



MENTAL HEALTH

Fion Liu | Kadrah Mensah | Kayla Polan | Justice Walz

**Curated by
Lauren Fournier**

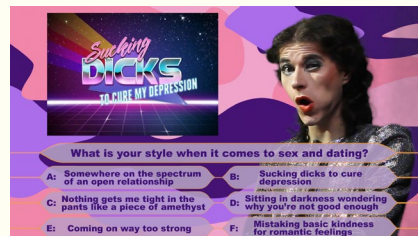
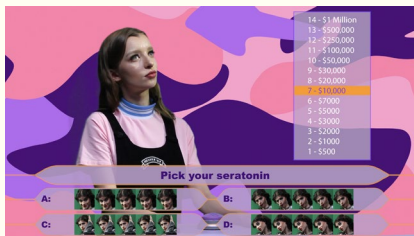
Exhibition Essay

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MENTAL HEALTH brings together new works by four emerging artists based in tkaronto/Toronto who take up issues related to mental health in their art practices. Through installation, sculpture, video, performance, and flash art, these artists reflect on what “mental health” means in relation to their own lived experiences. Often using humour, performativity, and play, the artists shake up the discourses and institutions of “mental health” and trouble the binary dividing mental health and mental illness through feminist, queer, non-binary, and BIPOC frameworks. The works in this exhibition are as material as they are conceptual, and engender new perspectives on the place of mental health in contemporary art.

KAYLA POLAN

SINGLE-CHANNEL VIDEO
WHO WANTS TO BE A MENTAL HEALTH MILLIONAIRE
 (2018)



KAYLA POLAN, WHO WANTS TO BE A MENTAL HEALTH MILLIONAIRE?, SINGLE-CHANNEL VIDEO (STILL), 2018.

Calgary-born, Toronto-based artist Kayla Polan

is a multidisciplinary artist working across traditional and new media.

She received her BFA in Drawing & Painting from the Ontario College of Art & Design University. She is currently an MFA candidate at the University of Waterloo. Her practice melds feminism and popular culture to investigate contemporary ideas about queer identity, fetishism, domesticity, mental health, autobiography, and consumer culture through the use of painting, sculpture, printmaking, video, and performance. She has received multiple awards for her work, including the Spark Box Studio Emerging Artist Award.

Her work has been exhibited in several group exhibitions in Canada, USA, and Europe.

In her performance-for-video **Who Wants To Be A Mental Health Millionaire** (2018), Kayla Polan creates a queer game show that focuses on “mental health” through self-awareness. In it, Polan features as the contestant “Kayla Polan” alongside game show host “Barbara Wires,” played by artist James Knott, with the artists re-performing ABC’s *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*, the game show hosted by Regis Philbin that ran from 1999 to 2011. Campily using the premise, visuals, and music from the original game show and appropriating it to queer effect, Polan incorporates relevant GIFs and memes, catchphrases from Ru Paul’s *Drag Race*, and moments of queer performativity—like Polan and Wires pausing from the action of the game show to take a “#queerloveselfie,” or the brief flash on the screen of one of Polan’s aforementioned “slutty selfies.”

The video opens with a very real, somber disclosure of Polan’s own mental health history; while Polan’s characteristically buoyant sense of humour is very much present in the video, there is also an earnestness that comes from a painful place. While some of the video’s humour comes from its citation of apt memes, it also demonstrates a responsible awareness of the limitations of internet culture: one of the possible answers to the question “What are the hardest pills to swallow?” is “No matter how relatable and funny the meme is, it will never actually help you work on your mental health”—to which the gameshow host echoes: “get help, not memes!”

Through queer performativity and play, Polan transmutes the nostalgia of late 1990s-early 2000s popular culture into something meaningfully queer, using



Me acting shocked after I ruin my own happiness through the same self destructive behaviours I've been repeating my whole life



What's your brand of anxiety?

I don't need an alarm clock, I have my anxiety

Social anxiety

B: Ruining my happiness through self-destructive behaviours

D: Anxiety about money

the conceit of **Who Wants To Be A Mental Health Millionaire** to think through serious questions that pertain to mental health in the context of queer, feminist, twenty-first century life. On this game show, in order to answer correctly you must answer truthfully; thus, to be “successful” as the winner—the “mental health millionaire”—you must be honest with yourself about your own strengths and limitations. With it’s profoundly truthful self-awareness, **Who Wants To Be A Mental Health Millionaire** gets at thorny issues related to mental health in intersectional spaces, including this statement, listed as an answer to the question “What are the hardest pills to swallow?”: “Mental illness and past traumas are not valid excuses to avoid accountability for perpetuating toxic, manipulative, or abusive behaviours.” Polan’s work shows an awareness both of herself (as an artist living with mental health issues) and of the context she is living within: a structurally inequitable, neoliberal, capitalistic context where University graduates struggle through precarious underemployment and pharmaceutical companies continue to make millions off of people’s pain. This video, which marks the beginning of an exciting video practice for Polan, holds space for the various tensions between self-care, consumerism, sex, queerness, social media, friendship, and precarity that characterize life in the late 2010s.

Fion Liu

MULTIMEDIA INSTALLATION AND TATTOOING PERFORMANCE
WORRY-GO-ROUND | **BRIBERY DURING DINNER** | **SADSTAB**
 (2018)

Fion Liu is a multi-disciplinary new media artist based in Toronto.

Their work centres on themes of duality, mortality, abjection, alter ego and mental health. They are known for their distinctive characterised D.I.Y. style and has worked in multiple mediums including analogue audio and photography, video and app making, electronics, performance, installation and stick & poke tattoos.

In **Worry-Go-Round** (2018), Fion Liu reconfigures a 1970s Kodak carousel slide film projector into a fortune-telling machine that audience can ask questions of. The carousel projector becomes like the Magic 8 ball that people interact with in the hopes of receiving guidance through divination. As the slide moves around the carousel, each projection on the wall features a written response in Fion's handwriting and marked with the artist's characteristic alter-ego "**sadstab**" logo. During the cycling of the carousel, the audience will also experience the artist's projection of distrust and self-destructive manner and thought through the slides. The contradiction creates the bipolar perspective of mental challenges both manic and depressive. **Worry-Go-Round** invokes anxiety and the experience of perpetual worry that characterizes the lives of those living with chronic anxiety and related mental health struggles. In **Bribery During Dinner** (2018),

Fion reconfigures another dated technology, here a Gachapong machine, into an artwork with oracle-like effects. The Gachapong machine reminds Fion of their childhood, when they received pocket money to entertain themselves during the adult's dinner party, and they would compulsively put coins into the machines to win a prize. By playfully recasting the randomizing technologies of toys into artworks with therapist-like capacities, Fion comments on the ways in which we as millennials turn to technologies outside of ourselves—like social media—when we are struggling with mental health. Choosing to work collaboratively, Fion invites other artists in their communities to contribute original works of art into the capsules: these will be dispensed to viewers who put a toonie into the Gachapong machine over the course of the exhibition's run.



FION LIU, SADSTAB STAND, 2018.

The issue of the relationship between social media and mental health was taken up in a recent roundtable that the Artists' Health Alliance held in partnership with Akin Collective at Glad Day Books. Speaking about what he described as myths related to artists and mental health, Dr. Chase McMurren reminded those of us in the room that "social media is not real life." He explained how the images of others's lives that are projected to us via social media platforms are carefully curated ones that, very often, leave us feeling depressed and wanting. The message in the roundtable was one that suggested we take a step away from social media for the sake of our mental health—it was a message that felt very affirming and necessary to me, as I was struggling with my own feelings of imposter syndrome in graduate school and consistently found myself "triggered," for lack of a better word, by social media platforms like Instagram. In Fion's work, the stance

is more ambivalent: rather than saying that this recourse to social media technologies is negative for mental health, Fion's work is more uncertain. With their ongoing stick-and-poke tattooing practice, affectively titled **sadstab**, the artist describes how they "wanted to stab her sadness away": notably, they have now tattooed over 580 times, yet they remain tattoo-less themself. During pedestrian Sunday, on the last day of the **MENTAL HEALTH** exhibition, Liu will be in the gallery tattooing in a three-hour "**sadstab**" performance. Millennial life in a neoliberal, capitalist context is characterized by these more ambivalent relationships to consumption and self-care, and **Worry-Go-Round** moves between affirmation of shared, social, game-like rituals and an awareness of the limitations of these "self-care" rituals for mental health care."

Dark *and* Lonely®

KADRAH MENSAB, DARK AND LONELY, MIXED-MEDIA INSTALLATION (LOGO DETAIL), 2017.
PHOTO CREDIT: KADRAH MENSAB

Kadrah Mensah

MIXED-MEDIA INSTALLATION
DARK & LONELY
(2017)

Kadrah Mensah (b. 1996, Toronto, Ontario) is a conceptual new media artist, focused on the integration of art, technology, and culture to expand representations of existence. At the core of her practice, she explores the ways black identity is sublimated by capitalism, mental health, and cyberculture. Her work takes shape through installation, video, performance, and sculpture. Her recent work, *Dark and Lonely*, is an interactive installation that satirizes the hair relaxer brand, *Dark and Lovely*, by highlighting the ways black women are pressured to alter themselves in order to gain access to capital, and what the lingering effects can be on their mental health. She has recently graduated with a BFA in New Media from Ryerson University.

In **Dark & Lonely**, Kadrah Mensah adeptly appropriates the *Dark and Lovely* line of hair products to create an artist intervention resonant with a Black feminist politic of mental health. Particularly taken with the *Dark and Lovely* line of “no lye hair relaxer,” marketed to Black and African-American women to straighten their hair, Mensah creates her own product called **Dark & Lonely**. Re-performing the unsettlingly joyful smiles of the models on the product boxes, Mensah steps in as a model for **Dark & Lonely**, a product “Brought to you by CAPITALIST SCHEMES.” On first glance, the product looks like a regular hair relaxer that you could buy at a drugstore; on closer look, it becomes clear that this is something else. The relaxer name “Nappy Headed

Ho” is explained by the artist as “a derogatory, misogynistic, and anti-black term used to degrade black women with hair that is seen as ‘unkempt’ due to its incongruence with dominant, European beauty standards.” Reading the box, we come to the description of “‘I Want To Die’ No Lye Relaxer,” a darkly satirical naming of the pain that such commercial hair relaxers cause women on a physical and emotional level. Extending this pain to a deeper consideration of mental health, Mensah’s **Dark & Lonely** hair relaxer comes in three variations—one for depression, one for anxiety, and one for bipolar disorder—and she adjusts her performance for the photographs accordingly. Continuing her masterly intervention into the commodified

“Nappy Headed Ho” is explained by the artist as “a derogatory, misogynistic, and anti-black term used to degrade black women with hair that is seen as ‘unkempt’ due to its incongruence with dominant, European beauty standards.”



KADRAH MENSAB, DARK AND LONELY, MIXED-MEDIA INSTALLATION (DETAIL, INSTALL VIEW), 2017.
PHOTO CREDIT: ERIK BABINSKI.

cultures of hair products—in this case, hair straightening agents—Mensah subverts the use of lists in branding what a product will do by listing, instead, some of the symptoms of the three mental health issues listed on the box. For the “Depression” box, for example, the product states that it will preserve “Headaches, Irritability, Weeping, Self-Hatred, and Hopelessness.” The juxtaposition of these distressing symptoms with Mensah’s bright eyes meeting the camera straight-on, a single

glistening tear descending down her left cheek, evokes a deep discomfort in the viewer, who isn’t entirely sure what to make of the drugstore aisle installation they have stumbled upon. **Dark & Lonely** empathizes with Black women who use relaxers as a way of dealing with their hair and the social world it inhabits, while also critiquing the overarching systems that sustain its necessity.



KADRAH MENSAB, DARK AND LONELY, MIXED-MEDIA INSTALLATION (DETAIL), 2017.
PHOTO CREDIT: KADRAH MENSAB

JUSTICE WALZ

MIXED-MEDIA INSTALLATION
EXPI(R)ATION
(2018)

Justice Walz is a Toronto-based interdisciplinary artist.

She graduated with distinction from Ryerson University where she obtained her BFA in New Media. Walz uses her practice to explore her identity as a queer, mad, and chronically ill WOC, often examining notions of self-care, gender, intimacy, and feminism in the process.

As Liu looks back to childhood and the compulsive rituals that characterized their life as a kid, so too does Walz look back to childhood when working through ideas related to mental health in her art practice. In **Expi(r)ation** (2018), Walz makes manifest that which she perpetually hid as a kid: the food in her lunches that, forgotten, would start to rot. A symbolic manifestation of the young artist's struggles with mental illness, it was during periods of particular struggle with mental health—depression, dissociation—that the rotting food would proliferate. The sense that this food had been neglected by Walz would increase her anxiety and allow feelings of shame to fester. Now, with **Expi(r)ation**, the artist recovers the forgotten food-bodies through the attentive act of painting them with resin, using this material practice as a way of working through difficult affects: the ritualistic practice of painting the fruits and vegetables in resin becomes both a memorial and an act of contrition, allowing Walz to move toward self-forgiveness and reclamation of past shame. Paradoxically preserving that which has already begun to rot through a diligent act of care, Walz encapsulates the mouldy foods

and the tupperware containers and Ziploc bags that hold them in layer after layer of resin, effectively suspending the microbiological process of decay in time. A self-identified mad and queer POC artist, Walz has grown up with mental illness as part of her family life as well. The fact that Walz's mother, who struggles with mental illness, is a microbiologist, and that Walz spent time as a child playing in science labs, adds another layer of meaning to this work. Displayed on an altar made from salvaged materials, and installed as a vigil in the gallery space, the resin-coated vegetables and fruits in **Expi(r)ation** invoke a sense of pathos and embody, in a compelling way, the complex interrelations between food, consumption, bacteria, care, mental health, vitality, and decay.

At once tongue in cheek and sincere, MENTAL HEALTH makes space for a nuanced consideration of the intersections between life as a millennial artist and this often all-consuming thing called “mental health.”



JUSTICE WALZ, EXPI(R)ATION, CROPPED, 2018.

LAUREN FOURNIER

CURATOR

Lauren Fournier is a curator, writer, video artist, and PhD candidate. She is a queer person living on Indigenous land, who comes from a settler-colonial, working-class context that includes intergenerational trauma and struggles with mental health and addiction. She positions her curatorial practice at the intersection of feminist experimentation, intersectionality, and social justice issues related to mental health, healing, and care. She has worked as a frontline mental health and harm reduction on the unceded Coast Salish territories known as Vancouver, where she developed a visual arts and creative writing group for adults living with concurrent disorder. Recent curatorial projects include Autotheory (Vtape), Fermenting Feminism (Büro BDP), and The Sustenance Rite (Blackwood Gallery). She is the recipient of the 2018 Middlebrook Prize for Young Canadian Curators, and her exhibition Epistemologies of the Moon will open at the Art Gallery of Guelph in September.

List of Artists and Works

Fion Liu, **Worry-Go-Round**, projector and installation (Kodak Carousel 750H and amended slides), 2018.

Fion Liu, **Bribery During Dinner**, mixed-media installation (Gachapong vending machine and amended capsules), 2018.

Fion Liu, **SadStab**, tattooing performance, ongoing.

Kadrah Mensah, **Dark & Lonely**, mixed-media installation, 2017.

Kayla Polan, **Who Wants To Be A Mental Health Millionaire?**, single-channel video, 2018.

Justice Walz, **Expi(r)ation**, mixed-media installation, 2018.

Exhibition essay by Lauren Fournier

MENTAL HEALTH is part of the "In Space" curatorial events organized by The White House, a thematic series of five exhibitions focusing on the experiences of disenfranchised peoples within social, political and physical spaces. "In Space" is conceived of by Sandra J. Manilla and co-produced with Nathaniel Addison, Stephanie Avery, and Leone McComas.

This project is supported by the White House Studio Project, the Toronto Arts Council, the Ontario Arts Council, Wysp Creative, and the Artists' Health Alliance.

Thank you to our sponsors!