

*Charles
Campbell:
An Ocean
to Livivity*



surrey
art gallery



Charles Campbell: An Ocean to Livvity

In partnership with:
Surrey Art Gallery

Curated by:
Jesse Birch & Jordan Strom

Introduction

From the intimacy of a quiet inhalation to the distance between continents, *Charles Campbell: An Ocean to Livivity* brings together metal and mixed media sculptures along with immersive and participatory multichannel audio installations. Tapping into the fecundity of the Black diasporic imagination, Campbell reconstructs and reinvents lost connections, lamenting the violent disruptions of the past while constructing a home for Black communities' strength of being.

Central to the exhibition is *Black Breath Archive*, an installation of breath recordings from Nanaimo, Vancouver Island, Surrey, and Lower Mainland residents. Campbell strips away racial hierarchies and holds up Black breath as its own force—a carrier of ancestry and experience, a creator of community and something that, even in its most subtle presentation, changes the way we think, feel, and live.

Other artworks that address breath and breathing are *Breath Cycle* and *Finding Accompong Reprise*. *Breath Cycle* gestures towards a deeper past, connecting the oxygen we breathe to its production in symbiotic, multispecies communities of ancient lichen. *Finding Accompong Reprise* derives its shape from the bronchial structure of a human lung as well as the forked shapes of slave yokes (forked wooden sticks used to tie captives together in a line). Both these works nod to fractal geometry and binary counting systems that originated in Africa.

“Livity” is a Rastafarian word that can either mean way of life or the life force present in every living thing. The artworks in *Charles Campbell: An Ocean to Livity* evoke a sense of journey, worldly interconnectedness, and communal struggle against the injustices of times past and present, geographies far and near.

Charles Campbell: An Ocean to Livity is the seventh exhibition through which Nanaimo Art Gallery asks the question, *what stories do we tell?*

Not-Insisting: Charles Campbell's Chorus of Aliveness

—SONNET L'ABBÉ

“What is the word for keeping and putting breath back in the body? ... That word that I arrived at for such imagining and for keeping and putting breath back in the Black body in hostile weather is *aspiration*.”

—Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*

In her 2007 book, *Zong!*, NourbeSe Philip speaks of her struggle to “not-tell a story that must be told.” Her collection of poems is made from fragments of the text of a 1793 British court decision that documented, but also fundamentally disavowed, the lives of 150 African men, women and children, when it held that an insurer was liable to compensate the slave ship owners, who threw the 150 African people overboard, for “loss of cargo.” Part of Philip’s conundrum is how to hold up the lives and being of African people, of her ancestors, while using the very English language that named them property. Her work introduces strategic silences into language to evoke “the story of be-ing, which cannot, but must, be told. Through not-telling.”

In *An Ocean to Livity*, Charles Campbell uses sound and sculpture installations to centre Black breath and create work that speaks

through not-speaking. In his work I feel something of Philip's intuition that "telling," that is, using conventional narrative and argument to insist on Black humanity, is inadequate to honouring the depth and breadth of intergenerational, diasporic Black aliveness. In Campbell's installation, we attend to how spirit, or spiritual states, make themselves known through the breath, listen to the sound of air moving in and out of lungs, and consider Blackness in relation to the fundamental ecology of body and environment.

Eric Garner was not the first North American Black man to utter "I can't breathe" under a policeman's chokehold, but it was after his death that the Black Lives Matter movement took up the phrase as a slogan. In 2020, after we heard audio of George Floyd gasping these same words, echoing not only Garner, but also the voices of people in news footage of overwhelmed hospitals with respirator shortages, the phrase became a mantra for world-wide fights against anti-Black oppression that resonated with a global collective desire to live. It was as though Floyd spoke at the very moment when his words, his telling, could actually be heard, in the moment when the sweep of viral infection made people around the world radically sensible to our interconnectedness with, and our vulnerability to, each other's breath.

Ben Okri wrote that perhaps the phrase had the potential to adequately describe the impact of racist oppression:

“‘I can’t breathe’ suddenly equates racism with the deprivation of air, which is what it always was. Previously we saw racism, if we saw it all, as a diminishment of a person’s humanity. But that was always too vague. ‘I can’t breathe’ goes beyond saying that you are depriving me of freedom, of humanity, of respect. It says: ‘You are depriving me of the right to air itself.’”

The irony, though, of “I can’t breathe” as a slogan is the amount of hallowed breath needed to be able to say it. There is a deep indignity of wasting a drop of precious breath to pronounce these words to the unlistening ears of whoever is restricting another human’s wind. Campbell’s recordings speak to the same preciousness of life force. Campbell invites Black participants in his project to literally save their breath, both in the sense of orchestrating a choral rest from needing to “tell” the fundamental value, matter, and energy of Black life, and in the sense of saving, in audio archive and spectral light, the precious, spectacular phenomena of our breathing bodies.

During the preparation for *Black Breath Archive*, Campbell asked participants to invite an ancestor to join us for our early conversations. It was uplifting to feel the room so enlivened by the ancestral group assembled there in spirit! Later, participants were again asked to welcome an ancestor into the soft, quiet atmosphere

of the recording studio. We breathed, with eyes closed, and used memory and imagination to connect with the images, traces and rhythms of earlier generations alive in our own bodies. For some of us, our breath slowed as we felt present with benevolent elder figures. Some of us breathed faster as we met those ancestors from whom their families were estranged.

Numerous spiritual traditions teach that to connect to one's own breathing is to connect to rhythms of nature within the self. We experience ourselves in relation to the air that sustains us, and by extension to the plants and trees that produce our oxygen, to the soil that produces the trees, to the sun that makes them grow, etc. To attend, with care, to the breath of another is also an act of incredible intimacy and ecology. In response to a loved one's distress, an attuned person will come close and model deep breathing, and will speak in flowing, soothing tones in order to co-regulate their upset loved one and bring the stressed system (the system including the loved and the loving one) back into balance. Campbell's recordings offer a kind of co-regulation to all listeners: as Black breathers connect with those from whose bodies we descended, we are co-regulators, offering and receiving restorative relationship across generations. As listeners connect to the fleshly rhythms of intergenerational Black presence, they are granted an experience of precious intimacy with all that Black breath is within the larger global ecosystem.

As a vocalist and speaker who works consciously to write within the contexts of colonial and slave trade legacies, it felt counter-intuitive for me to choose, as a Black person with a voice, to sit in front of a microphone and actively not-speak. To speak up for Black experience in the diaspora is a crucial, necessary act; Black presence and histories stay alive through reiteration and sharing. Wouldn't recordings of speech, or song, or even of whoops and shouts, be an archive of Nanaimo-area Black breath that honours how often we have *had* to hold our breath, or at least our tongues, in environments that encourage our silence?

Campbell's creation honours exactly that space where Black people are vibrant, present, and influential whether we speak to it or not. Like NourbeSe Philip, who, working in the context of legal language, used not-telling and visual silence to honour the unspeakable story of one-hundred and fifty breathing people, Campbell works in the context of having to insist that Black lives matter. He holds up the sound of *not-insisting*, *not-protesting*, the sound of spirit itself moving freely. Campbell publicly attends to Black bodies breathing outside the performative postures they must so often take in order to assert or prove their value. His work, as much a creation of community as of sound and material objects, reminds us that to a loving listener, *not speaking* is still not *silence*.

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—Charles Campbell

Biographies

CHARLES CAMPBELL is a multidisciplinary artist, writer, and curator who lives and works on lək̓ʷəŋən territory, Victoria, BC. His artworks, which include sculptures, paintings, sonic installations, and performances, have been exhibited widely in the Americas and Europe. Campbell is the recipient of the 2022 VIVA Award from the Jack and Doris Shadbolt Foundation and the 2020 City of Victoria Creative Builder Award. He holds an MA in Fine Art from Goldsmith College and a BFA from Concordia University.

SONNET L'ABBÉ is a mixed-race Black writer, professor, organizer, and performer of Afro-Guyanese, Indo-Guyanese, and Québécois ancestry, and the author of three collections of poetry: *A Strange Relief*, *Killarnoe*, and *Sonnet's Shakespeare*. L'Abbé lives on Vancouver Island, where they organized both the 2017 Women's March and the 2020 Black Lives solidarity march. They had their first major poet-songwriter performance as part of The Port Theatre's Discovery Series in 2021. They are currently a professor of Creative Writing and English at Vancouver Island University.

What stories do we tell?

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