

GLITTER
ARE

ELASTIC

*Sonny Assu, Shary Boyle,
Whess Harman, bailey macabre,
Cole Pauls, Jillian Tamaki,
Momoko Usami &
Joshua W. Cotter, and
Ronald Wimberly*

Nanaimo
Art Gallery

JULY 15 to
SEPTEMBER 24

Gutters Are Elastic: An Introduction

— JESSE BIRCH

Gutters Are Elastic is a group exhibition that takes an expanded view on what comics and graphic novels can be: amorphous and empowering things that don't sit still. This project sees the gutter (the space between the frames in a comic) as a generative site of possibilities where readers insert their own perspectives. This elastic gutter centers the margins, while stretching the story off the page and into the physical space of the Gallery. From ceramic busts to handmade quilts, visitors experience artworks that are linked to comics and graphic novels through a wide range of media. The exhibition features artists from diverse backgrounds and perspectives including Sonny Assu, Shary Boyle, Whess Harman, Bailey Macabre, Cole Pauls, Jillian Tamaki, Momoko Usami & Joshua W. Cotter, and Ronald Wimberly.

Conventionally, we understand comics to be found in newspapers' funny pages, or as slim booklets that can be purchased in grocery store line ups, or at specialty shops like Nanaimo's *Curious Comics*. Graphic novels, on the other hand, are often much more variable in their formats, from stamp sized flipbooks to poster size publications, but still they live in the realm of print.¹ In Scott Macleod's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, he gives comics a much broader definition. He emphasizes that the central

1. For more on the forms and uses of comics see Marnii Stanley's *Why I love comics* in this booklet

characteristic of comics is that they are pictorial stories that unfold from scene to scene, which he calls “sequential art”. As he explains: “from stained glass windows showing biblical scenes in order, to Monet’s series paintings, to your car owner’s manual, comics turn up all over when sequential art is employed as a definition.”

Most of the artworks in *Gutters Are Elastic* contain elements of sequential art, but this definition need not be limited to individual works. We can understand entire art exhibitions as a kind of sequential art as well. As we move from object to object, idea to idea, artworks build on each other to create expanded narratives. Like gutters, (those frames between comic panels that open up to allow us to insert our own ideas) art exhibitions allow us to bring our own experiences and meanings to these encounters. From making a mini comic, to becoming immersed in the artworks, or relaxing with a comic on a bean bag, in *Gutters Are Elastic* there are many ways to become part of the story.

Sonny Assu’s large mix media paintings draw inspiration from his experiences collecting comics as a youth, while thinking about value and ownership from his Ligwilda'xw of the Kwakwaka'wakw perspective. In the triptych *Ashes* (2023) Sonny painted formline ovoids and copper shields in 80s pop art colours over pages from an X-Men comic from the same era. According to speculators in the 80s, many comics were supposed to accrue value, but in the

end were almost worthless in monetary terms. Nevertheless they had value to Sonny. This particular comic features the Australian Aboriginal character “Gateway”. As Sonny explains, even though the character was stereotyped, the fact that there was an Indigenous person on the pages of X-Men matters. By painting the pages of this X-Men comic he may be destroying it’s worth as a collectible comic, but he is highlighting a different kind of value. In *Who will say it’s done?* he paints over a Spiderman comic in red on a five point triangular form, which references a Chilkat blanket that belonged to his ancestor, chief Billy Assu. Chilkat blankets show status. By using this form Sonny is reflecting on how status is expressed through his own everyday experiences.

Shary Boyle’s work has often explored the empowering and fantastical possibilities of experimental comics. Shary works across a wide range of media, but from early on she has made illustrated comic zines which she photocopied and distributed among her friends and networks. 16 of her mini-comics were compiled in the 2004 publication *Witness My Shame* (available at the Gallery Store). In 2006 and 2008 her work was included in the renowned art comics anthology *Kramers Ergot*. For *Gutters Are Elastic* we are sharing her original drawings from this publication.

Shary’s stories often move off of the page and into three dimensional worlds made of clay. In 2018 she collaborated with

Jillian Tamaki, to create *Judy*. Inspired by the British seaside marionette who is almost invariably tied to her abusive husband Punch through countless puppet shows, this *Judy* has gained some of her own free will. Sculpted by Boyle, here *Judy* stands empowered and alone with her own world, stories, and fantasies foregrounded through illustrations by Jillian.

Jillian Tamaki is a renowned illustrator and cartoonist who has created many award-winning young adult graphic novels. Her work in *Gutters Are Elastic* explores the medium of quilting. Often made with love and given as gifts, quilts speak to practices of care. Jillian made *Blue Quilt* during Covid, and the comic panels she embroidered on it document her feelings and everyday concerns during this time.

Shrouding a community member in a blanket is an act of trust, care, and love. **Whess Harman's** blanket installation *Bad Kids* was inspired by the work of his friend and fellow artist, Alison Bremner. Alison has explored ways of honouring and celebrating individuals who aren't likely to be held up as upstanding—people who aren't resilient in “acceptable” ways, who haven't (and are not required to) adjust to life in this colonial system. As Whess explains “These are community members who wouldn't likely be uplifted in either mainstream society or within our own communities. Like most people, I have people in my life who I love

deeply but who don't get a lot of respect, patience, or empathy because of how they aren't well-adjusted to colonial trauma and/or walk a line of self-regulating through substances and addiction. I wanted to make a blanket for the troublemakers, because sometimes I'm one too."

bailey macabre identifies as nêhiyaw ayâhkwêw, Ukrainian, neurospicy, disabled, agender and indigiqueer. Along with these identities comes community and strength, but identities can also feel restricting especially when they are framed by others. bailey's work in *Gutters Are Elastic* employs graphic sensibilities drawn from their work making comics to express these concerns through dynamic use of language and font. Drawing inspiration from both blankets and ribbon skirts, bailey took time embroidering and embellishing their words to speak with care and power.

Setting original comic panels in relief over a Zip-A-Tone background, **Cole Pauls'** work in *Gutters Are Elastic* is an experimentation with Tahltan shapes, culture and motifs. Îêge zedle son nesit'în (We see stars only at night) is a surrealistic landscape exploring the author's roots and identity. Following the footsteps of artists Hironori Kikuchi, Maki Sasaki and Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas, Cole plays with a dreamlike narrative, threading the connections between land, regalia, performance and spirit.

Momoko Usami's ceramic works contain stories that unfold across their surfaces. Her wall based works for *Gutters Are Elastic* take the form of Cowrie shells, which mimic the shape of eyes, and have been used as currency in many cultures. *Witness #1 Lady Justice* reflects on the state of American civil unrest and the fraught legal system. *Myopic Prospector* invites viewers to look closely at what they search for and value, and offers space for reflection. Together with her partner Joshua W. Cotter they created *Traversing Twilight*, a large ceramic skull that speaks to cycles of death and rebirth on both an individual and planetary scale.

Joshua W. Cotter's contributions to *Gutters Are Elastic* include original sequences from his epic graphic novel series *Nod Away*. The scenes depict characters experiencing surreal out of body experiences and altered states of consciousness. The blue lines in the background were made with a non-photo blue pencil, which allows artists to sketch in their designs, as the blue doesn't register when the pages are scanned for final output. Seeing the blue lines on the original drawings is like seeing the unconscious of the artwork. Joshua's tabloid newspaper, *Infinite Cuck* (titled after the name he is called whenever he expresses progressive political views online in the USA) reads like a voyage into the unconsciousness of the American midwest. Joshua has also included the original art for his *Gutters Are Elastic* poster.

Ronald Wimberly's *LAAB Magazine* is a platform for intersections between comic art and critical politics, and includes the work from an incredible spectrum of contemporary artists and writers. The reading room installation allows visitors to have an embodied relationship with this epic project. *LAAB #0: Dark Matter* is dedicated to exploding the lethal tropes of Black representation in science fiction and popular mythology. *LAAB #2: Eat/Shit* concerns itself with food, waste, compost, and sustainability, as well as broader issues from media consumption to cultural appropriation. *LAAB #4: THIS WAS YOUR LIFE!* concerns themes of death and environmental devastation, horror, hauntology, necropolitics, and the anthropocene.

Gutters Are Elastic is the sixth exhibition through which Nanaimo Art Gallery asks the question, *What stories do we tell?*

Why I love comics

—MARNI STANLEY

Comics offer many delights, the first of which is a rich diversity of style and voice. They come in many genres—general fiction, superheroes, humour, romance, Sci-Fi, fantasy, biography, history, memoir, journalism, and many more—and all in an ever-increasing plurality of makers from around the world. As art forms go, they are a fairly democratic medium, much less expensive to make in their basic form than many kinds of art, enabling emerging artists to get their start in digital comics and hand-made comics distributed through comic book stores and festivals. While there are many skilled artists working in a wonderful variety of styles making comic books, there are also successful comic books which are made with stick figure drawings or stock images. Given the range of story and the range of art, there really is something for everyone in the world of comics.

There are also many ways we engage with comics. They engage one area of our brain with visuals and another part with language. The images are not merely illustrative of the text, rather the verbal and visual narratives of a text work together to create the language of comics. They challenge us with puzzles and tasks. How do the words and images interact in this particular comic? What clues are there within the visual details of a panel (that is a single image within the sequence, usually framed by a line or by white space)? How much time passes between panels? Are there things happening between panels that we fill in as the story progresses?

Has the artist changed the layout and to what effect? Is a larger panel an indication of more time passing, or the impact of a moment's important action? How does the artist use techniques such as juxtaposition, font design, colour palette, symbols, and panel size, shape, and positioning, to contribute to my understanding? Do the images, words, and layout work together, or do they seem to be creating contradiction? How does the design of the comic itself (typical book format, miniaturized, super-sized, fold-out, or some other variant) work with the content? Do you feel like you are reading a book or handling an artifact? As with most art, the more we engage with that particular medium, the more it teaches us about how to look at it and how to read it.

The richness of technique in comics is matched by the richness of voices of their authors. Not only can you read by genre, you can seek out comics by authors from different parts of the world, or by subculture, or ideological bent. I read a lot of comics as a child—*Archie*, *Sugar and Spike*, *Classics Illustrated*, ghost stories, and all the comics in the newspaper, but, as with most youthful fans, I was encouraged to give them up and move on to “grown-up” reading. But I started to get back into them in the 1980s when I was at Grad school. In part this was because the 1980s was an important decade for comics in English with Alan Moore's *The Watchmen* and *V for Vendetta*, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, and Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* all launching in that decade. These were all comics with rich scripts

that gave as much attention to ideas as to action, and they were all visually complex as well. I also lived near a good comic book store, access always matters.

But the 1980s was also the rise of neoliberalism (Mulroney in Canada, Thatcher in the UK, Reagan in the US) all doing their best to dismantle the notion of society, which led to lots of critical voices (including Moore), but also Posy Simmonds in *Posy* and Steve Bell in *If*; and many others. The outsider status of comics and other graphic narratives have made them ideal for the exploration of social and political realities that fall outside of the normative. Many graphic narratives portray characters that are largely ignored in other cultural texts, and knowledges which are not usually treated as valid. Both insiders and outsiders make comics.

The wide range of subject matter in comics also means that we will all find things to offend us. Encountering comics you don't like is an opportunity to engage in thoughtful criticism. You can also deliberately seek out the writers and artists that counter the prejudiced and problematic ones, including the historical examples of those critical perspectives. For example, many of the underground comics of the 1970s, such as those by Robert Crumb, made a joke of violence against women, but, at the same time, women artists such as Trina Robbins, Shari Flenniken, Roberta Gregory, and Dori Seda were making underground feminist comics.

The second half of the twentieth century saw an improvement in the diversity of comics in a number of directions. Black artists such as Jackie Orme (*Torchy Brown*, 1950s) and Morrie Turner (*Wee Pals*, 1960s) broke barriers mid century on racial representation. In the 1980s Howard Cruise edited *Gay Comix* and made *Wendell*, Alison Bechdel launched *Dykes to Watch Out For*, and Cath Jackson did *Visible Vera*, all part of the Queer artists expanding representations of sexual diversity.

Once largely an ephemeral and disposable art form published primarily in newspapers and on cheap paper not designed to last, comics have become an important media for a wide representation of story, and celebrated for their artistry in festivals, library collections, and gallery exhibitions such as this one.

Read comics. Enjoy the worlds and experiences they build and explore. Try your hand at drawing and writing a short one to better appreciate the skill of those who do it well.

As you read comics, pause to admire the art as it catches your eye. One of the abundant pleasures of comics is re-reading; sometimes the pull of the story's momentum carries us too quickly through on first read. The second reading, when plot no longer compels, allows us to slow down and enjoy the view, and reflect on what we have seen and read.

If you are already a fan of the art form, challenge yourself to read outside the familiar genres you usually favour. Encourage a non-fan friend to read a comic by picking one for them that you think will suit their interests or taste. Spread the pleasure of comics bounty.

COMICS FROM MARNI STANLEY'S COLLECTION ARE INCLUDED IN THE *ELASTIC FORMS* SECTION OF *GUTTERS ARE ELASTIC*.

Biographies

Sonny Assu (Ligwilda'xw of the Kwakwaka'wakw Nations) has been recognized for his mashups of Indigenous iconography and popular culture. Through a variety of mediums including sculpture, painting, prints, large-scale installations and interventions Assu's work maintains a profound connection to past traditions while speaking to pertinent issues of our time. Assu's work is included in numerous major public collections, including the National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa), Art Gallery of Ontario (Toronto), Museum of Anthropology (Vancouver), and the Vancouver Art Gallery. In 2021, Assu received the Eiteljorg Contemporary Art Fellowship, awarded every two years by the Eiteljorg Museum in Indianapolis, Indiana—the home of one of the finest collections of Indigenous art in the world.

Shary Boyle works across diverse media, including sculpture, drawing, installation and performance. Highly crafted and deeply imaginative, her practice is activated through collaboration and mentorship. Boyle's work considers the social history of figurines, animist mythologies, antiquated technologies and folk art forms to create a symbolic, politically charged language uniquely her own.

Boyle's work is exhibited and collected internationally. She represented Canada with her project *Music for Silence* at the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013, and her work has been featured at the 2017 Gyeonggi International Ceramic Biennale in South Korea and the 2021 Kaunas Biennial in Lithuania. Boyle is the recipient of

Canada's Hnatyshyn Foundation Award, the Gershon Iskowitz Prize, and holds a 2021 Honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts from the Ontario College of Art and Design University.

Joshua W. Cotter is the author of numerous comics, including *Skyscrapers of the Midwest*, *Driven by Lemons* and *Infinite Cuck*. His work has been nominated for Ignatz, Harvey and Eisner awards, and his current project, *Nod Away*, was an Angoulême Sélection Officielles. He lives in rural NW Missouri with his partner, Momoko Usami, their children, and two ornery goats.

Whess Harman is Carrier Wit'at, a nation amalgamated by the federal government under the Lake Babine Nation. They graduated from the Emily Carr University BFA program in 2014 and are currently living and working on the territories of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh as the curator at grunt gallery. Their multidisciplinary practice includes beading, illustration, text, poetry and curation. As a mixed-race, trans artist they work to find their way through a tasty plethora of a reasonably managed attention deficit disorder, colonial bullshit and queer melancholy. To the best of their patience, they do this with humour and a carefully mediated cynicism that the galleries go hog wild for.

bailey mcabre is a nêhiyaw ayâhkwêw/michif and Ukrainian artist based on Snuneymuxw homelands, recently known as Nanaimo.

They identify as agender, queer, disabled and neurodivergent. In 2022, they created the Vancouver Comic Festival's land acknowledgement comic.

Cole Pauls is a Champagne & Aishihik Citizen and Tahltan comic artist, illustrator, and printmaker hailing from Haines Junction (Yukon Territory). He holds a BFA in Illustration from Emily Carr University. Residing in Vancouver, Pauls has created three graphic novels: *Dakwākāda Warriors* (2019), *Pizza Punks* (2021) and *Kwändür* (2022). In 2017, Pauls won Broken Pencil Magazine's Best Comic and Best Zine of the Year Award for *Dakwākāda Warriors II*. In 2020, *Dakwākāda Warriors* won Best Work in an Indigenous Language from the Indigenous Voices Awards and was nominated for the Doug Wright Award categories The Egghead & The Nipper.

Jillian Tamaki is a cartoonist and illustrator from Calgary, Alberta, who now lives in Toronto, Ontario. Her first picture book, *They Say Blue*, won the Governor General's Literary Award and the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award, among many other accolades. She co-created the highly acclaimed graphic novels *Skim* and *This One Summer* with Mariko Tamaki and she is the creator of the webcomic *SuperMutant Magic Academy* and *Boundless*, a collection of short comics for adults.

Momoko Usami received a BFA and an MFA from Kyoto City University of Art in Kyoto, Japan, and moved to the United States in

January 2008. A resident artist at Lillstreet Art Center in Chicago in 2009–2010, Momoko went on to establish her personal studio in the countryside near Kansas City, Missouri, where she started Art Farm in 2014, hosting small art classes for the community. Momoko draws inspiration from many things, including Japanese painting from the Edo period, dreams, and daily encounters on the street. Her unique, playful, and often interactive ceramic works have been shown in the United States, Canada, and Japan.

Ronald Wimberly is an artist who works primarily in design and story. He is an accomplished illustrator and cartoonist, having designed several graphic novels as well as shorter works for *The New Yorker*, DC/Vertigo, Nike, Marvel, Hill and Wang, and Darkhorse. His works include *Sentences: The Life of MF Grimm* and *Prince of Cats*. Ronald was the 2016 Columbus Comics resident and two time resident cartoonist at Angoulême Maison des Auteurs.

Wimberly's most recent graphic novel is a candid but sensitive portrait of Eugene Bullard, America's first Black fighter pilot. Wimberly balances the personal and the historical to interrogate concepts of cynicism, idealism, fear, glory, and the pervasiveness of anti-Black racism.

What stories do we tell?

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