

# Paradoxes of a Soft Spoken Tree

Z'otz\* Collective



**Exhibition Title**

Paradoxes of a Soft Spoken Tree

**Artists**

Z'otz\* Collective

**Dates**

Remote Residency (Toronto, ON)  
22–28 August, 2020

Exhibition (Nelson, BC)  
29 August–26 September, 2020

**Exhibition Essay**

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**OXYGEN ART CENTRE**

**Based in Nelson BC,** Oxygen Art Centre is a rural artist-run centre that provides space and programming for artists and the public to engage in the creation, study, exhibition, and performance of contemporary art. Founded in 2002, Oxygen is an integral and long-standing cultural hub for artists of all disciplines. Oxygen's annual programming includes an Exhibition & Residency program and Education program, as well as events, presentations, readings, and workshops.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND GRATITUDE

**We acknowledge with gratitude** that we are located on the unceded traditional territory of the sn̓ɬay̓ckstx, Sinixt Arrow Lakes, Sylx, Ktunaxa, and the Yaqan Nukij Lower Kootenay Band peoples. We recognize the enduring presence of First Nations people on this land and that it is home to the Métis and many diverse Indigenous persons.

We are grateful for the financial support we receive from Canada Council for the Arts, BC Arts Council, BC Gaming, Province of BC, Government of Canada, Vancouver Foundation, Columbia Kootenay Cultural Alliance, Columbia Basin Trust, United Way, Osprey Community Foundation, Nelson Lions Club, and Nelson and District Credit Union.

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We especially thank all of our volunteers, donors, and members.



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## ARTIST STATEMENT

**Z'otz\* Collective is a group of three artists with Latin American roots:** Nahúm Flores (Honduras), Erik Jerezano (Mexico), and Ilyana Martínez (Mexico/Canada). Formed in Toronto in 2004, Z'otz\* members meet weekly to collaborate on works that incorporate drawing, painting, collage, sculpture, and site-specific installations. The direct approach of drawing, their primary means of expression, allows them to create quirky, humorous images that touch on the themes of migration, displacement, transition and transformation. The work connects to the storytelling traditions of their background, with mythological beings and symbols that transition between the individual and collective dynamic. Z'otz is the Mayan word for “bat”.

## EXHIBITION STATEMENT

### Expressions of Relatedness — A lens into the world of Z'otz\* Collective

by Deborah Thompson

**The poetic and enigmatic exhibition title**, “Paradoxes of a Soft Spoken Tree” installed at Oxygen Art Centre, prepares us for the co-joining of contrasting imagery, and reflects the serendipitous working process of collaboration that is the signature of Z'otz\* Collective. Bound together by their shared diaspora, and a passion for drawing, these three artists of Latin American ancestry have formed a working collective whose practice includes; drawing, collage, assemblages and sculptural ceramics. Central to the group's creative practice is a surrealist technique of free association in which words randomly generated are then gathered in a “book of titles.” These words are then revisited and amalgamated to form the titles for finished works and exhibitions. Underscoring this spontaneous process is a fidelity to intuition, inclusivity and relatedness that guides their collaborative process.

Entering the Oxygen Art Centre, I join a procession of cut vinyl human, animal and abstract imagery that leads me into and around the gallery space. I am immediately reminded of the pictographs and petroglyphs of the pre-Hispanic Pueblo people who inhabited the Colorado plateau between 500 B.C. to 1450 A.D. Chiseled or painted onto the sandstone walls these hauntingly seductive forms sprawl, overlap, merge and morph, in repetitions that seem to form a system of communication. To my settler eyes, these images are cryptic, and any narrative structure, speculative. In particular, a series of Pueblo glyphs along the San Juan River in Southern Utah, know as the “Big Kachina Panel”, where large humanoid figures with arching lines, gourd-like shapes or drawings of smaller bodies extend from the top or sides of their heads,

comes to mind. Theories about the meaning of these mysterious appendages include: protective foliage; hair style; feather or horned head wear; ornamentation worn by shamans and spirit helpers; smoke rings; thought clouds, and so forth. They present as otherworldly, and form symbolic expressions of an invisible relatedness between spirit and human, spirit and other.

Similarly, in the fluid drawings of Z'otz\* Collective there appears to be otherworldly expressions of relatedness. Drawings of contrasting, and seemingly unconnected characters are united visually through bodily expulsions, hybridized forms, anatomical extensions, speech bubbles, invasive intrusions, fragmented abstractions, and simple gestures. Jerezano refers to this joining process as “complex scenery dependency.” Working from a “very intuitive place,” he says, “the group blends their six hands into one.” In this collaborative process each member assumes responsibility for the overall piece without taking individual ownership. This liberation of ego allows their process to evolve collectively and unconsciously, bringing forth what appears to be uncanny and supernatural imagery. In what could be seen as a record of grotesque “out of body” experiences, these extensions instead serve as visual props, binding illogical imagery together to form a sort of kinship or sense of belonging. This emphasis on relatedness may reflect an Indigenous worldview that sees all living things as being connected.

It is interesting to ponder another similarity between the archaic Pueblo glyphs and those of Z'otz\* Collective—that of migration. It is believed in the mythology of today's Pueblo people, the Tewa, Tiwa, Towa, Keres, Zuni and Hopi, that their ancestors migrated from four directions to converge in the Canyon Country of the SW United States. Thousands of years of a nomadic lifestyle driven by survival, trade and commerce are recorded on the sandstone walls. The three artists that comprise Z'otz\* Collective have endured their own migrations finding themselves, and each other in Toronto where they have formed a visual art practice around both their shared histories and individual identities. Much like the ancient Pueblo artists they have created for us a record of the migrant experience.

Situated in the far corner of the gallery, as part of the wall mural, are two seemingly unrelated images—that of a small pig-like animal, and a closed loop of cord. The continuous looping aspect of the cord recalls an Ouroboros, often depicted as snake biting its tail, the ancient Egyptian symbol of renewal.



The pig, famous for its glutinous enjoyment in the bounties of life exemplifies an earthly mortality. This paradoxical combination of images plays with the transient and eternal nature of existence, and is a theme found in much of the Collective's work. In speaking with Jerezano and Nahúm, I hear the workings of this embedded paradox in Jerezano's existential inquiries such as, "where are we going?" and "why are we here?" contrasting with Nahúm's light rejoinder, "it's best not to take life too seriously." A collaborative process that has flourished for its spacious inclusion of such contrasting perspectives.

With their unique biographies as Latin American immigrants the members of Z'otz\* Collective stand close to their ancestral roots, and maintain a felt sense of belonging to Indigenous culture. The group lists Indigenous art, in particular that of Inuit, Egyptian and Mayan among their inspirations. Yet, they reside in Toronto, Canada, a city that has also shaped their practices. Martinez and Nahúm are graduates of the Ontario College of Art and Design, and Jerezano is a self-taught artist who has worked in the printing industry. In this way, they walk between urban/colonial and traditional/Indigenous binaries. Martinez describes her immigrant experience as "chameleon-like," allowing her to let go of one cultural context in order to fold into another, or, as she would say, "I can be that now." The chameleon spills into the collaborative process where the artists embrace a blended, morphing, composite style, mixing Indigenous influences with the everyday world around them.



Henry Moore, *Reclining Figure*,  
Drawing, 1977-78

In pondering the work of Z'otz\* Collective, I am reminded how the infusion of Indigenous art and culture has expanded the visual language of Western art, and how it has influenced the aesthetics and development of 20th century Modernism. For example, Henry Moore's extensive series of "reclining figure" drawings were inspired by his visit in 1925 to the Trocadero Museum in Paris. There he saw a Chacmool, a sculptural form found in Toltec-Mayan temples throughout Mesoamerica from 900 to 1150 AD. Chacmools are thought to represent a fallen warrior. The sculpture's 'body' is presented in a reclining posture with a slight cavity carved into its torso forming a basin or vessel. Food, tobacco or blood used as an offering during sacrificial ceremonies would be placed in this concave area. The expressive gesture of the Chacmool's elongated body, raised knees, sunken torso and counter-rotated head remained with Moore throughout his career, inspiring many drawings, maquettes, and sculptures. These formal explorations in

distorting, elongating, stretching, piercing and twisting the anatomy contributed to his mature style of figurative abstraction, and contributed to expanding the Western canon of art.

The artists of Z'otz\* Collective in their varied histories and education have likewise mixed Indigenous and Western influences in the evolution of their visual language. Examples of this merging can be found in the exhibition at the Oxygen Art Centre, in particular, not long after we enter the gallery, a lone figure hovering in a state of mythic giantism greets us. Supported by two thin legs the figure's torso is pierced by holes in an otherwise opaque body, a small bird rests on the crown of figure's head, the figure gazes towards the sky. Two birds, one fragmented, the other whole bookend this towering figure. An urban skyline dangles below. In all, the figure presents an expression of interiority that echoes back to Moore's "reclining figure," and to the archetypal nature of the Chacmool. Despite its proximity to nature and culture it exudes a feeling of autonomy, and in this way, is a portrait of sorts, of the human condition. It offers the viewer a place to pause in an otherwise moving pantheon of imagery, and thus provides an opportunity for reflection.



*Maya chacmool from Chichen Itza  
displayed at the National Museum  
of Anthropology (Mexico)*



## The Residency

All photos taken by  
Z'otz\* Collective  
August 2020





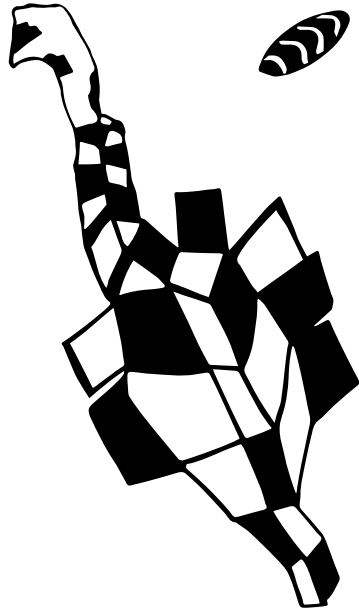




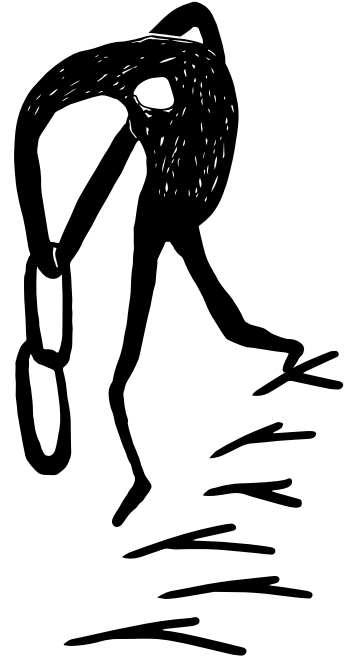








## The Exhibition



All photos taken by  
Randi Fjeldseth  
September 2020



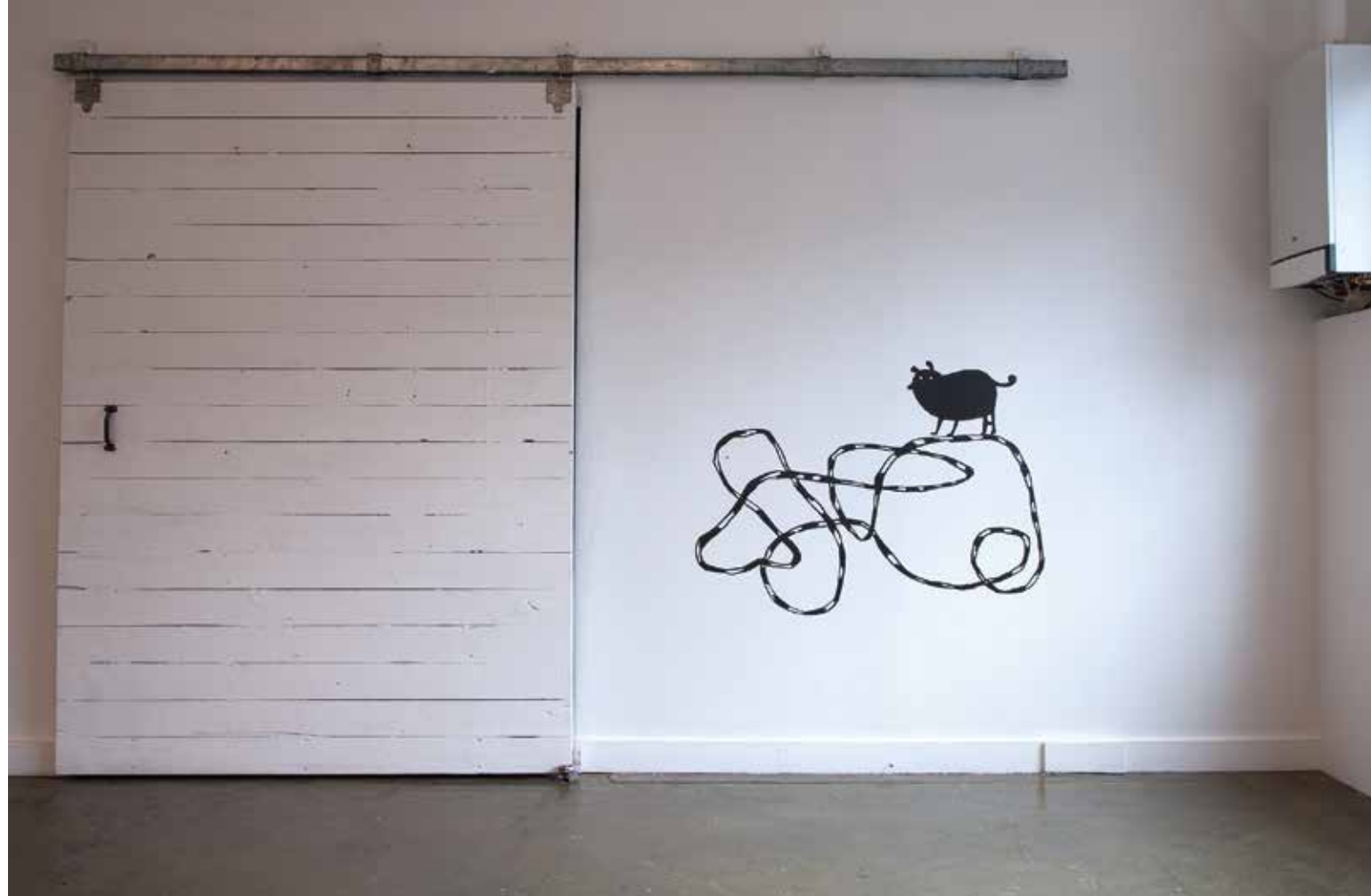




















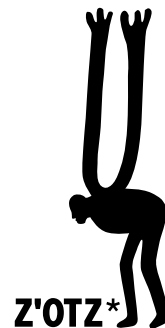
## ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

**Z'otz\* Collective is a group of three artists** with Latin American roots: Nahúm Flores (Honduras), Erik Jerezano (Mexico), and Ilyana Martínez (Mexico/Canada). For over a fifteen years, Z'otz\* has worked collaboratively out of a shared studio in Toronto, on drawings, paintings, collages, sculptures, and site-specific installations. They have attended residencies in Croatia and Serbia, where they initiated work with ceramic sculpture. Since then, the trio have incorporated ceramic pieces into ephemeral wall drawings.

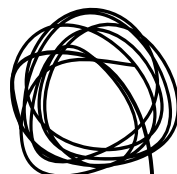
Z'otz\* created a mural for the Toronto PanAm Games in 2015 and were featured on CBC Sports. They have received grants from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. The three members were awarded grants for their individual practices from the esteemed Pollock-Krasner Foundation in New York City.

The Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal commissioned Z'otz\* to create a series of ceramic sculptures which have become part of their permanent collection in the recently inaugurated Stephan Crétier and Stéphanie Maillery Wing for the Arts of One World. In 2019, the group exhibited at YYY Artists' Outlet and the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington.

Z'otz\* Collective has had over 25 solo exhibitions and over 40 group exhibitions in museums, galleries and artist-run centres in Canada, Mexico, USA, Serbia, and China.







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