

The Shape of Things: A Look at Canada's Rectangle

at Neutral Ground Artist-Run Centre, in Regina, October 14 - December 2, 2017

Walking into Neutral Ground's gallery space this fall, the first thing you'll see is a tiny but powerful woman staunchly greeting your gaze; she stands with her hands on her hips, a doll-size sculpture in a playful landscape. The tiny installation was created by Zoë Schneider, one of eight artists, along with Cruz Anderson, Cam Forbes, Jaye Kovach, Jessica Morgan, Amber Phelps Bondaroff, Phomohobes (Jason Cawood and Colby Richardson), and Nic Wilson, who are presenting work this fall at Regina's artist-run centre. Though the artworks in Canada's Rectangle were not specifically curated—the artwork was juried from an open call for submissions—they share several thematic concerns: a dedication to tactile art production, an interest in materials which extends at times into a philosophical inquiry around substance; and a continued exploration of the liminal nature of identity.

Zoë Schneider's installation is titled *Numina's World* (2016). Occupying a short plinth, the fantasia of powdery undersea colours invokes an afternoon at the beach. Sections of an ice-cream soft sand castle house are set carefully into a wilderness of arranged debris. Schneider has an ongoing commitment to breaking down stereotypes around art and craft production, often choosing to work with inexpensive and recycled materials.^[1] Here she incorporates found objects, crystals, plaster and modelling clay into sparkling sand and tempera pigment. *Numina* is realistically proportioned, smooth and green, with a plasticine look. She is in fact, a stereolithic print created from a laser body scan that Schneider commissioned of herself. Though lasers and 3D printing sound like scientific alchemy, they are actually quite domestic. Schneider worked with a local company that regularly creates such sculptures as custom cake decorations, but unlike the aspirational display of a wedding cake, *Numina's* tiny world seems to invite us to dig in, to create a narrative and engage in building.

Process was a large part of the artist talks at the opening reception. Saskatoon-based artist Jessica Morgan spoke about beginning with a question and making work as a method to research answers. Her wall drawing series, *Light and the absence of light* (2015 – present) began with the inquiry, "How much can an absent object say?" The question sparked in a moment of humour as Morgan realized her talent for misplacing possessions and how once lost, missing objects would take on mythic detail in her memory. As an antidote she experimented with drawing absent items and then representing objects by drawing just the shadows they cast. In some cases, the shadow was



Numina's World (2016). Zoë Schneider and *Studies from the Maritime Plaza Hotel* (2016) Cameron Forbes. Photo by Neutral Ground

suggestive enough to stand in for the absent object.^[2] As her research progressed she began larger projects, placing nails in the wall and drawing the cast shadows in charcoal and graphite. She experimented with trompe l'oeil, leaving and removing nails to see if the viewer could still infer them. In this exhibition, after she finished her drawing Morgan removed both the nails and the light-source. The marks on the wall, dark lines in a rough grid, record the shadows so specifically as to imply the light that cast them. It is a subtle effect, like a quiet magic trick.

Jason Cawood and Colby Richardson also gave an artist talk during the reception, discussing their artistic partnership. They have collaborated since 2012 under a collective name, Phomohobes, specifically to create collage. Their process is guided by an agreement over several aesthetic principles which include: working in the same space (a challenge since Cawood is based in Regina and Richardson is now in Winnipeg); sourcing

images from a diverse range of lifestyle magazines but only those printed before 1990; cutting and combining images using scissors and glue, but with a surgical and seamless precision; finishing each collage by scanning and reprinting the work as an archival ink-jet print on rag paper. Blair Fornwald's essay on Phomohobes in the September 2017 issue of BlackFlash gives a complete discussion of their methods, and eloquently describes their surreal and evocative compositions, "...unreason-able scenarios, as oddly incongruous and arresting as fever dreams."^[3] For this exhibition, Cawood and Richardson were encouraged by Neutral Ground to experiment with presentation. Choosing two works with dynamic architectural spaces, Birth Chamber (2016) and A Chair for James (2016) [4], the artists added another layer of collage with framing material using (pre-1990) deadstock. Though as archivally sealed as regular, discretely made framing, the "FunFrames" mismatched corners and contrasting colours add considerable visual tension. The two works hang as a diptych, dramatically lit in ovals of light, and balance each other as day does night. Collage is a method of working dating back centuries, but it is not often exhibited nor discussed in Saskatchewan. It is a pleasure to see a growing interest and discourse in this medium.

Watercolour is another medium not often curated into our local galleries. Cameron Forbes uses a variety of watercolour, gouache and acrylic in her Studies from the Maritime Plaza Hotel, Arrangements: Windows, Covering, Water, Opening (2016). The loosely painted sketches, in a variety of shapes and sizes, are arranged like tiny theatre props on shelves. Forbes works plein air. Her research into landscape painting delves deeply into the relationship that we have with place, and is taking her beyond the familiar depiction of traditional landscape to consider the role of painting in constructing an identity of place, and to record the spaces we have constructed. In these works, her brush feels out the shapes of the light in the spaces she is painting, noting colour and texture, as a chef might consider flavours in composing a meal. These studies are part of a series that placed Forbes as a finalist in the 18th annual RBC Canadian Painting Competition in 2016. It is worth taking a look at the scope of her series online.^[5] Her paintings defy traditional display, changing shape, and coming off the walls to stand freely. [6]



Mountain Movers: Rockies; and Mountain Movers: Pack (2017), Amber Phelps Bondaroff and Birth Chamber (2016) and A Chair for James (2016), Phomohobes. Photo by Neutral Ground

Amber Phelps Bondaroff's work, *Mountain Movers: Rockies*; and *Mountain Movers: Pack* (2017) are components from a performance she created at the Banff Centre: a short film shown as a loop on a monitor, and a wearable sculpture that is the hero of the film, a mountain constructed of cloth attached to a frame-pack. *Mountain Movers* follows the artist through a winter wilderness as she carries the mountain on her back. The sequence is edited to present several vignettes as she journeys through snow and trees, and then enters a building. Inside, the mountain seems even more ungainly, barely fitting through the hallways and doors. Each sequence becomes progressively absurd, as the Mountain Mover pushes past copiers and office staff, barely making it through the hallways. While the mountain perfectly externalizes the stresses we carry, the performance humorously makes us wonder why we carry these burdens. There is an additional fun in the hike moving from Canada's most iconic landscape into a generic office space, which is ironically, a more day-to-day Canadian environment. For artists such as Bondaroff, film is a part of the professional toolbox, as much as drawing or sculpture, and she incorporates it seamlessly into the realisation of her performance work, translating a site-specific event into the gallery setting.^[7] The fabric mountain pack sculpture serves to anchor the film, a surprisingly solid presence in the gallery.

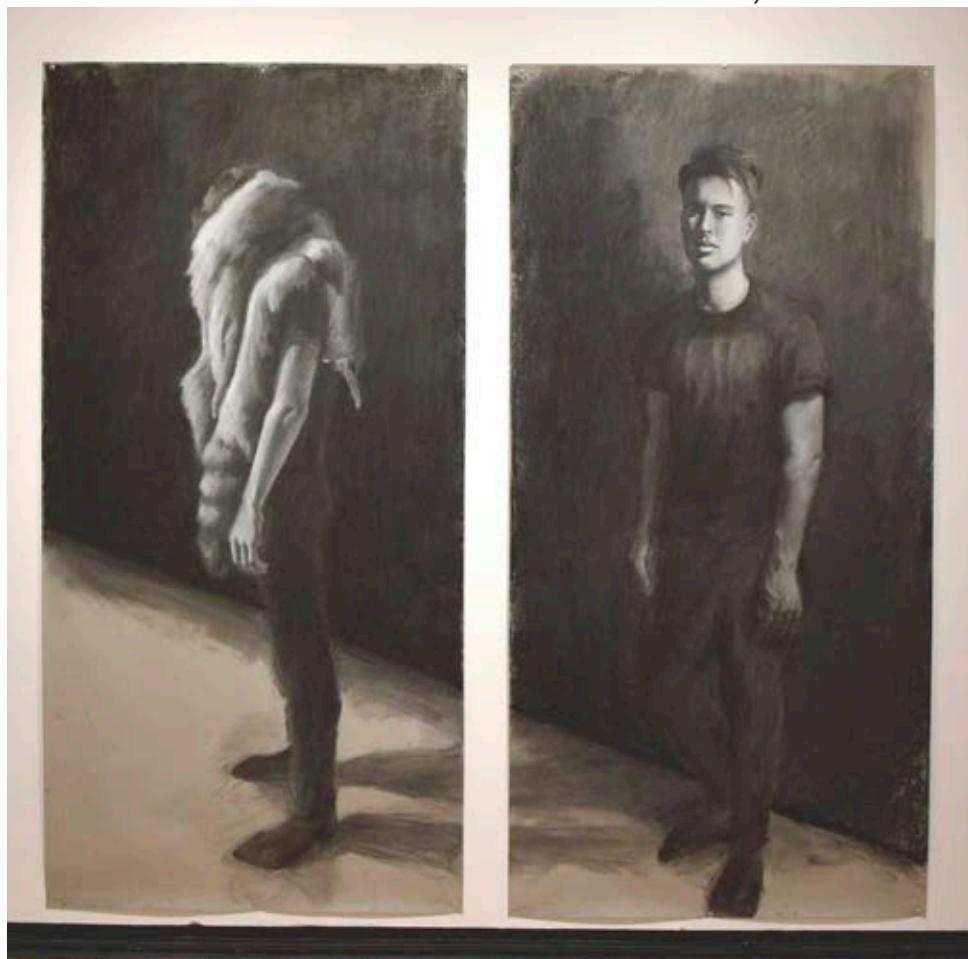
Nic Wilson's single channel video is presented more conventionally in a darkened room, just off the main gallery space. *Untitled* (Nic Wilson) (2015) is simple but poignant, consisting of the artist's name spelled out in candles. The candles are lit, and the letters slowly burn away. The camera holds steady, still watching as the last flame gutters out in a pool of wax, and there is only sadness left. Then the video loop plays again. The lack of narrative has a similar banality to other durational work such as Warhol's short film, *Eating*, but a different tone emerges from Wilson's work as it loops. While the use of birthday candles invokes a special event for an individual, repetition drains uniqueness slowly away. In a world of 7 billion people, almost 2 million of us share a birthday each day; a quick peek online reveals at least ten Nic Wilsons.

As we address our histories of colonialism and other hegemonic social

structures, including gender identity and class, we open discussion on the meaning of individual identities, rights and responsibilities. In this exhibit, both Cruz Anderson and Jaye Kovach present work strongly engaged in crisis and the representation of self.

Cruz Anderson's *Pikwaciyiniw | Sauvage* (2017) is comprised of two large drawings, life-size, full-length self-portraits in chalk and charcoal. Translated into Cree and French respectively, the title and the impetus for the drawings derive from the ethnically indigenous Anderson's personal discomfort with the growing use of the word "savage" in Hip Hop culture. Although this slang usage is meant to convey not caring about consequences, a sense of defiance more than apathy [8] the word still carries a sharper conventional meaning of uncivilized ferocity [9], and stings too much for casual conversation. Anderson's realistic depiction of self is a departure from his earlier abstract works, and more clearly personal, but the emotional content is the same. The scale and the darkness of the pieces function as a Rothko might, creating a space for the gallery viewer to share an emotional and visceral experience.

Pikwaciyiniw | Sauvage (2017) Cruz Anderson
Photo by Neutral Ground



W/H/E/N/G/O/D/C/L/O/S/E/S/A/D/O/O/R/I/S/M/A/S/H/H/I/S/W/I/N/D/O/W/W/I/T/H/A/B/R/I/C/K (2017) by Jaye Kovach is an installation activated by the performance of live tattooing. Dried dandelion root and prairie flowers hang down to create an intimate space around a circle scribed on the floor, within which a portable medical table is positioned for performance times. A banner hangs across the space with samples of flash that tattoo recipients may choose from. Kovach's needle-poked tattoo designs contain symbols of transition: images of doors and windows, portals, ladders and stairs. On a nearby pedestal Kovach has placed a brick, a dried bouquet of flowers, and a short artist statement in the form of a zine. Her poetic text speaks of transition, moving or taking root, and feeling precarious. Instant photos from her on-going performance events are pinned up as documents above the pedestal. For many, choosing to get a tattoo is connected to marking transitional passages, recording personal history. In this work, Kovach invites us into her process of coming to understand the connections between self and body, and to meditate on the events that form our identity.

It is difficult to quantify the free-wheeling exploration that artists undertake as they research new work. Ideas



W/H/E/N/G/O/D/C/L/O/S/E/S/A/D/O/O/R/I/S/M/A/S/H/H/I/S/W/I/N/D/O/W/W/I/T/H/A/B/R/I/C/K (2017)

by Jaye Kovach. Photo by Neutral Ground

may bubble up easily, or slowly form on a sketchbook page; they may come through experiment, working with materials, pushing limits; or they may develop through hard work and repetition. It's what you do with your ideas that is important: artists need to build, test and get feedback. This fall's opening exhibition at Neutral Ground was an excellent reminder that one of the roles the artist-run centre does well is to provide a sand box environment, an exhibition space for emerging work. Canada's Rectangle is a thought-provoking group of works, and with the addition of performances and artist lectures through-out the exhibition period, provides a welcome space for artist and audience.

-by Margaret Bessai

Footnotes:

1. *Interview with Schneider on exhibition, Scutelliphily* by Michael Peterson for the podcast, *Unframed*, on CFCR and online at: <http://www.zoeschneider.net/press/>
2. *Morgun's work reminded me of a project by Ross Melanson: "Shadowlands. (A thing by its shadow)" currently existing as an online archive at, https://www.facebook.com/ross.melanson.7/media_set?set=a.10152650599621442.1073741896.541766441&type=3*
3. *"Just What Is It That Makes Phomohobes So Different, So Appealing?"* by Blair Fornwald for BlackFlash issue 34.2, online at: <http://blackflash.ca/just-makes-phomohobes-different-appealing/>
4. *From a discussion with the artists, James refers to the artist James Turrell, who sculpts architectural spaces with light.*
5. *For installation images, see Forbes' website:* <http://www.cam-forbes.ca/blog/2017/1/8/maritime-plaza-hotel>
6. *Forbes' eponymously shaped canvasses remind me of Elizabeth Murray's work, but the real strength of Forbes' paintings comes through cumulatively in her installations, as each canvas functions as sentence to build the story of a space.*
7. *Another great example of an artist's use of film by is Lisa Birke, in red carpet which follows the artist as she precariously strides the red carpet in heels and a ball gown through the plains and forest of Canadian landscape and into the ocean.*
8. *From an email discussion with Anderson, see also: https://www.purewow.com/entertainment/teen-slang-terms-2016*
9. *Savage has roots in Latin, from silva meaning "of the woods"; in middle english this evolved to mean wild, undomesticated, and fierce; in standard English it ranges from ferocious or cruel to ungovernable person, reckless.* <https://www.etymonline.com/word/savage>