

List Projects 24: Sharona Franklin Bakalar Gallery, March 10 —June 5, 2022

Artist and Disability Justice Advocate Sharona Franklin’s first institutional solo exhibition premieres newly-commissioned sculptures in an ambitious installation that stages, in the artist’s words, “a memorial for the biohazardous waste that connects us all.”

The MIT List Visual Arts Center is pleased to announce List Projects 24: Sharona Franklin, the Vancouver-based artist’s first institutional solo presentation. Working with a wide range of media and materials, the artist and disability-justice advocate reinterprets vernacular and domestic craft techniques to make psychedelic, hallucinatory works in textile and ceramic, as well as molded and cast gelatin sculptures that reference biomedicine and pharmacology. With a distinct material sensibility that reveals tensions between the handmade and biotech’s industrial-scale production, Franklin’s works raise complex questions about access, care, and disability in relation to biomedical research and ethics.

At the List Center, Franklin debuts an installation of newly commissioned sculptures looking at medical waste, so-called “Big Pharma,” and the products and byproducts of bioscientific research. Connecting her own extensive research into environmental harm and bioethics with more holistic propositions for remediation and care, Franklin’s work approaches these themes from a variety of perspectives—including her personal relationship to healthcare economies and medical waste formed through her sometimes-alienating interactions with the medical system.

In her performance, *New Psychedelia of Industrial Healing* (2017-ongoing), photographs, which the artist refers to as “bio-shrines,” recast Franklin’s daily act of self-administering injections of an antibody treatment as a ritual performance. The resulting images—shared by Franklin on social media as performance documentation and incorporated into artworks like *Hemichrome Plate* and *Comfort Studies* (both 2020)—each feature a syringe containing her daily dose arranged into a still life–like composition alongside figurines, decorative plates, food, flowers, or other household items. For *Mycoplasma Altar* (2020), the artist encased fresh and dried flowers, medicinal plants and herbs, prescription pills, personal ephemera, hardware, and medical syringes in an “altar” of cast gelatin (an animal byproduct frequently used by the pharmaceutical industry). Over time, the wobbling, translucent medium, has slumped and shrunk, partially decomposing with the sculpture’s other organic components—an inherent mutability that summons associations with the body’s fragility and inevitable decay.

The installation at the List Center expands on Franklin’s interest in relating spiritual and ritualistic practices to medical and scientific ones, present in these earlier works. Floor-to-ceiling curtains, typically employed as temporary, mobile partitions in medical care facilities, wrap the gallery’s interior, while found church pews emblazoned with the artist’s words offer a place for rest and contemplation. Franklin’s interventions, referencing both institutions,



transform the exhibition space into a site to hold, in the artist's words, "a memorial for the biohazardous waste that connects us all."

Within the curtained sanctum, new sculptures focus on Franklin's meditations on how life and death cycles mirror those of consumption and waste. A child-sized, biodegradable casket made of willow wicker is glazed with a layer of resinous, hardened gelatin. And instead of a traditional funerary bouquet, the casket's exterior is adorned with detritus from the pharmaceutical industry, including empty gel caps and small pieces of medical equipment, as well as fragments of the artist's writing. The work's invocations of mortuary rites and decomposition as a process of regeneration stand in stark relief to the methods required for disposing of the biohazardous, industrial waste materials arranged on the casket's surface.

Wish you Well (2022), the exhibition's central sculpture, takes the form of a wishing well, a metaphor for life-sustaining water that, while hopeful, also alludes to contamination. The well's translucent paving stones, made of dehydrated gelatin, encase homeopathic botanicals, fungi, bones and pelts of small animals (some routinely used for biomedical research), medical and biohazardous waste, as well as collages of found text and pharmaceutical advertisements from Franklin's personal archive. The work offers an allegory for the cyclical relationship between toxicity and the production and consumption of biohazardous waste by reflecting on how environmental harm from industrial pollution creates conditions for epigenetic changes that can then cause chronic disease—in turn increasing the demand for pharmacological treatments. This pattern, disproportionately affecting low-income and historically marginalized populations, is referred to by the artist as "biological poverty." Together, Franklin's new body of work unfolds the complexities and contradictions of our dependency on biomedical products and the uneven distribution of their benefits and harms.

Franklin's exhibition is organized by Selby Nimrod, Assistant Curator, MIT List Visual Arts Center.

About the Artist

Sharona Franklin (b. 1987) is a Canadian multidisciplinary disabled artist, writer, and advocate. Recent exhibitions and projects include a city-wide public art project with the City of Vancouver, Canada; an online solo exhibition with Printed Matter / St. Marks, New York; The Audain Gallery of Simon Fraser University, Vancouver; La Casa Encendida, Madrid; Kings Leap, New York; Unit 17, Vancouver; G44 Center for Contemporary Photography, Toronto; New Image Art Gallery, Los Angeles; and Flux Factory, New York. Recent publications include *Injustice in Biopharm* (Cassandra Press, 2019) and *Rental Bod* (Peace Library Publications, 2016).

Support for List Center Exhibitions

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