

P.S. —

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Lyla Rye
Mirage



Previous spread
Lyla Rye
Detail from *A Meditation*
2019
COURTESY LYLA RYE

LYLA RYE'S solo exhibition *Mirage* has its Canadian premiere while we are all still living in a precarious and extraordinary moment. Consisting of a variety of still and moving images, the exhibition explores our complex relationship with nature and our built environments, while addressing the ever-increasing influence of digital technologies on our existence. As, during the spring, we sat tight indoors in the midst of the first wave of the pandemic, silence bore down and the animals took note. Much of our constant production ceased and the world slowed down; with few of us flying, the skies became quiet and, eventually, the wildlife cautiously emerged. Despite the overarching existential uneasiness created by this crisis, most of us took solace in the calm and watched with curiosity as the animals dared to wander. In 2020, we reached another juncture in our always-complicated relationship with nature. It is the first time in our collective memory that we are experiencing a truly global event, one that has profoundly affected each of us, albeit in different ways. Certainly, our world has drastically changed since the pandemic of 1918, which took place in the industrial age. Today, we live with social and physical distancing in a technological age and, for the most part, we welcome digital technology as a useful means to meet many of our challenges. Stuck in our homes, we chat, meet, and (if we are fortunate) work virtually. We were already moving in this direction; now, suddenly, out of necessity, more of us than ever before are using multiple devices and screens for nearly every task.

Mirage consists of three works that address not only our relationship with nature, but in this context, themes that have come to be the hallmark of Rye's practice. As an artist

who uses video, one of these is time; the ever unfolding of now—the multiple ways in which we experience temporal duration as we remember the past, anticipate the future and experience the present. In a fast-paced world, we feel the pressure to be constantly productive, while also enduring the anxiety of stillness and anticipation. A second theme explored by the artist is our relationship to three-dimensional and two-dimensional space. From the beginning, Rye's practice has occupied the space between moving images and sculpture. Both her sculptural forms and her methods of presenting her videos are architectural and structural.

The central work in the exhibition is the video installation, *A Meditation* (2019). This work is projected on an accordion-like screen consisting of three panels. A screen, when used as a room divider, denotes a border, suggesting a world hidden behind it. Used in *A Meditation*, the screen draws the viewer's attention to the fact that it is a three-dimensional object in space and disrupts the illusion that the images projected on it depict three-dimensional realities. The form of the screen is echoed in the zig-zag pattern created by the multiple, rectangular video clips within the projection. Collectively, these resemble a busy office workspace composed of numerous cubicles. The individual video clips are scenes of land and water that together proceed slowly across the screen, appearing on the right and then exiting stage left. The video screens continuously on a loop of twenty-two minutes and thirty seconds. First, there are familiar-looking landscapes with puffy white clouds, saccharine pink skies and soothing teal-coloured water—ubiquitous images most of us have seen, for example, as screen savers, though not



Installation view of *A Meditation* (2019) by Lyla Rye. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PREFIX INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART (TORONTO)

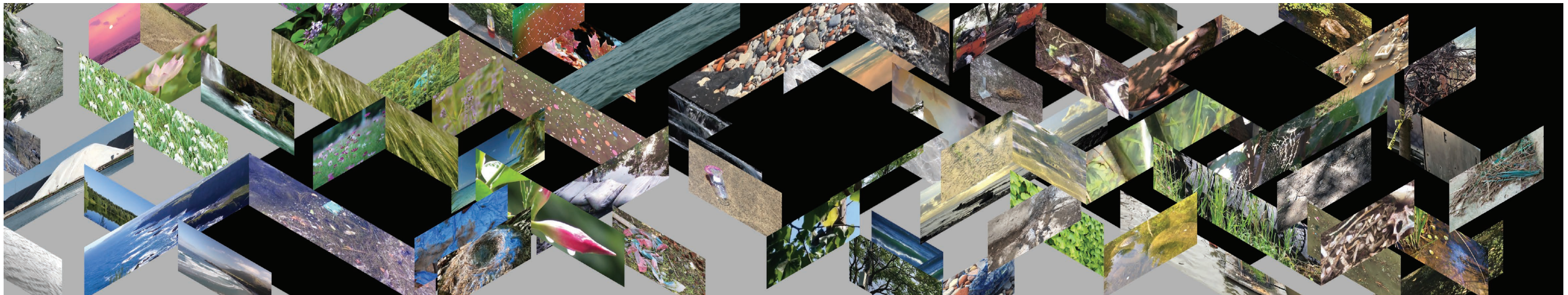
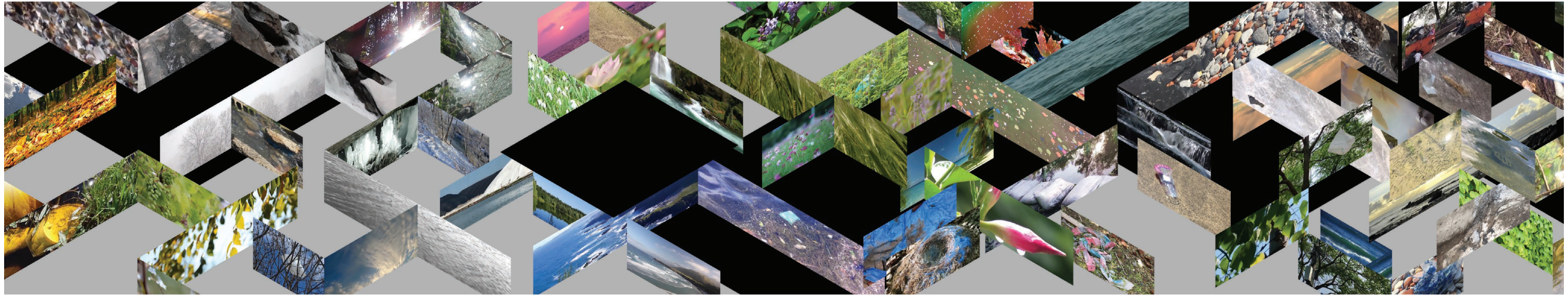
¹ See Lutz Koepnick, *On Slowness: Toward an Aesthetic of the Contemporary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014): 3.

in the actual world. These versions of nature appear digitally enhanced and too perfect. These are also the idealized landscapes we find in the myriad of meditation videos that have appeared on YouTube in recent years, some of which the artist has included in *A Meditation*. These self-help videos are produced and uploaded to the Internet to help us counteract the anxiety and stress created by the very screens to which we are still paradoxically connected. As we continue to watch *A Meditation*, these idyllic images gradually disappear from the screen and are replaced by short cellphone-captured videos. Instead of glossy veneers and saturated colours, we see murky images of overgrown weeds and floating garbage. Harsh sounds reminiscent of wind captured on a cellphone microphone encroach on the meditative “mood-music” that accompanies the introspective march.

The images inch along, their slow pace complementing the meditative feel of the nature videos, but also slightly exacerbating the viewer's creeping sense of tedium, and drawing our

attention to the banality of the images. We are seduced by the peaceful quality of the idealized images of nature only to be confronted by stark disruptions in imagery and sound. This contradiction gives rise to distinct embodied reactions and brings us to awareness.

Experiences of time have long occupied the thoughts of those examining life through works of art. In his book, *On Slowness: Toward an Aesthetic of the Contemporary*, Lutz Koepnick proposes that slowness can be a contemporary tactic to stave off the ever-accelerating pace of our world. For Koepnick, fast-paced interactions and speed are not a singular contemporary reality; rather, he suggests that we experience different temporal frameworks simultaneously. There is no singular narrative; instead, there are many narratives and future possibilities. We can experience time as “going forward, backward and sideways all in one.”¹ “Slowness enables us to engage with today's culture of speed and radical simultaneity without submitting to, or being washed over





Installation view of *Fluid Anomalies* (2020) by Lyla Rye. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PREFIX INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART (TORONTO)

by, the present's accelerated dynamics. Slowness demonstrates a special receptivity to the copresence of various memories and anticipations, narratives and untold stories, beats and rhythms in our temporally and spatially expanded moment."²

A Meditation is a projection of multiple images and views depicted simultaneously within one space. The images of nature are both real and illusory: they are videos, landscapes, and millimetre-thin, flat presences all at the same time. They are a myriad of digital worlds, each one recording a different pace of motion while they move synchronously together across the screen, creating a visual cacophony both soothing

and jarring. Random black geometric planes are another element in the succession of moving graphics. This addition (or perhaps reduction) encroaches on the light grey background, and complicates our perception of space and of the landscape images themselves. Some of these ominous, black shapes move in the same direction and at the same pace as the videos, while others move at a different speed and in their own direction. They lie under or hover over the images, disrupting and collapsing the architectural space.

The style of the projection panel and the way in which Rye has organized three-dimensional space in *A Meditation* reference

Detail of *Fluid Anomalies* (2020) by Lyla Rye. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid
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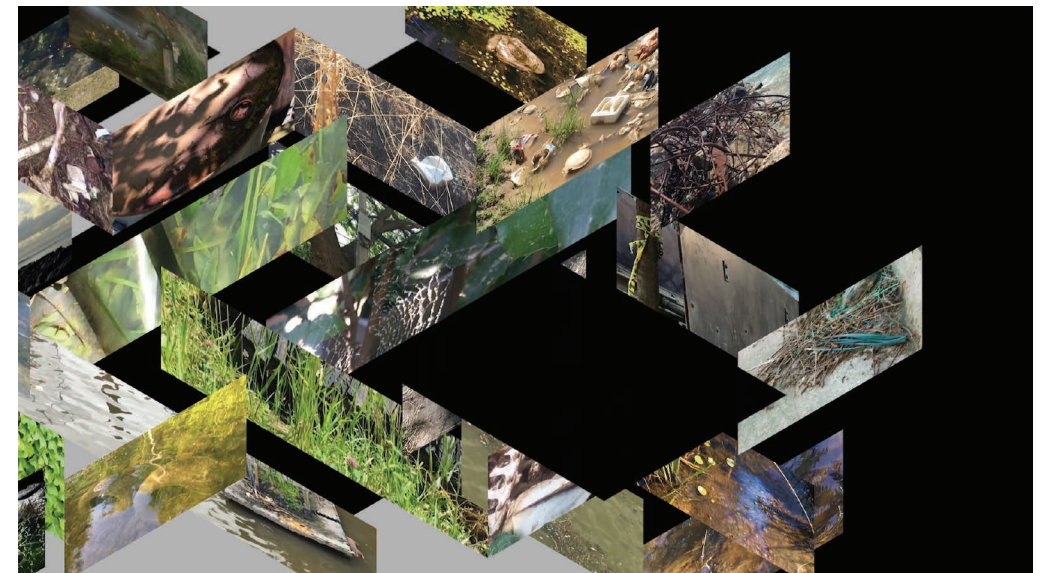
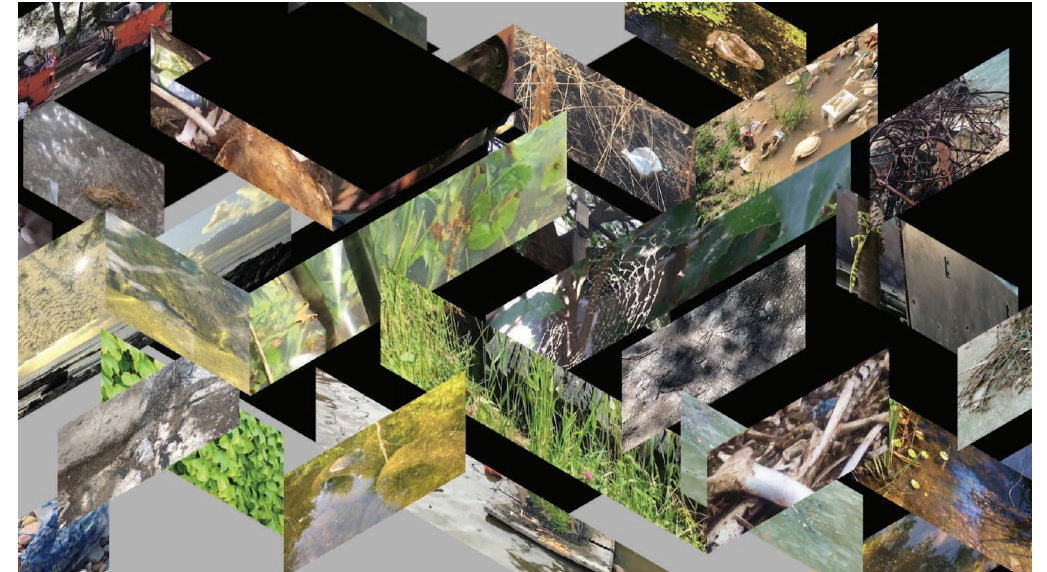


Japanese design. Rye recounts her experience of accidentally wandering into the Japanese collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, in order to avoid the crowds elsewhere.³ As an artist who has consistently adopted the graphics of architecture, she was drawn to the use of isometric perspective in the visual narratives depicted on the screens. Used in the renderings of classic literary works such as *The Tale of Genji*, isometric perspective allows for a god-like aerial view that depicts the world in a way that appears manageable and organized. We can see from above in a three-dimensional format, one that uses uniformity to flatten complicated perspective renderings. It is a systematic illusion of space, with no single ideal view or vanishing point. (Interestingly, isometric perspective was also widely used in early video-game graphics for many of the same reasons). The delicately rendered scenes in Japanese screens often contain lavish visual elements such as gold clouds. As with the black planes in *A Meditation* that move over and under the video frames, these clouds offer a notion of slow, continuous movement, while both hiding and revealing the pictorial narrative through which they appear to drift.

Flatness is a key component of the textile work *Fluid Anomalies* (2020). Thirty-six delicate, white, silk squares are organized in two horizontal rows that wrap around two walls in the gallery. Each of these squares is printed with a video still of water—arbitrarily composed captures of greyish blue waves, ripples and drips in different states. The tension that exists between the amorphous quality of water and its containment in the rectangular frame with its familiar 16:9 screen ratio make these images alluring. Each of the paper-thin rectangles is slightly digitally manipulated, accentuating its flatness: either the corner is turned up, or one side of the image is warped, or the image appears to fold in on itself. Each image is overlaid with an embroidered black shape reminiscent of the black planes that appear in *A Meditation*. The solid, hand-embroidered shapes appear to manipulate, join or pierce the photograph. The delicate images, centred on the wispy, floating, silk squares and pierced by the black void, cleverly remind us that the photographic image is an illusion—a two-dimensional reproduction of the real world that evokes our senses only through reference and not through direct embodied connection. Rye has used textiles

² Koepnick, *On Slowness*: 6.

³ Lyla Rye, interview by Stephanie Cormier, March 23, 2020.





Installation view of *Suspended Meditations* (2020) by Lyla Rye.
Photo: Toni Haikenscheid
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PREFIX
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and needlework in a number of her previous artworks and, in *Fluid Anomalies*, the slow act of embroidering by hand contrasts with the instantaneity of the digital image.

Mounted in the surround gallery, *Suspended Meditations* (2020) consists of two large-format, colour photographs, one oriented horizontally, the other vertically. Created by compositing stills from the video *A Meditation*, these photographs further abstract the imagery and confuse our perception. In the horizontal image, there are many screens visible, crisscrossing in isometric perspective against the black background. The negative space of the black planes covers parts of the images, creating a fragmented and patterned abstraction. The vertical work echoes the narrow hallway in which it is mounted. In this image, landscape scenes appear to fall from above, piling onto each other to create a dense woven pattern that resembles a textile. We look down from above at the image and at all of the smaller versions of landscape that it contains. It is as if we have left the Earth and are looking down at its bounty of nature in a Google Earth view.

The nature scenery—the cloying sunsets and emerald green lakes—depicted in the YouTube and other meditation videos that appear in *A Meditation* have the quality of kitsch. The first point in Susan Sontag’s classic essay, “Notes on ‘Camp’” reads: “Camp is a certain

⁴ Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” in *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays* (1966): 276.

⁵ Oscar Wilde, “The Decay of Lying,” in *The Collected Oscar Wilde* (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2007): 360.

⁶ Wilde, “Decay of Lying,” 360–92.
⁷ Members of the Ocean Memory Project, “The Ocean Carries ‘Memories’ of SARS-CoV-2,” *Scientific American* (August 15, 2020)

mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of artifice, of stylization.”⁴ In her preface, Sontag dedicates the essay to the playwright Oscar Wilde, who observed that “the more we study Art, the less we care for Nature.”⁵ Wilde was referring to the late-nineteenth-century notion of nature as crude, unwieldy and something to be tamed, groomed and controlled—best manicured and gazed upon from a distance.⁶

In 2020, the age of YouTube, COVID-19 and intensified political strife, we need to turn away from depoliticized depictions of nature based in artifice and find pragmatic ways of seeing ourselves as part of nature, rather than above it. The twenty-first century has brought with it digital technologies that enable us to see and experience the world in new ways, but that also contribute to our chaotic and accelerated pace of life. In response to these contemporary pressures, we seek refuge in spaces and activities that can calm us and reconnect us with nature. *Mirage* encourages us to consider the ways we have created a separation from, and a commodification of, the natural world and its resources—of vital life-giving forces such as land, air and water. Rather than treat the natural world as a transactional product to be used for our relief,

we need to acknowledge it as integral to our survival. *Mirage* contributes to the popular and necessary worldview that confronts post-capitalist and colonialist mindsets.

In a recent *Scientific American* article seeking a deeper understanding of the coronavirus, the authors ponder neuronal networks in nature and ask, “Is there a way for us to search—individually and collectively—for ways to shift the paradigm from “ego to eco”? From separated humans, fearful of each other and of nature, to an ecologically entangled sense of self? And what will be encountered on such a search?”⁷ *Mirage* challenges us to examine more closely our relationship with nature so that we can move forward with both nature and technology as equal and compassionate partners.

List of Works

Lyla Rye
A Meditation
 2019
 Three-channel video
 installation on angled walls
 Colour, sound, 22:30 minutes
 Variable dimensions
 COURTESY LYLA RYE

Lyla Rye
Fluid Anomalies
 2020
 36 colour image transfers on
 silk with cotton embroidery
 43 cm x 43 cm each
 COURTESY LYLA RYE

Lyla Rye
Suspended Meditations
 2020
 Two colour photographs
 51 cm x 152 cm each
 COURTESY LYLA RYE

Lyla Rye is a Toronto-based visual artist who works in installation, sculpture, video and photography. For more than thirty years, she has explored the experience of architectural space. Her dynamic artworks call attention to the ways in which we perceive space and time. Her work has been featured in numerous exhibitions, including at the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery (Toronto), the Whitney Museum of American Art (New York), the Southern Alberta Art Gallery (Lethbridge) and, most recently, KB19, the Karachi Biennale (Pakistan).

Betty Julian is an off-reserve citizen of Sipekne'katnik First Nation (Indian Brook First Nation) in Nova Scotia, Canada. A curator of contemporary art, she was a founding member of the advisory council for *Prefix Photo* and, from 2004–18, a member of the curatorial council for Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art (Toronto). In the latter capacity, she curated the group exhibitions *Movers and Shakers* and *Trade Marks*, as well as solo exhibitions by Renée Green and Lorna Simpson. Currently, she is the adjunct curator at Prefix ICA, where she curated a solo exhibition by Nadia Myre.

Stephanie Cormier is a practising visual artist who also writes about contemporary art. Born in Montréal, she came of age in rural parts of the Caribbean, returning to Canada as an adult. She holds a BFA from the Ontario College of Art and Design (now OCAD University, Toronto) and an MFA from the University of Guelph (Guelph, ON). She has participated in exhibitions and residencies across Canada, the US, England and the Caribbean.

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Published on the occasion of the exhibition *Mirage* by Lyla Rye held at Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, from October 2 to November 28, 2020. Curated by Betty Julian, with an essay by Stephanie Cormier.

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