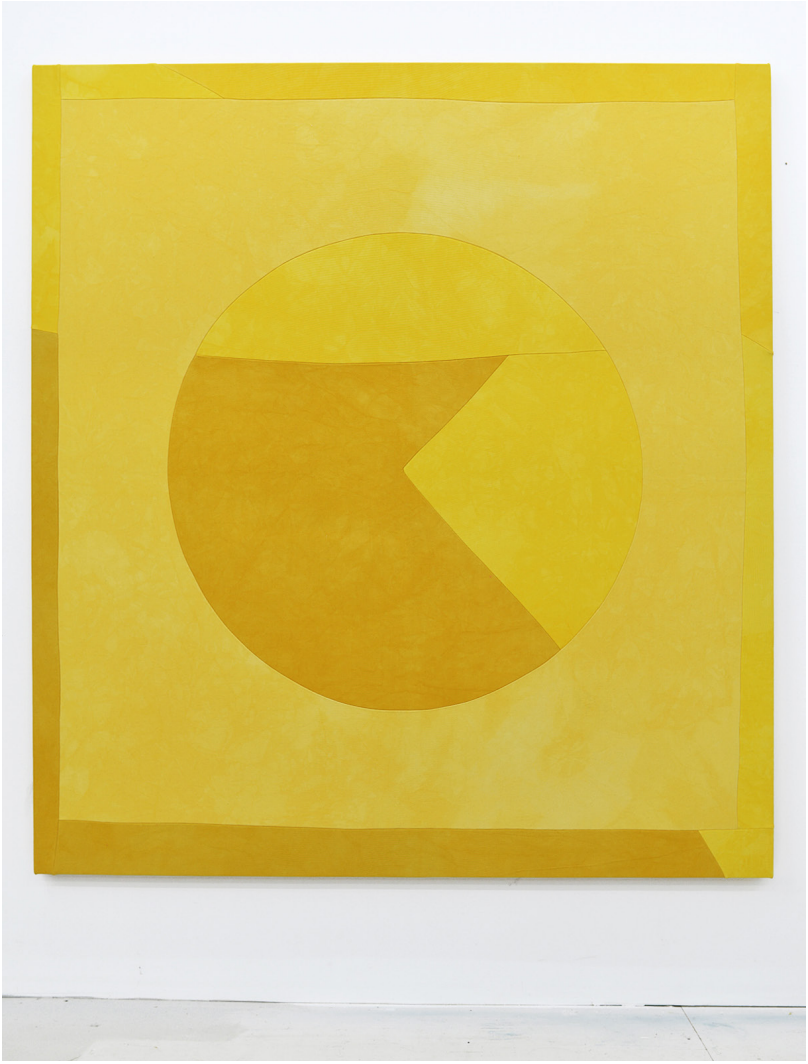
Colour in the Flesh

By Reilly Knowles

Stories of belonging
Colleen Heslin

May 29 - July 24, 2025



Colleen Heslin. *Shifting into focus.* dye on sewn canvas, 72”x66”, 2025. Image courtesy of the artist.

Lean in closer to the nuanced shift of colour on the cloth. Closer to the texture of the stitch. Closer to the place where seam meets seam. Closer – until red, purple, and yellow wrap around you and speak. What will you say to one another?

Colleen Heslin's *Stories of belonging* is colour in the flesh. Composed of six hand-dyed, sewn compositions in the hues of the rainbow, they implement colour as a force that speaks to the viewer's body and provokes personal, inward exploration. Drawing from being neurodivergent and a Highly Sensitive Person, Heslin's experience of colour is profound. This work is the result of their decade-long hyper-fixation with colour as embodied experience. Where we often imagine the word "painting" to belong to emulsified pigments sitting on a crust of primer, sealed from the canvas, these paintings are chemically bound to the canvas as dyes—There is no ground. Colour permeates the cloth, and becomes the body of the work, incarnated.

Abstraction allows colours to speak in clear voices, unhindered to a certain degree by references. Abstraction is also a longstanding companion to fabric. Quilters were abstractionists long before the men raised as figureheads of the modernist painting movements. Women made patchworks long before their practices began to mount the hedge between "craft" and "art." *Stories of belonging* pulls from both sides of the divide.

Colleen Heslin. *Automatic program*, dye on sewn canvas, 72”x66”, 2025. Image courtesy of the artist.

While experimenting with textiles after previously focusing on photography and oil painting, Heslin witnessed how their work was minimized by others as domestic craft. Picking at instead of collapsing under their discomforts, Heslin's dye paintings only grew in scale, undergirded by research into women's labour and textile traditions. However, Heslin is reluctant to call their work feminist. They are sensitive to hypocrisy in the cultural industry, that often professes radical progressiveness while still not relinquishing equal opportunities to women and other marginalized artists. They hold the label to an extremely high standard.

For Heslin, *Stories of belonging* is a deeply personal body of work. Having grown up in London and currently living on traditional Tla'amin territory in gathet, British Columbia, an exhibition at Forest City Gallery is a homecoming. However, the art created for this journey is more complicated than the flat pleasure "homecoming" might suggest. The exhibition emerges from a period of burnout and struggle, for which artmaking has been their healing practice. Each painting was produced as a somatic meditation upon social and intergenerational strife in western culture, resulting in spiritual, emotional, and psychological awakenings.

In contemplating our entangled systems of colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism, Heslin has come to value networks of care that strive for abundance for all members of society over systems that fetishize individuality and encourage competition and scarcity. Textile acts as a metaphor for this soft vision of the world. The artist has compared a body that is open to somatic experiences of colour and to

transforming its worldview with “soft open fiber,” evoking plush cotton that is ready to soak up a hot bath of blue or green.

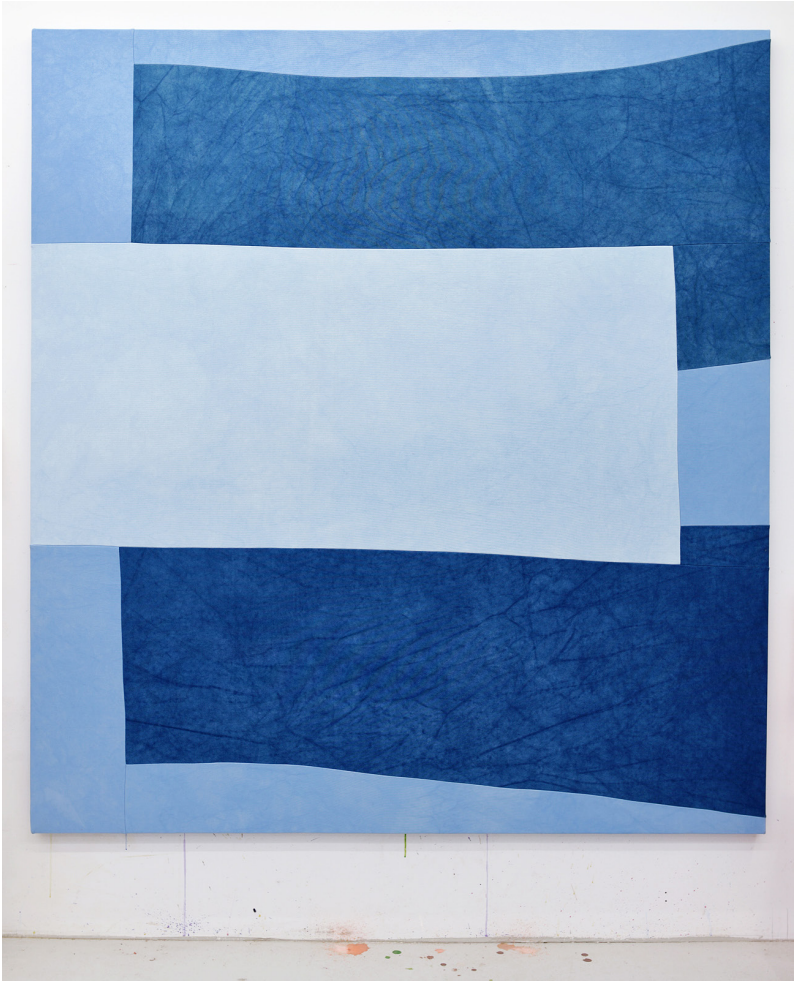
Interrogating history and the social order are integral parts of Heslin’s creative practice. They are keenly aware of how every artist, every artist’s labour, and the products of that work live in a context of injustice. Although Heslin feels their work is sometimes mischaracterized building upon the abstract expressionist movement of the mid-twentieth century, they are instead motivated by pulling away the curtain from power and metabolizing hard truths into positive energy through artmaking.
It is by no accident that *Stories of belonging* echoes the hues of the pride flag, and that this exhibition falls within the city’s pride celebrations.

The rainbow is the banner of otherwise unalike people who share the experience of intense introspection triggered by injustice, and who, should we be lucky, emerge with inner peace and a better appreciation for the work that needs to be done for us all to thrive. For the artist, openness and joy are the tethers between their work and queer pride. Where pride is about being open to the diversity of human gender and sexuality, Heslin asks their viewers to open themselves to colour in new ways, to feel as they feel and take it into their bodies. The rainbow signals the queer commitment to joy as we march it down our city streets and wave it above our counter-protests. Light, that full spectrum of light, dazzles and banishes the darkness.

Heslin believes that their emotional energy is preserved in these paintings and that we can access something profound in ourselves and better understand one another if we permit ourselves to feel deeply.

Stand in the glow of each painting. Is the light bouncing back onto your skin, casting you in a new colour? Does your flesh feel the hue? Can you feel a joyful future?

Colleen Heslin. *System failure,* dye on sewn canvas, 72”x66”, 2025. Image courtesy of the artist.



Colleen Heslin. *Re-alignment,* dye on sewn canvas, 72”x66”, 2025. Image courtesy of the artist.

Colleen Heslin. *Sending and receiving*, dye on sewn canvas, 72”x66”, 2025. Image courtesy of the artist.

Colleen Heslin. *Micro / Macro*, dye on sewn canvas, 72”x66”, 2025. Image courtesy of the artist.

Bios & Acknowledgements

Colleen Heslin Colleen Heslin lives and works on traditional Tla'amin territory in qathet, BC, Canada.

Reilly Knowles Reilly Knowles is a settler interdisciplinary artist living and working in London, Ontario — on the traditional territories of the Haudenosaunee, Lūnaapéewak, Anishinaabek, and Chonnonton Nations. A 2020 graduate of Western University's Bachelor of Fine Arts Program, Knowles has held solo exhibitions and special projects at Museum London (London, Ont.), Good Sport Gallery (London, Ont.), Forest City Gallery (London, Ont.) and Jordan Art Gallery (Jordan, Ont.). He is a member of the London-based Coves Collective, as well as a recipient of the Ann Roberts Curatorial Fellowship at the Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery. He has written for *Femme Art Review* and *Centred Magazine*.

FCG

Forest City Gallery (FCG) is an artist-run centre founded on artistic autonomy with a commitment to excellence in programming exhibitions and events that reflect and address recent developments in cultural production. FCG serves to foster and support contemporary art, promoting dialogue among local, regional, and international arts communities. FCG represents artists of all disciplines and career levels with a focus on emerging artists and practices.

FCG's programs and exhibitions are free and accessible to all thanks to the generous support of the Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Arts Council, London Arts Council, and the London Community Foundation.

We are grateful to our artists, members, volunteers, donors, and community partners. Our operations rely on your generous and dedicated support.

Please consider becoming a member of FCG.

For information on our programming, or for other general inquiries, please contact the gallery at info@forestcitygallery.com

1025 Elias Street, London, Ontario, N5W 3P6, Canada

Forest City Gallery is situated on the traditional territories of the Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee, Lenape, Huron-Wendat and Attawandaron peoples, which has been a site of human activity for over 10,000 years. The local First Nation communities of this area include Chippewas of the Thames First Nation, Oneida Nation of the Thames, and Munsee Delaware Nation. In the region, there are eleven First Nations communities and a growing Indigenous urban population. Forest City Gallery acknowledges the longstanding relationships that Indigenous Nations have to this land, as they are the original caretakers, and we acknowledge historical and ongoing injustices that Indigenous Peoples endure in Canada.

To acknowledge this traditional territory is to recognize its longer history, one predating the establishment of the earliest European colonies. We also acknowledge the colonial frameworks within which Forest City Gallery operates and the need to identify and remove barriers on an ongoing basis.

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