

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

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**THE GLOBE AND MAIL**



## Moonmilk and hurricanes: Two artists bring a primeval instinct to Toronto's Power Plant

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Glasgow artist Karla Black developed a series of new sculptures for her first solo exhibition in Canada.

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At a recent talk in Toronto, the Scottish artist Karla Black described a mysterious substance known as moonmilk: a white calcium deposit in underground caves that remains permanently soft, slushy and malleable. At a site in southern Australia, ancient rock artists have pressed their hands into the moonmilk; because the substance is always wet, these markings that date back tens of thousands of years would appear as though freshly made.

It is that moment when the human hand reaches out to make its mark that Black seeks to recreate in her cheerfully messy sculptural installations of everyday materials, works that both record the primordial instinct toward art and perhaps stir that same impulse in the viewer. The

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Glaswegian artist, who has mounted solo shows across Europe and participated in the Venice Biennale in 2011 and 2017, makes her Canadian debut with some of her own finger painting on the walls of Toronto's Power Plant – and a whole lot of other gestures in paint, paper and powder.

The central sculpture in her provocative and engaging Toronto exhibition, part of a fall program that also includes a show of work by Guatemalan artist Vivian Suter, features a forest of construction-paper garlands hanging from the high ceiling of the Power Plant's east gallery. These pale-green streamers are occasionally decorated with pieces of yellow and pink paper; in between them, Black has overturned multiple white laundry racks, thrown bubble wrap on top and poured great quantities of pink powder on these shapes and all over the floor.

The place looks a bit like a giant daycare art project, and if a three-year-old were to enter the gallery, she would surely run amok. However, museum etiquette still applies: You can't touch the art and you view the show by walking around its perimeter. Penetrating the large yet delicate centrepiece would disturb the powder, just for starters.

That tension, created by work that squeezes its anarchic desires inside gallery protocols, is typical of Black's push-pull with the art world as she seeks a place where the chaotically instinctual is permissible. At her artist talk held at the Ontario College of Art and Design University last week, somebody asked whether her art was site specific; she replied that it apparently wasn't since a piece created in a Venice palazzo at the 2011 Biennale has since been acquired by the Tate in Britain. Figuring out how you buy, preserve and display such art – Black's materials also include toilet paper – earns contemporary art curators their keep. For audiences, the challenge is puzzling through their own physical and intellectual responses to Black's transformation of a space.

Certainly, there's a friendly invitation to do so: the Power Plant installation also includes three small, glass-fronted doors, mounted at right angles to the gallery walls as though playfully encouraging the viewer to enter something. Black also smears blobs of Vaseline in-between glass panes – the jelly echoes the instability of the moonmilk – to include what are perhaps the most conventionally art-object-like things in her show.

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The atmosphere of playful impermanence is greatly enhanced by the pastel palette Black favours, but the artist has repeatedly rejected critics' conclusion that those colours – plus her use of pigments and powders from commercial makeup – are purposefully feminine. She sees her choices as aesthetic and rejects any metaphor, narrative or, a dreaded word, meaning. "I am very confused by that word, I don't like it; I don't understand it," she said at OCAD U.

So the Power Plant installation simply asks the viewer to witness the making of something – and to think about that. At its most effective, the experience may echo the wonder a viewer might feel in the presence of cave art, that sense of an encounter with a fundamental impulse that, for all the transience of Black's materials, time cannot erase.

A poignant tension between the ancient and the disappearing is also at play across the hall in Suter's similarly spectacular installation in the western gallery. There, the Guatemalan artist has hung dozens of unframed, unstretched canvases marked with big painted shapes in bold but earthy reds, blues and greens. These could be read as landscapes, bodies or objects, but the artist often changes the direction the canvases are hung, switching them from landscape to portrait, so here, too, illustration is not the point.

The effect is to reproduce the wondrous atmosphere of an artist's studio – more anarchic, more creative than the tidy installations in which museums traditionally specialize. To reinforce that point, Suter includes a series of canvases spaced so tightly together on a hanging rack that visitors can't actually get a full view of their surfaces.

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Artist Vivian Suter, who grew up in Switzerland and now lives in Guatemala, opens her first exhibition, *La Canicula*, at The Power Plant at Toronto's Harbourfront Centre.

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But all has not been wonderful in Suter's actual studio. Alongside her mother, artist Elisabeth Wild, she works on the site of a former coffee plantation on the shore of Lake Atitlan in the volcanic mountains of southwestern Guatemala. The place was struck by a hurricane in 2005 and a tropical storm in 2010, flooding Suter's studio and damaging her art. It was after this experience that she began to purposefully leave her canvases outside, letting nature take its course, which explains the old, earthy atmosphere created by *La Canicula*. (The title is the Spanish term for the dog days of summer.)

Curator Nabila Abdel Nabi, who also organized Black's show, has included a selection of Wild's small paper collages, too. (The mother-and-daughter duo often show together.) These are classic little examples of surrealism: Through the fastidious assembly of coloured paper cut from magazines, Wild creates an impression of architectural spaces that appear both fully real and utterly abstract.

Her work, strikingly mounted here in a smaller gallery where it hangs along a big green stripe painted the length of the room, contrasts sharply with her daughter's: Wild is precise and small; Suter is big and gestural; Wild's art can be controlled and contained; Suter hints that is impossible. Wild is civilization; Suter is the encroaching jungle. It's a highly effective juxtaposition because it emphasizes the impermanence of Suter's project. In the face of nature both fertile and hostile, her practice brings that primeval instinct toward art full circle, as a warming planet hurtles toward two degrees.

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Black worked with construction paper, powder paint and clothes racks, as well as glass, petroleum jelly and cosmetics.

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La Canticula and the Karla Black installation are on show at the Power Plant gallery at Harbourfront until Dec. 30.

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