

Collection Connections: Safe At Home

By Karly Boileau, Assistant Curator

Collection Connections is a new initiative that creates meaningful engagement and dialogue between current exhibitions and Cambridge Art Galleries' permanent collection of contemporary fibre art. Drawing on themes in the exhibition *Is It The Sun or the Asphalt All I See Is Bright Black* by Chloë Lum and Yannick Desranleau, Vessna Perunovich's 2004 work, *Safe At Home*, has been selected from the collection to highlight the artists' use of materials within their work.

Made from elastic and straight pins, *Safe at Home* is part of a larger body of work Vessna Perunovich developed during an Informal Architectures Residency at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity in 2004. In this series of works, Perunovich created architectural structures out of elasticized thread to illustrate the changeable nature of space, boundaries, identity, and gender roles. This work is comparatively smaller than its counterpart, *(W)hole, House of Exile*, a large-scale open frame house made of elastic thread that visitors could physically enter, creating a more collective experience of the work. On a much smaller scale, using similar materials, *Safe at Home* invites thoughtful, personal contemplation on the multiple meanings of home.

The artist's choice of material is integral to the meaning of these works. If "the medium is the message"¹ as the pioneering media and communication theorist Marshall McLuhan stated, then the medium of elastic used to create *Safe at Home* can be said to communicate in an accessible way the abstract idea that space, boundaries, identity, and gender roles are fluid. More than merely a means to create the work, the elastic thread demonstrates the themes in *Safe at Home* by its very nature—it can stretch, retract, form, restrain, and break. Born in the former Yugoslavia before emigrating to Canada in the late 1980s, Perunovich's artistic practice is informed by her diasporic experience set against the political backdrop of the Balkans and stereotypical gender roles. In *Safe at Home*, Perunovich encourages us to consider our personal understanding of what a home is by using a medium that depicts this space—which historically has been viewed as feminine—as flexible, changeable, and permeable.

Making Connections

Materiality is a shared concept in *Safe at Home* and the video installation and sculptures presented in the exhibition *Chloë Lum and Yannick Desranleau: Is It The Sun Or The Asphalt All I See Is Bright Black*. In both instances, materials are employed for the specific

¹ Marshall McLuhan, 'Chapter 1: The Medium Is the Message,' from *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press: 1994), pp. 7-21.

purpose of conveying thematic ideas and concepts to the audience. In *Is It The Sun Or The Asphalt All I See Is Bright Black*, abstract material sculptures are created out of a variety of materials including papier mâché, latex, urethane rubber, vulcanized rubber, steel, Tyvek, lycra, and screenprinted paper. While Perunovich chose elastic for its ability to encapsulate her concepts, Lum and Desranleau begin with material exploration and allow the nature of their materials to inform the final work. In this sense, the sculptures in *Is It The Sun Or The Asphalt All I See Is Bright Black* are conceived as collaborators for the human performers that engage them, equally contributing to meaning and narrative in this work.