



Could see nothing in fog.

Chelsea Thompto, *Fog Lights* (2023). Textured glass, LCD screen, Raspberry PI, code, and 3D printed housing, 2 x 2.5 x 3 inches, duration infinite. From *Indiscernible thresholds, escaped veillances*, 1 May 2024–27 July 2024, Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid, courtesy of Art Museum at the University of Toronto.

EXHIBITION REVIEW

TYLER MATHESON

INDISCERNIBLE THRESHOLDS, ESCAPED VEILLANCES

12 January—24 February 2024

Art Museum at the University of Toronto,
Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

Immense transformational and liberatory possibilities arise from what are otherwise sites of oppression or violent extraction—whether the body, labor, land, or spirituality—when individuals have agency in their representation.

—Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton,
“Known Unknowns: An Introduction to *Trap Door*,”
in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the
Politics of Visibility*

Stratus opacus is a type of cloud that is distinguishable as being dark and opaque; denying visibility, it disguises the location of the sun, moon, and stars. Like a blanket of fog, these clouds conceal what's behind them and inhibit our ability to see what lies beyond. Curated by Dallas Fellini at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto, *Indiscernible thresholds, escaped veillances* featured works by Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, Lucas LaRochelle, Joshua Schwebel, Chelsea Thompto, and Lan "Florence" Yee that explore the slippery and shrouded frameworks of illegibility, opacity, and invisibility. Through sculpture, photography, video, sound, and performance, these artists challenge simplistic trans representation and trouble trans hypervisibility, turning toward the productive potentiality of opacity and archival illegibility. Taken together, their works explore invisibility as an act of self-protection and form of political agency for queer and trans individuals and connect the social and environmental demands for visibility. In so doing, *Indiscernible thresholds, escaped veillances* reminds us that visibility is an atmosphere in which extractivism thrives. By comparing the potentiality of invisibility and opacity in the context of trans politics and environmental discourses, this review explores works in this exhibition that emphasize alternative modes of perception and representation, that embrace the fog of invisibility, the unseen, and the unindexable, and that challenge dominant narratives that conflate visibility with empowerment.

Trans and queer people have long had to grapple with the trouble of being seen. Contemporary emphasis on the importance of representation has positioned visibility as a means to claim individual agency and potentialize broader social connections. But to be located, made visible, pinpointed, or identified, can also other, disenfranchise, or render one as a potential subject of violence. The demand for visibility has been utilized in the propulsion of queer and trans social movements, however, there exists a long history of queer and trans scholarship that criticizes and is wary of representations' relationship to power as a "trap door" to be avoided.

Chelsea Thompto's installation *Fog Lights* (2023), for instance, harnesses invisibility, employing fog as a metaphor for trans embodiment and resistance.

Fog obscures vision, and, in this work, undermines expectations of trans legibility. Three small video sculptures are hung at eye level along the gallery wall: the screens refer to fog lights used in cars. Following a nonlinear structure, a selection of computer-generated texts—their source material drawn from found texts including US military documents, and historical horror fiction, as well as Thompto's own writing ("I often feel like fog...")—glow from each capsule. Textured glass screens further obfuscate the view, so much so that often the text is inscrutable. As each generated sentence fades in and out of its veillance with no clear beginning or end, the work exists infinitely, suggesting an endless generation of fog that encapsulates, conceals, and cocoons Thompto's experiences of transness.

Lan "Florence" Yee's textile works respond to a desire to see oneself within official archives while feeling wary of the violence against racialized trans people perpetuated by reductive ethnographic representations. Images printed on silk and embroidered with text hang in grids between two-by-three-foot wooden structures. Troubling a singular narrative of transness by decentralizing straightforward photographic representation of trans bodies, Yee conjures a desire for plurality, multiplicity, and complex evidence of past racialized and queer experiences. In their work translucent snapshot images of landscapes, windows, and bedroom scenes are applied with text that Yee uses to disclose information to the viewer: "by the time I had reached myself it was too early," one work reveals. Yee's work negotiates with archival processes that demand trans legibility. As Fellini notes, "Repeated across Yee's textiles is an appliquéd Cantonese character for good luck: 吉 is a textual stand-in for empty, used superstitiously by Cantonese people to avoid using the true character for empty, which is a homonym for evil/criminal."¹ 吉 is used here to embrace absence and illegibility, Yee acknowledges that which is missing from the archive and playfully refuses to contribute to desired representations of transness. Yee's translucent photographic installations, hung between lumber used for framing houses, mimics the shape of blinds and curtains, emphasizing the delineation of *inside* and *outside* both materially and conceptually. Like stratus translucidus,

a type of cloud identifiable by their hazy and translucent veil, Yee's work's translucency allows viewers a partial visibility to what lies beyond.

For queer and trans individuals living in a heteronormative reality, visibility leads to surveillance. The artists in this exhibition consider their stakes in trans visibility by refusing to provide something the viewer may desire and reminding us that power may also be obtained by agency over invisibility. In Joshua Schwebel's durational and interactive performance series, *Hiding* (2007–2010), the artist published advertisements in lost-and-found and confessional sections of newspapers, announcing that he would be hiding in a given public place at a specific date and time. Here, the artist takes Google Maps Street View images of locations where he once hid, prints them onto postcards, and mails them to the art gallery, where they are displayed on the glass entrance doors, adhered with simple scotch tape. Schwebel's gesture evades being located, or visible, situating the work within the social expectation of trans "passing," demands for the visualization of trans bodies, and "accusations of deceptiveness directed against trans people."² The installation of the documentation of *Hiding*—outside the exhibition space, haphazardly taped to the gallery doors—might go unnoticed by gallery attendees, creating a double layer of obscurity and invisibility for the artist. Schwebel denies us legibility both in the place the performance was enacted and once again in the documentation of it, impeding the cisgender gaze.

If the function of an exhibition is to make things visible, what does it mean for this exhibition to refuse trans legibility? Fellini argues in their writing about the exhibition that the featured artists "anticipate a cis voyeurism, but rather than welcome an inclusionary neoliberal co-optation of their work's transness, they opt to withhold, disguise, mislead, or obscure in the face of these forces."³ The artists in this exhibition respond to exploitative pressures from art institutions and the voyeuristic demands of trans visibility by employing opacity in their work. Contemporary expectations of trans cultural production demand simplistic and easily digestible representations of uncomplicated, often linear, trans lives. To make sense of visualizing the invisibility

of trans experience, these artists embrace Jack Halberstam's claim that "failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, [and] not knowing"⁴ can serve as ways of engaging with this work and offer the potentiality for invisibility to become generative, unexpected, and queer.

The artists in this exhibition evade extractive desires for trans bodies as evidence by offering, instead, invisibility. The works in this exhibition seek to be understood through other barometers. By navigating the atmospheric windows that this exhibition opens, we might come to understand opacity as beneficial for trans lives without digging at the edges of their representation. Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley and Lucas LaRochelle both claim their stakes in trans visibility by creating their own counter-archives of queer and trans experiences. In both artists' video-based works, they negotiate access to trans archives and histories. Through a collaboration with viewers and participants, both artists give their contributors agency over their representation and participation in their counter archives.

Indiscernible thresholds, escaped veillances offers alternatives to extractive cis voyeurism through works that are intentionally rendered obscure, coded, generative, and resistant. Featuring works by artists who desire opacity and agency over representation, this exhibition asks: what possibilities can exist in trans (in)visibility? As the artists in this exhibition withhold anticipated and limiting representations of transness, they create a spaciousness for other possibilities. This play between opaque and transparent makes up a conceptual fog that billows and looms through each room of the exhibition. Made possible by the gaps of this exhibition's visibility, viewers might experience shifting cloud formations, moments of unknowing, disorientation, and obscurity.

NOTES

- 1 Dallas Fellini, "Indiscernible thresholds, escaped veillances: Proposed alternatives to trans hypervisibility in the archive, the gallery, and the biopolitical state" (master of visual studies thesis, University of Toronto, 2024).
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011).