



Affirmations: When All Is Said and Done

Curatorial essay

Curated and written by Christina Leslie

This year's Summa exhibition, *Affirmations: When All Is Said and Done*, reflects the McMaster School of Arts graduating cohort's shared experience. They describe the title as a response to their uncertainty, particularly in a program that encouraged them to create without always knowing the outcome. Over four years, persistence became their form of affirmation—an act that shaped their artistic practices and identities.

For this cohort, affirmation is an act of resistance, a way to ground themselves in unstable times. Entering university amid a global health crisis, they found making art to be a declaration of presence, a means of holding onto creative agency. They see their work as part of something larger—a force for change, a testament to the sustaining power of artistic practice, and a commitment to supporting one another.

This Summa exhibition marks the end of a one-hundred-and-eight studio arts program. Structural changes have led to its closure, making this cohort its final custodians. Aware of this legacy, they take a moment to acknowledge what they've learned, honouring the mentors, professors, and traditions that shaped them.

The work in this exhibition is a celebration of discovery. It emphasizes processes ranging from painting and sculpture to textiles, drawing, photography, jewelry, film, and animation. Many pieces embrace making as an iterative, exploratory act, prioritizing experimentation over finality. These student artists lean into hand-making, emphasizing tactility, labour, materiality, and intuition to create their works.

Beyond materiality, their kinship stands out. During some of their final critiques, I witnessed extraordinary support, generosity in feedback, and curiosity about each other's practices. They are artists who seek to learn, question, and validate each other's choices. This spirit of mutual

affirmation is embedded in their work, whether through assertion, declaration or simply putting something into the world with intention.

Each student's work is an example of their expression, shaped by the support and encouragement they have received from the program.

Elinor Brown's *The Super Executive Podium* plays with power and affirmation through humour. Constructing a podium—a site of authority and public address—she subverts it with an unexpected pink colouration, nodding to femininity and the historical silencing of marginalized voices. A recorded chant of affirmation produced collaboratively with other artists saying “Elinor, shine your light” playfully suggests future agency, imagining a world where she takes the stage to enact change.

Gage Minard's paintings weave folklore and nature. They depict vines like arteries and trees with pulsating energy, blurring the line between anatomy and environment. His work creates an enchanted world where nature feels alive, inviting viewers into a mystical landscape.

Gillian Reid also draws from folklore and theatre, creating intricate cut-paper works that evoke traditional storytelling and merging digital and craft-based methodologies into 3D work.

Amber Forno's work is deeply personal and rooted in childhood illness and medical experiences. Repurposing fragmented pieces of other works she composed, she abstracts the body's inner workings into compositions that speak to resilience and healing.

Leyda Glover explores altered states through dreamlike imagery and augmented reality, crafting liminal spaces (the in-between) and surreal landscapes. **Audrey Ewen's** paintings take a similar approach. They illustrate her shift from her usual technically skilled landscape drawings to expressive to music-inspired abstract paintings, blending realism and intuition.

Alysha Aran's oil canvases reclaim Canadian art history by blending Filipino cultural elements with a famous group of seven painter Lawren Harris' landscapes. They assert her identity and reshape and recontextualize the Canadian historical narrative.

Theodora Oyinloye interrogates identity through material, incorporating brass knuckles and photography to challenge racial stereotypes in works aptly titled *Baby Boy* and *Plight*. Her work examines how Black masculinity is coded and portrayed in media and the commodification of African Gold.

Ayesha Khan finds meaning in creating her version of a "Jali"—the intricate geometric latticework of Islamic architecture, used to let in light and air—employing it as a metaphor for identity and belonging.

Chayse Victoria reflects on identity through athleticism, using a locker installation to examine the transient nature of sports careers (with a nod to female athletes like herself) and question whether personal identity can exist beyond trophies and uniforms.

Jenny Kim uses pop culture, newsprint aesthetics, and comic strip language to create multi-layered 3D sculpture works, embracing a Roy Lichtenstein aesthetic.

In cinema, **Eugene Kim** has produced a suspenseful short film narrative using sound and strong visuals that play with viewers' heightened emotions, harkening back to classic Hitchcockian tropes and the horror genre. Meanwhile, fellow cohort **Perry Yenica** teases the audience with an animation that touches on memories, loneliness, and the structure of animated films.

Maddie Lavrence's textile-based practice takes an intimate approach, crafting a robe adorned with floral motifs, using artificial flowers to represent each family member's birth month. This piece is a coat of arms and a protective cloak, affirming familial bonds.

Finally, **Yiwen Xu's** *Stardust* employs tufting, a traditionally craft-based technique, to create colourful rug pieces that explore themes of the universe, nostalgia, and childhood. The rugs also challenge the fine art/craft binary, positioning handmade labour as a legitimate and valued artistic practice.

Despite their diverse mediums and themes, this group is united by a shared embrace of affirmation—through their process, materials, and subjects. In their art education, producing, experimenting, and trusting have become key parts of the creative process. Their work exemplifies their support for one another, whether through critique, encouragement, or mutual belief in each other's artistic pathway. This final Summa exhibition of this program, their work serves as both a culmination and a beginning. Proof that while this chapter is ending, the creative energy it has fostered will continue to echo and inspire long into the future. Their work reverberates all the affirmations that have shaped their creative practices.