

*Search Party*

A Video and Installation Exhibition

by

Tait Wilman

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I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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## **Abstract**

*Search Party* is an installation and video exhibition that explores my identity—how it is constructed and consumed, and how representations of landscapes and discourses of ‘Canadiana’ play in its formation. Since moving to Southern Ontario from Alberta, I feel lost without the Rockies. Attempting to comfort this disorientation, I developed the idea of an alter ego or a persona, a ‘stand-in’ fake for the real. The development of a persona allows for an examination and questioning of the troubled relationship that I have with my own identity. Throughout this body of work, my alter ego attempts to navigate the landscape in search for a place of comfort and a relationship with space. Through the guise of memory and souvenir, the exhibition uses personal memory, strategies of re-enactment, and various familiar display methodologies to explore the aestheticization and commodification of identity, land, and nature.

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## **Dedications**

I would like to dedicate my thesis exhibition to my friends and family. To my parents: Michelle and Robert Wilman who have always loved and supported my creative path without any doubts. My sister Nateish who is a constant inspiration and sounding board for my ideas. My brother Logan for teaching me to shoot beer cans and cheering me on from afar. My best friend Mia who drops everything when I need her advice and love. To Brenda and Diane, whom I consider aunts, for their support and kind words. To Kole, who has given me immense support through this entire process along with helping me squeeze my rock sculpture into my tiny Fiat. Thank you for always believing in me even if my ideas seemed strange and crazy and for helping me along the way, I love you all to the moon and back.

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## **Introduction**

*Search Party* is an installation and video exhibition that explores discursive trajectories located between identity and landscape. The exhibition uses personal memory, humour, strategies of re-enactment, and methodologies of display, to probe and critique ideas of ‘Canadiana’ (the controlled, politically problematic, and marketable representation of Canada), the lack of equity and inclusivity in Canadian settler-colonial culture, and the images of gender in popularized versions of the so-called country-Western culture. As a Canadian descendant of English, Ukrainian, and Romanian settlers, I grew up in Western Canada and moved East to further my education. Since moving to the East I have been working towards this exhibition. The exhibition reflects my discomfort with my identity, my attachment to home and land, and my attempt to challenge colonialism through my artistic practice. I address this discomfort through constructed representations of the West, performing through constructed identities, and investigating, through both installation and video, my ambiguous relationship to nature and place.

To traverse this complicated and uncomfortable ground, I actively adopt the role of the imposter and attempt to construct both a physical and an embodied sense of place. I seek landscapes where I have no ownership, and attempt to feel at home. I hide under a fake rock to try to blend in. I wear a high cut bathing suit and cowgirl fringe to allow myself agency while performing to video, but still fall between the space of predator and prey. In combination with the video works, I created colourful abstractions of mountains cut from automotive steel, which also function as highly polished shelving. This suite of sculptures relates to the negotiation of a constructed leisure and the natural landscapes that surround a significant part of Canada’s highways. Most Canadians drive to experience nature, to ski, to hike and to participate in other



outdoor activities, but they also experience nature *en route*. I would argue that these highway adjacent landscapes viewed from the position of cars, function as picture-perfect, postcard-like souvenirs, and are often used as one of Canada's selling points. Signage in green, blue, orange, yellow, or black and white along the roadside frames various constructs of experiences such as lookouts, campgrounds, points of interest, historical sites, gas stations, and gift shops. This concept of Canada as both wilderness and place of outdoor leisure rubs up against more sinister narratives of settler colonialism and the commodification and exploitation of nature (especially in Alberta). A perception of leisure as a consumable product gets disseminated through advertisements, campground passes, and tourist keepsakes. In *Search Party*, through the guise of memory, the handmade, to mass production, I reinterpret the landscape in ways that positions it as souvenir. The audience has the option of taking a memento from this constructed event in the form of a postcard adorned with images of the *City Cowgirl* persona and her costume ephemera. I chose to title the exhibition, *Search Party* as the term relates to the act of searching for something or someone that is lost, hidden or missing. In the exhibition, search implies the action of looking or seeing as I attempt to navigate Southern Ontario. The word party references leisure, and enjoyment, much like bush parties that are a common pastime in the prairies. In spite of this reference to community, in both the video and installation works I am alone, searching for something that can't seem to be found.

## **The Backdrop**

Identities that are usually associated with the landscape and culture of Western Canada, are constructed and consumed in a particular manner and fit within a broader discourse of what is usually termed ‘Canadiana’. Webster’s Dictionary defines ‘Canadiana’ as: “materials (historical documents and artifacts) concerning or characteristic of Canada, its civilisation, or its culture; also: a collection of such materials” (Merriam-Webster. Web). My interest in exploring these discursive trajectories between identity and landscape stems from lived experience: the majority of my life I lived in Western Canada where I participated in homogenized cultural and touristic events associated with the West. Buying into these activities as a child and a teenager, exposed me to the tropes of ‘Canadiana’ that surface in my work.

I grew up in Calgary and dressing up like a cowgirl is something that I’ve done since I was a child. The greatest celebration for the city is the Calgary Stampede—a ten-day celebration with pancake breakfasts, bucking broncos, chuckwagon races, midway rides, and deep-fried foods. The pedagogy of the Stampede encourages dressing up as a cowgirl, then reinforces that doing so is both acceptable and desirable. Every year my mom would take my sister and I to Sears to pick out a new parade hat even though they were always the same—a straw cowboy hat, with a plastic sheriff’s badge glued to the front and a ribbon with a red or blue whistle. Later in life, the Stampede was an excuse to dress up Western and go on a ten-day bender. The Stampede unfolds as a public performance separated into two themes: The Wild West, complete with cowboys, agriculture, and Stampede princesses, and the counterpart, is represented by a narrative of nature, pre-industrialization, and Indigenous

tales. The Indigenous community participates in the Stampede by gathering at the *Indian Village*, a space where the five nations, Tsuu T'ina, Piikani, Stoney, Kainai, and Siksika erect tipis and perform powwows and showcase traditional arts and crafts (Indian Village. Web). The Indigenous community is also represented by the Indian Princess, who is chosen by the five nations to represent the Treaty 7 as part of the Stampede royalty (Indian Village. Web). The Indian Princess's role is to educate audiences about "the rich, vibrant First Nations culture and welcoming visitors from around the world to the Indian Village and the Calgary Stampede" (Calgary Stampede Indian Princess. Web). The Stampede Royalty is comprised of four members: two princesses, a queen and the Indian Princess to promote Western heritage and values (Calgary Stampede Royalty. Web). These Stampede staples have been around since I was a child, and I believe audiences have become complacent to these re-enactments and semantics. In the era of truth and reconciliation, it's time to lose the historic Cowboy-Indian narrative.

And yet, the cowgirl stereotype is something that I can't seem to escape; it provides a vision of confidence and personal freedom that is present even as I question it. Yvonne Tasker discusses gender identity and freedom as they are enacted within the genre of the Western in her book *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema*, where she states,

If the Western is noteworthy for its foregrounding of masculinity as a form of performance, which, at least potentially, links the showgirl and the cowboy, it is also and pre-eminently a genre in which freedom is the central term. The Western is a genre in which white men and women achieve freedom in class terms that is simply unimaginable in other genres (Tasker 53).

In terms of gender identity, dressing up is central to Western ideology. I joke that you can take the girl out of Alberta, but you can't take the Alberta out of the girl. I am still drawn to the boots, fringe, and braids. Being a fake, temporary cowgirl is fun; you get to eat pickle corndogs,

two-step and enjoy carnival rides. But there is a darker side to the imitation cowgirl; she's a lie who constructs her identity through a performance of stereotypes. I identify with many Western typecasts due to the representational narratives that were repeatedly portrayed through media, advertising, events, and fashion trends, along with the city's branding. The Calgary Stampede is an annual event where the city's brand fails to redress its colonial past. As Marilyn Burgess explains in *Canadian "Range Wars": Struggles over Indian Cowboys*:

At the Calgary Stampede, the parade, the layout of the fairgrounds, the rodeo, and the media all lay out a particular "pedagogy" of regional origins, articulated to national narratives of identity. In the story as they tell it, Indian people were virtually extinct at the time of the arrival of white settlers. The first of the latter were the cowboys, who arrived together with the fur traders and the North West Mounted Police (Burgess 1).

I am both a witness and a participant in this pedagogy of mediated regional narratives. The Stampede demonstrates a Eurocentric patriarchal structure based on dominance over land and beast—it celebrates masculinity in all its forms. The misogynistic and hyper-sexualized attitude that accompanies the Stampede was brought to the public's attention in 2017 with the installation *This is What It Feels Like* created by Next Gen Men (Dempster. Web). Next Gen Men is a non-for-profit group focusing on gender education and equality. *This is What It Feels Like* critiques the objectification of women in public spaces. The installation invites viewers to enter a trailer and, once inside, alone in the dark, all you hear are recordings of catcalls. The experience of being inside this installation provides the witness with an approximation of the experience of having unwanted comments directed towards you because of your gender. (Dempster. Web).

The macho romanticized cowboy (and cowgirl) narrative is a whitewashed myth that sublimates the history of Indigenous people to foster frontier folklore and a vision of Canada that is both white and male. As a female and a person who seeks solidarity with Indigenous

challenges, these narrative privileges a vision of Canada that does not include me. In order to navigate this uninhabitable “territory,” I choose to embody a hybrid persona because it allows me to explore the push and pull relationship that I have with Westernized culture. Thus, the backdrop to this exhibition is my lived experience—blown apart, critiqued, looked under, unpacked and self-examined. Transplanted from West to East, I am attempting to come to terms with why I have never fit in here. Using humour, and a DIY aesthetic, I adopt a constructed identity that I seek to dislodge at the same time. *Search Party*, therefore, is an extension of myself: it tells a story that is part truth and part fiction, and through the intersections between them, attempts to open up a larger question of Canadian identity and its many mythologies.

## East Fakes West

When entering the gallery, the viewer encounters identity explorations told through two video works, *City Cowgirl* and *Lost Without You*. In *City Cowgirl* (Figure 1) dressed as my fake persona (in fringe jacket, cowboy hat and boots, and bright bathing suit) I wander around a boggy wooded area without purpose. The video is located inside a make shift hunting blind, and in order to view the video, the viewer must walk up a set of steps. The blind mimics rural architecture, hunting blinds, ice fishing huts, outhouses and tree forts. Once inside the blind, the viewer will encounter two holes drilled through the back wall to view the video much like a peepshow. When they opt to climb up the structure to peer through the holes, the viewer becomes complicit in the act of voyeurism.

*Lost Without You* (Figure 2) is a looped video with long takes of landscape shot from a fixed point of view. The scenes are of rural Southern Ontario landscapes and while some incorporate trees, large stones, snow-covered fields, others present void natural space. What is consistent in all of the scenes is a fake rock. The fake rock appears, sometimes resting within the space, and at other times growing limbs. Female legs are exposed with black cowboy boots covering her feet, and arms protrude from the sculpture wrapped in a fringe jacket. The rock at times attempts to explore the natural environment but appears to be lonely and lost. The title hints at this sense of loneliness and the unsettling feelings of not belonging; it is directly linked to my feelings of being lost without the mountains since moving to Ontario.

On the gallery walls are a collection of colourful metal shapes which mimic tamed, clean-cut landscape forms and reference souvenirs and ‘Canadiana’ memorabilia. The metal shapes entitled *Sisters* after the *Three Sisters* mountain peaks near Canmore, Alberta, (an hour outside of

Calgary) act as simplified replicas of the physical mountain range. Each piece of sheet metal becomes a sculptural object through the fold and is painted with colours that are associated with nature, camping equipment, neon safety gear and the construction industry (fluorescent orange, neon pink, metallic chrome, lagoon, golden sunset and rebar green). Spray paint is an authoritative material that is often used to mark territory—property lines, hiking trails, graffiti and construction sites. My use of spray paint and choice of colours, speaks to concepts of both demarcation and camouflage. Some of these display forms hold nothing, while others hold pseudo-replicas of the forms made in ceramic. Placed among the scattering of ceramic shapes, are miniature figurative sculptures of rocks with legs protruding from the mass. Created from Styrofoam, the process involves carving a rock structure based on my memories of the Rockies and attaching girl's limbs (legs and/or arms) made from craft oven-bake clay. These rock girl sculptures act as mementos, mimicking the persona in *Lost Without You*. They are scaled down to be handheld, thus becoming an object of desire or a reminder of the journey spent with the rock covered *City Cowgirl*. Accompanying the videos and objects is a handcrafted sandwich board. The sandwich board, a leftover from retail used to advertise, promote, draw customers in or offer up memorabilia, holds a variety of postcards. The postcards present photographs of my persona and the ephemera she uses to adorn herself (the fringe jacket, boots, and swimsuit). These objects are takeaways—souvenirs from the exhibition.



*Figure 1. City Cowgirl. Tait Wilman. Video still. 2017.*



*Figure 2. .Lost Without You. Tait Wilman. Video still. 2017.*





*Figure 3. Search Party. Tait Wilman. Installation View. 2018.*



*Figure 4. City Cowgirl. Tait Wilman. Installation View. 2018.*

## **Rock and Roll, Costumes, Hybridity, and the Imposter**

In *City Cowgirl* my alter ego wears braided pigtails, a pair of second-hand black cowboy boots, a vintage brown suede fringed jacket, a soft cream-coloured cowgirl hat, and a fluorescent pink swimsuit (with the text, *summer sixteen*, in reference to Drake's album from the summer of 2016). I spontaneously dressed up in a bathing suit in the studio one day, adding a fringe jacket, cowboy boots, and hat and began developing a persona that I later named the *City Cowgirl*. The persona has evolved as I have used her for multiple performances. The video in the exhibition was filmed during a performance art residency on Bojana Videkanic's property in Bancroft Ontario. As part of the residency, I spent an afternoon wandering through a boggy forest with no particular actions planned besides aimless exploration. Occasionally I make eye contact with the camera— it's clear that I'm aware that I am being watched, but I'm okay with that. This is in part due to the ridiculousness of the entire situation with the outfit coupled with the banal actions I perform and the landscape that surrounds me.

In *City Cowgirl*, the camera shifts as if the viewer is holding binoculars. I occasionally make eye contact with the camera, and I counter the gaze by continuing my meanderings unfazed by the presence of a voyeur. Clearly, I am vulnerable due to my exposed legs (which were all cut up by the end of the day due to the prickly shrubs), my brightly coloured swimsuit, and my “amateur” interaction with the landscape. I have no items of survival, so either I am in danger or simply looking for a place to set up camp. I am aware of being watched or possibly hunted, and within the confines of the duck blind, there is the added inference of the male gaze. My actions are ambiguous, regardless of these ambiguities, the fact remains that I own my engagement with the landscape.

## Playing Cowgirl

Using stereotypes, I can examine my relationship to the Western imagery of a cowgirl—a fabricated figure of the so-called “true Albertan” completed by a backdrop that advertises the province as a place with a deep connection to its natural landscapes. I consider the cowboy hat, fringe jacket, boots, and bathing suit to be an empowering costume for myself. There are cinematic and real-life models for the self-directed cowgirl, one could reference the iconic Calamity Jane or certainly Annie Oakley. Oakley embodied a persona that represented freedom: she was a rebel, a cross-dresser (Tasker, 60), she wasn’t tied down by a man or a family, and she mixed Western wear with Indigenous embellishments. Given her particular image, Annie Oakley was a prevalent persona for young girls to consume. This is exemplified in Ann McGrath’s text *Being Annie Oakley*, where she argues that Oakley created an image of freedom, competition, and strength for females:

Annie Oakley’s image was individualistic, competitive, and “free”. Her legend was created by repeated stage performances that were conditional upon the various contemporary venues featuring liminal stories of the historical frontier. Oakley is usually represented as a girl rather than a woman or wife, and never as a mother. Her physically adept, free, emancipated, and modern image was well suited to becoming a rebellious icon of the modern, New World girl/woman throughout Europe and parts of Asia. Unencumbered by staff, children, or (visible) husband, and wielding frightening loud and smoky weapons, her realm of authority was not the home but the wide world outside. (McGrath, 210)

Similar to Oakley embodying a powerful image of freedom and modernity, I find dressing like a cowgirl to be a powerful act of self-determination—perhaps it’s the ability to put on a persona that isn’t shy, who knows she’s ‘bad-ass,’ and doesn’t care how others perceive her. We’re used to seeing the sexy cowgirl portrayed to us through advertisements, movies, or television shows. While Annie Oakley wasn’t conventionally beautiful, she was independent, and she was a hybrid of masculine and feminine. Being female and using my body in my work in itself can be a

political/feminist act—it can be transgressive, much like how Western cowboy/girl image is also politically charged. I want to challenge the patriarchal Western system by embodying a stereotype and taking back my power as a woman by making decisions on how I represent myself. Until recently I would not have labeled myself as a feminist. Yet as a millennial I believe there is a constant search for identity through social pressures. The last several years have been marked by a constant state of crisis when it comes to female bodies, and bodies of those who are marginalized (#metoo, Trump, Womens’ marches, etc.). Through the use of my rock sculpture in *Lost Without You*, my persona’s identity becomes further unfixed. By combining nature and human and covering my face the City Cowgirl becomes ambiguous. This mash-up and ambiguity further complicates the reading of the cowgirl stereotype.

In both of my personas, I combine Western tropes with pop culture identifiers from my generation to create a mash-up or hybrid identity. A contemporary symbol that embodies a hybrid identity is Canadian hip-hop artist and actor Aubrey Drake Graham (aka Drake). I discovered Drake as a teenager when he appeared in the television series *Degrassi*. *Degrassi* is perhaps one of the most internationally recognized aspects of Canadian popular culture (Rintoul. Web). Drake, who is both Black and Jewish, is often celebrated as a multicultural Canadian icon. In *Musical Artists Capitalizing on Hybrid Identities: A Case Study of Drake the “Authentic” “Black” “Canadian” “Rapper”* Amara Pope argues that Drake uses his hybrid identity as a marketing strategy to gain popularity through ethono-marketing. (Pope. 4). For example, in his video *Started from the Bottom* (2013) many scenes situated within Toronto to capitalize on Canadian nationalism, from the Parks and Recreation soccer field, to a view of the skyline. There is also a scene where he is working in an Ontario Shopper’s Drug Mart. By portraying himself as both a famous hip-hop artist and a Canadian living an ordinary life, Drake

has become a souvenir of the new Canada, an artist who is able to operate in both hip-hop circles and mainstream culture. The text *summer sixteen* on my bathing suit makes an obscure reference to Drake, but also to Toronto, and by using this reference, I am taking the Western cowgirl out of the west and bringing her east to the city.

The imposter or persona is not a new phenomenon in the world of visual culture and art. Adrian Stimson is an artist who effectively uses a persona and is also from the same region of the prairies as myself. Stimson is a member of the Siksika (Blackfoot) nation. His work investigates identity construction through the hybridization of the Indian cowboy, the Shaman, and Two Spirit being. Stimson has created a persona called *Buffalo Boy* (Figure 3) (whose alter ego is *Shaman Exterminator*). Donning fishnet stockings, pearls, and a buffalo g-string *Buffalo Boy* uses campy humour and cross-dressing to challenge Canada's colonial history. Stimson creates a hybrid persona which breaks down binaries, blends cultural references through the use of actions and costume, and blurs the boundaries between the fake and the real.

The high cut bathing suit and the fetishized western wear are conventionally associated with young attractive female bodies in popular culture. These garments are overtly feminine, and for me in my role as an imposter, they are personally empowering. They allow me to challenge the male gaze and the hegemonic discourses of the sexualized female in humorous ways. When you unpack Stimson's persona, you see that he similarly uses pearls and fishnets. The pearls imply colonial wealth and the fishnets relate to subcultures of sex workers, punk rock, and hyper-sexualized female legs. My imposter cover-up is the Drake-obsessed urban cowgirl. Employing similar tools of hybridization (the mashup and assemblage of archetype) allows me to explore my own identity through a constructed persona which can resist easy consumption. The aesthetic of a stampede cowgirl is one of a sexy cowgirl: a girl wearing lingerie and Daisy Duke

cut-offs. This sexualized female attire comes into play with my swimsuit worn in both videos and the 90's high cut and style references other sexualized women from the 90's (the era I was born in) such as Pamela Anderson, who played CJ Parker on the television show, *Baywatch* (1992-1997) (Figure 4). The bathing suit is a highly sexualized, visibly revealing garment—another costume that allows me to question my female, twenty-something, Canadian identity. Instead of the cowgirl's denim short-shorts, the bathing suit results in a hot pink bum that pokes out from underneath the rock costume in my video, which signals to how visual representation often fetishizes the female figure in Western and pop cultures. This combination forms an absurd and ambiguous persona of a girl searching for her place within society and landscape.



*Figure 5. Buffalo Boy. Adrian Stimson. Photograph.*



Figure 6. C.J Parker in Baywatch. Pamela, Anderson. 1992. (in comparison to) City Cowgirl (self-portrait). Tait Wilman. 2017.

Nancy Davidson, a contemporary American artist, also uses bright colours and personal narratives that deal with femininity, the hybrid, the discomfort of sexualized bodies, and Western imagery. Davidson is a sculptor living in New York. Her exhibition *Ridin' High* at Lord Ludd Gallery in 2016 involved an installation of brightly coloured inflatable sculptures and ropes. New York curator and writer, Andria Hickey, described her response to Davidson's work in relation to America's obsession with pop culture by stating:

I can't help but think about Kim Kardashian when I look at Nancy Davidson's sculptures. Not necessarily the person, but the form —that shiny, plastic, oiled-up, ballooning, photo-shopped version of Kim Kardashian that tried to break the internet. It's not just that many of Davidson's inflatable sculptures are bound and tied until they resemble an oversized (expanding?), apple bottom, it's also the artist's astute understanding of popular culture, spectacle, and kitsch, and her dexterous approach to malleability of latex and air (Hickey, Web).

Davidson's approach to the lexicon of Western stereotypes and the sexualized nature of female representation in these stereotypes references advertisements, carnivals and pop culture. Her inflatable sculptures are large-scale and comical, taking on the role of various female accessories such as thongs, lace stockings, and hot pants (Figure 5).



*Figure 7. Overtly Natural, Nancy Davidson. 1993.*

Her larger-than-life approach to sculpture is enticing with vibrant colours and adornments, however the scale and sexual qualities create an uncomfortable feeling. This unease is a feeling that I want to create in my own installations and performances. At first, I want them to seem funny and comfortable with their highly designed aesthetic, however the longer one interacts with the work, the more one begins to question what's going on. Like Davidson, identity construction, consumption and fetish become the elephant in the room. I understand that using the bathing suit and exposing my legs fetishize my body, however it speaks to a woman's right to self-determination—to have autonomy over her own body, to self-direct and to represent herself as she sees fit.



In *The Object* Anthony Hudek explains that in the late 1970s the male gaze fetishized the entire female body. Hudek also discusses the power that object possess, specifically objects associated with the female body.

Like the toy, the fetish exerts a transformative power upon itself as well as other objects and subjects. The fetishist, in Freudian psychoanalysis, is someone (presumed male) who, out of fear of castration, invests in objects (often one related to female attire, like shoes) with erotic characteristics. By extension, particularly in the late 1970s and 1980s, the male gaze was seen as an objectifying one, fetishizing entire female bodies through language and representation. But as the subject finds itself increasingly ‘mired’, as Hito Steyerl argues, “in its own contradictions”, and the object less dependent on it, the fetish becomes a double-edged instrument in the hands of those cognizant of its power: while Alexis Hunter and Ana Godel represent shoes to indict them as targets or objectifying male desire, Sherrie Levine’s multiplication of shoes or ready-mades plays on the substitutive quality of fetish (Hudek 22-23).

Davidson uses the presence of lace, tongs, and nylon to yield erotic power. In my case, the bathing suit adds an element of hyper-femininity and humour, similar to Lori Blondeau’s photographs of *The Lonely Surfer Squaw*, a persona that addresses the presence of Canadian racism and colonialism in popular culture (Figure 6). *The Lonely Surfer Squaw* is a photograph of Blondeau, an Indigenous woman posing in a beaver-skin bikini with a gigantic pink surfboard in the snow. Through the language of the pin-up girl, this piece depicts the stereotypes of a colonial past that are still present today. Lynne Bell discusses Blondeau’s various personas in her article *Scandalous Personas, Difficult Knowledge, Restless Images*:

No account of Blondeau’s performance practice is complete without mention of her sassy and irreverent personas *COSMOSQUAW* (1996-) and *The Lonely Surfer Squaw* (1997-). With these two personas, Blondeau takes on the hegemonic white aesthetics of contemporary media culture, grafting her own body onto iconic images of white pin-up girls. [...] “It’s a photograph of me as a 1950s or 1960s surfin’ babe—only I’m an Indian woman standing on the prairies in the middle of winter!” Blondeau explains (Bell N.pg).

Blondeau's use of personas to create sassy, tongue-in-cheek humour allows her to discuss how Western stereotypes have affected her personal views on her identity, and how the majority of white culture perceives her body.



Figure 8. *Lonely Surfer Squaw*. Lori Blondeau. 1997.

Growing up on the prairies, I am conflicted by my own attraction to Western stereotypes and the colonial implications that come with the Western aesthetic. Western role-playing is gendered and scripted, and innocuously embedded in daily routine. Ask any Calgarian if they learned how to do the *Texas Line Dance* in elementary school, and most would say yes. The cowgirl is “the” female character in the Western narrative. She barrel-races, performs aerobics, rides bareback etc. Consequently, I feel like a con artist. I identify with this cowgirl stereotype even though I have never ridden a horse. Gabrielle L’Hirondelle Hill and Sophie McCall are the editors of a collection of writings on art works that interrogate the contemporary

era of reconciliation in Canada entitled *The Land We Are*. They discuss how the concept of the con man has shaped cultural conventions:

The case of the con man shows how the impostor narrative has shaped the American cultural imaginary. It highlights the symbolic economy at work in identity formation and the cultural specifics of how selves are made in North America. Other forms of the impostor narrative, such as racial passing, cross-dressing, or going Native, are equally indicative of identity categories and conventions of constituting the self (McCall 18).

This stereotypical colonial con man performance is a menace, as it replaces reality with identity categories. For example, it allows for the erasing of Canada's Indigenous history by promoting the friendly, sanitized whitewashed version, a narrative that makes me want to crawl under a rock and hide. Much as Lori Blondeau created a persona to explore identity and expectations, Camille Turner uses her persona, *Miss Canadiana*, to assert her body and Blackness into Canadian culture. (Figure 7). Turner states: "my image as Miss Canadiana points to the contradiction of the Canadian mythology. My body, as a representation of Canadian heritage, is surprising only because Blackness is perceived as foreign in Canada" (Turner. Web). This performative persona speaks to Turner's experience with bigotry while growing up in Hamilton, Ontario (Turner. Web). Dressing in a red gown, sash, and tiara, Turner inserts her identity into public space where her authoritative persona allows viewers to believe she is *Miss Canadiana*. She presents her true identity in a manner that pokes fun at the viewers' expectations and subverts and problematizes racism and classism to stake a claim in Canadian pageantry, and in Canadian identity. For myself, when embodying the performed self (as in the swimsuit wearing cowgirl under a rock), I want to speak to the burden of accountability, feelings of personal guilt, as well as a sense of not knowing what to do. The ambiguity and contradictions that my persona and my performativity embody stem from a sense of placelessness. I am vulnerable as I carry the

burden of the West while seeking to remove my privilege and power. Dualities are always at play through engagement with, and exploration of, my personal vulnerability.



Figure 9. Miss Canadiana. Camille Turner. Photograph. 2002.

## **Rocks as a Sense of Place**

Rocks can be mountains or pebbles. They are used as markers and reminders; we can hide under rocks, and we can be curious about what's under them. Both the physical presence of stones and the symbolic nature of their form resulted in the development of the rock-like sculptures in my work. In *Lost Without You* the rock has become a container capable of housing my body, though not quite all of it. With my protruding limbs, both it and I become caricatures, which in turn exaggerates my own body. In *On Longing: Narrative of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Susan Stewart addresses this concept of perception of place through the body when she writes:

When the body is the primary mode of perceiving scale, exaggeration must take place in relation to the balance of measurement offered as the body extends into the space of immediate experience. But paradoxically, the body itself is necessarily exaggerated as soon as we have an image of the body, an image which is projection or objectification of the body into the world. Thus, the problems in imagining the body are symptomatic of the problems in imagining the self as place, object, and agent at once (Stewart 132).

My body becomes implicated within *Lost Without You* as the rock grows limbs. Using my body, I can explore the stereotypes of country Western identity and the struggles I have with it. I use my body to survey a sense of self and place. This longing for a non-constructed experience of place and identity is something I will continue to search for. By dressing up as a rock, an object that relates to multiple locations and moments, I am able to further my impostor character by hiding my identity. My miniature rock girl sculptures also take a form of an imposter through the use of materials that mimic natural forms. Styrofoam imitates a rock, spray paint acts like chrome, and craft clay looks like ceramics.

The rock girl sculptural objects reference the second video work in the exhibition, *Lost Without You*. This video is composed of a series of short vignettes that depict a human-

sized constructed rock within a variety of banal southern Ontario landscapes experiencing changing weather conditions. At some point within each video, the rock shifts from a sculpture to a performative object as the rock stands up, to reveal the girl (i.e., my alter ego the City Cowgirl) who hides inside. As I/she moves around, we get glimpses of my/her fringed jacket sleeves, bare legs with black cowboy boots, and bits of the bathing suit. The rock resembles something that is familiar—it mimics weight and suggests a burden, yet it is light and lined with felt. Made from chicken wire, spray foam, and papier-mâché the imposter rock reveals its DIY aesthetic when you look up-close, but from afar it is a convincing dupe. From a purely subjective point of view, the rock references the Rockies, landmarks, and memories of constructed landscapes such as the ones found in zoos or amusement parks that I have visited since I was a child. The play between real and fake is enacted as the rock which initially sits still in the landscape, seemingly grows limbs, wanders about and tries to find a spot where it fits in. As one watches the video they witness the I/she covered by a rock endlessly attempting to find a place of comfort. This interplay of gender, landscape, and expectations links to *Calendar Girls*, a video by Canadian artist Lisa Birke. Birke consistently uses herself as the protagonist in all of her videos, addressing the representation of women in relation to landscape. Birke examines notions of ‘self’ through the lens of gender, cultural tropes, and female representation (Birke. Web.). In *Calendar Girls* (Figure 8), she uses these concepts to create a tragic-comic, humanizing experience for the viewer. A female form, standing alone the landscape, dressed up in different outfits. Each woman(Birke) has a different object on top of her head: a pylon on the figure standing in a corn field, a cardboard box on top of Birke dressed in a black tank top, a red skirt, black tights and white gloves, etc. The female figures stand still within the natural surroundings,

and suddenly the figures begin to clumsily dance as if they are interpreting the space and attire they find themselves in. The piece is humorous and yet sad. These women are alone in the natural space, exposed to the elements and their vision is hidden. Birke states that “a humorous spectacle reveals the fallacy of the selfie and the mythos of objectification while restoring the humanness of the stripped-down Calendar Girl” (Birke. Web.).



Figure 10. Lisa Birke. *Calendar Girls*. Video Still. 2014

In the video *Lost Without You* I too struggle to move through nature encumbered by a sculpture which covers 50% of my body and has no eye holes. I navigate through the landscape unable to see anything besides my feet. I often stumble and walk into trees and shrubs. The rock costume is awkward and disorienting: sounds are muffled, and it's dark, the ground shifts under my feet, and I have no sense of direction. The rock girl is in a funny yet sad space. Due to the structure of the exaggerated body, my arms rest strangely on the armholes, and all I can see are my feet. Before putting on the rock, I plan my trajectory within the landscape however once inside I have to give into the rock and wander. I struggle

to locate a space where I feel comfortable enough to spend a period of time, however, nowhere feels safe and welcoming.

In a similar vein, Canadian artist duo Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan echo my personal attempts to navigate and struggle with my constructed identity, along with loss of place and belonging. In their *Lesbian National Parks and Services*, a collaborative project founded in 1997 Dempsey and Millan create for uniforms for the *Lesbian Rangers* to wear while patrolling national parklands. The duo challenges the public's ideas of tourism, recreation and the "natural" world (Dempsey) (Figure 9). Dempsey and Millan are equipped with informative brochures and insert a visible female queer presence into a space that is typically dominated by heteronormative imagery. By performing in multiple spaces such as parks, city streets and even in schools (in Canada and abroad) they have inserted their identities into heteronormative space. As much as I attempt to insert my constructed performative identity within aspects of the landscape through the motions of rock-girl, it's clear that I am lost through the looped video.



Figure 11. *Lesbian National Parks and Services*. Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan. Performance. 1997.



## **Solid as a Rock**

My personal connection with rocks comes in two forms: the Rocky Mountains that are advertised as untouched Canadian nature, and beach pebbles which remind me of summers spent on the West Coast of British Columbia. In the early twentieth century, Canada wanted to differentiate itself from Europe and the United States. Through the artwork of the Group of Seven, the realization and use of landscape as an articulation and embodiment of Canada was an easy pill to swallow. Geneviève Richard explains how nature was used to characterize Canada in *Nature and National Identity: Contradictions in a Canadian Myth*:

In the early 20th century, Canada was in a period of redefinition as it moved from a frontier nation to a Western industrial nation (Mackey 25). During this transition, Canada began to recognize the need to better characterize the nation and form a common sense of identity. The Group of Seven played an important role in this process as their art sought to embody the Northern wilderness that represented Canada (Richard 5).

The Group of Seven represented a wild, untamed landscape, sending a message that Canada was rugged and untouched. However, this idea of being where few have been before ignored the brutality of our colonial past. It's nicer and moreover polite (two distinctly Canadian characteristics), to portray Canada as a natural place of coastal beaches, rolling prairie hills, and the snowy peaks of the Rockies than as a place of colonization and lost land.

Canada is a clear example of the constructedness of nations. Canada's difficulty in constructing a sense of identity was also difficult because its "problematic occupation of the country" (Hjartarson, 208). Creating an identity surrounding the natural world, then, becomes simpler as it did not need to address issues of colonization and plurality (Richard 6).

There are multiple Indigenous artists in Canada who use their art practices to battle this erasure of history and the violent outcomes of this colonial narrative, such as Kent Monkman of Cree ancestry. Monkman who works in a variety of mediums, including installation and performance

alongside painting and video has developed a time traveling alter ego, and drag persona named *Miss Chief Eagle Testickle*. In his recent exhibition, *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience*, Monkman presented research in the form of objects (cultural artifacts, such as moccasins) that he had collected from Canadian Museum's collections over the past two years (Figure 10). These objects are presented in comparison to his large-scale paintings, which stylistically mimic Western art histories from the nineteenth century. Within these paintings *Miss Chief* appears and reappears at different times and spaces throughout Canadian history. Monkman uses *Miss Chief* as a humorous yet pointed interruption within these paintings (Morgan-Feir. Web). Through the use of a visual language that Canadians are accustomed to, Monkman infiltrates this constructed, romantic vision of the Canadian landscape causing the viewer to pause and consider the problematic historical and contemporary issues within this postcard-like picture.



Figure 12. *The Bears of Confederation* (from *Shame and Prejudice — A Story of Resilience Exhibition*) Kent Monkman. Acrylic on canvas. 190 x 345 cm. 2016

## Road Trip

In *Sisters* (Figure 11), landscape is transformed into fun, curvy cartoon shapes. The stylized playful, colourful, and childlike forms made from automotive steel, a thin and malleable material, act as decoys to reframe the natural. The amalgamation of the reduced landscape forms into a retail-like display, as well as a material that directly relates to leisure and transportation, speaks to the consumability of Canada's landscape and the taming of nature. We see a similar reduction and simplification of landscape occurring in Iain Baxter's plastic vacuum-sealed landscapes made in the 60's and 70's that questioned perceptions of the "untouched" landscape. Incorporating themselves under the business and artistic moniker 'N.E Thing Company' (NETCO), Iain and Ingrid Baxter proceeded to "interact to redefine 'landscape' as a product of human interest, an element of subjectivity and charted its relationship to forms of identity and national positioning" (Shaw, n.p.). Along with Baxter's collaborative works he also worked solo, creating plasticized versions of the glorified landscape so often depicted in classical Canadian art (Figure 12). Nancy Shaw describes the materiality in relation to Baxter's use of techniques (such as heat sealing and moulding) in her essay *Siting the Banal: The Expanded Landscape of the N.E. Thing Co.* and how this plays with the notion of consumer packaging:

The landscapes were stylized and toylike, captured and preserved in the most modern of materials — plastic. Mixing and matching materials and motifs of consumer culture, this work enlisted Pop Art strategies and highlights links between fine art, consumer durables, industrial process and advertising techniques (Shaw N.pag).

Baxter's hybrid practice investigates the tropes of Canadian landscape art through nature, mapping, consumption, environmental issues and suburban versus urban. The idea of "the great outdoors is promoted as leisure, and offered as a commodity to visitors. Alexander

Wilson explains how nature in advertising is a mediated construct in his book *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to Exxon Valdez*:

Nature is part of culture. When our physical surroundings are sold to us as “natural” (like the travel as for “Super, Natural, British Columbia”) we should pay close attention. Our experience of the natural world – whether touring the Canadian Rockies, watching an animal show on TV, or working in our own gardens – is always mediated. It is always shaped by rhetorical constructs like photography, industry, advertising, and aesthetics, as well as by institutions like religion, tourism, and education (Wilson 12).

Canadians are accustomed to seeing images of rolling landscapes through beer commercials, or panning shots of frozen lakes for coffee commercials. Canada is known for its glamorized views of rugged landscape and leisure. With this in mind, each steel body that I created is folded to act like a shelf or diorama. Some shaped shelves hold nothing, while others hold spray painted ceramic sculptures that mimic and repeat the abstracted landscape forms of the shelves.



Figure 13. *Sisters*. Tait Wilman. 2018. Installation view. Steel, Styrofoam, ceramic, spray paint, clay.



Figure 14. *Landscape with One Tree and Three Clouds* Iain Baxter. Acrylic paint on vacuum-formed plastic. 81.3 × 95.9 × 6.5 cm. 1965.

The folded shapes reflect retail displays for products, objects of desire or souvenirs. Much like the function of the tourist postcard, the installations are similar to a collection of souvenirs, in that they are constructed versions of my personal narratives. In this way, I reference the kitsch aesthetic of souvenirs and gift shops, which portray an idealized appearance of place. In *The Artificial Kingdom* by Celeste Olalquiaga, kitsch is described as a wish image:

Despite appearance, kitsch is not an active commodity naively infused with the desire of a wish image, but rather a failed commodity that continually speaks of all it has ceased to be — a virtual casual with a two-way ticket to the realm of myth — the collective or individual land of dreams (Olalquiaga 28).

Since moving from Alberta to Southern Ontario I have a sense of feeling lost. Through creating forms that mimic the landscape that I am familiar with, I have in a sense brought the West with me via memories and nostalgia. I often find myself looking up and being shocked to not see the mountains or getting a thrill when my car climbs or descends a hill. I have had to rediscover a landscape that I assumed I was familiar with. I believe this separation from what felt comfortable has given me the impetus to reimagine. The longer I'm away, the more vivid the recreations become, reality begins to fade into memory, and the recreations become reality.

Through the use of personal memory, my current installation sheds light on how cultural signifiers (especially souvenirs) are often a ruse, a kind of fake performance. For example, I lack authentic survival skills, and could not survive on my own in the woods. My only hunting experience was through my brother, a hunting guide and an outdoors man, who taught me how to shoot a rifle at beer cans. So, my experience (although real) is superficial in that it doesn't truly equip me with any real knowledge of outdoor survival or other perceived skills that my persona points to. It is reduced to a purely, leisure-based activity, and a virtual representation. It is akin to my appreciation for the commodified trend of a camping gear aesthetic. In *On Longing: Narrative of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Susan Stewart discusses the souvenir as way to measure experience, and uses the example of a carnival to illustrate this concept:

The souvenir both offers a measurement for the normal and authenticates the experience of the viewer. The giant begins with the two authenticating signs of origins: the graph itself and the mark upon the world made by his labor. [...] But the souvenir also domesticates on the level of its operation: external experience is internalized; the beast is taken home (Stewart 134).

Much like witnesses of an event (like a carnival), I attempt to create an event through a mash-up of experiences, objects and materials. Memory guides these recreations and re-

enactments of personal narratives, but similar to experiencing a landscape by way of a car, my exhibition is positioned through the scope of an impostor. Moreover, my use of objects as both sculpture and souvenir, elicits a conversation about authenticity. For example, some materials feel authoritative and sure of themselves (e.g. wood, spray paint, steel and rebar), while others lack authority, as they are materials relegated to the craft table (e.g. paper and Styrofoam). Through this veil of the impostor, authority and authenticity are constantly at play. Stewart describes this play of the authentic in relation to souvenirs, as nostalgia:

Within the development of culture under an exchange economy, the search for authentic experience and, correlatively, the search for the authentic object become critical. As experience is increasingly mediated and abstracted, the lived relation of the body to the phenomenological world is replaced by a nostalgia myth of contact and presence. “Authentic” experience becomes both elusive and allusive, as it is placed beyond the horizon of present lived experience, the beyond in which the antiques, the pastoral, the exotic, and other fictive domains are articulated. In the process of distancing, the memory of the body is replaced by the memory of the object, a memory standing outside the self and thus presenting both a surplus and lack of significance (Stewart 133).

In my exhibition, these myth-like souvenirs are then displayed in an aestheticized format relating to contemporary museum and retail displays. *Sisters* forms a quasi-horizon line, where the stylized silhouettes mimic natural forms, such as mountains and clouds. In this installation, they are reduced to abstracted, simplified, almost cartoon shapes. In reference to the personal, they speak to my memories of Canadian landscapes with a focus on the Rockies. However, as Stewart points out, the shapes have become nostalgic signifiers standing in for lived experiences.

## **Pet Rocks: In Conclusion**

The creation of this exhibition is an exploration of self. I am trying to navigate where I fit in, in the socio-cultural context of Canada. The first thing I noticed when I moved to Waterloo from Calgary was my lack of a sense of direction due to the flatness of Southern Ontario. Without the mountains, I didn't know which direction west was. By exploring the construction of cultural identity through landscape propaganda in the form of stereotypes, tropes and souvenir, I'm able to fall for 'Canadiana' and simultaneously resist and reject it. I represent this concept through the construction of a persona figure—a mash-up of Western archetypes and pop culture references. Much like setting up a campsite, my installations are constructions; they mimic the natural world, the souvenir shop, and the hunting blind. This collection of work allows me to discuss my complex relationship with Canada, and the need to redefine my Canadian identity through memory, souvenirs and nostalgia. Some aspects from this exhibition will only last through memory or as a souvenir of this exploration. Take for example the single scene in *Lost Without You* where the one bright evergreen is centered in the frame. It is now lost forever as it has now been demolished to build an extension of Highway 7. Sad but true.



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