

SUSTAINING APERTURES

LYS DIVINE NDEMEYE
COLIN BERG MBUGUA





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MARCH 7 TO
JULY 6, 2024

CURATED BY
Jenn Jackson



Or Gallery

xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Skwxwú7mesh,
and səliłwətał Territory

236 East Pender Street
Vancouver, BC Canada V6A 1T7

+1 604 683 7395 | or@orgallery.org
orgallery.org

Colophon

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EDITOR Jenn Jackson

PROOFREADER Lucien Durey

DESIGNER Odwak

IMAGE CREDITS

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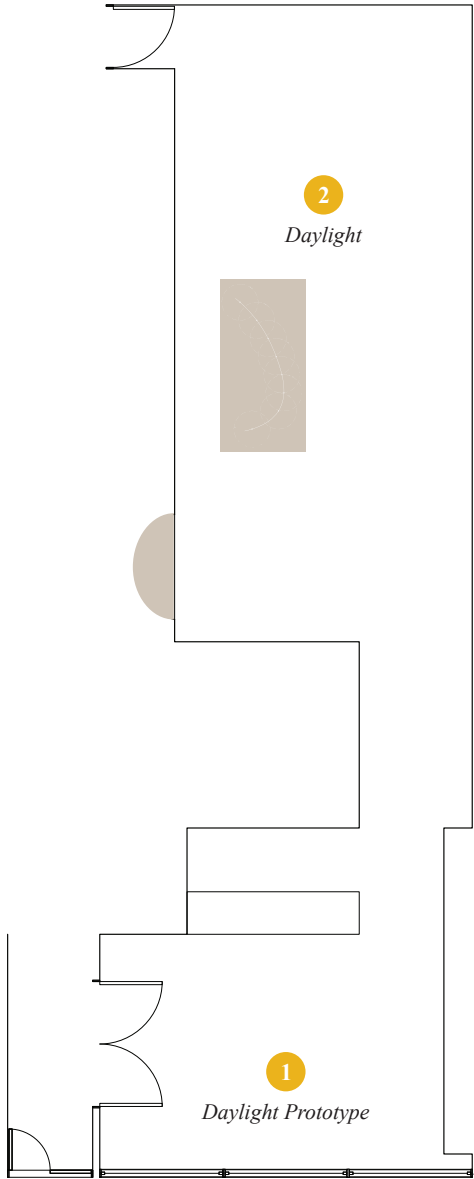
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Exhibition Map



List of Works

- 1 **Daylight Prototype**, 2024, ceramic, cables. dimensions variable. Courtesy of the Artists.
- 2 **Daylight**, 2024, full spectrum LED growing light fixtures, timber frame wall, painted plywood, salmonberry and sage seedlings, ceramic containers, aluminum basin, steel cables, growers pump, drip emitter, poly-tubing, elbow fitting, water, mirror. dimensions variable. Courtesy of the Artists.





Foreword

Sustaining Apertures marks the first exhibition by Lys Divine Ndemeye and Colin Berg Mbugua. The discursive project explores the artists' collaborative practice and builds upon their significant contributions to intersectional conversations around social and environmental justice—through place-based installation and design in contemporary art, architecture, and community planning.

The newly commissioned sculptural works presented within *Sustaining Apertures* engage community-based knowledge and supports, including cultural practices as they relate to ancestral food cultivation, community organizing, and storytelling. From light-based interventions to alternative architectural and archival practices, the lessons nurtured through the exhibition invite opportunities to experience diverse cultural teachings, traditions, and values.

Sustaining Apertures will be the first public viewing of *Daylight* (2024), an immersive pavilion composed of a central aperture that beams light onto a constellation of salmonberry

plantings amid a system of sustenance. The continual flow of water within the pavilion references the transformative power of Skwachàys, where Or Gallery is currently located, as a place where salt marshes and freshwater springs once abundantly flowed. *Daylight* (2024) honours ancestral relations to sustenance alongside the protocols necessary to support healthy ecosystems and powerful connections for many generations to come.

Together Ndemeye and Mbugua recognize that the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Skwxwú7mesh, and səlilwətał people and territories are timeless. The artists' social and architectural explorations pay honour and respect to how vast relations have shaped the many publics that have emerged out of the history of this place—specifically, the rich and culturally diverse local community in the area immediately surrounding the Or Gallery in Chinatown, Hogan's Alley, Strathcona, the Downtown East Side, False Creek Flats, and adjacent neighbourhoods.



➔ VIRTUAL TOUR

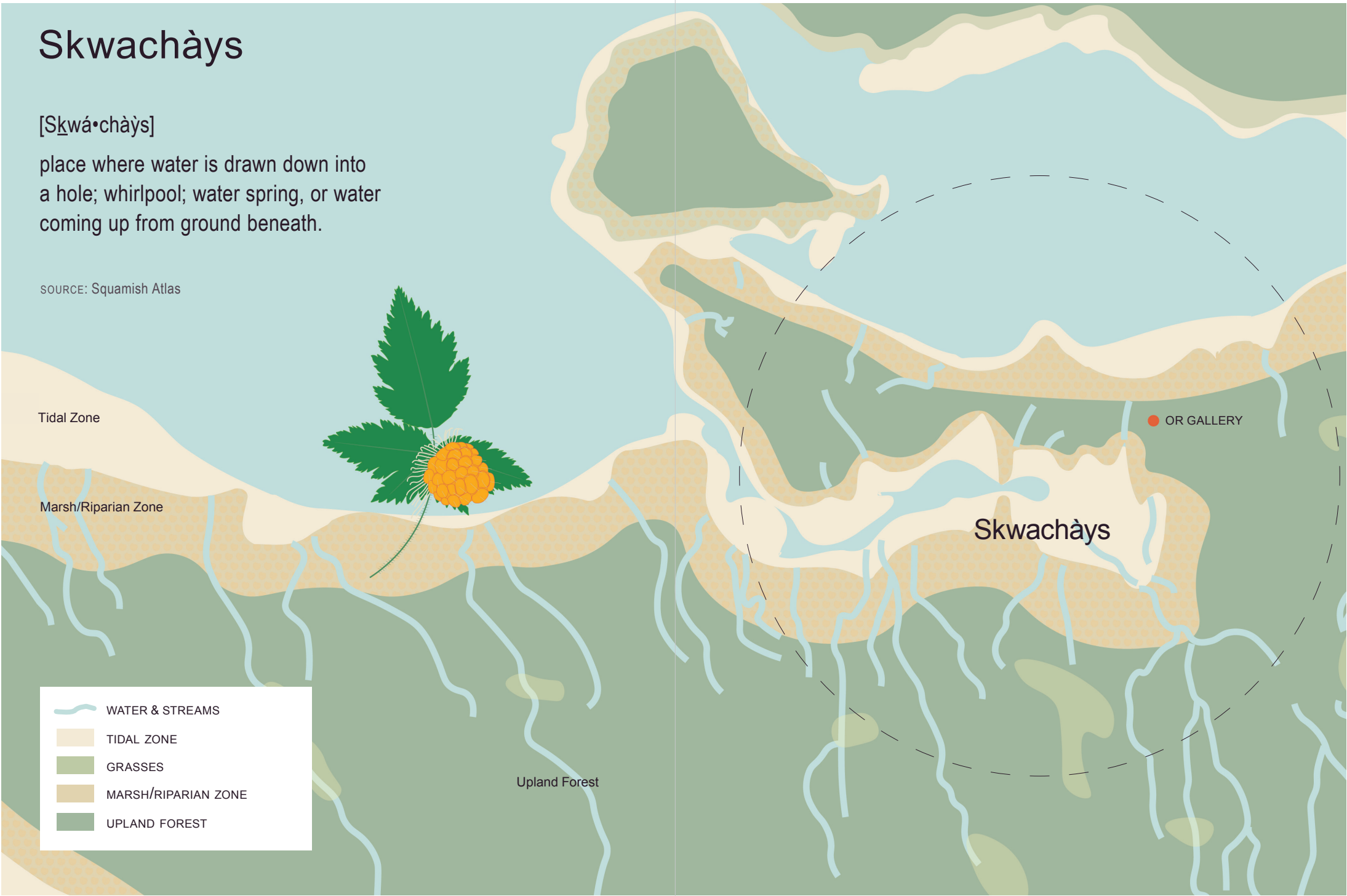
OPPOSITE: Ceramic prototypes
for *Daylight* pavillion

Skwachàys

[Skwá•chàys]

place where water is drawn down into a hole; whirlpool; water spring, or water coming up from ground beneath.

SOURCE: Squamish Atlas



Skwachàys Ecological Study



Skwachàys ecological study is a speculative illustration aiming to reconstruct lost ecologies of the local land and waterways. The study highlights the ecological complexity and richness of Skwachàys by focusing on ethnobotanical relations and species interactions.

The study was produced in 2021 by landscape designer and artist Nicole Dulong at the School of Architecture + Landscape Architecture (SALA) at the University of British Columbia as part of a studio course entitled [re] constructing Hogan's Alley, co-instructed by Divine Ndemeye, Sierra Tasi Baker and Justin Benjamin Taylor.

Skwachàys ecological study is a response to the following inquiry:

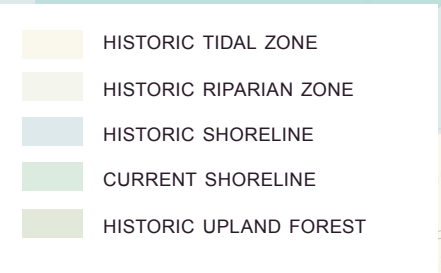
How can we as spatial designers use our tools and architectural and landscape architectural languages to start daylighting untold, silenced stories of places?

Diagram courtesy of Nicole Dulong

Daylighting

The process of revealing streams and waterways that have been buried in urban infrastructure.

Daylighting restores lost hydrological flows and brings riparian ecosystems back into life. This process gives a chance to lost fauna and flora to be part of urban environments. In this project, salmonberry, a plant often found living in riparian areas, becomes the catalyst for uncovering the lost ecosystems and lives of Skwachàys.



OR GALLERY

Skwachàys



PHOTOS: Lys Divine Ndemeye and
Colin Berg Mbugua in the studio.



Daylighting Ecologies

JENN JACKSON

We are on the cusp of spring in the x̣ẉṃə̣θ̣ḳẉə̣ỵəm, Sḳẉx̣ẉụ́7mesh, and sə̣ḷiḷẉə̣ṭəl territories where *Sustaining Apertures* takes place. It is from the positionality of awakening that the shape of the exhibition opens out towards ways of being in relation with the territory—honouring the rhythms and cycles of our natural environment and the plurality of conceiving time alongside seasonality.

Lys Divine Ndemeye and Colin Berg Mbugua initiated *Sustaining Apertures* as an experiential prototype towards daylighting the interconnected relations of place. The project aims to emphasize the ways in which much of our physical and mental connections to the surrounding natural world have been obfuscated by development and industry—how the histories of this place, the living archival manifestations of this territory, have been continually paved over. The cultivation of *Sustaining Apertures*, as a discursive project, centres on intersectional conversations around social and environmental justice. Working across the field of art, architecture, and design, Ndemeye and Mbugua have focused on the integral link between how we understand past geographies with visions for those of

Sustaining Apertures is an opening to the ancestral light of this land and the liveable world that, despite destruction and exploitation, continues to persist beneath the industrialized surface.

the future. Specifically, on the capacity for contemporary, art, architecture, and community planning to radically shift our relationship to food security and Indigenous sovereignty.

The sculptural works presented within *Sustaining Apertures* engage community-based knowledge and supports, including cultural practices as they relate to ancestral food cultivation, community organizing, and storytelling. From light-based interventions to alternative architectural and archival practices, the lessons nurtured through the exhibition invite opportunities to experience diverse cultural teachings, traditions, and values. Through the convergence of nature and architecture, Ndemeye and Mbugua demonstrate the adaptability of these systems within regional, national, and international contexts. For the

OPPOSITE: Ceramic prototype with salmonberry planting.

artists, *Sustaining Apertures* is a catalyst for diverse communities to engage with the life cycle of surrounding environments on a global scale. The artists' motivations are personal and political, linking the site specificity of Or Gallery to urban and rural communities across the Americas, to their familial homes in East Africa, and beyond. The vast spatial, social, and cultural contexts of these scales are collapsed by the acute need for food security across complex geographic arrangements.

Prompted by the urgent pressures of climate catastrophe and amid the decimation of our natural world, Ndemeye and Mbugua began prototyping a response to the growing occurrence of rising temperatures and sea levels, environmental degradation, extreme weather, and natural disasters. Within their basement studio, just below Or Gallery, they set about experimenting with vertical cultivation processes as an alternative methodology towards grassroots community food security. The studio was full of possibility and potential: tending to seedlings, they gently transitioned new sprouts and accompanying roots out of nutrient rich soil beds and into small coconut

husks. Each step was taken with the powerful intention of optimizing a prosperous habitat for growth and communal sustenance. There was much excitement with the appearance of each small bud, for the beauty of basil, kale, and sage plantings coming to maturity, and for the eventual cycles of cultivation that would lead to feeding artists in nearby studios. As yields increased, the gift of food expanded out into the neighbourhood.

In observing subterranean life cycles within their studio, Ndemeye and Mbugua were inspired by the sacredness and agency of each plant, by the sociality that was developed through reciprocal acts of care, and by the community building that such simple gestures cultivated. These transformative relations drew the artists into further research, spending time with elders, knowledge keepers, and storytellers from their broad communities. Through these dialogues, the artists' vision for *Sustaining Apertures* expanded to engage with the site of the studio and Or Gallery more directly.

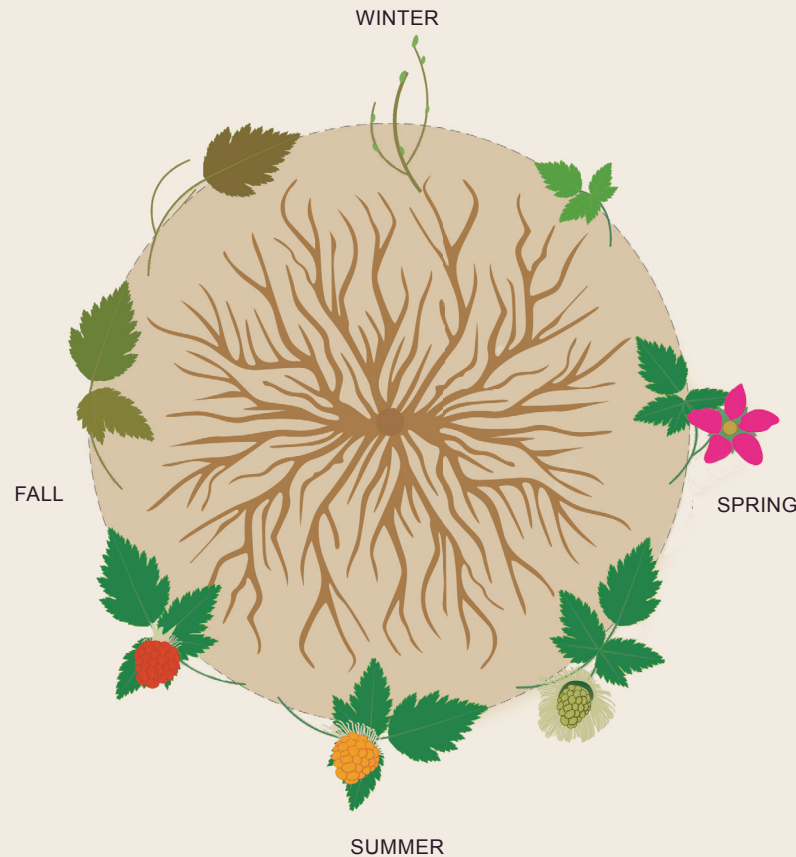
In the final months of developing research towards *Sustaining Apertures*, Ndemeye and Mbugua spent many hours visiting *The Seventh*, an exhibition at Or Gallery featuring the collaborative work of Japanese and Trinidadian artist Lauren Brevner and Skwxwú7mesh artist James Nexw'Kalus-Xwalacktun Harry. They learned through these daily encounters of the Skwxwú7mesh principle that in order "to enact powerful change one must always be thinking seven generations ahead"¹ —that the vocabularies

of this territory are always in relation to the land as an interconnected web of life, where human and non-human beings make contact and co-exist. In dialogue with *The Seventh*, Ndemeye and Mbugua took steps to actively acknowledge the site of Or Gallery, and to daylight the contours of the territory that existed long before recorded memory.

According to the Squamish Atlas, the place name of the territory where the gallery is located is called Skwachàys.² The meaning of the name is described as "the place where water

is drawn down into a hole; whirlpool," and "water spring, or water coming up from the ground beneath."³ Long before the development and urbanization of Skwachàys, the territory held bountiful tidal zones, salt marshes, freshwater springs, and surrounding forests. Based on stories shared by James Nexw'Kalus-Xwalacktun Harry, Skwachàys is a significant Skwxwú7mesh site, a territory of great meaning derived from its importance as a pivotal place of sustenance.⁴ The ancestral land, teaming with life, inspired traditional systems of food cultivation, honouring seasonal cycles and the interconnectivity of all living things.

It is from the history of the territory that Ndemeye and Mbugua came to envision the immersive installation of *Daylight* (2024) as a gathering place to affirm the natural world of Skwachàys. The pavilion is an exercise in world building. It is a space that invites an interruption of the ecological destruction and exploitation imposed upon the territory. It is an opening to the ancestral light of this land and the liveable world that, despite destruction and exploitation, continues to persist beneath the industrialized surface. Upon entering the installation,



The choice of plant species in *Sustaining Apertures* is in respect for seasonality and the natural rhythms and cycles of the Skwachàys environment

viewers are greeted by a central aperture that beams lifegiving light onto a constellation of Indigenous plantings amid a system of sustenance. The continual flow of water within the pavilion echoes the power of Skwachàys, as a place where the salt marshes and freshwater springs once abundantly flowed. *Daylight* (2024) is a place to be slow, to take a deep breath and to sense the embodied feeling of interconnection between small gestures and larger cycles. The intermingling of solitude and sociability within the work honours ancestral relations to sustenance alongside the protocols necessary to support healthy ecosystems and powerful connections to the territory for many generations to come.

In choosing the plantings for *Daylight* (2024), Ndemeye and Mbugua wanted to honour the relationship of the immersive installation with the natural rhythms and cycles of the Skwachàys environment. This respect for seasonality led them to choose a species of plant that echoes the language of the territory and interconnectedness of repeating cycles. In both the hən̓q̓m̓iṇəm

and Skwxwú7mesh languages, the names of seasons carry with them references to the natural world and the ways that human and non-human entities exist in synchronicity with the specificities of time and place. For example, in Skwxwú7mesh sníchim (sníchim meaning language), the translations for varying months of the year relate to the seasons of the surrounding environment. In *Held by the Land: A guide to Indigenous Plants for Wellness*, Skwxwú7mesh ethnobotanist, Leigh Joseph, shares that one of the first plants to sprout in the spring is the salmonberry, known in Skwxwú7mesh sníchim as Yetwánaý (yet-wan-eye). She shares that the saskay (the Skwxwú7mesh sníchim name for salmonberry shoot) arrives in late March/early April, blooms in April-May and bears ripened fruit through May-July.⁵ Joseph generously describes the central ways that Indigenous language informs a profound connection towards understanding the multiple contours of the land. This is echoed in her description of Indigenous language as DNA, whereby anything that is significant to community is named and

OPPOSITE: Seasonal lifecycle of salmonberry illustrated by Lys Divine Ndemeye .



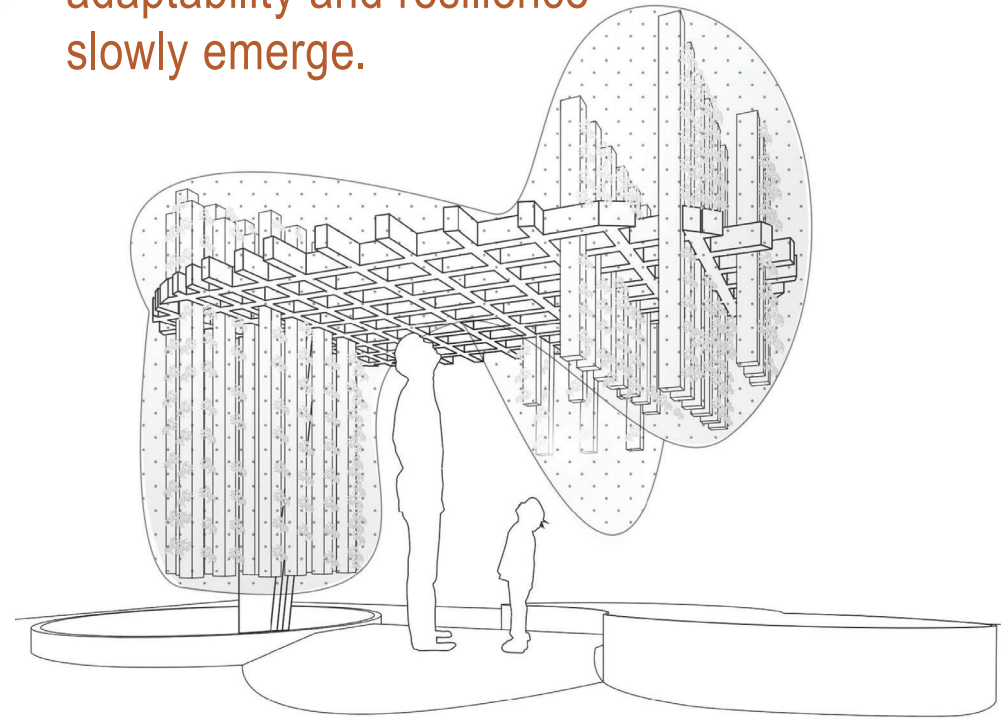
RIGHT: Salmonberry seedlings growing in Lys Divine Ndemeye and Colin Berg Mbugua's studio.

OPPOSITE: Daylight concept renders by Lys Divine Ndemeye and Colin Berg Mbugua.

therefore informs worldviews upon the territory. For example, “the word for April is tsá7tskay (tem-ts-ah-ts-k-eye), which translates to ‘when salmonberry shoots are collected’ [and] May is tem yetwan (tem yet-wa-n) or ‘the time when the salmonberries ripens.’”⁶ The profound complexity of these relations is infinitely expansive and only a fraction of the magnitude can be understood through translation. It is from this fraction of an opening towards the language of the territory that Ndemeye and Mbugua came to centre the resilient salmonberry planting as the heart of *Daylight* (2024).

The artwork opens a set of conversations, towards the entangled histories, and towards the presents and futures of Skwachàys. It is an accessible and persuasive invitation to breathe together with, and next to, the cellular respiration of each salmonberry. The conceptual framework of *Daylight* (2024) proposes that the plants are teachers, and thus, by being in their presence, teachings of abundance, adaptability and resilience slowly emerge. The premise of the work, as a site for vertical food cultivation, connects directly to the territory while conceptually allowing for broader considerations for how disruptions from the natural world often equate with the loss of health and culture for all. Whether in an urban or rural environment, territories that have been exposed to colonial processes of degradation, expansion, and extraction require alternate visions for living closely with the land. Amid the conditions of climate crisis, unpredictable weather, water loss and floods, the relationships between bodies, community, and territory are continually threatened. Rather than move away from dependence upon the land, vertical food cultivation proposes the incorporation of natural elements and ecosystems amid spaces

The conceptual framework of *Daylight* (2024) proposes that the plants are teachers, and thus, by being in their presence, teachings of abundance, adaptability and resilience slowly emerge.





where conventional cultivation is not possible. Furthermore, decentralizing sustainable food cultivation enables circuits of environmental restoration with an overall positive climate and ecological impact.

Through *Daylight* (2024), complex water, climate, food, and energy cycles become visible. By connecting and making these overlooked relationships tangible,

the artists produce new models for sustaining vital natural cycles on the territory. Acts of propagation, cultivation, and genetic preservation, open opportunities for cultural transmission. They shed light on the deep histories of this place—decolonizing knowledge and engaging stories that inspire innovation between traditional food cultivation and futures that empower communities.

Sustaining Apertures is an opening towards global Indigenous solidarity. It is a prompt to deploy cultural tools—art, architecture, and design—in radical new ways. It is an effort to spark grassroots conversations that reverberate beyond localized contexts. The material manifestations of the exhibition elevate the essential value of holding reverence for the site specificity of place. This underlying principle is synonymous with the Indigenous cultures that Ndemeye and Mbugua each carry with them from their ancestral territories in East Africa. The prompt to daylight the land and water ways of this territory directly links to concerns that the artists have each experienced within their own familial contexts. It is with profound respect for the Skwachàys territory that salmonberry is constellated within *Sustaining Apertures*. From this positionality, a strong spirit of place, the methodology of daylighting is offered as an adaptive portal, not only towards ecological redress, but also towards the expansive potential to ignite urgent conversations of cultural reparation. By daylighting the geographic history of this place, the exhibition plants seeds for a multiplicity of histories and a plurality of futures.

In honour of the spirit of Skwachàys and adjacent territories, all salmonberry plantings grown within the *Sustaining Apertures* exhibition will be gifted back to the land, offering an abundance of life affirming kinships alongside an alternate opening to the archive of this place.



ABOVE: Ceramic prototype for *Daylight* pavilion.

OPPOSITE: Lys Divine Ndemeye and Colin Berg Mbugua in the studio.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Jenn Jackson, *The Seventh: Lauren Brevner and James Nexw'Kalus-Xwalacktun Harry* (Or Gallery, 2024), 17.
- 2 Squamish Atlas. "Skwachàys." Accessed January 7, 2024. <https://squamishatlas.com/>.
- 3 *ibid.*
- 4 James Nexw'Kalus-Xwalacktun Harry in conversation with Jenn Jackson, January 31, 2024.
- 5 Leigh Joseph, *Held by the Land: A Guide to Indigenous Plants for Wellness* (Wellfleet, 2024). 118–119.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 26.

Sustaining Ecologies

1 ROOFTOP GARDEN (SEMI-PUBLIC)

- RESILIENT ROOF SYSTEM.
- ROOF STRUCTURE AS RAIN CAPTURING INFRASTRUCTURE.
- OFFERS ADDITIONAL SEMI-PUBLIC SPACE, ENCOURAGING MULTI-GENERATIONAL INTERACTIONS.

2 RAINWATER HARVESTING

- USING INTEGRATED LANDSCAPE AND ARCHITECTURE.

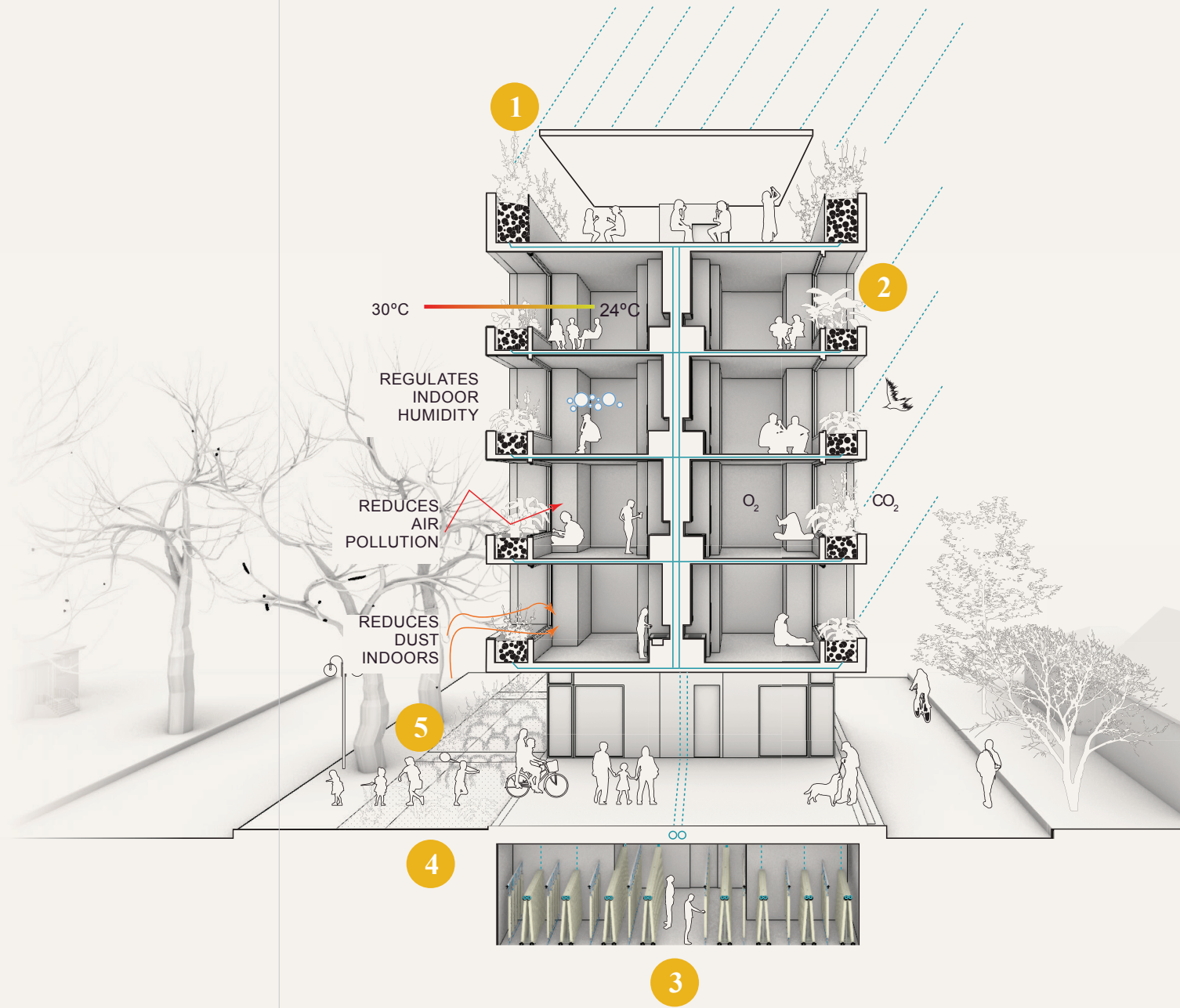
3 UNDERGROUND VERTICAL FOOD CULTIVATION

- GREYWATER FOR IRRIGATION.
- 2,500 SQ.FT OF INDOOR VERTICAL FOOD CULTIVATION ANNUALLY YIELDS AN ESTIMATE OF 20 TONNES OF LEAFY GREENS SUCH AS LETTUCE, BOK CHOY, PARSLEY, ETC.
- IN CONTRAST, FOOD CULTIVATION ON 1 ACRE OR 44,000 SQ.FT OF FARMLAND YIELDS 12 EQUIVALENT TONNES OF LEAFY GREENS A YEAR.

4 PERMEABLE WALKWAY

5 BIORETENTION

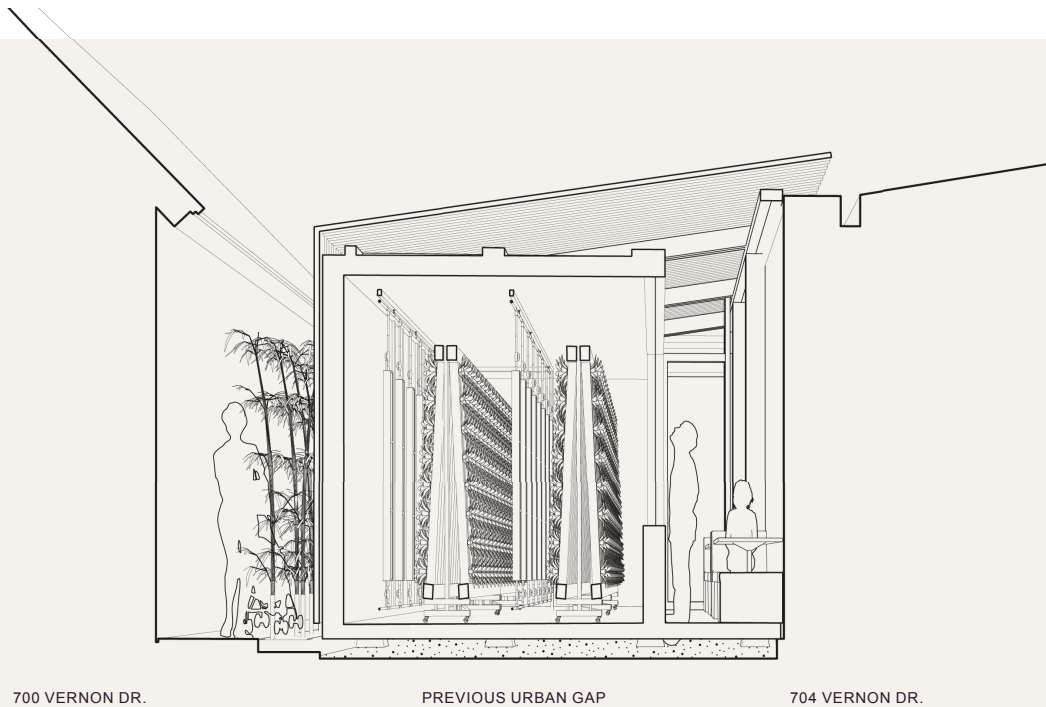
- RAIN GARDEN.



Rise Up Market Place

Rise Up Marketplace is a community supported locally sourced grocer and café located in the residential neighbourhood of Strathcona—a few minutes from Or Gallery. Owned and operated by Roger Collins, the shop responds to food security in the community with Caribbean influenced dishes. Collins is a pillar of

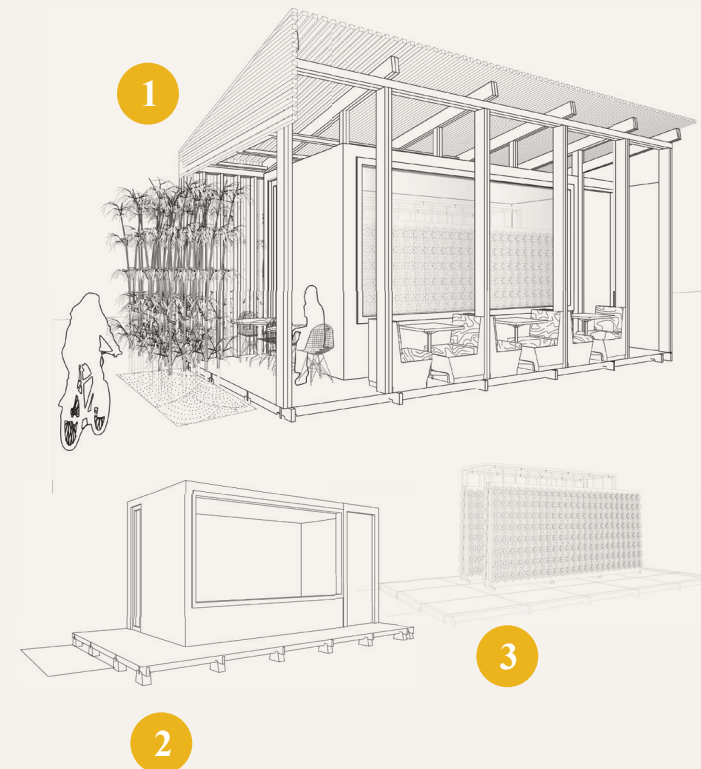
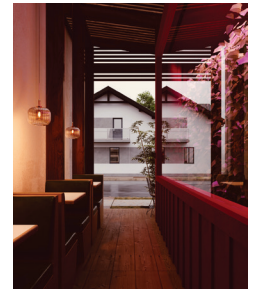
the community and is an important supporter of Lys Divine Ndemeye and Colin Berg Mbugua's research. The speculative sketch below explores how a 400 sq.ft café patio could be transformed to host food production while providing accessible and diverse food options to the community.



700 VERNON DR.

PREVIOUS URBAN GAP

704 VERNON DR.



- 1 357 SQ.FT OF FARM SPACE AND SEATING AREA WILL PRODUCE AN ESTIMATE OF 2 TONNES OF LETTUCE A YEAR.
- 2 TYPICAL INSULATION MAINTAINS CONSTANT TEMPERATURE THROUGHOUT THE YEAR. THE WINDOW PROVIDES THE ABILITY TO CONTINUOUSLY INSPECT THE FARM WHILE BENEFITING FROM THE FULL SPECTRUM LIGHT IN THE DARKER MONTHS OF THE YEAR.
- 3 THE STRUCTURE SUPPORTS A FARM IN AN URBAN INFILL USING TEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE, WHILE ADDING FINANCIAL AND SOCIAL RESILIENCE TO COMMUNITIES THAT NEED IT MOST.

The Artists

Lys
Divine
Ndemeye

Lys Divine Ndemeye is an award-winning landscape designer, artist, and educator (Adjunct professor at UBC School of Architecture + Landscape Architecture) with ancestral roots from Burundi.

Ndemeye is the Founder and Principal of Remesha Design Lab, a research-design firm that provides services in landscape design, public art, and community engagement. Remesha Design operates within the framework of decoloniality, Indigeneity and Afrofuturism; a school of thought that combines ancient wisdom from Africa with technology and creativity to envision social change and alternative futures.

Ndemeye works to centre Black and Indigenous World Views into

landscape systems. She focuses on community empowerment, sustainability, and community-led design approaches. Prior to pursuing a career in design, Ndemeye worked in different municipalities in strategic and urban planning and has over 10 years of experience in community building and engagement.

Ndemeye is the founder and Co-Director of the Black+Indigenous Design Collective; a social enterprise working to build the capacity of Black and Indigenous Youth in the spatial design fields and public art, and working to increase the visibility and agency of Black and Indigenous communities in urban spaces. She is also the host and producer of the Design Unmuted podcast, a platform that elevates marginalized voices in design, art and all things creative.

Colin
Berg
Mbugua

Colin Berg Mbugua is a Kenyan Canadian artist, researcher, and architectural designer. He holds both a Masters and a Bachelor in Architecture. Mbugua's practice Kagvrv, founded in 2021, engages multi-disciplinary contexts that draw from traditional architectural practices while engaging experimentation through collaboration and cross-

cultural exchange. His research explorations activate conversations around social and environmental justice through place-based installation and design in contemporary art, architecture, and community planning. Mbugua is currently working on a community-based project that involves workshops that explore food sovereignty and security between urban and rural spaces.

Acknowledgements

WE ARE GRATEFUL FOR the generous government funders and community partners, Urbanarium and Capture Photography Festival, who have made *Sustaining Apertures* possible.

Thank you to the family, friends, elders, knowledge keepers, and community members who contributed to *Sustaining Apertures* in many meaningful ways. Your teachings continue to expand, transform, and activate the conceptual territory of the artwork and exhibition themes.

Xwalacktun Rick Harry for an inclusive celebratory welcome.

Lauren Brevner and James Nexw’Kalus-Xwalacktun Harry for their collaboration and dialogue on Indigenous representation and land-based gestures in contemporary art.

Kirsten May and Anthea Lee, inspired publication designers.

Photographers Gloria Wong and Connor Davies.

Blaine Campbell for his expertise professionally documenting the exhibition.

Ceramic fabrication and co-design from industrial designer Nolan Talbot Kelly.

Exhibition design and installation with master carpenter Alixzandar Morle.

Skillful and creative preparators Agnes Fan and Vincent Isabel.

Lucien Durey for his keen editorial support.

Research support from Roger Collins at Rise Up Marketplace.

We especially acknowledge the dedicated volunteers and artist studio neighbours who facilitated care for the salmonberry plantings Alex Chan, Sai Di, Jin He, and Megan Kwan.

— LYS DIVINE NDEMEYE, COLIN BERG MBUGUA,
AND JENN JACKSON

Or Gallery is a not-for-profit organization supported by its members, individual donors, corporate funders, foundations, the City of Vancouver, the Province of British Columbia through the British Columbia Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts.

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236 East Pender Street
Vancouver, BC Canada V6A 1T7

+1 604 683 7395 | or@orgallery.org
orgallery.org