

Karen Zalamea

Every Surface Is a Shrine



Karen Zalamea *Herbarium (after Flora de Filipinas)*, 2024–25, cyanotype on watercolour paper, 30.5 x 23 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Gallery Tour and Workshop
Teacher Guide

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Welcome Teachers

Our School Field Trip offers students the opportunity to learn, explore, and create through contemporary art. During their visit to *Karen Zalamea: Every Surface Is a Shrine*, students will participate in a guided tour of the exhibition, engaging in thoughtful discussion about what they observe, interpret, and feel in response to the artworks.

Students will explore how Karen Zalamea uses photography alongside sculpture, video and historical processes to examine themes of memory, family history, migration, and identity. Through close looking and conversation, they will consider how materials can hold meaning and how surfaces, such as stone, paper, and photographs, can carry stories across generations and geographies.

The exhibition invites students to think about archives, preservation, and “kinwork”—the care and effort involved in maintaining family and cultural connections. They will reflect on how personal histories connect to larger ideas such as diaspora, colonial histories, and trans-Pacific identity.

Inspired by Zalamea’s creative processes, students will participate in a hands-on art activity that explores connection, memory, and place. Using materials and design strategies drawn from the exhibition, they will create their own artworks that reflect identity, family stories, or meaningful objects and locations in their lives.

This program emphasizes visual literacy, critical thinking, creative expression, and connections to BC Curriculum in Arts Education, Social Studies, and English Language Arts.

In The Gallery

This exhibition features a combination of wall-mounted artworks and sculptural artworks that occupy the gallery space. Visitors are kindly asked **not to touch** the artwork to ensure its preservation. There is a video with sound in this exhibition. The gallery is well-lit to allow careful observation, and bench seating is available just outside for rest or reflection. Visitors are encouraged to fully engage with the artworks visually, appreciating the textures, layers, and spatial arrangements, while refraining from touching the artworks or any gallery fixtures.

About the Exhibition

Spanning sculpture, installation, video and historical processes, the exhibition *Every Surface Is a Shrine* highlights Zalamea’s sustained engagement with her diasporic identity as a Canadian Filipino artist. Central to the exhibition is *Sunken Garden* (2020–), a growing body of work that

transforms her ancestral home in Quezon City, Philippines, into a site of archival and speculative reconstruction.

Through manipulated still and moving images of chico trees, a constructed image from a marble staircase built by her great-grandfather in their ancestral house in the Philippines, and hand-woven photographic ropes made from reprinted family archives, Zalamea enacts what she terms “trans-Pacific kinwork”—a way of linking generations, geographies and embodied histories through intimate material processes.

The exhibition takes its title from a sculptural object: a marble slab, which in the exhibition space becomes both artifact and site of gesture. The inscription of text on its surface evokes geological memory and the embedded weight of repeated touch showing that how everyday physical materials hold memory. The concept of surface as a site of memory further expands in *Herbarium (after Flora de Filipinas) (2024–)*, which reconfigures nineteenth-century botanical illustrations as cyanotypes—layering colonial histories of extraction with photographic processes tied to scientific imaging and feminist authorship challenging how “scientific” images are often not “neutral” but linked to colonial history.

Across these interconnected works, Zalamea meditates on photography’s role in holding, translating and reanimating histories. Her practice foregrounds the photograph not as a static representation but as a mutable object—one that can be woven, engraved, enlarged or reprinted to forge correspondences between the personal and the political, the archival and the embodied. This exhibition invites us to *look closely* at Zalamea’s art but also our own experiences to find meaningful, tiny moments, ordinary objects, and unremarkable sites of remembrance.



Karen Zalamea *Sunken Garden (Chico)*, 2025, inkjet print on canvas, 61 x 76.2 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

About the Artist

Karen Zalamea is a visual artist whose photographic practice critically considers the medium's methodologies and materials to attend to issues of memory, inheritance, place and identity.

She is the recipient of the 2025 Barbara Spohr Memorial Award for Photography from the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, Alberta, and the 2023 Prefix Prize from the Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art, Toronto. Her work has been presented in solo and group exhibitions and as public art projects across Canada and internationally. Zalamea holds an MFA from Concordia University, Montreal, and a BFA from Emily Carr University of Art + Design, Vancouver.

She was born and raised in Vancouver, Canada, by immigrant parents from the Philippines, and now resides in Burnaby, on the ancestral and unceded homelands of the hən'q'əmin'əm' and Skwxwú7mesh speaking peoples.

The artist acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the BC Arts Council.

Explore

Griffin Art Projects. (2022, May 20). *Live From the Studio with Karen Zalamea*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJh8jcZZ8lo>

Student Engagement

Classes can participate in two different workshops inspired by Karen Zalamea's art. Both are 2 hours and include a gallery tour and reflective artmaking activity.

Image Transfer and Experimentation Workshop

Inspired by artist Karen Zalamea's exhibition, this hands-on workshop invites students to explore photography in playful and creative ways using cyanotypes. Participants will experiment with transforming images onto new surfaces, discovering how photographs can change and take on new meanings through material and process.

Just as Zalamea's work explores memory, place, and identity, students will have the opportunity to engage their curiosity and creativity, seeing photography as a flexible and expressive medium for storytelling and personal expression.

Clay – Make Your Mark Workshop

In connection with Karen Zalamea's exhibition, this workshop invites students to explore how memory and place can be expressed through art. Using clay, students will experiment with mark-making and texture to create unique impressions that reflect their own stories and experiences. Just as Zalamea's work reimagines histories through different materials, this



hands-on activity encourages students to see how clay can hold and translate personal expression.

Please allow up to **6 weeks** for clay processing. You will be notified by email for clay pickup.

Before You Arrive:

We've included optional activities below to help prepare your students for their visit to the gallery.

Activity 1: Who is the Artist?

Learning more about an artist can help students interpret the exhibition and make connections to their own lived experiences.

Discussion Questions:

- a. Where is Karen Zalamea from?
- b. What materials does she typically use in her practice?
- c. What common themes does she explore in her work?
- e. If you could ask Karen Zalamea one question, what would it be?

After Your Visit:

Activity 1: "Across the Ocean" Mapping Identity

Themes: Migration, diaspora, place

Suggested Grades: 3–7

Project

Students create a mixed media map that explores personal or family connections to place. They can:

- Mark places that are important to their family history (cities, countries, neighbourhoods, territories).
- Draw lines connecting these places to show movement or migration.
- Add symbols, colours, patterns, or small drawings that represent culture, language, traditions, food, or memory.
- Include short written reflections, such as "This place is important because..."

Teachers may choose to:

- Use world maps, outline maps, or have students draw their own symbolic maps.
- Encourage students to include Indigenous territory acknowledgements where they live.
- Invite discussion about voluntary and involuntary migration in age-appropriate ways.

Exhibition Connection

- Trans-Pacific identity
- Migration
- Diaspora

- How geography shapes identity

Reflection Prompts

- How do places shape who we are?
- Can you belong to more than one place?
- What does “home” mean to you?

Activity 2: Family Story Object Drawing

Grades: K–6

Themes: Archive, inheritance, memory

Project

Students bring (or imagine) a meaningful object from home (for example: a photograph, recipe book, toy, piece of clothing, tool, or cultural item).

They will:

- Observe the object carefully and draw it with attention to detail (shape, texture, pattern).
- Add colour or shading to show material qualities.
- Write 2–5 sentences (adjusted by grade level) explaining:
 - What the object is
 - Who it belongs to
 - Why is it meaningful
 - What story does it hold

Teachers may also:

- Create a classroom “mini archive” wall display.
- Pair students to share stories orally before writing.
- Discuss how preserving stories is a form of care.

Exhibition Connection

- Archive
- Family photographs
- Inheritance
- Kinwork (maintaining family connections and stories)
- Photography as preservation

Reflection Prompts

- Why do we keep certain objects?
- How can an object hold memory?
- What stories might this object tell in the future?

When You Arrive

➤ **Activity: How to Look at Art in a Gallery**

There are a few things we can do to help us look at art, even when we know nothing about the artist or artwork. You can practice these strategies with any artwork in your classroom or online.

- a) **View the art from different angles.** What does it look like up close? Or 5-10 steps back from the artwork? How about viewing from the side or from a standing or seated position? Take your time to look at the art without comments or instructions first.
- b) **Use visual thinking strategies to engage your class with an artwork.** The three main questions to ask your students when viewing artworks are: What is going on in this artwork? What do you see that makes you say that? Anything else? These questions provide a framework for students to observe and share their thoughts and interpretations of art.

Curricular Connections

➤ Arts Education (K–12):

Big Ideas Connections

- Art is a means of exploring identity and a sense of belonging.
- Art reflects cultural contexts and perspectives.
- Creative processes are used to explore and express ideas.

Curricular Competencies

- Explore how materials and processes communicate meaning (e.g., cyanotype, marble, weaving photographs).
- Connect artwork to personal, cultural, and historical contexts.
- Reflect on how art expresses identity, memory, and place.
- Interpret and respond to artworks using art vocabulary.

➤ Social Studies (4–12):

Big Ideas Connections

- Migration and movement shape societies.
- Colonialism and global interactions have lasting impacts.
- Identity is shaped by culture, family, and history.
- Global connections influence local experiences.



Curricular Competencies

- Examine how personal and family histories connect to larger global histories.
- Explore diaspora and transnational identity (Canada–Philippines).
- Discuss colonial histories connected to botanical collecting and archives.
- Analyze how cultural identity evolves over time.

➤ **English Language Arts (K–12)**

Big Ideas Connections

- Stories help us understand ourselves and others.
- Texts are socially, culturally, and historically constructed.
- ** Exploring First Peoples Principles of Learning (land, identity, interconnectedness). **

Curricular Competencies

- Interpret visual texts (photography, installation).
- Make personal and cultural connections.
- Analyze how meaning is constructed through materials and imagery.
- Reflect on memory, family, and belonging through writing.

➤ **Environmental / Science Connections**

Through:

- Herbarium
- Botanical imagery
- Cyanotype as an early scientific imaging process

Connections to:

- Classification systems
- Colonial plant collection
- Observation and documentation of nature
- Human relationships to land

Cross-Curricular Learning Opportunities

- Identity & Belonging
- Cultural Heritage
- Migration & Diaspora
- Memory & Archives
- Land & Place
- Colonial Histories
- Intergenerational Relationships
- Care & Kinship

Key Words

Archive: A collection of historical materials (such as family photographs) that preserve memory.

Botanical Imagery: Images of plants used in artworks, often connected to science, history, and colonial plant collecting.

Cyanotype: A camera-less photographic process that creates high-contrast blue images. Objects or photo negatives are placed on light-sensitive paper, exposed to sunlight (UV light), and then washed with water. The exposed areas turn blue while covered areas remain white.

Diaspora: Living between cultures, often connected to migration from one country to another.

Herbarium: A collection of dried and preserved plant specimens mounted on paper for study. Plants are collected, identified, pressed, and carefully displayed so their features are visible.

Historical processes: In visual art, this refers to the development of techniques, materials, and ideas over time, as well as the ways we study and interpret them. From early natural pigments to contemporary conceptual practices, art history helps us understand how artists like Karen Zalamea build on and transform artistic traditions through their chosen materials and approaches.

Identity: How a person understands themselves, including culture, history, family, and place.

Installation: An artwork designed to transform a space that viewers can move through or experience physically.

Kinwork: The effort of maintaining family connections across generations and distances. This includes caregiving, organizing gatherings, preserving photographs, sharing stories, and upholding traditions. It is ongoing, often unpaid labour, historically done by women.

In Zalamea's works, Kinwork refers to emotional labor done by people to keep their family ties after immigration across the Pacific Ocean. This is a term the artist uses to describe how art can bridge the physical and metaphorical distance between “home” and “homeland.”

Marble: A natural stone used in sculpture and architecture. In this exhibition, it connects to family history and material memory.

Migration: The movement of people from one place or country to another.

Personal & Political: The idea that family stories and personal experiences connect to larger histories such as migration, colonialism, and cultural identity.

Photography: The practice of creating images using light.

Representational (Figurative) Art: Artwork that shows recognizable people, objects, or places.

Sculpture: Three-dimensional artwork made from materials such as stone, metal, or other physical media.

Surface as Memory: The idea that materials (like marble, paper, or photographs) can hold history through touch, time, and use.

Trans-Pacific: Across and extending beyond the Pacific Ocean; connecting places such as Canada and the Philippines.

Trans-Pacific Identity: A sense of identity shaped by connections across the Pacific Ocean.

Video: Moving image artwork.

Woven Photographic Images: Photographs that are cut, reprinted, or woven together to create new layered meanings.



Evergreen Cultural Centre | Art Gallery at Evergreen

1205 Pinetree Way, Coquitlam BC, V3B 7Y3

604.927.6552 | schoolbookings@evergreenculturalcentre.ca

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