

BIOGRAPHY

Melanie Barnett is a ceramicist whose work draws upon themes of mycology, agronomy, and climate science to create sci-fi worldbuilding experiences that speculate upon the future. She holds an MFA from NSCAD University (2024) and a BFA Honours in Ceramics from IshKaabatens Waasa Gaa Inaabateg Department of Visual Art, Brandon University (2021). Melanie's work has been included in national and international publications, and has been exhibited across Canada. Her work has been generously supported by the Canada Council for the Arts (2024), The Elizabeth Greenshield's Foundation Grant (2022), the Nova Scotia Graduate Scholarship (2023), and the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) Canada Graduate Scholarship-Masters (2023). Barnett was the recipient of the Governor Generals Gold medal in Academic Excellence (2024) awarded at NSCAD University.

This publication accompanies the exhibition, "It looked like your Biosuit", presented at the Estevan Art Gallery & Museum, from June 13th - Aug 22nd, 2025

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It Mumbles and Gulps, Gramma Lichen,
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IT LOOKED LIKE YOUR BIOSUIT

Melanie Barnett

June 13th - Aug 22nd, 2025



AN INTERVIEW WITH *MELANIE BARNETT*

Q) What is this exhibition about?

“It looked like your BioSuit” is a worldbuilding project that chronicles the survival of a small community of photosynthetic people post-climate-disaster. Generations ago the predecessors of this community (who are called the Wearers) learned to cultivate fungi, moss, algae, and lichen into wearable protective gear. They called these garments the BioSuits. The BioSuits and Wearers exist together in an intricate symbiotic relationship. The BioSuits are a remediating body. Through a real-world process called mycoremediation the BioSuits clean the micro environment around each Wearer as a sort of bio-space-suit function. The Wearers are mobile – forced into an eternal migration to avoid the cyclical environmental hazards that wreak havoc on the Earth’s surface. This mobility allows the mycoremediating qualities of the BioSuit to extend beyond the individual Wearers. As they travel across vast landscapes pieces of the BioSuits flake off, go to spore and to seed. Their progeny settle along the path resulting in an intergenerational environmental remediation. Essentially, through their BioSuits and migrations the Wearers will eventually mycoremediate the entire planet.

Q)Your project constructs a richly detailed speculative world. What inspired you to blend agronomy, mycology, and sculpture into a single narrative?

When I was creating this body of work it was important to me that the world be read as science fiction, not fantasy. Both of these genres fall under the umbrella of “speculative fiction”, but I wanted to guide the viewer in a very specific way.

There is a written component to this project in the form of my MFA Thesis from NSCAD University (<https://nscad.cairnrepo.org/islandora/object/nscad%3A11116>). In this document I flip back and forth between a fictional narrative and the real-world scientific research that has influenced the worldbuilding.Each aspect of the worldbuilding is backed up by research. Everything in the work, in the world, is technically (not probably) possible. The photosynthetic skin of the Wearers is based on a photosynthetic sea slug. The idea of a living protective garment that can also be mobile and not rooted is based on a type of weevil that grows lichen on its back as camouflage. Mycoremediation is real, too, and the way Wearers grow their food is based on a practice called permaculture.

This worldbuilding project looks to a future that is so far removed from our time that the Wearers don’t even remember that we existed.

They represent a possible way to survive a rapidly changing climate. Their world is presented as science fiction so that readers and viewers might view it as something possible. Scientific discovery is influenced by popular media all the time, and maybe one day someone might see this work and try to make the BioSuits a reality.

Q) What role does hope play in your speculative future—and how do you navigate the tension between dystopia and optimism in your work?

I don’t view this body of work or this speculation as dystopian. It was actually really important to me that it wasn’t. The figures are always depicted as happy, or at least not expressing any negative emotion. They’re shown smiling, eating, telling stories. I wanted to depict the joyful moments of their lives. It’s not an unrealistic utopia – people still break their legs and they’re typically unhappy about that, but the way their communities come together to help one another in times of need/tragedy takes on more of an optimistic view.

The Wearers’ communities are so different to how we (in Western Canada) configure our own communities and settlements. The Wearers are shown in moments of joy because if they weren’t then it would be easy to misinterpret the work as “this is a future to be feared”. If the Wearers don’t find joy in their communities and their BioSuits, then why would anyone in a contemporary time choose to consider this speculation as a desirable possibility?

Q) Why did you choose ceramic sculpture as the primary medium for portraying the Wearers and their BioSuits?

Ceramic is a man-made, permanent material. In ceramics we take clay, a naturally occurring material formed through erosion of rock, form it into shapes, and subject it to extreme temperatures. In the kiln clay changes to ceramic. A chemical and physical change occurs – ceramic can never go back to being clay. It is forever changed, forever altered, and will never not be ceramic.

Ceramic has deep roots in our past, as far as human civilization goes. Ceramic was, from what I’ve read, one of the first technologies to be developed across several civilizations. Ceramic was everywhere and it was developed independently across the world. I think that’s really amazing, that something so simple can connect so many people across so many millennia.

I’ve used ceramic to bring the BioSuits and Wearers into existence because of this history, and because of its permanence. These sculptures are permanent, in a way. Even though they might break and shatter one day, they will still be there in some essence.

Through ceramic the BioSuits and Wearer speculation can travel into the future, long after my life has run its course. They are like time capsules, and maybe someone millennia from now will unearth them and learn from this worldbuilding project.

Q) Can you walk us through the process of designing a BioSuit? How do you decide which fungal or botanical features to emphasize?

I built the BioSuits fairly loosely. I wanted them to feel organic so I didn’t put a lot of prescribed forms onto them. I built a loose base for the figure and then added on forms derived from fungi, moss, algae, and lichen until I felt it was complete.

In the early days of the worldbuilding process there were definitely some ground rules I had to lay down. One of the first questions/problems I ran into that stumped me for a solid three months was “can the BioSuits have zippers?”. This question might seem simple, but think of all the things within that question. In order to have zippers the Wearers would need to have some level of industry to process the material to make the zipper. That could be metal or plastic, or maybe something else entirely. They would also need permanent settlements and potentially mining operations to allow for this level of industry.

This applies to a number of things within the design of the BioSuits. They also don’t have shoelaces, or fabric that is stitched together. I decided that the BioSuits would be technically removable from the Wearers’ bodies, but they would rarely do so. This also influenced the design because it meant that I could be much more organic with it. I didn’t have to think about how convenient it would be to remove the BioSuit or how pieces would be attached together. The BioSuit components would take care of all of that.

Q) You mention that many of your figures are portraits of family and friends. How does this personal dimension inform or transform the speculative narrative?

In speculative fiction, especially where the author/creator is imagining a future involving people there is a responsibility to consider who you are writing into that future. For example, if there is a work of fiction that only ever mentions able-bodied people then it is assumed that anyone who has a body that falls outside of that narrow description did not live. It is assumed that without an able body one cannot survive in that future. If only young people are ever mentioned, then it implies that in that imagined future people don’t live into old age. If an imagined future only mentions white people, then what happened to everyone else?

Because “it looked like your BioSuit” is a work of speculative fiction I also faced this responsibility. An additional challenge was that I work fairly slow – ceramic is not a medium you can rush, especially not with the level of detail that I’ve included in these works. I needed to choose who I was going to write into this future and why. I had a limited number of figures I could realistically make within the time frame of an MFA degree.

I eventually chose to centre the works on members of my family.

My sister, parents, grandparents, and partner are all referenced within the figures of this exhibition. I decided that if I was going to write an imagined future and I was given control of who lived and died, then at the very least I would hope that my family would make it there.

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Q) Growing up on a grain farm in rural Manitoba clearly shapes your vision of agroecology. How do your lived experiences manifest in the fictional world of the Wearers?

When I decided to include family members as the core figures in this body of work I began tying the worldbuilding project more directly to my experiences living in an agroecosystem.

In Where Your Family Gathers the central figure is my sister. She represents the legacy of a multi-generational grain farm. She will likely be the next person to run our family grain farm (though she is in no way pressured to do so. It will be her choice). In this work my sister’s BioSuit forms the landscape on which four smaller figures sit. These figures are our parents, my sister, and myself.

These small figures are shown performing in-world activities that relate to our real-world roles in our home agroecosystem. My dad is teaching my sister how to plant. My mum and I had a less-direct role in the farming business, so our in-world counterparts are shown foraging/berrypicking.

Q) In your view, what role can speculative art play in shaping real-world environmental consciousness or action?

I think that imagined futures and speculative fiction can have an incredible impact on the real world. Through imagination we are able to play with ideas and solutions to problems that we currently don’t have the technology to solve. Anything is possible in fiction.

If I use “it looked like your BioSuit” as an example, the technology to create the BioSuits doesn’t exist. There are individual research projects that come close – I once read about a project where researchers are making fungi-based leathers. I chose to keep “it looked like your BioSuit” situated firmly in sci-fi so that the BioSuit/Wearer symbiosis can be interpreted as something possible, so that maybe people like the researchers making fungi leather will find a way to make their textiles alive.

Q) Do you plan to expand this speculative world further—perhaps through other media like writing, film, or performance

At this time I view the BioSuits and the accompanying worldbuilding as complete. That being said, The BioSuit/Wearer symbiosis is only one way that a human civilization could adapt to a changed climate. Within the worldbuilding I have intentionally left holes, places where new ideas can spring up and be written into existence.