

"Thick as Mud' at the Henry Art Gallery shows that mud is more than just a material"

By Taylor Bruce

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A clay sculpture by Artist Candice Lin attempting to comprehensively reimagine facets of the swamp through coating her creation with a lard infused with a custom scent of rotting vension, part of the "Thick As Mud" Exhibit at the Henry Art Gallery. Sean Fan.

Mud is more than a material; it is also a subject – the subject of memory, of lives lived and lives lost, of places and their stories. It is both earth and water, and an in-between state that can be used as a metaphor for resolving boundaries and binaries, according to curator Nina Bozicnik.

The new exhibition at the Henry Art Gallery, "[Thick as Mud](#)," brings together artworks created by eight artists from around the world and invites viewers to ponder these associations.

The first piece, titled "Sitting Shiva" by Sasha Wortzel, uses chairs webbed with Burmese python skin to illuminate the history of colonial habitation in south Florida, commenting on how individuals transform the landscape. It centers on absence, grief, and loss, and holds a more abstract tie of

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mud as a swamp, according to Bozicnik. In the background, viewers can hear the audio of a tropical storm.

The exhibition then progresses into the rotunda, where the work of Candice Lin is displayed. Lin's ceramic creatures, created out of mud from Saint Malo, bring up the concepts of colonialism and diaspora, and perceptions around contamination. The creatures are portrayed in a ritualistic and reverent form, and hold perfume infused with animal fat that is lightly scented with rotting vermin.



A "Split Metate, between two worlds" sculpture made by Christine Howard Sandoval with Adobe mud and wood. The background is a mural by the same artist named "Fire," part of the "Thick as Mud" exhibit at the Henry Art Gallery.
Sean Fan.

In another room are adobe drawings on paper created by Christine Howard Sandoval. An artist of Indigenous descent, Sandoval touches on the colonial histories of habitation and forced labor specifically in Spanish missions. Her work focuses on ancestral trauma, pain, and how education and history have erased certain peoples and their histories.

On the other side of the hallway is a video created by Sandoval titled "Niniwas- to belong here." In the video, she moves through the site while touching different elements that show the lives of the people that lived there, according to Bozicnik.

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The video itself is extremely powerful. The way that Sandoval moves through the mission is both moving and disorienting, and it feels as if the viewer is the one reaching out to touch these elements themselves.

The largest room in the exhibition features the work of two artists. On the wall are woven tapestries created by Diedrick Brackens. One tapestry features a catfish — a mud-dwelling bottom feeder. The catfish allowed Brackens to create an alter ego for himself while representing his ancestry and personal identity, according to Bozicnik.

Spaced throughout this room are ceramic statues made by Rose Simpson. Simpson's statues represent the strength from vulnerability — as expressed through her breakable materials — and creates commentary centered on missing Indigenous girls.



A ceramic and mixed media sculpture by Rose B. Simpson, named "Protector A," the "x" is a symbol used by the Pueblo tribes in New Mexico to signify protection. Also a woven cotton rug by Diedrick Brackens named "stud double," part of the "Thick As Mud" Exhibit at the Henry Art Gallery. Sean Fan.

On the left side of the gallery is a room with a tri-paneled video installation titled "Of Men and Gods and Mud" by Ali Cherri. The video challenges the dominant narrative of progress, showcasing mud brick workers set to a background of people reading mythologies about mud and flooding in both English and Arabic.

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"The story of the flood as world maker is, in fact, the story of mud," the video states. "Religion and science converge in the place where earth and water meet."

The video installation was my favorite part of the exhibition. I was fascinated by the way the videos were spliced together on the three screen panels and loved hearing the stories being told in the background. The way Cherri composed the video was absolutely stunning, and I hope to have the opportunity to watch the video again.

On the right side of the large gallery is another video by Dineo Seshee Bopape that animates a variety of different drawings together. Mud is rubbed on every wall in the room, and in the background, there is a haunting audio clip. It began as a crying sound that turned almost to a wail, which then evolved into a loud pounding that reverberated throughout the room.



A half-wall of mud by artist Eve Tagny as a site-specific installation known as "The Carriers," the artist seeks to reconcile her experience with gentrification in Quebec through the use of mud and living materials reinforced with organic-materials, such as hay. Part of the "Thick as Mud" exhibit at the Henry Art Gallery. Sean Fan.

The last artist featured is Eve Tagny. Tagny's installation is titled "The Carriers," and illustrates the legacies of disrupted landscapes and the embodied memory within them. There are three performance videos of varying lengths, as well as an inkjet print and site-specific installations. In the exhibition, each artist has a different use of mud — either as subject or material — and creates meaning in a creative and beautiful way. "Thick as Mud" opened Feb. 4 and will be featured at the gallery until May 7.

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