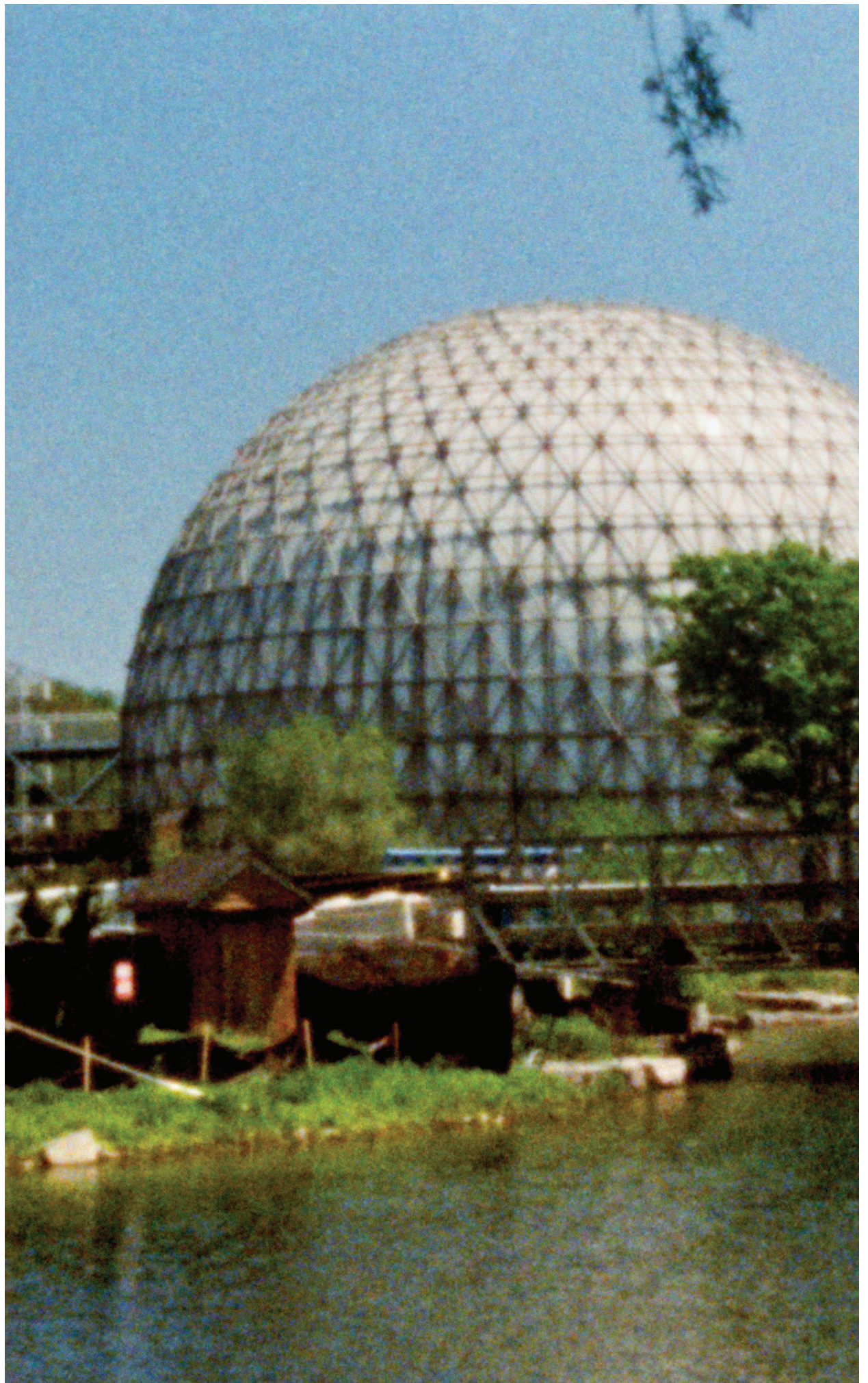


**Oliver
Husain**

I ♥ Snail



Among the Spheres: The Metamorphoses of IMAX
by Allison Whitney

In 2023 four film historians, Monika Kin Gagnon, Janine Marchessault, Jessica Mulvogue, and myself, Allison Whitney, met with our artist collaborator Oliver Husain at Toronto's Ontario Place to shoot *MAXI*, a two-channel film wherein we discuss the findings of our ongoing research on the first decades of IMAX, a Canadian invention and the leading immersive cinema format, while enjoying a flight of patisserie fashioned after the iconic architecture of the global network of IMAX cinemas. A week previously, while examining the papers of IMAX technical experts Creighton and Althea Douglas at the National Archives of Canada, I had come across a bumper sticker with the curious slogan "I ♥ Snail." The sticker was an advertisement for the Golden Snail/Keong Emas cinema at the heart of the Taman Mini Indonesia Indah heritage park in Jakarta. As Oliver Husain's 3D film, *Golden Snail* details, not only does the theatre architecture evoke the spiral of a snail shell, but it also represents the park's semiotic merging of a fairy tale, an economic development



Mylar: detail of a still from Oliver Husain, *MAXI*, two-channel film, 17 min, 2026; cinematographers: Eva Kolcze and Khanh Tudo.

Stills from Oliver Husain, *MAXI*, two-channel film, 17 min, 2026; cinematographers: Eva Kolcze and Khanh Tudo.



campaign, an ecological intervention (with unforeseen consequences), and a project to define Indonesian national identity through a miniaturized artificial landscape. As you move through Oliver Husain: *I ♥ Snail*, you may notice that in many respects, this sticker, with its pictographic language, its evocations of myth and nationhood, and its invitation to enter the multimedia space of the theme park, summarizes the guiding principles that accommodated IMAX's formation, evolution, and future.

IMAX film, camera, and projection systems were born, and perfected, at World's Fairs: temporary environments rich with opportunity for experimentation with the shape and size of film screens and cinema architectures. Not only do these venues attract novelty-seeking audiences primed for technological spectacle, but the planned impermanence of pavilion structures have allowed architects and filmmakers an occasion, that cinema-builders rarely enjoy, to play with construction materials and audience flows without the pressure of physical durability or economic sustainability, not to mention the creative potential afforded by the large spaces required to contain the vertical immensity of IMAX screens, typically in excess of six stories high. The first IMAX film, *Tiger Child*, was made for Osaka's Expo 70, and its conceptualization was fully integrated with its pavilion's pneumatic structure, an inflatable building whose interior was covered in an ever-changing "mandala" of slide projections. *Tiger Child* integrated the spatial and formal conceits of its equally ephemeral predecessors at Montreal's Expo 67: first, the National Film Board of Canada's *Labyrinth* pavilion, whose premise was that visitors would move through a series of chambers, each with a different configuration of multi-screen projection, while watching a montage of documentary footage playing out an allegorical narrative of the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur. The filmmakers imagined themselves as "Daedalus" figures, merging disciplines of art and engineering to create the labyrinth that would both contain the monster and shape the hero's journey, and thus set viewers like you on the path of a mythical quest. Meanwhile, the *Polar Life* pavilion, with its own multi-screen configuration, placed its audience on a rotating platform, requiring the mobile viewer to constantly shift their point of view, to choose where to look, to become aware of their own bodies as perceptual agents in the space of the cinema, and to imagine what role technologies of vision might play in their futures. These pavilions were, plainly, a sensation, so much so that the Expo 67 filmmakers were invited to Japan to create a pavilion for Expo 70,

and as Gagnon explains in Husain's two-channel film *MAXI*, inventors Roman Kroitor, Graeme Ferguson, and Robert Kerr merged their experimental visions and sketched the concept for IMAX on a napkin, setting off a chain of events that would lead to the giant screen cinema formats, and their rhetoric of immersion, that we know today.

As our four researchers in this work discuss memories of lost spaces, reconstructed from interviews and archival traces, they also investigate lasting structures, most notably the geodesic domes that became so integral to the spatial logic of IMAX cinemas and filmmaking. From Buckminster Fuller's American Pavilion at Expo 67, to the Ontario Place Cinesphere (home of the first permanent IMAX theatre), to the dome screens of the OMNIMAX (IMAX Dome) system, their spherical geometry manifests the transformations of vision brought about by modern technology, from the proto-digital "data visualization" of their interiors to their suggestion of "the globe" itself, at once proposing a utopian notion of a unified world, while also representing a planet newly visible "in the round" thanks to the distant perspectives afforded by the dawn of space travel. Indeed, the first OMNIMAX cinema was constructed for the Rueben Fleet Space Theater in San Diego, its configuration borne out of a merging of an IMAX projector with a new raked-floor planetarium design, inspired by a literal shift in perspective brought about by the experience of astronauts, transitioning from earthbound observer to explorer suspended in the heavens. In Husain's film, the confections on the picnic table are modeled after these spheres and their respective architectural containers, from the mirror surface/mirror glaze of Paris' La Geode, which not only reflects the worlds of sky and water around it, but boasts massive IMAX Dome and 3D projection systems within, to the textured surface of Tijuana's La Bola (an IMAX cinema and Mexican cultural centre), meant to evoke traditions of both earthen pottery and the modern dome.

In *Golden Snail*, footage of glass domes, which appear throughout the heritage park in Jakarta, contain greenhouse environments that purport to preserve and showcase Indonesia's regional biodiversity. The film presents this imagery within the narrative logic of folk tales, specifically those of a princess who undergoes a metamorphosis to become a snail. While these domes are practical structures, and ones that resonate with the history of modern exhibitions, consider how you feel as you watch the descent of the geodesic frame around the spherical fishbowl, itself containing a sculptural hand and lone snail, just as the voice-over reveals the biological and ecological realities of the real-life golden apple snail. As you learn about this Amazonian species introduced throughout farms in Asia as an inexpensive food source, one that would ultimately have devastating ecological impacts on local species and environments, you might ask, what function do these domes perform? Might there be limitations on their modern vision of global communication and interconnectedness? Indeed, what happens when their containment is breached, and whose interests do they serve?

As the camera enters the heritage park's so-called "Garden of the Legend of the Golden Snail," we learn of how the "princess' charm intoxicated the giants," setting off a chain of events of subsequent shapeshifting. Metamorphosis and extremes of bodily scale are common tropes of fairy tales, but they are also integral to giant-screen spectacle, especially in 3D. *Golden Snail*, like any 3D film, simulates elements of stereoscopic vision, which allows us to perceive depth and volume, and in so doing it asks you, the viewer, to contemplate how you see. While a 3D film is as illusory as its 2D counterparts, the volumetric image offers a promise of physical presence, a fantasy that you could "reach out and touch" the figures on screen. If one follows this fantasy



to its logical conclusion, the shifts in scale that one takes for granted in the cinema, from distant miniaturizing views to extreme close-ups, take on implications for the 3D viewer, whose relative "size" shifts with every cut. As you watch *Golden Snail*, and indeed, consider each of the golden snails that appear throughout, think about not only your relationship to the image (does it make "you" tiny, or a mythical giant?), but also the design premise within the heritage park, where the "golden snail" appears in quite literally every size, from the monumental scale of the cinema architecture, to the creature small enough to perch atop your finger. The penultimate scene in *Golden Snail* presents the interior of the IMAX cinema from the perspective

of the projection booth, showing both the screen and the audience. This kind of shot is now ubiquitous in advertising campaigns for feature-length IMAX films, and especially for screenings of now-rarefied 70mm prints. These images promote the act of cinema-going as an experience based in the relationship between (comparatively) tiny human bodies and the enormous screen. Here, the shot depicts a fictional screening of Husain's imaginary IMAX film, *Antah Beruntah*, which dramatizes the mythological narratives of the heritage park, including the descent of a giant foot, enacting a drama of scale for the rapt viewer. Ask yourself, what does it mean for them, and for you, to enter and observe this spectacle?



One of IMAX's early promotional slogans was "The Cinema of the Future is Already Here," a statement that implies that its immersive power is integral to the cinema's trajectory. However, to better understand this "future," it is important to consider the media landscape from which it was anticipated. Husain shot *MAXI* on both digital video and Super 8mm film, the latter both a playful nod to the relative size of film formats, with 8mm being the smallest and IMAX's 15/70 the largest of the established film gauges (70mm film, fifteen perforations per frame). Super 8, which debuted in 1965, also recalls the media ecology of the period when IMAX was conceived. Whereas viewers in 2026 are accustomed to high-definition media and giant-screen presentation,



to say nothing of the ubiquity of smartphone cameras allowing one to create such images on the fly, for audiences some fifty years ago, their televisions were more akin to the Sony Trinitron TVs in Husain's installation, photography was fully analog, and home movies were very much a special interest. IMAX screens were designed to not only fill one's field of vision, but also draw attention to the scale and power of the technology, while offering images of unprecedented clarity and surrounding the audience with sonic complexity. All of this offered an arresting experience that could pass for the cinema's logical destination within IMAX's effort to push the "image maximum."

And yet, as IMAX developed, it became clear that its destinations are in fact a branching path—in this exhibition you will find that while each cinema and projection technology purports to offer experiences of immersion, the variety of forms and systems speak to the fact that the cinema is always in dialogue with human perception, never in charge. As the historians in *MAXI* identify one of the pastries as representing the CINÉ+ (CinePlus) theatre at the Canadian Museum of History (formerly the Canadian Museum of Civilization, and the first IMAX theatre to contain both a rectangular screen and an IMAX Dome), they slice it in half to reveal the interior just as they explain that the original plan was for the conversion from one screen to another to be part of the show, a metamorphic cinema that "would construct itself around the audience." As you move through *I ♥ Snail*, consider the construction of each screen, each medium, each invitation to look and feel, and what it both offers and asks of you and your fellow viewers.

Artist and filmmaker **Oliver Husain** is based in Toronto, Canada. His projects are often collaborations with other artists and friends; and often begin with a fragment of history, a rumour, a personal encounter or a distant memory. He uses a wide range of cinematic languages, technical experiments and visual pleasures – such as dance, puppetry, costume, special effects – to animate his research and fold the viewers into complex narrative set-ups.

Leila Timmins is the Senior Curator at The Robert McLaughlin Gallery.

Allison Whitney is a Professor of Film and Media Studies in the Department of English at Texas Tech University. She is a scholar of film technology, with a particular focus on the history of IMAX, 3D cinema, and sound studies, and she is a member of the IMAX: A Transnational History research group, supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. In 2026-27 she will be a Fulbright Canada Distinguished Chair in Arts and Social Sciences in Canada and North America at Carleton University.

Oliver Husain
I ♥ Snail
Curated by: Leila Timmins
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Golden Snail (2026) is a re-edited and reformatted version of *Garden of the Legend of the Golden Snail* (2019). The film was commissioned and produced by Outer Worlds / Public Access Collective / True Frame Productions in IMAX 3D format.

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Mylar: Still from Oliver Husain, *MAXI*, two-channel film, 17 min, 2026;
cinematographers: Eva Kolcze and Khanh Tudo.

Back cover: Still from Oliver Husain, *Golden Snail*, 3D film, 2026;
cinematographers: Christian Kroitor and Dylan Reade.



