

BUTTERFLY FX

Emily Pelstring

July - October 2021

State of Flux Gallery

Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre



Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre is a non-profit organization facilitating the presentation, interpretation, and production of contemporary visual, time-based and interdisciplinary arts. Modern Fuel aims to meet the professional development needs of emerging and mid-career local, national and international artists, from diverse cultural communities, through exhibition, discussion, and mentorship opportunities. Modern Fuel supports innovation and experimentation and is committed to the education of interested publics and the diversification of its audiences. As an advocate for contemporary art, as well as for artists' rights, we pay professional fees to artists in accordance with the CARFAC fee schedule.

Modern Fuel is situated on the unceded ancestral territory of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabeg peoples. We acknowledge the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabeg peoples as the past, present, and future caretakers of this land. We also recognize the Métis peoples and other nations from across Turtle Island who have called Katarokwi / Kingston home for generations upon generations. We are grateful to be able to live, learn and make art on this land and be in

such close proximity to the waters of the St. Lawrence River and Lake Ontario. To acknowledge this traditional territory and waterways is to recognize this city and country's longer history pre-dating confederation and the work that must still be done in decolonizing our spaces and relations. We at Modern Fuel strive towards respectful relationships with all of our communities in hopes of walking a good path together.

We at Modern Fuel want to state unequivocally that Black lives matter, Indigenous lives matter, and that the lives of People of Colour matter. Modern Fuel strives to ensure that members and visitors feel safe and welcome in our space and at our events. We do not tolerate discrimination, harassment, or violence including but not limited to ableism; ageism; homophobia and transphobia; misogyny; racism and white supremacy. It is also important to us that Modern Fuel not only continues to present works and programs that support Black and Indigenous artists, members and visitors, but invests in the work of becoming an inclusive, anti-racist organization. We feel it is only then that Modern Fuel can advocate for artists and foster community with care and respect.

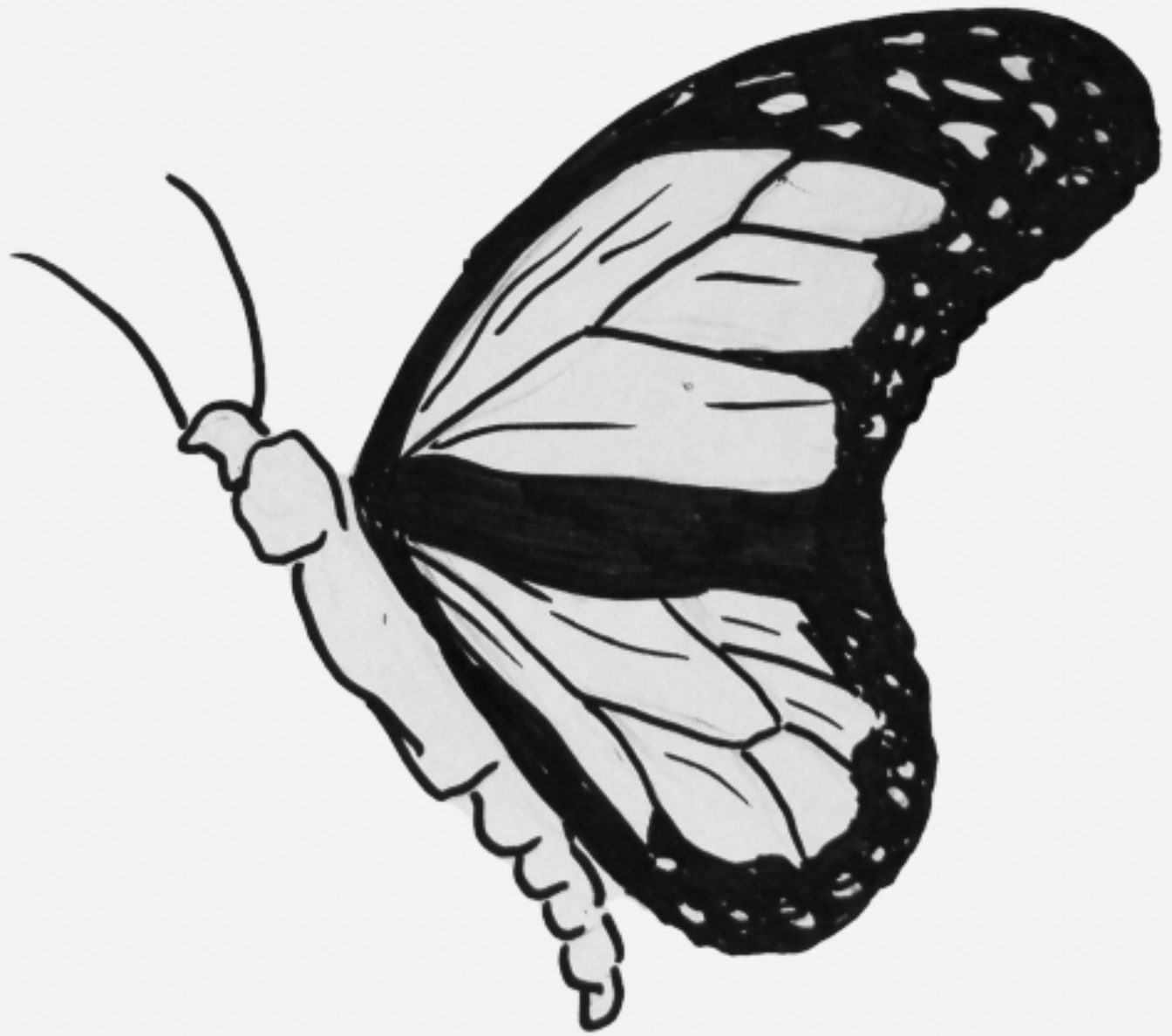
Butterfly FX
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Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre
305-307 King Street West
Kingston, ON K7L 2X4

Gallery Hours
Tuesday-Saturday
12-5PM



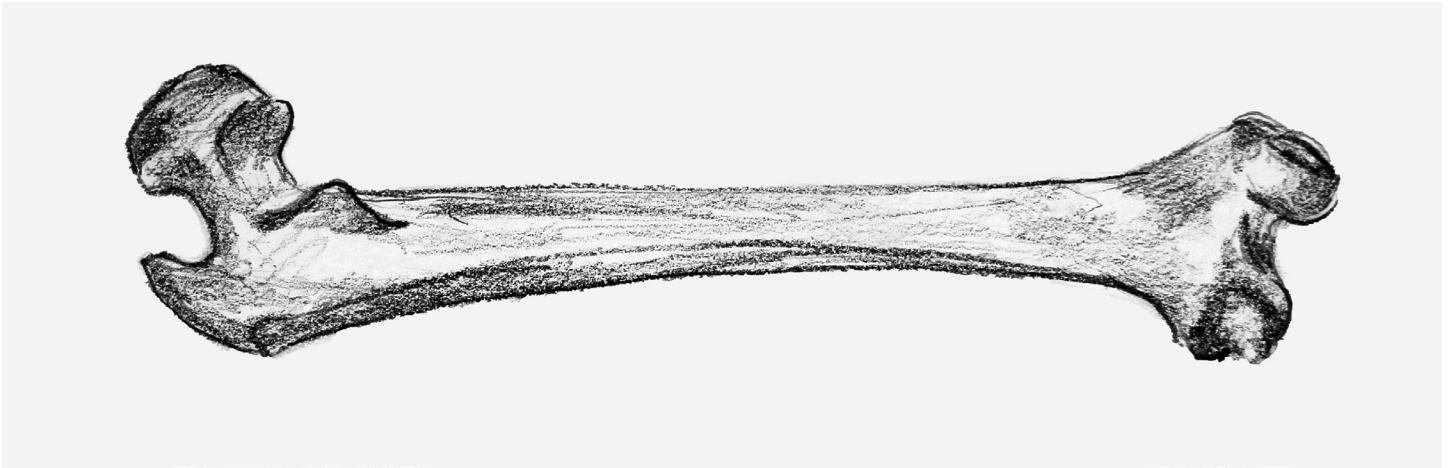
Butterfly FX is somewhere between a terrarium and a reliquary. The work offers a reflection on these two traditions of containment: the terrarium as an attempt to contain the wild, and the reliquary as an attempt to capture the metaphysical within the material. This particular stained-glass box contains a fantasy ecosystem in which fluorescent cartoons, fetish objects, and cheap craft materials writhe in a bioluminescent garden. Animated creatures traverse through egg-portals and create elixirs, an ice-phallus blooms with spring flowers, and guardian butterflies watch over the situation. Symmetrical planes of reflective glass frame the activity and refract the light toward an ambiguous space beyond the container.

FX

The apparatus is simple: a video screen, face-down on top of a glass box, with two planes of glass placed at 45-degree angles inside the box, resulting in two Pepper's Ghost scenes visible from opposite sides of the box. The Pepper's Ghost trick originated on the live stage in the late 1800s. It became a popular low-tech

illusion that eventually made its way to amusement park haunted houses. This is where I first came across the effect as a child. Because this trick makes such unbelievably effective use of everyday phenomena, it tends to make the viewer ask how the effect is happening. In this way, it is always a little bit self-reflexive. I'm interested in the effect-ness of the special effect—its inherent un-reality. This interest aligns with my preference for animation styles that eschew any attempt at realness and allow animators to visualize outlandish ideas. I think of my installation work as “expanded” animation, in the sense that it expands the animated image into a theatrical space where the question “how is this happening?” is intensified by immediacy and live presence.





Reliquary

I started this piece with curiosity about the physical shape of the special effect. The glass box first reminded me of Catholic reliquaries that house the remnants of saints' bodies for display. These remnants can be almost anything: an entire desiccated appendage, a fragment of bone, or a piece of cloth that once touched the body of the saint. The glass reliquary boxes protect against the grubby hands of worshippers and mediate the presence of the dead. The relics inside are not purely symbolic objects—they are actually understood by the church as having varying degrees of metaphysical potency. In this way, the sacred relic speaks to a slippage between the material and the immaterial, between life and death. For a religion that premises its belief system on the separation of body and soul, the magic of the relic—the vital energy it possesses—seems contradictory. In my own reliquary, there are remnants of bodies (shells, birds' nests, dentures, hair) intertwined with ghostly presences rendered visible by techno-magic.

Terrarium

As I started building the world inside the box, I began to feel like I was controlling a microcosm. In some ways, this impulse to control an isolated system also informs the production of animated films and the creation of gardens, aquariums, and terrariums. I wonder about the act of manipulating a faux ecological environment within apparently sealed boundaries. How does this practice account for the complex interconnections that exist between and across ecosystems?

In this terrarium, there are loose allusions to the “butterfly effect”, which describes how small changes can have unpredicted consequences. In the animated drama that unfolds, there are many strange and ambiguous cause-and-effect relationships. The constructed world in *Butterfly FX* is partially made of intangible light, so it refracts, reflects, and spills beyond its glass boundaries.



Tinkering

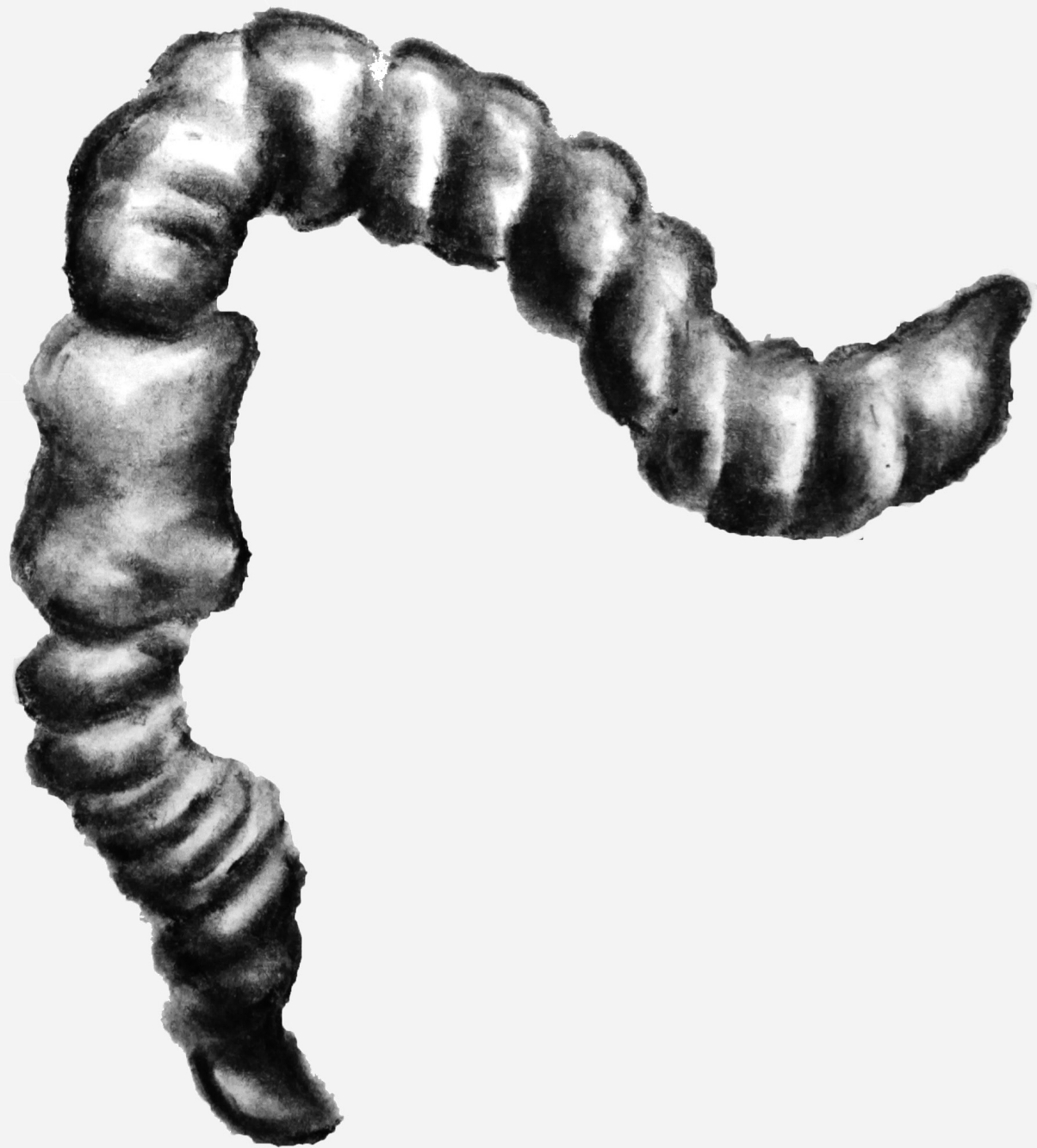
I started building this piece without making precise predictions about the final outcome. Instead, I committed to following new directions as mistakes presented themselves. For example, the Pepper's Ghost image is on a different plane when viewed from each side of the box, whereas I had initially assumed that the two planes would be aligned at the same point in the centre. I used this miscalculation as an opportunity to create two animated scenes on separate planes, giving the story an asymmetrical, dual perspective. I also hadn't anticipated that the light from the LED flora would reflect in the multiple planes of glass on either side of the box. Instead of eliminating the extra ghost-flowers that appear floating in the distant background, I composed them strategically and embraced the added layer of spatial complexity. I hadn't intended to embed imagery inside of glass cups and vases either, but discovered this illusion by accident. This led me to ask whether I could also embed animation within a solid transparent object. I had been reading excerpts of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, a 1487 treatise on witchcraft written by the Catholic clergy, which declares that witches are super into Satan's "icy member". This inspired me to animate a magical glass dildo: a gorgeous ice-phallus for the patriarchy's imagined witches.

Inspirations

At some point while making this work, I read Ursula K. Le Guin's "Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction", which tells the story of technology through the invention of receptacles. The story posits that the real heroes of the tale of human existence are objects that enable

us to hold and carry things that sustain life, like food and water, rather than the weapons of destruction that are often celebrated in patriarchal narratives. I am inspired by this call to re-imagine technology in terms of the maintenance of life. Importantly, the story of the vessel-as-primary-technology is ongoing. It has no satisfying arc. No advancement into new territory. No finality. This story, and the introduction by Donna Haraway, offered me a way of understanding the complex politics of building and containing that would inform the way *Butterfly FX* developed. I was already making a container when I read it, but I didn't know why.

In all of my creative work, I owe a great deal to the ongoing collaboration and friendship of Katherine Kline and Jessica Mensch. While tossing around metaphors that would inform the imagery in our livestreamed show, *Sistership TV* (2018-2020), we discussed all manner of vessels: wombs, space ships, enclaves, wicker balls. We arrived on "a playpen within a shitstorm" to describe our collaboration. In this playpen, we huddle together and make a game of re-symbolizing images, objects, and archetypes that come to us pre-loaded. In my independent artistic explorations, I've learned to re-work and re-cast familiar symbols in a similarly playful manner. Thankfully, these explorations are never really solitary—they are always in dialogue with my collaborators and community. <3



Thanks to:

Naomi Okabe for sending me the Le Guin story

Jenn E Norton for laughing at the *Malleus Maleficarum* with me

Anne-Sophie Grenier for being endlessly flexible about scheduling this exhibition

Graeme Langdon for editing this text



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