

## SARAH DAVIDSON

### *Swamp Sight*

Jan 08 - Feb 19, 2022

Image:  
Sarah Davison  
*Leaf Tender*, 2021  
Watercolour, ink, and pencil crayon on paper  
7.5 x 11.5 in





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Working primarily between drawing and painting, Sarah Davidson creates compositions in which shadowy, biomorphic figures and delicate, foliated fragments mingle. Making reference to a history of discourses constructing the 'natural' world, their works investigate bodies, environment, observation, and the tangled strings which often bind them together. While they often draw directly from 'nature', their drawings diffract distinctions between embodied self and other through a queer ecological lens: critters and space collapse in upon one another, suggesting a permeable web. Both the eye and the mind work towards the known--animals, plants, brush marks, lines--but are caught in a space of undoing.

In *Swamp Sight*, Davidson weaves a world of uncanny connections around the act of looking. Frog, moth, and human eyeballs all appear to regard the viewer and each other. Drawn partly from observation, these works depart from natural history illustration to swim towards a strange new form of camouflage. A question floats among the forms: who's seeing who, and how?

## ABOUT THE EXHIBITION



Canada Council  
for the Arts

Conseil des arts  
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ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL  
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO  
an Ontario government agency  
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

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## *Swamp Sight* - Sarah Davidson at Wil Aballe Art Projects

Text by Lauren Lavery

In the classic animated film, *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), Alice is caught up at a maze-like intersection in the road when an echoey voice begins to sing from her surroundings. “Did you lose something?,” the voice asks. Startled, Alice looks up to find a large, crescent-shaped smile emerging from the blackness of the tree branch above, teeth gleaming like a bright moon. As Alice stumbles for words, the disembodied mouth apologetically dismisses her, and a pair of eyeballs materialize from above, first the left and then the right, plopping themselves into place above the grin, their pupils rolling around the whites like marbles. Finally, a complete figure begins to surface: vertical purple and magenta stripes form around a body and a tail, revealing a large, lounging cat.

Perhaps the best way to explain the Cheshire Cat’s fantastical entrance is by examining the aesthetic techniques real flora and fauna have evolved over time to help protect themselves from predators and to trick their prey—otherwise known as camouflage. From an evolutionary standpoint, camouflage is a tactic used to ensure the longevity of organisms. It takes various forms, including cryptic and disruptive colouration, motion dazzle, alterations in materiality, and behaviour including transparency and self-decoration. One of the most unsettling camouflage accoutrements are eyespots, which develop on many species of winged insects and birds, as well as on fish and reptiles. This form of mimicry, according to one theory, is meant to intimidate and distract predators from more vulnerable body parts, thus ensuring survival.<sup>1</sup> If we understand camouflage as a part of evolutionary survival, what happens when the eyes refuse to merely camouflage, but also develop agency of their own?

In *Swamp Sight*, Sarah Davidson’s recent work illustrates the possibility of this uncanny, psychedelic scenario. Each drawing features at least one amphibian or human eye with pitch-black pupils gazing out of the frame and back at the viewer, giving a new meaning to the notion of feeling watched coupled with the uncertainty of where from. Eyes, or eyespots, emerge from within the tangle of vegetation in each work, sometimes tucked in a dark crevice behind a large bug-eaten leaf, other times disguised within the sketchy confines of a moth’s wing. Davidson’s works are technically complex—their superficially flat surfaces seamlessly weave classic drawing elements, such as hatching and cross-hatching, with mixed materials including pencil crayon, ink and watercolour, to create an illusion of ethereal, murky depth. The swampy aspect of this work forms within organically-shaped fields of colour, wherein blobs of complementary colours (greens and reds, blues and oranges) envelope the foregrounded eyes, leaves, lily pads, and veil-thin wings, heightening the hallucinatory effects of the patterning and generating an environment of disruptive concealment for the bodiless beings to lurk within.



Although bodiless, the eyes are not without essence. Disembodied eyespots pop out of bodies and wings and reinstate themselves as floating orbs amidst the weightless landscape. Similarly, petals and leaves meld into moths wings, all of which are meticulously patterned and contrastingly colour coated, thus enforcing a kind of material amalgamation that portends an agentive power. If we are to consider the eyes through Jane Bennet’s “thing power”: “the object becomes Other, when [it] looks back”<sup>2</sup>. In other words, the eyes’ agency becomes apparent in this moment of looking back. The eyes are acting in the world, and are thus embodied beings, no longer inert and passive in relation to the material world around them.

There’s a moment in *Detection*, 2020, where a large red teardrop narrowly hangs from the tip of a branch, its bulbous weight seeming to sway, ready to leap at the slightest jostle. Droplets appear multiple times across the exhibition, sometimes as teardrops from an eye or dew from the humid swamp. In other works, delicate, veiny interior details could equally depict the petal of a flower or the transparent wing of an insect. It seems simplistic to describe these environments as chaotic, but in many ways they are. Davidson’s swampy landscapes are lawless, defying so-called ‘natural’ laws of materiality, gravity and even corporeality—so much so that the figures within become *transcorporea*<sup>3</sup>—assuming a “fluidity between material and theoretical bodies, challenging dualities and dichotomies. Transcorporeality assumes inter- and intra-connections, intra-actions, entanglements and transits between human and other-than-human bodies.”

Davidson’s reference points clearly include botanical drawings, but their disruption of the ‘natural’ order we normally associate with viewing this type of work further projects the eyes and eyespots into what scholar Mel Y. Chen refers to as “queer animation.”<sup>4</sup> The notion of the Other, as first described by Bennet, reappears in Chen’s analysis, where Chen furthers the idea by likening it to a queer sensibility, noting that queering “sets its users up for a suitably messy governance, even an antigovernance.”<sup>5</sup>

If we as viewers are to understand Davidson’s defiance of the ‘natural’ order of corporeality, physics and camouflage as a kind of collective galvanization, then it must in fact be a reclamation of the eye’s Otherness, of their transcorporeality. Like the Cheshire Cat’s disappearing and reappearing form, the eyespots in Davidson’s work employ their agency to invent an unruly new world—an undefinable, psychedelic Otherworld of a swamp—in which to camouflage, and from which to look back.

1 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eyespot\\_\(mimicry\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eyespot_(mimicry))

2 Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 42.

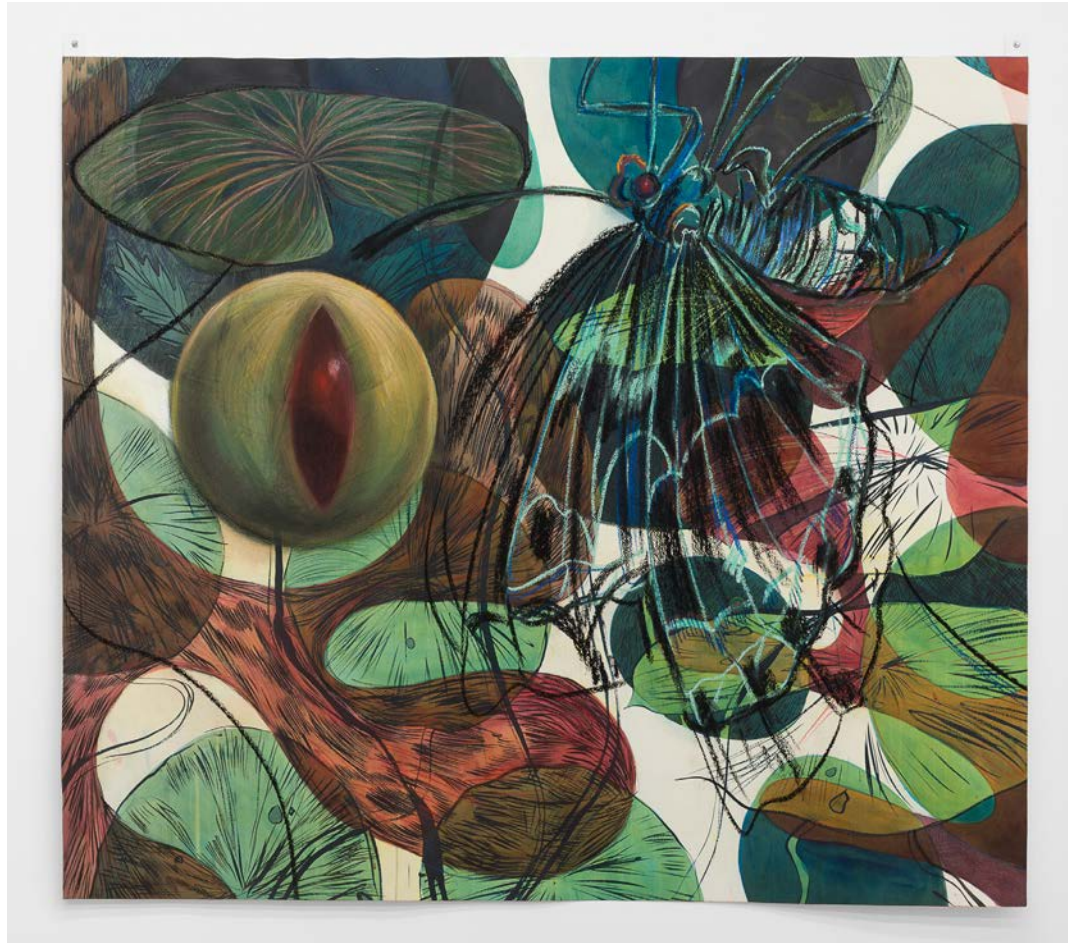
3 Definition from IGI Global, 2021: <https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/transcorporeality/87370>

4 Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 57.

5 *Ibid.*, 85.



Sarah Davidson  
*Swamp Sight*, Exhibition view  
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Sarah Davidson  
*Mothweb*, 2021  
Watercolour, ink, pencil crayon and pastel on paper  
37.5 x 42.5 in (95.3 x 108 cm)



Sarah Davidson  
*untitled, 2021*  
Dye, cotton twill, fitness ball  
26 in diameter (66 cm)





Sarah Davidson  
*untitled, 2021*  
Dye, cotton twill, fitness ball  
22 in diameter (55.9 cm)



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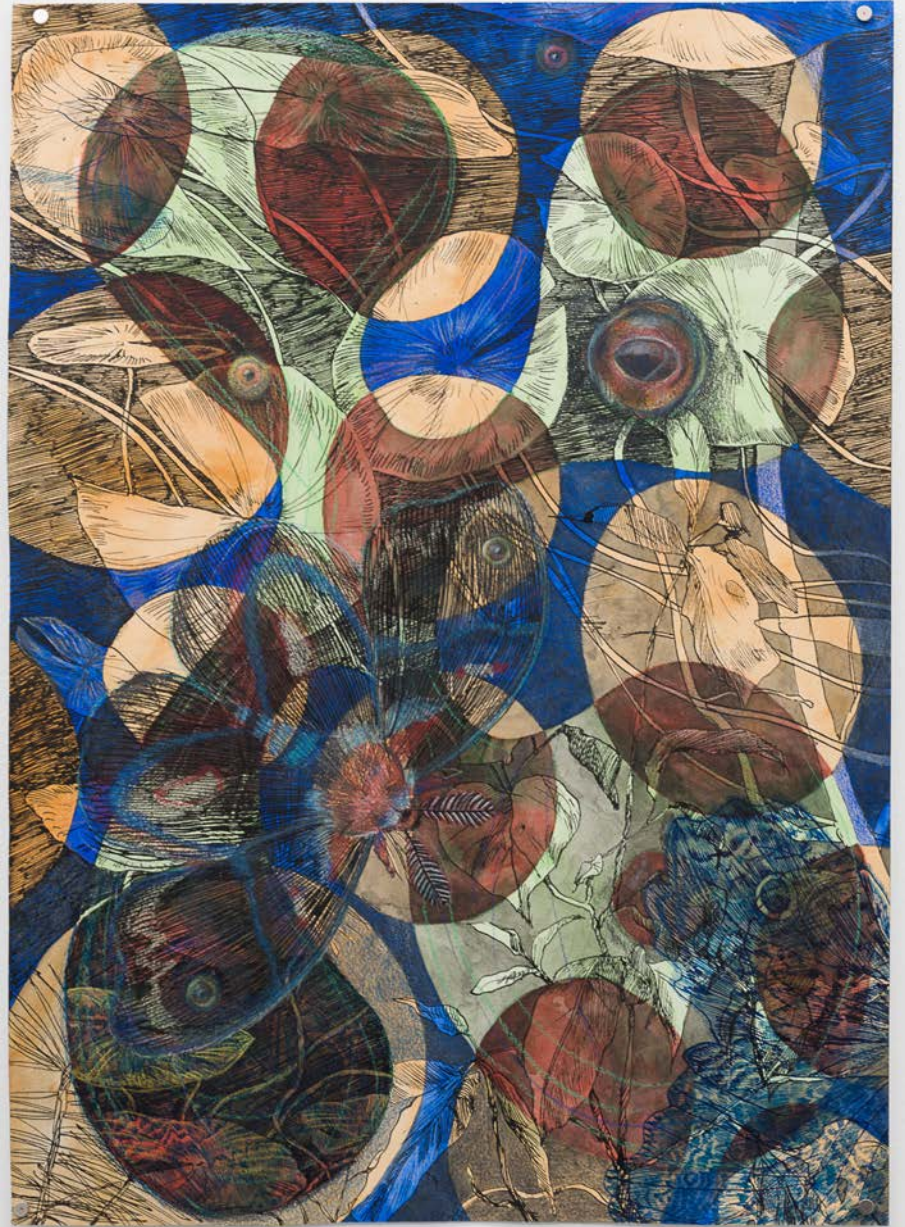
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Sarah Davidson

*Saccade*, 2020

Watercolour, ink, and pencil crayon on paper

19.5 x 14 in (49.5 x 35.6 cm)







Sarah Davidson  
*Burn*, 2021  
Watercolour, ink, and pencil crayon on paper  
12 x 18 in (30.5 x 45.7 cm)





Sarah Davidson  
*Dizziness*, 2021  
Watercolour, ink, and pencil crayon on paper  
12 x 17.5 in (30.5 x 44.5 cm)

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Sarah Davidson

*Blue Drop*, 2021

Watercolour, ink, pencil crayon and pastel on paper

63 x 50 in (160 x 127 cm)







Sarah Davidson  
*untitled, 2021*  
Dye, cotton twill, fitness ball  
22 in diameter (55.9 cm)

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Sarah Davison

*Leaf Tender*, 2021

Watercolour, ink, and pencil crayon on paper

11.5 x 7.5 in (29.2 x 19.1 cm)





Sarah Davidson  
*untitled, 2021*  
Dye, cotton twill, fitness ball  
22 in diameter (55.9 cm)



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Sarah Davidson

*Fell*, 2021

Watercolour, ink, and pencil crayon on paper

17.5 x 11.75 in (44.5 x 29.8 cm)





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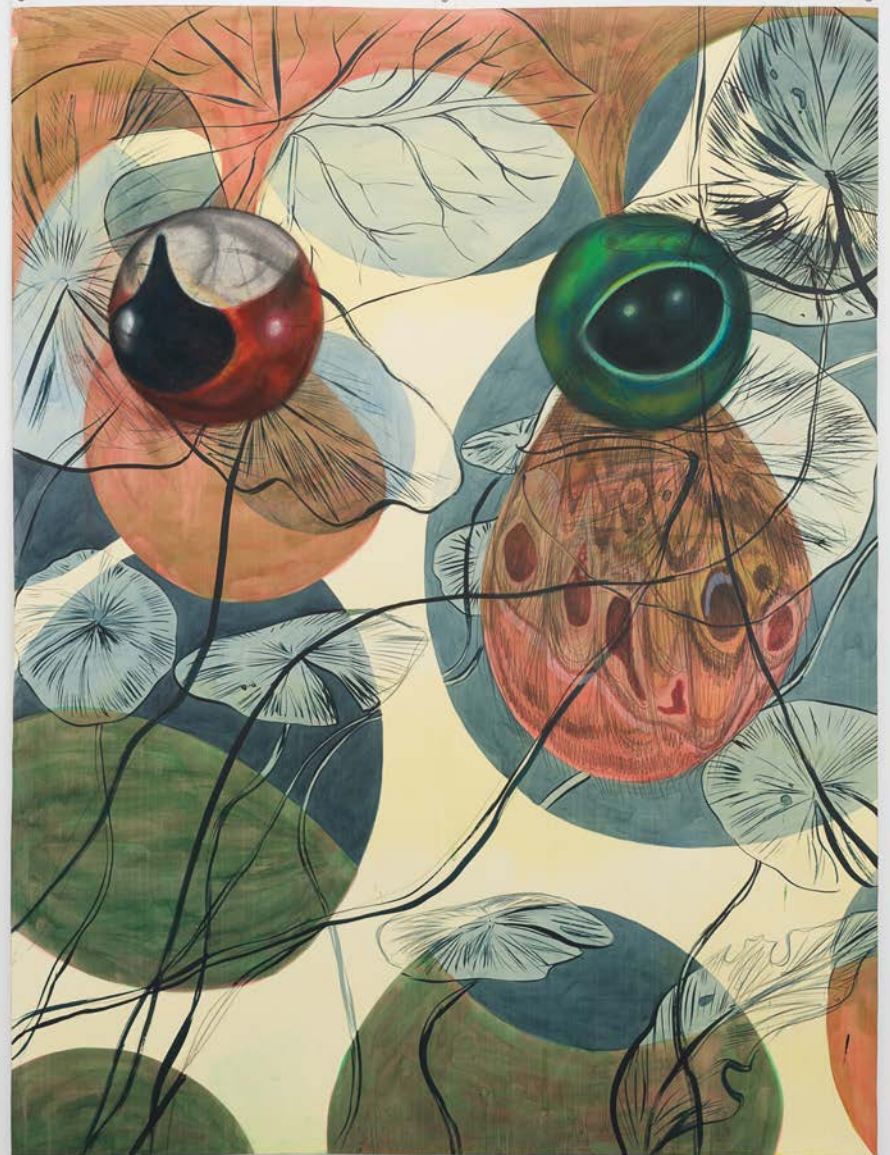
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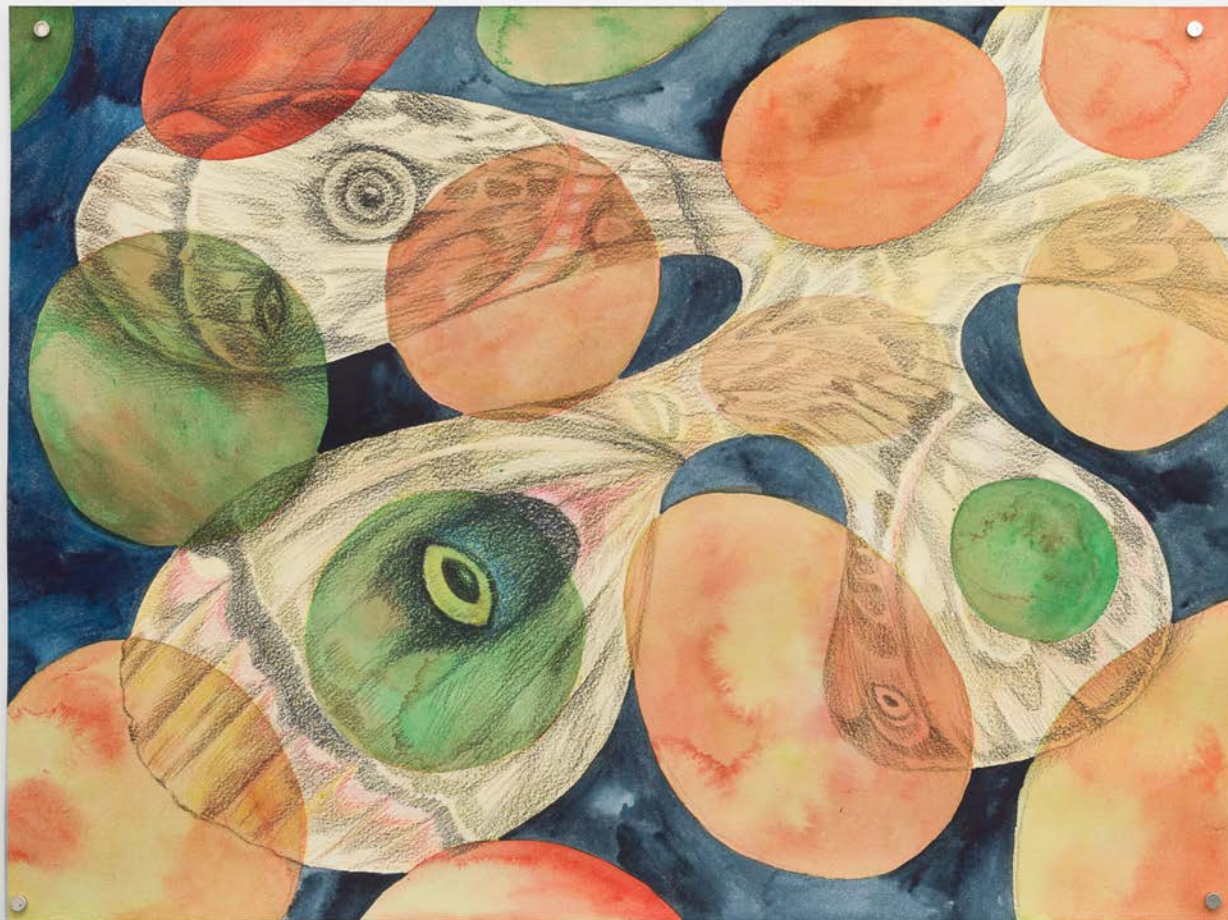
Sarah Davidson

*The Organism and its Surroundings, 2021*

Watercolour, ink, pencil crayon and pastel on paper

63.5 x 47 in (161.3 x 119.4 cm)





Sarah Davidson  
*Blob Bulb*, 2021  
Watercolour and pencil crayon on paper  
14 x 19 in (35.6 x 48.3 cm)



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Sarah Davidson

*Look Left*, 2021

Watercolour, ink, and pencil crayon on paper

14 x 10 in (35.6 x 25.4 cm)





Sarah Davidson  
*untitled, 2021*  
Dye, cotton twill, fitness ball  
26 in diameter (66 cm)



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Sarah Davidson  
*untitled, 2021*  
Dye, cotton twill, fitness ball  
26 in diameter (66 cm)



Sarah Davidson  
*Amphibian Feeling*, 2021  
Watercolour, ink, pencil crayon and pastel on paper  
43.5 x 58.5 in (110.5 x 148.6 cm)



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Sarah Davidson

*Boundary Waters*, 2020

Watercolour, ink, graphite and pencil crayon on paper

12 x 8.5 in (30.5 x 21.6 cm)





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Sarah Davidson

*Thaw*, 2021

Watercolour, ink, and pencil crayon on paper  
12 x 15.75 in (30.5 x 40 cm)



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Sarah Davidson

*Wave*, 2020

Watercolour, ink, and pencil crayon on paper

11.75 x 8.5 in (29.8 x 21.6 cm)





Sarah Davidson  
*Swamp Sight*, Exhibition view  
Wil Aballe Art Projects | WAAP, 2022





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**SARAH DAVIDSON** (she/they, b. 1989, Ottawa) lives and works in Tkaronto/Toronto, Canada. She has exhibited her work at Feuillet (Los Angeles), Cassandra Cassandra (Toronto), Erin Stump Projects (Toronto), Unit 17 (Vancouver), The Power Plant (Toronto), Little Sister (Toronto), Birch Contemporary (Toronto), The New Gallery (Calgary), and Audain Gallery (Vancouver), among others. She was a finalist in the 2018 RBC Canadian Painting Competition, and is the recipient of awards and residencies including the Canada Council for the Arts Research and Creation Grant (2021), The Banff Centre's Late Winter BAiR (2020), and AiR Sandnes residency in Sandnes, Norway (2016). She holds a BFA from Emily Carr University of Art & Design (2015) and an MFA from the University of Guelph (2019).

## CV

b. 1989, based in Tkaronto/Toronto, Canada

## EDUCATION

2019, MFA, Master of Fine Art, University of Guelph, ON  
2015, BFA, Bachelor of Fine Arts in Visual Arts, Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Vancouver, BC  
2011, HBJ, Honours Bachelor of Journalism and English, Carleton University, Ottawa, ON

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

## SOLO & TWO-PERSON EXHIBITIONS

2022, Swamp Sight. Wil Aballe Art Projects, Vancouver, BC  
2021, Side View. Feuillet, Los Angeles, CA  
2020, Deep Vision: Sarah Davidson and David Ruben Piqtoukun. Cassandra Cassandra, Toronto, ON  
2019, The Secret Life of Forms. Erin Stump Projects, Toronto, ON  
2017, for the trees. Dynamo Arts Association, Vancouver, BC  
2016, In Line, To Glue: Sarah Davidson and Elisabeth Horan. The Bakery, Vancouver, BC  
2016, the scrap collector. Gam Gallery, Vancouver, BC  
2016, Mapping IRL. WePress Gallery, Vancouver, BC  
2015, Backgrounds. Chernoff Fine Art, Vancouver, BC



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## GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2021, Puddle Popper Lounge, Vancouver Comic Arts Festival, Vancouver, BC

2021, BLOOMDOOMROOM: Carolina Benitez, Sarah Davidson, Ryan Grover, HaeAhn Kwon, Colin Miner, Emmanuel Osahor, Dana Slijboom, Alex Tedlie-Stursberg, Soft Turns, SUM, Susannah van der Zaag, Laurence Veri, and Allanah Vokes. The Plumb, Toronto, ON  
2019, Cognizance: Basil AlZeri, Aidan Cowling, Sarah Davidson, Azadeh Elmizadeh, Cassandra Ferguson, Jackson Klie, Deirdre McAdams, Alexine McLeod, Jose Mora, Emily Moriarty, Ben Mosher, Caroline Mousseau, Laurence Pilon, Xiao Xue. Birch Contemporary, Toronto, ON

2019, SUPER, NATURAL: Derya Akay, Maya Beaudry, Francesca Blomfield, Colleen Brown, Sarah Davidson, Fischli & Weiss, Lucien Durey, Sharona Franklin, Ezra Gray, Julian Hou & L'escalier, Tiziana La Melia, Arvo Leo, Emily Neufeld, Ebony Rose, Alex Tedlie-Stursberg, Tristan Unrau. Unit 17, Vancouver, BC

2018, How The Wet Sock Flower Revealed Itself: Sarah Davidson, Simone Jarvis, and Sonja Ratkay. Dynamo Arts Association, Vancouver, BC

2018, Staring Contest Through Fuchsia Membrane: Puddle Popper (Sonja Ratkay, Sarah Davidson, Juli Majer, Mel Thibodeau). Little Sister, Toronto, ON

2018, RBC Canadian Painting Competition Exhibition. The Power Plant, Toronto, ON

2018, New Energy: Jackson Klie, Caroline Mousseau, Sarah Davidson, Alexine McLeod, Laurence Pilon, Ben Mosher, Deirdre McAdams, Azadeh Elmizadeh, Emily Moriarty, Aidan Cowling, Xiao Xue, Cassandra Ferguson, José Andrés Mora, Basil AlZeri. Boarding House Gallery, Guelph, ON

2018, Refiguring Worlds: Sarah Davidson, Brendan George Ko, Ginette Legaré, Maryse Larivière, Ed Pien. Birch Contemporary, Toronto, ON

2018, Casualize: Sarah Davidson, Daniel Griffin Hunt, Jessica Jang, Brennan Kelly, and HaeAhn Kwon. 10Carden, Guelph, ON

2018, Going On Without Us: Sarah Davidson, Daniel Griffin Hunt, and Emily Moriarty. Bovey Teaching Greenhouse, Guelph, ON

2017, Ancient Follicle Seeks Green Wish: Puddle Popper (Sonja Ratkay, Sarah Davidson, Juli Majer, Mel Thibodeau). The New Gallery, Calgary, AB

2017, Plintor Drax Lounge: Puddle Popper (Sonja Ratkay, Sarah Davidson, Juli Majer, Mel Thibodeau). Site Factory at the Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, BC

2017, Accident of Being Together: Jackson Klie, Andrew Buszchak, Megan Moore, Jessica Jang, HaeAhn Kwon, Emily Moriarty, Xiao Xue, Walter Scott, Sarah Davidson, Brennan Kelly, Deirdre McAdams, Daniel Griffin Hunt, Aidan Cowling, Cassandra Ferguson. Boarding House Gallery, Guelph, ON

2017, A Cabinet of Curiosities: Luke Armitstead, Sarah Davidson, Paul Halley and Juliana Silva, curated by Darius Stein. Elissa Cristall Gallery, Vancouver, BC

2016, Puddle Popper: Sonja Ratkay, Sarah Davidson, Juli Majer, Mel Thibodeau. Dynamo Arts Association, Vancouver, BC

2015, Geometry of Knowing Part 4. Audain Gallery, Vancouver, BC

2013, The No. 3 Rd. Art Columns. City of Richmond, Richmond, BC

## TALKS & WORKSHOPS

2021, Artist talk, Puddle Popper Lounge, Vancouver Comic Arts Festival, Vancouver, BC

2021, Artist talk, University of Toronto

2020, Plugging in: Networking in the Arts for Post-Secondary Students, The Power Plant, Toronto, ON

2019-20, Visiting Artist, Havergal College, Toronto, ON

2019, Artist talk, University of Toronto

2019, Artist talk, Sibling, Toronto, ON

2017, Artist talk, Vancouver Art Rental and Sales, Vancouver Art Gallery

2017, Enrichment workshops, Artists for Kids, The Gordon Smith Gallery of Canadian Art, North Vancouver





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2016, ArtsToGo workshops, Arts Council of New Westminster, New Westminster, BC

## PRESS

2021, Artist Feature, Art Maze Magazine, issue 25  
2021, Artist Feature, Peripheral Review 2020-2021 Print Publication  
2021, Puddle Popper, Discorder Magazine, September/October 2021  
2021, BLOOMDOOMROOM: Face to Face with the Slow Apocalypse, Femme Art Review  
2021, BLOOMDOOMROOM at the plumb, Art Viewer  
2021, Sarah Davidson at Feuilleton, Art Viewer  
2020, Deep Vision: Sarah Davidson and David Ruben Piqtoukun, Terremoto  
2019, Review: Cognizance, Birch Contemporary, Toronto, Canadian Art  
2019, Sarah Davidson's Woven World, Indoor Recess  
2019, SUPER, NATURAL at Unit 17, Vancouver, Mousse Magazine  
2019, Five Cool Art Shows We're Looking Forward to Checking Out in Vancouver (SUPER, NATURAL), Scout Magazine  
2019, Editor's Pick (SUPER, NATURAL), Art Agenda, Canadian Art  
2018, Editor's Pick (How The Wet Sock Flower Revealed Itself), Art Agenda, Canadian Art  
2018, Featured Artist, The Gathered Gallery  
2018, 'Staring Contest Through Fuchsia Membrane' at Little Sister Gallery, TZVETNIK  
2018, Meet September's Featured Artist, SAD Magazine  
2018, Sarah Davidson and Aimée Henny Brown on Fragments, Femme Art Review  
2018, Review: Refiguring Worlds / Birch Contemporary, ARTTORONTO  
2018, Finalists Announced for RBC Canadian Painting Competition, Canadian Art  
2018, Two Emily Carr Alumni Among Finalists for the 20th Annual RBC Canadian Painting Competition, Emily Carr News  
2018, Finalists Named for the RBC Canadian Painting Competition, gallerieswest  
2018, Ottawa artist a finalist for RBC painting prize, Artsfile  
2018, MFA students explore the life of plants in Going On Without Us, The Ontarion, March 15, 2018  
2017, Must-Sees This Week: November 9 to 15, 2017, Canadian Art  
2016, Artist Interview Series: Sarah Davidson, The Volumes Project  
2016, Print's charming for reinvigorated zine scene, Vancouver Courier, December 20, 2016  
2016, Elisabeth Horan & Sarah Davidson, The Bakery: Conversations



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2016, Artist Portfolio: Sarah Davidson, Kolaj Magazine, October 2016  
2015, Sarah Davidson's "Nothing AZ", Scout Magazine  
2015, Review: Intuition (Sarah Davidson and Linton Murphy), Broken Pencil Magazine, Issue 66

## **AWARDS & RESIDENCIES**

2021, Visual Artists Creation Projects Grant, Ontario Arts Council  
2021, Research and Creation Grant, Canada Council for the Arts  
2020, Exhibition Assistance Grant, Ontario Arts Council  
2020, Concept to Realization Grant (Puddle Popper), Canada Council for the Arts  
2020, RBC Emerging Artist Network at The Power Plant  
2020, Emerging Visual Artist Grant, Toronto Arts Council  
2020, Late Winter BAiR, Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity  
2019, University of Guelph College of the Arts Research and Travel Award  
2018, Finalist, RBC Canadian Painting Competition  
2018, Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)  
2017, Graduate Tuition Scholarship, University of Guelph  
2016, AiR Sandnes, Sandnes, Norway  
2012, Jack and Doris Shadbolt Scholarship, Emily Carr University of Art and Design

## **COLLECTIONS**

Royal Bank of Canada  
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