

Arts

Inside Shary Boyle's new exhibition, we're all a part of the show

Mixing animatronics and theatre, the Gardiner exhibit is the perfect return to museum-going

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Installation view of *Judy* by Shary Boyle. The performer's hand puppets stand in for different female archetypes: the Activist, the Old Wife, the Witch and (not pictured) the Worrier. (Toni Hafkenscheid/Courtesy of the Gardiner Museum)

Around this time last year, [Shary Boyle](#) was spending a lot of time at Toronto's Gardiner Museum. She was there to install *Outside the Palace of Me*, her first major solo exhibition since 2013, the year she repped for [Canada at the Venice Biennale](#). Installing was a six-week job, and a thoroughly hands-on process. She would have

been inside painting the scenery herself; there was an animatronic wax mannequin to assemble (*Judy*), and another moving sculpture, *White Elephant*, that needed to be dressed. (Two-and-a-half-metres tall when seated, its "ginormous sweater" must be fastened together in pieces, attached with hundreds of snaps.)

But of course, this was 2021, and wave No. 3 had other plans for the show.

- **PRINT'S NOT DEAD** [With this image of a headless saint, Shary Boyle slyly critiques male-dominated 1970s conceptual art](#)

"By the time we all had it up and lit, we knew that the museum just wouldn't be able to open its doors," says Boyle, talking with CBC Arts. So instead of opening on March 25, as originally scheduled, the show's plentiful sculptures and drawings were removed from the gallery and nestled back in their storage crates.



Shary Boyle, *The Sculptor*, 2019. Terracotta, porcelain, china paint. (John Jones/Courtesy of the Gardiner Museum)

"It was insane. It was unprecedented. I mean, we're so tired of that word, but really — it really was," laughs Boyle. "I've been in the arts my whole life, and I've never seen that happen."

And though the sudden cancellation felt like a shock at the time, there wasn't much to do except wait for better days. "I just felt like, 'OK, I'm definitely not alone here,'" says Boyle, who put her faith in a postponed opening, hoping the show might have its hometown debut in one year's time.

Remarkably, that's what has finally come to pass. Outside the Palace of Me is [now showing at the Gardiner](#), and it will appear there through May 15 before beginning a national tour that brings the exhibition to Montreal (Montreal Museum of Fine Arts), Vancouver (Vancouver Art Gallery) and Kitchener-Waterloo (Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery) over the next two years.

Curtain up!



The Dressing Room is the first thing visitors will see at Outside the Palace of Me. (Toni Hafkenscheid/Courtesy of the Gardiner Museum)

Though it wasn't the intention, it's hard to imagine a museum experience better tailored for the Great Re-opening, or whatever we're calling this moment — the season following our collective winter of Omicron.

The show is themed around ideas of performance and selfhood, as presented against a backdrop of cultural crises — ideas that were all developed before COVID ever happened. (The museum invited Boyle to develop the project in 2018.) But the space

itself has been engineered to feel more interactive — more social, even — than an ordinary trip to the art gallery. And that, after all, is what we've missed most: the chance to just do stuff together.



Welcome to Outside the Palace of Me. (Toni Hafkenscheid/Courtesy of the Gardiner Museum)

In the Gardiner's exhibition notes, they describe the scene as a "collective performance space." But theatre, specifically, is the word of the day.

Upon entry, you'll pick up a playbill (in lieu of the usual didactic cards) before passing through a darkened "Dressing Room" (the show's first section). And the path to the main gallery is an actual stage, framed by a proscenium arch and lined with ceramic works — each piece absorbing enough to maybe distract you from a certain reality. As long as you're up there, you're actually part of the spectacle — or you certainly are to the visitors who've already made their way to the floor.



One perspective from the stage. Installation view of *Outside the Palace of Me*. (Toni Hafkenscheid/Courtesy of the Gardiner Museum)

That's especially true should you drop a loonie or toonie into *Centering*, a coin-operated pottery wheel dressed in sequined skirts that pulls focus downstage when activated — twirling as though possessed by the Red Shoes. Personally, I opted to take the audience P.O.V. to experience that one; lurking on the floor, ready to press "record" for an Instagram Story.



Centering takes a spin. (Toni Hafkenschied/Courtesy of the Gardiner Museum)

Two robotic entities, the previously mentioned *White Elephant* and *Judy*, bookend the room, stationed to the left and right of the catwalk. They occasionally flicker to life at random, drawing crowds — or just scaring them. *White Elephant*, especially, packs a fright. (I yelped, anyway.) Without warning, the statue's porcelain head whips around on its axis. It's a sort of Jack in the Box effect, by way of *The Exorcist*. To quote the playbill, it's a sort of uncanny reminder of the "outsized privilege and legacies of violence" that comes with whiteness.



Installation view of White Elephant. (Toni Hafkenscheid/Courtesy of the Gardiner Museum)

The best seat in the house is arguably the Orchestra section. Choose a red-velvet chair — on loan from Toronto's Royal Alexandra Theatre — and you'll have a view of

everything: Boyle's sculptures and paintings and drawings, plus all your fellow patrons/performers. And best of all, she's provided an iPad programmed with dozens of songs, a playlist from which you, the audience-turned-conductor, can choose what's playing on the gallery's soundsystem. Janelle Monáe, Beverly Glenn-Copeland, Cat Power: your read on the show might change with one tap, and with it, the perspective of everyone milling about.

The scaffolding of it all is deceptively simple; there's really no mistaking the gallery for a gallery. And yet, the whole theatrical concept works, to Boyle's delight. Where you are in the room, and what you're engaged with, winds up shifting your relationship to everything and everyone else in the space.

"I think it actually might be functioning in a psychological way that is exactly what I hoped for but I could never predict," she says. From the outset, Boyle was keen on doing something that mined theatre as a metaphor. And it's worth mentioning her background in performance here, notably the work she's done accompanying musicians including Feist and Christine Fellows — for years, she illustrated concerts with illuminated stories, drawn live via overhead projector.

'Everybody performs'

All too often, people go to a gallery and just wander around as passive spectators, Boyle says. And for this exhibition, she wanted to jolt folks out of spectator-mode. The route she paved — from the dressing room to the stage to the audience floor — was an "architectural intervention," she explains. "Can we get people to feel like they too are on the stage, in a way — that we're all collectively doing something together?"

To pull it off, she turned to Shannon Lea Doyle, a scenographer who's created sets and costumes for Toronto performance companies including Soulpepper Theatre and Canadian Stage.



Detail of *The Procession* (2021) by Shary Boyle. (Toni Hafkenscheid/Courtesy of the Gardiner Museum)

But beyond the actual design of the space, theatre is a theme that Boyle kept coming back to while developing work for the exhibition. "When I first started to think about theatre as a metaphor, I really was thinking about performance and how everybody performs, whether they're conscious or not. Like, the kind of roles that they've either developed for themselves or they've had thrust upon them," she says. Depictions of an artist persona abound, as do nods toward the performance of gender, race, class, etc.

The word "identity" is overused, says Boyle, but that's ultimately the subject she's tackling through the show's theatrical conceit — "the way that we really perceive each other and how we perceive ourselves, and the differences between those two things."

"It's really complicated to try to work that stuff out through visual art. But I knew if I made things interactive and gave people permission and welcomed them that it might create circumstances ... where you just have a really human reaction," she says. "Each person comes to the work with a different history, a different experience. But there's some things that are just shared."



Installation view of *Outside the Palace of Me*, the new exhibition from Toronto artist Shary Boyle. (Toni Hafkenschied/Courtesy of the Gardiner Museum)

It's tempting to think the show wouldn't have prioritized that same spirit of playfulness if we hadn't spent the last two years living in such a restricted way. But Boyle says this was her vision from the start.

"I think that it really jumps out right now because anything interactive has been so highlit as a potentially charged space. We're dying for it," she says. "The show has nothing to do with COVID at all, you know — it's just kind of like COVID has brought into relief so many things that we already struggle with, like alienation and the need to connect."

Boyle's felt that need, too. Before this week, she hadn't really celebrated the opening of the show, but on Wednesday, the Gardiner threw a private reception, gathering collectors and patrons and all the artists and fabricators Boyle had worked with on the exhibition. "It felt epic," she says.

"It was so beautiful to see because everybody was so excited to see each other," she continues. "You could feel how we just took so much for granted."

On March 16, the Gardiner will host a free launch event for the public, and Boyle's just as excited to mix and mingle at that party.

"We've all missed each other so much," she says. "Our senses ... I feel like they're scrubbed clean and they have room and receptivity for taking in music and visuals in a way that we haven't in years. Like, people are very sensitive. It's awesome. It is a great moment, actually, to share stuff right now."



From inside the exhibition, the audience gets a different view of the Dressing Room. (Toni Hafkenschied/Courtesy of the Gardiner Museum)

Shary Boyle. *Outside the Palace of Me*. To May 15 at the Gardiner Museum, Toronto. www.gardinermuseum.on.ca



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