

Feral Domestic

Western Front is pleased to present an exhibition by Dani and Sheilah ReStack, who use video, drawing, and photography to contemplate queer desire, family, and collaboration in a time of planetary crisis.

The exhibition features a multi-channel installation of the video trilogy *Feral Domestic* (2017–22) and three artist books of drawings, writings, and images related to each work, which together document the artists' ongoing interest in the domestic as a space of creative possibility.

Composed of the videos *Strangely Ordinary This Devotion* (2017), *Come Coyote* (2018), and *Future From Inside* (2022), the *Feral Domestic* trilogy traverses a seven year period in the ReStacks' relationship as it materializes in their life and work, and intersects with questions of motherhood and reproduction.

Assembled from fragments of documentary footage, and fictional and restaged scenes with family and friends, each work moves dynamically between moments of conflict, desire, communion, joy, and the everyday. This emotional range is coupled with an attention to the natural world and the expressive

potentials of colour, sound, movement, and materials—which are repeatedly cut, submerged, spilled, stacked, stitched, and buried—to provide proposals for reshaping current conventions towards new possibilities.

The *Feral Domestic* trilogy screens every hour on the hour during gallery visiting times and runs for a total duration of 53 minutes.

To close the exhibition, an iteration of the artists' ongoing performance *Shameless Light* (2016—) will be presented on April 6, 2024. For the performance, queer identified women and non-binary community members have been invited to write love letters, which they will read aloud under red neon lights to create space for queer love as an unruly and generative act.

Presented at Western Front, this exhibition serves as an introduction to the ReStacks' practice and marks the commencement of their participation in our artists-in-residence program. During their residency, the ReStacks will further the development of a feature length video *Stovepipe to the Sun*.

STACK OF AND FOR THE RESTACKS

by Jac Renée Bruneau

The first in Anne Carson's series of poems, *Stacks* (2008), is called "STACK OF THE DEFINITIONS OF 'STACK.'" It goes:

Large usually conical pile (as of hay) left standing in the field / Large quantity or number / English unit of measure especially for firewood equal to 108 cubic feet / Vertical pipe (as to carry off smoke) / Exhaust pipe of an internal combustion engine / Pyramid of three rifles interlocked / Structure of bookshelves for compact storage of books usually in the plural / Pile of chips sold to or won by a player of poker / Collection of data of which only the most recently added item may be removed the latest item being at the top basic operations are "push" and "pop" sometimes known as a "last in first out" construction or LIFO / To fall over in skating

The subsequent entries proceed by riffing on ideas of stacks, stacking, and restacking, with a loose mindedness to the above.

Dani and Sheilah ReStack have cited this collection as central to their decision to change their last name; in the spirit of that and the *Feral Domestic* trilogy, what follows is a series of stacks that offer but one way of stacking the matter of these three constituent films.

BLOOD STACK

the red liquid that circulates in the arteries and veins of humans and other vertebrate animals, carrying oxygen to and carbon dioxide from the tissues of the body

violence involving bloodshed

temperament or disposition, especially when passionate

family background; descent or lineage¹

In 1971, the American psychologist Martha K. McClintock published a research paper about something that had long been observed among females: if you spend enough time together, you start bleeding at the same time. This—"menstrual synchrony"—is often reported by all-female living groups and by mothers, daughters and sisters who are living together.

Lesbians, too.

The paper offers some preliminary proof that "there is some interpersonal physiological process which affects the menstrual cycle."²

Sheilah has said that their "relationship is the blood of the work."³

In *Strangely Ordinary This Devotion* (2017), Dani pulls her hand out of Sheilah and it's covered in blood.

In response to (yet another question about) what's up with all the blood, Sheilah's like: "Why not?" and "What does it mean, as women, to have control over bloodletting and see it spilled again and again?"⁴

The couple went to Dr. Melman, to ask how they could "infuse Sheilah's baby with [Dani's] DNA."⁵

I imagine two people cutting their palms open and clapping them together, forcing their blood into the streams of the other.

Melman said the only way would be for Sheilah to "eat a large quantity of [Dani's] flesh," which wasn't of interest, so instead, Dr. Melman made an incision in Dani's head "to release [her] fear of motherhood."⁶

The procedure kicks off a nearly 53-minute-long stack of ways to think around *whether or not to have a baby*. There's no way for the viewer to know the precise effects of this (symbolic?) therapy, but regardless:

1 All definitions from Oxford Languages. Accessed December 2023.

2 Martha K. McClintock, "Menstrual Synchrony and Suppression" (1971), *Nature*, vol. 229.

3 Sumin Choi, "Dani and Sheilah ReStack" (2021), *FemexFilmArchive*, online, accessed December 2023.

4 Genevieve Yue, "Interview: Dani and Sheilah ReStack" (2022), *Film Comment*, online, accessed December 2023.

5 Dani in Colette Copeland, "Stack for Martha's Sisters: Dani + Sheilah ReStack at FWCA" (2021), *Glasstire*, online, accessed December 2023.

6 *Ibid.*

conflict around the matter persists, and

the ReStacks' work might be read as a kind of research and development process for strange tools with which to consider questions posed in their domestic lives.

A Blockbuster alleyway fight: you have something I want and/or you betrayed me and/or this isn't over and/or once I've subdued you, we can start over.

2 blood stoppages: pregnancy, menopause.

Attempts to replicate McClintock's study and corroborate her results have been mixed, inconclusive,

[unsurprise about incompatibility of "female knowledge" with science]

but arguably, the mutual acknowledgment of such sanguine alignments is good enough: uncanny, smirk, smile, shake head, laugh.

Sisterhood, brotherhood, whateverhood.

After all, the ongoingness of our days can make us forget to look for magic, so when it presents—

MAGIC STACK

the power of apparently influencing the course of events by using mysterious or supernatural forces

mysterious tricks, such as making things disappear and appear again, performed as entertainment

a quality that makes something seem removed from everyday life, especially in a way that gives delight

Sheilah: "It is so hard to even use the word magic, but you know what—it is a strategy. [...] The magic I am thinking of is disruptive, frightening, messy, and uses what is available to open up possibility."⁷

BREAKING NEWS: The lesbian witches in Ohio have been reportedly indoctrinating more people into their cult.

Hand-harvested glacier water eyedrops.

Women-only spaces (an animal understanding).

Rock rituals performed so that babies might one day be born with the ability to survive without water. A rock in a willing open mouth. A rock placed on a child's back, a mother's back. A buried, bloodied rock, exhumed and carried up a hill.

These ritualistic acts are less a means to a particular end (based on an established set of protocols) and more like... earnest ways of setting up alternately shaped containers for communication.

"I'm fucking you with your, my, big cock."⁸ Your (my). (Your) my. Your/my. Your—my.

Imagination is obviously not only for children, but at a certain point, we realize that we had to start seeking it, start pursuing that state of exceptional permeability.

The home as a site not of repose but of experimentation, rupture, refusal.

Jack Halberstam observes that the assimilation of queers into (hetero)normative capitalist society (legalization of gay marriage, etc.) subjects us to that criteria for success. But queers had always wanted to transform all that, not gain acceptance into it...

(The ReStacks are the only lesbians on their street.)

And so came Halberstam's "low theory," which builds on José Esteban Muñoz's "queer failure" and involves, among many things, "locat[ing] all the in-between spaces that save us from being snared by the hooks of hegemony."⁹

Drawings on the walls; a bag of water pendent from the ceiling; a dog yanking on a confetti-flecked strap-on; Sheilah spilling a mouthful of fake blood for the camera.

Ursula K. Le Guin riffs on Gary Snyder's image of composting as part of the creative process: "Stuff goes into the writer, a whole lot of stuff, not notes in a notebook but everything seen and heard and felt all day every day, a lot of garbage, leftovers,

7 Sheilah in Copeland.

8 Dani and Sheilah ReStack, *Strangely Ordinary This Devotion* (2017), film.

9 Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), Duke University Press.

dead leaves, eyes of potatoes, artichoke stems, forests, streets, rooms in slums, mountain ranges, voices, screams, dreams, whispers, smells, blows, eyes, gaits, gestures, the touch of a hand, a whistle in the night, the slant of light on the wall of a child's room, a fin in a waste of waters. All this stuff goes down into the novelist's personal compost bin, where it combines, recombines, changes; gets dark, mulchy, fertile, turns into ground. A seed falls into it, the ground nourishes the seed with the richness that went into it, and something grows. But what grows isn't an artichoke stem and a potato eye and a gesture. It's a new thing, a new whole."¹⁰

A thing to cling to re: the apocalypse, for everyone other than the small few who—

The moon, as always.

METHOD STACK

a particular form of procedure for accomplishing or approaching something, especially a systematic or established one.

orderliness of thought or behavior; systematic planning or action.

If I ask you X a couple dozen times and you roughly answer Y each time, then maybe we've hit some limit of language and maybe that urges us toward the non-linguistic.

Walking around familiar places, eyes blazing.

Conjuring a sense of occasion for an interminable conversation: calling it "art," a camera.

And what of the human compulsion to force all information into story?

Dani has said that working with Sheilah has made her ease her grip on narrative, as long as there's some guiding thread of it in the *making*.

Is the timeline assembled only to be broken? Or is it born broken? "Broken" here as a generative thing, as in queer failure, as in abstraction—but it's a crude, inaccurate word that implicitly backs normative ideas of wholeness. So maybe instead, I'll say:

1. If a linear story follows a bell curve, consider literally any other shape.
2. Constellations come into existence when people make a point of drawing lines between the stars that comprise them.

What does it feel like (as viewers) to languor in the space that comes before meaning-making?

James C. Scott: "Illegibility, then, has been and remains, a reliable source for political autonomy."¹¹

Take turns sharing the mouse during the edit. Compromise—barter?

Confound control. (Excruciating ego massage.)

Try to see yourself from outside. Instead of a birth scene (as Sheilah had secretly hoped)¹², the final film, *Future From Inside* (2022), includes some of the ReStacks' queer peers improvising conversations about their baby question. Sheilah told me: "Sometimes one of us would call the person who was going to play our part in the argument and explain, and sometimes we would try to explain the opposing view so that we would have to practice being the other."¹³

Stone soup.

Salad of tenses, orientations, POV.

In *Come Coyote* (2019): DIY insemination, the shot glass of sperm carried carefully from one room to another like pots or buckets or bowls full of blood destined for some transmogrification.

"Failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world."¹⁴

¹⁰ Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Wave in The Mind: Talks and Essays on The Writer, The Reader, and The Imagination* (2004), Penguin Randomhouse.

¹¹ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1998), Yale University Press, as quoted in Halberstam.

¹² "Dani & Sheilah ReStack in conversation with Fox Hysen, Maggie Nelson, and Molly Zuckerman-Hartung" (2022), Kunstverein Nürnberg, video, online.

¹³ Email exchange with author, Dec 2023.

¹⁴ Halberstam.

The realization that some aspect of the work is unwittingly being worked on; hit record.

Sheilah records them in an embrace on the bed, and Dani is like:

“You were bringing up something important—that you’re not going to blame me forever about it.”

[Silence.]

“Oh, you’re not agreeing on that.”

Sheilah: “I’m just looking at our video”¹⁵

Dreams (day ones, night ones) as decisions.

“Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well.”¹⁶

SPILL STACK

The
bucket
is
empty
and
there’s
water
everywhere.

Biographies

Dani and Sheilah ReStack are collaborators. *Feral Domestic*, the trilogy of videos they made from 2016 to 2022 combines documentary footage from their lives, re-enactments and fantasy sequences for queer feminist imagining of past, present, and future. They live in Columbus, Ohio with their two daughters and are committed to the domestic as a place of unruly possibility—a portal for emotional logic, fragmentation, and new narratives that allows the quotidian to inform the sublime. Dani is Associate Professor at Ohio State University. Sheilah is Associate Professor at Denison University.

Jac Renée Bruneau is a writer based in New York City. They are a screenwriter; a critic (film, experimental moving image, and art); and, a National Magazine Award-winning editor. www.jacbruneau.net

¹⁵ Dani and Sheilah ReStack, *Future From Inside* (2022), film.

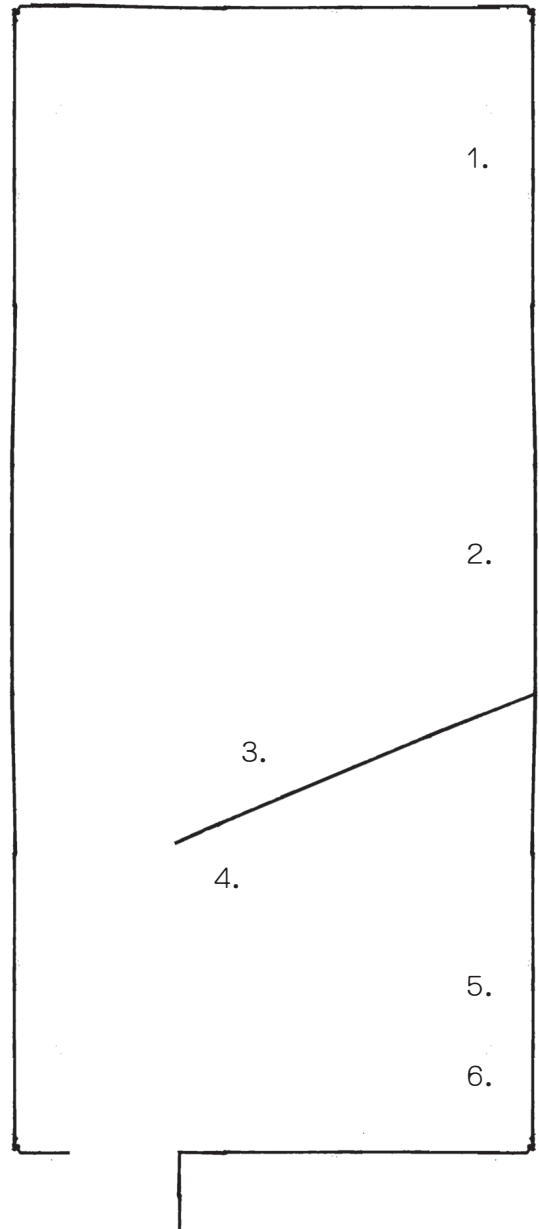
¹⁶ Halberstam.

List of Works

Floorplan

All works by Dani and Sheilah ReStack,
and courtesy of the artists.

1. *Strangely Ordinary this Devotion* (2017)
HD video
26 min. 23 sec.
2. *Come Coyote* (2019)
HD video projected on to a futon mattress owned
by Western Front founders Martin Bartlett
followed by Eric Metcalfe.
7 min. 32 sec.
3. *Future From Inside* (2022)
HD video
18 min. 51 sec.
4. *Strangely Ordinary This Devotion* (2021)
mixed media artist book
57 x 42 x 4 cm
5. *Come Coyote* (2021)
mixed media artist book
57 x 42 x 4 cm
6. *Future From Inside* (2021)
mixed media artist book
57 x 42 x 4 cm



Project Team

Curator: Susan Gibb
Assistant Curator: Kiel Torres
Design: Line-Gry Hørup
Technicians: Daniel Pickering, Hannah Rickards, and Ben Wilson

Western Front gratefully acknowledges the support
of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Government
of Canada, the BC Arts Council, the Province of
British Columbia, and the City of Vancouver.



Canada Council for the Arts
Conseil des arts du Canada



BRITISH COLUMBIA
ARTS COUNCIL



BRITISH COLUMBIA

Supported by the Province of British Columbia

Canada

CITY OF
VANCOUVER