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Embedded Here, in Cracks and Niches:
Shannon Garden-Smith & Emily Smit-Dicks at 8eleven

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Review

By Tiffany Schofield

Bestowed on us at the entrance of *She Makes Two From One and One*, a two-person exhibition by Shannon Garden-Smith and Emily Smit-Dicks, is a text by Jasmine Reimer. “*At the table, the sisters wear plastic scraps of light*”, an excerpt of the poetic work reads. It’s a fitting narrative, for there is no doubt that we are entering the domestic abode of two sisters. Their shared tendencies (and might we say neuroses?) are on display in muted tones, obsessive

materiality and labour-intensive production. One of the first exhibitions to take place after 8eleven's relocation to 888 Dupont, Garden-Smith and Smit-Dicks handle the *dérive* with grace. *Come in, stay awhile*, they beckon.

To live and *to dwell* are effectively synonymous, philosopher Ivan Illich has asserted, though they carry with them different connotations—living places emphasis on the temporal, while dwelling emphasizes the spatial. To dwell is to inhabit a discrete space, shaped by the intimate act of living. It is within the realm of dwelling that *She Makes Two From One and One* operates. The gallery's past life as a live-work studio leaks through in its apartment-like layout. Spanning multiple rooms, sculptural forms are embedded in walls, hung from the ceiling, and fill nooks and crevices. Navigating the exhibition requires slowness, and suffuses vulnerability; like entering the home of a close friend, only to discover they aren't home.

The exhibition's eponymous work is an intricate, multi-panel stained glass window that divides the exhibition space from the rest of the gallery. Approaching the translucent plane, its pattern begins to dissipate as it reveals itself to be debris embalmed in resin, comprised of bits you might find in your dustpan after sweeping: wood shards, mesh, zip ties, pebbles, pine needles, wires, paint chips, tile, and other unidentifiable organics. As the only piece produced in direct collaboration, the debris of *She Makes Two From One and One* (2017) was collected by the artists during the process of clearing out 8eleven's former space and renovating the new location. The work is the messy remnants of cohabited space, or in Illich's words, the traces left by one's own living. (1)

The intimate interactions which allow for the production of work that is truly site-responsive is the type of practice artist-run spaces have traditionally sought to foster. These spaces are, in essence, dwelling spaces for artists and their work. They are also among the most vulnerable in the increasingly precarious real estate market of Toronto. As older, independently-owned buildings are transformed into corporately-owned condominiums, the ability to dwell has become less accessible. "As the world is cemented over, dwelling space is extinguished," Illich writes. "It exists only in cracks and niches. Most people are forced to acquire costly space in which they cannot dwell." (2) It's a notion with which Toronto-based artist-run spaces are all too familiar. In these new spaces, traces of living are made to be as invisible as possible, either through restrictive regulations or remodelling. In order for artists to truly dwell, spaces must be porous and amenable to the kind of permeability that allows traces to remain, instead of being instantly reset with drywall filler and a stroke of white paint.



Bricks and Stones, 2017 by Shannon Garden-Smith. Photo by Yuula Benivolski.

The disjuncture between the site-specific and the so-called white cube is given a knowing nod in Garden-Smith's *Bricks and Stones* (2017). Three brick-like shapes, made with small decorative stones that have been individually

pushed into floral foam, emerge from smooth, rounded niches in a white stucco wall. Taking full advantage of the location change, the installation imparts a false archaeology upon the space. Eight layers of drywall have been carved out, each layer visible in the niche's recesses. It takes a moment to register the absurdity of the scenario; to consider the possibility that the multiple layers have resulted from years of botched DIY renovations, or if it has all been constructed anew. Either way, the recessed shelving signals a paradigm shift for the gallery space, allowing artwork to dwell in the spaces beneath and within the gallery walls.

Alike in both their material and installation sensibilities, the artists deal heavily in a co-optive kind of making, imparting the viewer with new value for the prefabricated, the leftover, and the quotidian. Being so physically altered from their original, familiar states, the objects withhold their material properties from afar, keeping compelling secrets contained in the intimate details.



Cactus, 2017 & *Pear Protector*, 2017 by Emily Smit-Dicks. Photo by Yuula Benivolski.

divulging what its companions would not tell. The glossier surface and visibly hollowed out interior distinguish it from the others embedded in the stucco wall, irrefutable evidence of the intense labour involved in their production. Here, the viewer that lingers is rewarded for more careful looking.

In *She Makes Two From One and One*, the ambiguous and abject materiality of the objects unsettles their predisposition to decorum, and exposes the hidden, often gendered labour involved in the production of a welcoming domestic space. The exhibition embeds itself like a splinter, the kind of intimate gallery experience I find rare and continue to dwell on for weeks after. "Only those who recognize the nightmare of nondiscrete space can

Smit-Dicks exploits this material ambiguity most readily, as we discover further down the hallway, where what looks to be a stuffed grey tube sock stiffens on approach. *Cactus* (2017) stands rigid, impossibly thin and tall, with a metallic sheen and the texture of a wet sock that has been left on a radiator and has now hardened into a solid crust. *Pear Protector* (2017) sits propped alongside, defined by its sections of sheer nylon fabric filled with plaster and formed into a grid of a dozen fist-sized casts. The pair beg to be touched, their ambiguous textures provoking perceptual doubt and creating a sense of haptic urgency that persists throughout the exhibition. It's the type of materiality that cannot be fully known until firmly held or tenderly caressed, imploring viewers to engage more intimately with each object and its surroundings.

Tucked away in the back room, two hemispheres of green floral foam embedded with small decorative stones, sit side by side—like a fallen moon, split in two. One half maintains its ideal form, while the other appears battered from the landing. It's as if Garden-Smith's attempt at restoration went awry, and the second part has been left to heal on its foam bed. Mounted on the wall behind this landing site, and slightly obscured by the clear plastic strips of a half-destroyed shower curtain or walk-in freezer, a solo brick comes into view. Its form closely resembles a shell-encrusted jewelry box I remember from my childhood, which I would sneak into my older sister's bedroom to admire. This furtive act of viewing is reenacted in approaching *Brick Grip* (2017), its solitude exaggerated by

regain the certainty of their own intimacy and thereby dwell in the presence of one another,” Illich proclaims. In Garden-Smith and Smit-Dick’s co-opted space, they resist the nondiscrete, imbuing the gallery with softness and intimacy. But whether we, as visitors, are invited to stay and dwell in their presence remains to be seen—that privilege belongs to the objects. As it turns out, the sisters are rather inhospitable hosts.

 Cart (0)

1. Ivan Illich, *H2O and the Waters of Forgetfulness* (Dallas: The Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1986), 8.
2. *ibid*, 19.

She Makes Two From One and One was held at 8eleven Gallery in Toronto from May 17 to June 10, 2017.

Feature image: *She Makes Two from One and One* (2017) by Shannon Garden-Smith and Emily Smit-Dicks courtesy of 8eleven Gallery. Photo by Yuula Benivolski.

