

*Winter Garden*  
Mere Phantoms

March 30 - May 11, 2019



We live in an increasingly fragile age. From environmental crises to the weakening of the social contract, we've entered a long Winter in America.<sup>1</sup> We struggle to keep up with the pace of culture and capitalism. We try to find ways to be well. We want to regain a sense of agency. Whether we are in a global city or a border town, the concept of home is increasingly elusive. We look in the shadows, for stories from the past that we can see ourselves in. We wonder: how do we help each other and help ourselves?

Finding agency — and finding home — amid the fragile balance of contemporary life are recurring themes found in the work of Mere Phantoms, the collective moniker of artists Maya Ersan and Jaimie Robson. Their immersive installations rely on audience participation, situating viewers as performers within environments that are lyrical, cinematic, and haunted with stories that come alive through light and shadow. Inspired by cinema, folk art, experimental theatre, and current events, Ersan and Robson create elaborate cut paper scenes that are an amalgam of cities and scenes real and imagined. Of particular influence is the experimental theatre of Augusto Boal — a Brazilian theatre practitioner and activist for whom destabilizing the actor–audience dynamic through the full participation of the viewer is central to imagining and enacting change, a method theorized by Boal in his *Theatre of the Oppressed*.<sup>2</sup>

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1 *Winter in America* is the name of Gil Scott-Heron's 1974 album. Its lyrics are about the struggles of the African-American community and inner cities in the 1970s.

2 Doug Paterson, "A Brief Biography of Augusto Boal," Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed, <https://ptoweb.org/aboutpto/a-brief-biography-of-augusto-boal/>.

For Ersan and Robson, “paper is ultimately a way to get to the shadow”<sup>3</sup> — the immaterial heart of their work. In *Three Cities: Prayer & Protest* (2014), cut paper representations of cities the artists have lived in (Istanbul, Montreal, and Vancouver) illustrate the built forms and tensions that exist within each city while light-wielding viewers create tangled shadows of infrastructure and human activity on the surrounding walls. In *Come Out and Play* (2013), the campaign slogan of Turkey’s Prime Minister Erdoğan, which literally translates to “don’t come to play,” is flipped, serving as an invitation for Biennale-goers to contribute to the installation.<sup>4</sup> In their most recent project, *Shadows Without Borders* (2018), Ersan and Robson created a mobile interactive shadow installation that travelled to refugee camps, squats, and settlements in Athens and Istanbul, where children and families could create their own narratives. These projects embody the spirit of Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed*, where art and play serve as forms of storytelling from the margins that can be instrumental in dismantling forces of oppression.<sup>5</sup>

In the new work on view at Hamilton Artists Inc., Ersan and Robson use the form of the architectural winter garden to crystallize a web of ideas around power, technology, development, and empire across time and space. Winter gardens, structures built of cast iron and plate glass, were constructed in Europe and North America in the mid-nineteenth century so that people could be surrounded by exotic plants (in the case of England, sourced from their

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3 Maya Ersan, in correspondence with Tara Bursey.

4 Joseph Henry, “Montreal’s Mere Phantoms report on the Istanbul Biennale,” Blouin Artinfo, September 29, 2013, <https://ca.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/965105/montreals-mere-phantoms-report-on-the-istanbul-biennial>.

5 Ken Gewurtz, “Augusto Boal’s ‘Theatre of the Oppressed,’” *The Harvard Gazette*, December 11, 2003, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2003/12/augusto-boals-theatre-of-the-oppressed/>.

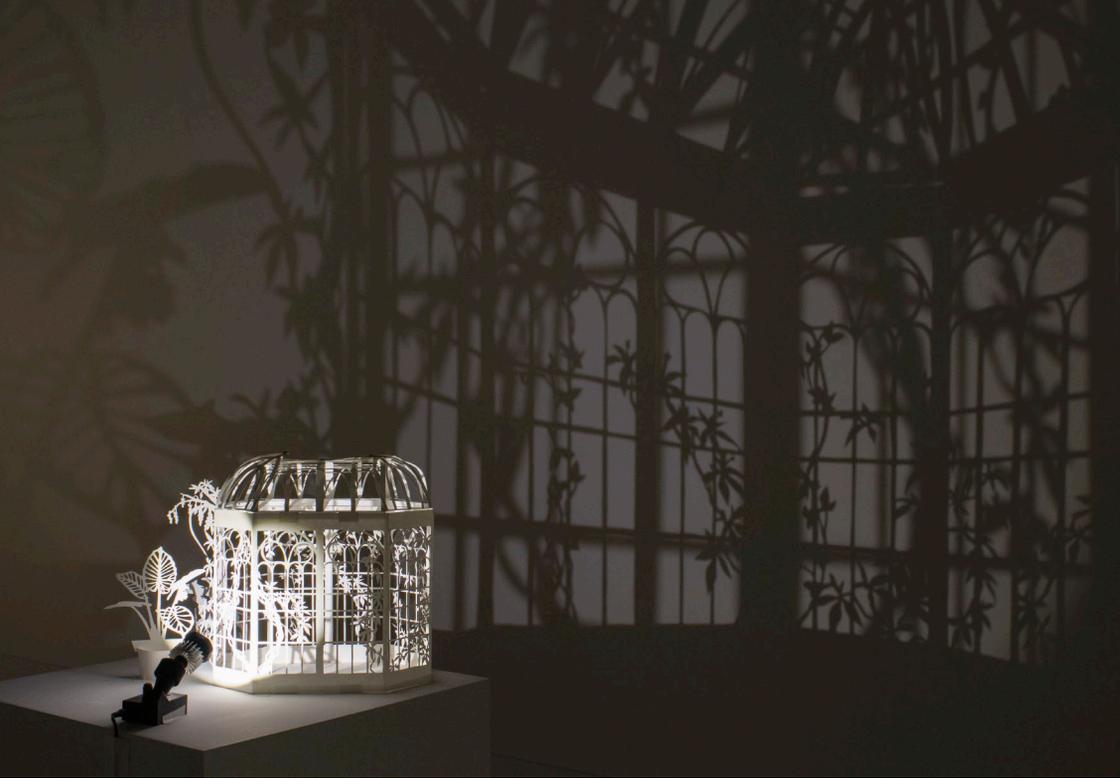
colonies) in winter. Like water fountains, winter gardens were symbols of prosperity and health at the time — their proliferation on both sides of the Atlantic can be attributed to overcrowding in cities and the resulting cholera outbreaks that ravaged the United Kingdom and North America. The winter garden was a colonial oasis in a stew of urban programs, promising escape through opulent architecture and an aura of Victorian “life reform.”<sup>6</sup> Notably, many winter gardens (including Hamilton’s own Crystal Palace in Victoria Park, built in 1860) did not last, needing to be torn down a few decades after they were built due to the expense of their upkeep and their lack of structural integrity.

*Winter Garden* is a progression from an earlier work called *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (2017) — referencing Hieronymus Bosch’s work of the same name — which positioned the built infrastructure of urban environments as somewhere between heaven and hell. In *Winter Garden*, colonized plants are emancipated and animated as disruptive agents through participation, theatricality, and play, functioning as a type of mirror image held up to those who interact with the work. Delicately detailed cut paper greenhouses — some containing plants, some containing faces and figures — evoke a curiosity and wonder we might associate with treasure boxes or dollhouses. Mysterious and alluring, this collection of structures and the life forms they contain simultaneously evoke carceral spaces such as jails and detention centres and the window walls of twenty-first-century glass towers.

Disrupting the static captivity of each winter garden, viewers engage in shadow play to amplify and animate the details of each paper construction within space, creating an effect both ominous and playful. Through this

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6 Daniela Blei. “The False Promises of Wellness Culture,” *JStor Daily*, January 4, 2017, <https://daily.jstor.org/the-false-promises-of-wellness-culture/>.



process, viewers create a space to consider the fragile truth of contemporary progress amid forms that conjure some of the greatest challenges of our day — mass incarceration, migration and border crossings, the legacy of colonialism, gentrification, capitalism — the very matter through which our social contract has been made brittle. This interaction with the work serves as a reminder of our own agency and capacity to spur change, and of the ultimate vulnerability of glass houses in the face of those who throw stones.

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Based in Montreal, *Mere Phantoms* is a creative studio that combines intricate paper cutouts, drawings, video and animation to create site-specific installations and performances. By inviting audiences to take on an active role in creating and animating the work, these immersive environments explore audience/performer

*Tara Burse* is an interdisciplinary artist, independent curator, writer and arts worker with an interest in social history and social justice, working class identity and printed matter.



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