



Caretaker to Caretaker

An interview with Artspeak's Bopha Chhay
- Part Two

by Bopha Chhay, Paula Booker

Published on 18.01.2022



Publication launch of Sol Hashemi's *Excerpt from Baker's Dozen*, at Trout Lake, Vancouver, September 2021. Courtesy of Artspeak.



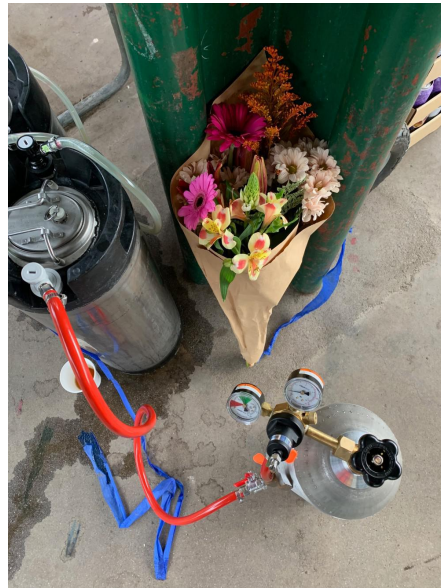
Installation shot of exhibition host with visitor in Ruth Buchanan's exhibition *Dead Marble*, at Artspeak Gallery, June 9 – July 28, 2018. Courtesy of Artspeak.



Installation shot of Ruth Buchanan's exhibition *Dead Marble*, at Artspeak Gallery, June 9 – July 28, 2018. Courtesy of Artspeak.



Bopha Chhay. Courtesy of the author.



Artspeak launch of *Excerpt from Baker's Dozen* by Sol Hashemi, Trout Lake Park, Vancouver, September 2021. Courtesy of Paula Booker.

Bopha Chhay, a writer and curator from Pōneke Wellington, speaks about her curatorial work as the director of Vancouver's non-profit artist-run space Artspeak; her interest in artistic projects that reach beyond the space of the gallery and into the community; how an institution might honour the specifics of place; and Artspeak's living legacy. The conversation, with Paula Booker, Vancouver-based curator from Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, was recorded after hours on 8 November 2021 at Artspeak, Vancouver, BC, on a cold and wet West Coast evening in Canada's fall. To read the first part of this interview [click here](#).

Part Two

PAULA BOOKER When I first came to Vancouver in 2016, I was struck by the number of artist-run spaces, and relatively few commercial galleries that exist here, in part due to market forces and also due to funding opportunities in Canada that support non-profit spaces. There is slightly less institutional precarity. When projects institutionalise, have permanent funding, staffing and resources, you have a different set of problems and circumstances, but more ways you can support artists, too.

BOPHA CHHAY As an artist-run centre that's in its thirties, Artspeak has its own particular legacy. You hinted at these challenges, sometimes a legacy can bring with it a lot of baggage, or lend itself to gatekeeping. Artspeak has a very particular mandate—to encourage a dialogue between visual arts and writing and text practices. Depending on who the director is at that time, they interpret that mission and the values of the organisation in a very particular way.

PB The cultural legacy in Vancouver is kind of self-contained, you could say insular, self-referential. The practitioners that set up the Artspeak project are still working in Vancouver. Previous directors of Artspeak are still in the city, they've gone on to lead other spaces and come back and are in dialogue with Artspeak.

BC This is why it's really important for me, when I work in a particular place, to consider community building and how long that takes. It's not just an event, it could take years to build particular relationships of trust, with many different people and groups, and whoever walks in through the door. It is slow work, and takes the amount of time that it needs to take. I really appreciate the boom and bust energy too though. When you can do something, a project, a space, a collaboration and recognise that there are human, emotional, economic limitations and constraints you have

to work within, then it's not about exponential growth. We can't be expected to deliver and produce all these outcomes all the time. I've worked on several collaborative publications and projects with the understanding that they can have a limited lifespan, due to various life constraints, and recognizing when things need to come to a natural end. For example, from 2016–18 we published five issues of *Charcuterie* (a small, multi-format periodical on experimental and contemporary art literature) before the co-editors Eli Zibin, Steffanie Ling, and then designer Victoria Lum and I had to stop for other jobs in order to pay rent.

Our first narrator bluntly describes where his attraction to gay women—"fags" and "sluts"—comes from, and calls himself a "slut" as well, admitting that "it takes two to tango." The second narrator is gay, and speaks of the power struggle that is inherent in sodomy; logically, the physical act excludes the tenderness of face-to-face kissing. In this district, the notorious misogyny, there is no punch to female, no cartoon cat and dog, no back issues of *National Geographic*. But Day offers hope: the first narrator (*Arts Khadi*) is depicted with his girlfriend (*Thana Khadi*) at home to close up

Moreover, its single-speaker orientation (and its resulting vulnerability) fails in a fundamental and individually specific question that cannot be reductionistly lumped into the two qualitative categories of class and race. But here, I-OVE, is a universally understood of Indian soul can be reduced to a gesture as simple as a touch between two Indians, directly experienced or vicariously represented. What *Vinai* Tindivan offers are three case studies, leaving a lot of the specifics



The *Blush* describes the film as being a "cr de coeur in the most profound sense," made with the same type of "tonille didoucy" as Barry Jenkins's

moment, I struggle to see value in this superficial component. Yet, these are horror films that depict the struggle of giving a black man, and in the case of the third interview, an immigrant, possibly a Muslim man, but in first-world literature, cinematic scope, and narrative focus, there is not much else to compare other than the sometimes poorly "hi-the-economy" camera-work. Visually, *Visions of Transience* boreed me. It was a 16-minute film that was 20-minutes too long. The interviews conducted with the three men are gaudy with hand-held overcast actuality-footage: people pulled back shots of trains, a white car, a black car, a black man, a black woman, a black couple in bed. As much as I can linger and revel in the muddy indifference of the world, I heard myself annoyed.

Inside pages of *Charcuterie 4: very tactile* present, published 2018. Courtesy of Charcuterie and Bopha Chhay.

5
CHARCUTERIE THE OTHER PLANTS ARE ALSO
HAVING A HARD TIME



Book review by Bopha Chhay on inside pages of *Charcuterie 3: need not pander*, published 2017. Courtesy of Charcuterie and Bopha Chhay.

forms of communicating. I also wanted to think about the curator as a care-worker.

BC You started with the etymology of curator. I often have thought about this, because I am not a formally-trained curator. People often ask me how I came to curating, and I like how it forces me to stop and consider the path that led to this moment. I think about curatorial work as being similar to the process of many other occupations. How you materialise and bring an idea to fruition, who you bring with you, what are the ideas you're expanding on together, and acknowledging that it's a process, so stumbling a little, and failing is also part of that learning process. I keep coming back to the word intertextuality, because it forces a deeper looking, seeing, being, it refuses closure, it remains open to interpretation. In that we're always trying to figure out what our relationship and responsibility is to each other, to things, to ideas, to histories. I think of artworks as different kinds of text. To me an exhibition can be like a publication, or an essay, or a poem, or a story. I often see the different projects within a themed annual program as stanzas, and it is only at the end of the year that you reflect on the whole. That iterative approach is like a story being told over the course of a year. Each project can also stand on its own. As curators I think we're managing different things; for better or for worse. Maybe we shouldn't be doing a hundred things at once, climbing up ladders, adjusting the lights, drafting budgets, hosting, and doing all that stuff. But I like the idea of caretaking, because it's not just the object, it's not just the artist, it's not just the space, it's also everything outside of the institution, the relationships with funders, donors, the neighbourhood. You bring with you all those relationships, and layers of history that inform how you work with the artists you invite.

PB Pivoting projects towards publications during the pandemic was a way of being responsible, still doing programming but doing it with care. The last time I saw you was at Sol Hashemi's book launch in the park in October. The photo book was presented as a four-pack of beer. I think that's an interesting example of a pivot.

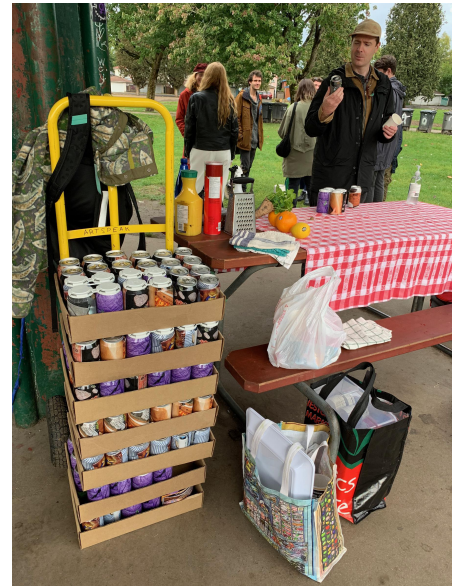
BC Yes, that was a fun project. Titled *Excerpt from Baker's Dozen*, Sol had envisioned it as a 'photo book' and we planned to launch it at the Vancouver Art Book Fair. The photos taken by Sol, who has a primary practice in photography, are presented on the cans of beer. He also has a brewing practice. One of my favourite beers in the series was called *Selenite Pale Ale for Clearing Negative Energy* and on the can was an image of a magic wand and a book, the flavour was wild marjoram flower, magnum hops, malt, water and yeast. Another beer which was really delicious was called *Mugwort Beer for Dreaming*. The image was of dyed stones and a wool rug, and the beer was made from mugwort, barberry, hops, malt, water and yeast. There were six different beers we randomly selected from to create each four-pack publication.



Publication launch of Sol Hashemi's *Excerpt from Baker's Dozen*, at Trout Lake, Vancouver, September 2021. Courtesy of Artspeak.



Publication launch of Sol Hashemi's *Excerpt from Baker's Dozen*, at Trout Lake, Vancouver, September 2021. Courtesy of Artspeak.



Artspeak launch of *Excerpt from Bakers' Dozen* by Sol Hashemi, Trout Lake Park, Vancouver, September 2021. Courtesy of Paula Booker.

PB There were so many stimulating elements to this, the olfactory, the tastes, the visuals, the being in community with others to share something together, the idea of imbibing; there were all these different things at play that had been so rare these last two years. We all gathered outside, in a park where there was a big shelter as it was the fall and raining...

BC We live in a rainforest.

PB In Vancouver it's always raining, from fall in September to spring in May. Rain for nine months of the year.

BC Recently Sol did a talk here, in our series called the *Speakeasy: Salon*, a nod to the history of Artspeak as a speakeasy. The *Speakeasy: Salon* was an informal para-academic setting, where artists and other cultural practitioners were invited to speak, making artistic research ideas public. It's really off-the-cuff, presenters choose a research interest to speak about and they don't have to be an expert. Previous talks have included a presentation on a collection of maritime erotica, histories of archaeological digs, and quantum physics. It gives people an idea of the kind of rhizomatic or interdisciplinary nature of artistic research and the different directions that it can go in, but not necessarily into the final outcome or the work. I think the *Speakeasy: Salon* programme is just an excuse to get together and have a chat, share a cup of tea. But also our publications are about making ideas, projects, or research public. So again, it's that different kind of circulation of ideas outside of a formal exhibition in a gallery.

PB I'm personally more interested in texts that have a life of their own outside of an exhibition or that are not descriptive of an exhibition. Art itself has a relationship to an audience, and when that is described through text it can affix and prescribe one interpretation.

BC When speaking, as in writing, I'm also very reluctant to overly describe things. It allows people to come to the work on their own terms, depending on where their curiosity lies. I like the idea that people take what they need, whether that's enjoyable, puzzling or disturbing, whatever resonates for them. For example, with Woojae Kim's project, while it appears to be an incredibly quiet show, there's actually a lot going on. The microorganism breaks down sugar and starches, and transforms it

into alcohol. The alchemy is thrilling, and some people may be interested in the process, while other visitors are much more interested in the materials—the unbaked bricks, and clay cups from the local river, or chlorophyll photographic prints.



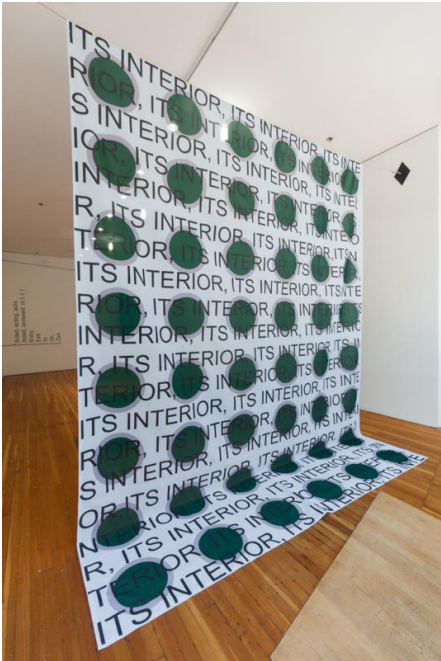
Installation shot of Ruth Buchanan's exhibition *Dead Marble*, at Artspeak Gallery, June 9 – July 28, 2018. Courtesy of Artspeak.



Artspeak, 233 Carrall Street, Vancouver, BC, V6B 2J2, with Ruth Buchanan's exhibition *Dead Marble* on display, June 9 – July 28, 2018. Courtesy of Artspeak.



Installation shot of Ruth Buchanan's exhibition *Dead Marble*, at Artspeak Gallery, June 9 – July 28, 2018. Courtesy of Artspeak.



Ruth Buchanan, *Its Interior*, 2015, Geo-mesh, steel fixtures, rope, 3800mm x 3000mm. Installation view, *Dead Marble*, June 9 – July 28, 2018, Artspeak, Vancouver. Courtesy of Artspeak.



Installation shot of Ruth Buchanan's exhibition *Dead Marble*, at Artspeak Gallery, June 9 – July 28, 2018. Courtesy of Artspeak.



Installation shot of Ruth Buchanan's exhibition *Dead Marble*, at Artspeak Gallery, June 9 – July 28, 2018. Courtesy of Artspeak.

BC Another thread in my programming at Artspeak is transnationalism and diaspora, which I hinted at earlier; like local, regional, national, international connections. What are the similarities and commonalities that we share as opposed to the nation-state borders that separate us?

PB I don't think we can separate the places that we come from, our positionality, and the way we subconsciously operate. Do you think that your position as an outsider to Vancouver with relationships to—for example—some New Zealand artists, like Berlin-based Ruth Buchanan who did an amazing project here, is bringing international influences into Artspeak?

BC With her questions around language, text, installation, and power, Ruth's artistic practice really speaks to the mandate of Artspeak, as was evident in her 2018 Artspeak exhibition, *Dead Marble*. When I invite artists who are not local, I'm looking to complicate some of our entrenched ideas, here, about what art is or certain expectations of what it does; they're able to unsettle those things. That is my hope and my desire anyway. We can be locked into particular ways of looking at things, sensing things, or ideas, approaches, concepts, creating a certain inertia, and I think they can become calcified, which is not ideal. I was interested in working with Ruth because her work refuses this idea of calcification. She approaches exhibition making, writing, publishing, specific historical moments and place, thinking about and through institutions that encourage a porosity, that challenges entrenched ideological systems, structures that simply don't work for a lot of people. I enjoy the way her work often precipitates other possibilities and alternatives, lines of questioning – materially, conceptually and ideologically. These ideas were particularly evident in the symposium *Uneven Bodies* held at Govett-Brewster in 2020 that brought together speakers to discuss collecting Māori and Indigenous Art, and what the responsibilities of institutions are in shaping how works in their care are shared and contextualized with appropriate tikanga, protocol. I wasn't at the symposium, but Ruth sent the publication *Uneven Bodies (Reader)* to me via post. The symposium ran alongside an exhibition organised by Ruth, *The scene in which I find myself / Or where does my body belong*, that took the Govett-Brewster's collection as a starting point to question the wider societal role of a museum collection.

Earlier this year, Artspeak commissioned Ruth to write a long-form text *Where does my body belong? From institutional critique to*

infrastructural transformation. Or Standards and Mothers. This became Issue One of our new publishing project *BEACON*—a pamphlet series in ten issues that focuses on how the commitment of artists to wider social movements informs contemporary practice. After I worked with Ruth on *Dead Marble*, we would catch up regularly as there were still ideas and questions that we were churning through. Particularly around language, and circling around how to negotiate that tension of how much to articulate openly and how much to withhold. The commission for *BEACON* came about because we kept landing on this idea of accountability beginning with language, and the conscious decisions we make around that.

PB This idea of calcification is interesting, how a practice that was once innovative, can become entrenched. The art histories of Vancouver prominently feature photoconceptualism led by male artists Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham, Stan Douglas and others, and photography is still so important today, landscape is a big part of that. Drilling down on that, where we are situated now, in an urbanised downtown, is a very particular place. Artist Douglas Coupland coined the nickname for Vancouver, the City of Glass, after its many condo towers. This imagining and the gentrification, narrative-building and patriotism that framed Vancouver's 2010 Olympics promotes a settler narrative of Vancouver as a young neo-liberal international city on the edge of the mountains, largely undermining millenia-long Coast Salish relationships to this place. As local Metis-Cree filmmaker and planner Kamala Todd writes, this is an Indigenous city, in "This Many-storied Land." We're on the unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Nations on land that wasn't bought, it wasn't sold, there wasn't a war, there was no treaty, what does that mean?

BC It's stolen land.

PB Yes, it's stolen land. It's a really interesting, and problematic, difficult place to work. It's like an interstitial place. A

lot of treaties were made in other parts of Canada but not on the West Coast in British Columbia. There was an urgent rush to claim this space for the Crown and Canada for many reasons, including resource extraction (the Fraser River gold rush), fur trading and concerns over the potential for annexation by the USA. You referenced this earlier, being an uninvited guest, and also an untrained curator. Once I was having a drink with you and an institutional curator, and I controversially declared: “Curators don’t need to be formally trained!” And he asked me, “Why did you come to Canada to do a curatorial programme, then?” Well, I studied to take a break from working as a curator!

BC I love that. But also you’re right, we don’t often have time for reflection, and I think a formal programme of study allows you that time to reflect, and build upon what you’ve already been working on. You’ve been working for so long. You need time out, and a break from wage labour.

PB Getting a chance to re-calibrate, train and actually think about the practice of curating, I shifted my focus. In my curatorial masters degree at The University of British Columbia I asked, how can I decolonise my practice? Can I integrate Indigenous curatorial methodologies into my practice, as a settler curator? I had previously thought that my job was to create space and ensure resources were there within my programming for that work to happen by Indigenous or Māori artists or curators. My biggest takeaway from *Decolonising Methodologies* by Linda Tuhiwai Smith was yes, it’s a start to open the door for others to do the work, but are you actually doing your job if you can’t work with Indigenous artists; if you don’t know that there are other protocols and relationalities and different ways of working? To me, as a curator, this means engaging in different curatorial methodologies; re-structuring timelines and ways of approaching consent, recognising different ways of being in-relation, including relationships with place, unravelling existing power dynamics and so much more.

BC That is a really important question in terms of your methodology. I really appreciate the curatorial work you've done, because I think it raises so many of those important questions. I love that you mention Linda Tuhiwai Smith's work and research because she is such an incredible thinker, but also very pragmatic and clear about what decolonisation actually means. I often think about Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang's text *Decolonisation is Not a Metaphor*. It's an incredible text for thinking about where we are in this particular place and what relationships we support and try to give space to, and how best to steward resources ethically and responsibly.

PB Yes, and what does "land back" mean? I think it means land and resources fully back in Indigenous stewardship, it means paying rent on stolen land, it means things are going to be different from the way they are now. It means that the status quo will have to change, to give up power. It means we're going to be uncomfortable. Those who are comfortable now are going to be uncomfortable in the future.

BC And being uncomfortable is crucial for learning.

PB Dude, if you haven't been told off or course-corrected lately by an Indigenous auntie are you really doing anything useful?

BC Probably not.

PB Being told off is the first step to doing something right.

This is Part Two of a two-part interview between Vancouver-based Aotearoa curators Paula Booker and Bopha Chhay. To read Part One [click here](#).

Biographies



Ruth Buchanan is an artist of Taranaki, Te Ātiawa and Pākehā descent living in Tāmaki Makaurau. She works across exhibition making, writing, design and teaching. Her work draws out the contested and dynamic relationships between the body, power, language and the archive. This process of contesting often relates closely to the types of relationships that standardised infrastructures, such as archives, libraries and museums, create between our bodies and society at large, and actively asks how these relationships could be otherwise.



Bopha Chhay is a writer and curator who lives and works on the unceded territories of the xwməθkwəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and Səlilwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) First Nations, also known as Vancouver. She is the director/curator at Artspeak, an artist-run centre with a specific mandate to encourage dialogue between visual arts and text/writing practices. She has held positions at Enjoy Public Art Gallery (New Zealand), Afterall (Contemporary arts research and publishing) Central Saint Martins College of Arts & Design (UK) and 221A Artist run centre (Vancouver). Her curatorial practice is frequently guided by a thematic query that shapes programming over the course of a year, guided by the research areas of transnationalism and diaspora, collective pedagogical practices, art and community organizing, art and labour, sound, and independent publishing.



Paula Booker lives on the edge of the Salish Sea, in the place called Xepxápayay [Skwxwú7mesh], formerly the place of many cedar trees. In 2004, she co-founded Canary Gallery, on Auckland's K Road, and has held leadership, editorial, and curatorial roles at Enjoy (NZ), Ngā Taonga/New Zealand Film Archive, Richmond Art Gallery, VIVO Media Arts Centre (Canada), Belkin Gallery (Canada). Now living on the unceded territories of the xwməθkwəyəm, Skwxwú7mesh, and səlilwətaʔ Nations, Paula believes work in the arts that supports Indigenous sovereignty can be both reparative and generative of new spaces for social justice. She holds a Master's in Critical Curatorial Studies from the University of British Columbia; her research was in curatorial decolonisation informed by Indigenous analyses of coloniality and theorisations of unsettlement, always cognizant of issues of place.

