

Water Over the Bridge

A Thesis Exhibition Statement

Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies and Research

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By

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis exhibition to my husband, Giuseppe Borgo. What an adventure it has been!

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Introduction

A line of bright colour stretches West to East, across the front gallery floor, connecting two large-format charcoal drawings of the Saskatoon bridges in various forms of dysfunction – twisted, warped and blocked. The south side of the gallery is filled with colourful scenes of carnival, spirit animals, prairie plants, a multitude of characters, and scenes of oceans and volcanoes. A strong central figure stands in command of it all. This is where the last two years of working on my Master of Fine Art thesis has taken me. In this statement, I will attempt to add some literary context to help in the navigation of the visual works contained in the *Water Over the Bridge* exhibition.

After the completion of my Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree, with an exclusive focus on painting, I began to explore various mediums of expression. This opened up the world of installation art and allowed me to move freely between printmaking, drawing, painting, collage, beading and installation. In agreement with artists such as Nancy Spero (Lyon 2010), I felt that every work was part of a larger, yet to be defined work and viewed the static picture frame as a barrier to expression. Using modular works and scrolls allowed for ongoing, non-linear visual discussions, with each work informing the next. This freedom facilitated my exploration of spirit animals, carnival traditions, Metis material culture, socioeconomic divides and barriers, and conciliation. I drew inspiration from the work of Joseph Beuys (Rainbird 2005), with its emphasis on the artist's role in the social and political

climate. My own experiences, identities, and personal narratives have served as the catalyst for the *Water Over the Bridges* exhibition.

Water Over the Bridge

Exploring Identity: From the Carnival to My Spirit Animal

Identity is often complex, intersectional, and shifting throughout a lifetime. Cultural activities, including the carnival tradition and connection with spirit animals, provide a place for the exploration of identity. I speak of these cultural activities in a generalized way. Both were once highly specific to distinct cultures but have become shared across many cultures in the present time.

My initial carnival studies (figure 1) were generated through field research in various locations in Northern Italy. As described by Bakhtin (1968), carnival represents the ultimate freedom with its “peculiar logic of the inside out, of the turnabout, of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanities, and comic crowning’s and uncrowning’s.” Carnival brings about a freedom that allows individuals to explore aspects of their identity that may remain repressed in the confines of regular societal functioning.

An important element found in carnival events, images and spectacles is that of the grotesque, or grotesque realism. In this tradition, the material human body is distorted, grandiose, exaggerated, and uncontained. It is important to note that the human material body represents the people as a whole within the carnival tradition,

a population that is continuously growing and undergoing renewal (Bakhtin 1968).

It is an eternal process that cannot be contained.



Figure 1: Corinna Wollf, 2014, Carnival Studies, drawing & collage, each drawing is 24 x 36 inches

Within grotesque realism we see images of inventive freedom – the fanciful, free, and playful distortion of plant, animal and human forms. Often carnival imagery deals with universal problems of life and death; the material body element including wine, food and sex; and an element of time portrayed through stages of life, all things ephemeral, and changes in fortune/fate (Bakhtin 1968).



Figure 2: Corinna Wollf, 2015, *Third Space Carnival*, collage (detail)

Masks used during carnival represent transition, metamorphosis, the crossing of social rules and boundaries, mockery of socially accepted norms, and a variety of archetypes and favoured characters used to open the imagination to new possibilities. The carnival works found in *Water Over the Bridge* draw from this tradition. For example, figure 2 shows a detail of my interpretation of a common

carnival character, Arlecchino (also known as Zanni). This archetype is often used to portray scenes of feasting and gluttony, overgrowth, and bodily explosion. The use of masks allows participants to try on numerous aspects of personality and play multiple roles, shifting identities, within the larger body of the people.



Figure 3: Corinna Wollf 2015, *Third Space Carnival*, etching and collage, 4 x 8 feet

The large work, *Third Space Carnival*, is composed in the shape of the Italian Alpine Arc in a free form re-configuration dictated by creative invention of the carnival tradition. This work is a modular installation in that it is composed of 10 original etchings (often in multiples) and several drawings, pieced together along with handmade paper in a collage work. Images within the work are derived from the wooden masks of the Dolomites (Sauris, Val di Fassa, San Michele Adige) and the ancient Venetian territories including Bagolino and Ivrea. Venice permeates the work like a large sea with traces of Eastern frescoes and typical characters including Arlecchino and Pulcinella. References to Tiepolo's depictions of Pulcinella from the

18th century are included. The installation consists of five etchings developed in relation to the various carnival traditions of Venice, the Dolomites, Bagolino, Milan and Ivrea. A further series of five etchings depicting the marble rock formations that characterize the territories (Istrian stone, Marble Red Trento, Tonalite dell'Adamello, Candoglia marble, Rosewood Onciato of Crevadossola) were used in construction of the installation. I felt it was important to reference the very ground, or land, from which this rich cultural expression arose.

The world of carnival is always ephemeral, undergoing constant destruction, renewal and regrowth. The temporary world shown in *Third Space Carnival* is in a state of destruction by flood. Carnival lies at the junction between life and art as a lived experience in which artists are not distinguished from the public, actors are not separate from spectators (Bakhtin 1968). It was appropriate that the *Carnival* work be installed in the public space during the 2016 Nuit Blanche in Saskatoon, Canada.



Figure 4: Corinna Wollf, 2015, *Third Space Carnival*, etching and collage, 4 x 8 feet, Nuit Blanche Saskatoon, 2016 Installation



Figure 5: Corinna Wollf, 2016, *My Spirit Animal*, drawings, 36 x 24 inches (each drawing)

Through my learnings about Indigenous ways of knowing, including readings (Wheeler 2012), courses, and work within the community, I came to explore another cultural process for the exploration of identity and meaning. By learning about animals, their behaviours, and how they interact with the environment, I had the opportunity to reflect upon these complex dynamics in a way that relates to my own identity. In this way animals communicate with humans, informing us our own unique personalities and gifts, and guiding our behaviours to be consistent with our place within an interconnected web of life. The *My Spirit Animal* series was inspired by my observation of the animals of present-day Canada and Italy. I was particularly intrigued by aspects of hybridity found in this post-colonial world, for example, the Asian Water Buffalo has been domesticated in Italy and is an important source of milk for mozzarella cheese. This brought me to think about the American Buffalo and the stories of colonization it holds. I was thinking about the marble animals of art history and the real, often distant animals that inspired them. Many

such animal teachings that I learned about in the summer of 2015, are depicted in the *My Spirit Animal* drawings.

As this work developed, I was exploring the volcanic landscape of Italy and reading about the volcanic processes in general, amazed at the massive regenerative power of the earth. There were many animal stories to be found within this exploration. For example, after a volcanic eruption a thick crust covers the area preventing regrowth. Elk play an important role in regrowth when they run across the crust, their hooves break through and pound the crust into a fertile soil in which plants, such as the ginestra depicted, can flourish. As with the *Third Space Carnival*, images of destruction, renewal and regrowth are present in *My Animal Spirit*. This again is a modular work, composed of nine drawings, which can be exhibited individually, in groups of three, or together as a larger work.



Figure 6: Corinna Wollf, 2015, *My Spirit Animal*, drawing, 72 x 72 inches (9 drawings)

Through the *My Spirit Animal* exploration, I found a strong connection with one particular animal, the coywolf, a fascinating hybrid unique to the Canadian environment.

I Am Métis

Having studied art at Universities in Canada, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands, I have become acutely aware that worldview is expressed through artistic aesthetic. Be it the open picture frames of Dutch Golden Age art; the lyrical, flowing lines of Italian Baroque art; or the sharp, angular lines of the German pre-reformation period, art historians have consistently acknowledged artistic aesthetic as a reflection of a worldview held by a specific culture, historical period, or individual artist (Kearney & Rasmussen 2001). Our worldview is the way in which we understand and interact with the world and can be shared as part of a group/cultural identity, or it can be one's individual understanding of the world.

The Métis, as an Indigenous People in Canada, have a group-oriented rather than individualistic culture, therefore, their worldview is spoken about as shared. The Métis National Council asserts that Métis knowledge systems “form the foundation for understanding the natural world, building skills and behaviour adaptable and applicable to other facets of Métis life, maximizing use and benefit of natural resources within community accepted ethical boundaries, and contributing to personal and community spiritual, physical, intellectual and emotional health and

development.” The Métis worldview has been described as unique and holistic (Vizina 2010). It is important to note that traditional worldview is not separate from contemporary worldview. The Métis are alive and well and participating in all aspects of contemporary life, bringing with them their unique worldview and finding hybrid ways of working within the current post-colonial society.

As described by Brenda Macdougall, Carolyn Podruchny, and Nicole St-Onge (2006) the Métis are a distinct people whose ethnogeneses occurred on the Great Plains, in the boreal forests, and in the subarctic scrublands of present-day Canada. They have a unique culture with their own language called Michif; territories, which are currently occupied; economic activity rooted in the fur trade, and artistic production, both historic and contemporary. Chris Anderson (2014) describes three criteria for the definition of Métis personhood and clarifies that while all Métis have both European and Indigenous heritage, not all mixed European/Indigenous people are Métis, some are non-status Indians. Criteria for Métis personhood is 1) the person must publicly identify as Métis; 2) the person must have biological and social ties to a Métis people, specifically not just to a First Nations relation, but to a Métis family/community; and, 3) the person must be accepted by that community. It is important to note that Métis “is not a catch all term for anyone who is Indigenous-but-not-First-Nation-or-Inuit.” The Métis ethnogeneses occurred in pre-colonial times, and present-day Métis people have familial ties to those communities. The definition of Métis personhood is not rooted in racialization or mixedness. Métis people are fully Indigenous in their own right and recognized as such by the Canadian Constitution.

The *I Am Métis* work explores Métis identity and aesthetic sovereignty. I was looking at the works of many contemporary Métis artists including Christi Belcourt and David Garneau while working on this piece. Other reference materials included photographs and archives of the Métis from the Fisherton, MB area, which is my mother's community of origin. During my undergraduate program, I had the opportunity to attend a talk by Christi Belcourt. Feeling inspired by Belcourt's work, I embarked on a self-portrait, depicting myself surrounded by prairie flowers and plants. My excitement for the work was quickly destroyed when I presented it in a class critique, only to be told by the instructor that the work was stylized, non-painterly, and sentimental. I destroyed that painting, feeling shamed for presenting an important part of my identity as art. The large-format drawing titled *I Am Metis* represents the reclamation of my Métis visual identity.



Figure 7: Corinna Wollf, 2016, *I Am Metis* (details), drawing, 6 x 10 feet

Again taking inspiration from the work of Belcourt and her collaboration with Italian fashion designer Valentino, I drew a life-size woman in a black dress inscribed with plants and flowers of great significance. For example, the milk thistle (*Silybum marianum*) on the left sleeve is a reference to the weeds that grown in ditches, where the Métis once lived as “road allowance people” (see figure 8). The dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) on the right sleeve is for diaspora, or the dispersal of the Métis people after the resistances of 1870 and 1885 (see figure 8). Leadplant (*Amorpha canescens*) was chosen to honour my grandfathers. Each plant chosen has a story, a reason for being included. The woman’s bare feet and the exposed root systems speak to connection to the land. I also included my spirit animal, the coywolf, to stand strongly beside the woman in claiming her identity and importance within the contemporary art setting.¹

¹ The *I Am Metis* work will be featured on the cover of Katherena Vermette's novel, *The Break* (forthcoming September 2016). The work was also featured in a news story on the CBC



Figure 8: Corinna Wollf, 2016, *I Am Metis (coywolf detail)*, drawing, 6 x 10 feet.



Figure 9: Corinna Wollf, 2016, *I Am Metis*, drawing, 6 x 10 feet

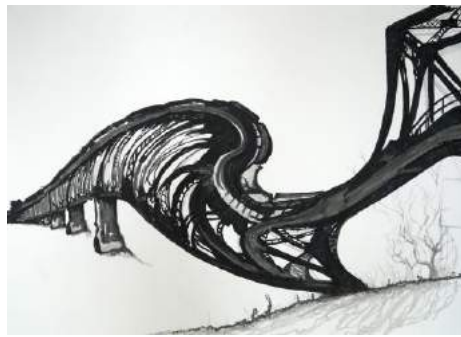
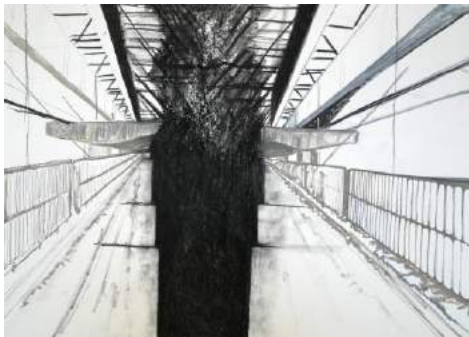
Bridges: Warped, Twisted and Blocked

Bridges are rich in symbolism. They can be a way to cross a divide, a strategic location for attack during conflict, a symbol of colonialism in the North American context, or a marvel of engineering. From my perspective, having spent my formative years in the Saskatoon inner city, they can also represent a border between socioeconomic classes, with those on the less-affluent west-side of the bridges struggling to access education, resources, and connections that will allow them to access the privilege often found on the east-side. The bridges also represent an unspoken divide between Saskatoon's Indigenous and Non-Indigenous communities. Crossing this divide has been a major journey in my life that has left me with the need to speak about the barriers I faced and to try to help others navigate their way across the bridges.

During my second year of the MFA program, I became disillusioned and began to believe that these two worlds could not be bridged, and that my journey across was afforded to me only due to the whiteness of my skin. I expressed this frustration through two very large drawings of the Saskatoon bridges in various states of dysfunction – warped, twisted, and blocked. In recent years, the phrase “building bridges” had become a buzzword on Canadian campuses in discussions about reconciliation. I would argue that it is not possible to build bridges on uneven ground. The long history of colonial action in Saskatchewan has ensured gross

inequities in living conditions and access to resources between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples.

As outlined by Amnesty International (2015) Indigenous people live on average eight years less than non-Indigenous people. In 2004, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Aboriginal Peoples noted “poverty, infant mortality, unemployment, morbidity, suicide, criminal detention, children on welfare, women victims of abuse, child prostitution are significantly higher in Aboriginal populations compared to any other sector of Canadian society, while education, health, housing conditions, family income, and equal access to economic and social opportunities are much lower.” What basis is that for building bridges? The work that needs to be done is leveling the deep inequity that exists; bridges built on uneven ground will always fail. Through the bridges drawings, these frustrations, barriers, and failed bridges are expressed in a visual format.



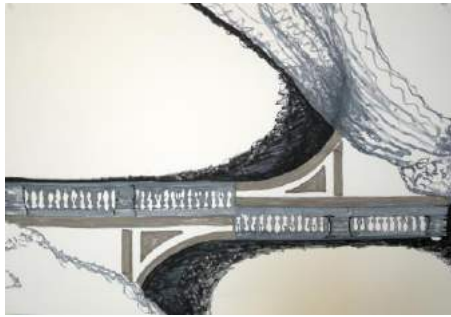


Figure 10: Corinna Wollf, 2016, Bridge Studies, drawing, each drawing is 24 x 36 inches



Figure 11: Corinna Wollf, 2016, Bridges I, drawing, 4 x 40 feet



Figure 12: Corinna Wollf, 2016, *Bridges II*, drawing, 4 x 15 feet

A Pack of My Own

The visceral, emotional, and difficult production of the *Bridges* drawings left me with the need to retreat, to rediscover slow time and to contemplate what it all meant. I turned to traditional Métis beading for this exploration, researching the work of Gregory Scofield, Amy Briley and Sherry Farrell Racette (2011). Using this knowledge, I began to construct *A Pack of My Own*. In this work, I returned to my spirit animal, the coywolf, beading its form over and over again on a piece of black felt. As stated by Scofield (2011), there is a security in the work of beading. Every

second bead is meticulously secured to the felt and each bead is strung snugly together. No individual bead is alone. This is the strength of community in visual form.



Figure 13: Corinna Wollf, 2016, *A Pack of My Own* (in progress), glass beads on black felt, 20 x 38 inches



Figure 14: Corinna Wollf, 2016, *A Pack of My Own* (details), glass beads on black felt, 20 x 38 inches

In the beading process, I became intrigued with the back of the felt, with its thousands of stitches and errors, which would normally be covered by a hide or denim backing. The stitches evoke persistence, difficulty, trial and error, growth, motherhood, creation, individuality, and connection. I photographed this part of the process and scanned the stitching in high resolution. From these scans, I created five large-format digital images to be included in the *Water Over the Bridge* exhibit. Beads were sourced from both Canada and Venice, Italy to underline the trade relationship at the root of Métis beading. Historical examples, such as those on view at the Gabriel Dumont Institute in Saskatoon, SK, were typically made using beads from present day Italy or the Czech Republic.



Figure 15: Corinna Wollf, 2016, *A Pack of My Own*, photograph

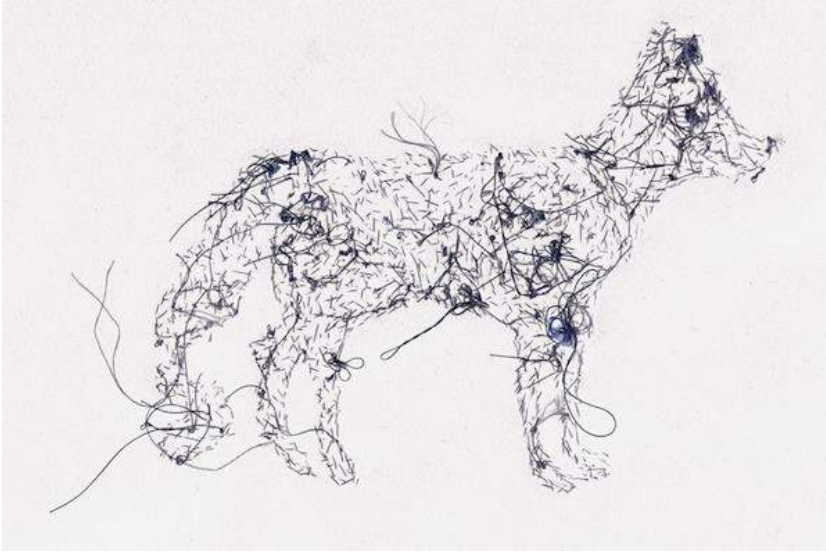


Figure 16: Corinna Wollf, 2016, *A Pack of My Own*, digitally altered scanned image

The *Pack of My Own* works can be related to contemporary artists such as Christi Belcourt and Barb Hunt. These artists call upon the long history of craft and woman's work and its importance and role in defining material culture. Belcourt has taken traditional Métis beadwork onto huge canvases through the use of dot painting. Hunt employs the use of handcrafts, traditionally associated with women, in combination with difficult subject matter. In Hunt's work there is a play between material and subject matter. In the installation *Antipersonnel*, land mine forms were knitted in bright pink wool. Johnson (2011) notes that the use of knitting infuses the work with an element of slow time. One can imagine the artist working for hours on the pieces, each one done with care and contemplation. Such a working method seems highly appropriate when dealing with a complex subject matter.

There is a subversive aspect to sewing that has allowed women a voice, even in highly oppressive societies.

A Way to Cross

The summer of 2016 brought with it the opportunity for me to work as part of the installation and monitoring team for the Christo and Jeanne-Claude project *The Floating Piers* on Lake Iseo, Italy. This was a massive project, conceived by the artists in 1970, at which time they envisioned people walking across the water on a series of floating piers. After decades of planning and searching for a project location, and years of negotiations with the political bodies in Italy, *The Floating Piers* became a reality, with three specially designed piers covered in a yellow-orange fabric connecting mainland Sulzano with two islands – Mount Isola and San Paolo, on Lake Iseo in the alps of Northern Italy.

Working as part of the project team, I had the privilege of seeing this massive project come together, despite many difficulties with communication, as the team was composed of people from many different cultures, speaking different languages. Once installed, over 1.4 million people passed over the piers, people from around the world. The piers were composed of 220,000 interlocking cubes making up a total distance of 3 km, 220,000 pins holding the cubes together, 200 anchors, 37,000 m of rope, 70,000 m² of felt to line the piers and streets under the fabric, 100,000 m² of fabric covering 3 km of pier and 2.5 km of street, and 2.7 million liters of water.

This was a highly participatory art project, engaging hundreds of people from many cultures. It required the involvement of several levels of government and the support of community leaders. The success of *The Floating Piers* confirmed my hope that art does have the capacity to bring people from many backgrounds together to foster creative action. During the exhibition it felt as though the entire world was in that space, the project team members would say “tutto il mondo è qui” (the whole world is here). The project space was transformed into a “third space” for open discussions about issues such as the current refugee crisis, the balance between indigenous peoples rights and the rights of newcomers, art in the public space, and the definition of place.

The final work in the Water Over the Bridges exhibition references *The Floating Piers*. A vibrant line of colour, running West to East, installed on the gallery floor, connects the two large-format drawings of *Bridges: Warped, Twisted and Blocked*. This work marks a return of colour and hope to my artistic production.

Conclusion

I am hopeful that there may be a way across after all. The exhibition is titled *Water Over the Bridge*, which is a reversal of a common saying “water under the bridge.” When we say water under the bridge we are typically referring to an event, transgression, or insult to be left without challenge for the sake of calm. By reversing the title, a challenge to this passivity is made. There are some things that need to be challenged, things that threaten to be destructive if not addressed. The divides, both socio-economical and racial, that exist in Saskatoon need to be

addressed openly, not simply left to go on because they are uncomfortable to discuss.

Water Over the Bridge Installed



Figure 17: Water Over the Bridge, installation photo 1



Figure 18: Water Over the Bridge, installation photo 2



Figure 19: Water Over the Bridge, installation photo 3



Figure 20: Water Over the Bridge, installation photo 4



Figure 21: Water Over the Bridge, installation photo 5



Figure 22: Water Over the Bridge, installation photo 6



Figure 23: Water Over the Bridge, installation photo 7



Figure 24: Water Over the Bridge, installation photo 8



Figure 25: Water Over the Bridge, installation photo 9



Figure 26: Water Over the Bridge, installation photo 10

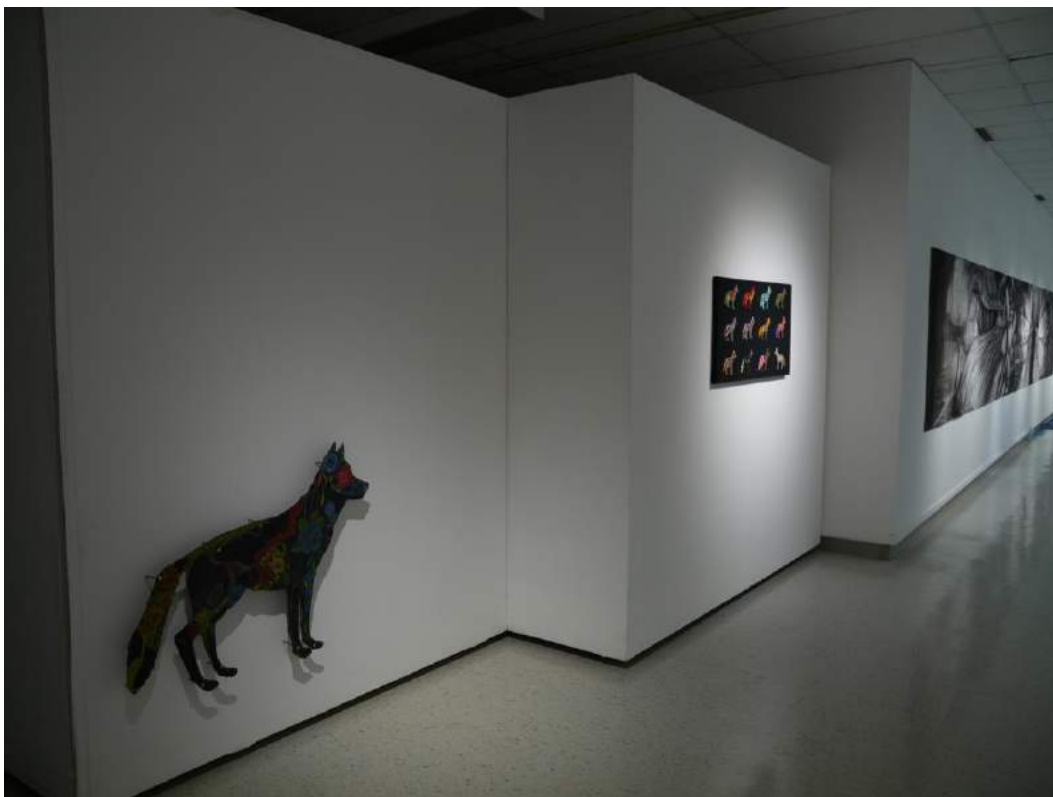


Figure 27: Water Over the Bridge, installation photo 11

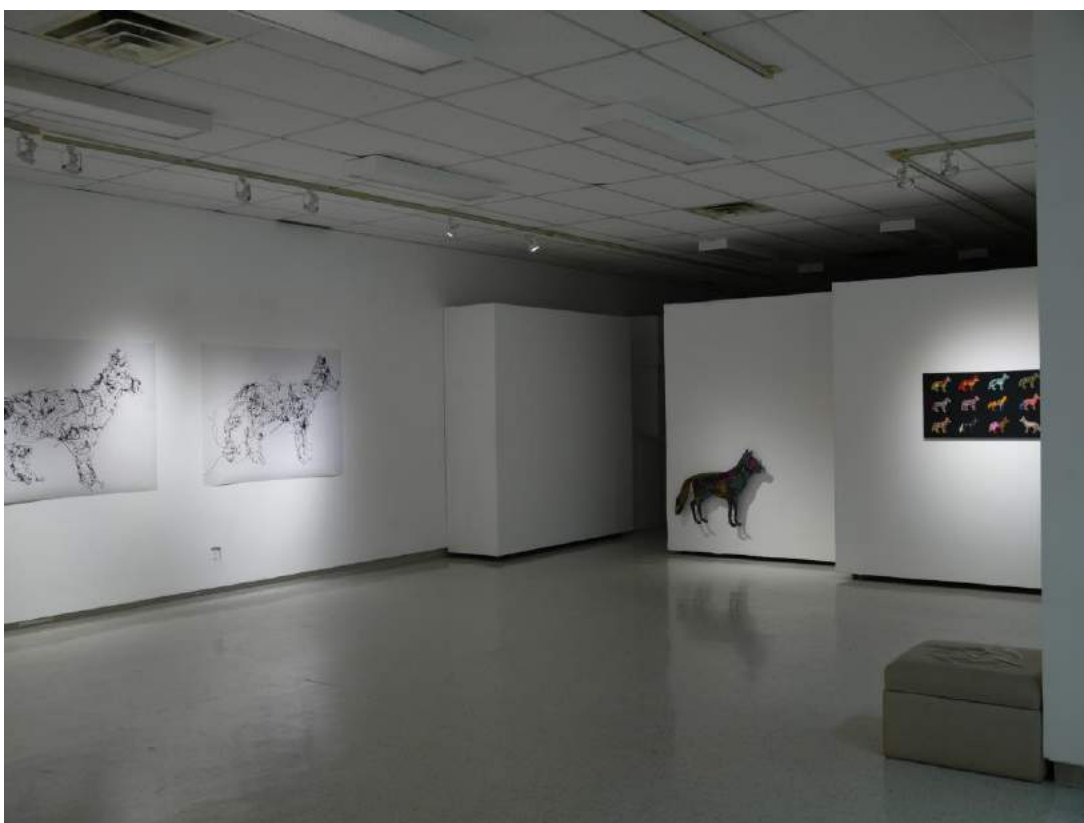


Figure 28: Water Over the Bridge, installation photo 12



Figure 29: Water Over the Bridge, installation photo 13



Figure 30: Water Over the Bridge, installation photo 14 & 15



Figure 31: Water Over the Bridge, installation photo 15 & 16



Figure 32: Water Over the Bridge, installation photo 17 & 18



Figure 33: Water Over the Bridge, installation photo 19 & 20



Figure 34: Water Over the Bridge, installation photo 21 & 22



Figure 35: Water Over the Bridge, installation photo 23 & 24



Figure 36: Water Over the Bridge, installation photo 25

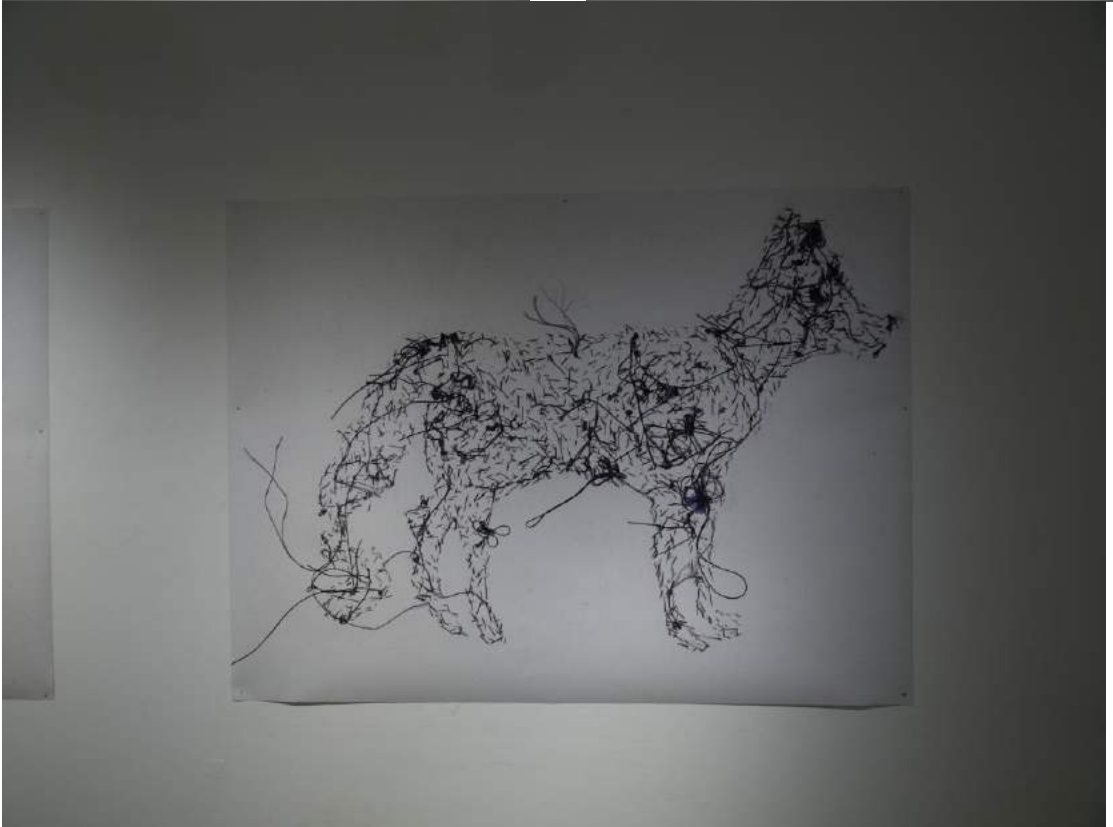
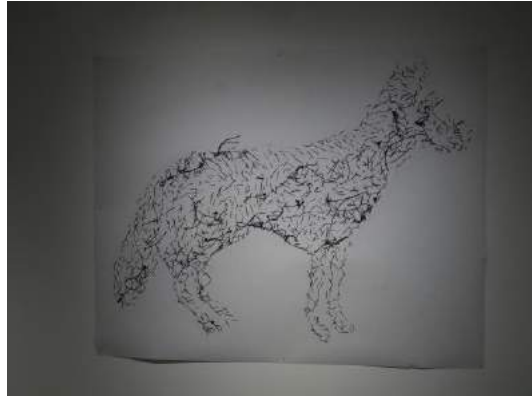


Figure 37: Water Over the Bridge, installation photos 26, 27, 28, 29 & 30

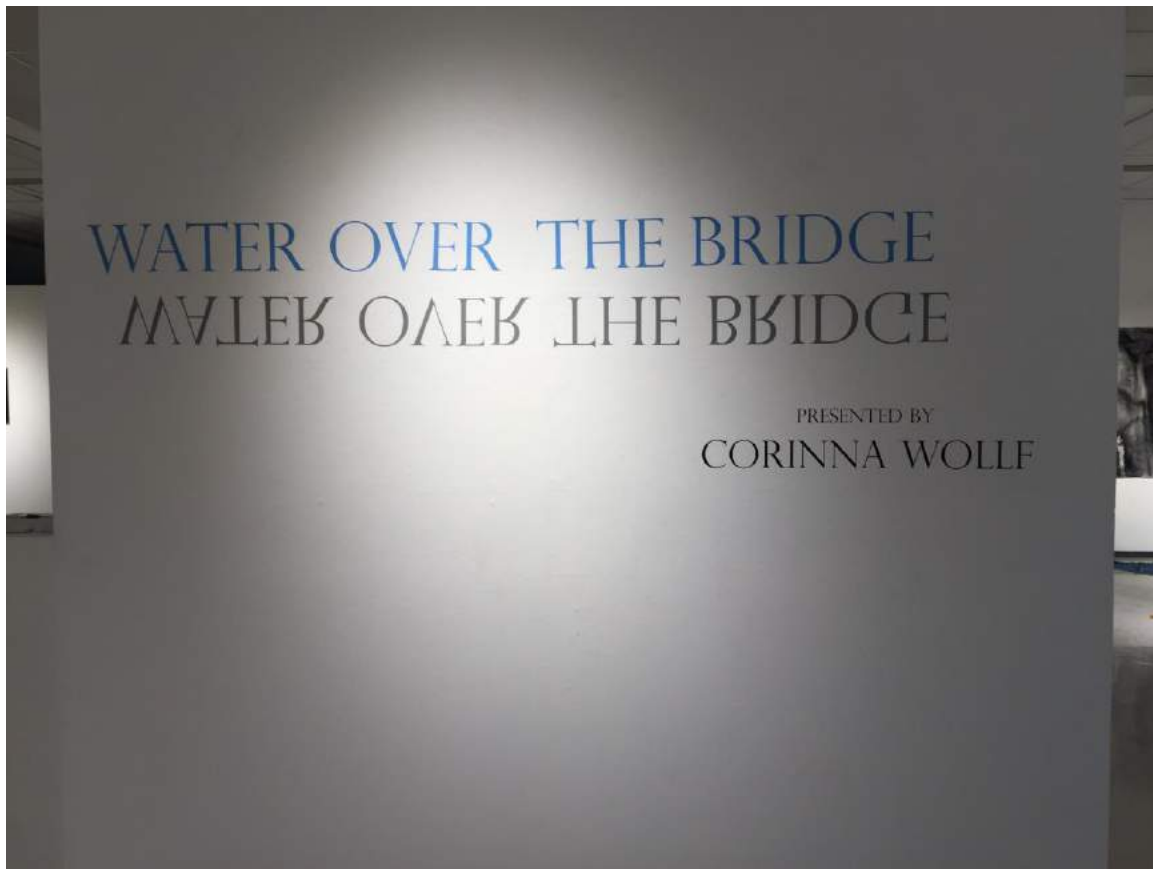


Figure 38: Water Over the Bridge, installation photo 31

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