

DWALL
Between Awake and Asleep

An Exhibition Statement Submitted to the
College of Graduate Studies and Research
in the Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Masters of Fine Arts
in the Department of Art and Art History
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon

By
Robyn Anderson

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OR

Dean
College of Graduate Studies and Research
University of Saskatchewan
107 Administration Place
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 5A2
Canada

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my thanks to the many people without whom this paper would not have been possible. First—the University of Saskatchewan and the Department of Art and Art History, who have afforded me the opportunity to research something I have a true passion for.

I am grateful to all the faculty of Art and Art History, particularly those who served as my advisors, Allyson Glenn, Alison Norlen and Jennifer Crane. Without their support, time, advice, and assessments I would have been at a loss. Also, Tim Nowlin, who reawakened a love of drawing in myself that I thought was gone. And Joan Borsa, for great insights and editing. I would also like to thank the other staff of the department, particularly Patrick Bulas, Todd Lyons, Barb Reimer, Louise Barak, Nadine Penner and Marcus Miller, who combined have saved me from more difficult situations than I care to count.

In the words of Stuart McLean, I would like to thank my “long suffering” editor and friend, Bradley Myles, who took the deranged ramblings of a lunatic and somehow helped me create a thesis paper. Finally, I would also like to extend my gratitude to the various friends, family and colleagues who have given me so much valuable support, advice and help, including Diana Chisholm, Judy Chisholm, Gerard Chisholm, Xiao Han, David Dyck, Adrienne Penney and Belinda McDavid.

Thanks, to all of you.

For Colleen Anderson and Walter Anderson,
who value happiness above all else and encouraged me to become an artist.
(As always, you were right!)

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It is a frightening thought that man also has a shadow side to him, consisting not just of little weaknesses and foibles, but of a positively demonic dynamism. The individual seldom knows anything of this; to him, as an individual, it is incredible that he should ever in any circumstances go beyond himself. But let these harmless creatures form a mass, and there emerges a raging monster; and each individual is only one tiny cell in the monster's body, so that for better or worse he must accompany it on its bloody rampages and even assist it to the utmost. Having a dark suspicion of these grim possibilities, man turns a blind eye to the shadow-side of human nature.

— Carl Jung, *On the Psychology of the Unconscious*

dwall n

dwall n also **drool**, **dwoll** *MED* dwle n 'dazed or unconscious condition'

(c1400-1450); *EDD* dwal(l) sb 1 'light slumber' Sh I Nfld. The state of being half-asleep; a slumber.

1858 [LOWELL] i, 84 Once or twice I falled into a kind of dwall [i.e. doze].

1895 *JA Folklore* viii, 28 Dwoll: a state between sleeping and waking, a dozing.

A man will say, 'I got no sleep last night, I had only a dwoll.'

1937 DEVINE 19 Drool. A state between sleeping and waking. 'I was asleep, surely, but I 'urd what was goin' on: I was only in a drool.'

—*Dictionary of Newfoundland English*

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a description of the research and processes that have culminated in my graduating master's thesis exhibition. *Dwall*, the title of my exhibition, is a word of Newfoundland origin used to describe the state between being awake and asleep. My work as an artist has been deeply influenced by the culture of Newfoundland where I was raised, on two acres of forest where my father built our family home.¹ In this rural landscape, I was allowed to run wild—either with my brothers or on my own—and learn about my culture and its stories, about imagination and whimsy, even about darkness. The experiences I had in that place, and the things that I saw and felt, inform my work, where I grasp to retain and explore some of those same formative emotions.

This body of work consists of large-scale drawing and printmaking gallery installations that explore my culture and the place it comes from, as well as exploring darkness and fear, narrative and nature. These pieces have a surreal, illustrative and darkly whimsical quality highly influenced by artists like Kiki Smith, Collette Urban, Jim Holyoak, Albrecht Dürer, Swoon, Damien Hirst and Anselm Kiefer. This supporting paper will place my work in the contemporary and historical context of these artists, and also explore how all these complementary, conflicting influences have led to the production of my graduate-level body of work—particularly my focus on the paradoxical nature of darkness and how it is a necessary tool for creation.

1. FEAR AND ANXIETY

To describe my art practice in ten words or less, I would say that I express my anxieties through whimsical narrative in installation art. Anxiety is fear that comes from the mind instead of from a reaction to an outside threat. Thinking can become repetitive and obsessed in an attempt to predict the outcome of future events, and the anxious mind creates fear of what is to come by gravitating toward the negative possibilities in any given situation. Anxiety is the most personal aspect of my work since I function with generalized anxiety disorder. No artist can completely

¹ To fully appreciate the work of any artist, we should know some circumstances of their life and worldview. As such, it should be known that I am a young, middle-class, Caucasian woman who was raised in rural Newfoundland. My worldview is Eurocentric and affected by all the advantages that my position in life has afforded me by chance of birthright. Throughout the essay, I will refer to “the viewer” or “the audience.” These are imagined groups—the result of Western approaches to culture that inevitably generalize opinions of the public.

separate their inner workings from their work, and I make no attempt to hide my own—in fact, I often use it to fuel my artwork.

My desire to express my anxiety is nothing new. Fear and anxiety are major emotions that artists have expressed throughout history. In 1498, German painter and printmaker Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) created his Apocalypse series of woodblock prints. These pieces, which include *The Four Horseman of the Apocalypse* and *Four Angels of Death*, among others, are Dürer's effort to illustrate how the end of the world would look according to the predictions of the Christian Bible. The



Fig. 1. *Melencolia* by Albrecht Dürer

prints are scenes from the Book of Revelations, rendered in immense detail with memorable religious imagery, like fire raining down from the heavens and angels fighting demons. Much of the imagery in art produced before the 20th century was religious in nature due to the importance of the church during that time, so it is only natural that artists would express fears of the end of the world in a theological context.

Similarly, Dürer's piece *Melencolia* features an angel in deep thought and is an expression of how depression can affect those who follow academic pursuits (fig. 1). At the time, melancholia would have been viewed as a physical disease, an imbalance of the humours; what Dürer was expressing was a precursor to anxiety and depression, which often go hand in hand (Raden, 82).² This angel's forlorn look could very well be caused by the negative repetitive thoughts that lead to anxiety.

² Medications that treat anxiety are often used to also treat depression and obsessive compulsive disorder.

Fear can also be a driving force behind entire artistic movements. In the early 1900s, there was a notable surge of artistic movements in reaction to the sociopolitical upheaval that arose before, during, and after the First and Second World Wars. For example, the Futurists embraced technology in a belief that it would protect them from their fear of defeat during the upcoming World War One³. Cubism tried to break down the world artists saw changing quickly around them, and addressing the passage of time and attempting to control it through the depiction of something uncontrollable. The Dadaists worked in the opposite direction, embracing seemingly nonsensical imagery in order to escape the harsh realities of a post-World War One world. Surrealism later developed out of Dada and used art as a way to release the subconscious and the worries that rested therein.

My piece *My Father's Basement* is one example of anxiety in my own work (fig. 2). For *My Father's Basement*, I individually hand-cut 4500 life-sized black and white moths, which I then pinned to the wall in an installation piece. Everything from process to installation was a reflection of the obsessive, repetitive thought process that is associated with debilitating anxiety. Creating the moths was a time- and labour-intensive process; it



Fig. 2. *My Father's Basement* by Robyn Anderson

³ Many Futurist artists joined the war effort enthusiastically and eventually died in combat. Disillusioned by the atrocities of war, and with few members left alive, the movement fell apart.

took several months to silk-screen them and cut them out one by one. The moths were originally pink, blue, and yellow pastel colours, but it was apparent they were inconsistent with the rest of my drawing, so I ended up using spray charcoal, erasing the printmaking I had worked so hard on. The spray charcoal gave them a dusty, ash-like appearance that better reflected the appearance of real moths. The installation was also labour-intensive; I placed each moth individually on the wall with a sewing pin, which took several hours. While planning my process, I considered easier ways of creating the moths, but I chose this more difficult way because of the time it provided for quiet contemplation and meditation. The process was paradoxically both pointlessly complicated, like the thoughts associated with anxiety, and also calming, due to the sense of ritual and meditation that came with the time it took to create and install each moth.

2. DARKNESS AND THE BLACK SUN

Anxiety is a negative feeling, but it spurs creativity. Its place and influence in my work can be understood in part through Stanton Marlan's take on Carl Jung's concept of the Black Sun. *Black Sun* (or *Soleil Noir* or *Sol Niger*) is a term Carl Jung discussed only briefly in his works about alchemy, but the concept was later expanded upon by other writers and artists. In *The Black Sun: The Alchemy of Art and Darkness*, Stanton Marlan discusses his own interests in darkness in relation to Jung's concept:

Sol niger is an image that Jung wrote about in his late works on alchemy, and though it played a relatively marginal role in his reflections, I have found its implications to merit a far more extensive exploration... In the face of darkness and the suffering that sometimes accompanies it, there is a natural tendency to turn away from the psyche. While this defensive process is at times necessary, it may also inhibit or bypass a hidden potential in the darkness itself. The dark side of psychic life is both dangerous and at times tragic, but the acceptance of its tragic potential was for Jung a necessity. He noted that the cure for suffering might well be more suffering. (4)

This concept of the Black Sun has become part of the exploration of darkness that features prominently in my work. The link between fear and darkness is clear. On one hand, we fear darkness: it is where the unknown lurks, and what is unknown could hurt us. On the other hand, the fear and the darkness are both necessary: fear can help us survive, we gestate in darkness before we are born, and we need the night to rest for the upcoming day. I have always been interested in the darkness. As a child from the Sesame Street generation, I had preoccupations with subjects I found difficult to understand, like mortality, depression, failure, loneliness, sexuality, and anxiety. These preoccupations have since permeated my casual interests and my artwork for much of my life, as I try my best to understand them through creative expression and process.

When I completed my undergraduate degree, the piece I showed was *It All Falls Apart* (fig. 3). This piece has formed the theoretical basis for much of my graduate work. At the time that I created the piece, I did not know why I was compelled to hang a dresser from the ceiling, paint it reflective black, and show the drawers falling out. I later came to understand that I created it to identify a transition in my life. This piece represented

a climax in my struggle with my anxiety and depression, but I realized it manifested from a dark state, a place from which I create some of my favorite works. Once I came to this realization I researched literature to identify words that could communicate how I felt about using darkness as a positive force in my life—this is when I discovered Marlan’s concept of the Black Sun.



Fig. 3. *It All Falls Apart* by Robyn Anderson

Black Sun and *A Dark Place* are both pieces by the young British artist, sculptor, and jack-of-all-trades Damien Hirst that anchor my work in a contemporary context. The pieces, from 2004 and 2006 respectively, are large circular canvases covered in black flies in resin (fig. 4). Hirst was influenced by Richard Serra's paintstick drawings, which were large, expressive, textured black circles created with thick oil sticks. On his website, Hirst notes the importance of beauty and death and how the two can be conflated. He recalls looking at his earlier fly vitrines, *A Hundred Years* and *A*



Fig. 4. *Black Sun* by Damien Hirst

Thousand Years, and thinking, “Oh my God! What have I done?” Continuing, he states:

I think it was Thomas Hobbes who said people are like flies brushed off a wall. I like that metaphorically. Your whole life could be like points in space, like nearly nothing. If you stand back far enough you think people are just like flies, like the cycle of a fly is like your own life. When you make that connection with the paintings... it is like all the people in the world who die in a hundred years. That amount of death is pretty black. (Hirst)

Hirst manages to create a beautiful piece based on the very dark concept of the futility of life. He was examining his own relationship to the *Black Sun*: he had dark thoughts about the inevitability of death and the futility of life, but when he stepped back from them, they became something beautiful.

I wanted the same feeling to come across in *My Father's Basement*. Like the individual flies in *Black Sun*, the moths represent the many individual thoughts that create the overwhelming feelings of anxiety. Single thoughts, like single moths, are harmless on their own, but when collected these feelings can be debilitating, just as a swarm of moths can be frightening. However, from a different perspective it becomes obvious that these thoughts and the swarm of moths that represent them can also be the beginning of something beautiful. The way I feel about my own work and process was probably stated best by Marlan: “Art is healing, and the shadow of despair is the fuel for creativity” (ix).

Like Hirst and Serra, I often use dark materials to convey a sense of darkness. One of these materials is charcoal, the most basic drawing tool.

Charcoal has been used to create a sense of darkness and atmosphere in art pieces throughout history. It comes from ash—burnt sticks and bones, all that is left after the light of the fire fades—and so it always reminds me of Bonfire Night in Newfoundland. Bonfire Night is what remains in North America of Guy Fawkes Night: the night of the 5th of November, when people burn effigies of Guy Fawkes to celebrate his failed attempt to attack the British Parliament. It is a dark tradition, but still practiced all the same.



Fig. 5. *Soldier* by Robyn Anderson

I also use positioning of the body to create a sense of darkness or anxiety. In *Soldier*, I deliberately set out to make the audience uncomfortable with my depiction of an anthropomorphic rabbit soldier (fig. 5). His black eyes, his extra-long fingers, his hunter-like body position, and his pick-axe weapon pointing toward the viewer are intended to create an unsettling feeling of the unknown.

This is similar to the way Kiki Smith uses body position in her cast-figure work *Lilith*. Unlike Hirst's work, which has some dark subject matter concerning death, Smith's subject matter is often the parts of life that are perceived to be unpleasant or uncomfortable for those who confront it. On a physical level, Smith's works are often rendered in sombre colours. When she draws, it is in charcoal, and when she casts sculptures, they are done in a dark metal. Smith is a contemporary artist who uses darkness in her own way. For example, her cast-figure work *Lilith* is an unsettling look at Eve's predecessor in Eden (fig. 6). The sculpture—with its dark metal body and unsettling blue eyes—is mounted on the wall above the audience to look like some sort of insect or predator waiting to pounce from a



Fig. 6. *Lilith* by Kiki Smith



Fig. 7. *Pyre Women Kneeling* by Kiki Smith

threatening body position similar to what I used in *Soldier*.

A similar piece, Smith's *Woman on Pyre*, beautifully immortalizes the last moments of a woman about to be burned to death on a wooden pyre (fig. 7). The woman looks peaceful, instead of frightened, with arms extended to embrace or bless the audience. Once again, Smith looks straight at the darkest situations that others might turn away from.

Smith is also willing to look at issues of the body that some consider dark or disgusting and place these subjects in a gallery as things of beauty. She works with physical sensations, and often shows the body excreting urine, feces, or menstrual blood. Her piece *Train* is a cast sculpture of a woman hobbled over with strains of red fabric and thread emerging from between her legs. Many viewers feel disgust at such a raw, private sight of something often viewed as negative, dirty, gross, or dark. But Smith places it on display for all to see; menstruation is, after all, a necessary part of birth process, and being able to bare children. Smith catches the moment in all its glory and points out the hypocrisies in how we view and think about the body—especially the female body.

3. WHIMSY

At the foundation of creativity and invention is darkness, this is where impossible ideas are born of dreams. Desperate need, forces us to realizations, out of essentialism. Let us focus now on those impossible and whimsical ideas that come from darkness. To fully enjoy wit, comedy, or fantasy, a part of the mind that demands order and logic has to be ignored. Works of art can demand the same suspension of reason—they are not always entirely logical or serious. Instead, they often embody a sense of the whimsical that can make us giggle like children or leave us open-mouthed in awe. In order to enjoy artworks to their fullest, the viewer must give themselves over to the work fully. In my recent installation drawing works, I have been moving further and further off the wall in an attempt to surround the viewer in an imaginary world like the ones I would have surrounded myself in as a child in the woods—a world of imagination, costumes, magic and sensorial realms built on nonsensical stories—in an attempt to create a sense of escapism for the viewer. I have always been interested in recreating the feelings of

whimsy and wonder I experienced as a child who had an active imagination. This wonder is rare in everyday adult life, but so worth experiencing.

Swoon is one artist who is capable of surrounding the viewer in whimsy, and her work has deeply influenced my own. “Swoon” is the graffiti handle of Caledonia Dance Curry, born in 1978 in the United States. She was trained at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, but soon after turned to street art—mostly intricately cut life-sized prints pasted in public spaces—to fulfill a personal need for whimsy in her work. Unsatisfied with

her work ending up on gallery walls and later claiming she “felt very suffocated by this life that was laid out for [her],” she began working on a set of portraits that she pasted in hidden areas around Brooklyn (TedX Talks). These portraits quickly became known in Swoon’s neighbourhood; the community cherished them as something secret and magical and uniquely theirs.

Thrilled by the everyday wonder she could create for people, Swoon’s practice evolved when she decided to include multimedia, installation-based work that surrounds the audience in a surreal, delightful, and immersive experience. In *The Swimming Cities of Serenissima*, Swoon worked for two years to assemble a group of ramshackle boats that functioned not only as transportation, but also as a small city (fig. 8). The result was a surreal experience of floating houses that would not look out of place in a post-apocalyptic movie. They are a twist on the expected and feel like they are the remnant of some fantastic dream of adventure.



Fig. 8. *Swimming Cities of Serenissima* by Swoon

Colette Urban's work explores a similar sense of play and whimsy, but unlike Swoon, Urban does not surround the viewer in another world; instead, she becomes a character of some other world. For example, in the performance piece *Bare*, Urban dressed in green garb, wore a backwards stuffed teddy bear head, and wandered the forest in quiet reverence (fig. 9). This piece



Fig. 9. *Bare* by Colette Urban

reminds me of my own childhood—wandering the woods by my home, encapsulated in a world of imagination and my own invented rituals. Urban's work captures that same sense of whimsical pretending. It is too ludicrous to be real, but it is also somehow irresistible: we want to choose our own half human, half animal outfits and join her. Similarly anthropomorphized figures often find their way into my own work, as does a similar sense of whimsy. I try to offer the viewer this fable-like forest that they can walk into and participate with—a place where they can either put masks on or take them off, depending on their own prerogative, and experience some kind of catharsis similar to what I would have felt as a child walking around the forest surrounding my home (fig. 10).

4. SURREALISM AND SYMBOLS

Whimsy could be viewed as one element of surrealism. While whimsy is more of a motif, and Surrealism is a defined art movement with its own history, both have an uncertainty that I delight in. I find surrealism—"stressing the subconscious or nonrational significance of imagery arrived at by ... unexpected juxtaposition"—and the phantasmagoric—"having a fantastic or deceptive appearance, as something in a dream or created by the imagination"—fascinating (Dictionary.com). Often associated with the unconscious mind and dreams, I find the

unpredictability of the surreal refreshing and amusing. Surrealism influences my own work through my dreams, where unpredictable elements and scale come to light and I chose to bring them into my work. The surreal can provide metaphors represented through images previously unconsidered.

The book *Phantoms of the Imaginations* says that “the genesis [of Surrealism] was a profound exploration of the unconscious by negating as many as possible of the disciplines of control” (Hammacher, 259). Desire for control is often at the heart of anxious thinking, and it is interesting to note here that surrealism requires an artist to control his or her desire to control. The artist needs to let go of the desire for logic that dictates reality and place seemingly random elements together in order to allow autonomic imagery to be expressed. This juxtaposition of seemingly arbitrary images can give the audience deeper meanings than a strict replication of reality can, and there is a comfort that can be found in surrealism. Anxiety can fall away when we know there is no possible way to predict what can happen next, and there is no obsessing over outcomes, since there is no possible way to predict them—one can only accept what the situation is when it is placed in front of them.

The general knowledge of surrealism and art in the mind of the public ends with Salvador Dali in the 1930s and 1940s; however, artists continue to work with the same dream-like elements. I only recently became aware of contemporary drawing artist Jim Holyoak, but I found strong parallels between my own work and his work on



Fig. 10. *Showdown at Dingwell's Lane* by Robyn Anderson. Photo by Alex Thiesson.



Fig. 11. *Lycanthrope* by Jim Holyoak

pieces like *Lycanthrope* (fig. 11). Jim Holyoak is also a Canadian artist who works in black, white, and grey large-scale drawing installations filled with nature and surrealism. Holyoak deconstructs images of wolves and hares and other animals so that when you look close, you do not see the fur or eyes you expect to see, but instead find prints of human body parts or surprising textures. I particularly enjoy learning from the way he works with the negative space.

5. NARRATIVE

Narrative often makes the basis for art. Works can tell new tales, or they can be a response to stories we have heard our entire lives. And we cannot help but interweave artworks with narrative—as soon as an artist places several components together in an image, a narrative will be formed by the viewer.

Swoon's use of whimsy is complemented by her interest in storytelling. Many of her early wheat pastes are portraits that tell stories of women and children. Small signifiers here and there—a ball being played with, a baby being breastfed—allow the viewer to read entire lives into a single print.

In her extensive 2014 installation work *Submerged Motherland* at the Brooklyn Museum, the artist created an entire world of cut-outs, paper, and prints (fig. 12). The viewer walks into the space and passes a boat-like structure before they come to a large tree made of paper and fabric, surrounded by hobbled-together houses. By giving us a magical space in which to exist, Swoon creates a type of immersive stage in which the audience actively participates and completes the narrative. There is a similar sense of narrative in Swoon's *Swimming Cities of Serenissima*, in which the viewer understands that there is an implicit journey these vessels are taking part of.



Fig. 12. *Submerged Motherland* by Swoon

While Swoon creates her own narratives to surround the viewer in, Kiki Smith reacts to pre-established stories. In *Pool of Tears* and *Pool of Tears II*, Kiki Smith created her own versions of a narrative explored hundreds of times before: Alice in Wonderland (fig. 13). Both images are of Alice, swimming in a pool with a group of animals. The pieces are a reference to an early scene in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in which Alice and the animals almost drown in a flood created by Alice's own tears after she has accidentally made herself giant.

Smith is a master of effectively creating narrative with very few elements. Her cast-iron sculpture *Rapture* depicts a life-sized, unclothed woman emerging from the stomach of a wolf (fig. 14). The wolf and the woman are the only two elements in the work, but Smith has managed to create an entire story. The viewer must wonder: how did the wolf become pregnant with the woman, carrying her until she was fully grown? And what is the destiny of this mysterious figure now that she has



Fig. 13. *Pool of Tears II* by Kiki Smith



Fig. 14. *Rapture* by Kiki Smith

been born of magical circumstance?

Like Smith, I am working with a pre-established narrative in *Showdown at Dingwell's Lane*. Dingwell's Lane is the road my father grew up on, where my grandparents had their home and where I spent much of my young life. The piece was inspired by a story my father often tells about an alcoholic man he once knew. The man had had trouble with the police, and was not a good father to his son. At one point, he got his act together and beat his addiction for a few years. Then one day, my father was outside doing work on a neighbour's yard when the man got drunk and went out onto Dingwell's Lane with his gun. Father laid low in the grass with my uncle—while his neighbour was in the house with some other children from the neighbourhood, keeping them away from the man—and they watched as the man had a shootout with the police and shot an officer. The man and the officer both survived. But I was captivated by how the story seems like a piece of pure *Canadiana* (if there is such a thing) fiction to me.⁴ I found it fascinating that the man was angry at the police and angry at himself, and gave in to the dark side of himself that led to the shootout.

This story is just one example of many stories, both familial and cultural, that have surrounded me when I was growing up. In the piece inspired by the event, I open up the narrative of the showdown so that it is accessible to the viewer. It becomes a group of masked bandits approaching a giant wolf with an outstretched hand. It is obvious that there is conflict, but difficult to tell who is attacking and who is being attacked.

⁴ I would believe the incident was invented if the rest of my family had not corroborated the story. An effort was made to research an article on this, but many of the archives of the local paper from this time seem to be missing or destroyed.

6. CULTURE

Newfoundland and Newfoundlanders are known for their rich storytelling traditions; hundreds of songs and stories are unique to the province and its people. My father ignited my own love of stories by reading to me every night



Fig. 15. *Daughter* by Kiki Smith

before I fell asleep, his voice filling my head with images. This growing love of stories was an integral part of why I became an artist. *Showdown at Dingwell's Lane* is based on a true story, as mentioned above. But, through storytelling, my father also passed down to me a broader language of symbols and literature that have specific meaning to Newfoundlanders. Consider, for example, the train in *That Was a Long Time Ago*. In western culture, a train is broadly synonymous with a journey. However, in Newfoundland culture, trains represent an aspect of life that no longer exists since the closure of the Newfoundland Railway.

The term *culture* is broad and hard to define. It is the “manifestations of human intellect,” but in a more tangible sense it is the rituals, behaviors, beliefs, stories, songs and visuals that surround us in our particular social and geographical locations (Oxford). Paradoxically, art functions as a part of culture, but also as a reflection of it. An artist's work is always a product of the influences that surround them throughout their life, but their work can also be a direct comment on these influences.

Kiki Smith was born in 1954 in Nuremberg, Germany, before she and her parents moved to New Jersey, where she grew up in a Catholic tradition (*PBS* and *Pace Gallery*). Explorations of cultural and personal identity, as well as place and belonging, are strong themes that run through Kiki Smith's work. Her roots in Germany and her traditional religious upbringing would

become highly influential in her later work, and her subversion of both traditions has formed the framework of much of her artistic career.

Daughter is one example of these subversions (fig. 15). The piece is a sculpture of a young girl in a white dress and a red hood, with bunches of rough hair erupting from her face. The girl has a look of awe on her face and a pair of piercing, unsettling blue eyes.

The hood is a reference to the European tale of Little Red Riding Hood, in which a young girl travelling to her grandmother's house is hunted by a menacing wolf. The tale explores moving from childhood to adulthood and embodies ideals like the risk of temptation and the need to preserve female innocence. In *Daughter*, Smith has created a figure that is both the innocent young girl and the wolf that hunts her in the story. Her white dress—representing innocence—is now covered with the red hood, a symbol charged with sexual and violent connotations. The fusing of the two is a rewriting of the story, a deconstruction of the false duality of innocence, violence and sexuality: perhaps Little Red Riding Hood is not as innocent as she seems.

Kiki Smith also challenges preconceptions of female identity in Western culture and Christianity in her works titled *Rapture*, *Lot's Wife*, *Lilith*, *Mary Magdalene*, and *Virgin Mary*. *Virgin Mary* is another embodiment of the themes present in *Daughter*. Smith recreates the often idealized image of the *Virgin Mary* and strips her bare, removing even her skin in order to demythologize her and make her real to the viewer. When the viewer can see her inner workings, Mary can no longer be the virginal embodiment of a fictional, ideal woman. Smith has re-embodied her as a real person instead of an abstract ideal. Smith's ability to redefine cultural influences is inspiring to me as a young artist, and is something I wish to replicate in my own work in the future.

Until I left Newfoundland I did not realize how deeply the cultural influences of my home province were ingrained in my psyche. Things that were normal customs for me were suddenly incomprehensible quirks to those I met. Language was different. The emphasis on storytelling was not as strong.

Newfoundland traditions like “mumming” were unheard of, and when I explained Newfoundland customs, they were thought of as very odd.⁵

Eventually, the animals and traditions that I missed from home began to appear in my work—some as foreboding omens, some as embodiments of positive influences. In my piece *That Was a Long Time Ago*, I depicted a train emerging from mist, with codfish swimming around its wheels (fig. 16). I wanted the piece to pay homage to forgotten or erased cultures.



Fig. 16. *That Was a Long Time Ago* by Robyn Anderson

Both my grandfather and great-great-grandfather worked on the railroads before they were closed, so I wanted specifically to explore train culture in Newfoundland in relation to a well-known aspect of culture in Newfoundland—in this case, cod fishing. Through the drawing, I was able to explore and redefine my cultural roots in visual frameworks that I could understand.

⁵ Mumming is the Christmastime practice of dressing up as a group, covering faces, and going door-to-door for libations while dancing and playing music. Usually, mummers will not leave until their hosts guess the identities of the people behind the masks.

Colette Urban, in contrast, looked to her culture as a positive inspiration in her own work. Urban was born in Denver, Colorado, and lived in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan and various other places in Canada and England before she settled in Newfoundland and lived there until her death (Gilmore). It was Urban's adopted Newfoundland culture that influenced her work the most.

In *Collecting Culture*, Urban gathered a variety of knick-knacks, souvenirs, photos, and other domestic objects and displayed them in a gallery (fig. 17). The pieces come from around the world, and elephants are the focus of the collection. Urban chose the elephant to represent Newfoundland because she saw it as a stable, intelligent, and kind animal. The result is a grouping that does not criticize collecting culture, but celebrates it as a means of inspiration.



Fig. 17. *Collecting Culture* by Colette Urban

Urban was able to take the symbol of the elephant, which we often associate with other mythologies, and use it in a way that is her own. This is something I often try to do in my own work. For example, the wolf, the fish, and the moon are symbols that appear in Roman, Greek, Norse, and North American Indigenous mythologies. I have used these symbols with their pre-existing connotations, but I have also projected my own meanings onto them in *Showdown at Dingwell's Lane* and *That was a Long Time Ago*. In *Showdown at Dingwell's Lane* the wolf appears as a giant figure, out of proportion, and seems to be both an aggressor and at the same time being attacked. The moon is also out of proportion in this piece—unlike the wolf, the moon is unnaturally small and replaces the face of a figure. In *That Was a Long Time Ago*, my fish have learned to swim on land, surrounding the tracks of a train as a representation of family as I discussed earlier in this section.

7. IDENTITY

Urban described her work as guided by her “interest in questions of identity and response to landscape” (*Colette Urban*). Identity is another aspect of culture, except identity is culture reflected upon the self. Titles often accompany identity—in my own case, titles like *woman*, *Newfoundlander*, and *storyteller* all come to mind. Even the identity associated with the term *artist*—stereotypically viewed as shaman, creator, tortured soul, or genius—can be reflected in an artist’s work.

My exhibition, *Dwall*, contains many pieces that address identity. I never thought of my artistic practiced as a way to address my personal character. This was until I realised that, through my artwork, I

had been solving issues of identity on an unconscious level. When I left Newfoundland for my graduate degree, cultural identifiers such as Newfoundland animals and architecture became more prevalent. When living in Newfoundland, I did not include these themes in my work—perhaps because I felt they were already familiar to my audience and did not warrant mentioning.

It became clear that in the future I would need to consciously address issues of identity in a way that would not jeopardize the outcome of my work. For example, almost all the figures in my work wear masks of some kind. Masks are a fundamental symbol for identity, or trying to hide one's identity. I like to blur the boundaries of the masks on my figures, confusing where the



Fig. 18. Showdown at Dingwell’s Lane (detail)
by Robyn Anderson

mask ends and where the figure actually begins. For example, in this detail of *Showdown at Dingwell's Lane*, the fur of the dog mask mixes in with the hair of the figure (fig. 18). I wanted to make a comment on how it is sometimes impossible to tell where our metaphorical masks and our real selves separate.

8. PLACE

Just as my identity as a Newfoundlander has found its way into my work, so have my ideas on Newfoundland and on the concept of place itself. In the book *Place*, Tacita Dean and Jeremy Millar note that “we retain a strong sense of place, even if we find it hard to define with any satisfaction” (Dean 17). Place is difficult to define, because it—and our perception of it—is always changing depending on our experience, knowledge, moods, and those around us. My work has a strong sense of place, usually expressed in the context of displacement and feeling out of place.

Only after leaving Newfoundland did my pieces begin to reflect place. This dislocation from home inspired much thought on comparing differences between the place I had lived my entire life and the new place I found myself in, where I felt uneasy. In *Chasseur in the Forest* by Romantic German painter Caspar David Friedrich, 1813-14, the artist has managed to capture a feeling of being out of place really successfully (fig. 19). The piece shows a small hunter



Fig. 19. *Chasseur in the Forest* by Caspar David Friedrich

facing a threatening, unknown, and unsurmountable forest.

In my piece *Showdown at Dingwell's Lane*, I reimagined elements of the real Dingwell's Lane and the true story that inspired this piece and placed them together in a surrealist landscape. I wanted to create a similar uneasiness for viewers engaging with my work. In particular, it was my intent to make the viewer feel out of place. Instead of leaving the forest on canvas, however, I decided to hang tree trunks from the ceiling, causing a sense of smallness and unfamiliarity for viewers in a place—in this case, the gallery—where they would usually feel comfortable. I tried to use the actual space of the gallery to throw off the viewer. In a gallery setting, viewers expect only to see the work at eye level on the wall. Because I decided hung the canvas tree trunks from the ceiling, the viewer has to participate in the scene from a lower vantage point—a perspective like that of an animal in the woods surrounded by the unknown, with possible threats on all sides.

While developing the canvas trees for that installation, I reflected on the works of Anselm Kiefer, a contemporary German painter and sculptor whose work includes many desolate, treed landscapes (fig. 20). His work is a mournful reflection of German history and confronts the taboo horrors of the Holocaust. His piece *Rhine* illustrates a memory of the woods near his childhood home on the border of Germany and France.



Fig. 20. *Rhine* by Anselm Kiefer

Rhine is an unreality, a mythical representation of what it used to be, because those woods no longer exists as they once did... The place still exist geographically—anyone could go and visit the same point on a map—but it is not the same place Kiefer is remembers. The place he creates in *Rhine* is a version place existing only in his memory.

This is similar to the way I have presented Dingwell's Lane in my work. I have only the memory of a story my father told me of the shootout he witnessed. While Dingwell's Lane still

exists, and I can still go visit it, the same people no longer live there, the same social constructs that led to the incident are no longer in place. The version from my father's story has become mythical to me, so I presented it in a mythical way. In Germano Celant's book on Kiefer, Celant comments on how the artist approaches dark places that seem to have no space in contemporary conversation. Celant says that:

For Kiefer, the possibility of being in the world does not lie in rejecting the circumstances of one's cultural, social anxiety and anguish of a forbidden and fearful past. Rather than entering a new life, the artist is concerned with immersing himself in all the hidden and subterranean drives of his existence in order to seek a tranquility and a salvation in its historical and psychological maze.

(Celant 13)

In other words, Kiefer is concerned with creating a new place out of the old, real place, in order to understand the past.

9. ROMANTICISM

Recreating real places, however, can lead to romanticizing them, and romanticism risks overlooking real problems so we can enjoy the beautiful and dramatic images it creates. Romanticism provides us a path to imagine ourselves as victim or hero with no risk to our real selves. Sometimes this endeavour leads to the cliché, and as such it is a fundamental problem for contemporary artists. In my own work, I use codfish, fishing stages, and other images so common in Newfoundland culture they could easily be considered cliché, but I try



Fig. 21. *Ghost* by Robyn Anderson

to represent them in a subverted way. My piece *Ghost* portrays classic Newfoundland fishing stages—a fishing stage is a building at the edge of the water used for the storage and processing of codfish—except I decided to create the drawings on canvas and stretch them on canvas frames (fig. 21). I addressed the potential romantic cliché of the stages by giving them whimsically long stilts. I sewed small pairs of pants and sleeves and attached them in order to give the stages a grotesque appearance, and I also depicted the stages in various stages of decay. I loved how the actual images of stages were surrealist—so unusual and precarious they appeared to be something only possible in a dream—and wanted to play with and exaggerate that surrealism. I was also interested in the idea of conflating people and place: how people and the places where they live can be so much part of each other and how, when a person leaves or passes, their place can lose the meaning once attached to it or physically deteriorate in a very real way with no one to look after it. In this case, rural Newfoundland fishing stages were abandoned after resettlement. They were left naturally and can still be seen on the coast, slowly decomposing.⁶

10. Nature

The oldest artistic expressions that we know of today are animal paintings, like those deep in the caves of Lascaux and Pech Merle in France, completed in approximately 20000 BCE (fig. 22).

The drawings and stenciled hand prints are immediate and large; they undulate with the cave walls, and many of them hang above the viewer.

Experimentation to create techniques of painting, finding pigment, grinding



Fig. 22. *Spotted Horses and Human Hands* at Pech Merle Cave, Dordogne, France

⁶ Resettlement was an initiative of the Newfoundland government in 1954 to relocate members of smaller communities to larger settlements in order to close those smaller locations and save money on transportation, infrastructure and government services. This resettlement is often blamed for the loss of many individualised traditions.

pigment, mixing paint, and finding ways to store paint would have taken much time and effort, even before the artwork itself could be created. Meanwhile, another person would have had to tend to the light in a dark cave while the artist or artists worked (Stokstad). I really admire the mark making, tone, mood and presentation of these images. The whole body must have been used to create such large marks so high on the walls of the caves. In the same way, I now use my entire body to create large pieces like *Soldier, That Was a Long Time Ago* and the wolf in *Showdown at Dingwell's Lane*.

The pieces in the caves in France illustrate the animals in the artist's environment that would have been important for their survival through hunting. These are not only images of observations, however; the artist or artists also left their own mark through stencils of their handprints. These marks are evidence of the first cultivation of the natural world; symbolically, by placing their handprints over these depictions of nature, the artists demonstrated that humans were already changing the way we experience nature. These first works show the importance these artists placed on expression and imitation of the natural world, considering the efforts spent on these images could have been used instead on survival efforts.

The animals usually portrayed as most threatening in art are often chosen for their dramatic majesty, not because they pose any real threat. Nature no longer threatens us as it once did. In fact, humans are now a considerable threat to destroying nature. Henry Buller makes careful note of this when he states:

Modernization saw the growing subjugation of the natural world and its animalia through a range of practical processes, including domestication, species eradication, breeding and habitat change, and philosophical standpoints, from religious iconographic appropriation through representation, scientific classification and ultimately bio-ethical displacement. (Buller, 132)

As mentioned above, I grew up surrounded by nature in rural Newfoundland in a boreal forest. Images of nature have found their way into my work since I first began producing artwork. What we consider as the natural world is defined as "the physical world and everything in it (such as plants, animals, mountains, oceans, stars, etc.) that is not made by people" (Merriam-Webster). Nature becomes a larger-than-life element of my work now, exaggerated by

imagination; nature no longer lies outside the bonds of human creation. What we view as wild and outside our control is often actually carefully cultivated.

In my piece *Showdown at Dingwell's Lane*, a larger-than-life, menacing wolf appears to face off against a group of masked figures in a forest scene. I wanted to play on the preconceived notions of what we view nature to be, and on the nature—in the sense of inherent traits—that the wolf, the man on Dingwell's lane and humans in general possess. Is the wolf attacking or being attacked? Who is the real danger? My work is both an effort to portray a reflection of how nature used to be perceived—as a threatening presence spurring tales that are beyond reality—as well as how it is now: nonthreatening and carefully cultivated.

10. PROCESS

No writing on an artist's work would be complete without some mention of process. I am not devoted to one medium. I was trained primarily in printmaking, drawing, and photography but also dabble in sculpture and multimedia works, as well. When I imagine a project I want to work on I consider what medium would suit it best—not how to change the project to work in a particular medium. My work manifests in a typical manner: I write and create sketches of what I plan to create, examine what compels me to create it, choose which medium I feel would suit the project best, and then create small maquettes before moving on to full production.

Each medium has its own advantages and communicates ideas differently. I began working with large-scale drawing installations for a few reasons. First, paper gave me a way to surround the viewer in a storybook-like world. Paper has symbolic meaning on its own—I associate it with learning to write and draw on paper in childhood, and the many books we are exposed to in school—and I wanted the audience to be reminded of old books with illustrations, like *Alice in Wonderland*. Second, paper is also practical. Pieces can be rolled for transport and it is relatively inexpensive. Third, the size allows me to draw with my entire body—there is an immediacy to the way I work, and I love for my pieces to show marks from my whole hands as I stretch to reach and pull the charcoal pigment in different directions.

I more often use printmaking when I want to talk about process and repetition, as I did in *My Father's Basement*. Printmaking is a process of intense physical effort and ritual. Ritual is

very important to me. Repetitive acts calm me and give me a sense of safety and predictability. Rituals do not need to be huge productions, but simple acts like preparing a cup of tea every morning. Though it falls into the “suffering artist” trope (which some of us may be all too familiar with within the Western canon,) in a way I believe some sacrifice of intense physical effort needs to be made in order for a work to feel complete and be satisfying to me.

I often simplify my images so that they are no longer an effort at true representations, but just symbols of the things they represent. This results in a very illustrative quality that lends itself well to the sense of narrative I portray, but it is also done because I have no desire to replicate reality for what it is. I do not identify with a practice of replicating reality exactly as it is on a canvas. Instead, I imagine how to use symbolism and abstraction may offer more possibilities of what I can depict. In symbolism there is room for exploration, and symbols can pick up where words fail. Kiki Smith makes note of this when she says, “In some ways the meaning is very private to me; it can’t be expressed in sentences... I could sort of explain it, if I felt like it, but it exists as a realm in me, and it’s not very interesting to me to try to put it into language” (Smith, 40).

CONCLUSION

In order to attend the MFA graduate program at the University of Saskatchewan, I had to move far away from the Newfoundland culture I was most familiar with. At the beginning of the program, I was interested in how my anxiety could be a source of inspiration—more specifically, I wanted to know how darkness and creativity could be linked with the ideas in my work. This led me to research the concept of the Black Sun, a term used by Jung to describe how the negative can be creatively beneficial. The pieces in my installation, including ones which directly relate to this idea of the Black Sun, were related to my anxiety and largely informed by my Newfoundland culture and folklore, from which I take comfort.

While I use traditional imagery in my work, I try to avoid clichés and over-romanticising by informing traditional images using personal content. My images began to take on surreal elements such as exaggerated proportions and disjointed imagery. I enjoyed the liberty of working with more openly fictional and abstract content. Furthermore, by using three-dimensional pieces, I could surround the viewer, provoking a sense of narrative and whimsy

intended to bring him or her on a sort of unreal journey. That desire to transport the audience into a new world has informed the material and physical effort that has gone into my work—for example, large paper-based pieces that fill the gallery space and provide an unusual and immersive experience for the viewer.

I decided to title my show *Dwall*—a Newfoundland term used to refer to the state of being in between awake and asleep—because of my Newfoundland culture and because, similarly to what Smith states above, I hope the unreal and surreal places in my works produce feelings in the viewer that are difficult to describe. It is my desire that one of those feelings is delight in the sense of unease. It is my intent to bring these complex issues to a viewers' attention. By demonstrating how darkness can be a source of inspiration when juxtaposed with themes such as narrative, culture and whimsy, I hope to create a space which encourages viewers to address the darkness within themselves—an act that can create discomfort, but may not be as terrible as it seems. After all, it is only in the night and darkness that the most vivid dreams and visions reveal themselves.

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