



Emilie Grace Lavoie, *Times Are Hard for Dreamers*, 2022.

# Emilie Grace Lavoie

## Dreams at Sunbury Shores Arts & Nature Centre

BY KATE GILES

Emilie Grace Lavoie's *Times Are Hard for Dreamers* examines the space between the object and its ecology, living ecosystems, and the environment. It opened on March 3 at Sunbury Shores Art and Nature Centre in St. Andrews, New Brunswick. The exhibition title echoes one of the themes explored in *Amélie*, a romantic French comedy film shot in Paris directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet in 2001.

Grace Lavoie is an artist, curator, and member of the 3E Collective. Her practice predominantly involves ceramics and textile installations. After earning a diploma in fashion design

at LaSalle College (2011), Lavoie's awareness of ecological issues in the industry put her on the trajectory to using visual arts to investigate and portray the degradation of the environment and its relationship to the body. She earned a BFA from Université de Moncton (2016) and an MFA from Emily Carr University of Art and Design (2018).

Lavoie's previous bodies of work made interesting connections to the degradation of the environment. Her new exhibition, *Times Are Hard for Dreamers*, takes a turn from the degradation of the environment to investigate the inner world of



those who exist in these degrading worlds. Instead of her typical dark earth toned growth formations, this installation pulls the viewer into a synthetic and colourful space.

The statement “times are hard” is an aphorism central to humanity and the art we create. It is also the unending rhetoric we’ve heard throughout the ongoing pandemic. We’re tired of our daily lives and the media being saturated by this news. Since the global pandemic, we have a different relationship with our homes and ourselves (the physical self and the inner self), but this is not the lens in which we should exclusively read Lavoie’s work. She brings us in, grabbing us with the colourful and playful installation, and navigates our attention to smaller and smaller details to consider a deeper and broader expanse.

While consisting of many individual pieces, *Times Are Hard for Dreamers* is meant to be viewed as a singular installation. For the sake of discussion, I will separate the installation into three components: wall pieces, ceramic sculptures, and a centrepiece. The wall pieces echo a formalist language from abstract minimalist paintings. Wobbly and rounded shapes overlap in a mix of colour and textures, ranging from thin and gauzy to fuzzy faux fur. The ceramic sculptures reference Lavoie’s previous work by replicating its growth-like structures. Left unglazed, their fragility is emphasized by a multitude of thin loops. The wall assemblages and the centerpiece consist of a ceramic chandelier with hanging plastic and colourful beads. Hung above a neon and tinsel shag floor rug, the centrepiece is fun and playful, and the ceramic sculptures sit in stark contrast.

The fabric assemblages on the wall lack seams or stitches that sewing fabric together would create. It is affixed to the wall with small pins, a necessity to hold the work up that also illustrates how the floating illusion works and emphasizes the material qualities of the different fabrics used. Fabric cut out to form dripping shapes pairs with gravity to create a sluggish weight in the wall hangings, struggling to hold themselves up in a bodily way. Fibre art has an inherent materiality that reflects soft, bodily forms and states of being, but it is also linked to extensive metaphors and historical associations. It holds a history that is tied to architecture, the working class, and the collective actions of labour unions and political protests.

With the pandemic, we were forced into more global awareness and an increased state of anxiety as the world seemed to explode with labour issues, anti-oppression movements, and calls for collective action through individual activity. While seeing something close to a reckoning with the state of civil structures and social systems, we had to watch from within the container of our homes and process from the container

of our own bodies. Just like Lavoie’s work turns from her previous investigation of the outside environment, we turned to our inside environments. The centrepiece directly suggests a domestic space while the fabric wall decor acts as the tapestries that once decorated, insulated, and separated living spaces. Lavoie is pushing attention to living spaces while pushing further inwards with nuanced details in each component.

While the wall pieces evoke numerous anthropomorphic qualities, it is surprising that the ceramic sculptures sitting on the floor or on plywood platforms do not. The more sea creature-like ceramics—objects that call directly to living things—are what feel dead, like bleached coral. The unglazed ceramic pieces sit on the gallery floor or on platforms made from untreated plywood and table legs painted yellow. Tiny holes in the ceramic sculptures accompany what look like lines that a bug might carve in the stump-like structures. One of the larger ceramic sculptures holds a host of thin, hollow lines that crumbles in the middle. Like the other installation components, it is small details like this that provide an object’s equivalence to a human emotion or experience.

The relation of body and impact can be read throughout *Times Are Hard for Dreamers*. The act of walking by the textile work, or the gallery’s airflow, will ruffle the fabric on the wall. Even if these movements were not deliberate, Lavoie’s choice and treatment of material were. The fabric used is creased instead of ironed flat, edges not hemmed, indents and fingerprints left in the unglazed ceramic—perhaps a statement on the pressure of how things should be, and an internal stress when leaving them open, unfinished, and vulnerable.

In Lavoie’s *Times Are Hard for Dreamers*, she invites viewers to examine a deeper and more personal experience of her work while using materials to compose consideration between physical and mental space, external and internal space. What is first perceived as a fun playground is an invitation to sink into your own inner world, to float and ponder.—have times always been hard, will they always be? What to do as a dreamer trying to find their way during these times? ■

*Kate Giles is an artist, curator, and White Settler living in St. Andrews, New Brunswick, the traditional territory of the Peskotomuhkati Nation. They are a graduate from Emily Carr University of Art & Design (ECUAD), having achieved a Bachelor’s Degree in Visual Arts with a minor in Curatorial Practices. Their current practice focuses on translocal spaces and community. As someone who lives in New Brunswick, works in Ottawa, and helps manage a Vancouver artists’ disability collective, they prioritize the connections and opportunities found in such spaces.*