

future relics of our time
by Andrea Valentine-Lewis

Within the walls of the Basilica of Saint Anthony of Padua in Italy are the remains of Portuguese Catholic priest, – and showcased in a reliquary encrusted with gold and jewels is his tongue.¹ During the Middle Ages, objects associated with holy people and sacred sites were deeply celebrated.² Due to their association with saints or with heaven itself, relics like Saint Anthony's tongue, were considered divine.³ The term relic derives from the Latin *relinquere*, meaning “that which is left behind,”⁴ and these objects have indeed become temporal markers for future generations. Reflecting on the material and affective dimensions of Medieval relics, one might wonder, what would constitute a future relic representative of our present time. The exhibition *future relics of our time* considers these questions through the works of Serisa Fitz-James, Jack Kenna, and Isabel Wynn.

Today, our planet appears to be on the brink of collapse. In addition to deepening social and political unrest, we are now experiencing the results of our current geological era, the Anthropocene, or perhaps more aptly: the Capitalocene, referring to the damaging effects not caused by humans alone, but by Capitalism as an ideology.⁵ While places in the Southern Hemisphere, including coastal communities in South Asia, have already been experiencing climate disasters such as the deadly Typhoon Rai which recently swept through the Philippines, the Capitalist North is now experiencing a boomerang effect in the form of raging fires and other severe weather events. As those with the power to save the planet continue trying to maintain the current status quo, others are embracing the unruly and weird precariousness of our current time. \

The properties of clay as an expressive medium are interesting to contemplate in relation to this condition. In its raw state, clay is impressionable and pliant, but when

¹ Lindsay Corbett, “Monumental Reliquaries & the Enshrinement of Sacred Remains,” February 11, 2021, online, Zoom, 1:17:18, McGill University.

² Corbett, “Monumental Reliquaries.”

³ Corbett, “Monumental Reliquaries.”

⁴ Corbett, “Monumental Reliquaries.”

⁵ Jason W. Moore, “The Capitalocene, Part I: on the nature and origins of our ecological crisis,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 44, no. 3 (2017).

placed in the kiln, it follows its own rules and is susceptible to 'disobedience.' Ceramic artists are accustomed to the element of chance inherent in the firing process, and a cracked or caved-in result is typically viewed as unfit for presentation. Rather than disguising such flaws and rejecting the 'disorderly' qualities of clay, the works included in this exhibition embrace the negative chance effects of the material in order to convey both humour and melancholia. By leaning into precariousness, these three artists can be viewed as taking part in the creation of future relics that represent our current, uncertain time. This methodology embraces precarity, and this turn towards precarity as a survival method--while not a new concept--is becoming an increasingly necessary position.⁶

In her book, *Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing writes at length about the Matsutake mushroom, a resilient entity that prospers within the Ponderosa Pine deforestation in Oregon.⁷ Tsing uses the Matsutake mushroom as an emblem of both promise and ruin because it thrives as a consequence of their seemingly derelict condition.⁸ She explains that precarity *is* the condition of our time, rather than the exception, and suggests asking the question: "What if precarity, indeterminacy, and what we imagine as trivial are at the center of the systematicity we seek?"⁹ While she is speaking directly about the environmental crisis and attributing the cause to the steady rise of capitalism, her reflection on precarity as a state of existence that embraces vulnerability is both inclusive and encouraging.

Serisa Fitz-James's works in this exhibition were created during an exhilarating and freeing moment of their life, both as an artist and as a person. Leading up to this time, their artistic process felt restrained and tied to a series of preconceptions about the type of art they should produce. These encumbrances were finally eradicated in 2020 when they decided to make art for themselves. A significant part of this shift towards

⁶ Kathleen M. Millar, "Toward a critical politics of precarity," *Sociology Compass* 11, no.6 (2017): 2. There are several scholars who reflect on precarity as a political concept including: Pierre Bourdieu (1998) considered precarity as a labour condition (e.g. job insecurity, part-time employment, and low wages); Guy Standing (2011) sees the *precariat* as a socioeconomic class (e.g. migrants, call-center workers). While never fully detached from labour and economics, the scholars who discuss precarity as an ontology or way of life, are far more inclusive.

⁷ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 20.

⁸ Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*, 20.

⁹ Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*, 20.

self-determinism was embracing the chance and surprise inherent to working with clay, rather than controlling its every outcome, many ceramicists who must consider functionality and uniformity when making bowls or teapots. For Fitz-James, it is a matter of watching and listening to the material and “see[ing] what it has to tell [them],” where roughly 70% of their artistic process is intentional, leaving 30% for experimenting with the material until they find a mistake they love.¹⁰ This process often involves loosely layering wet, coloured clay on top of itself and navigating the oozing and drooping tendencies that come as a result. Fitz-James’ intuitive process also extends to the motifs represented on the ceramic surface. Most of the emblems they translate and preserve in clay come to them in dreams or visions. Rather than use a pen and paper to record, dreams are recorded on the surface of a pot. Much like the glorious Matsutake mushroom that has risen out of destruction and uncertainty, when working with clay Fitz-James’s artistic process encourages what they refer to as a “perfect ugly” to emerge.¹¹

Where Fitz-James’s turn towards precarity arises out of their approach to artmaking, Jack Kenna’s recurring motif, the milk crate, can be considered a symbol of vulnerability and resourcefulness. Since 2017, Kenna has used the image of milk crates in his work – in painting, drawing, tattooing, printmaking, and clay. For Kenna, the milk crate represents nomadic periods of life where repurposed crates become functional vessels for storage, transportation, even as furniture.¹² Because of this, Kenna considers the milk crate emblematic of both the freedoms and limitations associated with being an adolescent or young adult. This attribute is emphasized in his work, *Living in a Box of Wine with You* (2022), where the milk crate is wrapped with a text that also relays the title, and it doubles as a vessel for empty wine bottles. The phrase came to him when he misheard the lyrics to the song “Borrowed World,” by Brooklyn-based rock band Widowspeak.¹³ Through Kenna’s perception the lyric “Living in a Borrowed World With You,” became “Living in a Bottle of Wine” and later, “...Box of Wine” [with you].¹⁴ The dichotomic nature of Kenna’s ceramic works– simultaneously rendering humour and

¹⁰ Serisa Fitz-James, phone call with author, January 11, 2022.

¹¹ Serisa Fitz-James, phone call with author, January 11, 2022.

¹² Jack Kenna, FaceTime with author, December 18, 2021.

¹³ Jack Kenna, FaceTime with author, December 18, 2021.

¹⁴ Jack Kenna, FaceTime with author, December 18, 2021.

melancholia—is where his work aligns with the abundance that can come when leaning into precarity.

Isabel Wynn describes her artistic process as a conversation between the conscious and subconscious state.¹⁵ Her works are a physical representation of the complexities of the human experience, with each vessel referring to a significant experience in the artist's life and a conscious recognition of a particular state of mind. For example, *Ruminating* (2021) renders a festering body unable to let go of the cyclic, spiraling nature of anxiety through a large, black vessel pin-pricked with glossy black glaze dotting the surface. In *Discomfort* (2021) the salmon pink hue of the vessel's raw "skin" is revealed and concealed by a peeling and pooling skin of pale pink glaze. The contrast between permanence and impermanence is strengthened in the way that Wynn pushes the material to its limit, allowing the clay to collapse and fold before 'freezing' that moment during the firing process.¹⁶ Wynn's vessels embody vulnerable and chaotic moments as worthy of being monumentalized and treated as sacred.

During the Middle Ages, organized religion and its symbols were the driving force of Western society, however the 21st century brings far more diverse means of propulsion. Reflective of this particularly uncertain moment in human history, these artists work with, and not against, the cracks and splinters inherent to vulnerable processes. Even more, the artists demonstrate that there is abundance, humour, prosperity, and wisdom available in precariousness--as they negotiate the potential of collapse.

This essay was written on the occasion of the exhibition *future relics of our time* at Equinox Gallery in Vancouver.

future relics of our time

Serisa Fitz-James, Jack Kenna, and Isabel Wynn

Curated by Andrea Valentine-Lewis

February 19 to March 19, 2022

¹⁵ Isabel Wynn, texting with author, January 26, 2022.

¹⁶ Isabel Wynn, phone call with the author, January 24, 2022.