

Many Feathers Flock Together: Celebrating T - Bird

**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
Knowledge of Discipline: Studio Area
in the Department of Art and Art History
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan**

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By

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Department of Art and Art History at the University of Saskatchewan has provided so many opportunities for me to further my artistic practice that I need to give thanks to the entire Department, in particular Graham Fowler, Alison Norlen, Allyson Glenn, Susan Shantz, Marcus Miller, Lynne Bell, Patrick Bulas, Tim Nowlin, John Graham, and Joan Borsa. I would like to give a special thank you to my supervisor Graham Fowler for his encouragement and insight over the past two years of the program. My fellow MFA candidates have encouraged me throughout the program.

I owe my gratitude to my parents, Pat and Dale Ollenberger, and my sister Jo-Ann Holman. My family's support has meant everything to me. I would also like to acknowledge my dog Theodore who was by my side while I worked on many assignments.

Above all, I am indebted to everyone who has been part of Camp Thunderbird over the past four years for their support, understanding, and belief in this project. Without everyone's help and support I wouldn't have been able to accomplish this body of work. A special thank you as well to my co-workers Sasha Youzwa, Josh Dueck, Erin Rissling, Emma Duncan, Riley Zielke, Sarah Piluk, Jillian Rospad, Casey Barker, Marie Barker, Kim Gignac, Chelsea Duncan, Meg Duncan, Jamie Whiteside, Alyssa Postnikoff, Carmen Miller, Steven Kary, Carter Astleford, Lynn Howlett, Verna Brickner, Adam Gamble, Lane Sentes, Brandon Hasmatali, Curtis Lacelle, Reid Hala, Larry Moss, Clinton Fullerton, Lynn Howlett, Lynne Lawson, Penny Maelde, Jason Gamble, Mark LeBere and Lori Friars, and our clients, whose participation and support means the world to me: they have changed my life forever.

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Pamela Ollenberger

Many Feathers Flock Together

Celebrating T - Bird

MFA Thesis Exhibition
October 13 - 24, 2014

Gordon Snelgrove Gallery
University of Saskatchewan
Murray Building room 191

Hours: Monday - Friday 9:00am - 4:30pm

Reception: October 24, 7:00pm - 10:00pm

Gordon Snelgrove Gallery is supported by the Department of Art and Art History, College of Arts and Science University of Saskatchewan, with Museum Program assistance from Sask - Culture Inc (Sask Lotteries)

Many Feathers Flock Together: Celebrating T - Bird

The people in my life and my surroundings have always fascinated me. My MFA exhibition “Many Feathers Flock Together: Celebrating T-Bird” consists of a series of large paintings inspired by the relationships of the people at Camp Thunderbird, a camp for adults with intellectual disability, formed with their environment. My intention, to express ways in which we can celebrate living in a world of increasing interconnected diversity, is expressed in the body of work presented here.

This work draws upon experiences I have shared at Camp Thunderbird, during the summers of 2011 through 2014, with individuals who live with intellectual disabilities. The time I spent employed at camp has inspired me and taught me to examine the way in which I view my surroundings through a different lens. The camp is a large piece of private property situated on the edge of Candle Lake, a resort village with several provincial parks located around it. The population is made of permanent residents and those who seasonally vacation there. The lake itself is surrounded by a large boreal forest which is also a home for many types of wildlife. The camp runs during the summer season. Each week there are about twenty-seven new campers who arrive at camp for four to five weekdays. There are nine counselors, a cook, an assistant cook, a director, an assistant director, and a maintenance person employed at the camp. I was employed as a camp counselor every summer for four consecutive years. Campers typically had intellectual disabilities that included fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, autism, and Down’s syndrome. The camp is not able to accommodate people with physical disabilities as it lacks a means to facilitate walkers or wheelchairs.

As individuals we grow, and develop our ability to distinguish difference. The learned perceptions of individuality can, over time, become problematic as they can promote the development of significant, socially prejudiced associations. Interpretation of difference has challenged me to pursue complex problems of epistemology. As a result, I no longer think of individuals with intellectual disabilities as being disabled but as individuals who possess a different set of abilities. At camp, I sense that everyone there, whether it is a client, a counselor, or the director, possesses an innate ability to view their world and surroundings in a more beautiful and joyous way. Learned perspectives on difference can develop into a pessimistic frame of mind through which we view one another; however, a pessimist has the ability to become an optimist when they think about their reactions to diversity in new, or different, ways. It is valuable to acknowledge, explore, and change negative perspectives by highlighting the beauty in the differences amongst ourselves; I hope my efforts and those of others will further a paradigm shift towards an understanding of difference that embraces difference as strength.

I often incorporate personalized symbols to employ a more visual and conceptual portrait of individuals. The visual elements that have been incorporated in my work range from my own interpretations or responses within the renderings of those individuals and images or renderings that they themselves have incorporated.

I think the elements of visual ambiguity in my work will appeal to some viewers more than the explicit elements because it allows them an interpretation of the subject matter based on their own perspective and experiences. While the narrative of my work is open to individual interpretation, the eclectic visuals surrounding each person are conceived to be suggestive of the individuality and diversity of that person and the relationships I shared with them. The profound effect our surroundings and relationships have upon us can provide us with a metaphor of human individuality. At times, these

relationships leave us questioning our perceptions. Once seen, these perceptions possess a structural social significance and expressive importance; viewers can then make associations between these and certain identities, beginning to question their own perspectives of their surroundings.

I aim to acknowledge peoples' interactions with and thoughts on life, as well as the presence of the individual. In my experience, our perception or understanding of the world is derived from our own individual interests; I rely on relationships and life experiences. When I look at my surroundings I notice the way people weave on and off the paths they've chosen, shaping everyone's experience and environment. These interactions, those we share and the complex ways in which they shape us fascinate me. Our interactions have the power to change us. Capturing this interaction is vital to my art. Memories of the playful way I experienced the world and the inspiration drawn from it continue to inspire me in my current work.

I am aware that certain perspectives and perceptions found in this series of paintings address issues beyond Western cultural norms, encouraging controversial debate and discomfort in the viewer. We are asked to question what we have in common with one another, as well as what we know about our differences. A viewer's insecurities and preconceived, learned responses combined with the potential discomfort felt when we address challenging concepts of difference contribute to negative, harmful conclusions. I feel that cultural differences evolve gradually over time; for example, throughout history there have been periods of progress which incrementally influence how we view each other in society. Periods of social progress that are ideally meant to improve society broke through barriers when people started to realize that people themselves could make a difference in society. Periods such as the American Civil Rights Movement or the reform movement have benefited society to further an acceptance of differences between select

cultural representations and a greater understanding of diversity amongst one another. Through my own research I have come to a better understanding of the relationship between artist, audience, and critic. I have observed discontinuity between different perceptions people hold, and I realized addressing aspects of this in my own work, both as a source of personal development and as a way of adding value to current cultural discourse, is critical to my work.

My journey to develop a series of pieces which celebrate the individuality of people living with (primarily) intellectual disabilities has been difficult. This difficulty has arisen from past marginalization of such individuals, who have been subjectified under society's gaze and represented as subhuman. I researched several artists who faced these types of difficult issues which range from the beginning of the 20th century to the present day, including Diane Arbus, and Jérôme Bel. My current work has some relation to the culturally significant issue of 'othering,' as does the work of Arbus, and Bel. I chose to research work by Arbus, and Bel because both produced bodies of work which represent marginalized cultural identities or significant issues of stigmatized identity. Both artists address cultural difference; the basis of their work conveys subjects who have typically been categorized by society in a way which has been seen as negative. While researching other artists, I came to understand that some criticism is derived from the politics of the gaze and practices of looking. It is important to research and question these criticisms. I developed a series of questions based on my research and art practice which I hoped would give me insight into issues including cultural difference, 'othering,' and the politics of the gaze. How should an artist represent individuals who have been marginalized or represented as being 'other' in history? Is it possible to be politically incorrect with the gaze? How is it that the desire for a utopia, ideally inclusive of all people, erodes to become an exclusionary ideology? Conducting research on my chosen artists has enabled

me to make advances within my own artistic practice. Through the use of artistic media I have sought to develop strategies which creatively seek to alter the perspectives and perceptions held by people in our society about difference, identity, and individuality. After my research on the issues which relate to the cultural representation of marginalized identities that my work could be potentially confronted by, I continued to investigate, while working at Camp Thunderbird, ways to develop a series of paintings which possessed significant sensitivity and compassion for individuals who have intellectual disabilities. I have chosen to empathize with my subjects and identify with their marginalization in society rather than view them as outsiders. When we experience viewing as an activity of equals, our perspectives can be changed and challenged, and supported and enriched as an accepted and integrated concept of normalcy within society. I believe there is still a need for gradual progression towards this acceptance. In my experience, conversing about the issues with painting individuals with intellectual disabilities as the subject matter of my paintings, I have come to the realization that my efforts and intentions would not be seen as genuinely good from the majority of society; the relationships I have formed with individuals who have intellectual disabilities would not be seen as altruistic; I would risk ridicule for the display and stigmatization of these individuals' disabilities. I want my audience to view me as a humanist painter who relates well with people and has good intentions. I believe that this ridicule is a projection of the viewer based on their own insecurities, feelings, and defeatist views of themselves and others, which needs to be re-examined and shifted before an ability to view other people with a different, enriched experience is possible.

In today's culture we are exposed to more artwork and images which push or cross boundaries which renders the link between the artist and their subject more apparent and, therefore, more easily questioned by the viewer. I hope that future generations of

audiences and critics will be able to offer new perspectives on the significance of engaging marginalized subjects as a shifting demographic that will no longer need to question the trust between an artist and their subject. The lack of trust and goodwill I experienced has been instrumental in guiding the direction I have chosen to take my paintings.

Originally, I wanted to incorporate figures within my paintings, but then decided to abandon the figure due to the difficult terrain and possible ridicule by others. I then shifted my concentration to the space of the camp and creating new ways to portray the people it engaged. My decision to abandon my initial concept, to use figures in my paintings, was the result of my respect for the clients of Camp Thunderbird, and concern it would generate controversy around the clients and their families. It is important to me that I do not further marginalize groups which are already stigmatized; I value everyone attending camp as a friend, and someone who I can empathize with. I hope that someday people will really think about and question profoundly the act of excluding people who have been previously marginalized for it only increases the degree to which they are presently marginalized. In theory, does this actually further categorize and stigmatize those individuals? This series of artwork has been challenging, with many ups and downs. I have had to accept these challenges and push forward with courage and determination in the hope that people will admire these paintings and be proud of them.

Over the summer of 2013 and 2014, while working at camp, I considered different ways to encourage clients to express their own perspectives of the beauty at camp. Campers were given the opportunity to participate and interact with the art themselves; my co-workers assisted me in informing campers if they were interested in participating, there would be counselors there to offer help if it was needed. *Summer 2013 Group Project* (figure 1), was developed throughout the summer of 2013. *Summer 2014 Group Project* (figure 2), was developed during the summer of 2014. Each week there was something

added to each of the paintings by campers who chose to participate. As a group, the first thing we did (in both instances) was tie-dye the entire surface of the canvas. As the weeks progressed, campers would add an object to represent themselves. Some campers squished fabric paint onto the canvas using shaving cream, some made drawings that were transferred onto the canvas, and some simply dipped their thumbs or hands in paint and imprinted the surface to make it a part of their own. As an artist, it was a very freeing and liberating experience to allow anything to be done to these paintings. This new found freedom, and the materials used were later incorporated into every one of my paintings. The materials used were all available and found at camp.



Figure 1. Ollenberger, Pamela. *Summer 2013 Group Project*. 2013. Fabric dye and acrylic on canvas. 72 x 72".



Figure 2. Ollenberger, Pamela. *Summer 2014 Group Project*. 2013. Fabric dye, tempera and acrylic, on canvas. 72 x 72”.

To create the pieces in figures 3-5, I took a stack of disposable cameras the camp counselors had dated throughout the summer of 2013. I was able to create a timeline to locate when each photo was taken thanks to the recorded dates. I think it is important to note that all the photos were taken by the camp clients who were willing participants. Each painting consists of images taken over the course of one full day at camp. At the end

of the summer I developed the photos and made collages, one for each day, using every images dated for that day of camp. Each collage was then printed onto paper and then transferred onto a canvas surface using Golden Fluid Matte Medium: a liquid which works by transferring printed images from one surface to another. It emulsifies the ink on the paper, allowing the ink to be transferred to the canvas surface. After the medium dries, you are able to peel the paper off the canvas. This method does not always result in perfect transfers, and, as you may notice, there are some areas with no image. I personally find the imperfections appealing because they add complexity and more visual interest to the images. My experiences with client participation have taught me that when these individuals are enabled to make their own images — as with the photographs — their unique, and often ignored, perspectives and ways of seeing become visible.

I realize that I am a bit of a romantic when it comes to painting. Romanticism was a new movement in Europe during the late 18th century.

The Romantic Movement was a reaction against much of the thought of the Enlightenment and the social transformation of the Industrial Revolution. Romanticism represented a turn toward “absolute inwardness.” Romantic artists thought the imagination was superior to reason as a means to perceive the world. Instead of controlling nature, they believed, people would be awestruck by it. They were also deeply interested in folklore, folk songs, and fairy tales. Romantics shared an alienation from what they considered to be cold rationalism that characterized the industrial economy and Enlightenment thought.¹

As previously mentioned, I have an interest in viewing the world through different lenses in order to try and relate to, or understand other people’s experiences. Figures 3-6 draw upon the Romantics’ idea of absolute inwardness as a way of perceiving the world which allows me to imagine camp life through the lens of the campers. I have found using

¹ Donald Kagen & Steven Ozment & Frank M. Turner & Alison Frank. *The Western Heritage: Eleventh Edition. (Volume C: Since 1789, Peason Education, Inc., 2013), 602.*

imagination, rather than logic, to be more valuable in trying to understand what it is to experience camp life as a camper.



Figure 3. Ollenberger, Pamela. *Perspective Inwardness I: August 20, 2013*. 2013. Image transfer and acrylic on canvas. 72 x 72”.

Figure 4. Ollenberger, Pamela. *Perspective Inwardness II: August 20, 2013*. 2013. Image transfer and acrylic on canvas. 72 x 72”.



Figure 5. Ollenberger, Pamela. *Perspective Inwardness: July 9, 2013*. 2013. Image transfer and acrylic on canvas. 72 x 72”.

My large landscape paintings (figures 6-9) are depictions of the campsite pictorially heightened utilizing a type of realist vocabulary. These paintings depict everyday objects found at camp: canoes, tie-dyed fabrics, beach toys, and a reference to the activity of the participants through their absence rather than presence. Figure 6 and 7 are meant to convey the fun nature and the play at camp. Contrary to many people's expectations of a camp for adults, everyone there enjoys playing in the sand, going canoeing, and taking a dip down the slide. In figures 8 and 9, a clothes line is filled with tie-dyed t-shirts that each camper made themselves. I feel that each shirt is a work of beautiful art on its own, and worked perfectly to represent each individual who was at camp for the week. The camp clothes line is hung in front of a bridge, which I conceive of as a metaphor to convey crossing into a new era of acceptance and coming together as a society.



Figure 6. Ollenberger, Pamela. *The Canoe And You I*. 2013. Acrylic and fabric dye on canvas. 72 x 72".

Figure 7. Ollenberger, Pamela. *The Canoe And You II*. 2013. Acrylic and fabric dye on canvas. 72 x 72".



Figure 8. Ollenberger, Pamela. *Where We Hang Out I*. 2013. Acrylic and fabric dye on canvas. 72 x 72".

Figure 9. Ollenberger, Pamela. *Where We Hang Out II*. 2013. Acrylic and fabric dye on canvas. 72 x 72".

I have used two archival paintings from this project to generate new subject matter. I had originally planned to have an individual in figure 10 and 12. As previously expressed, I abandoned the figure in a literal sense and sought to portray individuals in other ways. There is a silhouette in this painting (figure 10) of an individual. The silhouette suggests the presence of an individual and also an absence. I wanted this painting to convey the ability to view our surroundings in a more diverse, beautiful, and joyous way. The grey rocks suggest a typical perspective someone might have about rocks: that they are boring, grey, and not very beautiful. As the rocks progress toward the right they turn into beautiful, colourful, magical, rocks which I have intended to suggest a rock castle. The change in the perspective of the rocks is a metaphor for perceiving our

surroundings and one another's differences as beautiful things. Camp Thunderbird is a place of beauty, a place where people build beautiful rock castles together.



Figure 10. Ollenberger, Pamela. *Building A Beautiful Rock Castle I*. 2014. Image transfer and acrylic on canvas. 72 x 72".

Figure 11. Ollenberger, Pamela. *Building A Beautiful Rock Castle II*. 2013. Acrylic and fabric dye on canvas. 72 x 72".



Figure 12. Ollenberger, Pamela. *Utopia?* 2014. Image transfer and acrylic on canvas. 72 x 72".

In this painting (figure 12) to emphasize my earlier statement that questions whether it is better to include portrayals of those who have been marginalized or exclude them. Personally, I feel that although this painting uses very saturated colour that imbues it with an inviting presence, there is still an emptiness which can be sensed.

Perhaps this is the result of knowledge gained through experience that it is the people who come to Camp Thunderbird that make it have the vibrancy and life that it has.

Every piece I have produced in this series uses techniques distinctly unlike those in any of my other paintings. The large size of the paintings forced me to handle paint in a very different manner. Also, I used (and loved) various mediums that were previously unfamiliar, such as masking fluid, tempera, fabric dye, shaving cream, some of which required me to learn new skills such as how to transfer images. The use of these new materials resulted from my desire to devise a new type of portrait that represented and expressed the individual through their absence.

The paintings that I have produced for this exhibition are the product of my exploration of the relationships formed with the individuals who have been a big part of my life. The content of the paintings as a whole can be identified as a unifying theme which celebrates the diversity of humanity in a place where individuals, for a short time, come together and live harmoniously. The exhibition's title, *Many Feathers Flock Together*, is a play on the phrase "birds of a feather flock together," meaning that people who are similar come together to associate with each other, I do not believe this true. Individuals who are different can come together, learn from each other, and grow from their experiences. These paintings have formally been investigations, through both technique and content. This body of work has been extremely challenging and informative for me as an artist. I hope this body of work translates the beauty of experiencing diversity, gives voice to those whose voice may lack in strength and power, and addresses the complex nature of our relationships with others.

Bibliography

Kagen, Donald, & Ozment, Steven & Turner, Frank M. & Frank, Alison. The Western Heritage: Eleventh Edition. Volume C: Since 1789, Pearson Education, Inc., 2013.