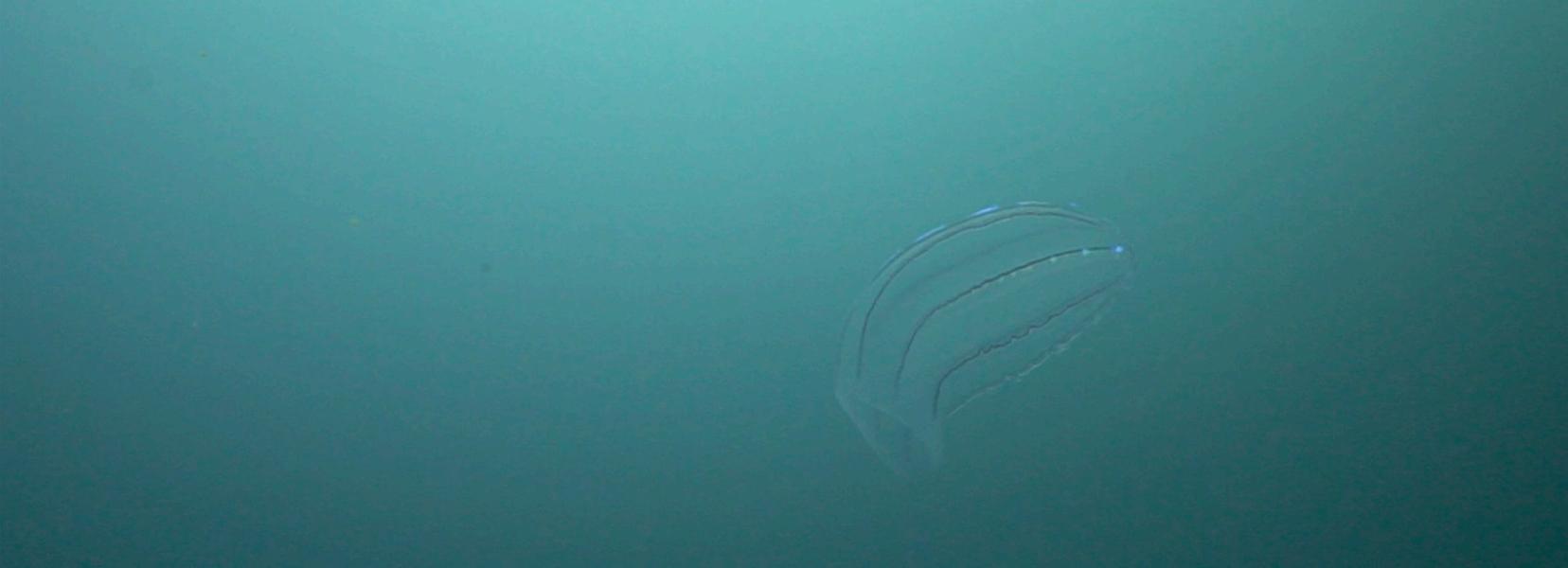


nichola feldman-kiss \ SIREN

Karen Alexander Curator Koffler Gallery Toronto 11 2022 – 03 2023 A siren is a mythological coastal bird/woman who, like the mermaid, is known to seafaring folk for her beguiling beauty and mesmerizing call. Her song is an exquisite beacon and a spellbinding lure. Siren is conceived as Welcome -a collective sonic embrace celebrating our return to, and delivery from, common waters. Siren honors the urgent will to survival through tenacious journeys into unknown futures while invoking ambivalent emotions associated with grand passages and existential transitions.

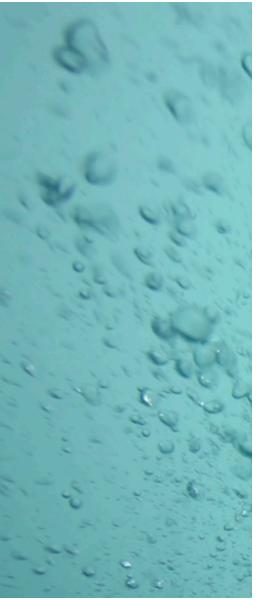




planet species animal human water free. Agent. in motion on the move in flight of the Earth of the Land of the Ocean her ecology. here and there sea and ice wind and current seed and settlement. birthing stretching growing learning lamenting fearing conquering breaking bruising rejoicing rounding looping surviving dying becoming born and dying anew a willful urge an urgent call to return a traumatic flight an existential passage an Oceanic Fantasy, breathe breathe breathe, compete create destroy win release rush. rush of anticipation. rush of adventure. bully dominate maim kill rush. greed to pillage. rush to sex. defile the bloodline. crush. settle colonize give it a name call it Power. a Nation State. reorganize order categorize Institutionalize Rule of Law Religion and State. spread the Language. spread the Lie. Authority syntax CAPITAL Letters the Printing Press to the Internet. educate assimilate annihilate exploit and syphon up. exercise brutality. divide and conquer. caste and creed colour and other. clear the land. corral the people camps and cages prison and zoos guns and cameras walls and fences borders and zones. evidence documents and predatory bureaucracy keep some in and others out. in flight the Siren calls. She is playful. She is Welcome. refuge beckons hope is horizon. She is lunar tide and current. She is elemental. She is the sun. She is the storm, wind against the sea ice desert sands fields of wheat solid rock. She is refusal. She is fleeting accelerating heartbeat raising hairs disembodied Witness universal Ancestor broken from tribe tribalized anew you and me over millennia peopling the planet. diaspora.



Siren sounds punctuate the urban cityscape. The familiar yet mysterious trills and tremolos of the Common loon resonate from my Ontario childhood. Ululations are improvised vocal expressions common to feminine cultures of the global south. The sounds are performed individually and collectively as a kind of vocal applause. Ululations celebrate arrival and clear paths forward. Ululating produces a primal physical and emotional release –clears the sinuses, lacrimal glands, the skin. The ululation trill is diverse to geography and reflects political ideologies that govern women's relative freedom to express and emote. Siren harmonics arise from sonic diversity among geo-specific vocalizations in polyphonic play.



Reflections on SIREN

Karen Alexander

blessing the boats (at St. Mary's)

may the tide
that is entering even now
the lip of our understanding
carry you out
beyond the face of fear
may you kiss
the wind then turn from it
certain that it will
love you back may you
open your eyes to water
water waving forever
and may you in your innocence
sail through this that 1

by Lucille Clifton 1936-2010





SIREN is a solo exhibition by the Toronto-based interdisciplinary artist nichola feldman-kiss. At the core of SIREN is reflection on concepts of diaspora, migration and displacement, the paradox of national boundaries and borders within an ecology of elemental flows. A new large-scale immersive installation of digital photography, specially commissioned by the Koffler Gallery for SIREN, sits alongside contextual artworks, which together dynamically engage stories of traumatic oceanic crossings and the geopolitics of the climate emergency intertwined with colonial narratives and diasporic themes of movement and migration. Siren III is sculptural in form. A ceiling-mounted grid of LED video panels is suspended askew toward two plantation teak steamer chairs framed by a plastic turf rug. The artwork is a meditation on boundaries and borders between the past and the present –abstracted aquatic depictions, and digital animations are set against an arresting ambisonic soundscape of disembodied voices. Siren III weaves a haunting elliptical narrative of panic, submersion, and seemingly last-minute survival.

From this transatlantic viewpoint, feldman-kiss's artworks couldn't be more timely, as English news bulletins and national newspapers are saturated with alarmist articles regarding the number of migrants crossing the English Channel in small boats from Europe². The exhibition's title plays on the double meaning of 'siren' as both the penetrating sound of emergency vehicles that punctuate the urban cityscape and the more mythical associations to hybrid female creatures said to have lured sailors to their doom. feldman-kiss designed their soundscape as a feminine counterbalance to the seduction of the open water and the distant horizon, so often considered masculine spaces of war and adventure. The vocal work featured in Siren soundscapes results from close collaboration among eight local women who perform the artist's international chorus –together, they create a delicate balance between alarm and comfort. feldman-kiss began working with improvised ululation in 2018 with two shoreline performances on a remote pier of Toronto Island. Through a hypnotic mix of traditional and experimental sounds, their vocal 'experiments' in the public realm inspired the choral element of *Siren III*'s complex score. Ululation, or zagareet, is an unwritten vocal tradition practised by women across diverse cultures from Africa through the Levant. The high-pitched vocalisations are made by rapidly beating the back of the tongue against the uvula. Ululations are a

kind of vocal applause intending to Welcome and clear paths forward. Through feldman-kiss's listening, the voices do more; they are female empowerment imbued with the spirit of survival and rebirth. These polycultural sounds refer to broader associations related to non-western traditions of story-telling and oral forms of expression. For feldman-kiss, the disembodied chorus acts as a witness and guide. Along with the artist, the performers' diverse backgrounds bring a sense of the personal to the artwork as they embody a tangible lived experience of migration and transition, which echoes throughout the work.

surfacings sets the scene and the tone of the exhibition. Impressionistic views of the sun, sea, and light filtered through the ocean surface establish SIREN's unsettling sense of bodily dislocation, fractured narratives and images –the blue of the sky seeming to mirror the blue of the sea. feldman-kiss reorganised video frames grabbed from Siren III ocean footage into a grid of twenty-five ambiguous aquatic windows. Taken together, the grid of printed video stills offers a sense of anticipation and foreboding, suggesting both exit from and entry to another worldly pool of memories. With their depiction of surface tension, the artwork explores boundaries and borders, a common theme throughout the works in SIREN. Are we above or are we below the surface of the water? With no figure ever depicted, we always try to orient our perspective to the works encountered. Sourced from a few seconds of raw material, the screen grabs of



surfacings become liminal spaces for transformation and collective remembering.

Instinctively drawn to Newfoundland's North Atlantic coast as a place of meditation and communion, the development of this body of work began during a period of personal need for feldman-kiss to recover and heal. "I had become brokenhearted for me and for the world. I suffered a moral injury. I needed to self-repair". Keen to produce more life-affirming work in the wake of a long experience as a defendant to a predaceous litigation. Late 2017, feldman-kiss discovered the Sea-Watch online post that would take their work in an unexpected direction. The hour-long video depicts one of the humanitarian organisation's most harrowing Mediterranean Sea rescue missions. Vulnerable rubber raftbound passengers, desperate to find sanctuary, are pitted against the might of the sea and the calculated actions of Libyan coast guards working to defend the shores of Europe from intruders. The viewer is placed in the centre of the action. While many people are saved by the Sea-Watch rescuers, we also witness on-camera drownings. The Sea-Watch video shows events unfolding in real-time without commentary. All we hear is the direct sound from lifeguards and victims.

On viewing the Sea-Watch video, feldman-kiss made connections to local and international ideas of diaspora with the traumas of contemporary people in migration. The





artist's quest was not to dwell on the horrifying and morbid, but to discover a shared sense of optimism and recovery by counterbalancing the brutality of the sea with the healing power of collective feminine voices. The artist has characterised their development of the body of work featured in SIREN, as "an investigation of a lifelong mermaid call, an unquenchable tidalpull of return to the complex planetary geocultural corridor that is the Atlantic Ocean". In the development of this body of new work, feldman-kiss saught to move away from the optics of symbolic figurative representations to explore a more abstract presence coupled with their ongoing interest in the highly politicised subject matter. From their initial encounter with the Sea-Watch video, feldman-kiss engaged with the (near) drowner's viewpoint, a decision considerably reinforced by their own love of the water and of the deep-sea. In a multi-layered localised reimaging of the rescue mission, for in Siren III the artist adopts a first-person perspective. The imposing immersive installation explores varying states of physical and psychological consciousness and disorientation triggered by drowning, not to reproduce the trauma heartlessly, but to consider an alternative narrative. The discombobulating experience of entering the water is over instantly, leaving viewers with a rush of excitement or gripped with fear. The chaotic sounds of the rescue mission above the surface disappear, giving way to the sensory connection of bodily heartbeats. Once underwater, 'the drowner' experiences moments of clarity, mystery and wonder as they explore an unknown world, encountering strange creatures and the ominous presence of a shifting iceberg. The arresting and, at times, soothing sounds of polyphonic ululations become a sonic guide through an underwater dreamscape.

Set in the waters off the coast of Newfoundland, and having developed Siren III in close collaboration with the local dive shop operator, early pandemic restrictions shifted Siren III from a highly interpersonal onsite production into a remote shoot, with feldman-kiss directing at distance from her downtown Toronto studio. The eleven-minute abstracted drama is ominous and mesmerising in equal measure. As we sink in surrender to the murky water, we are carried to an uncertain destination, and eventual escape. Filmed from the viewpoint of a submersed protagonist, the moment of entry into the water is fleeting before descending into a teal-blue abyss. Guided by the soundtrack, the viewer encounters a barely discernible seascape of fractured images, some real, some constructed. An iceberg drifts by, blocking our view of the sunny sky beyond the surface, creating a real sense of entrapment. With intention to work with the local crew's intimate experience with the ice flow and working from a position of sensuality, feldman-kiss rendered the movement of the ice majestic and hypnotic. The iceberg plays a central role in the underwater narrative of submersion and escape. SIREN is "an Oceanic Fantasy, a return to the water from whence we all came," and a kind of back-to-the-womb embrace before a spiritual rebirth.

As we experience the aquatic shifts and changes below the surface, escape is by no means certain. The ever-present





disembodied voices offer a delicate balance between alarm, regeneration, and healing. It is only when the ululations rise collectively from the depths –forcing the sinking perspective from those depths into a whirlwind escape, that survival is certain. Harmonic ululations situate the feminine voice centrally. The highly sculpted soundscape combines a symphonic manipulation of the female voice to mobilise ideas of the uncanny, as varying levels of accentuated audio provoke an unsettling bodily awareness in the viewer. The deliberate positioning of the hanging subwoofer speakers optimises the transmission of physical and environmental sounds, offering us the feeling of aquatic suspension. An even more complex sound mix is presented via headphones, four on the wall and two perched on the replica mid-century plantation teak steamer deck chairs. The audio mix experienced via the headphones is intense and personal –only in this intimate space does feldman-kiss feature the original sounds of the Sea-Watch rescue mixed with ululation samples. Crucially, it is only via the headphones that the rescue is confirmed with the few simple words "Give me your hand!" reproduced directly from the original Sea-Watch mission documentation.

The multisensory experience of SIREN invites us to consider our own sense of self, humanity and freedom. The poetics recall Lucille Clifton's moving short poem, *blessing the boats*, about female survival in the face of life's challenges and transformations. The poem's last two lines read: "and may you in your innocence / sail through this to that". Clifton's words offer a deep sense of wisdom and hope. Towards the end of the *Siren III* loop, feldman-kiss's on screen vision undergoes a radical material shift from iceberg video data into a stylised digital portal to escape and resurfacing, creating a quickening of motive, movement, and change. The highly crafted video editing invokes ideas of lucid dreaming. Image and sound collides. Who drives the narrative, the unseen protagonist, or the chorus?

If Siren III presents and reframes a narrative of trauma, in contrast, planet species animal human water free Agent. in motion on the move in flight of the Earth of the Land of the Ocean her ecology. here and there sea and ice wind and current seed and settlement. (study for Siren III) is more playful. As an artist with a deep commitment to collective practice, feldman-kiss worked in close collaboration with



Derya Akkaynak³, an oceanographer and scientist specialising in videographic colour calibration of oceanographic research data. In feldman-kiss's usual internet research focussed process they found their co-creator for this two-channel video installation online. Using the raw iceberg video data from which *Siren III* was assembled, feldman-kiss and Akkaynak created an ever-evolving seabed of dazzling marine colour coral-like communities. Presented on two curved LED screen nests mounted on simple maple ply plinths, the kaleidoscopic video offers an intimate view into a shifting seabed ripe with energy and possibility. Loops of prominent orange electrical cords that power the installation with orange gallery accent walls consciously echo the high visibility personal survival equipment used by the Sea-Watch rescuers.

Siren III's presentation on LED screens adjacent to the steamer chairs and the digital tapestry forces a collision of interior and exterior worlds, suggesting a tense and complex relationship between the public and the private, the personal and the political. The plantation teak steamer chairs, associated with mid-century ocean crossings, reference feldman-kiss's collective family history. The large-scale digital render on fine silk drapery suggests part luxury-hotel, part theatre, part sculptural object. The prominent display of 'behind-the-scenes' electronics infrastructure of Siren III is in direct contrast to the elegance and tenderness on display with the finely printed silk tapestry of Siren IV. The physical presence of the silk separates the various artworks, offers space for contemplation and softens





the light emitted from the many video screens throughout the gallery space. Materially, digital textiles provide a dreamlike quality coupled with a sense of beauty and domesticity in counterbalance with the imposing electronics of the sound and screen technology. As images morph and change, an aquatic world awakens and takes shape on the screens, and we ebb and flow in sync with the penetrating soundscape and jewel-like images. As we take stock of what we hear, we realise that the ululations form an 'other' space in an ever-increasing call to consciousness.

feldman-kiss urges us not only to engage visually and sonically, but also to connect viscerally and spiritually with, to borrow words from the title of one of their previous works, "the plight of the sufferer". The empathy the artist hopes to elicit from the viewer is not one of pity but of intolerance for the enormity of senseless human suffering and environmental loss unfolding locally and globally. Linking experiences of human displacement between present and past homelands is an essential element of the show. SIREN references historical migration by land and sea to create empathic pathways into the traumatic experiences of today's many hopeful and vulnerable people in flight toward refuge. Unfortunately, despite reaching 'safety', many are not welcomed. As Brendan Kennedy's 2017 Toronto Star exposé, Caged in Canada⁴, revealed of Canada's shameful treatment of African asylee Ebrahim Touré who suffered 69 months of indefinite detention, mainly served as an inmate of the Lindsay 'superjail' maximum security prison, followed by years of

immigration limbo and continued harassment by the Canada Border Services Agency.

feldman-kiss's ongoing research and site-specific explorations directly challenge and disrupt dominant media narratives by looking and thinking more deeply to discover the unseen and the unknown. Forgoing any adherence to documentary or narrative realism. feldman-kiss creates enigmatic spaces that deny the viewer a comforting 'lesson in history', theirs is a critique and meditation on the here and now. As the musicologist, writer and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha suggests, rather than speaking for communities, feldman-kiss 'speaks nearby'. feldman-kiss sets out to reframe and represent the Sea-Watch narrative with an engaged political reading as a challenge to reductive reactionary newspeak interpretations. The histories feldman-kiss prompts the audience to keep close to the surface are our own contemporary lived experiences coupled with an expanded sense of collective kinship that encompasses our planet, species, families, cultures and nations –each informing the other.

The questions posed by the artworks regarding the seduction of the ocean, intertwined with more brutal and savage memories, is an effort to remould colonial and diasporic histories, to disrupt the tendency to sit back and consume the 'tragedy of others'. Set against the vibrant background of multicultural contemporary Toronto, SIREN acknowledges the stories of thousands of unknowns. The SIREN chorus calls us to remember and to witness as their urgent and compelling voices offer an embodied



sense of warning, healing and psychic repair. SIREN's sonic register is essential to unlocking our sense of place. Visceral discomfort and political uncertainty haunt the work, evoking possibility, and failure. The artworks' dynamic sound elements address us directly, but at times they also seem to fold back into and beyond the speakers to their own deeper inner world. With eyes on present-day war, transnational migration, and environmental collapse, feldman-kiss's urgent concern is for our species and our planet and shows an expansive perspective on what is family, community and humanity.

Endnotes

- 1. Clifton, Lucille. "Blessing the Boats (at St. Mary's)." Quilting: Poems, 1987-1990, BOA Ed., Brockport, NY, 1995.
- 2. Taylor, Diane. "Cold Comfort Kent: Where Small-Boat Arrivals Receive a Fraying Welcome." The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, 21 Nov. 2022, tinyurl.com/yvdz289r.
- 3. Derya Akkaynak is a Turkish mechanical engineer and oceanographer at the Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute. Underwater photography is often compromised by dull and incorrect colours. Akkaynak developed Sea-thru, an algorithm that can remove the artefacts and distortions that occur in underwater imagery.
- 4. Kennedy, Brendan. "Caged by Canada." *Thestar.com*, Toronto Star, 17 Mar. 2017, https://tinyurl.com/mwavsc83.



nichola feldman-kiss

nichola feldman-kiss creates across disciplines with emphasis on relational, lens and hybrid media technologies presented as social engagement, institution intervention and public installation. feldman-kiss's process-rich research proposes identity as a fugitive concept while focusing on the body as a contested site of cultural production.

The artist's 25 year oeuvre is an ongoing critique of the Colonial paradigm (the violent ingestion of land, resources, peoples and cultures). Their artworks and installations lay bare the entanglements of globalised order that insist rights onto some while withholding the same entitlements from others, and ask us to reconsider difficult questions about what it means to be conscious social bodies within the contemporary moment. nichola feldman-kiss art and technology innovations and institution interventions have been hosted by the National Research Council of Canada, the Ottawa Hospital Eye Institute, Canada's Department of National Defence, and the United Nations among others.

nichola feldman-kiss holds an MFA from California Institute of the Arts. She a is a first-generation Canadian of the Caribbean diaspora and a repatriated citizen of Germany and Jamaica live working between Toronto (Tkaronto) and rural Newfoundland (Ktaqmkuk).

Karen Alexander

Karen Alexander is a London-based independent film and moving image curator and researcher. She has worked with and for the Royal College of Art and the British Film Institute and as a guest curator for a wide range of UK-based cultural institutions and art galleries, including Iniva, the Serpentine Gallery Up Projects, Tate, Autograph, London and the Watershed Bristol.

She has lectured and spoken widely about film, race and representation and contributed to numerous publications. Her research areas are UK artists' film and video, feminist and post-colonial politics of representation and gender. In 2014 Karen founded Curating Conversations, a practice-based professional development initiative aimed at emerging visual artists. She curated Whip It Good: Spinning From History's Filthy Mind by Danish/Trinidadian artist Jeannette Ehlers in 2015 and the Black Atlantic Cinema Club for Autograph ABP. In 2017 she co-founded Philomela's Chorus, a moving image commissioning and exhibition platform for women of colour, and in 2018 curated Dream Time: We All Have Stories for Nuit Blanche Toronto. As guest curator for the Cinema Rediscovered Festival in Bristol, she curated A Passion for Remembering: The Films of Maureen Blackwood in 2019 and Black Paris in 2021. Karen is on the board of Longplayer and is currently a tutor at Central St Martins, University of the Arts, London.

List of Works

surfacings (study for Siren III) 2022

photo installation

25 video stills wall mounted in wall mounted in 5 x 5 grid installation (134" wide x 79" tall) colour photo ink prints on Hahnemühle photo gloss (15"x 26" each) mounted on 3mm Alupanel with matte lamination

Siren III 2020-2022

single-channel video installation with two-channel mixed device soundtrack

indefinite HD video loop, 5:3 (12:45 minutes) ceiling mounted LED video wall (1.5m x 2.5m) with rigging and clamps electronics peripherals and cabling binaural headphone composition stereo subwoofer composition 6 wireless headphones 2 pendant subwoofers 2 plantation teak steamer chairs 2 headphone mounts, 4 wall hooks

Siren IV 2021

digital tapestry

3D render

6 x 16mm digital silk prints (42" wide x 120" tall) wall mount hardware, aircraft cable

planet species animal human water free Agent. in motion on the move in flight of the Earth of the Land of the Ocean her ecology. here and there sea and ice wind and current seed and settlement. (study for Siren III) 2021

with Derya Akkaynak (Al colourist)

two-channel floor mounted video installation (silent)

indefinite HD video loop, 16:9 (3:43 minutes) LED video wall (1.5m x 2.5m) electronics peripherals, cabling, 2 maple ply risers (1.5m x 2.5m x 10cm)



Sea-Watch 06 November 2017

Witness document (1:07.58 minutes) (expect discomfort)

courtesy of Sea-Watch

Gratitude

Sea-Watch

Karen Alexander, Curator

Adrienne Matheuszik, 3D design Caroline Christie, Video editor Michelle Irving, Sound design Rick Stanley, Camera

Lodi Awad, Vocals Valerie Buhagiar, Vocals Blandine Kan, Vocals Memory Makuri, Vocals Ruth Mathiang, Vocals Leila Moslemi, Vocals Roula Said, Vocals Maryem Tollar, Vocals

Ebrahim Touré, Friend Tovi Gruzman, Gear Derya Akkaynak, Al colourist Andrew Savery-Whiteway, Tech support Luyeza Lou, Print broker Jeremy Darby, Cantebury Studios Jonathan Groeneweg, Smokestack Studio

Mike Dunn, Khemia Design Kyle Duffield, A/V integration

Canada Council for the Arts

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Pouch Cove Foundation

GTR Industries Partners in Art

The Koffler exhibition team

Dr. Damian! Susana Erazo June Girvan Anita, Guggy and D Art Spin Toronto

all of you who have relentlessly supported me through the journey of SIREN and know who you are and enjoy privacy



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nichola feldman-kiss \ SIREN is a powerful and visceral mediation on borders, boundaries and elemental flows. At any time it would have been a thrilling statement to present this profound artwork, but just now, after a proterated period of pandemic introspection, and as the world erupts into environmental and geopolitical uncertainty, the many existential questions the artworks ask seem more urgent and more important than ever.

nichola feldman-kiss's life work has been a restlessly insistent exploration of corporeality, complex identity, and autobiography. The searching questions posed by their artworks are more relevant and more timely now than ever as Canada struggles to align its policies and practices with equity priorities that reflect the pluralistic values and multicultural histories of Canadian society.

It has been an enormous pleasure to work with nichola feldman-kiss to realise this exhibition. The Koffler Gallery is indeed very proud of the exhibition and are grateful for the opportunity to share SIREN with you.



We are deeply grateful to our many partners and colleagues without whom this exhibition would have been impossible to realise. We are very proud that SIREN is a Primary Exhibition of the Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival, and we are also greatly indebted to the visionary team at Partners in Art for supporting this exhibition. We are grateful for the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council, and also to the specialist technicians and installers whose skills made light of the show's technical challenges. Behind the whole exhibition stands the experienced wisdom of our Guest Curator, Karen Alexander, and I would also like to personally acknowledge the dedicated work and friendship of colleagues Interim Executive Director Lucy White and Interim Administrator Jasmine Spei, whose terms with Koffler ended shortly before SIREN opened.

Anthony Sargent Interim Director Koffler Centre of the Arts Toronto 2023











What is a mermaid, really? I wonder, is She the call that propels the seeker into the blue? Abandonment into flight? Is She the mirage of desperation? The voice of salinity? Desire itself on the way back to the womb?





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