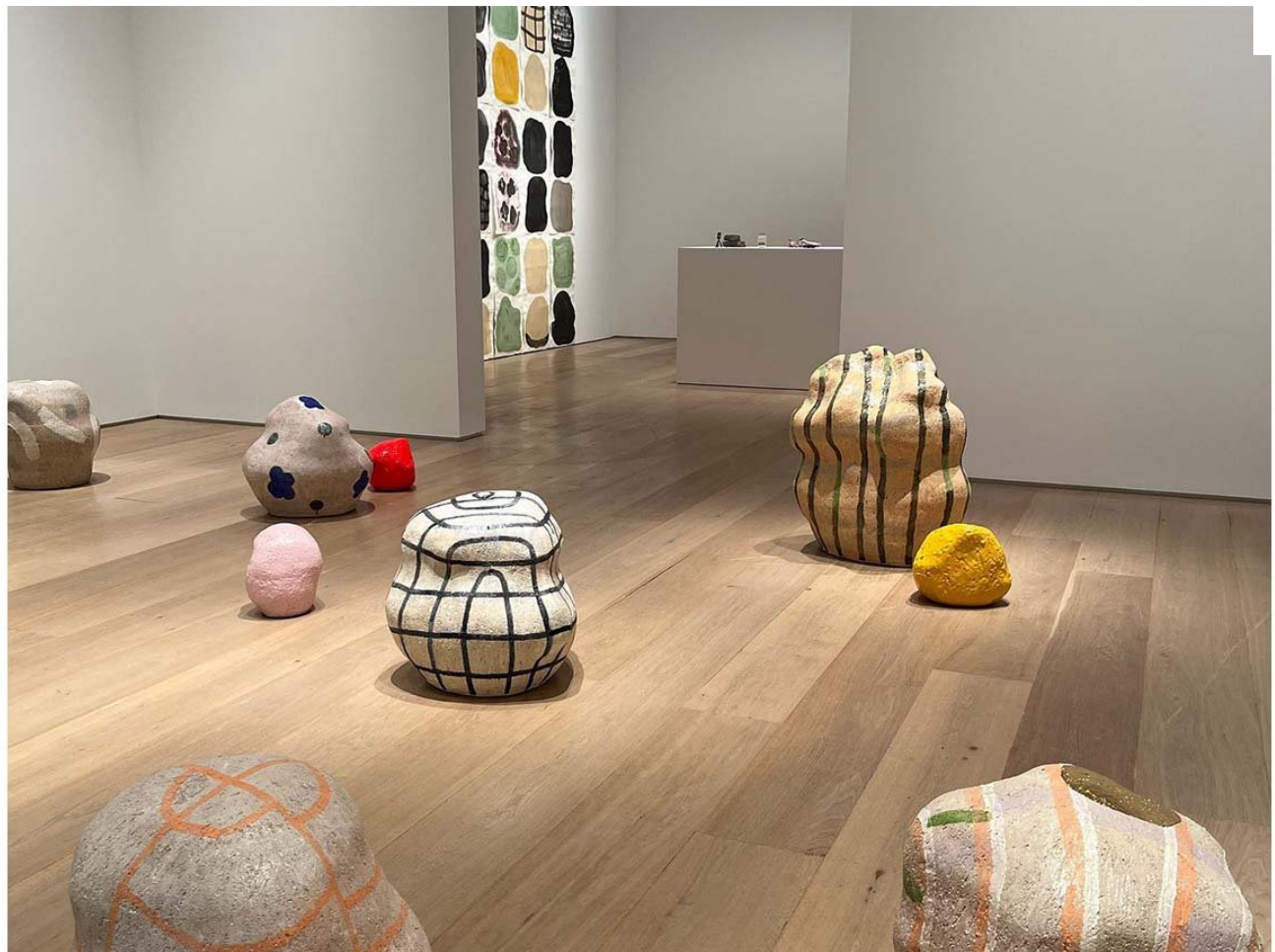


Gailan Ngan

Fundamental forms for now, here and beyond.

by Shazia Hafiz Ramji

August 8, 2022 5:45 PM



Gailan Ngan, "Moon Orbit," 2022, clay, slip, glaze, paint and 3-D printed objects, installation view at Esker Foundation, Calgary (courtesy the artist and Monte Clark Gallery, Vancouver)

Vancouver artist Gailan Ngan's *From the Studio Floor* presents a collection of works that are playful and inviting despite their weighty materials. The exhibition, on view at the Esker Foundation in Calgary until Dec. 18, brings together found materials such as chunks of clay and a cactus, with a series of ceramic sculptures collectively titled *Moon Orbit*, which Ngan describes as "blobs." They look like colourful boulders from outer space but are mostly made of clay from British Columbia.

Moon Orbit, laid out on the gallery floor, is painted in a range of solid colours, including purple, pink and red, as well as more muted stripes. I wandered around each form, imagining myself in an otherworldly maze,

watching myself turn as the rounded surfaces and jutting nubs of each form gently sculpted the gaps between them. Ngan's consideration of both time and negative space is deeply felt.



Gailan Ngan, "Moon Orbit" (detail), 2022, clay, slip, glaze, paint and 3-D printed objects, installation view at Esker Foundation, Calgary (courtesy the artist and Monte Clark Gallery, Vancouver)

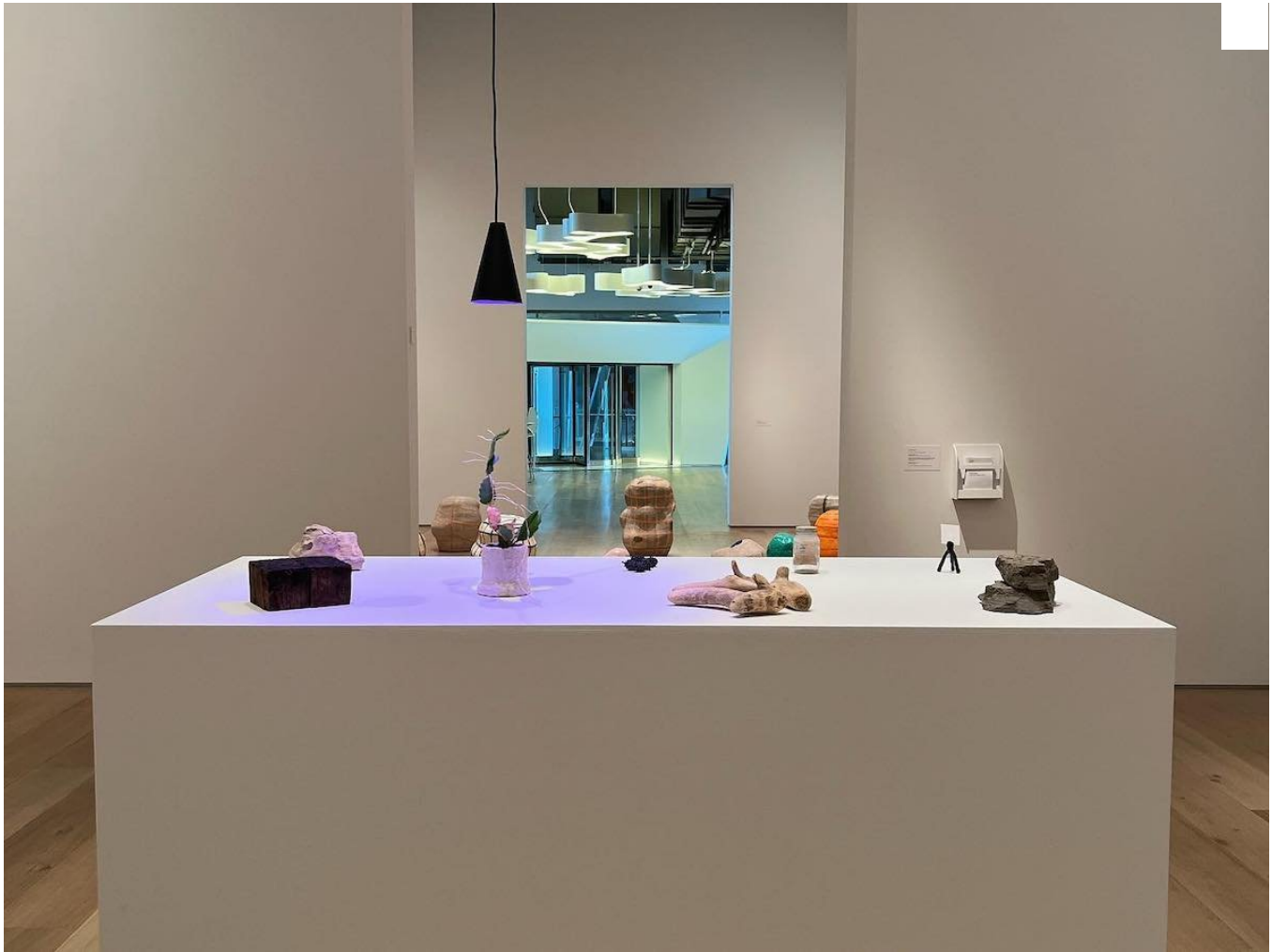
In a text accompanying the exhibition, Ngan writes: "Clay comes from the ebb and flow of glacial movement, the grinding of stone over millennia into fine particles, depositing into areas." This durational aspect is apparent in the surprisingly shiny lustre of the sculptures, which draws out dips, craters and grooves in the clay.



Gailan Ngan, "Moon Orbit" (detail), 2022, clay, slip, glaze, paint and 3-D printed objects, installation view at Esker Foundation, Calgary (photo by Shazia Hafiz Ramji)

On some works, Ngan has painted thick stripes that resemble contour lines on a map. They are expressive of the essential form – a rounded sculpture takes a web-like lattice, while a tall one has vertical stripes. Works in solid bright colours are smaller than the neutral-toned ones, creating a dynamic of shadowing through adjacency, making visible various connections based on colour and scale.

Ngan has applied a small circular cap of unpainted clay to the tops of a few boulders. She previously explored this technique in a 2019 solo show at the Monte Clark Gallery in Vancouver, using clay gathered from the Site C Dam site, a contentious hydroelectric project under construction on the Peace River in Northern B.C. Another sculpture has a golden cap, irresistible in its rich sheen, so bright it seems to gather all the ambient light.



Gailan Ngan, "Random Objects Of Material: 8 objects/ideas/materials. Things that I collect. Do they mean anything?" 2022, various objects, installation view at Esker Foundation, Calgary (courtesy the artist and Monte Clark Gallery, Vancouver)

Light is a fixation throughout Ngan's work. As the daughter of the late [Wayne Ngan](#), a well-known B.C. ceramic artist, her current work eschews the utilitarianism of pottery, although she pays several homages to him, notably through found materials and light. *Random Objects of Material: 8 Objects/ideas/materials. Things that I collect. Do they mean anything?* is a series of small found objects arranged on a plinth. They include a wall-climbing cactus from her father's ancestral village in southern China that's displayed under a blacklight. The cactus casts a tangible bright green shadow, reminding us of the sentient materiality of the plant, its water-filled and light-yearning body.

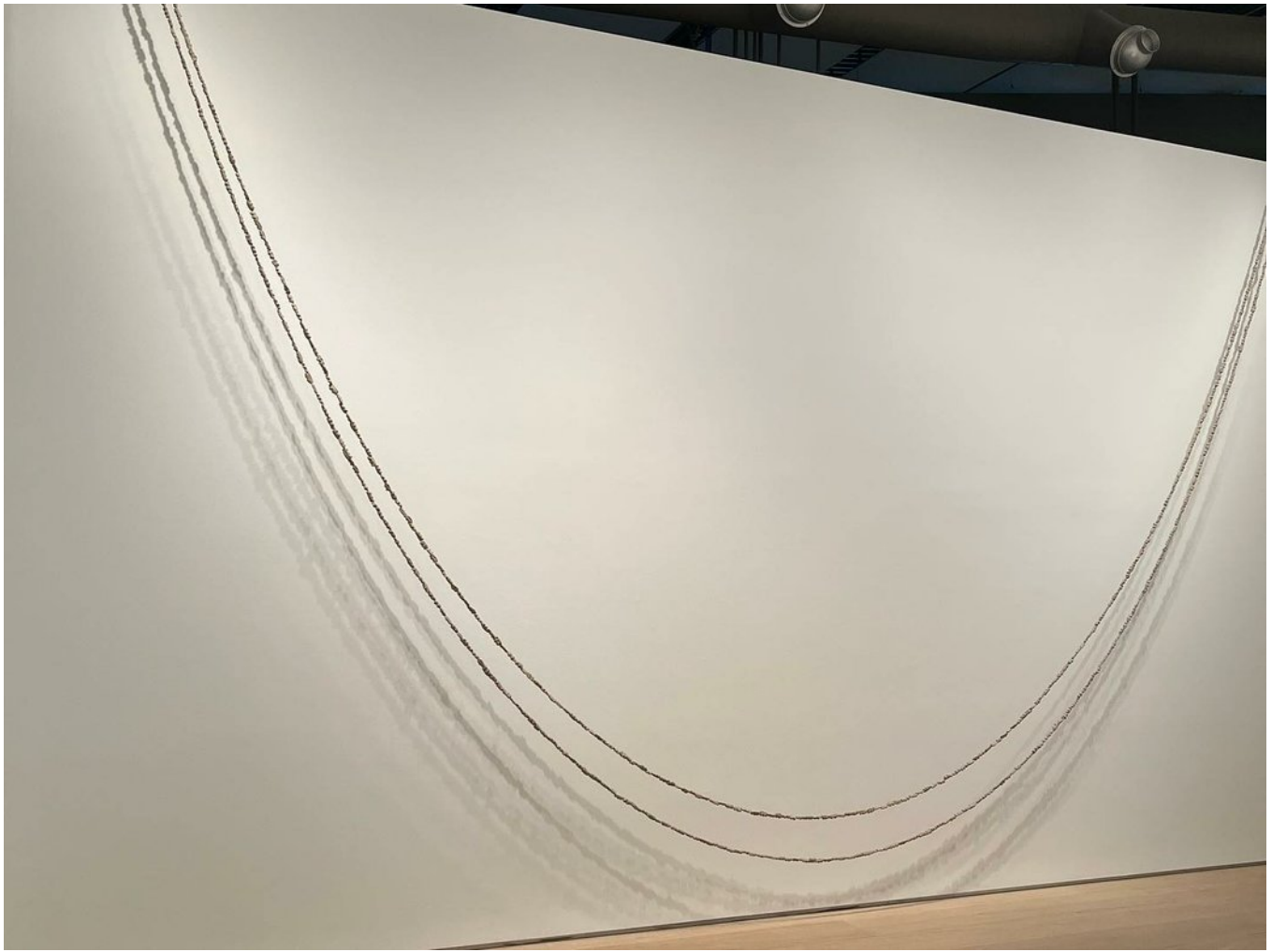
Beside it are beaver-hewn sticks that Ngan bought on Etsy. In her text, Ngan says she saw such sticks in a Vancouver park but didn't take them because it would violate the park's rules. Her environmental sensitivity also resonates in the other objects, which include chunks of clay, creosote pavers, a pinhole photograph, sculptures moulded from black clay and a jar labelled "uranium" that she found in her father's studio.



Gailan Ngan, "From The Studio Floor," 2022, opening event at Esker Foundation, Calgary, showing "Light Weight," 2022, ink, paint, clay, yellow iron oxide, chrome oxide and paper, at rear (photo Danny Luong)

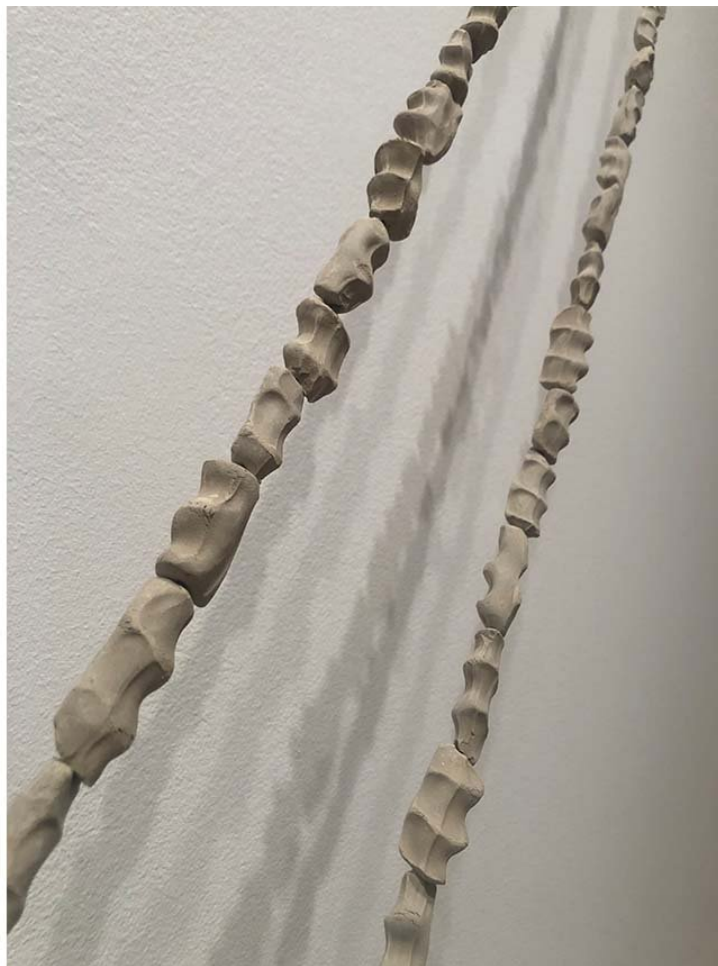
On the walls near the plinth, two large works contrast with the smallness of these objects. *Light Weight*, a grid of 64 two-dimensional works made with ink, paint, clay, yellow iron oxide and chrome oxide, is gestural and affecting. They look like cross-sections of the pieces in *Moon Orbit* but are almost sculptural in themselves, because of the implied movement of brush and paint, as well as various crinkles in the paper.

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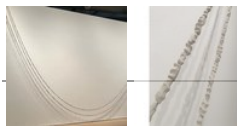


Gailan Ngan, "Room Necklace," 2022, unfired clay and string, installation view at Esker Foundation, Calgary (courtesy the artist)

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Gailan Ngan, "Room Necklace," 2022, unfired clay and string, detail of installation at the Esker Foundation, Calgary (photo by Shazia Hafiz Ramji)



The final work, *Room Necklace*, is a stunner. Two strings of unpainted bone-like clay beads are hung parallel to each other in a deep U shape, much like a necklace would rest on a chest. Ngan made them by squeezing clay to make impressions of the inside of her closed fist.

Ngan's work is elemental, intuitive and expansive, rooting us in the environmental concerns of here and now, but also pointing to what exceeds us: non-human carbon-based forms that are essential but also transcendent, if we remember the stardust we're made from – the same elements that constitute creosote and cacti. Ngan is an artist for whom form is a guiding question, not a problem to be solved. *From the Studio Floor*, despite its deceptive simplicity, is remarkably generous and expansive. ■

Gailan Ngan, *From the Studio Floor*, at the Esker Foundation from July 23 to Dec. 18, 2022.

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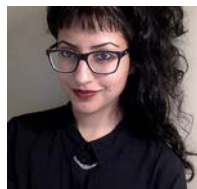
HOURS Visits to the gallery & bookshop must be pre-booked. Wed to Sat 11 am - 5:30 pm.



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Shazia Hafiz Ramji

Shazia Hafiz Ramji's writing is forthcoming in Momus, The Malahat Review and the 2022 Montreal International Poetry Prize anthology. She is the author of Port of Being.

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