

Karen Kraven

Bloemenlust

22 February – 10 May 2025

Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens

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OAKVILLE GALLERIES

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GALLERY HOURS

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Bloemenlust

Exhibition text by Katie Lawson

To meet the work of Karen Kraven in the context of a historic family home emphasizes the intimacy of encounter in its domestic setting. Long since uninhabited, the Tudor style residence of Gairloch Gardens is more than the sum of its parts, quietly holding the past hundred years in its stone and stucco walls, worn wood and tiles floors, the remaining hearth. The constituent material elements of *Bloemenlust*, an exhibition that brings together the artist's new and recent works, carry traces of the past lives of materials, drawing on surplus possessions, salvaged timber, fabric scraps, and roses. Together, these sculptures and installations emerge from Kraven's thoughtful inquiry into the politics of pleasure and pain, experiences of illness and grief, and the insatiable demands of capitalism for productive, labouring bodies.

Upon entering the Central Gallery, visitors encounter a trio of sculptures, reminiscent of partially upended umbrellas, blown by a gale. Spindle-like fragments of wood with hinged joints sit low to the tiled floor, each one host to textile remnants draped over their respective frames—tatters tied tenderly in place. The black nylon, sourced from the studio of a Montréal fashion designer, bears the traces of clothing production, cut through with absence. The shifting light of day, streaming in through south facing windows, enables full mutability of a textile's weave, particularly in the case of the slub silk and organza. Sourcing scraps is an enduring component of Kraven's material vocabulary, influenced by her connection to textile production by way of her father and paternal grandfather's knitting factory in Stratford, Ontario and her mother's

career in fashion. Remnants of the garment industry can likewise be found in a series of hampers, previously exhibited as a part of *Le Chiffonnier/The Rag Picker* in 2022 at AXENÉO7. They take a new form here in the Bachir Gallery, stacked high in a single column, a nod to the ways material was moved and stored in the family's factory.

Working with waste extends beyond the artist's work with textiles, the wooden scaffolding of her umbrella-like forms made from salvaged ash, a tree species now at risk in North America from the invasive emerald ash borer. Since the early 2000s, these glittering emerald beetles, thought to be introduced through infected wooden packing materials and shipping crates from the flows of global consumer capitalism, have claimed millions of ash trees, resulting in profound ecological loss.¹ Irregular wooden forms adopt the shape of fabric scraps, indexes of what is discarded. When the black nylon fabric scraps are hit with the flash of a camera, it transforms, like the colourful iridescence of insect exoskeletons. Things are not what they seem, deceived by optical illusion.

Questions about perception, cognition, and memory simmer below the surface of these works, as the artist reflects on conversations with her late mother, marked by the distortions of visual semantic paraphasia. A result of the brain damage wrought by vascular dementia, this manifestation of aphasia replaces the speaker's target word with another based on visual similarities—a lampshade becomes an umbrella, or vice versa. Caring for a loved one (or one's self) in the midst

1. A species at risk, black ash was declared endangered in Ontario in 2022. 99% of ash trees are killed by the emerald ash borer within 8-10 years of its establishment in the trunk. "Emerald Ash Borer," *Invasive Species Centre* (February 14, 2025): <https://www.invasivespeciescentre.ca/invasive-species/meet-the-species/invasive-insects/emerald-ash-borer/>

of a terminal condition often reveals the ways in which the medical industrial complex flattens the complex ways in which all bodies are inherently unstable, always in process, becoming and coming undone.

The relative values ascribed to health (positive) and illness or disability (negative) are a symptom of the ableism underpinning capitalist system, which demands productive, labouring bodies. To not satisfy these demands is to be othered, to be made invisible, despite the undeniable significance of caregiving as a central pillar of our shared interdependence. As Johanna Hedva reminds us, “no matter how it arrives, disability will arrive for everyone, sooner or later. In a way, this vastly disparate category is the most universal condition of all—the horizon of it is just closer to some than others. It is always there, and the question is not if but when it will arrive for you.”² This desire for productive bodies and minds is certainly a feature of the aforementioned textile industry—whether that is the small-scale atelier involved in every stage of production or the outsourced labour of sweatshops in a time of fast fashion. But this is true of many industries, including the global cut flower industry.

In the large-scale installation of the North Gallery, hundreds of tea roses are suspended on metal racks of varying lengths that emerge from the wall. Mimicking the form of armatures ubiquitous in industrialized cut flower production allows visitors to see the common rose anew. With the ever-widening gap between producer and consumer, it makes visible the necessary infrastructure of large-scale monoculture, its human and ecological impacts out of sight, out of mind. It is here that

2. Hedva, Johanna. *How to Tell When We Will Die: On Pain, Disability, and Doom*. New York: Hillman Grad Books, 2024: p. 15.

the title of Kraven’s exhibition comes into focus, with a reference to Bloemenlust, one of the world’s largest flower auctions established in 1911 in the Netherlands – the same country that, as of 2019, was also the number one producer and exporter of cut flowers. This designation is somewhat misleading, given that a large portion of the Netherlands’ roses are grown in Ecuador, which holds a spot in the top three alongside Colombia. In the last fifty years, cheap land, labour and long growing seasons have been exploited by companies in the Global North operating in Latin America.³

The pursuit of ever-increasing rates of productivity to meet consumer demand relies not only on long working hours far below a livable wage, but the use of high volumes of chemicals in the form of pesticides and fertilizers. In a workforce dominated by women, prolonged exposure to these substances has resulted in significantly elevated numbers of miscarriage, and in minors, neurological damages twenty-two percent above average.⁴ The impacts of the industry extend far beyond the human body, exerting immense strain on surrounding ecosystems, with highly contaminated air and water, the latter of which has been greatly depleted by the thirsty floral industry: “we must remember that a flower is sixty percent water. Each flower you get is sixty percent water and forty percent solid. What we’re exporting [from Colombia] is Iso huge amounts of water.”⁵

3. The first air shipment of flowers from Colombia to the United States took flight in 1965. A similar parasitic flower export industry exists in Kenya and Ethiopia, largely serving the European market. The data sampled here can be found in Solnit, Rebecca. *Orwell’s Roses*. New York: Viking, 2021.

4. Amor, Bani. “War of the roses: the exploitation of the flower industry,” *The Architectural Review*, 4 February 2021: <https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/war-of-the-roses-the-exploitation-of-the-flower-industry>

5. Solnit, *Orwell’s Roses*, 218.

Kraven's exhibition falls neatly between two holidays whose insatiable demand for cut flowers exerts tremendous pressure on the labour force responsible for growing, processing and shipping millions of roses: Valentine's Day and Mother's Day. Roses are ubiquitous in the culture of gift-giving, used to mark moments of joy, sorrow, loss, hope, victory. What do we ask the floral industry to stand in for? 'Say it with flowers' gained traction as a slogan through the twentieth century, a sentiment that might be understood as a continuation of Victorian era floriography, or the use of flowers as a complex means of coded expressions of emotion. But, as Rebecca Solnit notes, "roses mean everything, which skates close to meaning nothing."⁶ At times, their invocation is pure surface, pure ornament—yet their potential symbolic potency is paradoxically undeniable, as in the rallying cry of the women's suffrage movement of the early twentieth century, calling for "Bread for all, and Roses, too".⁷ This slogan would go on to be adopted by labourers in the Lawrence textile strike.

Cut flowers have been extracted from the plant's life cycle, interrupting the unfolding continuum of generations of roses. The garden, by contrast, is a place of perpetual becoming. In the seasonal dance between soil, seeds, water, and sun, death is not an ending but a new beginning, waste enables fertility. In the time frame of a temporary exhibition, bringing organic matter in unsettles assumptions we have about the stasis or fixity of artworks. By the time *Bloemenlust* closes in May, the roses of Kraven's work will be dried out, irrevocably transformed, just as the grounds beyond the space of the gallery burst

6. Solnit, *Orwell's Roses*, 15.

7. Andrea D'Atri. *Bread and Roses: Gender and Class Under Capitalism*. London: Pluto Press, 2020.

into bloom, near the formal rose garden on the grounds of Gairloch. In both cases, pleasure is precious, fleeting.

The transience of a cut rose is offset by the relative durability of the metal racks, much like the solidity of the sculptures formed from copper sheets that anchor the South Gallery. The forms replicate empty shoe boxes from the artist's mother's closet, each sheet laser cut from drawings before tracing the unfolded cardboard by hand. The copper is then carefully folded with a small manual brake and hand tools. In the shadows of grief, our attachment to a loved one's belongings after death can become compulsive and irrational, emptying a home of its contents, a continued series of painful goodbyes. The boxes, like all garments, are indexes of the body—clothing, like so many of our personal belongings, are "both the locus and the agents of affect, while at the same time being affected themselves."⁸ Kraven describes this work as a materialization of the absent body. In the transformation from cardboard to copper, reflected light glows in the hollows between folded planes. These works, like so much of *Bloemenlust*, sit in the space between holding on and letting go, between sitting in and moving through grief.

8. Sampson, Ellen. "Entanglement, affect and experience: walking and wearing (shoes) as experimental research methodology," *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, Vol. 5, Issue 1 (2018).

Karen Kraven is a Canadian artist working with photography, sculpture and installation. Influenced by her father's (and his father's) knitting factory, which stopped manufacturing the year that she was born, and by the physical and optical properties of textiles, her practice explores the ways in which clothing registers the body – how the body is unfinished, unstable and like an archive, something that unfolds and changes with time – pointing to the sustained impact of work and wear.

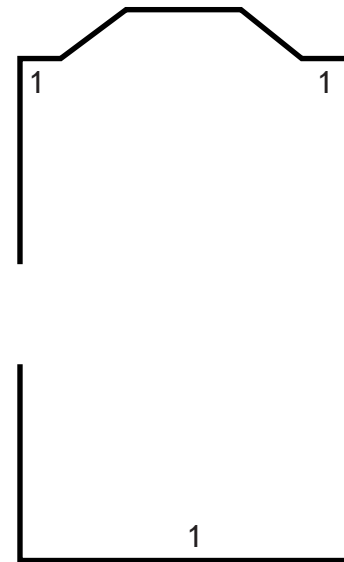
Recent solo exhibitions have included *Le Chiffonier* at AXENÉO7 in Gatineau (2022), *Hoist* at PLATFORM Centre in Winnipeg (2022), *Lull* at Latitude 53 in Edmonton (2020), *Dust Against Dust* at Parisian Laundry in Montreal (2019) and *Pins & Needles* in the Toronto Sculpture Garden (2018). Reviews of Kraven's work have been published in *C Magazine*, *Canadian Art*, *Momus* and *Artforum*. Her work was also recently acquired by the Musée d'art Contemporain de Montréal.

Acknowledgements

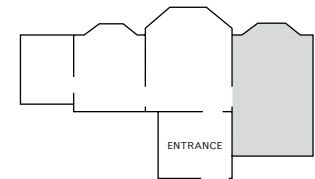
The artist would like to thank Montreal fashion designer Odeyalo for the fabric offcuts, Boris Dempsey for fabrication in steel, Atelier Clark for the assistance and fabrication in wood and the Daniels Faculty at the University of Toronto for their support. *Bloemenlust* is dedicated to the artist's mother, Alida Kraven.

Exhibition curated by Séamus Kealy, Executive Director, Oakville Galleries.

Karen Kraven ***Bloemenlust***

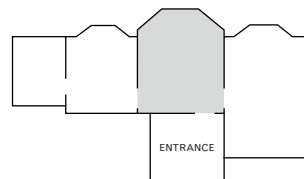
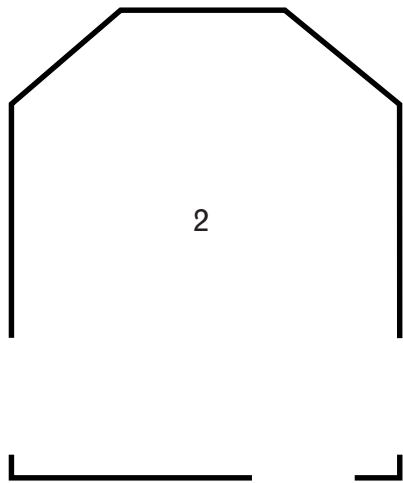


North Gallery



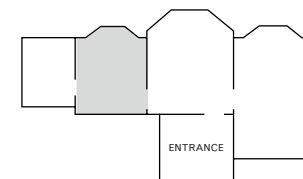
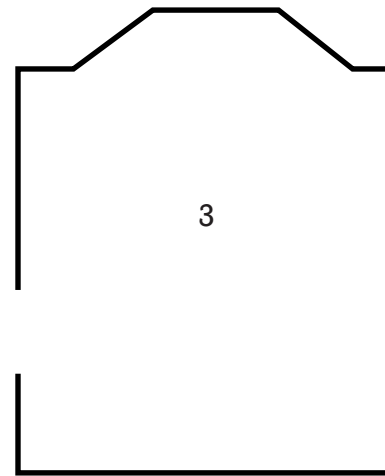
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- 1 *Bloemenlust*, 2025
Roses, steel and reclaimed ash wood.

Central Gallery



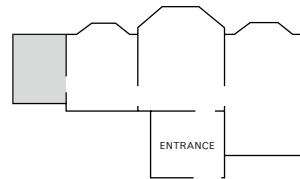
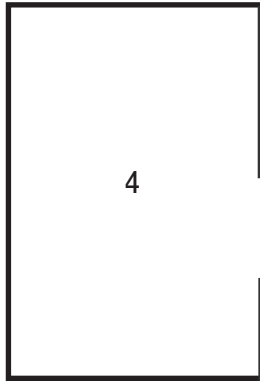
2 *Paraphasia*, 2025
Slub silk, Organza, iridescent nylon offcuts,
reclaimed ash wood and hardware.

South Gallery



3 *La Cordonnière / The Cobbler*, 2025
Copper and found shoebox tissue.

Salah Bachir Gallery



Oakville Galleries is located on Treaty Lands and Territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and the traditional territory of the Huron-Wendat and the Haudenosaunee. The treaty lands are covered by the Upper Canada Treaties, namely the Head of the Lake, Treaty No. 14 (1806) and Treaty No. 22. At the same time, Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens and at Centennial Square is uniquely situated along the shoreline of Lake Ontario and Sixteen Mile Creek. These waterways are unceded territory and the Mississaugas have unextinguished aboriginal title to all water, beds of water, and floodplains contained therein. As an institution, Oakville Galleries recognizes the importance of establishing and maintaining meaningful and respectful relationships with the original inhabitants and keepers of the land, and we are grateful for the opportunity to operate on this territory.

Oakville Galleries would like to thank the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation for the open conversation around truth and reconciliation.

4 *Le Chiffonnier / The Ragpicker, 2022*
Cotton, steel and garment offcuts.

