

Alison Pebworth

CULTURAL APOTHECARY



Before we find a cure, we must know what ails us.

MASS MoCA

I N T R O D U C T I O N

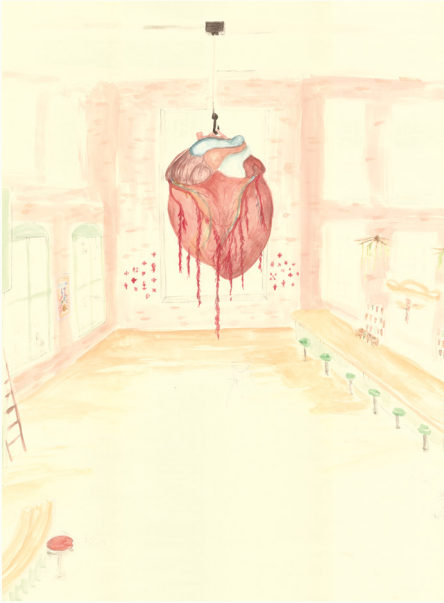
For more than a decade, Alison Pebworth has been inspired by a 19th-century neurological disorder called Americanitis. With symptoms both vague and vast—abnormal fatigue to premature baldness—a diagnosis of Americanitis pathologized the anxiety and ennui that plagued many Americans in the wake of industrialization and urbanization. These feelings persist today—albeit with new manifestations—alongside emerging contemporary concerns including burnout,¹ climate anxiety or eco-anxiety,² and loneliness.³

Pebworth's *Cultural Apothecary* at MASS MoCA asks us to consider the root causes that contribute to our feelings of unease today, and to work together towards tools for healing. Her interactive installation offers a space for embodied, in-person connection, curiosity, and exploration as an antidote to division, loneliness, and isolation. Pebworth has long blended painting, installation, and community engagement, following the tradition of roadside

attractions: vernacular spaces where legend, history, and science converge to tell uniquely American stories.

Pebworth often reuses and recontextualizes existing materials and visual languages, noting “I love conversations with old materials and the histories they bring.” For her *Cultural Apothecary* installation, she incorporates references to familiar elements of Americana such as roadside attractions, traveling medicine shows, old-world pharmacies, and mid-century drugstores, including medicine cabinets, glass vials of elixirs, neon signage, and a long bar with stools reminiscent of a soda fountain. These elements are rendered in materials and colors drawn from MASS MoCA's historic factory buildings (formerly home to Arnold Print Works from 1860 to 1942 and Sprague Electric from 1942 to 1985). The installation also incorporates a survey station, complete with artist-designed questionnaires. Visitors can help actively shape the installation by participating in several interactive data-collecting

- 1 Numerous articles in recent years—including from the World Health Organization (WHO), Mayo Clinic, and Psychology Today—address burnout, while noting that it is not a diagnosable medical condition. As the WHO notes, it is instead “included in the 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) as an occupational phenomenon.” (See “Burn-out an ‘occupational phenomenon’: International Classification of Diseases”; World Health Organization, May 28, 2019. <https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases>)
- 2 In a publication related to the intersection of climate change and mental health, the American Psychological Association (APA) defines eco-anxiety as “a chronic fear of environmental doom.” (See “Mental Health and our Changing Climate: Impacts, Implications and Guidance,” APA, 2017, 68. <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2017/03/mental-health-climate.pdf>)
- 3 In 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General declared loneliness an epidemic. (See “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community,” Office of the Surgeon General (OSG), Washington (DC): US Department of Health and Human Services, 2023. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>).



Alison Pebworth, *Cultural Apothecary Preliminary Sketch*, 2023. Pencil and watercolor. Courtesy of the artist

pieces including the *Heart Tally*, survey stations, and a central sculptural heart to which they can add their dreams and aspirations. In addition to the visual accumulation of information in the space, Pebworth will share this data with other artists to use in future iterations of the project. As she explains, “Before we find a cure, we must know what ails us.”

Pebworth asks visitors to unplug from their phones and other web-based devices while in the gallery. She explains:

In acknowledgement of the many layers of cultures that pre-date and continue to shape the identity of what it means to be American, the *Cultural Apothecary* is designated as a “Beyond Place”—a social gathering space for being present for oneself and those around you.

The “Beyond Place” is a rough translation of the Algonquin word Hoosic. The *Cultural Apothecary* sits at the merging point of the north and south branches of the Hoosic River.⁴

In the spirit of confluence, the *Cultural Apothecary* invites visitors into a space of introspection and connection with others, whether familiar or strangers. A glowing sculptural heart hanging high above offers poetic encouragement to visitors to examine what they carry in their own hearts, and perhaps, lay their burdens down for a while as they engage with the works in the space and with one another.

⁴ It is with gratitude and humility that we acknowledge that we are learning, speaking, and gathering on the ancestral homelands of the Muhheaconneok, Mohican people, or Munsee Lenape people, who are the indigenous peoples of this land. Despite tremendous hardship in being forced from here, today their community resides in Wisconsin and is known as the Stockbridge-Munsee Community. We pay honor and respect to their ancestors past and present as we commit to building a more inclusive and equitable space for all. The Stockbridge-Munsee Band has two recognized languages, Mohican and Munsee, which are part of the Algonquian language family. Following the colonization of the region by Europeans, two factories occupied the site now home to MASS MoCA: Arnold Print Works, which printed textiles, and Sprague Electric Company, an electronics plant.

AMERICANITIS & SURVEYS

A large neon sign reading “Americanitis” acts as a beacon, drawing visitors along the expanse of Building 6 towards the *Cultural Apothecary*. Passing under this sign, visitors encounter a survey station, as well as a medicine cabinet with ephemera pertaining to Pebworth’s engagement with the medical history and cultural phenomenon of Americanitis (see timeline below). Americanitis was described by physicians and pharmaceutical companies in the late 1800s and early 1900s as a condition of high tension, shaped by the fast pace and high demands of modern life. Pebworth designed her surveys as a tool for reflection, encouraging visitors to contemplate the roots of unease that similarly shape our lives today.



Alison Pebworth, *Americanitis Neon Sign and Museum Placement Sketch*, 2023. Pencil and watercolor. Courtesy of the artist

“Americanitis”: A Brief Timeline

BY ALISON PEBWORTH

- 👉 **1869:** A neurologist named George M. Beard introduced a new disorder into the medical lexicon—“Neurasthenia”—the exhaustion of the central nervous system’s energy reserves attributed to the stresses of life in the fast-paced industrial age of America.
- 👉 **1870s:** Pioneering psychologist and philosopher William James, who suffered from this nervous disorder, was credited with renaming this condition “Americanitis.”
- 👉 **1890s:** To capitalize on this rising epidemic, the Rexall drug company introduced a medication called ‘Americanitis Elixir’ which claimed to be a soother for any bouts of nervous high tension.
- 👉 **1905:** Dr. William Sadler began a 20-year career giving public lectures on Americanitis, or the High Pressure Life that culminated in a 1925 book: *Americanitis: Blood Pressure and Nerves*. Sadler intended for the publication to “point out the dangers of modern high tension to those into whose hands it may chance to fall.”⁵

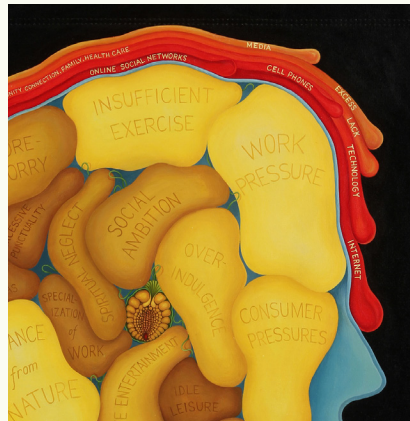
5 William Samuel Sadler, *Americanitis - Blood Pressure and Nerves* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), vi.

☞ **2011–2013:** The artist Alison Pebworth rediscovered the long-forgotten term “Americanitis” while researching the history of medicine shows in America,⁶ and realized she too suffers from the ailment. Sensing she might not be alone, she designed a survey sharing the historical background of Americanitis including symptoms, causes, and cures from William Sadler’s book. The survey asked respondents to consider which of these are still relevant today, and to opine on contemporary symptoms, causes, and cures. She gathered over 1,500 handwritten surveys over a two-year period while traveling coast to coast across North America with her *Beautiful Possibility* project.⁷ Pebworth then created two banners synthesizing data from these surveys.



Rexall “Americanitis” Tonic and Elixir bottles, late 19th to early 20th century. Collection of Alison Pebworth

☞ **2025:** 100 years after the publication of Sadler’s book, the causes and symptoms associated with the “high tension” and fast pace of modernity reach far beyond the United States. Pebworth develops the installation *Cultural Apothecary* at MASS MoCA where a new set of surveys invites visitors to reflect on the prevalent construction of binary choices in contemporary American culture, and to locate themselves along a spectrum of contemporary notions of health and well-being. Viewers are also invited to add new causes and cures of Americanitis to the survey boxes located near the *Americanitis: Enduring 19th C and Early 21st C Causes*, and *Americanitis: Early 21st C Word Cloud Cures* banners.⁸



Alison Pebworth, *Americanitis: Enduring 19th C and Early 21st C Causes* (detail), 2014. Acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of the artist

- 6 Greil Marcus, “America at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century,” *The New York Times*, January 26, 1998.
- 7 See Pebworth’s website for more on *Beautiful Possibility* (2010-2013): <https://alisonpebworth.com/section/451878-Beautiful%20Possibility%20Project%20%2F%202010-2013.html>
- 8 For additional information, see Greg Daugherty, “The Brief History of ‘Americanitis,’” *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 25, 2015. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/brief-history-americanitis-180954739/>

Beginning in the mid-19th century, soda fountain counters were introduced to pharmacies in the U.S. and Canada, and became not only places for dispensing reparative elixirs, but also spaces for socializing. Pebworth reflects fondly on the Rexall Drug Store that her grandparents operated in Dewey, OK, and on the soda fountain culture in which her mother grew up in the 1940s. As she travelled across rural America, Pebworth grew to love the similar fixed-stool counters (which still exist at many bars, cafés, and diners) that allow solo diners easy conversation with locals and strangers.

During select hours, visitors to *Cultural Apothecary* are invited to sit at this long countertop and sip a tea made with turmeric and other herbs and local ingredients, and experience the restorative power of communing with strangers. This custom tea, served in horn-shaped vessels handmade by Pebworth, was created in collaboration with herbalists Rebecca Guanzon and Justin Adkins of Wild Soul River in nearby Williamstown, MA. Turmeric, the tea's primary ingredient, contains curcumin, which has anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties.⁹ These qualities make turmeric—often known as the “golden root”—a particularly good potential curative for Americanitis, which was believed to be an inflammation-related condition. Upon returning their horn-shaped drinking vessel, visitors will be given a droplet-shaped piece of paper and a small red wooden ball, which are used to interact with the sculpture *The Future Has an Ancient Heart* and the *Heart Tally*.

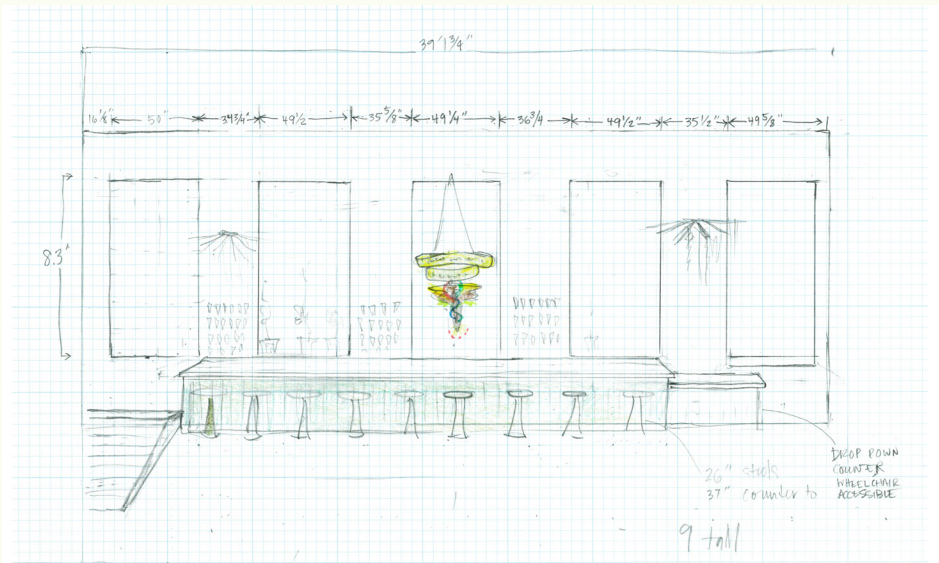


Page from Alison Pebworth, *Turmeric Hermeticum*, 2015.
Publisher: Little Paper Planes, San Francisco, CA

⁹ Mary-Eve Brown, “Turmeric Benefits,” Johns Hopkins Medicine: Health: Wellness and Prevention. <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/turmeric-benefits#:~:text=What%20is%20turmeric%20good%20for,%2C%20colitis%2C%20allergies%20and%20infections.>



Photograph of Alison Pebworth's grandfather (right) as a soda jerk in his uncle's pharmacy, Ochelata, OK, 1909.



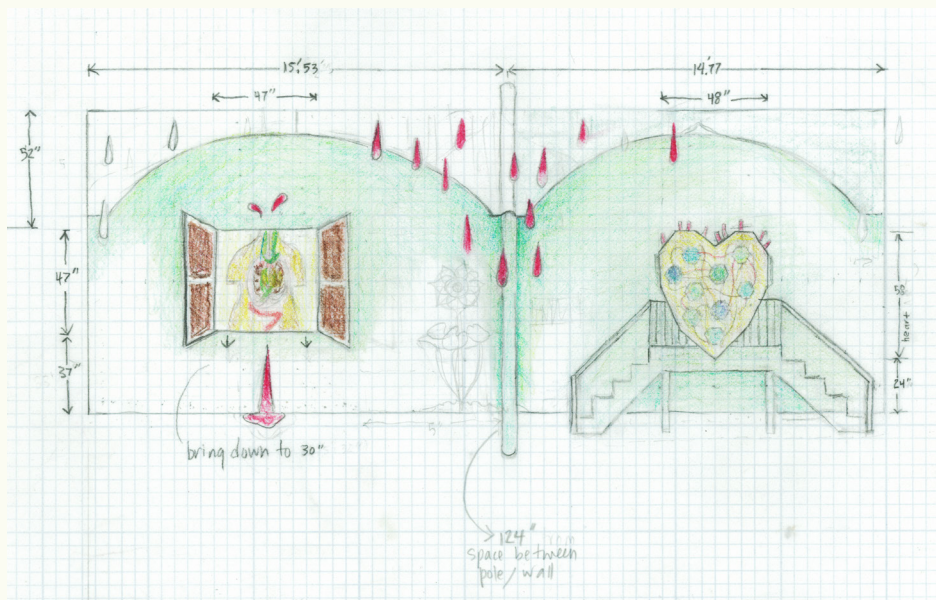
Alison Pebworth, *Elixir Counter Sketch*, 2024. Pencil and watercolor. Courtesy of the artist

HEART TALLY & ARMORED HEART

On the *Cultural Apothecary's* east wall are Pebworth's *Armored Heart* and *Heart Tally*. The lushly painted, cabinet-like *Armored Heart* points to the ways that we often guard our hearts—believing perhaps that exposing our feelings, hopes, and worries might make us too vulnerable. The *Heart Tally*, meanwhile, encourages visitors to share their current emotional state.

The *Armored Heart* is Pebworth's visualization of the limbic system: humans' emotional nervous system, which also controls our fight-or-flight responses. These responses, which are ancient, serve as evolutionarily tools intended to ensure survival. However,

today these responses are often triggered in moments of confrontation and fear, particularly when weaponized by those in positions of power. Pebworth's *Armored Heart* encourages us to examine our fear responses, and to consider whether what is triggering them is actually a threat to our safety and survival, or whether removing our defenses might offer an opportunity to better understand what lies underneath our emotions, leading to more authentic relationships to others. The imagery inside of *Armored Heart* points to examples in nature that break through hardened exteriors: the tenacity of a single weed, the molten power of the earth's core, the connective power of fungal systems.



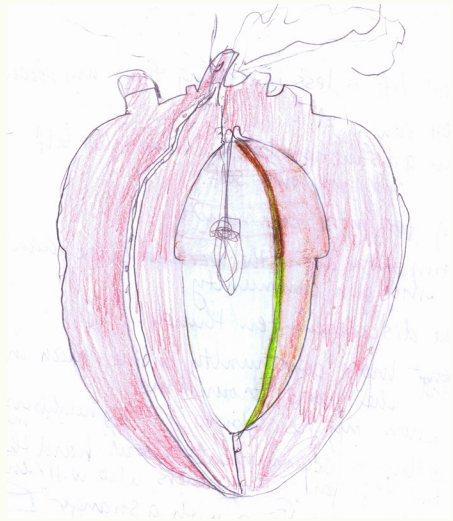
Alison Pebworth, *Cultural Apothecary Preliminary Sketch*, 2024. Pencil and watercolor. Courtesy of the artist

THE FUTURE HAS AN ANCIENT HEART

We are born knowing and connected to an eternal universe that pulses with the vibrations of everything that has come before us, and serves to propel us forward whether we recognize it or not. To free ourselves from our dis-ease with life, we must find our way back to this ancient connectedness by uncovering and following the deepest impulses that sit in our hearts. This project offers an opportunity to counter the “attention economy” that steals our focus from our core desires. *Cultural Apothecary* invites us to instead sit with our fondest memories and identify the root of what persists in our hearts over time. Will the collective co-mingling of our root desires create its own vibration?

—ALISON PEBWORTH¹²

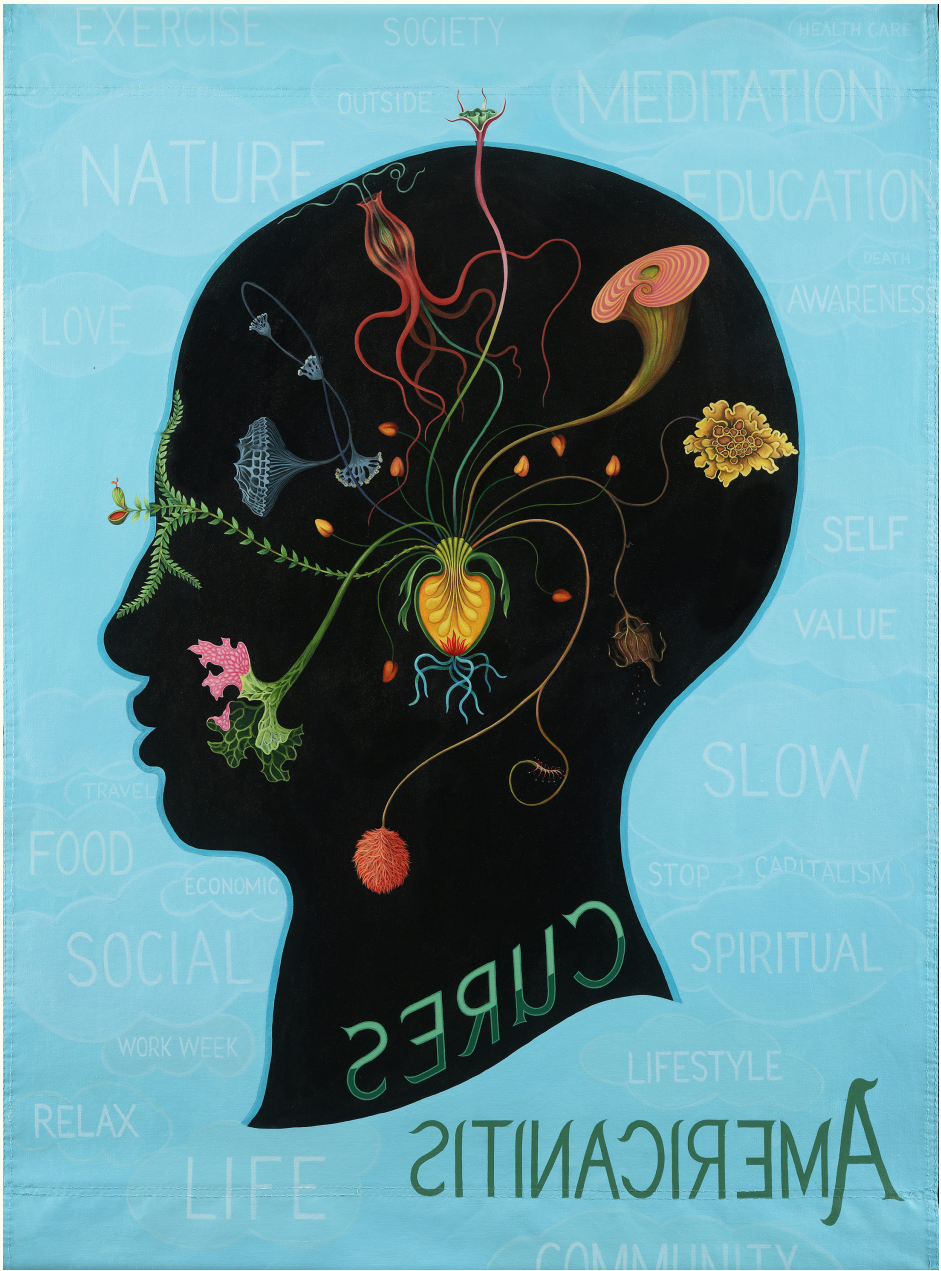
At the center of the installation hangs a large sculptural heart, visible at night through the gallery windows facing River Street, and at the convergence of the Hoosic River. An acorn cut-out at the center of the heart reminds us of the potential of hope to grow, if nourished. As George Bernard Shaw once said, “Think of the fierce energy concentrated in an acorn! You bury it in the ground, and it explodes into



Alison Pebworth, *The Future Has an Ancient Heart Preliminary Sketch*, 2024. Pencil on paper. Courtesy of the artist

an oak!” Visitors are invited to write the hopes and dreams they want to rekindle or nurture on red paper droplets, available at the Elixir Counter, and place them into the “Buried Dreams” box. Pebworth will attach new droplets to the heart over the course of the exhibition, and the co-mingling tendrils visualize the hopes and dreams that visitors desire to take root.

¹² The installation’s title is borrowed from the writings of artist, activist, and writer Carlo Levi. Levi was banished from the seat of power to a remote region of southern Italy for his anti-fascist beliefs under Benito Mussolini. Pebworth’s installation references his 1956 *Il futuro ha un cuore antico: Viaggio nell’Unione Sovietica* (*The Future Has an Ancient Heart: Journey to the Soviet Union*), a travelogue of a trip that Levi made to Leningrad, Kiev, Armenia, and Georgia the previous year.



Alison Pebworth, *Americanitis: Early 21st C Word Cloud Cures*, 2014. Acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of the artist

Alison Pebworth's work revolves around observing and commenting on contemporary culture through re-imagined prototypes of earlier histories and practices, with a focus on long-range projects that combine painting, installation, and social interaction. She has explored the tropes of American traveling culture with local and national touring projects, from a roaming Sideshow Tent with the *Roadside Show & Tell*, to the *Beautiful Possibility* Project, a two-year traveling exhibition and survey station that toured to over twenty-five venues across the United States and Canada, from Native American tribal centers to artist-run spaces and museums. Exhibitions include the Oakland Museum; Yerba Buena Center for the Arts; The DeYoung Museum; Southern Exposure; The New Children's Museum, San Diego; Museum of Contemporary Art, Detroit; and Open Space, Victoria, BC. Pebworth is the recipient of awards from The Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation, the Center for Cultural Innovation, the McEvoy Foundation, the San Francisco Arts Commission, and Alternative Exposure (The Andy Warhol Foundation). A 2021 MacDowell Fellow, other selected residencies include the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts (NE), Recology SF (CA), Ucross Foundation (WY), Cannonball (FL) and The Wurlitzer Foundation (NM). In preparation for *Cultural Apothecary*, Pebworth had a year-long Research and Development Residency in North Adams, during which she worked from her storefront studio on Eagle Street.

Alison Pebworth:
Cultural Apothecary

February 22, 2025 – May 2026

Support for *Alison Pebworth: Cultural Apothecary* provided by Ann and Bill Harmsen. Pebworth's long-term artist residency was supported by the Mellon Foundation.

Programming at MASS MoCA is made possible in part by the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation and Mass Cultural Council.

Front cover: Alison Pebworth, *Cultural Apothecary Elixir Counter Sign* (detail), 2016. Acrylic on board. Courtesy of the artist