

JANUARY 21, 2022

SANDRA BREWSTER

TRACES OF HOME

MIGRATION, MEMORY, AND BEING

ACI's new online exhibition explores how Toronto artist Sandra Brewster draws inspiration from the meaning of home, migration, and memory for the Caribbean Canadian community.



Installation view of the Blur series in the exhibition Sandra Brewster, Works from series: Smith, Blur, Video: Walk on by at OPTICA, Montreal, February 16 to April 3, 2021.

Sandra Brewster, photographed by Jelani Morgan.



The Art Canada Institute is honoured to present the work of leading artists in this country, and today we are publishing a new online exhibition, *Sandra Brewster: Traces of Home: Migration, Memory, and Being*. Pamela Edmonds, senior curator of the McMaster Museum of Art, has written an essay that accompanies Brewster's work, one that invites us to reflect on the role of the family in sustaining cultural heritage, identity, and community. Born and raised in Toronto, Brewster recalls a childhood replete with tales about life in Guyana before her parents immigrated to Canada. "My head is full of fractured memories formed from the stories told to me," says the artist, who has spent over two decades examining the effects of migration on her family and other individuals of Caribbean and African descent in her community. Incorporating their personal photographs, recollections, and cherished possessions from back home into her multilayered works, Brewster foregrounds the complexities of Black diasporic experience and identity.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

HIKING BLACK CREEK

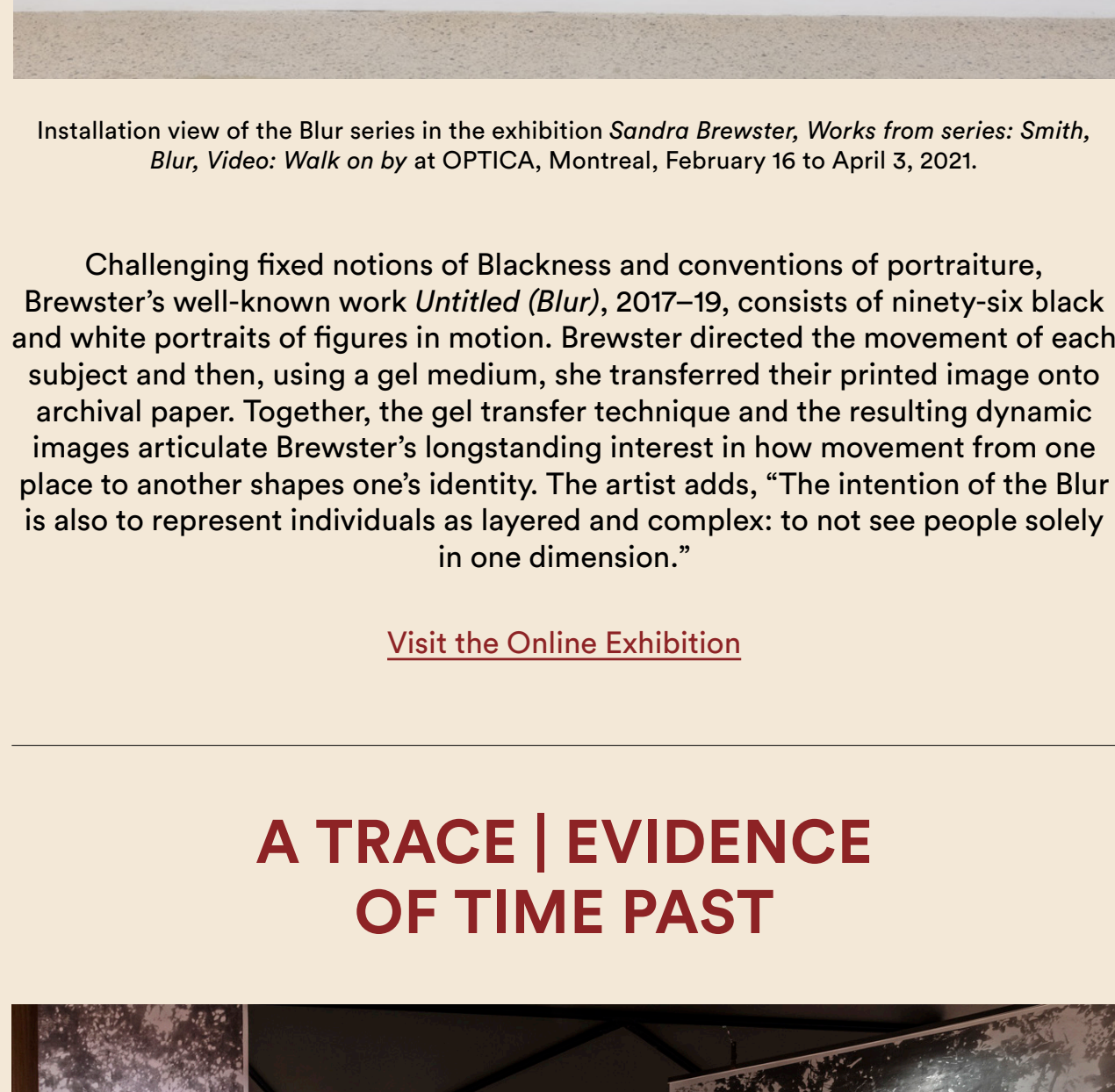


Sandra Brewster, *Hiking Black Creek*, 2018, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Brewster has long been fascinated by old family photographs and the memories and emotions they hold. *Hiking Black Creek*, 2018, depicts the artist's mother and father enjoying the natural scenery in Toronto as new immigrants from Guyana in the 1970s. Reflecting on their early experiences in Canada, Brewster comments, "I am sure my parents found comparisons between this landscape and back home which assisted them in becoming more acquainted with this place, where they would spend the rest of their lives. It is as if they were looking for a way to feel at home." This large-scale piece is composed of three photo-based gel transfers—pictures that have been transferred from one surface to another. Mimicking the appearance of worn photographs, the work signifies "a passage of time and offers a suggestion of untold stories," says Brewster.

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HEIRLOOM

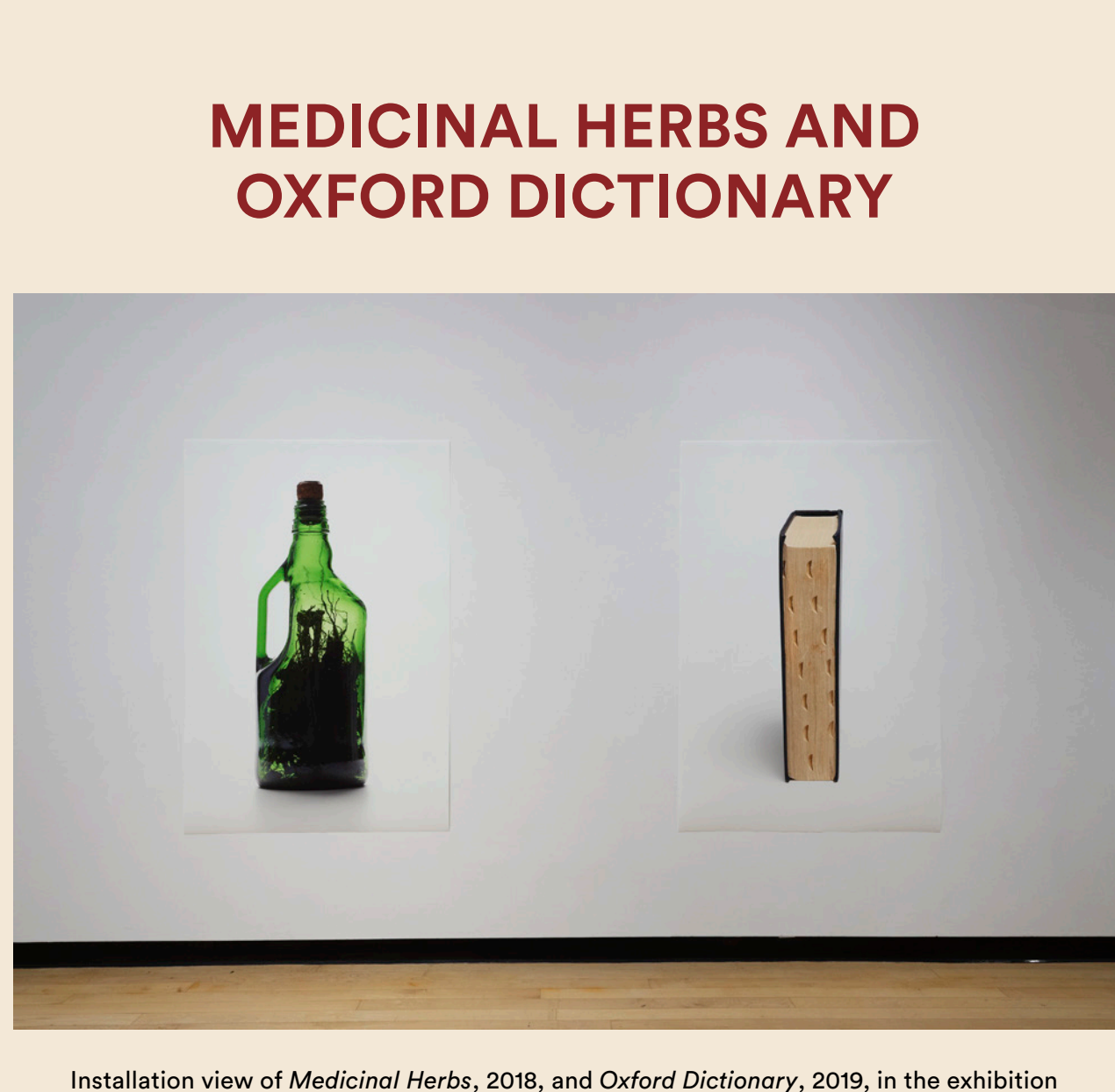


Sandra Brewster, *Heirloom*, 2017, collection of the artist.

Heirloom, 2017, consists of a glass vessel containing currants and fruits soaking in rum and wine—the central ingredients of Black Cake, a traditional Caribbean holiday dessert. The object belongs to Brewster's sister, who is the family member responsible for baking the cake. "The cultural tradition has transferred down to her," says Brewster. "I personally am unaware of anyone of my generation who makes Black Cake." This makes the jar "very special" and "a symbol of presence." *Heirloom* formed part of Brewster's exhibition *A Trace | Evidence of time past* (2017) at the Art Museum, University of Toronto, which examined her family's relocation from Guyana to Toronto, and how the journey impacted them and subsequent generations.

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UNTITLED (BLUR)

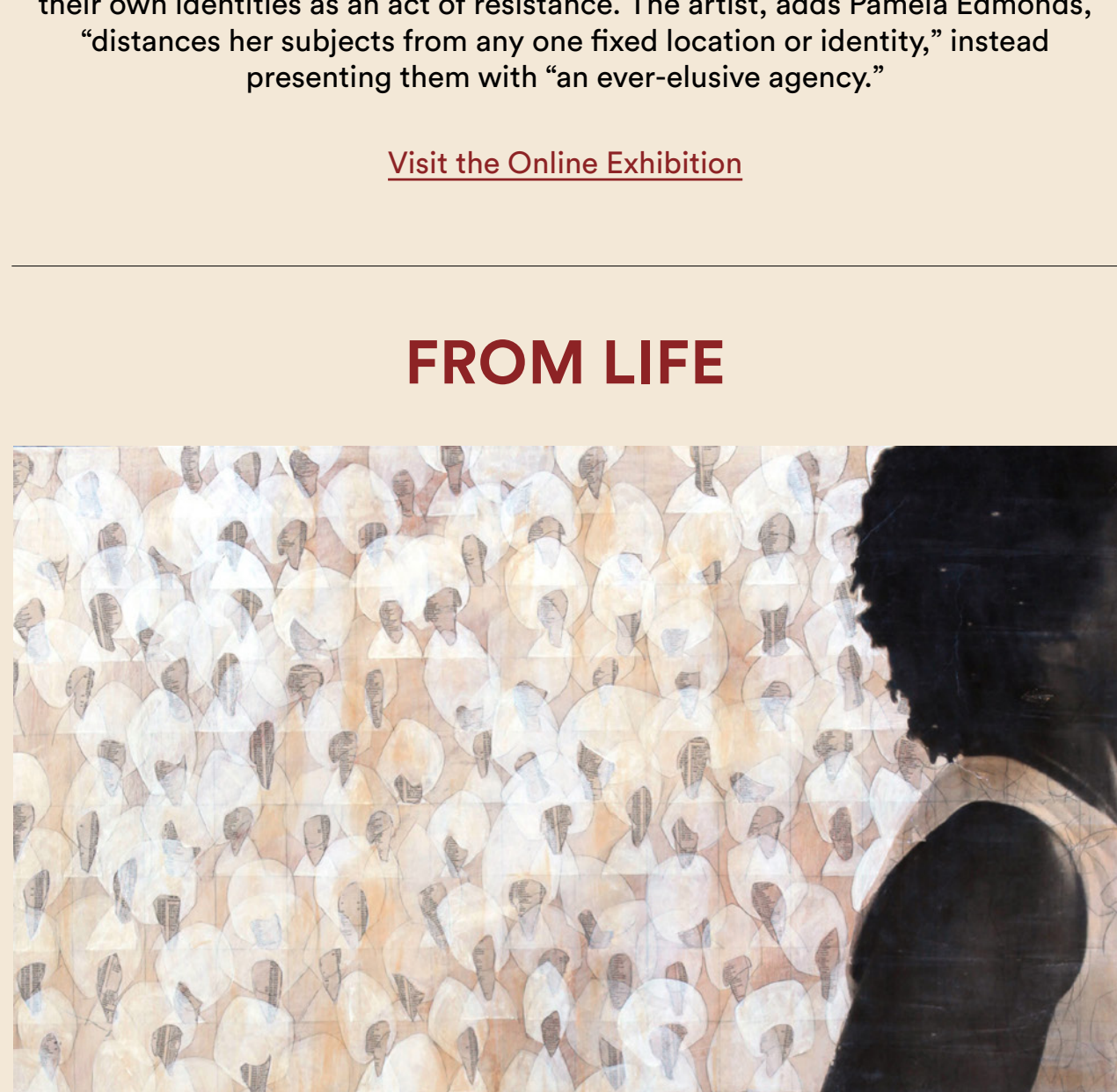


Installation view of the Blur series in the exhibition Sandra Brewster, Works from series: Smith, Blur, Video: Walk on by at OPTICA, Montreal, February 16 to April 3, 2021.

Challenging fixed notions of Blackness and conventions of portraiture, Brewster's well-known work *Untitled (Blur)*, 2017–19, consists of ninety-six black and white portraits of figures in motion. Brewster directed the movement of each subject and then using a gel medium, she transferred their printed image onto archival paper. Together, the gel transfer technique and the resulting dynamic images articulate Brewster's longstanding interest in how movement from one place to another shapes one's identity. The artist adds, "The intention of the Blur is also to represent individuals as layered and complex: to not see people solely in one dimension."

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A TRACE | EVIDENCE OF TIME PAST



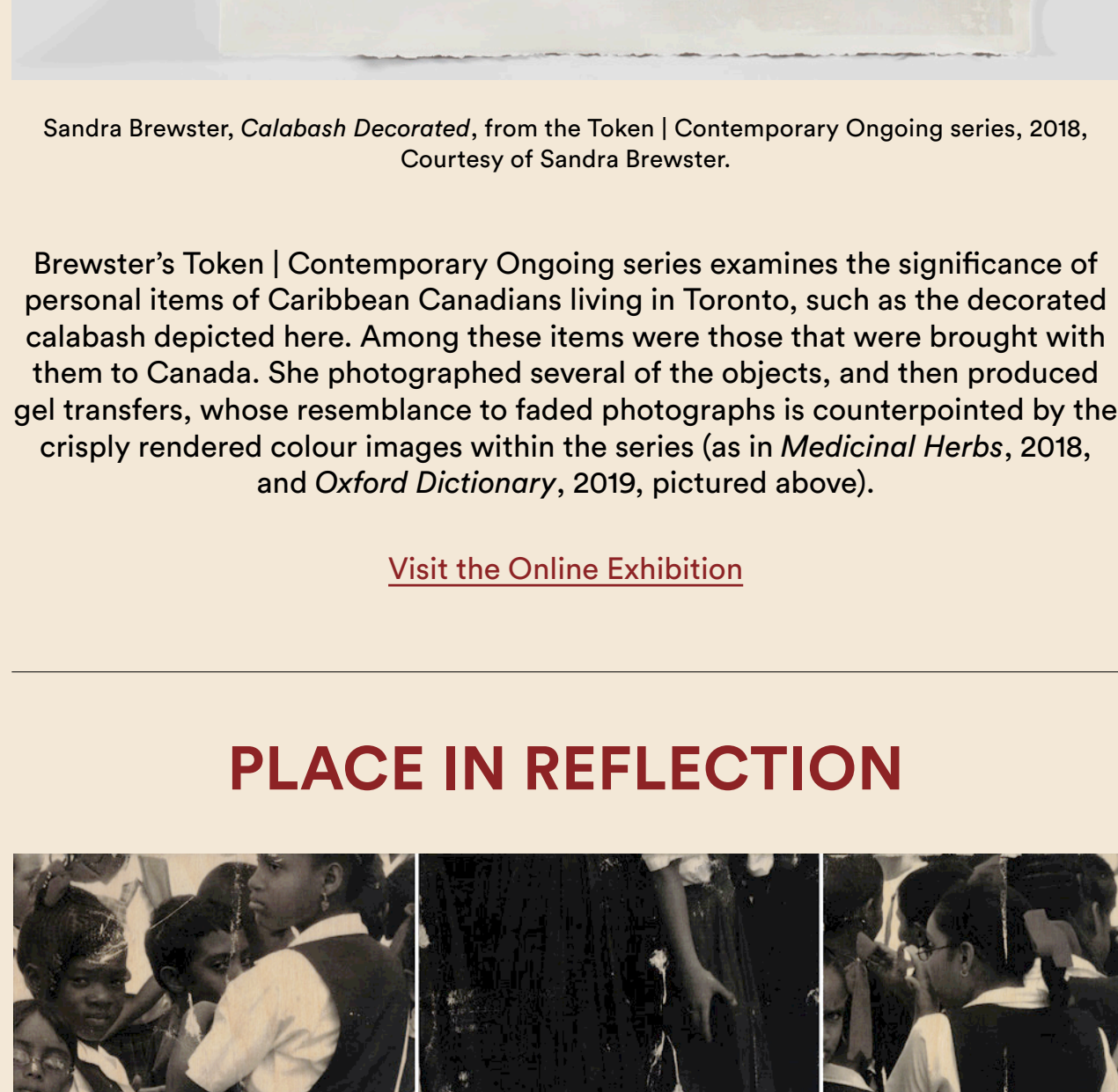
Installation view of the exhibition *A Trace | Evidence of time past* at the Art Museum, University of Toronto, March 2017.

In this installation view of Brewster's exhibition *A Trace | Evidence of time past* (2017) at the Art Museum, University of Toronto, large-scale photo-based gel transfers on mylar of the Essequibo River in Guyana hang from the ceiling, gently swaying in the space. Brewster's mother took a boat trip along the river years ago and returned with vivid tales—stories that later informed the artist's own experience of the natural attraction during her first visit to Guyana. Within the exhibition, the immersive images of the Essequibo River served as "a metaphor for movement, from one place to another place," says Brewster. She imagines that for the Caribbean people from her mother's generation who left home in search of another life, the "adventure...may have at times felt like a rush through rough waters."

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MEDICINAL HERBS AND OXFORD DICTIONARY

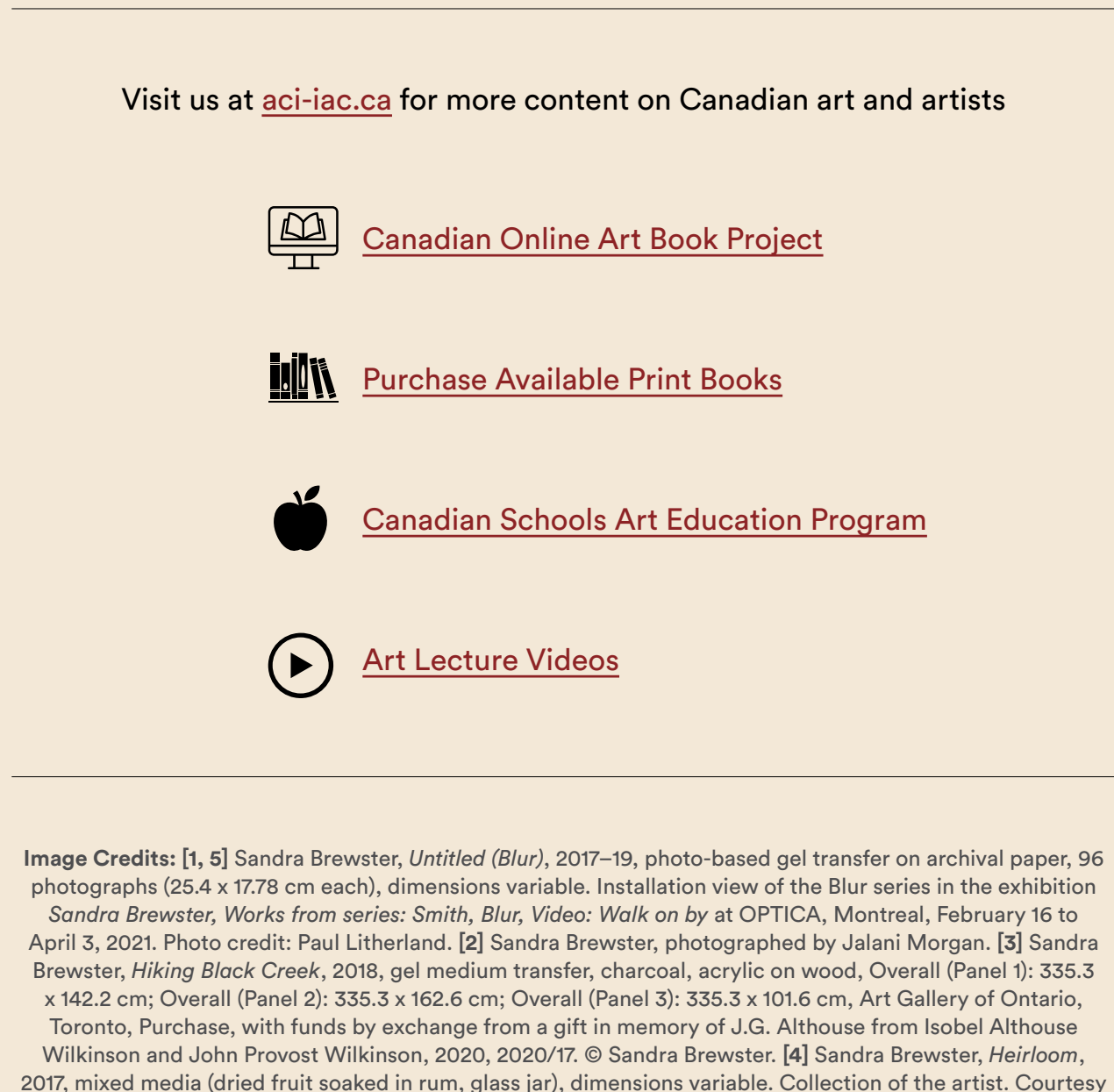


Installation view of *Medicinal Herbs*, 2018, and *Oxford Dictionary*, 2019, in the exhibition *Token | Contemporary Ongoing* at the Art Gallery of Guelph, January 22 to April 12, 2020.

During her residency at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in 2018–19, Brewster visited the Photography Department and was fascinated by the process of documenting the permanent collection. "This made me think of the objects collected and cherished in the homes of the Caribbean community here in Toronto," says Brewster. The bottle of medicinal herbs and Oxford dictionary pictured here are examples of the everyday items that the artist borrowed and photographed at the AGO using a special image capture process known for precise detail. These large-scale pieces are part of Brewster's series *Token | Contemporary Ongoing*, which further explores the significance of the objects through audio recordings of their owners' reflections.

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UNTITLED (BLUR)



Installation view of *Untitled (Blur)*, 2015–16, in the exhibition *Sandra Brewster: Blur* at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, July 24, 2019 to September 13, 2020.

"There is power in being able to conceal parts of who we are," says Brewster. In this self-portrait from the Blur series, an indistinct image of the artist is repeated and layered across five large wooden panels. Applied using a gel medium, the fragmented images show creases and areas where the ink did not adhere to the surface of the panels. In the series, which also includes portraits of other individuals, Brewster and her subjects are actively engaged in concealing their own identities as an act of resistance. The artist, adds Pamela Edmonds, "distances her subjects from any one fixed location or identity," instead presenting them with "an ever-elusive agency."

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FROM LIFE

Sandra Brewster, *From Life*, 2015, Courtesy of Sandra Brewster and Olga Korper Gallery.

Brewster developed her series *The Smiths* to address the common perception of a monolithic Black community. She created simplified figures with afros whose faces are collaged with sections of the phone directory listing individuals with the last name Smith—the most common surname in North America. Its extensive repetition evokes what the artist describes as "sameness and invisibility," despite the reality that the surname is shared by a diverse group of people. The Smiths fill the background of *From Life*, 2015, while in the right foreground is a large-scale photo-based gel transfer of a person whose body is partially out of frame. This work, the artist explains, is "meant to suggest a relationship between realistic representations of people and the monolithic Smiths."

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CALABASH DECORATED

Sandra Brewster, *Calabash Decorated*, from the *Token | Contemporary Ongoing* series, 2018, Courtesy of Sandra Brewster.

Brewster's *Token | Contemporary Ongoing* series examines the significance of personal items of Caribbean Canadians living in Toronto, such as the decorated calabash depicted here. Among these items were those that were brought with them to Canada. She photographed several of the objects, and then produced gel transfers, whose resemblance to faded photographs is counterpointed by the crisply rendered colour images within the series (as in *Medicinal Herbs*, 2018, and *Oxford Dictionary*, 2019, pictured above).

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PLACE IN REFLECTION

Sandra Brewster, *Place in Reflection* (detail), 2016, Courtesy of Sandra Brewster.

Place in Reflection, 2016, was created after Brewster visited her parents' native country of Guyana. She photographed places and people that reminded her of the stories that family members would tell her about life back home, and then created photo-based gel transfers on wooden panels. This sequence of fragmented images shows groups of schoolchildren in uniform. "I did [this] series of transfers because I knew that [they] would come out in a fractured kind of way, to show that these are...like false memories," says Brewster. *With Place in Reflection*, the artist acknowledges the differences between present-day Guyana and the homeland that exists in her family's nostalgic recollections.

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Image Credits: [1, 5] Sandra Brewster, *Untitled (Blur)*, 2017–19, photo-based gel transfer on archival paper, 96 photographs (25.4 x 17.78 cm each), dimensions variable. Installation view of the Blur series in the exhibition *Sandra Brewster, Works from series: Smith, Blur, Video: Walk on by* at OPTICA, Montreal, February 16 to April 3, 2021. Photo credit: Paul Litterland. [2] Sandra Brewster, *Medicinal Herbs*, 2018, archival pigment print, 185.42 x 121.92 cm; Sandra Brewster, *Oxford Dictionary*, 2019, archival pigment print, 185.42 x 121.92 cm; Sandra Brewster, *From Life*, 2015, while in the right foreground is a large-scale photo-based gel transfer of a person whose body is partially out of frame. This work, the artist explains, is "meant to suggest a relationship between realistic representations of people and the monolithic Smiths." Photo credit: Dean Palmer. [3] Sandra Brewster, *Heirloom*, 2017, glass vessel containing currants and fruits soaking in rum and wine. Photo credit: Toni Hoffenscheid. [4] Sandra Brewster, *Calabash Decorated*, from the *Token | Contemporary Ongoing* series, 2018, photo-based gel transfer on paper, 55.88 x 76.2 cm. Photo credit: Art Gallery of Ontario. [6] Sandra Brewster, *Place in Reflection* (detail), 2016, photo-based gel transfer on wood. Photo credit: Sandra Brewster.