

This exhibition takes place on the island of Manhattan in Lenapehoking, not far from where a Lenape village called Sapokanikan, or “tobacco field,” was once located (in today’s Greenwich Village). Prior to European colonization, tobacco was among the most widely exchanged materials in the Americas. Later, it became the first currency in the British North American colonies, used by the settlers to leverage wages, taxes, and fines. However, “in Indigenous economies, tobacco was not simply a trading commodity,” notes Gabrielle L’Hirondelle Hill, a Métis artist and writer who lives on the unceded lands of the S̱kw̱w̱ú7mesh, Musqueam, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples. “The Indigenous economic life of tobacco continues, despite colonialism, criminalization, and the imposition of capitalism . . . It’s evidence that our economic systems survive and continue to offer an alternative.”

Tobacco is the primary material of the works gathered here, which allude to the plant’s complex Indigenous and colonial histories. One gallery wall has been rubbed with fresh tobacco leaves. The sweet scent of the leaf “drifts beyond its physical edges to remind us of the immaterial world, the unknown, and the still possible,” Hill remarks. Flags, some sewn out of gradually disintegrating tobacco leaves, borrow their dimensions from the United States dollar bill. Ground tobacco-stuffed bunnies and hybrid human figures—the largest of which approximates the size of the artist’s own body—occupy the gallery’s central tables, some standing proudly or playfully, others reclining languidly. To create the delicate, richly colored drawings (which Hill calls “spells”) hanging on the walls, the artist soaked sheets of paper in homemade tobacco-infused oil and adorned them with charms, wildflowers, beer-can tabs, and other small objects collected in her Vancouver neighborhood. These spells, some of which Hill made for friends, speak to the power of reciprocity, interdependence, and dispersal—attributes crucial in a gift economy.