Assu was raised in North Delta, BC, over 250 km away from his ancestral home on Vancouver Island. Growing up as an "everyday average suburbanite," it wasn't until he was eight years old that he discovered his Kwakwaka'wakw heritage. Later in life, this discovery would become the conceptual focal point of his contemporary art practice.

Assu earned his BFA from Emily Carr University of Art + Design, Vancouver, in 2002 and was the recipient of its award for distinguished alumni in 2006. He received the BC Creative Achievement Award in First Nations Art in 2011 and was longlisted for the Sobey Art Award in 2012, 2013, and 2015. He received his MFA from Concordia University, Montreal, in 2017. His work can be found in the collections of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; Seattle Art Museum; Vancouver Art Gallery; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver; Burke Museum at the University of Washington, Seattle; and Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, as well as in various other public and private collections across Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

Assu currently lives and works in unceded Ligwiłda'xw territory (Campbell River, BC).

Brendan Lee Satish Tang is a visual artist who is widely known for his sculptural ceramic work. He received an MFA from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville and a BFA from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, and he is the recipient of numerous awards and accolades, both nationally and internationally.

Tang's work explores issues of identity and the hybridization of material and non-material culture while simultaneously expressing a love of both futuristic technologies and ancient traditions. Although he is primarily known for his ceramic work, Tang continues to produce and exhibit work in a wide variety of mixed and multiple mediums.

He is the recipient of the 2016 Biennale Internationale de Vallauris Contemporary Ceramics Award (France), was shortlisted for the Sobey Art Award (Canada), and was a finalist in the Loewe Foundation Craft Prize (Spain). Tang's work has been exhibited at the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver; Gardiner Museum, Toronto; Vancouver Art Gallery; Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Quebec City; Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche, Faenza, Italy; Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal; Boston Art Museum; Seattle Art Museum; and Fondation d'entreprise Bernardaud, Limoges, France, among many others.

Tang's professional practice has taken him across North America and to India, Europe, the Middle East, the Caribbean, China, and Japan.

WRITERS

Mary Bradshaw is Director of Visual Arts at the Yukon Arts Centre, Whitehorse, where she feels her most important role is to bridge the gap between the public and contemporary art in the North. Her enthusiasm for and training in art education and museum studies has led her to various cultural administration roles in artist-run centres, public art institutions, and a national sporting event. Certain that opening crates is one of the most underrated tasks in the gallery, Bradshaw always jumps at the chance to peer inside at their treasures. She has a MA in Art Museum and Gallery Studies from Newcastle University, UK, and she interned at Tate Britain, London. Bradshaw has sat on the Sobey Art Award Curatorial Jury Panel, was awarded Volunteer of the Year for her work organizing the Canadian Museums Association's National Conference in Whitehorse, and is Secretary for the Friends of the Yukon Permanent Art Collection.

Curator, writer, and artist Emelie Chhangur is the newly appointed Director and Curator of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, ON. This appointment follows a significant curatorial career at the Art Gallery of York University (AGYU), Toronto. At AGYU, she led the reorientation of the gallery to become a civic, community-facing, ethical space driven by social process and intersectional collaboration; founded the gallery's residency program; and received twenty-five Ontario Association of Art Galleries Awards for her contributions in writing, publishing, exhibition making, and public and education programming. Over the past twenty years, Chhangur has emerged as a leading voice for experimental curatorial practice in Canada and is celebrated nationally and internationally for her process-based, participatory curatorial practice, the commissioning of complex works across all media, and the creation of long-term collaborative projects performatively staged within and outside the gallery context. Chhangur has published numerous books on contemporary art and regularly contributes to art journals and anthologies and presents her research at international conferences.

Distinguishing herself as a cultural worker dedicated to questioning the social and civic role of the public institutions of art, Chhangur has developed a curatorially engaged approach to working across cultural, aesthetic, and social differences through a practice she calls "in-reach"—a concept that has since transformed engaged institutional practice in the arts across Canada. In 2019, she won the Ontario Association of Art Galleries' inaugural BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) Changemaker Award and was a finalist for the Margo Bindhardt and Rita Davies Cultural Leadership Award. In 2020, Chhangur won the prestigious Hnatyshyn Foundation Award for Curatorial Excellence. She holds a Master of Visual Studies from the Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design, University of Toronto.

Arin Fay is a curator living in the Interior region of British Columbia. Fay's areas of special interest include curatorial writing and publications, group exhibitions, and advocating for art and artists. She has curated and toured a number of exhibitions regionally, including Marianne Nicolson's *Waterline* (2015) and Toru Fujibayashi and Tsuneko Kokubo's *Regeneration* (2016), and is currently touring Paul Seesequasis's *Turning the Lens* exhibition and research residency project (2018–21) across Canada. Fay has attended the "Writing with Style" program and "Truth and Reconciliation through Right Relations" leadership program at the Banff Centre, Alberta, and is part of the Vancouver Foundation's Systems Change research program. She has undertaken curatorial residencies at the MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina, and Sled Island Music and Arts Festival, Calgary. Fay has been an active member of the arts and culture community in the Kootenay region for over twenty years, as a curator, artist, volunteer, and board member, and she is currently Curator at Touchstones Nelson Museum of Art and History in Nelson, BC.

Amy Fung is a writer and organizer working across intersections of histories and identities. Her first book, *Before I Was a Critic, I Was a Human Being*, which addresses Canada's mythologies of multiculturalism and settler colonialism through the lens of a national art critic, was published in 2019 by Artspeak, Vancouver, and Book*hug Press, Toronto.

Elizabeth LaPensée, PhD, is an award-winning designer, writer, artist, and researcher who creates and studies Indigenous-led media such as games and comics. She is Anishinaabe with family from Bay Mills Indian Community, Métis, and Irish. She is Assistant Professor of Media and Information as well as Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures at Michigan State University, East Lansing, and a 2018 Guggenheim Fellow. LaPensée designed and created art for *Thunderbird Strike* (2017), a lightning-searing side-scroller game that won Best Digital Media at the 2017 imagineNATIVE Film and Media Arts Festival, Toronto. Most recently, she designed *When Rivers Were Trails* (2019), a 2D adventure game following a displaced Anishinaabe during allotment in the 1890s, which won the Adaptation Award at IndieCade 2019, Culver City, CA.

Troy Patenaude, PhD, is an art and cultural historian, curator, guide, and educator with a passion for projects that help make Canada a more just and resilient place. He was born in Anishnaabek ancestral lands now covered over by the Robinson-Huron and Williams Treaties. His mom's side of the family is of British settler-colonial descent, and his dad's side is from a community that is at the moment part of the Georgian Bay Métis Community.

Patenaude has lived most of his life in the territory of the Blackfoot, Îyârhe Nakoda, Tsuut'ina, and Métis Nation of Alberta Region 3, now covered over by Treaty 7. He has facilitated cross-cultural sharing and outdoor education programs dealing with the effects of colonization on these lands for decades, and his PhD in Cultural Studies explores ways to decolonize our approaches to art in Canada.

More recently, Patenaude has taught at the Alberta University of the Arts, Calgary, and curated major exhibitions throughout Alberta. Some of these include *Treaty 7*, Fort Calgary National Historic Site, 2017, which was the first time the Treaty 7 document was brought back to the territory in which it originated; *The Dream We Form by Being Together*, the official Canada 150 exhibition at the Alberta Legislature, Edmonton, 2017; and *Nitssaakita'paispinnaan: We Are Still in Control*, with Blackfoot ceremonial Knowledge Keeper Kent Ayoungman, for the TREX program at the Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton, 2019–23. Patenaude is currently Director of Cultural Development at Fort Calgary National Historic Site and an instructor at the Alberta University of the Arts.

Stephen Remus is Minister of Energy, Minds, and Resources at Niagara Artists Centre (NAC), Ontario, one of the county's oldest artist-run centres. He has been involved with NAC for over two decades and has guided the organization to becoming one of the most stable centres in the artist-run network while honouring and maintaining its regionalist ethos. Remus is a screenprinter who also works in 16 mm film and video, and he also writes from time to time.

Laura Schneider is an award-winning curator and museum professional. Schneider has held curatorial and executive roles in Canadian arts organizations from coast to coast and is currently Executive Director at The Reach Gallery Museum in Abbotsford, BC.

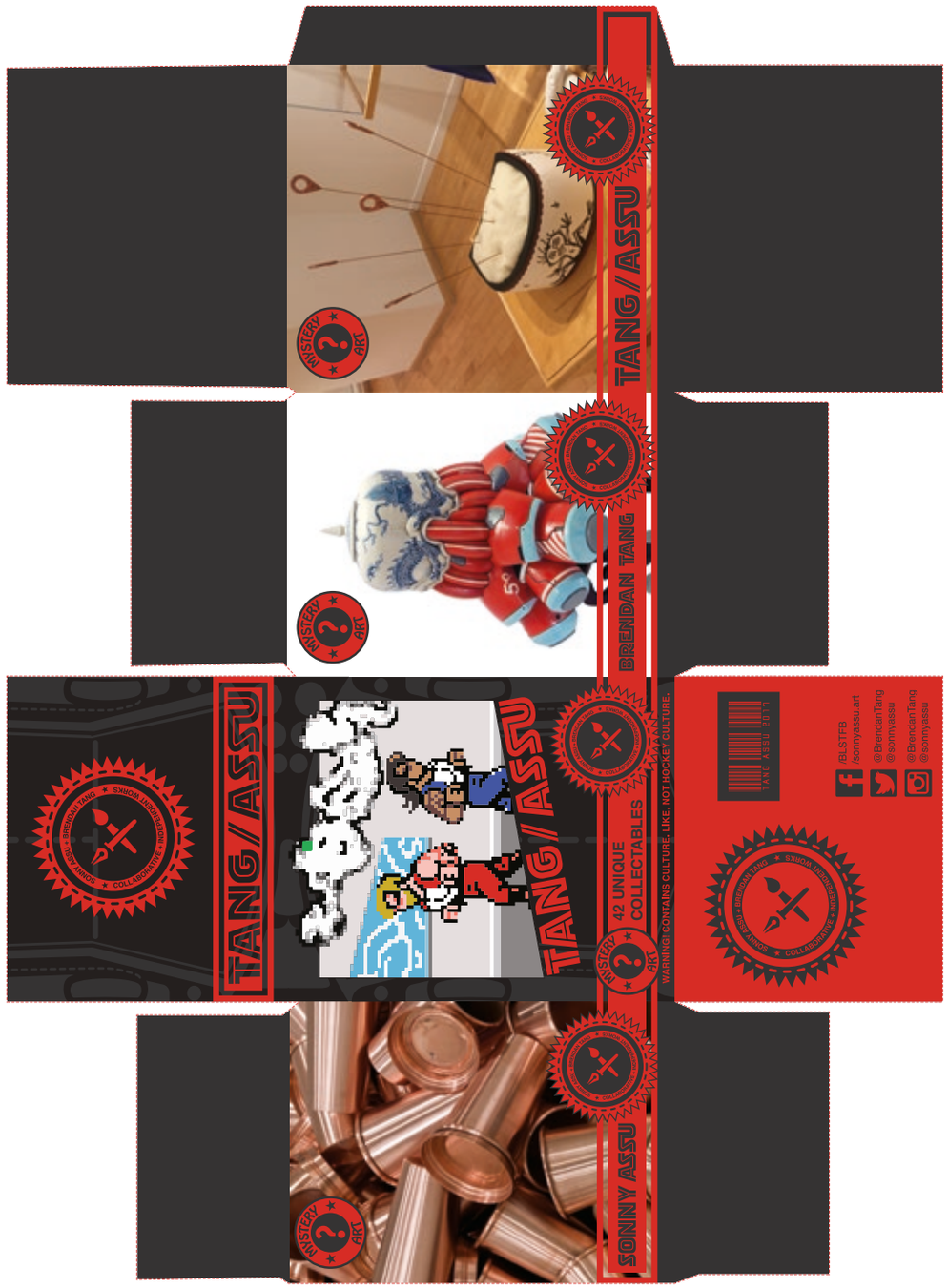
A believer in the ability of the arts to shape individuals and communities, Schneider is committed to supporting artists and integrating creative practice more fully into the lives of those around her. With a keen understanding of public galleries as dynamic and dialogic spaces, she envisions these places as nerve centres of cultural and community life where difficult conversations can occur and understanding and empathy can thrive.

Schneider is currently Adjunct Professor at the University of the Fraser Valley, Abbotsford, BC. She holds degrees in Art History from Queen's University, Kingston, ON, and Carleton University, Ottawa; a Bachelor of Education from the University of Ottawa; and certifications in Museum Leadership from Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, and Collections Management, from the University of Victoria.

BOOK DESIGNER

Sébastien Aubin recently held the position of Indigenous Designer in Residence at the University of Manitoba School of Art, Winnipeg, where he produced a body of creative work and research that extends our understanding of design and graphic form. He has worked for some of the most prestigious graphic design studios in Canada and maintains a career as a freelance graphic artist. Aubin has designed publications for numerous artists, organizations, and art galleries in Canada, including Terrance Houle; KC Adams; Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art, Winnipeg; Vancouver Art Gallery; grunt gallery, Vancouver; Trinity Square Video, Toronto; Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Ontario; and Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba, Brandon. He is a founding member of the ITWÉ Collective, which is dedicated to researching, creating, producing, and educating audiences about Indigenous digital culture. Aubin is also part of the AM Collective, which creates work that revolves around the imagination, sparking dialogue on subjects that relate to everyday life and emotions. He is a proud member of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation in Manitoba.


TANG / ASSU
GALLERY MUSEUM
May 25 - September 3, 2017
The Reach
SONNY ASSU + BRENDAN TANG
COLLABORATIVE + INDEPENDENT WORKS
Canada Council for the Arts
Conseil des arts du Canada


TANG / ASSU
BRENDAN TANG
SONNY ASSU
MYSTERY ART
42 UNIQUE COLLECTABLES
WARNING! CONTAINS CULTURE. LIKE. NOT HOCKEY CULTURE.
BLSTFB
sonnyassu.art
@BrendanTang
@sonnyassu

LIST OF WORKS

Works by Sonny Assu

Breakfast Series Lucky Beads, 2006, digital print, foamcore

Doesn't Look Like Anyone Lives Here. Let's Live Here!, 2014, acrylic on thrift store painting

Northwest Coast Face Swaps (42 trading cards), 2017, inkjet on card, plastic sleeve

Sunflowers for My Gran, 2006, oil on canvas board

The Voyage Home, 2014, acrylic on thrift store painting

Potlatch System 3, 2017, inkjet on paper

Nułamał Entertainment System, 2017, inkjet on paper

Wreck-conciliation! (with Jerome Baco), 2017, maple plywood, copper leaf, paint, digital video

Transwarp Threshold, 2016, acrylic on hide drum

Chinook Jargon, 2016, acrylic on hide drum

Spool up the FTL, 2016, acrylic on hide drum

Quantum Warp Theory, 2017, acrylic on panel

"… Do you see the end of the universe …" 2017, acrylic on panel

The Speculator Boom, 2017, 42 copper comic backing boards, Mylar bags, gold washi tape

Giant Sized Spectacular #1, 2017, acrylic ink, Marvel comic book pages on rag paper

Giant Sized Spectacular #2, 2017, acrylic ink, Marvel comic book pages on rag paper (exhibited at The Reach only)

Giant Sized Spectacular #3, 2017, acrylic ink, Marvel comic book pages on rag paper

Giant Sized Spectacular #4, 2017, acrylic ink, Marvel comic book pages on rag paper (exhibited at The Reach only)

Giant Sized Spectacular #5, 2017, acrylic ink, Marvel comic book pages on rag paper (exhibited at The Reach only)

Giant Sized Spectacular #6, 2017, acrylic ink, Marvel comic book pages on rag paper

Giant Sized Spectacular #7, 2017, acrylic ink, Marvel comic book pages on rag paper

Giant Sized Spectacular #8, 2017, acrylic ink, Marvel comic book pages on rag paper (exhibited at The Reach only)

Giant Sized Spectacular #9, 2017, acrylic ink, Marvel comic book pages on rag paper

Giant Sized Spectacular #10, 2017, acrylic ink, Marvel comic book pages on rag paper

Giant Sized Spectacular #11, 2017, acrylic ink, Marvel comic book pages on rag paper

Giant Sized Spectacular #12, 2017, acrylic ink, Marvel comic book pages on rag paper

SNIKT!, 2017, chalk paint, acrylic ink, acrylic medium, Marvel comic pages on panel

C.O.D., 2017, chalk paint, acrylic ink, acrylic medium, Marvel comic pages on panel

We All Must Deal with the Monster Within, 2017, chalk paint, acrylic medium, Marvel comic pages on panel

Subcribe Now and Save!, 2017, chalk paint, acrylic medium, Marvel comic pages on panel

Works by Brendan Lee Satish Tang

In Lieu of Expansion and Fear I Choose to Take My Chances and Roll the Dice, 2017, custom *Dungeons & Dragons* set with hand-drawn quest map based on each tour venue

Momento Mori: Television, 2018, watercolour on paper

Momento Mori: VCR, 2017, watercolour on paper

Momento Mori: Game Boy, 2017, watercolour on paper

Momento Mori: NES Console and Controllers, 2017, watercolour on paper

Late-night Programming, 2017, digital compilation of found advertisements

Pareidolia #1, 2016, polyurethane foam, acrylic, steel cable

Pareidolia #2, 2016, polyurethane foam, acrylic, steel cable

Pareidolia #3, 2016, polyurethane foam, acrylic, steel cable

Clayfighter, 2017, digital video

GIPoC, 2017, found G.I. Joe toys, wood, plastic

Manga Ormolu Ver. 4.1-B, 2016, ceramic, mixed media (exhibited at Illingworth Kerr Gallery and Art Gallery of York University only)

Manga Ormolu Ver. 5.0-Q, 2015, ceramic, mixed media

Manga Ormolu Ver. 4.0-X, 2016, ceramic, mixed media (not exhibited at Illingworth Kerr Gallery or Art Gallery of York University)

Manga Ormolu Prototype 1, 2014, ceramic, mixed media

Manga Ormolu Prototype 2, 2014, ceramic, mixed media

Punching Clouds, 2017, ceramic, wood, cardboard long boxes, concrete, mirror, plastic coins

Collaborations

Sonny Assu & Brendan L. S. Tang, *The Answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, The Universe, and Everything*, 2017, 42 porcelain Cheezies, found turned maple bowl, copper leaf

Sonny Assu & Brendan L. S. Tang, *Blind Box Collectibles* (42 boxes), inkjet on card

Sonny Assu with Brendan L. S. Tang, *Colonial Fighter*, 2017, inkjet on paper

Sonny Assu feat. Brendan L. S. Tang, *Broken Treaties*, 2017, maple plywood, copper leaf, paint, feat. *Clayfighter* (2017) by Brendan L. S. Tang

Sonny Assu & Brendan Lee Satish Tang: Ready Player Two
Curated by Laura Schneider
Organized and circulated by The Reach Gallery Museum

The Reach Gallery Museum
May 25, 2017–September 3, 2017
32388 Veterans Way, Abbotsford, British Columbia

Yukon Arts Centre
March 8, 2017–May 26, 2018
300 University Drive, Whitehorse, Yukon

Touchstones Nelson Museum of Art and History
June 16, 2018–August 5, 2018
502 Vernon Street, Nelson, British Columbia

Niagara Artists Centre
September 7, 2018–December 7, 2018
354 St. Paul Street, St. Catharines, Ontario

Art Gallery of York University
January 17, 2019–March 17, 2019
Accolade East Building, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, Ontario

Illingworth Kerr Gallery
January 14, 2020–March 7, 2020
1407 14 Ave NW, Calgary, Alberta

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Yuula Benivolski: pages 13, 52–53, 59, 79, 88–89, 96–103, 106–09, 115, 117–33
Geoff Farnsworth: pages 60–61
Arin Fay: pages 32–37
Diana Hiebert: end pages
Dale Klippenstein: pages 14–15, 30–31, 42–43, 64–65, 80–81, 94–95
Devon Lindsay: pages 38–39, 44–51, 74–75, 134–135
Michael Maranda: pages 104–105
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SITE Photography: pages 16–25
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Adam CK Vollick: pages 66–72

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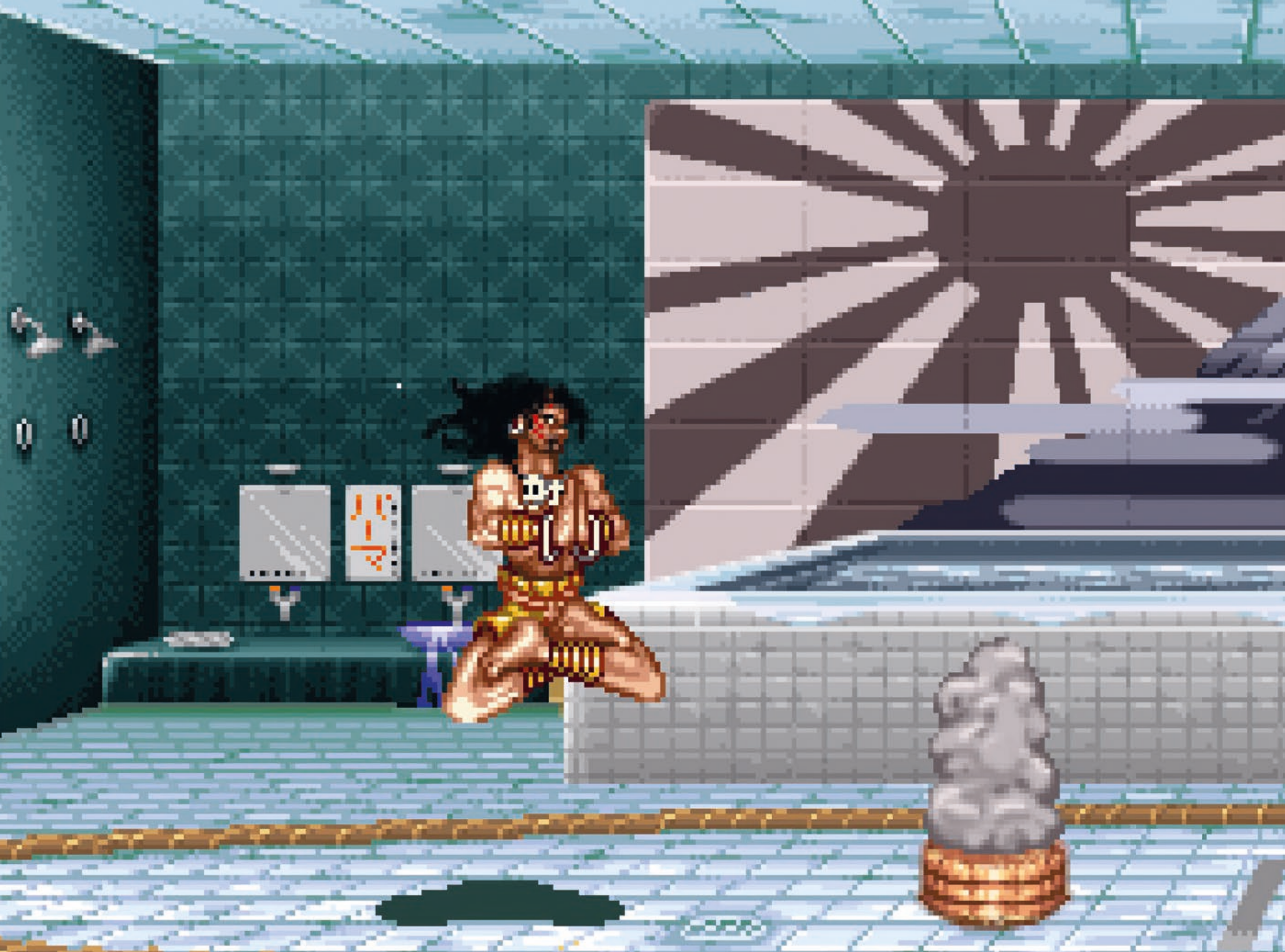

The Reach Gallery Museum

READY PLAYER TWO

Sonny Assu & Brendan L. S. Tang