

COME AROUND AGAIN: HOLD FAST AT 25



CHAD FEEHAN

Eastern Edge's annual contemporary arts festival is curated, administered, and faithfully attended by the smiling faces of eager artists that form the patchwork tapestry of the local arts community and from beyond the provincial borders. This year, 2024, marks the festival's 25th anniversary, celebrated throughout a week of always engaging, always eclectic arts programming.

Amidst a gracious helping of workshops from artists such as Shirley Anstey, August Carrigan, Kathryn D'Agostino and Raianny Queiroz, HOLD FAST inaugurated its festivities with *Foxtrot Oscar 1*, the official launch party and variety show within the high walls of the Majestic Theatre.

A celebration of the festival's 25-year run at Eastern Edge, *Foxtrot Oscar 1* featured a diverse and engaging set of entertainers who adorned the stage with music, dance, and theatre. After being taken on a trip down HOLD FAST memory lane via the theatre's projection screen, St. John's de-facto host extraordinaire \garbagefile took the stage to sing its praises, highlight its collaboration with Palestine Action YYT, and encourage boisterous, cheering enthusiasm for the performers of the night.

Helena from Sam the Band opened act one with a set of covers and originals ranging from acoustic crooning to soulful, broken beat R&B crooning, before giving the stage to Tendai Mudunge who prepared a humorous take on

the experience of new Canadians in Newfoundland utilizing a crew of performers and dancers. Lynn Panting Dance then washed the stage with flowing fabric, moving bodies and radiant light, giving way to Craig Francis Power who laid himself bare with selections from his upcoming book *Total Party Kill*, an autobiographical collection of poems about addiction, sobriety, and Dungeons & Dragons. Prolific drag aficionado Madame Daddy coaxed many a laugh from the audience with their animation-accompanied rendition of Jack Stauber's "Hamantha", leading up to an explosive performance by XIA-3, St. John's premiere guzheng fusion rock band.

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Though the Art Crawl during the final day of HOLD FAST featured more installations to engage with than even the speediest art appreciator is likely to bang out in a day, the festival's four Featured Artists served as a series of main attractions that participants could plan their bright, sunny afternoon around. At the very start of the day HOLD FAST collaborated



\garbagefile, Foxtrot Oscar 1. Photo: Ethel Brown.

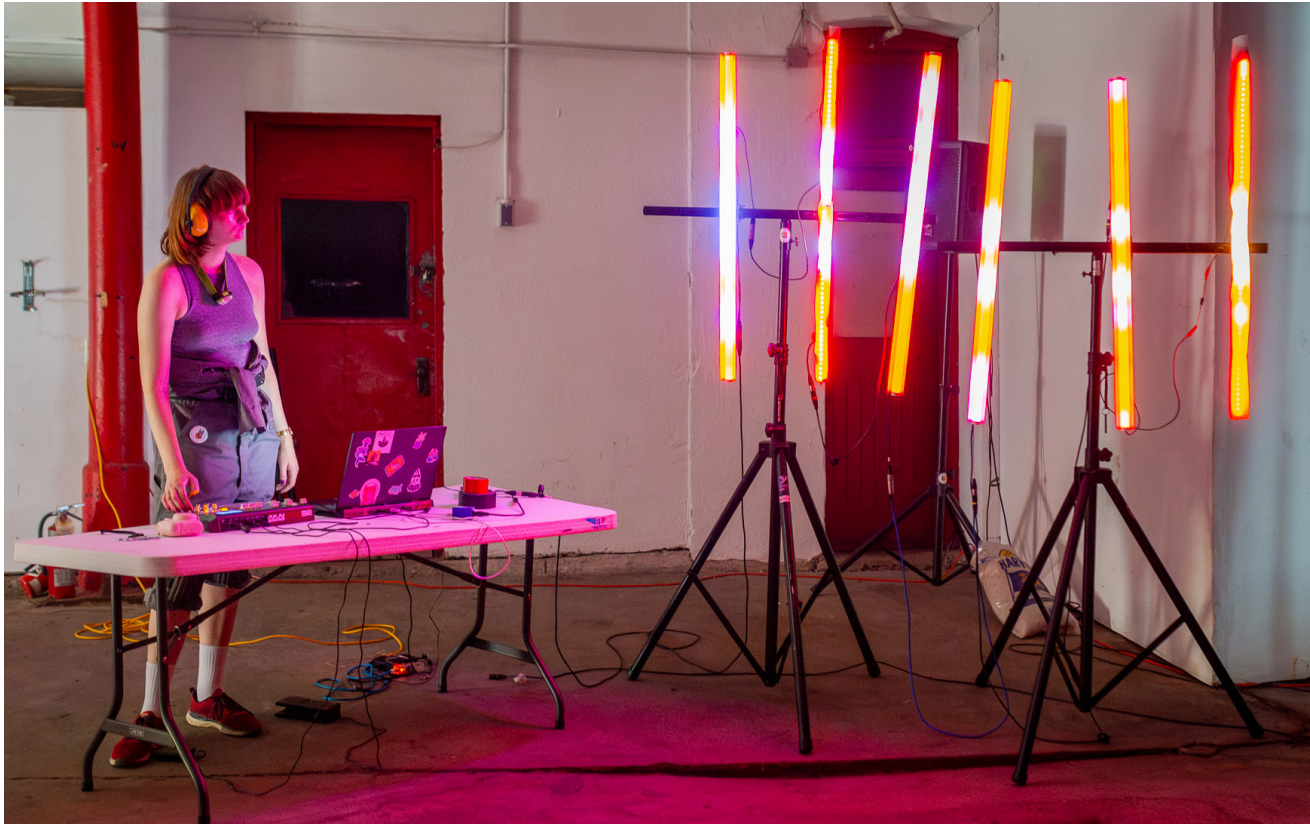
with the weekly Palestine Action YYT march, dovetailing perfectly with Sarah Khraishi and Beck MacLeod's tateez embroidery work titled *Co-Creating Homeland*. Khraishi, a Palestinian-Newfoundlander, and MacLeod, who is Jewish, collaborated on the work as a means of resistance to the genocide and colonization past and present experienced by Palestinians. During the artist talk, Khraishi explained that the motifs that make up the patterns within tateez are a language that demonstrate Palestinian heritage, land, life, and the connection between these aspects and its people. "It's a tangible symbol of our culture and a way of connecting with the land even when we are not physically on it as part of our cultural heri-

tage," Khraishi said. Their work was presented at the apex of the march down the pedestrian mall, which paused to take in a speech given by Khraishi before turning back towards the west end of the street, chanting even louder than before.

Stationed in Rocket Bakery, D'Arcy Wilson's *Lost Curlew* utilized a real-time camera feed of the remains of the province's last northern curlew stationed at The Rooms' Natural History Division, and a four simultaneous video loops of D'Arcy holding this bird, giving it the appearance of animate life that the likely extinct species can no longer do on its own. Over a coffee and perhaps a well deserved afternoon snack,



D'Arcy Wilson, Lost Curlew. Photo: Ethel Brown.



Robin Peters, Matt Samms and Mark Bath, What are We. Photo: Ethel Brown.

spectators meandered into the back of the restaurant to linger in observance of the lifeless animal. The installation was inspired by Wilson's research into the 19th-century naturalist Andrew Downs, the proprietor of the first zoological garden on the continent. Among many other animals, Downs kept specimens of the northern curlew, but despite being known as gentle with animals this care was largely misguided, as in the case of some unnecessary taxidermy. At Fancy Artist Talks, the night before the Art Crawl, Wilson referred to Downs' work as a "failed gesture," adding that she wanted to foster a sense of empathy for these long gone animals.

In contrast with the sobering stillness of Wilson's work, a short walk down the road one would find themselves in the middle of an audio/visual treat in the dimly-lit Baird Building garage. *What are We* is a collaboration between dancer/ animator Mark Bath, lighting technician Robin Peters, and musician Matt Samms, which turned the garage into a lively facsimile of the dark dance floor of any modern rave. An eclectic mix of techno, drum and bass, and other electronic rhythms thumped through the speakers while Peters mashed on a MIDI controller connected to a series of DIY LED light bars that flickered with the intensity of any big room warehouse party. While this audio/visual dyad interacted with each other, projections of



Beck MacLeod and Sarah Khraishi, Co-Creating Homeland. Photo: Ethel Brown.

Bath's own animations, including rotoscoped representations of his own likeness, added even more visual candy to the experience. Bath, being a dancer, hopped, skipped and jumped to the music, encouraging others to do the same, bringing the moment out of the realm of installation, towards a real full-on party. The trio initially came together at the most recent edition of Corner Brook's nighttime arts festival CB Nuit, in which Bath's animations were placed serendipitously close to Samms' and Peters' rave station, much to the delight of spectators. At the artist talk, Bath said they decided to build upon this coincidence. "It's a dance party on a Saturday afternoon, I guess," Bath said.

At times during the festival you were invited to dance. Other times, you were invited to listen. At Brenda Mabel Reid's *Underlay* installation in Bannerman Park, it was not only acceptable, but encouraged, to sleep. Reid concocted *Underlay* using common construction materials like tape, tarp, and Tyvek to create a very large quilt of hexagonal pods that reaches its conceptual zenith when one slips in for a little mask-assisted nap. As a non-binary person with backgrounds in architecture and quilting, Reid highlighted the oft-gendered natures of these disciplines which is examined through the blurring of boundaries and bucking of norms of the piece. At the artist talk, Reid noted how difficult



Brenda Mabel Reid, *Underlay*. Photo: Ash Hemmings.



NL Pipe and Drum Band. Photo: Shireen Merchant.

it is to be in and talk about these spaces as well as present work within them, choosing not to think about quilting as “women’s work” at all. As the quilt makes its tour around this end of the country, Reid has been hosting workshops which result in more pods being added to the piece. Sections made in Saint John, NB and St. John’s both have their own characteristic motifs imbued into the hexagonal sleeping pod, and will grow as they make their way back to Kitchener, where they currently live.

Completed just in time for Fancy Artist Talk, Melissa Tremblett’s 2024 HOLD FAST Mural is a bright, vibrant work adorning the outside wall of Eastern Edge, inspired by the motifs of Innu caribou coats. These coats, Tremblett

explained, would be given to the hunters each year, and were made from the coats of the previous hunt. Women in the community would interpret the hunters’ caribou laden dreams which would make their way into the new coat. Tremblett noted that as the need for a caribou hunt has diminished over the years with the advent of the reserve, so has the practice of coat making and dream interpretation. “But... I’m on it,” she said with laughter.

Aside from the Featured Artist projects, to walk through the downtown St. John’s core that Saturday afternoon was to participate in the HOLD FAST Art Crawl, whether one was aware of it or not. What would have begun as a normal stroll down the pedestrian mall soon became a tour

through many of the Art Crawl's offerings, from musical performances by NL Pipe Band and Christian Dauble, to live portrait sketching by Nikita Sachdeva, and even a sustainable fashion walk. Around the festival headquarters at Eastern Edge were a lively zine making table with Trans Support NL, banner painting with Neighbours United, and even a comfy "cinemobile" facilitated by Nickel Film Festival, which invited patrons to watch animated shorts in a little camper van. At First Light, Sylvan Hamburger's *Cranky* featured a decaying boat and printed impressions of the boats exterior hanging high

above, while New Aeolian Quartet presented their own ambient musical works in a satisfying double feature.

There were many, many more notable works worthy of mentioning, but we could sit here all day riffing on the quality and quantity of work that HOLD FAST brings to the table annually. Next year's instalment will come around again, and will surely continue in the tradition of exhibiting fresh, thought-provoking, meaningful art from the province and beyond.



Trans Support NL, Explore Zines. Photo: Ethel Brown.

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Sylvan Hamburger, Cranky. Photo: Ethel Brown.