

# KITCHENER-WATERLOO ART GALLERY

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## Hours:

Monday: Closed to the public

Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday: 9:30 am - 5 pm

Thursday: 9:30 am - 9 pm

Saturday: 10 am - 5 pm

Sunday: 1 - 5 pm

Admission to the Gallery is free.

Everyone is welcome.

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Jessica  
Karuhanga:  
Blue  
as the  
insides



## Jessica Karuhanga: **Blue as the insides**

The Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery is pleased to present the first solo exhibition of Ugandan-Canadian artist Jessica Karuhanga. *Blue as the insides* is a survey of Karuhanga's performance, video and sound installations over the last decade. Through poetic invocations of cultural symbols, artifacts and rituals, Karuhanga creates immersive sensorial environments. These settings collapse linear embodiments of time and uncover aspects of histories and relations that are otherwise hidden or unknown.

Karuhanga's practice explores self-articulation, beauty, illness, isolation and grief through intuitive approaches to drawing and performative movement. Her projects materialize as solitary encounters that preserve

an inherent magic or mystery of the sanctified objects and actions that she employs. Resisting expectations for total transparency, Karuhanga's polyphonic work speaks more immediately to some communities than others and questions the limits of how cultural artifacts perform, and for whom.

*Blue as the insides* centers aspects of Black subjectivity and embodiment that is otherwise lost in translation between experience and encounter. Body, place and technology come together to hold traces of Karuhanga's presence. Image and sound cohere a spiritual resilience that guides visitors as they peer into the private reveries of Black life.

## About the Artist

Jessica Karuhanga is a first-generation Canadian artist of British-Ugandan heritage whose work addresses issues of cultural politics of identity and Black diasporic concerns through lens-based technologies, writing, drawing and performances. Through her practice she explores individual and collective concerns of Black subjectivity and embodiment.

She was the 2020 - 2021 recipient of Concordia University's SpokenWeb Artist/Curator-in-Residence Fellowship. Karuhanga has exhibited her work at Mitchell Art Gallery (Edmonton, 2022), the Robert McLaughlin Gallery (Oshawa, 2021), Varley Art Gallery (Markham, 2020), The Bentway (Toronto, 2019), Nuit Blanche (Toronto, 2018) and Onsite Gallery (Toronto, 2018). She has performed at Remai Modern (Saskatoon, 2023), Pallas Art Projects (Dublin, IE, 2022), WNDX Festival of Moving Image (Winnipeg, 2020), Long Winter (Toronto, 2019), Royal Ontario Museum (Toronto, 2018), Cooper Cole Gallery (Toronto, 2017), Goldsmiths University (London, UK, 2017) and DoubleDouble Land (Toronto, 2016).

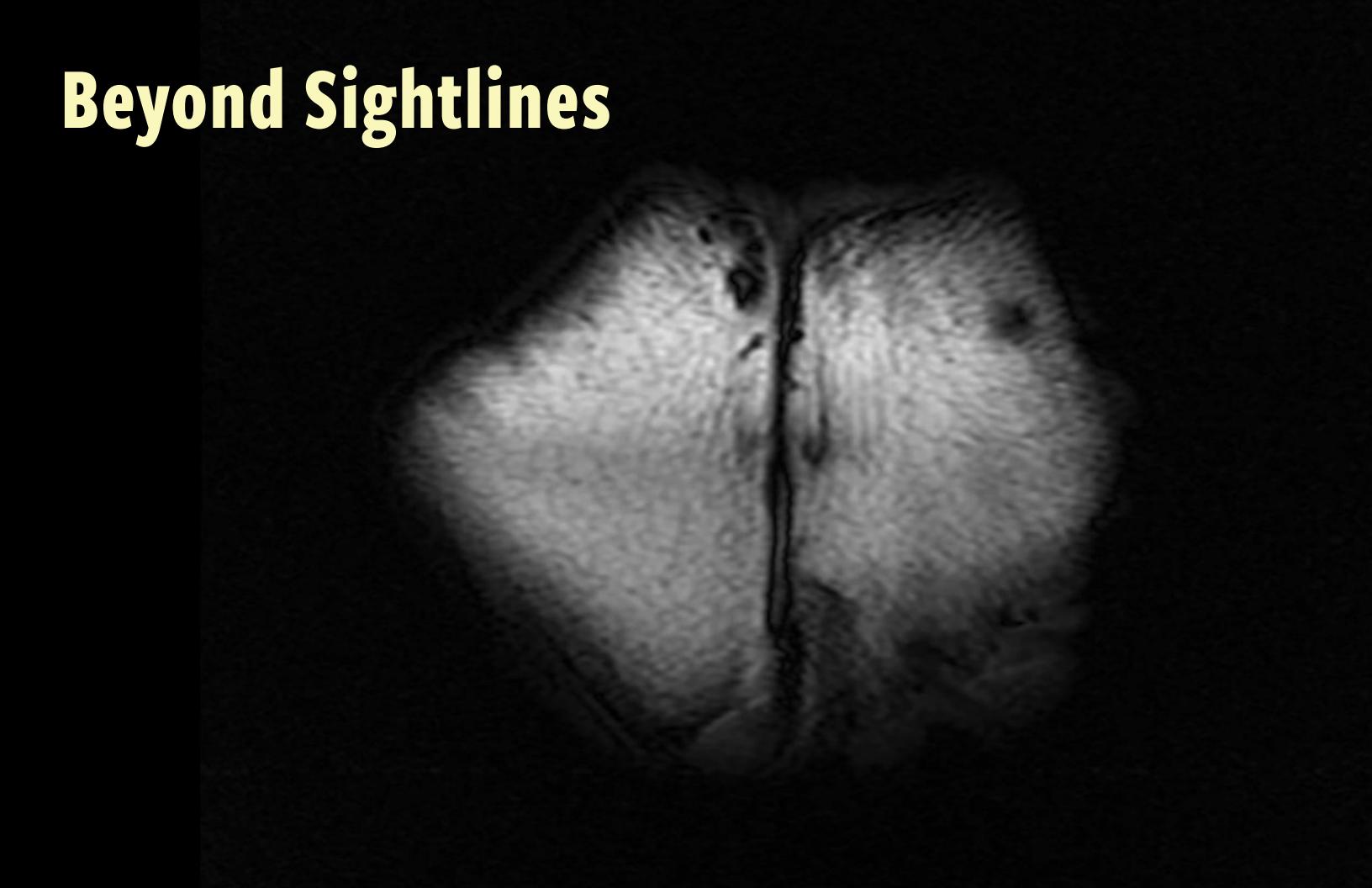
Karuhanga's writing has been published by *C Magazine*, *BlackFlash*, Susan Hobbs Gallery, Blackwood Gallery and Fonderie Darling. She has been featured in AGO's Artist Spotlight, *i-D*, *DAZED*, *Visual Aids*, *Border Crossings*, *Exclaim!*, *Toronto Star*, *CBC Arts*, *esse*, *filthy dreams*, *Globe and Mail* and *Canadian Art*.

She earned her BFA from Western University and MFA from University of Victoria. She is an Assistant Professor at Western University (London, ON).

Cover & Left: Jessica Karuhanga, *Blue as the insides* (still), 2021. Single-channel video with sound, 15:18 mins. © Jessica Karuhanga.  
Right: Provided by the Artist. Photo: Gillian Mapp.



# Beyond Sightlines



The following transcription was taken from a conversation between Dr. Nehal El-Hadi and Jessica Karuhanga on 4 March 2023. Nehal and Jessica have collaborated on writing and programming for over six years, beginning with *Ineffable Blaze*, an exhibition curated by Jessica at Trinity Square Video (Toronto) in 2018. They reunited again to talk about subjectivity, representation and relationality in Jessica's practice. The text has been edited for concision and clarity.

NE

Your work in this exhibition reflects different modes of intimacy: the interiorities and subjectivities of yourself and other women featured. *Body and Soul*, for example, is an intimate topography of your own body.

JK

The iteration of *Body and Soul* in the exhibition is actually a remake. I originally conceived this piece when I was in graduate school in 2012, and then I lost that video file. But it was a very important piece to me. It's a video of my torso in front of a white backdrop, and my torso is covered in tumours caused by my genetic conditions.

I'm interested in this obsession with landscapes and regionalism within Canadian cultural history, and I was thinking of my body as a landscape. But I'm also thinking about it in terms of place and origins, where I come from. I'm first-generation on my dad's side – he's a refugee from Uganda – and my mom is of mixed British and Romany heritage. Those origins have a kind of rootlessness, so I started with my body.

I made this work understanding that folks are going to invariably see this and imbue it with meaning around the medicalized body. I was really interested in how skin is read in terms of disability and race. I was also thinking about the white cube of an art institution, but also the blank walls that you might encounter in a hospital space. What new meanings are generated when my skin is projected onto a wall? It wouldn't have the same effect if the video was played on a monitor at all.

The audio track is meditative breathing, placed slightly disjunctive – not everyone notices that. You might see my stomach rising while you're hearing an exhale.

There's another work in the exhibition, on the other side of the wall from *Body and Soul* called *no other findings*. That work uses calibration scans from an MRI machine that appear to be abstract images, but they contain more information than the video behind it (see image on opposite page). But if you don't understand that language or understand how those machines work, the full context will not be legible. What is legible? What can be translated? I'm interested in how to reflect, deflect and refuse legibility.

NE

It's a bit weird to talk about the Black body in art when I'm talking about your actual body, and I can see you through the computer screen right now. But I'm thinking of Coco Fusco's *The Bodies That Were Not Ours*, where she describes the response to Black artists' work that uses their own bodies: "The extraordinarily high level of anxiety regarding the presentation of the black body in the arts and media is one of the most visible, lasting effects of an historical black experience in the diaspora."

JK

It's definitely something that I struggle with. Part of me wanted to move away from performance because I was tired – the work is demanding. But there's also an entitlement that non-Black folks have to the work. Not just to the work or the object, but my body and my subjectivity, so it feels like this desire or entitlement to my spirit. I do think that it happens with performing artists – there's a point where you see people expire or retire or they disappear, and it doesn't seem to be the same with non-Black performers.

If I'm looking at the history of art with performance artists, there's often the nude and naked bodies. Whose bodies are those, and what conditions in prehistory, maybe, informed that? So there's an aesthetic. Part of me wanted to move away from performance because I was burned out and I felt like returning to painting and sculpture.

I ended up moving more into film, where you're still dealing with the image and representation, but it feels safer than performance art. I don't think that it's a coincidence that a lot of performance art is by disabled, Black and Indigenous artists, queer artists, whether we're talking about drag or spoken word, whatever it might be. There's a bit of expectation of how you're supposed to act or perform. I'm always trying to find ways to circumnavigate or penetrate or disrupt those kinds of expectations.

NE

In *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance*, Uri McMillan describes Black women performance artists as "wielding their bodies as pliable matter" to assume objecthood as a strategy. McMillan writes that "performing objecthood becomes an adroit method of circumventing prescribed limitations on black women in the public sphere while staging art and alterity in unforeseen spaces."

JK

Maybe that's a better way to articulate what I'm trying to do. It is performing objecthood in the anticipation of already knowing how non-Black people read us. I'm already being watched. Even when I'm not performing, I feel that being-read happening.

NE

McMillan describes that the works of Black women performance artists in turn "make the spectators subject to their presence." It's an apt way of describing how your work – at least in both my experiences of it and witnessing others experience it – has a way of implicating the viewer.



JK

That's exactly what I was trying to do with the sculpture *through a brass channel*. I'm always thinking in these experiential terms, and insisting that the audience is not a passive receiver. Even if we're talking about viewers, I want the audience to understand and know that they are complicit in this exchange. I've always really appreciated art that does this – maybe I didn't realise it in the moment of viewing it, but later I'm like, "oh, I'm the subject of this."

*through a brass channel* consists of a copper pipe delicately balanced on a brass bangle, which in turn rests on a masonry stone from the wall of a building. The bangle is from my father's jewellery collection that he used to bring to trade shows of African artefacts and objects. I really love those bangles: they're just beautiful, but they remind me of shackles. They were also a form of currency. The copper pipe is a conduit or channel, and functions as a placeholder or metaphor. Structurally, the whole thing is a little bit precarious.



NE

As your approach developed over time, you started including other Black women in your work. Some of them are friends, others are artists. I'm curious about this expansion and inclusion in your practice, this literal growth of your concepts and executions, especially considering that your earlier work centred yourself.

JK

I felt it was important to start with myself as material. What often happens to Black artists is their practices can become faced with a reductive understanding of what representation means. And there's such a short history of us actually being able to self-articulate – to paint, draw and document our own lives. So understanding that, it felt important to start with myself and my own origin stories as a point in a constellation of Blackness, because it isn't a monolith.

I've never been interested in being a representation of a community. In fact, I think that's just a tool that non-Black audiences use to categorise the type of art that artists such as myself make.

Before I bring other folks in, there's an ethical question around care, because how can I? How can I start making art and bringing other Black women into the fold? If I can't protect myself, how could I possibly position myself as a host and protect them as well? I had to be absolutely sure that I understood what the parameters of my artwork are, especially because my works are always deeply autobiographical: it's a private or sanctified space. So it felt necessary that I figured out my own complicity in using myself as material before I even asked other folks to join me in my work.

## About Dr. Nehal El-Hadi

Dr. Nehal El-Hadi is a writer, editor and researcher investigating the relationships between the body (racialized, gendered), place (urban, virtual) and technology (internet, health). She completed a Ph.D. in Planning at the University of Toronto, where her research examined the relationships between user-generated content and everyday public urban life.

Nehal is the Science + Technology Editor at The Conversation Canada, an academic news site, and Editor-in-Chief of Studio Magazine, a biannual print publication dedicated to contemporary Canadian craft and design.

Nehal sits on the Board of Directors of FiXT POINT Arts & Media and the Provocation Ideas Festival.

Her current research projects explore human-sand relations, the cultural impact of white sandalwood regulations, and the long-term implications of surveillance. Nehal advocates for the responsible, accountable and ethical treatment of user-generated content in the fields of journalism, planning and healthcare. Her writing has appeared in academic journals, general scholarship publications, literary magazines and several anthologies and edited collections.



Beyond Sightlines Images: [1] Jessica Karuhanga, *no other findings*, 2021. Single-channel video. 01:15 mins. [2] Jessica Karuhanga, *through a brass channel*, 2017. Copper pipe, brass bangle, stone. Photo by Scott Lee. All images courtesy and © of Jessica Karuhanga. [3] Jessica Karuhanga, *being who you are there is no other* (still), 2018. 2-channel video with sound. 15:00 mins. [4] Dr. Nehal El-Hadi. Photo by Gillian Mapp.

# Key Works



## *Blue as the insides*

2021

Single-channel video with sound

15:18 mins.

Director: Jessica Karuhanga

Director of Photography: Manolo Lugo

Assistant Camera: Jessica Karuhanga

Editor: Meeka McLean

Featuring Ahlam Hassan

This film ultimately considers the impossibility of translating our unique internal spaces and the empathic capacities that guide our interactions with one another. It frames a Black woman in isolation and her descent (or ascent) into a world of her own making. With this woman, moving in relation to her environment, inside and outside of windows and partitions, we are alone together. Alone, as the screen is a clear delineation between her world and ours; and together with a persistent closeness as viewers peer in on private reveries and sanctified rituals of daily life.

The subject constantly averts her gaze away from the camera. Concurrently, this passivity renders her available for scrutiny and personal projection, whilst also distilling the quiet confidence that can exist when removed from the performative needs of public life. Viewers become aware of their own voyeuristic observation. The presentation of this subject is a carefully controlled spectacle of her body that ultimately coheres a relationship between her self and her social environment. As she removes herself from a domestic environment and enters a natural one, there is a powerful reclamation of autonomy, personal strength and cultural pride that is subtly encoded in the unfiltered ways that we carry our bodies through the world.

What daily habits and rituals have you developed or inherited? What do these daily rituals say about you? How do you nurture the strength to be who you are in the world, to hold space for your own body, and to reconcile the difference between who we are in private and who we are when performing for others?



**Body and Soul**

2019 (2012)

Single-channel video with sound  
02:06 mins.

Courtesy of Jessica Karuhanga

Editor: Serene Husni

Centered on Karuhanga's own body, *Body and Soul* explores societal fascination with colour, surface and skin. Here, flesh becomes an equal representative component (a synecdoche) for race as a sign of social difference. The cartography of the artist's body, laid out like a gently rolling landscape, invites an intimate consideration of Blackness and breath. It stands in contrast to the white wall of the artists bedroom and the white wall of the gallery, making a further connection toward legacies of medicalized bodies in supposedly neutral institutional spaces.

The title, a reference to one of the most iconic jazz standards that was, in part, made popular by Billie Holiday in the 1930s, includes two components. While body becomes a charged site grounding the sociality of race, there is still the unaccounted-for soul at heart, the soul that Langston Hughes wrote about in 1920 as being deep like the rivers. Finding it in a close reading of Holiday's lyrics, there is redemption for the conflicted body: *My heart is sad and lonely; For you I sigh, for you dear only; Why haven't you seen it; I'm all for you body and soul.*

If we think of the lines, marks and shapes of our own bodies as a landscape or topography, where might travelers arrive by following them? What stories, histories and memories are carried by your body and soul?



***being who you are there is no other***

2018

2-channel video with sound

15:00 mins.

Director: Jessica Karuhanga

Cinematography: Serene Husni

Assistant Cameras: Aaditya Aggarwal, Xin Liu

Editor: Serene Husni

Musical Composition I: Cormac Culkeen, Dave Grenon

Musical Composition II: Jessica Karuhanga

Musical Engineering: Erik Culp

Featuring Ahlam Hassan and Jessica Karuhanga

Karuhanga's art practice is an expression through both body and mind. Body and mind (or soul) are at once object and base, subject and material. The body can become a landscape as well as a representation of individuals inhabiting those landscapes. But what lands are these and whose bodies are represented or removed from their depiction?

Growing up in a post-industrial border town in south-western Ontario, Karuhanga developed a unique relationship to land and health (of body and environment). This two-channel video is a meditation on the imagination of the Canadian landscape as understood through the movement and centering of Black femme bodies. By placing herself in the regional landscape of her youth, Karuhanga populates a land that is often seen as being absent of blackness. She holds ground to experience, witness and revel in the beauty of wilderness while exploring themes of the wild. After all, the only one we have is our own-being who you are there is no other.

When was the last time that you took a moment to revel in the wild of the world? How do you understand your own bodies relationship to wilderness?



## KWAG Related Programming

### KPL Film Screening

*The Watermelon Woman* (1996) by Cheryl Dunye

26 April, 7:00pm

### Artist Talk with Jessica Karuhanga

18 May, 7:00pm

This Artist Talk is supported by Momentum Partnership and Sorbara Law.

### Curator Tour with Darryn Doull

27 May, 1:00pm

This Walk the Talk Curator Tour is sponsored by the Gamble Family.

### KPL Film Screening

*Faat Kiné* (2000) by Ousmane Sembène

31 May, 6:00pm

## Deeper Into the Blue

The following reading and listening lists have been developed by Jessica Karuhanga as resources for deeper engagements with the central interests of *Blue as the insides*.

### Reading

1. Coco Fusco, *The Bodies That Were Not Ours*, 2001
2. Anne Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker & The Modern Surface*, 2000
3. Uri McMillan, *Embodyed Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance*, 2015
4. m. patchwork Monoceros, *Remedies for Chiron*, 2023
5. Yusek Komunyakaa, *Blue Notes: Essays, Interviews and Commentaries*, 2000
6. Fred Moten, *The Little Edges*, 2014
7. Yrsa Daley-Ward, *Bone*, 2014
8. Warsan Shire, *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth*, 2011
9. M. NourbeSe Philip, *Blank: Essays and Interviews*, 2017
10. Dionne Brand, *The Blue Clerk*, 2018
11. Hortense J. Spillers, *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book*, 1987

### Listening

1. Moor Mother, *Brass*, 2020
2. Yves Tumor, *Safe in the Hands of Love*, 2018
3. serpentwithfeet, *DEACON*, 2021
4. Little Simz, *Sometimes I Might Be Introvert*, 2021
5. Jill Scott, *Who Is Jill Scott?: Words and Sounds, Vol 1*, 2000
6. Sault, *5*, 2019
7. Kelela, *Take Me Apart*, 2017
8. Irreversible Entanglements, *Who Sent You?*, 2020
9. Jazmine Sullivan, *Heaux Tales*, 2021
10. Summer Walker, *Last Day of Summer*, 2018
11. Tracy Chapman, *Tracy Chapman*, 1988
12. Sade, *Promise*, 1985
13. Meshell Ndegeocello, *Bitter*, 1999
14. Teyana Taylor, *K.T.S.E*, 2018



## Exhibition Acknowledgements

Curator	Darryn Doull
Lead Preparator	Lawrence Salza
Installation Technicians	Sarah Kernohan Sandy Gordon Jack Winn Robert Achtemichuk
Graphic Design	Lisa Narduzzi
Commissioned Interview	Dr. Nehal El-Hadi
Equipment Loan	Museum London Art Gallery of Guelph

### Jessica Karuhanga would like to acknowledge:

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We also recognize the contributions of KWAG staff at all levels of the organization. Every employee, volunteer and friend of the Gallery has an important role in the success of our programming. Thank you for your care.

Left: Jessica Karuhanga, *being who you are there is no other* (still), 2018. 2-channel video with sound. 15:00 mins.