



Jenna FitzGerald, *foraging*, 2024, double-exposed film, digital scan.

foraging

Jenna FitzGerald

Essay by Annapoorane Rajagopal Valarmathy

A forager doesn't march toward a destination. Eyes wandering, hands parting undergrowth to see what's beneath, they drift toward a colour half-hidden in leaf litter, a shape that doesn't belong to the bark around it.

How could foraging be a roadmap for that special kind of noticing we all need? That act of exploring the unknown while leveraging the known. In foraging, something is found only because someone was paying attention in a way that matters and to the things that matter. It is a slow, patient kind of searching. And, as it turns out, one that happens at every scale of this image, long before it ever reached a billboard on Shaw Street.

Before a mushroom breaks the surface, something has already been searching. A mycelial network spreads through the soil, exploring for and exploiting nutrients and moisture. The mushroom that emerges above ground as its fruiting body is only the visible result of that longer, slower search.

Jenna Fitzgerald, rooted in Toronto, approaches her multidisciplinary artistic practice in much the same way—moving through the world in search of moments worth remembering. Her photograph, *Foraging*, is a double exposure, consisting of two images on one roll of film, shot weeks apart: one in Mexico City, during a residency in Puebla and a month spent travelling the country; the other outside Toronto, on a mushroom foray with a hiking group. Because the first image stayed undeveloped until after the second was shot, Fitzgerald had no way of knowing how they would land on top of each other. A lamp fixture from a building in Roma Norte, and a corner of the Museo Antropológico's inner courtyard had already been exposed onto the film before she ever raised the camera again on a hillside covered in mushrooms and picnic cloth. She describes this as leaving the outcome up to fate. Like mycelium's foraging eventually gives rise to a mushroom, the resulting image is the fruit of the artist's work.

Above ground, foraging takes a more recognizable form. In September 2025, the artist joined members of the Five Winds Backcountry Ski and Snowshoe Club for a mushroom walk outside Toronto, guided in part by artist Diane Borsato. Everything they gathered was carried back and spread across a shared picnic cloth, alongside field guides and identification sheets. One by one, the group sorted through what they'd collected, learning names and distinguishing features from Borsato's expertise and each other's observations.

This layer of the image is easiest to recognize: hands in the dirt, books open on a blanket, a shared afternoon of learning. It is also the layer where the artist's own instinct for photography surfaces most plainly. She has described certain moments as “future memories”—experiences that announce themselves as worth keeping while they are still happening. Foraging for fungi and foraging for a photograph turn out to be closely related acts: both require noticing something before you fully understand what you've found.

A different kind of foraging happens on Shaw Street, in front of the finished image. Standing beneath the billboard, a viewer moves between the photograph's layers the way a hiker moves through undergrowth: gathering connections between a Mexican courtyard and a Canadian hillside,

between mushroom and museum stone, with no guidebook to say what any of it means. The photograph itself invites this searching rather than resolving it. Its layered exposures playfully resist the seriousness that structures so much of daily life, insisting that other ways of relating to the world remain possible.

The photograph asks one thing of anyone standing in front of it: eyes searching with curiosity—the same instinct that guides a hand toward a mushroom half-hidden in moss. To notice more carefully. To recognize that meaning emerges through our relationships—with places, with one another, and with the more-than-human world that sustains us.

Four kinds of foraging, nested inside a single image: a network searching through soil, a group of hikers searching a forest floor, an artist searching for surprises, a viewer searching the image itself, none of them knowing in advance exactly what they're looking for. What surfaces on Shaw Street is only the fruiting body—the visible part of a search that began somewhere none of us could see.

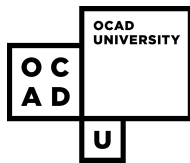
There is one phrase the artist returns to every time she lifts a camera: “I need to remember this.” It's what sent her looking in the first place. Standing in front of *Foraging*, that private instinct stops belonging to her alone. It becomes a question that the image leaves behind for whoever is looking:

What do we need to remember?

About the OCAD U Career Launcher Recipients

Jenna FitzGerald is a multidisciplinary artist from Toronto whose work explores the intersection of technology and nature, inspired by both organic and digital imagery and materials. Her artworks reflect impermanence in the digital age and create new mythologies to reveal the magic in the world all around us, as well as our current moment within the Anthropocene. FitzGerald employs a variety of mediums throughout her work, including photography, film, graphic design, 3D modelling, and experiential installations.

Annapoorane Rajagopal Valarmathy is a design practitioner. She is interested in how thoughtful systems and experiences can influence the way people think, interact, and create. Her work explores how design can scaffold people through moments of transition.

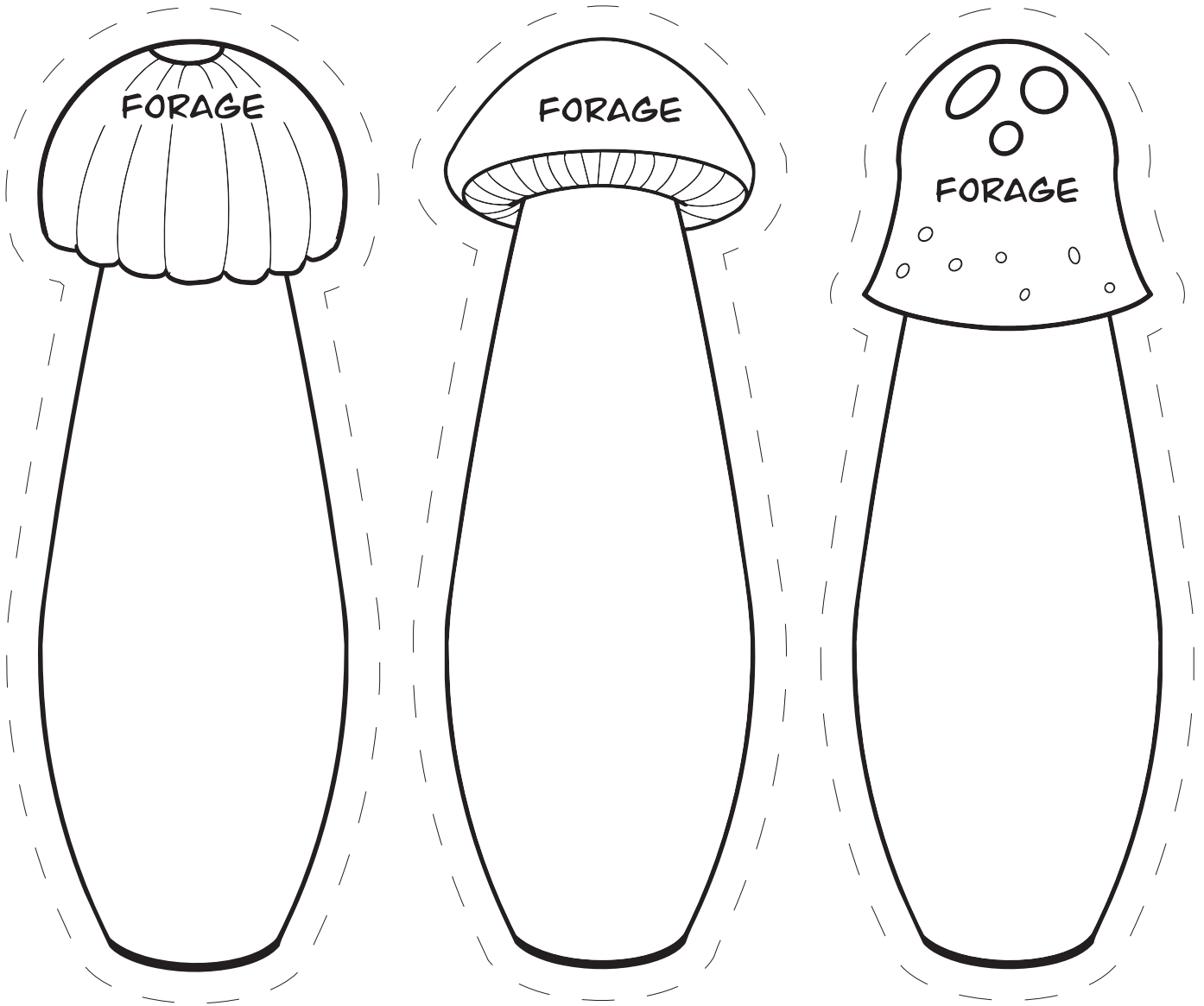


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Since 2016, Critical Distance has programmed the Billboard outside our former home at 180 Shaw Street between Dundas and Queen streets. Thank you to Youngplace for their continued support and participation in this long-running public art initiative.

Mushbook/ Bookforage



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