





Auricals
Alison Bigg





Ghosts of Conversations to Come

Kegan M'Fadden

Alison Bigg's recent body of work, *Auricals*, can be seen through a variety of lenses, and finds itself as the meeting point between lived experience and theoretical assertions.

In this series, comprising dozens of sculptures of found objects sourced through second hand stores or by chance, Bigg responds to the recent seismic shift in her life – degenerative hearing loss as a result of otosclerosis. Otosclerosis is caused when one of the bones in the ear becomes stuck in place; when this bone is unable to vibrate, sound ceases to travel through the ear and hearing becomes impaired. For one part of the ear to fuse to another might actually echo Bigg's approach to found sculpture. By marrying disparate objects (a door

chime with a metal kleenex box, cooking implements with car parts, a glass vase with a metal funnel, or a rubber hose and a lampshade), new realities and alternative possibilities begin to emerge. The intended use of these objects is thwarted, but something new coalesces. The familiar is made strange. Her recent diagnosis led Bigg to research, among many other aspects of what is to come and what will be lost, how information is delivered.

As a means of grasping her new circumstance, Bigg was drawn to the disruption between signal and noise: 'Signal', being the information, and 'noise' as the static that gets in the way, or obscures the information. This has been her starting point for the found sculpture with the intention of presenting objects that, in one way or another, suggest the transmission of information. In titling this series *Auricals* (a word she's made up; mashed together from two or more sources or references), the

artist cleverly presents a confusion that is then undone when we think of sound, but also of social antiquity (or the vast history of Information beyond empirical data).

Assembled like a museum of speculative artifacts from a collapsed time that is both antique and futuristic, *Auricals* is meant to quiet the noise. The artist concedes that these sculptures are open to interpretation, seeing as each element has had its own use – its own past life – and in her studio she transforms them into myriad possibilities, summoning fantastical applications beyond their original mundane intentions. The German philosopher Walter Benjamin, writing in the 1930s, offered that each original piece of art is imbued with an aura related to its time and space. He goes on to explain that art made through mechanical reproduction is emancipated from itself; its time and space no longer resonate in the same way; its conversation a ghost.

But what do we do with art made out of the detritus from a society in the thralls of advanced capitalism where all we seem to be surrounded by is disposable material(s) made through mechanical reproduction? Is Bigg reinvesting aura into these castaways by reconstituting them as sculptures to be pondered? I like the idea that everything has its own history, its own reason for coming into the world, and therefore its own death, too. In reanimating these dead pieces of our culture by fusing them together as a response to her medical condition where she finds herself now fifty percent deaf, Bigg is getting closer to magical realism. In literature, as well as visual art, magical realism is a style that embraces the mundane while introducing magical elements. This is often used when the protagonist has an obstacle to overcome, or a crushing reality to face. It might be hallucinatory (an old jalopy becomes a time machine), or it might be wishful thinking (a piano falls from

the sky and crushes your enemy), but the artist is offering an alternative from what was simply there before to what is now available. A new conversation struck. Magical realism exists when one is alienated (or marginalized), so that retreating into another world where a milk jar amplifies important sonic information via two arms with multiple metal prongs, or a pair of glass vases connected by a hose quiets noise, or a cauldron becomes a microphone, acts as one way of navigating her new reality.

“I like the idea that everything has its own history, its own reason for coming into the world, and therefore its own death, too.”

Bigg’s assemblage of cones, tubes, and filters are made into a cohesive and elegant installation through the restrained palette of silver or gold, as well as clear glass and metals, with the colour orange used as a restrained highlight. For this reason,

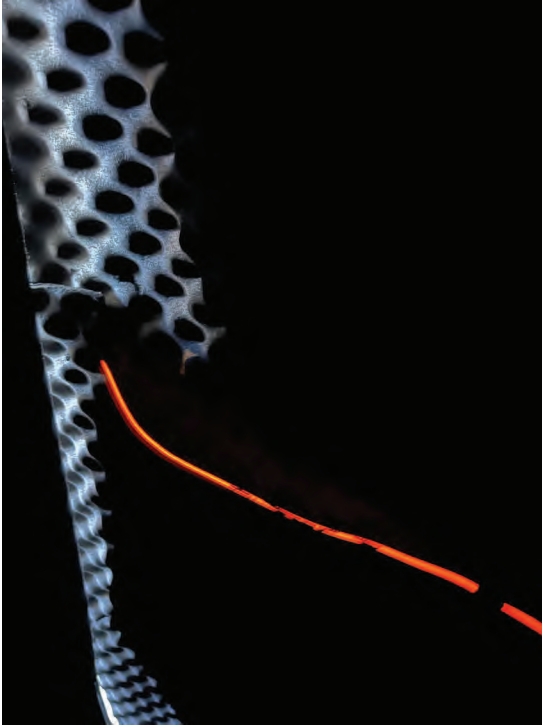
her concentration of materials do not carry the disjointed incongruity of so much found sculpture. The reflective surfaces offer an additional layer of information, the way an image can reverberate as though it is sonic, but the hot shock of colour is meant to suggest danger, and it is both everywhere throughout the installation and used formally to lead the eye while adding a visual balance. Like any of life’s unexpected turns, it’s how you look at it that guides the rest of your journey. In her research, the artist delved into historical

images of hearing aids over time and what she found was both obvious and humbling. Large horn-like devices meant to literally funnel sound into the ear canals were abundant, but so too was the pervasive feelings of inadequacy exacerbated by the

stigma of disability, leading to the ever-shrinking and streamlining of devices with the advancement of technologies. A sly nod to this history, and the larger (missed) point that everyone needs a little help hearing – or understanding – from time to time takes the shape of *Communal Hearing Aid for Dinner Parties* (2023). This surreal chandelier, in tiers of wire surrounding a clear plastic cylinder, with electric orange embellishments shaped into inadequate hollow tubes, topped by diminutive silver upturned funnels suggests that parties could more easily converse across a full table, but ultimately spoofs any real world application through its ostentatious design.

A parallel project to *Auricals* is the artist book, *#lostfoundsound*, produced in a limited edition with Victoria-based micro press, flask. In a series of hand-pulled prints with blind embossing, pronto-lithography, photo-etching, and stencil Bigg

once again fuses historical data, practical knowledge, and her own interpretation of the subject – that is, how information is received and transmitted. Specifically, how language migrates from sonic to visual (what was signaled is now signed). Through illustrations depicting the mechanics of American Sign Language, as well as her own found sculptures, Bigg bridges Benjamin’s hypothesis of the aura with elements of magical realism through phrases such as, “a radio for noisy pain” with accompanying lettering. Text on other prints suggest prototypes for how these *Auricals* might help navigate specific situations: “Gossip Machine”, “to filter misunderstandings”, “for shouting”, “for chatting with small animals”, while others simply offer the somber: SILENCE. The book’s 3D-printed cover, in shocking orange, underscores the element of play so intrinsic to Bigg’s output. Designed to resemble the Build-It-Yourself kits popularized in the mid Twentieth



Aurical Chamber (installation detail), 2023. Image credit: Regan Rasmussen.

Century, this articulated cover is replete with funnel, hose, tentacles, perforated whatsits and tapered whatchamacallits, so that anyone could assemble their own *Aurical* device.

A further investigation into what is possible when new limitations come into play is explored with Bigg's *Aurical Chamber*. This site-specific installation is a reference to the Anechoic chambers first developed during the 1950s to experiment with radio transmission. Designed to stop reflections of either sound or electromagnetic waves, these rooms are named after the Latin term suggesting 'no echo.' Usually padded entirely with high-density absorbent foam, Anechoic chambers certainly quiet

the outside world, however, some people have experienced continuous sound inside these silent rooms¹, while it is speculated that others might go mad – or even hallucinate – from the auditory deprivation. Bigg's *Aurical Chamber* is not fully sound-proof, though it is padded in black foam with the only light visible being a sliver of fluorescent orange filament. Being in this blackened space, where the outside world is muffled, forces a different kind of experience with the transmission of information.

In confronting her exceptionality, Bigg's artistic process involved grieving at first, which led to a new understanding of this loss as a potential gain. Through losing her hearing, she found she was able to engage with the world on a different level. It is with this intimate curiosity that Bigg began what she calls 'listening through seeing'. This inversion of perceptions carries over into the sculpture, installation,

and bookwork, where her *Auricals* embody the potential not only to amplify sound but to produce it as well ... Quieting the noise to ultimately convey the information.

– Kegan McFadden

"In that silent room, I heard two sounds, one high and one low. Afterward I asked the engineer in charge why, if the room was so silent, I had heard two sounds. He said, 'Describe them.' I did. He said, 'The high one was your nervous system in operation. The low one was your blood in circulation.'" – John Cage, describing his 1951 visit to the Anechoic Chamber at Harvard University.

[nb: Cage's infamous composition *4'33'* debuted the following year. An early working title for the piece was *Silent Prayer*.]





Resounding Signals

Regan
Rasmussen

“Silence is our listening openness ... if we want to hear something we must first give it our silence.”

– Jane Ash Poitras

Auricals examines communication tools in the context of a plugged-in world where the cacophony of noise and distraction is constant. Utilizing found object sculpture and printmaking processes, Alison Bigg explores what it means to hear/be heard/not hear, and suggests that by embracing silence, authentic listening can be enhanced.

Entering the gallery, I am greeted by an array of eclectic sculptures that invite playful consideration. To wander amongst these curious entities is to engage in an imaginative, nonverbal process of decoding. Fluted metallic forms referencing hearing devices from the past are juxtaposed against

upturned vessels reminiscent of satellite dishes attempting to broadcast imaginary sound waves. Other than a soft whirring sound emanating from a rotating cone perched upon a droid-like base, all is quiet, allowing for imagination to be sparked. A visual soundtrack takes shape as neon orange pops and dances through the gallery like tiny soundbites, hot chili flakes, rock pop candy or effervescent bubbles.



Curvilinear, crinkled edges ripple like arpeggios in contrast to legato smooth glass surfaces and staccato pulses of shiny metal. There is liveliness and joy in this quiet.

Adjacent to the main space, buffered from sound and devoid of sensory stimulation, a room full of quiet blackness offers a glimpse into an immersive alternate reality. This ‘aurical chamber’ was inspired by Bigg’s research into American composer and figure of experimental and electronic music, Pauline Olivero (1932 - 2016), and

her theory of deep listening. She maintained that, within sound buffering semi-anechoic chambers, it is possible to achieve heightened awareness by tapping into feelings and sensations to discern meaning. As I turn inward, I sense a different quiet. The tempo slows. My body becomes the sound, accompanied by a thin thread of melodic orange encircling me in the dark. A rhythmic mantra of heartbeat and breath leads to transcendence. Within this quiet there is sanctuary and peace.

Experiencing Bigg’s *Auricals* serves as inspiration to seek spaces of silence, to pause, re-set, and contemplate multimodal ways of receiving information. By *‘listening in every possible way to everything possible no matter what we are doing’*, as Olivero stated, there is an opportunity to enhance authentic, empathic communication within ourselves and with one another.

– Regan Rasmussen



Communal Hearing Aid for Dinner Parties, 2023





ERRATUM: Regarding this aurical. Misheard words prompted gallery staff to install this aurical upside-down. To properly experience the misophonic nullification this aurical offers, collaborators must stand on their head.

Gallery staff regret the error.

(The artist regrets nothing.)



Neckbones grind.

Your spine settles like a freighter docking,

Eyelashes collide,

A blink's loud as a garage door closing.

Don't dare swallow.

If you survive the hallucinations

you can hear your toenails grow.

Slow rise from the deep sea floor

to avoid the bends. Slow exit

from the anechoic chamber to avoid

descent into madness.

Place both hands on the glass rim.

Breathe. And again.

The sound of your heart beating stops.

But not the beat of your heart.



This aurical is evolvin to diminish
auditor overload and hullabaloo.

Earl testin reveals a sin ular abilit to rab letters
before honics reach the cochlear nerve.

(To date, onl letters with serif descenders.)

Auricalo ists are workin on a mutation
to reco nize and destro double vowels
and consonants.

CAPTURED: g, y, Y, g, g, Y, g, p, Y, g, g, Y



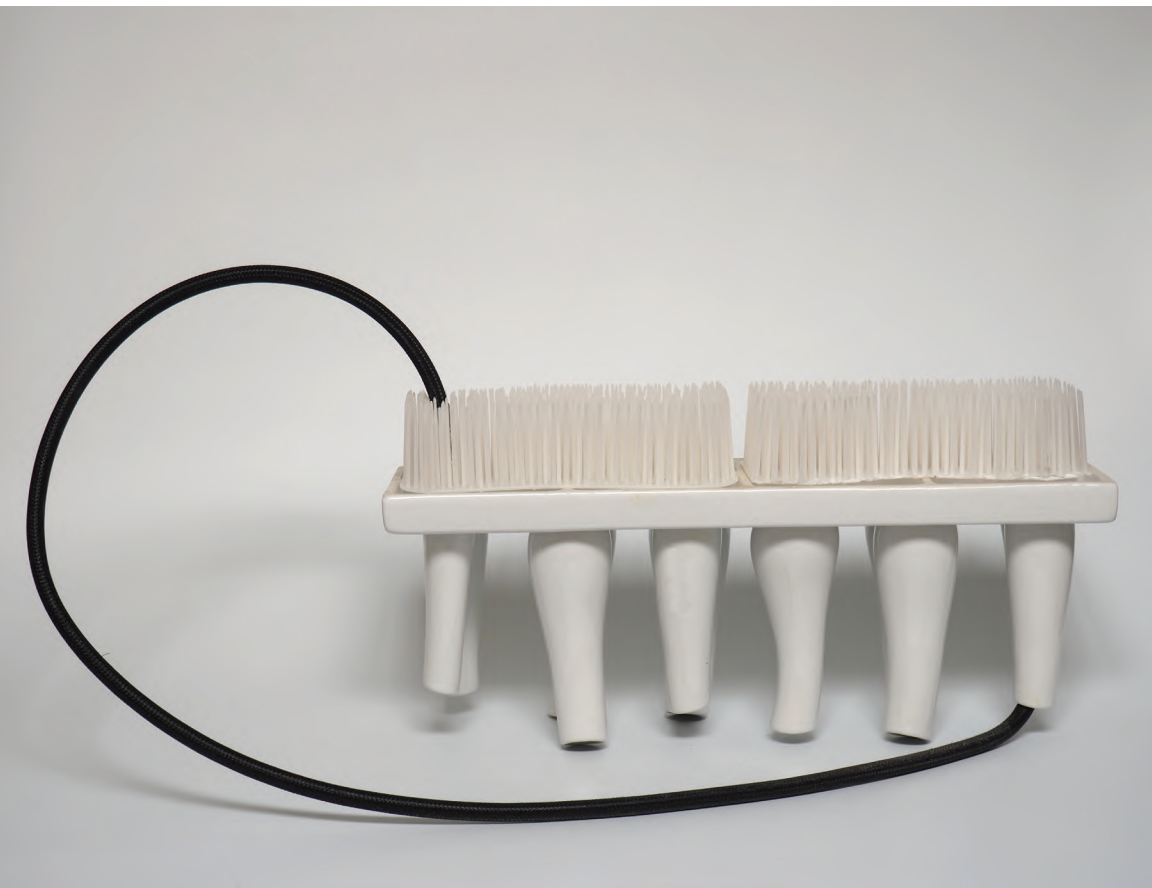
By and by, the artist posted open source 3D print files for this aurical. Someone sent her a billion dollars. Someone else attempted an assassination. (The artist survived.)

The cult tags her St. Aurical. (The artist rejects the label.)

AURICAL 10: Every living person may once and one time only hear the voice of and speak with one dead person of their choice for precisely 20 minutes. Non-transferable.



Being of sound mind.



Like a Roomba®
but for the glitch
between the amygdala
and the auditory cortex.



NOT a sunrise

not a mosquito bite

not a table lamp at a casino
on the Las Vegas strip

BUT champagne bubble

pop

a goblet raised to the couple
just married by Elvis
in the chapel next door



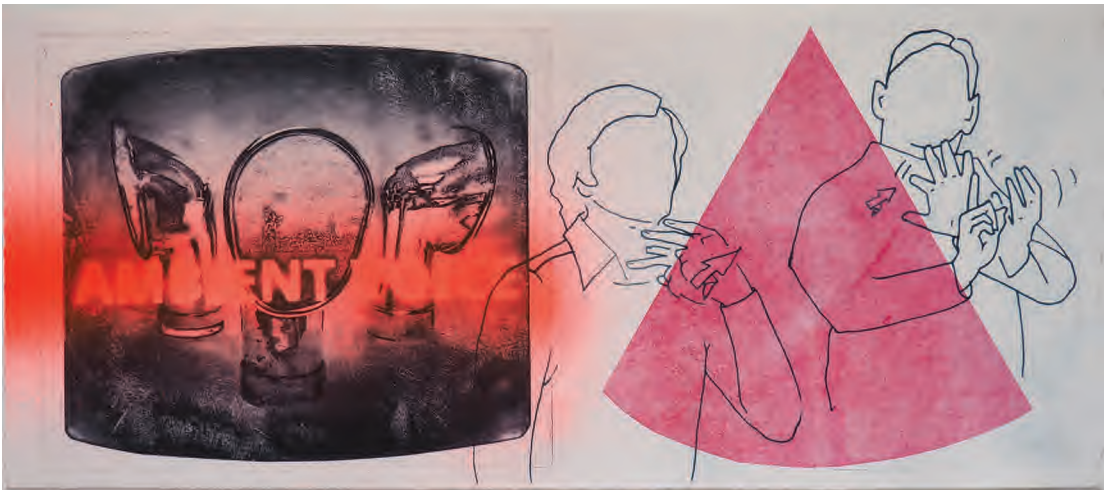
#lostfoundsound
2023
Artist book
Edition of 8, 1 artist proof
flask publishing

#lostfoundsound

Published by flask as a special limited boxed edition of 8, this artist book comprises eight hybrid prints accompanied by a 3D-printed cover.

The hybrid prints consist of solar plate etchings of Bigg's humorously confounding sculptures, pronto lithography prints of American Sign Language diagrams with blind embossing translations, collography, and spray painted stecilling.

#lostandfoundsound was commissioned by the Victoria Arts Council with funding from the BC Arts Council's ARTS Impact Grant.



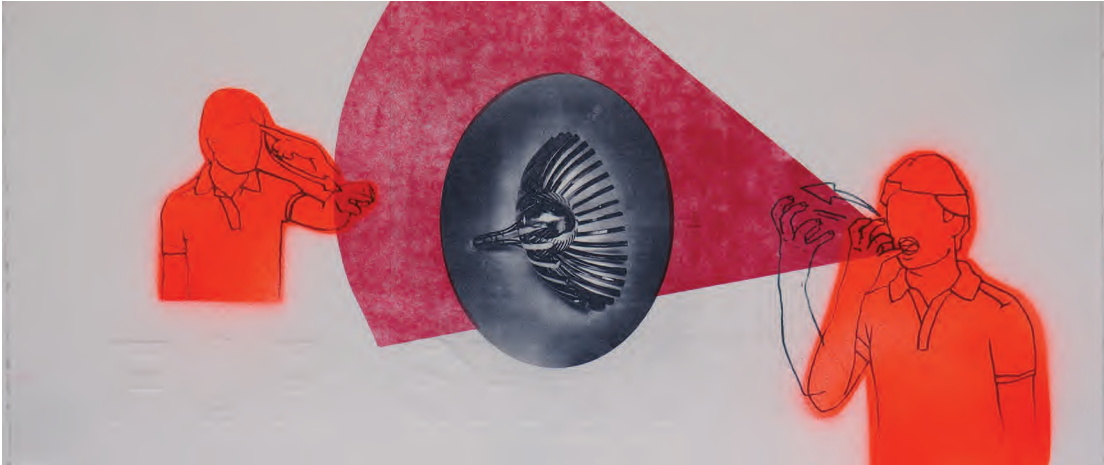
Ambient Voice, 2023



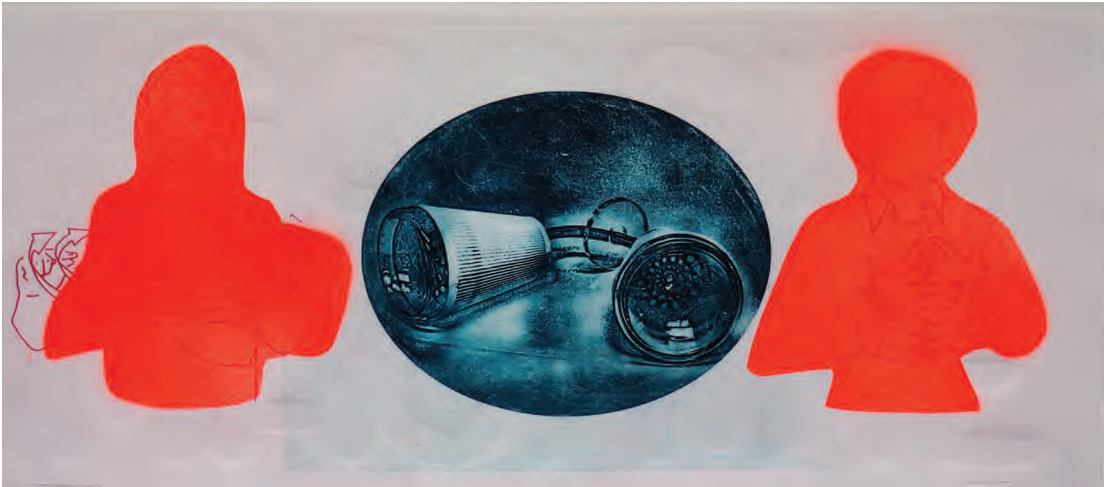
For Chatting With Any Small Animal, 2023



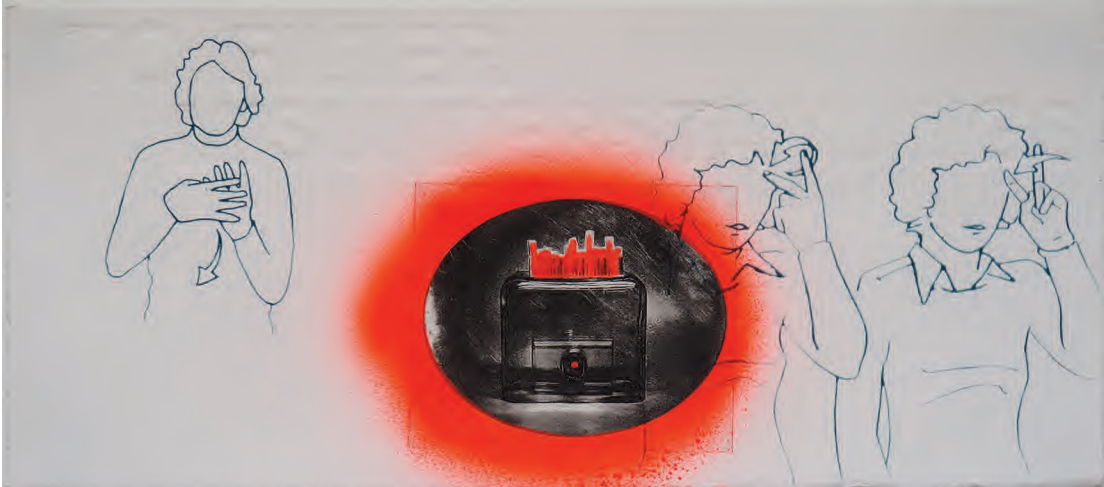
Clear Call, 2023



For Shouting, 2023



Gossip Machine, 2023



Talk Radio, 2023

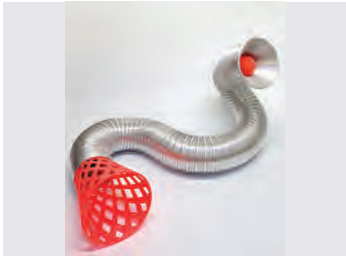
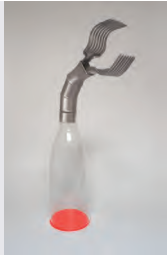
To Filter Misunderstandings, 2023

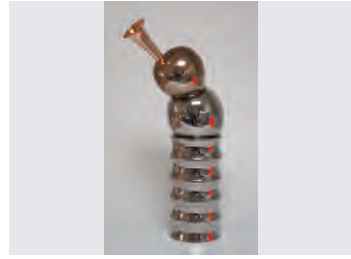
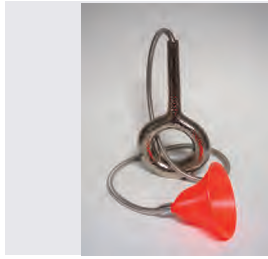
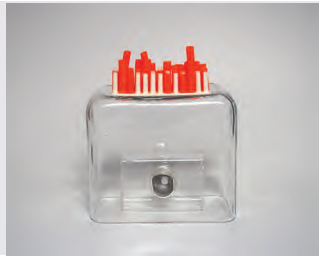


Silence, 2023









Previous spread, left

- Aurical no. 1, 2022, 14x15x14"*
- Aurical no. 2, 2022, 28x32x22"*
- Aurical no. 3, 2023, 37x13x13"*
- Aurical no. 4, 2022, 34x12x12"*
- Aurical no. 5, 2022, 27x12x6"*
- Aurical no. 6, 2023, 27x10x6"*
- Aurical no. 7, 2023, 57x24x24"*
- Aurical no. 8, 2022, 32x12x12"*
- Aurical no. 9, 2023, 24x12x7"*
- Aurical no. 10, 2023, 24x7x7"*
- Aurical no. 11, 2023, 62x7x7"*
- Aurical no. 12, 2023, 12x10x10"*

Previous spread, right

- Aurical no. 13, 2022, 12x12x14"*
- Aurical no. 14, 2023, 45x105x24"*
and *Aurical no. 15, 2023*
(variable)
- Aurical no. 16, 2022, 11x5x5"*

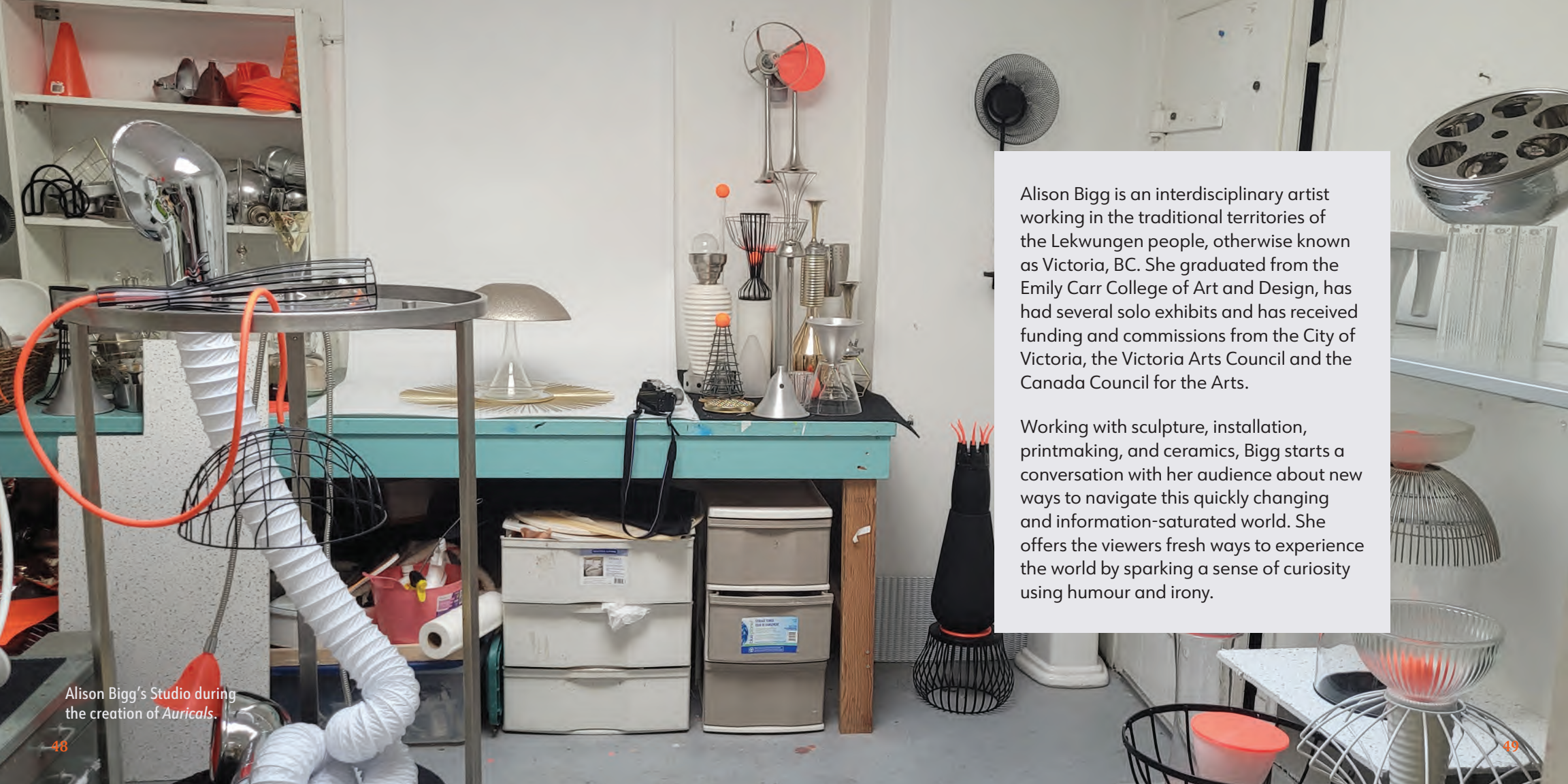
Aurical no. 17, 2023, 15x13x7"

- Aurical no. 18, 2023, 18x16x16"*
- Aurical no. 19, 2023, 12x30x10"*
- Aurical no. 20, 2023, 15x24x8"*
- Aurical no. 21, 2023, 63x30x30"*
- Aurical no. 22, 2023, 5x30x18"*
(variable)
- Aurical no. 23, 2023, 24x32x32"*
- Aurical no. 24, 2022, 4.5x3x3"*
- Aurical no. 25, 2023, 5x30x15"*

Above

- Aurical no. 26, 2023, 12x10x6"*
- Aurical no. 27, 2023, 16x24x12"*
(variable)
- Aurical no. 28, 2023, 20x6x6"*





Alison Bigg is an interdisciplinary artist working in the traditional territories of the Lekwungen people, otherwise known as Victoria, BC. She graduated from the Emily Carr College of Art and Design, has had several solo exhibits and has received funding and commissions from the City of Victoria, the Victoria Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts.

Working with sculpture, installation, printmaking, and ceramics, Bigg starts a conversation with her audience about new ways to navigate this quickly changing and information-saturated world. She offers the viewers fresh ways to experience the world by sparking a sense of curiosity using humour and irony.

Alison Bigg's Studio during the creation of *Auricals*.

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