

Not naught, but knots

by Jasmine Sihra

Those in Glass Houses...

Michelle Wilson

May 28 - July 23, 2026



Michelle Wilson. Studio documentation of *Those in Glass Houses...* 2026.

Michelle Wilson
Artist's Statement

This work began with a family story I could not let go of, and deepened through the act of trying to tell that story to my child. In 1911, my grandfather and great-uncle were sent to Canada as British Home Children—removed from their families at the ages of nine and ten and placed into a system that positioned them as surplus, transforming their bodies into capital for the colonial state. As I traced their histories, I began to think alongside another movement: the global circulation of plants through imperial greenhouse systems. Both operated through logics of transfer, cultivation, and control—lives uprooted, renamed, and reorganized to serve distant economies and imperial ideologies.

Those in Glass Houses... holds these histories together.

The installation takes the form of a greenhouse constructed from quilted, fused recycled plastics. I chose these materials deliberately—discarded, fragile, and ubiquitous—and, through sustained attention and care, transformed them into a structure that holds and diffuses light. The form echoes both stained glass and colonial greenhouse architecture—spaces that are at once protective and disciplinary. It is a site where care and exploitation blur.

Inside, plants grow. Some are medicinal species often dismissed as weeds—plantain, motherwort, dead nettle—plants that arrived with settlers and have persisted in disturbed soils. Others are native species,

grounded in place. These plantings were developed in collaboration with Taíno-Métis horticulture specialist Laura Ramirez-Sanchez, and they sit in tension with one another, asking what it means to belong, to be naturalized, to be out of place.

Sound moves through the installation, activated by touch. When you reach toward the plants, your body trigger a poem that unfolds in fragments, carried across voices, my own and my child's. This is important to me—that this story does not end with inheritance as burden alone, but continues as something shaped, interrupted, and reimagined across generations.

I understand this work as a kind of counter-archive—not one that corrects history with a single narrative, but one that holds complexity, contradiction, and feeling. This exhibition is, in many ways, about learning how to hold fragility differently. Not as weakness, but as a condition that asks for attention, responsibility, and care that does not repeat the violences it seeks to heal.



Michelle Wilson. *Princes of Naught* (installation view).
2023–2024.

Not naught, but knots
by Jasmine Sihra

In 2017, I was working as a gallery attendant as part of an undergraduate work study program at McIntosh Gallery at Western University. During the gallery's summer programming, they hosted *Choreographies of Resistance* (2017), the PhD thesis exhibition of Palestinian artist and filmmaker Rehab Nazzal. I spent many of my shifts at the gallery chatting with Nazzal and learning about her work directly from her. At that time, Nazzal was travelling to and from Palestine, documenting videos and gathering protest ephemera that captured the Palestinian liberation movement and ongoing resistance to the colonial theft of this community's homelands. I felt so honoured to learn about the intricacies of Nazzal's installation of slingshots and rocks, and video-work, but what I remember the most was the care that I experienced during my shifts. When Nazzal worked on installation, she left me dried nuts, fruits, and other snacks to make sure that I was eating properly throughout the day. And, I experienced the love and care that Nazzal's friends and family showed to her, to me, and to each other when they visited the gallery. One of these friends

was Michelle Wilson, who had only recently begun her own PhD journey. I opened up to Wilson about my own experience as an attendant for the exhibition, particularly as many attendants thought I was the exhibiting artist and/or Palestinian. One particular day, a patron began arguing and accosting me about the exhibition's content, and it confused me as a young student simply attending the gallery. Beside the fact that I was often ethnically misclassified and a victim of a racial microaggression, I also witnessed some of the targeted disruptions to Nazzal's exhibition and programming. I remember Wilson comforting me when I told her about these experiences. As a supporter of Nazzal's work and someone who educated herself on Palestinian liberation, Wilson was able to contextualize those disruptions and help me make sense of the experience. However, I realized quickly that this allyship and compassion is integral and sits at the crux of Wilson's artistic practice.

From this place of deep compassion, solidarity, and connection, Wilson's work, research, and practice gently encourages you to reflect on your history, and how you live out your own biography in relation to so many other histories and diverse peoples. By reflecting on her own position as a white settler educator, artist, and mother, she pushes us to tug at the knots of our own histories. Wilson's practice asks, how do we trace and pick at these knots as a generative strategy that helps us to better understand how we are connected to seemingly disparate peoples and places? This is especially

true for *Those in Glass Houses...*, where Wilson leverages her position as a white settler working in colonial institutions like universities and galleries to understand an inherited ancestry and confront settler futures across so-called ‘Canada.’ Slightly different from her previous works, *Those in Glass Houses...* critiques colonial settlement of land by bringing together plant knowledge, greenhouse technologies, motherhood, and connections to place. Drawing on personal histories, Wilson attempts to untangle the many knots of colonialism, bringing to light the often violent and dubious ways in which settlement has occurred across the world.

In 2023, Wilson participated in the MOTHRA residency with her then five-year-old child, Asa—a residency specifically for artist-parents/caregivers and their children. Asa began happily collecting sea glass from the beach, enjoying participating in the residency and offering material for Wilson to work with in her installations. It reminded Wilson of when her grandfather was taken into child labour from England to ‘Canada’ in 1911, that he was denied the playful and supportive childhood that Wilson cultivated for her child. It indeed became a moment of reflection on Wilson’s own inherited and intergenerational trauma. She also remarked on the similarities with the forced removal of Indigenous children into residential schools as part of the establishment of ‘Canada.’ Here, children, particularly their labour, is viewed as an expendable resource, used to maintain and uphold

settler futurities at the expense of Indigenous lives. It is well-known that many Indigenous children who attended residential schools were forced to work, unpaid, to maintain the very institutions that sought to assimilate, abuse, and oppress them.¹ Wilson's grandfather and great-uncle were among over one hundred thousand children who were removed from impoverished British families and sent to colonies between 1869 and 1900. As Wilson notes, the children were "promised opportunity; in reality, most suffered abuse and exploitation." This became the impetus for *Princes of Naught* (2023–2024), one of the works that make up the broader installation of *Those in Glass Houses...* The title is layered with irony and pun. It symbolizes the dubious labelling of children as naughty or inferior due to the possession of nothing—no wealth, talent, or authority. There is also an ironic similarity between Wilson's grandfather and great uncle being named William and Harry, just like the current heirs to the British throne, Prince William and Prince Harry.

Two questions started to circulate around *who gets to be a child?* And *who gets to be a mother?* Within the context of the ongoing genocide in Gaza, Palestinian-American scholar and psychotherapist Lama Z. Khouri notes that the success of colonial states hinges on the *impossibility* of motherhood,

1 Eric Hanson, Daniel P. Games, and Alexa Manuel, "The Residential School System," *Indigenous Foundations*, <https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/residential-school-system-2020/>. (accessed May 11, 2026).

to effectively ensure that children do not have a childhood. The ultimate aim is to diminish the Palestinian population to enable a full takeover of ancestral homelands.² When Wilson's child Asa, heard the story of Harry and William, they drew a picture based on their imagination, which Wilson then embroidered into a surface with conductive thread. If touched, the embroidery speaks in Asa's voice a poem written by Wilson, reflecting on this intergenerational, colonial trauma, revolving around the im/possibility of motherhood and childhood.

Taking inspiration from the sea glass on the beach, Wilson began to wonder about how greenhouses operated to steal, transport, and acclimatize plants across colonies. Of course, the link between greenhouses and seaglass is their materiality, but, more accurately, I argue Wilson's work captures what black futurist and writer adrienne maree brown calls fractals: "[...] a never-ending pattern. Fractals are infinitely complex patterns that are self-similar across different scales. They are created by repeating a simple process over and over in an ongoing feedback loop."³ For *Those in Glass Houses...*, Wilson identifies strategies for confronting and untangling those naughty knots of colonial theft and

2 Lama Z. Khouri, "Gaza's Broken Lullaby: Genocidal Unchilding and the Impossibility of Mothering," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 25, no. 3 (2024): 182. doi:10.1080/15240657.2024.2379204.

3 adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, (Chico, California: AK Press, 2017), 32.

forced removal that are felt on different scales and in different contexts. One of these strategies is fusing recycled plastics to create a translucent quilt that makes up the body of the greenhouse. In this way, Wilson refuses a kind of disposability of materials, a certain disposability that is seen in child labour that enabled colonial states to rise. To really consider the relationship between uprooted people and plants in greenhouses, Wilson collaborated with Taíno/Métis horticulturist Laura Ramirez to identify and cultivate naturalized and native plants to place in the greenhouse. Naturalized plants, such as plantain, motherwort, and dead nettle, were carried to colonies by settlers and now often dismissed as nuisance weeds, despite their medical properties, while native species, like milkweed, coneflower, and blazing star, can be crucial for sustaining local ecologies.

Really, what Wilson is attempting to do here is practice these fractals, or create actions on a small scale that reverberate to the largest scales. I believe that within *Those in Glass Houses...*, these fractals are actually knots. By refusing to understand her settler history as naught, Wilson was able to capture and unravel these knots. Instead, she chose to understand how colonial traumas are inherited by both settlers and Indigenous communities globally. When Wilson asked me to write this article, I immediately said yes because she always inspires me to reflect on my own history, and what privileges and power I hold as a Punjabi woman whose family settled in ‘Canada’ in the 1970s. I invite you to sit with her work and feel

out the fractals and knots of your own life. Perhaps, also consider the following passage from brown as an intention and meditation to guide you through *Those in Glass Houses...*

I am living a life I don't regret
A life that will resonate with my ancestors,
and with as many generations forward as I can imagine.
I am attending to the crises of my time with my best self,
I am of communities that are doing our collective best
to honor our ancestors and all humans to come.⁴

Bios & Acknowledgements

Michelle Wilson

Michelle Wilson is a queer, neurodivergent artist and mother living as an uninvited guest in Guelph, Ontario. Her practice approaches artistic collaboration as a form of anti-colonial care work. Rather than centring the myth of the individual artist, she works through enmeshed networks—creating conditions for many hands, stories, and ways of knowing to gather through shared creation.

She is a founding member of the Coves Collective and the Unsettling Conservation Collective. Working across textile, ceramics, and new media, her projects explore relationality, land, memory, and collective responsibility. She is currently an Assistant Professor teaching in the School of Fine Art and Music and in the Bachelor of Creative Arts, Health & Wellness program at the University of Guelph.

Jasmine Sihra

Born and raised in Tsí tkaròn:to ('Toronto'), Dr. Jasmine Sihra is an educator, researcher, and curator. She completed her PhD in Art History at Concordia University in 2026. Valuing the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in addressing environmental degradation and pollution, her career and research focus on how the arts can contribute to planning for inevitable climate disasters, particularly for underserved and underrepresented communities. Dr. Sihra is Punjabi Sikh, and she was raised in an immigrant household.



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.

The works presented here are Copyright © 2024 Rima Sater, Laura Acosta and Sandi Rankaduwa. Parties may not distribute, modify, transmit, download, copy, or use the materials in our print and digital publications for public or commercial purposes, or for personal gain, without express written permission of the artists, author and Forest City Gallery. Any unauthorized use of these materials may violate copyright laws, trademark laws, the laws of privacy and publicity, contract, and communications regulations and statutes and any other applicable laws.

