Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill: *Money*
Unit 17, Vancouver
March 30–May 26, 2019

by **Karina Irvine**

The history of the tobacco trade is riddled with discord: expropriation of lands, environmental destruction, colonial state regulations and the monopoly on its importation. Before contact, tobacco was widely used as a means to measure price and value in Indigenous economies, but it's not simply economic. With sacred significance, it has passed between hands for personal, social, political and spiritual uses. In Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill's exhibition *Money,* at Unit 17, the gallery is infused with the rich, balmy scent of tobacco released from its many forms: as resin, dried leaves, seed pods and grounds. By focusing on the Indigenous and colonial economic histories of tobacco, *Money* extends Hill's interest in alternative economies, questioning systems of exchange and the valuation of labour. Hill espouses a notion of wealth that is an ongoing socio-economic process of reciprocity and responsibility, a wealth that is contingent on the respect between humans and the natural world.

Hanging above both doorways in the gallery are flags stitched together with alternating colours of pale Virginia tobacco and the amber tint of perique. In an acknowledgement of tobacco's use as commodity money in America and the turn to paper money by colonial governments in the 18th century, these flags borrow the shape of a scaled-up American dollar bill. In suturing the histories of Indigenous currency with colonial economic and cultural imperialism, these flags perform as signifiers for an alternative economy. Their titles *Dispersal* (2019) and *Disintegration* (2019) suggest that they demarcate a site that thrives on the cyclical nature of growth and eventual decay. Affixed to both are a number of tobacco seed pods that take turns bursting over the course of the exhibition, distributing their rugose seeds across the gallery floor which subsequently make their way outside by the traipsing shoes that come and go. The visitors thus play a vital role in the distribution of goods and their potential growth. Naturally evolving, and by turns participatory, the flags represent governance as a social organization—one which encourages the process of ongoing shared efforts toward a slow growth economy that attends to the limits of nature.

On low, table-like structures in the centre of the gallery, a colony of rabbits assume various postures: sitting upright with legs folded, leaning forward with paws poised or bowing their heads as if grazing. These are not ordinary rabbits. They are made up of amassed objects: charms, dried flowers and tin can tabs affixed to pantyhose that encase the bulk of their form, tobacco. They are flaccid, resting limply. Their material composition lends them an urban, rather than pastoral, sensibility, and their names—*Trade* (2019), *Offer* (2019), *Gift* (2019), *Mint* (2019)—evoke forms of exchange and refer to the multiple systems that tobacco has circulated within. Lastly, the ability of rabbits to breed quickly and in large numbers provides a symbolic association to the capitalist logic of quickly reproducing supply to cater to high demands.

In a conversation in *C Magazine* issue 136, themed "Site/ation," Hill recounted that her Uncle Johnny rigged up a trapline in Ottawa to catch rabbits with a friend. The curiosities that this urban snare provoked led to research into the possibilities of trapping in big cities. As it turns out, "trapline" also refers to the route along which a recycler collects bottles and cans—the tin can tabs are a nod to this ad hoc enterprise. Both of these undertakings work as critiques of the self-destructive growth logic of capitalism by way of being self-sufficient and independent within it. By proxy, then, Hill's rabbits become emblems of alterna-

Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill, detail from *Exchange*, 2019, pantyhose, tobacco, cigarettes, thread, tobacco flowers, aluminum can tabs, spider charm, found metal hair clip, 43.9 cm x 51.3 cm x 79.7 cm
PHOTO: CEMRENAZ UYGUNER; IMAGE COURTESY OF UNIT 17, VANCOUVER

tive economies as a means of survival, in terms of food and financial security.

There is an underlying current in the exhibition highlighting the role of women in subsistence economies. In a conversation with the artist, I learned that the practice of trapping rabbits is an activity often performed by women. These themes were addressed in *Coney Island Baby* (2018) as well, a film about a group of Indigenous women learning how to trap rabbits, made by Hill along with Chandra Melting Tallow, Jeneen Frei Njootli and Tania Willard at BUSH gallery. Its title, which points to British slang that took "coney" (meaning rabbit) as a punny synonym for "cunny" (meaning cunt) again conjures the inimical associations of "breeding like rabbits." Despite these complicated connotations, the rabbits in *Money*, and in the film, signify the value of women's roles in holding the community together.

Elevated above the rabbits are two sets of legs—like the rabbits, they are made of pantyhose, adorned with tokens and stuffed with tobacco—folded and sitting across from each other in a ceremonial mien. One, *Kiss* (2019), has a brooch in the shape of lips in place of its anus. The other, *Exchange* (2019), has cigarettes neatly tucked underneath its nylon sheath to line its loin. Their position gives them a prominence in the space, but without hierarchy. In sitting across from each other, a mutual respect is implied, further acknowledging the benefits of a collective responsibility to each other and to the land. It could be assumed that these legs evince the trapper, and their genderless figures reinforce a shared task.

Though the title of the exhibition might seem misleading, *Money* offers a reflection on the abstract valuation of work and trade. It is a critique of wage labour and capital accumulation, calling for a resurgence of Indigenous economies centering on sustainable forms of exchange. The sacred significance of tobacco, in its use to form limbs and rabbits here, materially connects bodies to land. The gallery has been transformed into a site that asserts sovereignty—pointing beyond the link between colonialism and capitalism to redirect the flow of power back to the land.

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Alexia Laferté-Coutu and Jessica Williams: *Between Two Eternities*
Projet Pangée, Montreal
January 19–March 2, 2019

by **Esmé Hogeveen**

Textured glass pieces laid out like the remnants of a whale's vertebrae summon the memory of a childhood trip to the museum. Moody figures painted in jewel tones recall a teenager decorating her binder and the incredible focus required to make Sharpie lines look thin. In Projet Pangée's recent show *Between Two Eternities*, mid-size sculptural glassworks by Alexia Laferté-Coutu (Montreal) are put in dialogue with Day-Glo-dotted portraits and vignette paintings by Jessica Williams (Los Angeles). The result is an intermedia commentary on preserving—and actively recalling—personal histories.

Laferté-Coutu's and Williams' works invoke two pasts, two distinct spaces of daydreaming and reflecting upon memories, real and invented. In large part, the artists sidestep canonical questions of historical representation. Instead, viewers are led to contemplate the ways in which memory and mood often commingle, producing intractable—and potentially even pleasurably misleading—impressions of the past. Laferté-Coutu's silvery, semi-translucent glassworks are cast from moulds taken from the edges and corners of buildings and monuments. Resting on a table wrapped in a taut indigo-dyed cotton, laid upon the floor and mounted on a wall, the works appear as ghostly timestamps of an ambiguous urban history and simultaneously present an obscured view of the surfaces they're positioned against. By contrast, Williams' works, which depict bright flowers, butterflies, young women and a bowl of redolent cherries, are hypercorporeal, rendered with heavy brush strokes and a plummy palette reminiscent of late-20th-century pop culture. (The *Women & Songs* compilation CD covers come to mind.)

The interplay between the directness of Laferté-Coutu's blunt-edged, quasi-archeological works and the playful, borderline sardonic tone of Williams' paintings is light yet engaging. Akin to scrolling past a Facebook-recommended "memory" and, caught off guard, feeling compelled to revisit the image, one feels the peculiar sensation of idiosyncrasy promulgating emotional intensity when experiencing *Between Two Eternities*. The interaction of Laferté-Coutu's and Williams' styles recalls a New Age '90s romanticism seen through a contemporary lens, particularly as a result of Williams' works: the thick, smooth outlines and almost fan-fiction aesthetic of her feminine characters and lurid bouquets suggest the pathos of a mood ring. Similarly, the dark interiors and glowing mauve horizons of *Did I Dream You Dreamed About Me* (Williams, 2018) and *Strange Form of Life* (Williams, 2018) evoke singing along to The Cranberries and the vacillations between shame and brazen self-confidence that compose youth. It's difficult to plumb how deeply Williams intends for us to grapple with these tableaux. The self-consciousness of the portrait paintings is also manifest in *Nature of Desire no.3* (2018), a cherry bowl still life featuring sticky, dimensional strokes, and *Peonies on Fire (after Manet)* (2017), with its cropped composition and pastel blending. Viewers may feel skeptical, for there is something about the ironic handling of painted domestic scenes that continues to feel ill-resolved, yet over-attended, in the early 21st century.

Prompted by the barefaced sentimentality—whether sincere, feigned or most likely a combination of the two—of Williams' paintings, one notes Laferté-Coutu's more reserved and delicate nostalgia. The opaline contours and rough edges of her work read more personally when one considers the artist's method: applying fresh clay onto urban facades and then casting the imprint requires her to push, quite literally, up against the past. The captured imperfections remind us that