

Exhibition: *Outside the Palace of Me* by Shary Boyle

Described Tour Transcript: Parts 1, 2 and 3

PART ONE:

Hello and welcome to the described tour of Shary Boyle's *Outside the Palace of Me*, created with emphasis on a non-visual experience, with consideration of blind, partially-sighted and non-visual visitors.

This touring exhibition was first organized by the Gardiner Museum in Toronto, curated by Dr. Sequoia Miller. It is coordinated for the Vancouver Art Gallery by Siobhan McCracken Nixon, presented by Jane Irwin and Ross Hill, with additional support by Joanie Anderson.

Shary Boyle is a Canadian contemporary multidisciplinary artist, who works across diverse media including sculpture, drawing, ceramics, installation, and performance. Boyle's work explores the social histories of folk art and ceramic figurines as it interweaves a stark awareness of current cultural and earthly conditions. Boyle is an artist of settler ancestry and has concerned her work with de-centering the status quo. This exhibition in particular deals with perception, and visual bias, as it touches on the complexities of gender, race, sexuality and age, and the performance of self and other.

There are 28 individual artworks that make up this exhibition, each bearing intricate detail and imbued with layers of symbolism and reference. This tour will skim the surface of what's here, with a particular focus on visual description. To delve deeper into the inner workings of the exhibition you may find additional content on the gallery's mobile app, experience the exhibition's soundtrack curated by the artist or check out the exhibition's companion book of the same title which contains beautiful images, Boyle's astute writing and an extensive glossary of cultural and historical references that inform the vitality of this exhibition.

Outside the Palace of Me is installed on the west side of the first floor. You've entered the Gallery through the lobby doors to face the title wall: The artist's name, Shary Boyle, is posted above the exhibition's title, *Outside the Palace of Me*. These words, in black, appear within a red circle. The circular motif appears throughout the exhibition, on the walls behind specific artworks. Consider them spotlights or portals... rabbit holes that draw us in to tumble with assemblages of imagery through which meaning might formulate itself in surprising ways.

The entrance to the exhibition is framed by a blue velvet curtain, pulled back to show a dark chamber. This unconventional space has a dropped ceiling and reminds of a backstage dressing room; a darkened tunnel under spectator seats that welcomes us to traverse from ordinary life into the magical grasp of the theatre.

Posted on the wall here is an introductory statement from Dr. Sequoia Miller. It reads:

“Welcome to the Palace, where you are invited to assume the role of performer—as yourself. This show explores the creative nature of identity and the ways we see each other through our lived realities of connection, invention, resistance and injustice.

Allow yourself to wonder at the characters you will encounter and imagine their worlds. While each work presents a unique scene of experience, as a whole the exhibition embraces with empathy and complexity the urgency of social reckoning.

Outside the Palace of Me asks us to both honour and challenge those parts of ourselves and each other that we present to the world, and those we keep hidden within.

The exhibition includes no further wall labels. Please take one of the pamphlets nearby as a guide and for further information.

Please do not touch the art.

The artist trusts the viewer not to touch the fragile surfaces of her artworks.

Several sculptures have moving parts and delicate textiles that can be easily damaged.

Please follow instructions where posted to help us keep the artworks clean and safe.”

The pamphlet will be quoted throughout this tour. There is a screen-reader accessible version available on the Vancouver Art Gallery mobile app.

In the dressing room, we first come across a half-moon window. Behind this smoked glass, three peculiar clay heads greet us: *Pupils* in white, *Lens* in red and *Focus* in black, each with striking interventions at eye level.

Pupils, in white porcelain, has their chin tucked slightly down, with hair like a flattened pompadour or fur helmet—flapped over their ears and casting a strong, frame-like shadow. Lips are tensed into a short straight line below a narrow nose. Black pupils float in hollow holes behind the almond shape of open lids. The absence of top eyelid lashes enhances the strangeness of the erratic, lush, black lower lashes.

Lens, in black stoneware, has their chin lifted, with expression focused and steady. Their hair is braided into rows that loop over their nape. Below arched eyebrows, exaggerated eye-shapes frame flat, reflective mirrors.

Focus, in orange terracotta, has hair parted mid-scalp and combed down into a chest length beard. Their nostrils are flared, and their mouth parted to reveal enormous white tusks that curve up from their bottom gums, looping backwards to insert through empty eye sockets.

Throughout the exhibition, Boyle employs coloured clay without a fixed significance. At times geography, race or symbolism might be attributed to the tones—white, black and red—yet just as often the colour of the clay signals nothing but aesthetic choice. The nuanced, non-prescriptive use of clay tones invites us to notice what assumptions we make about narratives and associations of colour, especially when paired with images of people.

Behind these three unusual greeters, the window offers an introductory view into the gallery space, where we might notice other visitors wandering through. There's a black thrust stage, the length of a runway, in the centre of the room, and a row of three vibrant red velvet theatre seats to the left of it. On opposite walls, large target-like circle motifs reminiscent of the Looney Tunes "That's All Folks" cartoon end credits appear behind two striking humanoid sculptures. Offstage beyond the footlights, stands a plexiglass-encased series of 23 miniature black clay figurines.

Each section of The Palace offers an abundance of imagery to consider. As you listen through this tour, I encourage you to pause between each area—to integrate what you've heard and to feel into the space.

What do you hear?

What do you smell?

What does the atmosphere feel like on your skin?

Notice the subtle shifts and movements happening in the space around you...

How do they affect your experience of being here?

To the right of the half-moon window, a long ramp leads up towards the stage, where one can turn left to enter at the back. Alternately, an exit ramp continues straight down towards Stage Right, where we will eventually encounter the animatronic sculpture *Judy*. But first, let's make our entrance onto the stage to mingle with a chorus of ten enchanting ceramic sculptures, and pay our dues to the glamorous, spotlighted *Star*.

Moving up the ramp, we turn to the left and find ourselves under a proscenium arch, at the back end of the long, black stage. On either side of us are rows of multi-coloured ceramic

figures, each around 18 inches tall. Every sculpture is presented inside their own black, four-legged pedestal and encased in plexiglass, bracketing the stage in two rows of 5.

On our right there's *The Potter*, *The Painter*, *The Warming*, *Bitumen* and *Oasis*.

And on our left there's *Scarborough*, *Buy My Image* (John Taylor/Mary Anne Talbot), *The Sybarites*, *The Sculptor* and *The Peacock Spider*.

From the pamphlet:

"We are not just observers in society—we participate. Ten ceramic sculptures reference elite and popular ceramics to evoke the social factors that shape us: the lottery of cultural affiliation, the global environmental crisis, gender non-conformity, rituals of attraction and pleasure-seeking excess."

Moving forward, there's a sense of being witnessed and welcomed onto the stage by these characters. The light has shifted now, too. Strong beams focus on specific works and stretch into geometric reflections that dance over the floor and ceiling.

Every now and then there's a wobble from the right of the room, and a whirr from the left. Irregular movement rhythms that peak curiosity but first...

We move down the runway, shifting attention from right to left.

First, we pass between *The Potter* and *Scarborough*: two terracotta figurines.

The Potter sits in a familiar potter's stance, yet instead of a wheel with wet clay, a stack of fully realized, culturally specific pots towers between their legs. These ornate vessels refer to historical pottery from Ghana, France, China, Greece, Peru and Egypt. From a side view, the seated figure has no head, but from a frontal view decorative eyes painted on the top pot of the stack creates an illusion of character at head-level. Bodies are often described as vessels, and clay can be a metaphor for flesh. Earthen vessels unite humanity as the oldest objects made across all global cultures.

Scarborough makes reference to Boyle's place of origin: a culturally diverse Toronto suburb that was colonized by European settlers in the early 1700s. Here represented by a folksy, bug-eyed wanderer in a vest and cut-off jean shorts with a pink, pointed tongue extended between miniature tusks below a bat-like nose. They carry a plastic grocery bag in one hand, and a bindle-stick over their opposite shoulder, with a 1997 Scarborough Bicentennial coin where a knotted kerchief-bag might be.

Continuing forward...

The painter gazes into a mirror that has cartoonish facial features inked onto its surface. *The Painter's* face is blank white porcelain, but comes to life if the onlooker carefully adjusts their position to align the features drawn on the mirror with the figure's blank reflection.

Buy My Image commemorates John Taylor, an 18th century British trans-man who became a soldier and sailor during the French Revolutionary wars. The sculpture is made from black clay in a flat-back style, designed to sit on a mantle. Taylor is shown in a double-breasted Naval suit selling a collection of tchotchkes, including a tiny ceramic clown. In one hand they present the world's oldest known figurative sculpture: the Venus des Hols—a symbol of fertility.

Next, we pass between *The Warming* and *Sybarites*.

The Warming is a European-style terracotta figure, dressed in a modest floor-length dress, a bonnet and contemporary black sunglasses. A giant bronze sunflower with tiny black clay seeds emerges from their woven backpack. It blooms over their head like a parasol, shading them from ever-mounting temperatures.

The Sybarites dance in colourful cross-era European court garb. The sensual trio congregates around a teal and pink marbled fountain, from which a stream of silver liquid erupts and flows down onto one's head, another's chest, and the third's mouth.

Bitumen in glazed black clay reminiscent of fossil fuels, their sky-facing bum and legs clad in regal knickerbockers and delicate shoes. Bent over at the waist, their upper body is fully submerged inside a rooted tree stump. A brass rod emerges from their back to support a puppet-like, grimacing mask. The mask's fierce eyes stare under furrowed brows, and the golden-fanged mouth snarls.

Across the stage is a tiny porcelain sculptor working away at forming a relatively giant bust out of a mound of raw terracotta clay. Headless, she senses with her hands where to chisel next. Half the terracotta mound is sculpted into a face with a beak-like nose that curls down into a pointed tip. The other half remains as a lump, awaiting her skillful hands to complete the portrait, and perhaps herself.

The last sculpture on the right is *Oasis*, a glorious, intersex, full-gendered nude. The noble figure's arms and legs are shapely and long, they pose elegantly on one elbow. Glazed pink lips, nipples and sexual organs blossom against chalky white skin. An homage to fluid and trans bodies, crafted to be worshipped.

And to the left, an exquisite black hand is perched on spread fingertips to display a vibrant manicure; fine-painted synthetic nails pointed into stilettos. An oversized peacock spider sits on the wrist like a corsage, dancing to claim a mate. Two of eight legs and his abdomen exclaim skyward. He flaunts a handsome exoskeletal pattern in blue and red, framed by a fringe of yellow.

Finally, we find ourselves at the front of the stage, confronted by a curvy, life-sized abstracted torso mounted on a decadently upholstered pottery wheel. Recalling the stack of pots in front of *The Potter*, *Centering*'s shapely body is costumed in bedazzled textiles from hat-top to tripod bottom. The garment was collaboratively created by Shary Boyle and Toronto/London textile artist Grant Heaps. Hand-applied and sewn beads, crystals, feathers, human hair, netting and sequins adorn its surface, suggesting a fantastical celebrity performance costume. On the flat velvet surface of the tripod, a collection of pottery tools has been similarly jeweled. Unfunctional, they rest like forgotten relics.

Centering is coin operated. Onstage to the left of the sculpture, there is a sign at head-height with instructions. At the base of the sign is a clay facade housing a coin machine. When a looney or tooney is placed in the frontal slot, a central foot pedal must be quickly pressed to activate the 15-second performance. The pedal is positioned in front of a raised strip-light, which creates an arched distinction between us and the Star. All proceeds here are donated to YWCA's Inspirations Studio.

To access the next part of the exhibition, you are welcome to step down the stairs to the right of *Centering*, there are two steps, or to return the way you came, and follow the ramp down to the left. Offstage is a suitable moment to pause and reflect before moving on to part two of the described tour.

PART TWO:

Here we are, on the right side of the stage, in the section the pamphlet calls Puppet Show at the Wax Museum. Standing atop a red platform, at just over 6 feet tall, is *Judy*. Behind her, a wall-painting of hypnotic blue concentric circles encloses a bold red center.

Judy has a curvy, realistic female body. She is dressed in black like a stagehand: a turtleneck tucked into stretch jeans, tucked into vintage leather knee high, cube heeled boots. Her dark hair is a curly halo around her uncanny, hyperreal wax face. Her brows and lashes: unruly curtains that spout, unreasonably long, over her solemn expression. Struck by her living likeness, we barely notice her second pair of arms at first. Three of her hands operate hand puppets, the fourth an unsettling, androgynous, randomly dancing marionette.

From left to right:

The Old Wife: Judy of the famously violent Punch and Judy puppet show

The Activist: Homage to Angela Davis in camo

The Witch: green-skinned threat of Dorothy's

and dangling from marionette strings,

The Worrier: embodying maternal anxiety, grey with concern

Suddenly, *Judy's* wrist pivots! And The Worrier does her eternal two-step.

Judy is flanked by a collection of 6 figurative drawings, each in dynamic colours of ink and gouache:

From left to right:

Drag Show: An ambiguous and contemplative young Black figure is seated at a dressing room table. They gaze at themselves in a lightbulb framed mirror. Gender, race and age are all at question here, complicated by the mask of an old bearded white male character the figure is holding, either about to wear or remove. The table before them is covered in make-up, this whole scene referencing stage performers of all kinds.

Ventriloquist: a tiny, wide eyed wooden child-puppet with a crew cut stands upon the lap of a voluptuous seated figure shown from the neck down. The child holds one index finger close to closed lips in a posture of innocence.

Punch: A historically violently misogynistic puppet with bulging eyes and a long, hooked nose leers over elderly praying hands that hold a rosary. A hollow grin shows a row of chiclet teeth and this whole face is aching with the red of too much booze. They wear a pope's hat and a delicately crocheted veil that hangs over their shoulders.

Me And The Dead Matter: Two masked male figures in jumpsuits, dainty shoes and top hats co-puppeteer a sexy femme-presenting rag puppet. A circular mouth and demure downturned eyes with long lashes are drawn upon a balloon-like head. The puppet's body is a sheet gathered into three sections: one torso, one hips, one legs, and flimsy rope arms. The figures are lit from above against a shadowy, dark background. Black rods allow the masked puppeteers to man-handle the puppet.

Misogyny + Misanthropy: Two clasping hands, one Black with badly bitten nails, one white with long decorative acrylic nails, hold spherical finger puppets on their index fingers. The two spheres are painted to resemble human heads, facing off in question and communion.

The Collaboration: Three nude womanly figures of different scales and colours: yellow, blue and pink. Highly focused, they circle a miniature, muscular, white male figure, using paint brushes to decorate his body.

We will now move back towards the front of the stage, to encounter the series of miniature figures titled *The Procession*.

Once again, you are invited here to pause, to reflect, to settle, to notice before moving on with your visit.

Please select part three of the described tour to continue.

PART THREE:

We are now positioned in front of *The Procession*. From the pamphlet:

“Millions of people have taken to the streets to demand a more just world. Acts of protest are also celebrations of humanity and the hopeful possibility of change. Community happens when people act collectively to help the vulnerable and include the stranger. One person’s parade is another’s riot.”

On the wall behind the Parade, three circus-like spotlights in primary red, yellow and blue, overlap. Marching on top of a long and narrow white plinth is a group of 23 individual black stoneware sculptures of small, varying sizes.

Life-sized pairs of hands are held in shadow-puppet gestures... palms together with fingers pointed upwards like a tent, wrists crossed and thumbs linked suggest a shadow of birdwings in flight. Among the hands, two figures in medical masks carry unmarked flags, following a horn-playing leader.

Other characters include a family gently stepping over the toppled statue of a military horseman, head broken off in protest, riot police in full military gear, four drummers striking a shared drum, a woman in a witch-hat pushing an old man in a wheelchair, a man holding an infant aloft in glory, and a mastectomy-altered mermaid cradling a lobster and salmon in each arm.

Themes of protest, carnival and street activism collide, glorying in the myriad ways people gather, and collective action is born.

Continuing to the left is the row of red theatre chairs we noticed through the glass from the dressing room.

From the pamphlet:

“Take a seat and choose a song from the artist’s playlist assembled to score the exhibition. Consider how music changes everything. The artist pays her respects to all the lyricists and musicians who make our pain bearable and our lives euphoric, and who illuminate our innermost thoughts through the glory of song.”

On the wall to the left of the chairs is the ink and gouache drawing titled *Baptiste Kills His Father*, which reinvents a moment from the 1945 French film titled *Children of Paradise*, directed by Marcel Carné. A gentle mime named Baptiste murders his abusive father onstage in an off-script coup d’état. Here, Baptiste stands with limbs splayed, in a white Pierrot costume which billows in the gust of emotion. From his right hand extends a blade, which pierces the torso of his shrunken, airborne father. The father’s puppet-like arms are lifted in surrender, expressing this strike has effectively tilted the power dynamic.

Onwards to the left, we confront the *White Elephant* in the room, positioned in front of a final, black-and-white portal of concentric circles. This elongated, skinny, entirely-white animatronic figure is seated on a plinth in a catalogue-model posture, yet towers to over 9 feet tall. They wear an enormous hand-knitted prim 40’s-style sweater, tailored woolen slacks, lace-up oxfords and a chin-length banged bob haircut. Their hands and face are porcelain, with eyes and mouth painted in dramatic doll-like black. Without warning and high above us, their head spins a fast 360, hair fanning out dramatically. This spinning sound and motion has been calling our attention from the moment we entered the space, as we tried to stay focused on what is before us.

Two drawings flank this haunting presence:

To the left, *Lone Gunman*: A young white, blonde, white fairy-tale boy happily travels along a path, scattering fearful frogs, snakes and rodents. A pink, flesh-like assault rifle in hand, he is surrounded by dreamlike visions of the Wolfman, a small woman protesting in greek robe and mask, and a finger-shushing Goethe puppet.

To the right, *The Settler*: a pregnant young white woman in a pioneer dress and bonnet sits smoking marijuana off the back edge of a wagon in a wheaty field. A heavy gold chain drapes across her lap, her shoulder gripped by a strong, masculine hand inside the vehicle,

her nipples noticeably pierced through her sheer-white garment. A coin purse sits next to her, with a few stray silver medallions spilling carelessly along the wooden bench.

From the pamphlet:

“The inheritance of whiteness includes outsized privilege and legacies of violence. It presumes innocence while masking avarice. Guilt, denial and confusion cause some white people to grow, some to grow angry, some to stay mute. Like body dysmorphia, the invented racial category of “white” has stretched meaning beyond sense, exaggerating power and disproportionately assigning value.”

The artist describes *White Elephant* as a call to confront and acknowledge. An invitation to white viewers to cease avoiding the topic of white supremacy, and to begin the necessary conversations and actions towards justice. Recognizing that Canadian systems such as prison, policing, immigration, health care and education utilize white supremacy to oppress and control non-white people is a first step towards the possibility of restorative justice and imagining an equitable world.

There is an alcove in the back corner of the Gallery, beside the bathroom and behind the theatre seats, where a short film about the making of *White Elephant* is screened and an artist statement is posted, also available on the mobile app.

And finally, we’ve made our way to the half-circle glass and back of *Pupils*, *Lens* and *Focus*—to discover the gallery-view of these heads reveals a delightful surprise.

Inside the head of *Pupils*, two tiny black figures stand peeking through the eyeholes. Their round heads are what we first perceived as pupils from the front, their skinny black fingers wrap around the eyelids like a windowsill, becoming rows of eyelashes.

Lens has human eye-shaped holes cut into the back of their hollow head. A viewer can peer into these holes and look through the two-way mirrors of *Lens*’ “eyes”—in an effort to spot their own eyes reflected within them, and the half-circle mirror.

And *Focus* presents human eyes facing back at us, mounted on the tips of the tusks that pierce through their hollow sockets.

Only now do we understand the half-circle glass is a two-way mirror. Our faces and the three busts are reflected here, while the interior of the dressing room is hidden. Those on the entrance side are now witnessing us in a way that we cannot witness them. How does it feel

to be watched in this way, without knowing who the onlookers are? What are they thinking as they look at us, as we try and puzzle out all the perspectives, all of the points of view?

And that concludes our time together in the Palace. I'll invite you to pause, to reflect and to consider all that has surfaced.

What do you hear?

What do you smell?

What does the atmosphere feel like on your skin?

Notice the subtle shifts and movements happening in the space around you...

How do they affect your experience of being here?

Thank you for listening to the described tour of Shary Boyle's *Outside the Palace of Me*. We welcome you to share your valuable feedback with us.

Contact learn@vanartgallery.bc.ca to share your experience!

Produced by danielle wensley in collaboration with the artist Shary Boyle