

Seeing Stars

Al Razutis, Catharine MacTavish, and Gary Lee-Nova

guest curated by Felix Rapp

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Seeing Stars celebrates a brief yet bright friendship between artists Al Razutis, Catharine MacTavish, and Gary Lee-Nova. From 1974 to 1976 the three occupied a studio building in Vancouver known as the “Granville Grange”—located directly underneath the main ramp of the Granville Street Bridge—where they shared ideas, made art, and drank scotch together. *Seeing Stars* marks exactly 50 years since Al, Catharine, and Gary were last all together, and their first time exhibiting collectively.

By the time Catharine arrived in Vancouver from Toronto by way of Oakland in 1974, Al and Gary had already long established their individual studios at the Grange. In *Seeing Stars Being Stars*—an unpublished 2023 text recounting a late-night visit the three paid to artist and musician Al Neil in 1974—Catharine describes Al Razutis’ experimental media complex, known as “Visual Alchemy”, as “a sprawling eleven rooms, with just one fisheye porthole to see who is at the door... There is an office, a studio equipped for video and audio synthesis, a darkroom featuring Raz’s home made optical printer, a workshop for repairs, tinkering and alignment of laser mirrors, a holography lab, and an unsettling room where the former tenant [artist Glenn Toppings] succumbed to acetylene fumes, because, well, no windows.” Here, Catharine assisted Al with his holography and experimental films while also making her own drawings and holograms. On the floor directly above, Gary kept a much smaller studio where he painted and built frames and sculptures out of imperial yardsticks—made irrelevant at a national level when Canada went *Out to Metric* in the 1970s—with the help of skilled carpenter and friend, Alan Miller.

Despite the momentum of their independent artistic activities, and the closeness of their friendship, the three produced only a handful of discernibly collaborative works. Al and Gary’s experimental video *Hybrid* (1973), shot in Vancouver and synthesized at Evergreen State College, is one such rare example. Yet, their influence on one another is, to varying degrees of visibility, present across all the artworks in *Seeing Stars*. The photograph for which Catharine lent her hand in Gary’s *Untitled*

(1974), for example, was made on the same day that Catharine and Gary first met but was only assembled recently by Gary to honour her. More discreetly, the energetic ballpoint sketch of Visual Alchemy's vacant holography lab by Catharine, *The World is a Hologram in Your Heart* (D. Seeley) (1974), features a small typewritten label adhered to the back of the frame which reads "Al Razutis and Gary Lee-Nova taught Catharine to drink scotch here." Uniting the three is a shared, somewhat contradictory, attitude of resistance towards Vancouver's various scenes and groups of the 1960s and 70s. Each, in their own way, were highly independent and valued the impermanence inherent to artistic life.

After the birth of his son, Gary was the first to leave the studio when he moved his family to White Rock and started driving a taxicab. Shortly thereafter, Al and Catharine travelled to Egypt to shoot an experimental film funded by the National Film Board, but parted ways in the weeks following their return home. Catharine then spent a year travelling and eventually settled in Victoria where she had her first major solo exhibition, *Self Centred*, in 1977 at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. Now on his own, Al abandoned the studio, with equipment and artworks still inside, and moved to Samoa with his wife and son to write his book *Ilium Express*, which would not be published until 2024. Central to the exhibition, a cracked parabolic mirror—also framed by Alan Miller—which distorts the surrounding artworks, was rescued by Catharine from Visual Alchemy prior to the building's demolition in 1977 by the City of Vancouver. Despite years without a fixed address, Catharine has kept the mirror with her all this time.



Over the past three years, while writing to and speaking with Al, Catharine, and Gary individually, there has almost always been some mention of one another and of the transformative impact of their time together at the Grange. Although their lives and their art have diverged dramatically in the 50 years since, there is an undeniable, enduring shared consciousness between them. For me, curating *Seeing Stars* is as much about sharing the stories of their friendship as it is about creating an opportunity to reunite them. In doing so they have become my friends too. As Gary put it to me simply over coffee, *Seeing Stars* is about "three people who love each other."