

January 17, 2024

Members of Peer Jury
The 2024 Eldon + Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize
c/o CARFAC Alberta
3rd Floor, 10215 – 112th Street NW
Edmonton, AB, T5K 1M7

Re: A letter of nomination of Taïessa for the 2024 Eldon + Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize

Dear Members of Peer Jury,

I am writing on behalf of the Harcourt House Artist Run Centre to officially nominate **Taïessa** (legal name: Taïessa Katrine Pagola) and her compelling, evocative exhibition project “**variegata**” for the prestigious **2024 Eldon + Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Prize**. Taïessa’s exhibition project was **presented from October 13 to November 25, 2023 in the Main Gallery of Harcourt House Artist Run Centre in Edmonton** as a year-long culmination of her **2022-2023 Artist Residency** at our visual arts institution.

Taïessa is a young, emerging, Edmonton-based visual artist and arts activist. She obtained a Fine Art Diploma with Distinction from MacEwan University in 2018 before completing her BFA at the University of Alberta. In 2020, Taïessa participated in the Mitchell Art Gallery’s Artist Exchange pilot program. She has since expanded her engagement with local arts organizations through writing for *Art From Here* and *SNAPline*, and most recently showing her work at various public art institutions in Edmonton and beyond. When not in the studio, Taïessa spends her time as Production Supervisor at The Works International Visual Arts Society. Here, she acts as critical support for artists in all career stages and as mentor to other emerging artists and cultural workers through the *Works to Work* summer internship program.

Taïessa is a very bright, inspiring young intellectual and talented visual artist. I have known Taïessa since viewing the prototypes for “variegata,” which were showcased in 2022 in the group exhibition “*Fully Realized*” at Latitude 53. I was extremely impressed with the concept and the level of craftsmanship displayed in her work. I have observed Taïessa’s progress through professional and artistic achievements and I admire her enthusiasm, academic knowledge, and her acumen as a contemporary artist and community activist. Her impressive *curriculum vitae* is a testimony to her firm and demonstrated commitment to artistic practice and community engagement. She has developed strong conceptually based works in the past and gone on to successfully exhibit them.

In 2022, Taïessa was selected – through a jury process – as the **2022/2023 Artist-In-Residence at Harcourt House Artist Run Centre**. The jury was impressed with her passionate presentation – both written and verbal – and with the caliber of her planned residency project. Over the few months of her residency at Harcourt House, I have learned so much from my conversations with Taïessa and from her comprehensive progress reports relating to her art residency here. Later, I saw firsthand the powerful depth and scope of Taïessa’s creative research, and the incredible thoughtfulness combined with technical skill that were imbued into her works in progress.

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The work that Taïessa makes comes from a socially engaged practice, a vast technical ability, and a quiet yet powerful vision. This was evident in her recent body of work, "*variegata*" – the multi-media installation which culminated her 2022-23 Artist-In-Residence Program at Harcourt House Artist Run Centre.

In "*variegata*," the artist examines – through the installation of the series of the ghost-like handmade felt sculptures of houseplants – the commercialization of plant collecting as tied to colonial extraction. A current trend in the still booming exotic plant market dictates not only the species of plant, but its mutation. While many plants have variegation – simply, more than one colour present in their foliage – some have become highly desirable. Marked by white or cream-coloured splashes punctuating otherwise green foliage, these variegations can increase the selling price of plant clippings by hundreds of dollars. This genetic mutation emphasizes the ephemeral nature of plant life – not only will it cycle through growth and decay as an organic material, but it is certain to do so sooner as it lacks the chlorophyll necessary to sustain its own life.

Taïessa has cleverly adapted the '*white cube*' of the Harcourt's Main Gallery for her immersive multi-media installation with wooden structures in natural and dark-stained wood to provide stark contrast with the white walls and white plants, while offering at the same time structural support for a regimental display of neat rows of various plant clippings in clear bottles and jars. A closer look at the leaves of various plants revealed meticulously executed craftwork – the tiny, delicate stitches that provide structure to the leaves, the sharp angles of new growths, and the curling and ambitious wrapping of roots. Taïessa makes the plants by hand, shaping flat felt with a sewing machine and thread. She makes modular components of the plants before assembling several plants at once by hand-sewing and then retains the shape using wheat paste. The resulting plants look soft but are hard to the touch. The materials are inexpensive to obtain, but the process is extremely labour-intensive, with several hours going into the creation of the leaves alone. The wooden structures resemble tables, terrariums, and research shelves, suggesting a multi-disciplinary perspective of plants. Graphite drawings of the plants on paper demonstrate the artist's strict attention to visual details and bring to mind the 18th /early 19th century methods of visually cataloguing plants and other species by the botanists, anthropologists, or other researchers for research purposes prior to the development of photography.

Taïessa's studies of plants are both visually and socially oriented. Studying the visual language of plants allows her to recreate the exact angles of stems and new leaves, making each leaf identifiable as a real plant, but without labelling or naming anything. She leaves it up to the viewer to identify plant types based on the viewer's own knowledge, experiences, and relationships with the same kind of plants. The plants and their supports seem to fill the gallery space, not in a crowded greenhouse kind of way, but more of a large living room-style arrangement. The space seems aware of its purpose as an art gallery. The plants are art objects, made by the artist's hand for display, developing meaning from presentation as a collective. The structures are arranged in such a way as to invite viewers to mill around the space, observing the plants both up close and from across the room.

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As art objects made from inert materials, these sculptures actively resist ephemerality in direct contrast to the plant life they mimic. The hand-made plants in Taïessa's series, wryly displayed in glass vials designed for propagation, act as mementos frozen in time. Much like the colonial history of plant-collecting, this imagining relegates plant life to trophies to be amassed. However, this notion is complicated by the methodology. Like living plants requiring investments of time and care to thrive, these sculptures have been made through laborious craft practices. Together, this exhibition questions flora as capital rather than life ripe with histories and knowledges to be appreciated and learned from, and beckons for more equitable forms of exchange. Taïessa offers these pieces as spacious mementos to contemplate the implications of the objects in our daily life. The ghost-like presence of these felt sculptures of houseplants draws the viewer in and speak to the many layers and histories tied within these plants. Ultimately, "*variegata*" is not a collection of fake plants, but an active reflection on the social capital and social life of plants.

Though I nominate Taïessa and her evocative "*variegata*" exhibition for the 2024 Eldon + Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize, I truly appreciate Taïessa's other works from her previous series and find them equally thoughtful, conceptually, philosophically, and socially engaging, and of exceptional quality. Taïessa's passion for art and her dedication to the communities of which she is a part come together in her practice, making compelling works that address important social and political issues.

In sum, I highly recommend Taïessa for the 2024 Eldon + Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize. I found her works, especially her impressive body of work from the "*variegata*" exhibition, to be fresh, compelling, relevant, and worthy of your consideration and support. I strongly believe her impressive "*variegata*" project demonstrates conceptual resolve and has potential for its presentation at any reputable major contemporary art venue around the globe. Taïessa's animating spirit and disciplined approach to creating along with her active community engagement make her particularly well suited to take advantage of this prestigious Prize.

I do sincerely hope that Harcourt House's nomination of Taïessa for the 2024 Eldon + Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize will receive a favourable review and acceptance.

The nomination package has been enclosed with this letter along with the support material on a USB flash drive. Every effort has been made to provide the submission material as per submission guidelines check list. I trust you will find the submission material in order.

If you have any questions regarding this nomination, please do not hesitate to contact me directly at Harcourt House Artist Run Centre, tel. 780.426.4180; email: director@harcourthouse.ab.ca

Yours in Art,



Jacek Malec
Executive Director/Chief Curator

Encl./