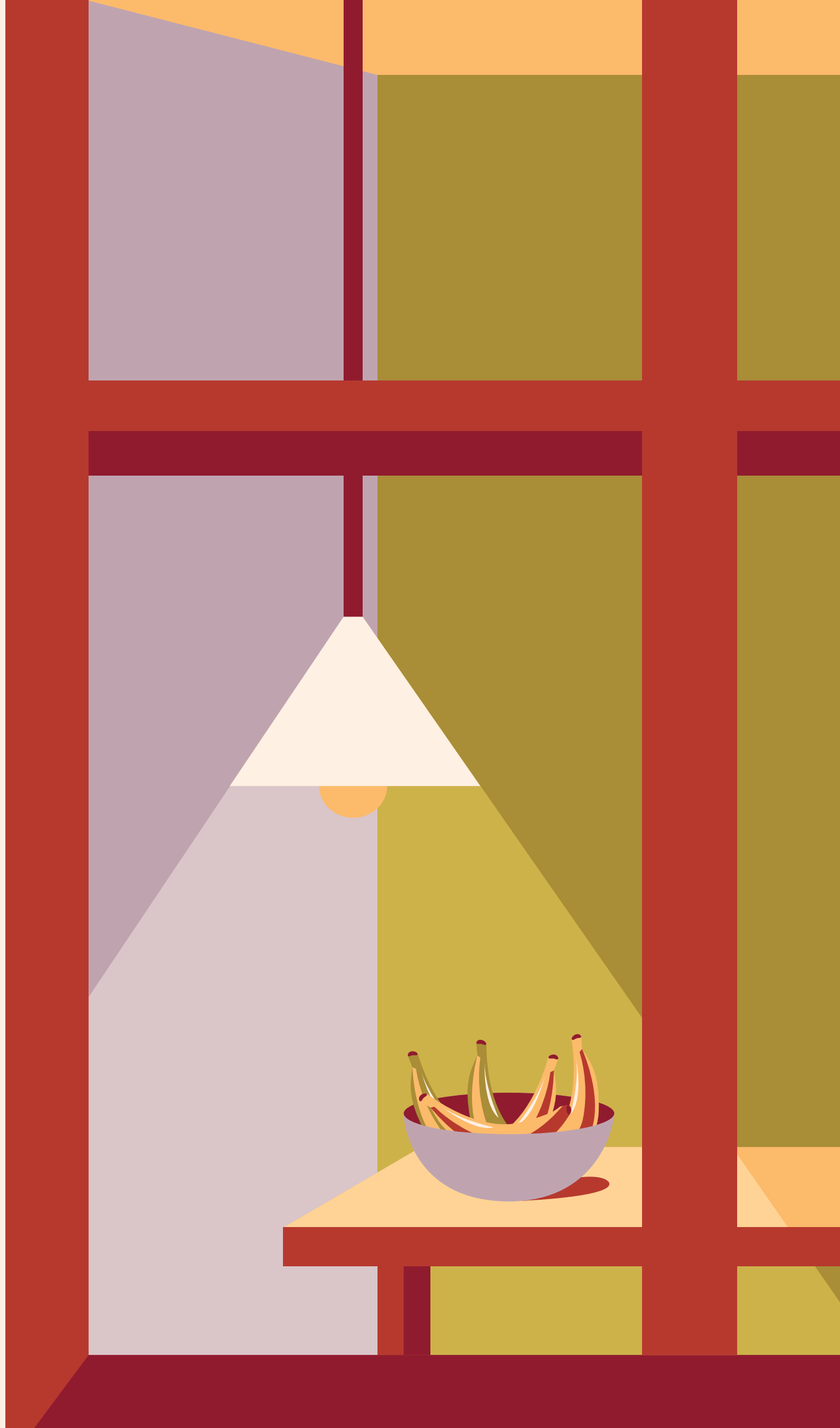


Tactics for Staying Home in Uncertain Times

March 15 - May 16, 2021

MSVU Art Gallery. Kjiptuk / Halifax, NS

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STAY HOME

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rudi aker
Cinthia Arias Auz
Michelle Campos Castillo
Bishara Elmi
Camila Salcedo

Curated by
Liuba González de Armas

The COVID-19 pandemic, fast approaching its first full year in Canada, has radically centered home as the site of daily life for many. The age-old question of home (namely "what and where is home?") is made no simpler by this reality. Indeed, this crisis has brought attention to a broad spectrum of inequalities in housing access. Co-opting the language of public health directives to stay home and shelter in place, *Tactics for Staying Home in Uncertain Times* invites viewers to consider the meanings of home through the lens of diaspora. This exhibition asks, how do we stay home when home is away? How do we make here feel like home?

Tactics brings together five emerging Black, Indigenous, and racialized artists living across Canada whose works articulate ideas of displacement, domesticity, and the limits of belonging. Their works are grounded in the fabric of lived experience, often recreating familiar objects of utility and comfort. Conversely, they also make the ordinary strange by using novel materials and unexpected forms, rendering, for instance, a ripening vegetable in hard polymer and teaware in crumbly earth. By inventively blending the familiar and the unfamiliar, each work suggests an array of tactics through which an individual may adapt to a new home.

Tactics interprets its constitutive artworks through the notion of hometactics as conceived by Latina feminist philosopher Mariana Ortega. Namely, these are "practices that allow for a sense of familiarity with and a particular sense of 'belonging' to a place, space, group, or 'world' while avoiding the restrictive, exclusive elements that a notion of belonging may carry with it."¹ In brief, the works themselves act as anchors that seek to make homes, however tacitly.

rudi aker's *topographies of a homeplace II (2020-21)* is a series of abstracted, three-dimensional bead weavings that map intimate, interior spaces of the artist's life. As both souvenirs and objects of contemplation, these handheld maps seek to haptically capture the experience of domestic spaces as they are remembered. By surveying their various homes in both Sitansisk/Fredericton and Tiohtià:ke/Mooniyaang/Montréal, aker speaks to their experience of mobility and diaspora: of leaving home to seek out education and creative pursuits, and the uncertainty of making a home as an uninvited guest to new territories. As a gathering of past and present dwellings, these maps gesture towards the act of creating comfort in transit.

Bishara Elmi's *Salt of the Earth (2017)* considers intermingling notions of memory, mobility, and material. The work takes the form of a handmade tea set, where each piece is made from soil that the artist has collected from previous homes over decades, then carefully pressed into molds. The resulting objects are texturally and symbolically rich. Each piece serves as an archive and index of the place from which they originate, bearing a unique array of mineral and bacterial life, scrambled into the familiar form of objects that embody comfort and status. The chosen material makes these works particularly delicate, and this fragility means that abrupt movement poses a risk of loss.

Camila Salcedo's video *tu (mi) mejor amiga (2020-21)* juxtaposes sound and moving image to trace shared experiences with her abuela, who moved to Canada in recent years and has spent much of the pandemic living in isolation. The artist records herself performing daily tasks in her new home. This routine is augmented by the voice of her grandmother narrating a typical

day in her life. This simultaneity of lives seen and heard in the video suggests a surprisingly collective aspect to the experience of living alone. There is a quiet intimacy in the video's recognition of domestic habits passed down through generations. The sounds and textures of long-distance connection are similarly embedded in the work through the abuela's voicemail. After all, phone and video calls with family and friends are a reality of diasporic life that long precedes this pandemic.

Cinthia Arias Auz's sculpture *Ta-da! (sin manos) (2020)* alludes to the gradual influence of lived experience on perception. A salt brick sits atop a warping shelf supported by baroque brackets. The semiotic openness of these three elements makes for a wealth of interpretations of the work. For instance, in the artist's childhood home in Guayaquil, salt stood for her grandmother's syncretic rites of domestic protection. In the North Atlantic region that hosts this exhibition, salt is instead bound with the marine realm and food preservation. Though markedly different, both views share a concern with protection and preservation. A person may hold these two interpretations simultaneously, oscillating between the two in accordance to their context. In this sense, the work explores the potential of blending cultural codes by presenting the tension of being (mis)understood without resolving it.

In her sculpture ***la comida en casa (2020-21)***, **Michelle Campos Castillo** models a handful of plantains to scale. Despite their formal similarities, plantains are distinct from bananas, though both are firmly associated with the tropics. This global culinary staple gradually transmutes from starchy vegetable to saccharine fruit as it ripens. Campos Castillo depicts plantains at various states of ripeness to suggest the variety of uses they have in culinary cultures spanning the Americas, Africa, and Asia, and their diasporas. In being so easily confounded with bananas, the sculpture hints at the tension between blending in and being misread by external observers. By depicting this vegetable in a durable medium, the work pays homage to and modestly monumentalizes the plantain as a familiar, sustaining food.

The overall exhibition design alludes to the intimacy of a kitchen, which is a site of culinary diplomacy, of culture shock and comfort, and crucially, of community organizing and coalition-building. In recreating a domestic space that is unique yet familiar, and assorted and yet cohesive, *Tactics* reveals common ground in the artists' experience of making home as diasporic people in times of global crisis. Where each individual artwork suggests tacit everyday gestures of individuals adapting to a new environment, they collectively make visible dialoguing tactics for belonging, making home, and cultivating solidarity with others.

¹ Mariana Ortega. "Hometactics: Self-Mapping, Belonging, and the Home Question," *Living Alterities: Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Race*, ed. Emily S. Lee (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014); 174.



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