

Like Their Art, Artist Vo Vo's Workspace Is Informed by Their Life Experiences and Anarchist Philosophy

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ARTIST VO VO (Christine Dong)

By Shannon Gormley

February 24, 2021 at 5:30 am PST

After working four months with a tapestry company to create a textile for an upcoming show, Vo Vo ran into a problem: The company refused to print the design.

The tapestry depicts a stately building with Roman columns alight with squiggly, pastel-colored flames. On a corner of the blanket is the phrase "Burn it down."

After months of back-and-forth, the company balked, saying it couldn't support the "situation there in Portland, Ore." It's a fitting, if ironic, backstory for the New Zealand-born, Portland-based artist's new show, [on display through April 1 at Fuller Rosen Gallery](#).

Things that have to do with fire was partially inspired by last summer's protests, and the misconceptions about Portland anarchists—and anarchism in general—that revealed themselves on a national level. Comprising video installations and cloth banners covered in illustrations and

slogans, the gallery show is a response to the idea that anarchists are primarily devoted to destruction. But the exhibit isn't exactly a condemnation of Portlanders who have wagged their fingers at Vo and their peers for the past year. Rather, it's intended as a bridge.

"I do want to meet people at an entry point that feels accessible to them," says Vo, who has worked for years as a radical educator. "A lot of [the show is] jokes and signals to my fellow anarchists, and then some are for people who haven't maybe critiqued liberalism, who haven't looked at where liberalism comes from, and the idea of U.S. exceptionalism and individualism."

Despite its controversial subject matter, *Things that have to do with fire* isn't preachy. It's warm, discursive and heartfelt. And, like Vo herself, it's full of sly humor.

Vo sews and weaves much of their work. Looms, sewing machines and quality materials usually don't come cheap, but all the materials in their home work space were either gifts or bought at a discount.

"I'm someone who's experienced houselessness myself as an adult and as a child. I'm constantly making work as a survivor, and someone who's experienced these systems as a participant," says Vo. "I think that's been a struggle for people to understand, because they assume that when they walk into a space—especially a very nice looking space with art displayed—they kind of assume that the person who's making it comes from a specific position."

1. Sewing Machine

When Vo started their MFA at the Pacific Northwest College of Art two years ago, they thought they'd study illustration. Then they found a sewing machine on the side of a road. As a kid, Vo worked in a sweatshop with their parents, but they hadn't sat at a sewing machine since. "Me and my parents were part of a wider network of Vietnamese refugees who were employed illegally to make things in Australia for North American fashion companies," says Vo, who is Vietnamese. Not long after they took home the abandoned machine, Vo shifted their focus from illustration to textiles. "I do feel so comfortable when I'm at the machine making stuff, and it's because I did it for hours as a kid," says Vo. "But this time, I'm doing it for me and not for another company."

2. Yarn Collection

Vo's towering stash of yarn is stocked with luxurious skeins of wool from Uruguay, Lithuania and Australia. It's an astounding amount of high-quality yarn, but it took them less than a year

and relatively little money to accumulate. "I think honestly my coping mechanism after COVID hit was to look at really cheap lots on eBay," says Vo. "I know what I like, but I'll only get it if it's free or if they're selling it on eBay for a really low price."

3. Storage Closet

Stuffed into a closet in the corner of Vo's workroom is two years' and dozens of hours' worth of work. A jacket might take an hour and a half—a surprisingly short period of time considering the clean lines achieved from cobbled-together, reclaimed fabrics. A weaved piece can take weeks. It's not uncommon for them to spend 12 hours a day in front of the sewing machine or the loom. "I get in the zone," says Vo. "That's why I chose to do what I'm doing, because I enjoy it."

4. Uniform Couch

Across from Vo's loom is a couch upholstered with U.S. Army uniforms from the Vietnam War, a piece from a show about immigration that Vo curated before the pandemic. Now, it almost blends into what Vo refers to as the "man cave" aesthetic of their basement workspace. "Even in the Southern Hemisphere, you're still bombarded with U.S.-specific films about the Vietnam War that center white dudes," says Vo. "All that this does is visualize that, even though that's an experience that I've had since I was a kid. My experience is always pushed aside for the Tom Cruise or the Charlie Sheen or whoever."

5. Loom

Last March, Vo came across a fortuitous Craigslist post: A woman in Ridgefield, Wash., was looking to get rid of a 3-foot tapestry loom. The loom was sitting in a barn, so it was rickety and caked with grass and horse manure. Vo fixed it up themselves, and it now looks sturdy and elegant—you'd never guess it was salvaged from literal shit.

Though Vo attributes their resourcefulness to their experiences with homelessness and as an immigrant, it also seems essential to the philosophy behind Things that have to do with fire.

"When I used to mask up and protest before COVID, wearing a mask would immediately attract so much insults from older white women," says Vo. "I do hope those same women that would scream at us from across the road with disgust would drop that accusation for a second to try to understand that anarchists are not trying to destroy their world, they're trying to build better things."

CRITICS' PICKS PHILADELPHIA

Vo Vo

Fuller Rosen Gallery | 319 N 11th St Unit 3-I

February 18, 2021 - April 1, 2021

By Amelia Rina



View of “Vo Vo: Things that have to do with fire,” 2021.

“Fire, never a gentle teacher”; “the economy will be perfect when all our workers have died”; “NO SWERFS NO TERFS THANKS”; “USA = no. 1!”; “What does your solidarity look like?” Phrases such as these, interspersed with various kinds of imagery, are emblazoned across bedsheet-size banners that hang from ceiling of this gallery. Throughout this exhibition, Portland-

based artist Vo Vo seeks to maintain the vocabulary and spirit of resistance in the wake of 2020's endless crises and chaos.

Vo worries that we're relaxing too much in this new, post-Trump landscape. They know that we can't go back to normal because to do so would require the continuing exploitation, oppression, and abuse of people and the planet. "Large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice and humanity," said Martin Luther King Jr.; the quotation is vertically embroidered on a banner in a bold sans serif font for *Black Lives Matter*, 2021. Even if protests have slowed, the crucial efforts of antiracist and antifascist groups—and the fight to stem the Covid-19 virus, which has profoundly ravaged Black and Brown communities across the United States—can't be diminished or forgotten.

Vo's use of embroidery and hand-dyeing suffuses these works' ferocious statements with a palpable sense of tenderness. Stitched drawings of bouncing coronaviruses, nature scenes, buildings, and abstract patterns dance around each textile field. In *White Feminism*, 2021, appliquéd lace collars, Girl Scout sashes, and clumps of wool are combined with messages supporting trans folk and sex workers. Hanging from a wall is *Burn it Down*, 2020, a blanket piece that includes a simple rendering of a building with fluted columns. A plaque in the center of the façade's mantle reads "PIGZ," while multicolored flames lick the structure's roof. In the lower left corner of the piece we read "BURN IT DOWN," written in an elegant serif typeface. Seeing this savage sentiment inscribed upon an object of protection and care makes me think of fire itself—its absolute destructiveness, its vital necessity.

PROVISIONAL STRUCTURES: CARMEN PAPALIA WITH VO VO AND JES SACHSE

7 JULY 2021 – 17 OCTOBER 2021

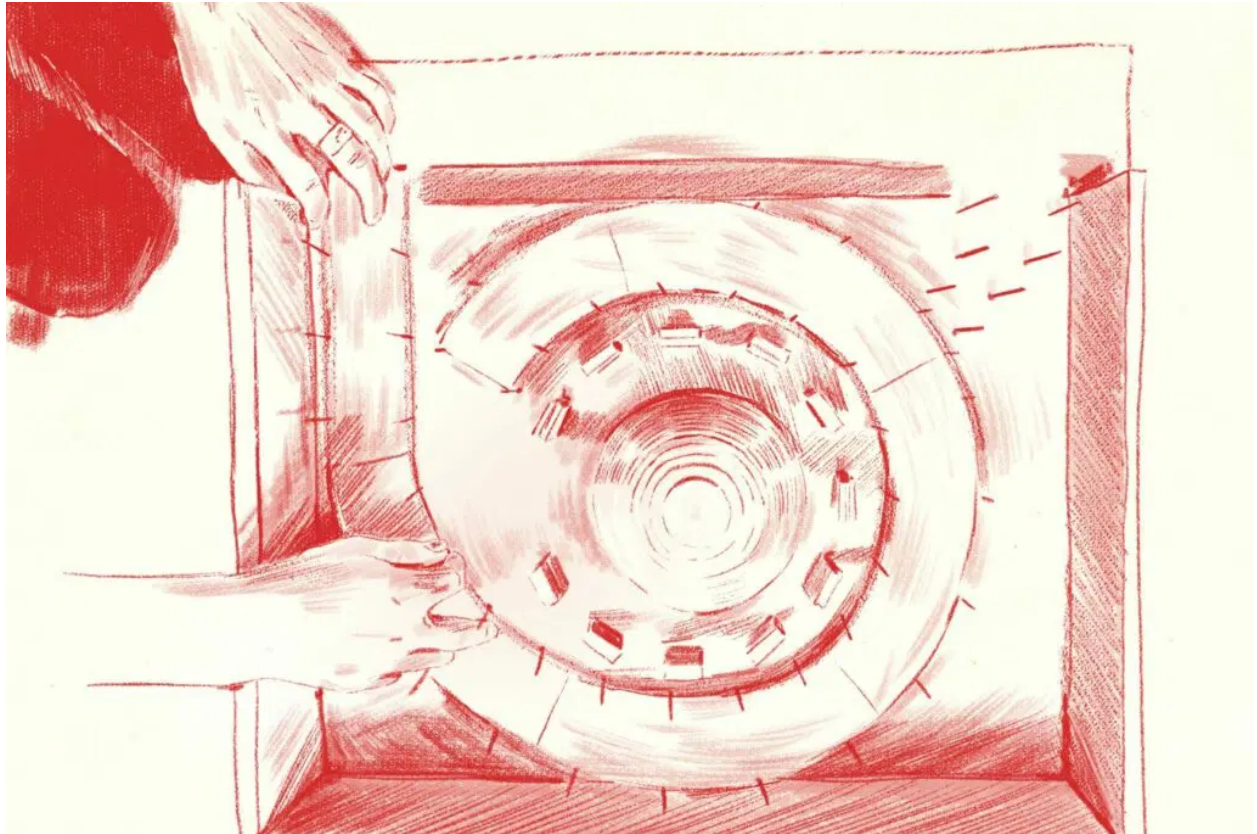


Image courtesy of Heather Kai Smith. This drawing reflects a bird's-eye view of a model for Provisional Structures: Carmen Papalia with Vo Vo and Jes Sachse. The square model shows the gallery space where visitors will be guided by a red string along an ascending ramp, overlooking a central, circular gathering space under a sound-reducing dome and audio presentations by artist Vo Vo. A figure (representing Carmen Papalia) is kneeling over the model with their hands moving over the pieces. The image is drawn in red coloured pencil and has a loose, moving quality to the lines.

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

CURATED BY

NICOLLE NUGENT

ORGANIZED BY

MACKENZIE ART GALLERY

GALLERIES

Kenderdine Gallery

Content Advisory: This exhibition and description features language related to trauma, presented within the context of trauma informed care and access.

Provisional Structures: Carmen Papalia with Vo Vo and jes sachse is a multi-faceted project that connects the artists, MacKenzie, and community. Composed of an exhibition, extensive public program, and the development of an accessibility statement for the gallery, this project pushes our understanding and imagination of how we interact with each other both inside and outside the gallery in a way that creates real, fundamental transformation.

THE EXHIBITION

Building on Carmen Papalia's [Open Access](#) research and development, Provisional Structures uses the framing of a temporary architectural structure to explore ideas of access and interdependence. Visitors are guided by a red string along an ascending ramp that spirals towards the ceiling and overlooks a central circular gathering space. Built of temporary scaffolding, this ramp serves as a proposal for something not yet built, a provisional embodied experience. Rem Koolhaas states in his *Elements of Architecture* (2014) that "a ramp can be an architectural element that changes political systems, triggers revolution ... encompassing two extremes as dreamscapes and as universal access." The ramp in this case provides us with the ground floor for accessibility, a space to build upon through dialogue and relationships.

The centre of the structure features a circular gathering space under a sound-reducing dome and an audio presentation on the principles of trauma-informed care, presented by artist Vo Vo. Papalia's practice has been built on relationships in the spirit of collaboration; Vo Vo's presentation offers us the chance to learn more about trauma and trauma-informed care, and asks us to consider how we support and rely on each other. This gathering space is surrounded by mirrors, creating an environment which encourages reflection and reminds us of the shared responsibility we all have within space and community.

In addition to collaborating with Vo Vo, Papalia is celebrating artist jes sachse's contribution to the discourse of disability arts and activism, acknowledging sachse as setting a context for his work and practice. In their installation of over 1300 brass plated metal plaques installed to bring to mind the aesthetic of a donor wall, jes sachse invites us to consider care through time in this repetition; the care we show ourselves and the care that we show to others. Through this work, sachse asks us to consider accessibility as a long unending process, one in which the time required is expressed by the person who needs support.

THE PUBLIC PROGRAM

Provisional Structures encourages us to explore the possibilities that can emerge when we think about a radically interdependent culture. Audiences will be presented with the

opportunity to build on their own embodied experiences and understanding of Disability Justice, a movement focusing on the need to build capacity within a community for care, without reliance on institutions. Programming for the exhibition will feature opportunities to discuss access, Disability Justice, and care from a multitude of perspectives, including a thematically connected summer issue of BlackFlash magazine and corresponding educator guide. The installation and public program for Provisional Structures will also feature a range of accessibility frameworks, including a diversity of translations, transcription, visual description, and signage.

THE STATEMENT FOR ACCESSIBILITY

Scaffolding is normally the first step in the construction of strong foundations; in this case, it supports the transformative pursuit of equity and accessibility, basic work that organizations must now undertake. The MacKenzie has continued our commitment to equity and access by working with Carmen Papalia towards the development of an accessibility statement. The MacKenzie Art Gallery Equity Task Force embarked on a series of workshops and research in the creation of this statement, led by Carmen and attended by community friends and colleagues David Garneau, Carla Harris, Peter Morin, and Elder Betty McKenna. The statement will exist alongside the exhibition and will remain a priority for gallery engagement beyond the life of the exhibition, guiding our thoughts, relationships, and actions as we continue to reimagine the future of accessibility, Disability Justice, and agency.

Provisional Structures: Carmen Papalia with Vo Vo and jes sachse was realized in collaboration with Architectural Designer Michael Lis (Vancouver) with funding support from the Canada Council for the Arts.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION



Installation view, *Provisional Structures: Carmen Papalia with Vo Vo and jes sachse*, The MacKenzie Art Gallery, 2021.
Photo credit: Don Hall, courtesy of the MacKenzie Art Gallery



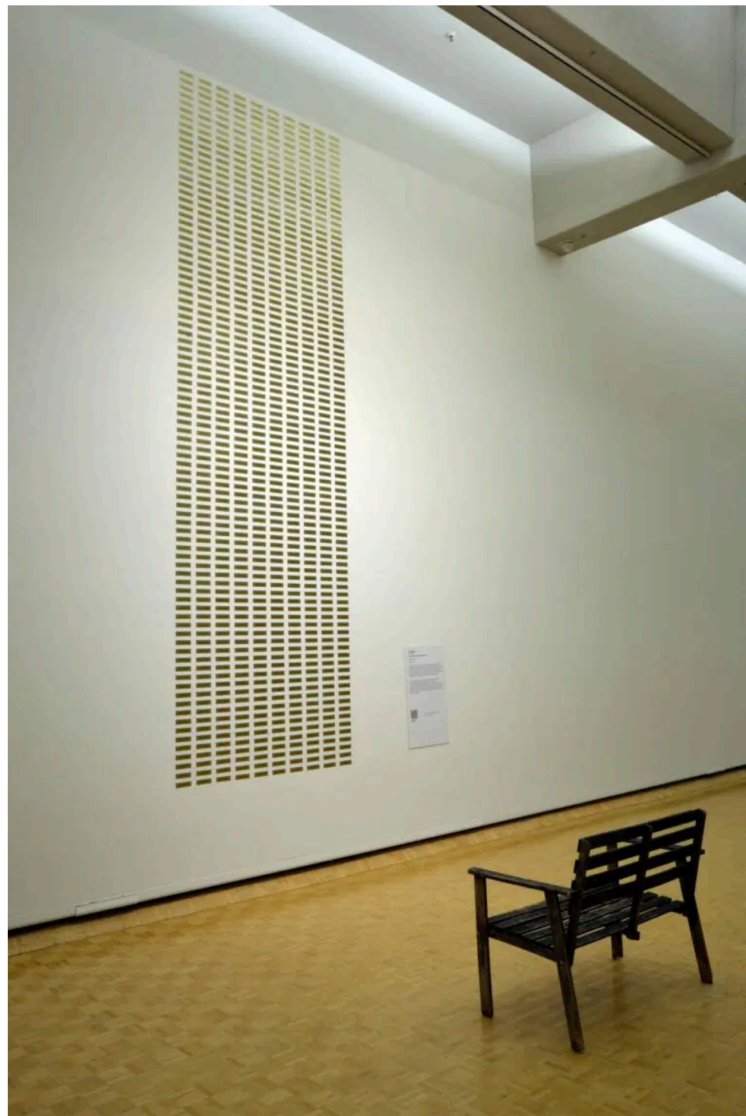
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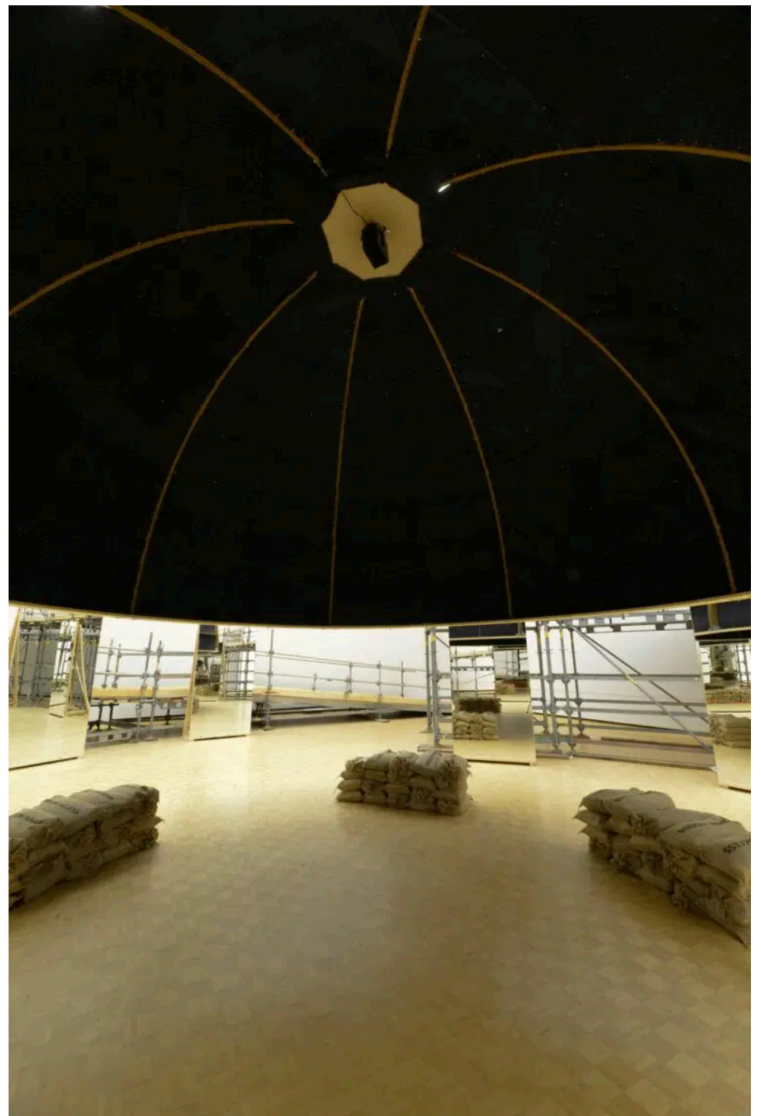
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