

Artist Statement: Final Expressive Art Project

“The Canadian Sieve”

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“The Canadian Sieve” is a multimedia short film about the Chinese Canadian immigrant experience using a mixed audio track to breathe cultural authenticity and emotion into accompanying watercolor and ink illustrations. The artwork is inspired by “Beyond Walls: Border Epistemologies and the Politics of Migration,” a short essay by Mary Gilmartin, to further elucidate the colonial roots of discrimination that persist in Canada’s consciousness as the nation faces a global pandemic.

What is the Artwork Investigating?

On January 9, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced the possibility of a new coronavirus stemming from Wuhan, China (WHO, 2020). Presently, the world is still reeling from the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic as nations, communities, and individuals are being impacted in unprecedented ways. Over this course, the year 2020 also saw social upheaval as awareness for numerous social issues came to light as they were further exacerbated by the tense and marginalizing conditions of COVID-19.

The pandemic, as it was tied to China, immediately put a potential target on not only Chinese individuals but also those who appear of Asian heritage (Choi, 2021). As a result, there have been a marked rise in anti-Asian discrimination and microaggressions in Chinese and other Asian communities, from the elderly being assaulted in public to children being attacked (Cabral, 2021; Choi, 2021). In April 2020, it was reported that 60 percent of Asian Americans witnessed someone blaming Asian people for COVID-19 (Gao & Liu, 2021). Incidents of discrimination throughout Canada became frequent to the extent that the Canadian government has funded a platform for the national tracking and reporting of such incidents (Chinese Canadian National Council, 2021). The 2021 Atlanta spa shootings was another reminder for many as its presentation

in media and political discourse further showed the continued silencing and dismissal of anti-Asian racism (Tamanaha, 2021).

“The Canadian Sieve” aims to investigate and challenge the silencing of Asian voices as it benefits a Western narrative of post-colonialism through the use of Gilmartin’s decolonial approach called *border thinking* (Naylor et al., 2018). Despite the apparent increase in xenophobic and racist tendencies against Asians during the global pandemic, the project understands anti-Asian discrimination to exist way beyond COVID-19, as it begins in the 19th century contexts of exploiting Chinese labour to build the nation that we call Canada today.

What is the Significance of the Artwork?

Political geography is a study of boundaries and divisions, and how such spatial structures affect political processes, such as knowledge production and truth-building (Political Geography, n.d.). Epistemologically, this impacts how we know what we know about the world, how we understand the countries within it, and how we relate to the people within them. Yet, this pursuit demands a vigorous examination, which further elucidates the need to apply decolonial theory to reveal the inequities imposed by Western ways of knowing and understanding the world (Naylor et al., 2018).

In the context of anti-Asian discrimination, it is firstly important to know Canada’s historical treatment of Chinese communities. Canada’s portrayals of the Chinese immigrant experience, during the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway or the divisive consequences of the ‘Chinese Exclusion Act,’ exist within border ontologies that perpetuate colonial violence and border imperialism (Chinese Canadian Heritage Fund, n.d.; Naylor et al., 2018). The coloniality is deeply embedded and unchallenged in Canada’s institutions and systems of power insofar as Chinese voices are excluded from retelling and reframing their story

(Naylor et al., 2018). This results in epistemic injustice as collective interpretive resources meaningful to Chinese communities are othered and devalued (Koggel, 2018).

To challenge the notion that Canada is a postcolonial state, it is then important to make room for and listen to Chinese ways of knowing their Canadian legacy as told by their families, who inherit an immigrant consciousness that continues to reckon with the harms of Canada's colonialism (Naylor et al., 2018). "The Canadian Sieve" takes one attempt at decolonizing hegemonic knowledge by demonstrating the concept of *border thinking* through illustrations and soundscapes while taking a second attempt as the process and outcome of this project is in itself an act of *border thinking*. It is hoped that this short film contributes to bridging the hermeneutical gap in Western epistemology by providing an interpretive resource and local reference to the Chinese Canadian immigrant story as reclaimed by the families of Chinese immigrants (Koggel, 2018).

What is the Theory or Concept the Artwork is Illustrating?

Border thinking is a decolonial intervention that confronts border ontologies embedded in knowledge production, which broader society often takes for granted (Naylor et al., 2018). It scrutinizes the idea of borders and its inherent divisiveness in othering the diversity of peoples and countries of the world. Firstly, *border thinking* highlights the categorization and resultant hierarchization of people through physical borders but also mental borders that differentiate by race, ethnicity, and class (Naylor et al., 2018). Secondly, *border thinking* empowers a unifying identity towards understanding and equity through the collective consciousness and experiences of exploitation that are carried on generationally (Naylor et al., 2018). Finally, *border thinking* demands action in an effort to reframe colonial ways of knowing by having members of the Chinese community re-own and retell their experience (Naylor et al., 2018). "The Canadian

Sieve” takes on this geographic focus of *border thinking* by playing with spatial spaces throughout the short film. Its motifs and themes pay tribute to these three ways in which *border thinking* is a decolonial approach and are highlighted below.

Sieves are an element that is illustrated repeatedly as a gridded mesh-like object. As sieves are used to sift through and separate wanted materials from unwanted materials, it mirrors the process of loss in identity as Chinese migrants conform to Canada’s expectations and needs during immigration. Specifically, the gatekeeping nature of sieves accept Chinese labour and skills while rejecting their culture, history, and family, which is symbolized when the (福) lantern is left behind as the Chinese migrants journey overseas to the first sieve of colonialism (Image 2 & 3). Sieves are used throughout the short film as symbols of walls, barriers, and ultimately, borders. This is illustrated with the portrayal of the Chinese Head Tax as sieve-caused decapitations and the portrayal of the ‘Chinese Exclusion Act’ as sieve-like laws and policies reinforced family separation and furthered loss of culture and generational trauma (Image 7 & 8). On one side of the sieve, the grass seems greener in Canada, but once migrated past this physical and metaphorical sieve-border, there is but a dark hole (Image 6, 7, 9, 10, 11 & 13). This motif makes appearances throughout the different scenes to embody the despair of feeling trapped in contrast with the initial hopes of achieving greater liberation.

The character illustrations similarly pay homage to the emotional and othering experiences of Chinese immigrants. Two characters are made distinct with identity at the start of the short film and appear white in colour and with hair (Image 1). However, as they make it to the first sieve, their individuality is lost as they join the homogenized masses of Chinese migrants labouring in Canada (Image 6). They are subsequently coloured as yellow since Chinese yellowness only surfaces when pit against the hierarchy of colonial spaces (Image 4). The Chinese migrants’ colouration conveys

the perception that they are different, tainted, and othered. The Western dehumanization of Chinese immigrants has fueled a stereotype of Chinese communities as an unemotional, alien monolith. These ghosts persist and continue to haunt present everyday interactions. For that reason, the characters in Canada are depicted as ghosts in their homogenized state of anthropomorphic existence (Image 4). Their nature as ghosts become more apparent as the illustrations move to the present day and are literally haunting present realities, with reference to the attack on an elderly woman who was lit on fire (Cabral, 2021; Image 12). Their likeness as ghosts is intended to be ironic as ghosts can typically pass through walls and borders. Yet, these Chinese ghosts, while haunting, cannot permeate through sieves or borders as colonial violence has already made its imprint in the fabric of Canadian consciousness. Presently, differentiation without borders remains an issue.

A multitude of sound clips were included as allusions to colonial power and Western hegemony. Excerpts of “O Canada” are played throughout as a reminder of the Canadian assertion that Turtle Island is the “home and native land” of Canadians (Image 3, 7, 10 & 11). Church bells, juxtaposed as welcoming fanfare with jarring clashes of the White saviour complex, are played at the first sieve encounter (Image 3).

Above all, the appearance of human hands exhibits the impersonal, structural, and systemic powers that continue to prize certain types of local knowledge production while denying other forms relevant to Chinese communities (Naylor et al., 2018; Image 5 & 9). The hands manipulate the illustrations as they see fit and ensure they exist within their borders. This is illustrated as a Chinese ghost was almost successful in escaping its borders, only to be dragged by the apparent all-knowing hands of hegemonic relations (Image 9). The Chinese ghost is dropped back into its role

within a hierarchical design as a sound clip representing the White saviour complex repeatedly asks, “How can I help?” (Image 10).

As a holistic imitation of *border thinking* that embodies the colonial difference, the short film culminates in a hopeful and redemptive space for restitution (Naylor et al., 2018). The Chinese ghosts mobilize in solidarity with their immigrant consciousness and manage to push outward to dismantle the borders that once enclosed and defined them (Image 13). This captures the essence of *border thinking*, as described as “the moments in which the imaginary of the modern system world cracks” (Mignolo, 2000, p. 23). In this way, the Chinese ghost regained some of his identity in the form of hair though he will never be able to return to what or where they once were (Image 14). That is the consequence of colonial violence as Canada continues to reckon with its past. However, in challenging border ontologies, the Chinese ghost is able to redefine his story as he understands it to future generations of Chinese and non-Chinese Canadians alike (Image 14). Similarly, we hope that with the presentation of this project, our *border thinking* has contributed to decolonizing the hermeneutical injustice embedded in Western scholarship and to honour the cultural plight our ancestors experienced as we accept the many worlds that exist in our shared reality. This is our endeavor “to suggest an alternative geopolitical imaginary and future” (Naylor et al., 2018, p. 207)

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APPENDIX A

Images included in the “The Canadian Sieve” short film.

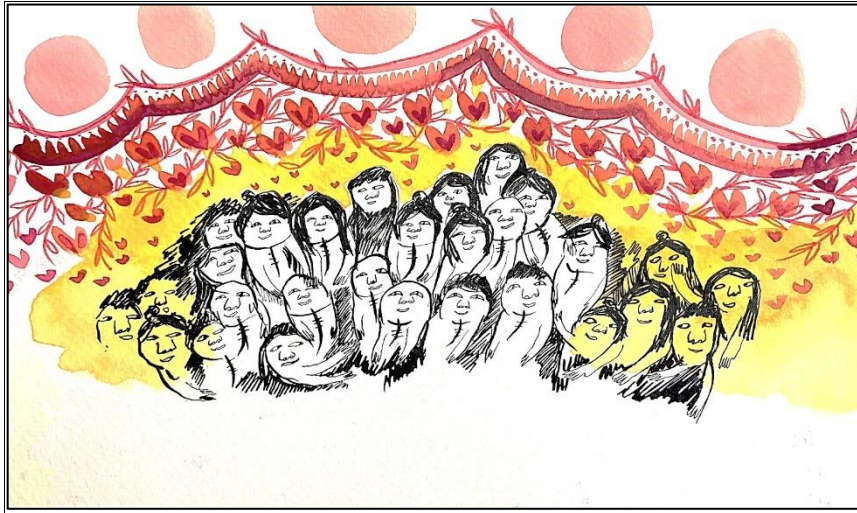


Image 1

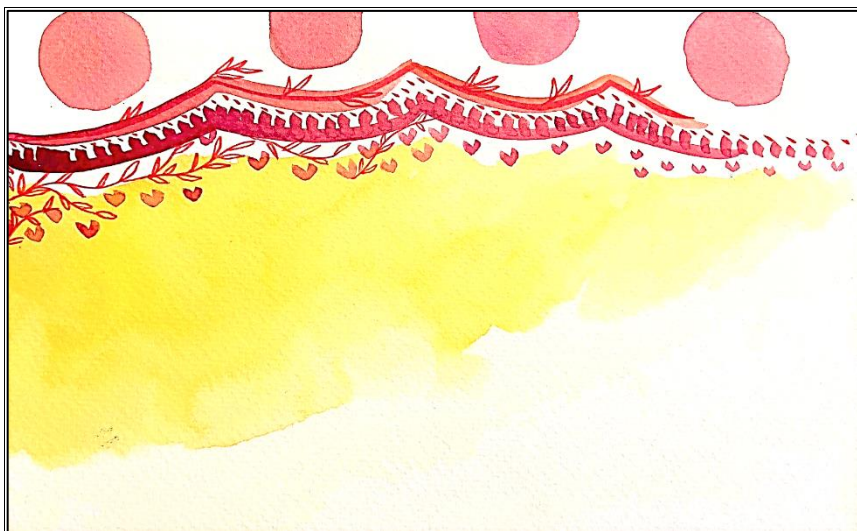


Image 2

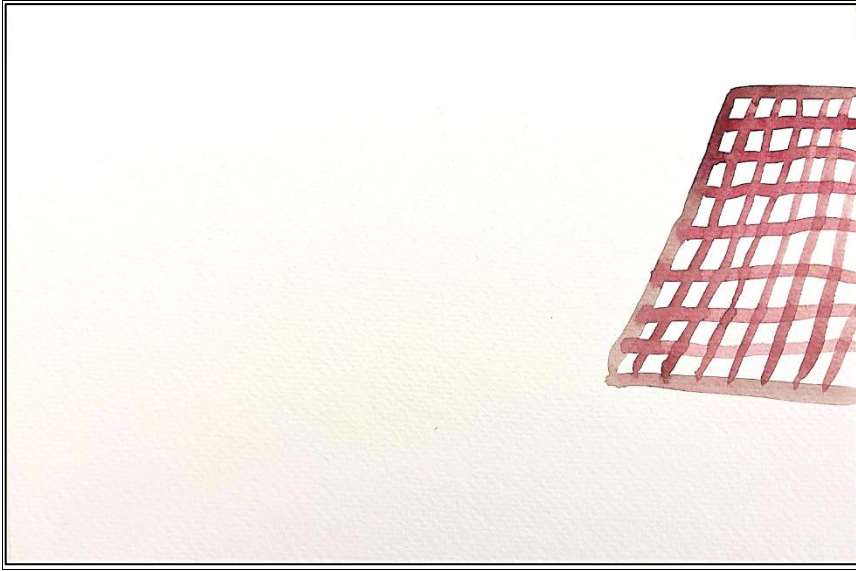


Image 3

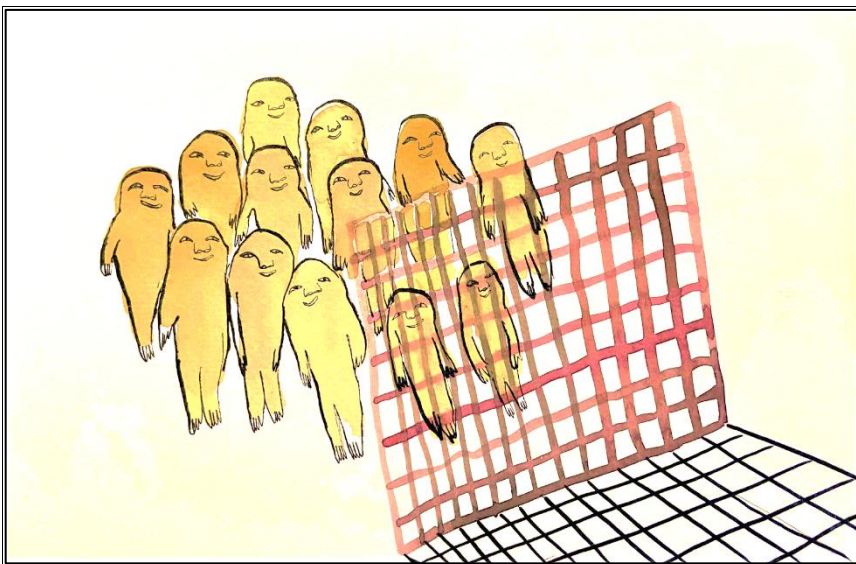


Image 4

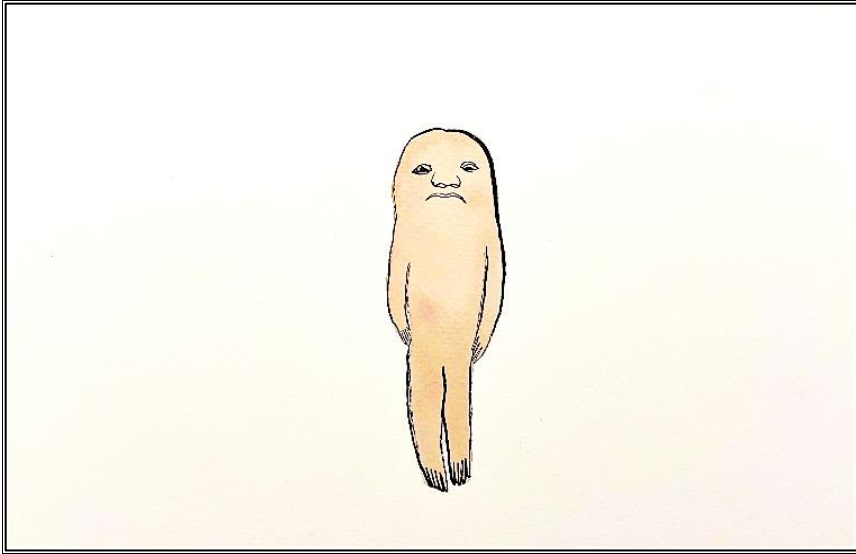


Image 5



Image 6

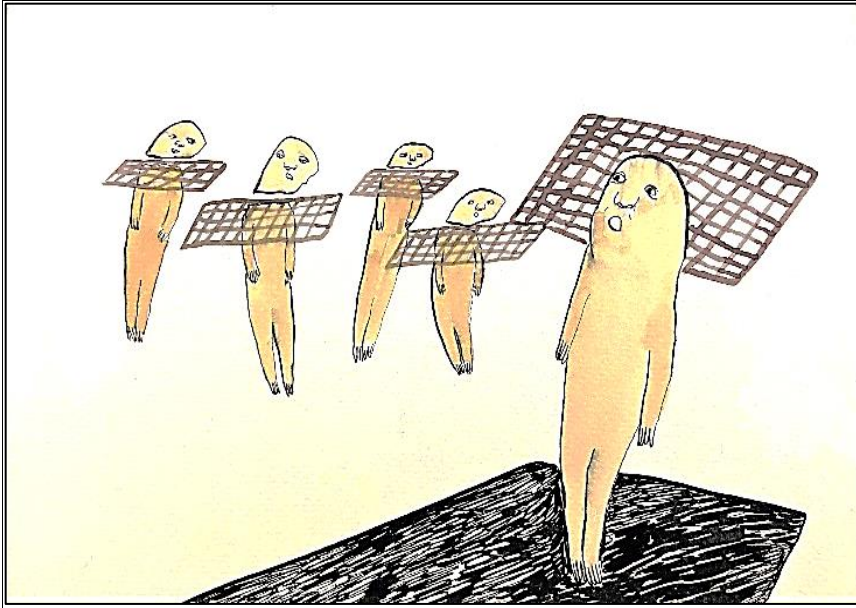


Image 7

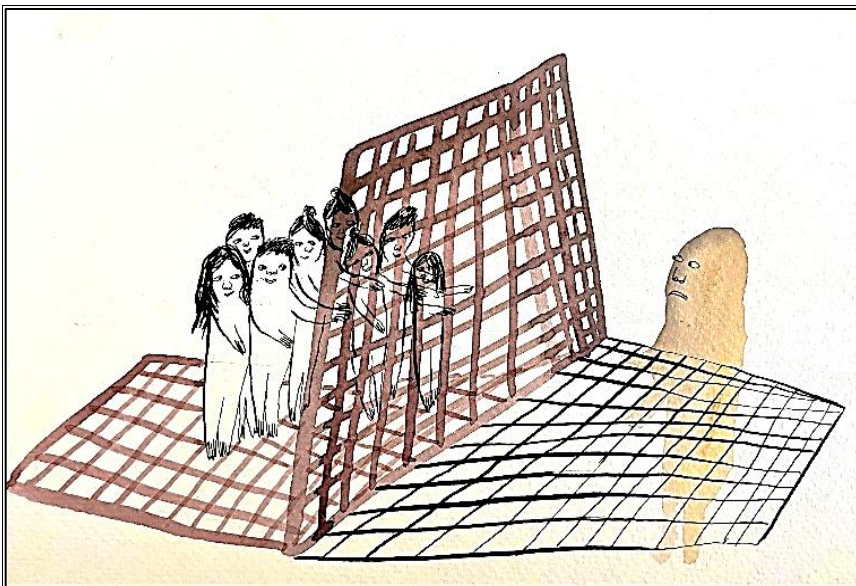


Image 8



Image 9

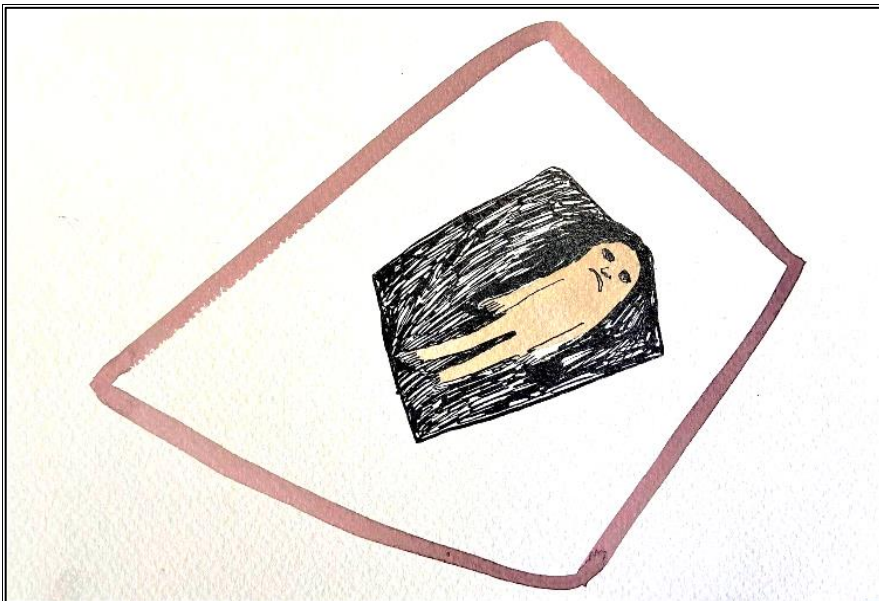


Image 10

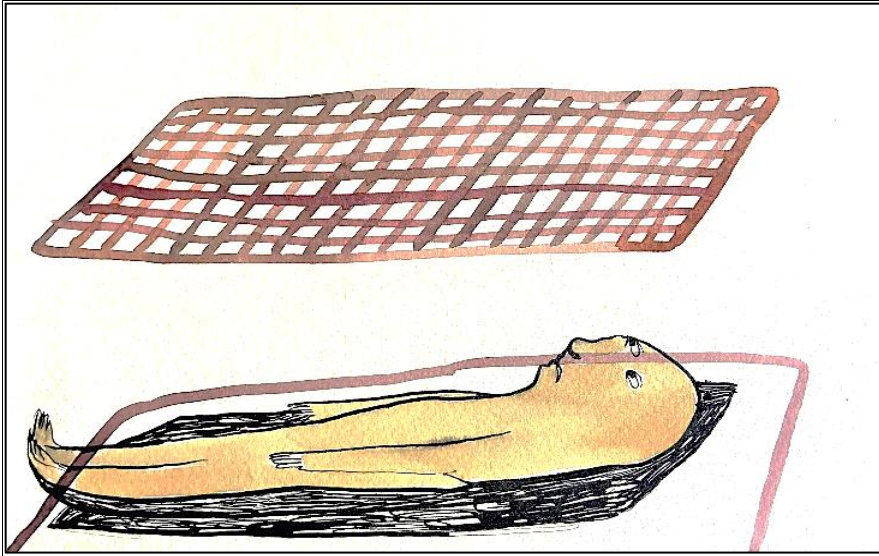


Image 11



Image 12

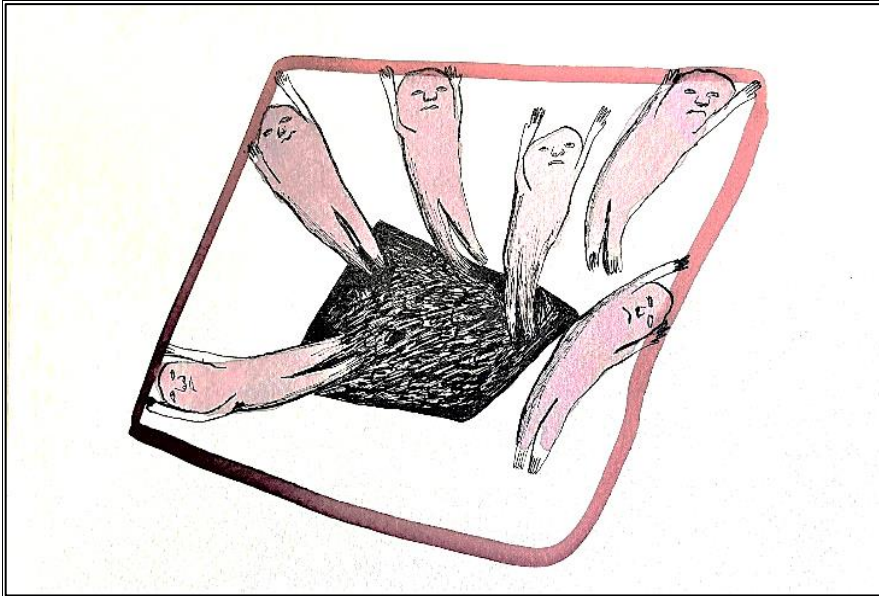


Image 13

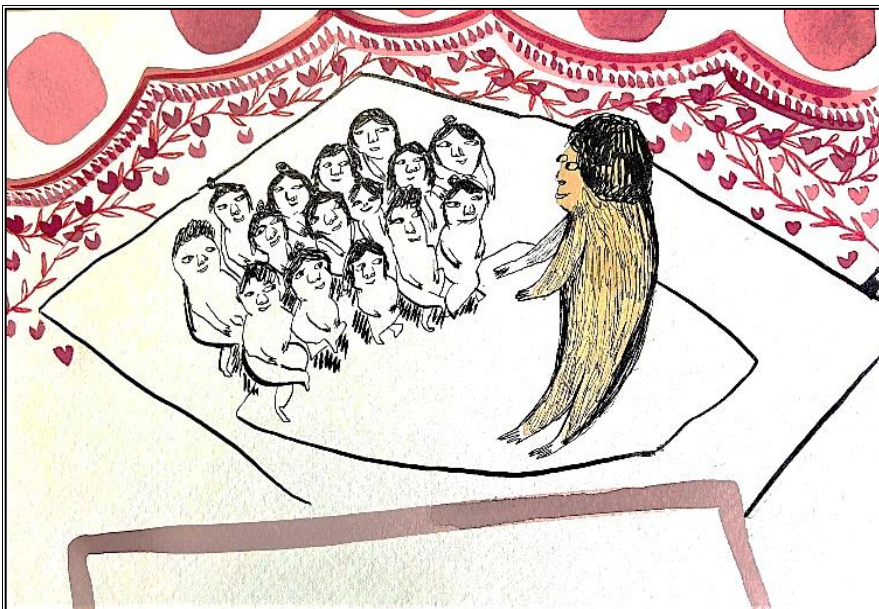


Image 14

APPENDIX B

“The Canadian Sieve” short film [click here](#)

Audio References:

Bach, J. (2021). Bach cello suite no.1 prelude [Song recorded by L. Campet]. (Original work published 1722)

Bach, J. (2018). Prelude in c major [Song recorded by Rousseau]. (Original work published 1722)

Debussy, C. (2017). Clair de Lune [Song recorded by A. Turk]. (Original work published 1905)

Leach, J. (Unknown). Chinese wedding music [Song]. De Wolfe Ltd.

Leach, J. (Unknown). Bamboo house [Song]. De Wolfe Ltd.

Maxwell, D. (Unknown). Church bells celebration [Sound effect]. Media Right Productions.

Maxwell, D. (Unknown). Lau tzu ehru [Song]. Media Right Productions.

Nagle, P. (Unknown). Shadows of war [Song]. Synctracks Ltd.

Namikoshi, Y. (Unknown). Begin the journey [Song]. Synctracks Ltd.

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All other sound effects provided by Zapsplat, 2019.