

The Jackalope in the Room
An Installation

by

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Author's Declaration:

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.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract:

The Jackalope in the Room is an installation of sculptural and found objects that have been altered or contextualized in a way that conflates strangeness with normality. Many of the items in the installation were given as gifts or found in thrift stores, and have been modified to communicate a broader cultural or psychological meaning. Often this meaning is related to personal anecdotes and stereotypes attached to the objects that, in turn, seek to complicate popular narratives and cultural myths—many of which relate back to my experiences in northern Alberta. Northern Alberta is a liminal, near-mythical place where our ideas about remote environments collide with mass industrialization. These shibboleths have a pervasive quality that allows me to construct an uncanny web of associations using often banal source materials.

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Dedication:

I would like to dedicate this to my varied homes, my family (especially my mother for all of her support), and all of the who have contributed to and supported this work in so many different ways and without whom it would not have been the same.

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Illustrations:



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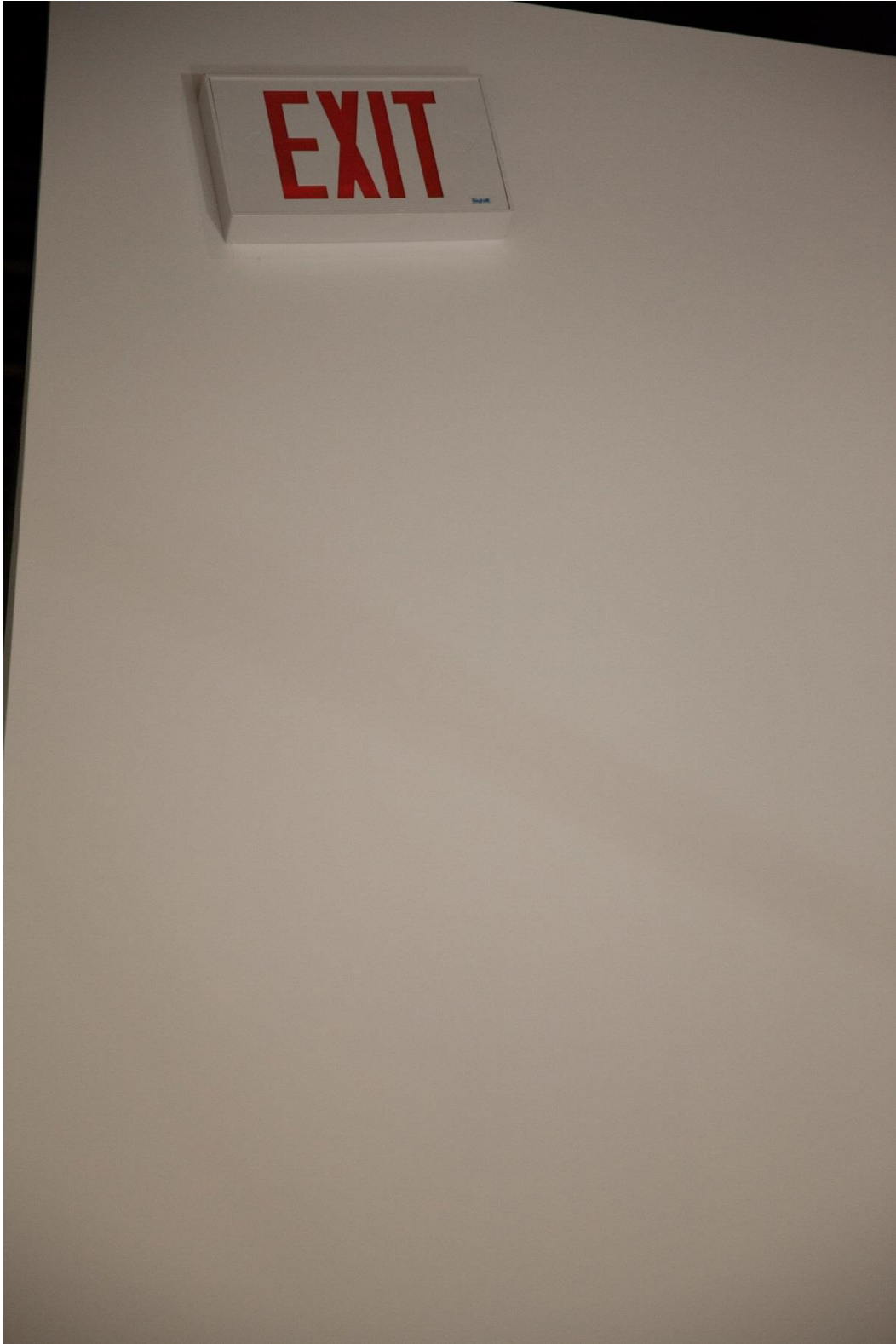


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Fig. 3 Megan Green, *East Coast Suburban Vacation (detail)*, 2014, rope, pulley, sock, extension cords, mercury vapor street light case, electronics, laundry wheels, bucket, canvas string, nail.

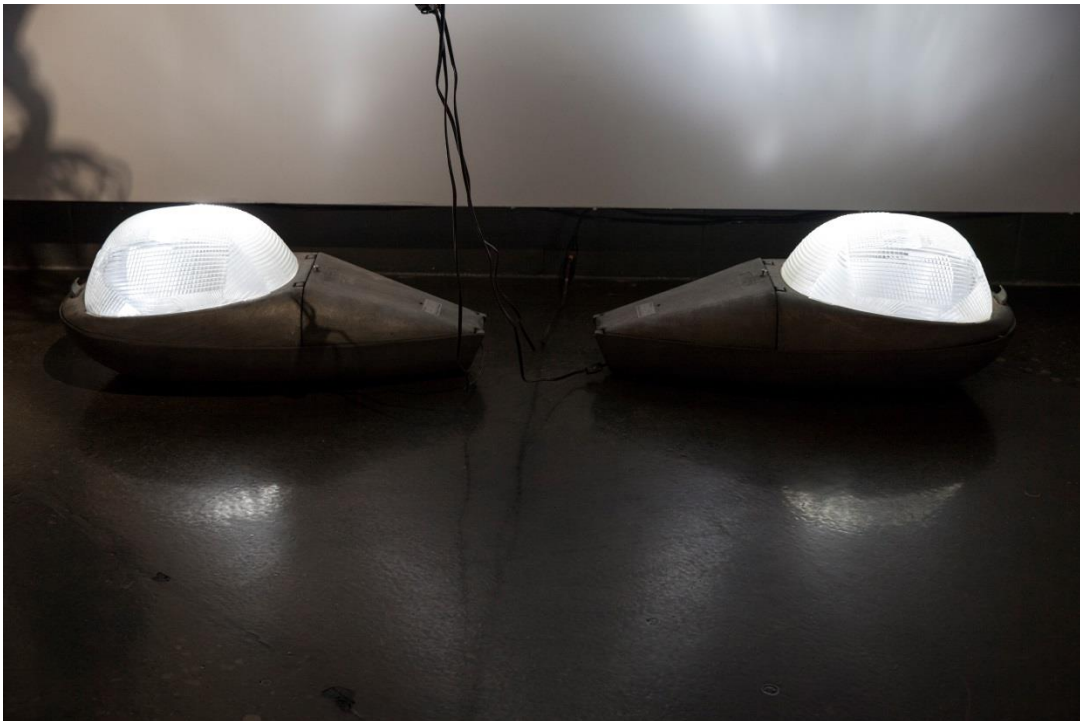


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All images of the artwork of artists other than Megan Green are images posted on the respective artist's personal website, or in the case of Anya Gallaccio, sourced from *Anya Gallaccio*. These images have been used without permission.

Megan Green's artwork was photographed by Brian Limoyo, excluding figures, 5, 15 and 16.

The Work

The Jackalope in the Room is an installation of sculptural and found objects that have been altered or contextualised in a way that conflates strangeness and normality.

Upon entering the gallery the viewer is confronted with a somewhat nautical style pulley system. A jumble of brown extensions cords hang from the pulley system. These cords lead to two street lights lying on the ground along the gallery wall. The lights are on and their light is very white. The rope from the pulley system runs back and forth between two of the gallery walls. The rope is just above eye level at its highest point, and lowers as it closes in on the entrance to the room so that it must be ducked under upon entering the room. Outdoor clothesline laundry wheels suspend the rope, and there is a grey work sock with a red stripe hanging from the rope.

To the right of the entrance is a vintage black institutional phone. The phone has no numbers to dial and there is a barely audible sound coming from the receiver. It sounds like someone walking through a field cutting down grass. Crows and ravens make noise in the background and all of the sounds come in waves.

The walls of the rest of the room are panelled with imitation wood boards. The patterns on the boards repeat. There is an illuminated exit sign hanging above the panelling, before the rope, near the entrance to the gallery. The sign hangs crookedly on the wall.

A minnow catcher bucket is hanging from an overlarge nail where the panelling in the room begins. Just beyond the start of the panelling, a form lays on the ground. It is made from embroidery hoops and unravelled canvas. The tail of this form hangs from the panelling, from a similar comically large nail as the bucket. An antler has been mounted on a small wooden shackle and is affixed to the end of the form. It looks like a hand trying to drag the form across the floor.

Next to the embroidery hoop form is a taxidermy grey squirrel holding a deer mask covered in shiny sequins.

Next to that is a wooden hive that has been affixed to the wall. Two plastic black spruce 'grow' out of the top of the hive. Aluminium shavings are visible inside the hive through a series of open slats in the wood. A button on the hive turns on a light inside of it.

To the right of the hive is an outdoor water faucet. Light comes out of the faucet instead of water.

On the back wall of the gallery there is a small light box with a photograph of a man in an orange plastic coat holding a severed deer head in each hand. He is standing on a slab of concrete and the edge of a pickup truck is just visible in the darkness behind him. The light box is framed by a wooden carving of a chestnut leaf. A set of antlers has been mounted on the sides of the box like a trophy deer mount. A white plastic power cord dangles from the light box. The object is illuminated even though it is not plugged in.

On the far right wall there is a small red LED sign that can read either SORRY, THANKS, or HELP! in response to the pushing of a button that is situated in an awkwardly carved wooden case dangling from its side. The sign is held to the wall by two antlers from a small deer.

An antler has been attached at its base to the wood paneling on the narrow wall to the right of the LED sign. Another grey work sock with a red stripe has been hung on one of the points.

A dark wood chair with a carved wooden worm on it sits near the centre of the room. The worm's 'mouth' is full of black plastic with long dry grass 'growing' out of it. There is a small object on the floor next to the chair. There is a plastic horn with a religious image at its opening. The horn is sitting on a wooden speech bubble, and is cushioned by the padding from one of a set of ear phones on top of the speech bubble. The speech bubble has three ceramic legs. There is a magazine table next to the chair. The space for magazines is filled with unravelled canvas. A medical male urine collection

bottle sits on the table. A ball of fur wrapped in a doily is inside the bottle. All of these objects and interventions are meant to spin a web of associations at once specific for the artist and yet open and mysterious to the viewer.

Process

My experience growing up in a somewhat infamous and relatively isolated place in northern Alberta called Fort McMurray has compelled me to explore the schemata of regionalism in Canada. My personal context prompted me to be critical of the discourses around that area that somehow fail to grasp the complexity of that and similar situations. I gauge popular opinion about this and similar places from news media, journals, documentaries, conversation with the general public, and anecdotes from the area. I make objects that are a distillation of my impressions about that experience.

The objects that are displayed in my installations are often given to me as gifts, found in thrift stores, or have some kind of context that is relevant to the subject matter of the individual piece. The found objects are often altered with other materials or put through a process with some conceptual purpose. The final piece is contrived in such a way as to communicate some metaphorical, symbolic, or allegorical meaning that is related to my first impressions of the object.

The objects that initiate individual artworks generally have a history that is implied by the objects having been thrift store items and looking 'used.' Whether or not the materials that I incorporate are genuinely old objects with an actual history is not always as important as the implied history and context of the work as a whole. Likewise, the genuine history of all the objects incorporated with the initial object is secondary to the context of or the starting impression from the initial object. The work is meant to call to mind the present and the near past for consideration.

In the gallery I am trying to create a proxy for a psychological world. The artwork can operate in an intuitive way without a viewer decoding the cultural references in the work. Often this is accomplished through a subversion of expectations produced by the alterations I make to the found objects. The piece *Golden Age* for example, operates on multiple levels as a cultural study informed by its relationship to the gallery, other artworks in the gallery, and as a phenomenological experience

through interaction with the object itself. Likewise, *Reaping Creature* is somewhat gestural, and is uncomfortable.

The feelings that I attempt to provoke with my artwork are related to psychology tropes and frustrations with culture. The attention to the phenomenological creates an empathetic sense in the viewing of the work. The phenomenological extends to the installation. The rec room is referenced, as well as the yard. The rec room is often below ground in the basement. Both are intimate spaces, not for formal company, either used for recreation or to hang the family laundry. Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* analyzed the house as “our vital space, in accord with all the dialectics of life, how we take root, day after day, in a 'corner of the world.’ For our house is our corner of the world...it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word” (Bachelard 4). In addition to the ‘vital space’ of the home, my installation also references 'cabinets of curiosities.' Both are a kind of cosmos that is related to the way that the mind understands 'things.' This understanding of 'things,' objects and spaces, or contexts, influences and informs my process. The feeling of the rec room is a phenomenological aura. Rachel Poliquin, who writes about cultures of longing, reminds us "to state the obvious, things are not ideas or mental images. Things are material entities. And because they are material, things generate encounters" (Poliquin 39). The characteristics of such encounters have a relationship to culture, personal experiences and the mental resonances of such experiences. Thus ultimately, the objects themselves are not the content of the work. Rather the content lies in the minds of the artist and of the viewer.

Many of my objects refer to or are the result of a craft; weaving, woodcarving, sewing, embroidery and taxidermy. Stephen Horne in "Embodying Subjectivity" refers to

Suzi Gablik and Donald Kuspit, who have often concerned themselves with 'memory' in relation to the issue of 'wholeness.' Kuspit has argued that it remains necessary for the individual to have a sense of wholeness to survive emotionally and that the crafted object is a means of restoring the individual's sense of wholeness. In Gablik's view, wholeness is a sort of process-oriented framework with both the self and world consisting of dynamic interactions and

interrelational processes. This modifies the typical modern construal of the self as ego, an isolated and mastering center, in favour of a self that exists as relatedness. (Horne 38)

The process involved in unravelling the canvas and putting it in the gallery is both a material exploration and a conceptual act. The neurotic act of spending hours pulling apart a piece of fabric is meant to provoke empathetic anxiety in the viewer; a recognition of that wholeness yet a destabilization of it. Canvas also references the image and the image, in turn, opens to another kind of world. The object suggests ulterior realities. So, by putting the piece in the rec room/gallery I draw attention to the hand crafted object, the context of recreational crafting, and the domestic nature of the fishing industry. This speaks to the "relevance of 'embodiment' to...linking the social and the personal" (Horne 36). The work functions as cultural critique and institutional critique.¹

The textile works in my installation could be seen to share "a feminist interest [with the work of Anya Gallaccio] in the recodification of disciplines, materials and forms historically attached to women's work [which] expresses a conceptual realignment of femininity to intervene hegemonic institutions" (Sanromán 25).² Yet my work is not necessarily related to exclusively feminist concerns. The embroidery hoops and string used in the work refer more to craft and domesticity than institutional gender inequality. The doily wrapped fur in the medical bottle that sits on the magazine table might be best read as an attempt at creating an object that embodies a manifestation of a sickly culture that harms all genders.

Since my own process involves addressing the context of the objects I use, it seems important to address an

emphasis on process and on the interconnection between place, resources and politics [which] falls closer to Gallaccio's way of addressing the relationship between craft, site and content. Earlier artists like Robert Smithson, Richard Long and others, began to explore expanded notions of site-specificity inclusive of explicit and implicit histories and narratives attached to site in order to locate their work physically and theoretically in urban and rural space. (Sanromán 26)

This is relevant to my own work if the objects can be considered sites of cultural myths that relate to place. In an interview with Claire Wallis, Gallaccio says that

The work often starts from a cliché about a place or material and an attempt to move beyond it. I keep returning to the personal, the domestic, the local. It is challenging to look at things under your nose, the things we take for granted. For example, *brown on white* (1993; pp. 66-67), the first chocolate piece where I painted the gallery walls, was made in Vienna. Vienna is famous for its café culture, a city of chocolate, the *sachertorte*, drinking chocolate, the Mozart balls, *Mozartkugel*; Mozart reduced to saccharine consumption, but Mozart's work and life is far from sweet. It is the city of Freud, the birthplace of psychoanalysis. There's a darkness or underside to Vienna and so I wanted to create to make something that encapsulated this sense of desire and repulsion, to sum up this weird tension. I wanted to create a space, almost a stage, a place that was loaded with intent... It is up to you as to how you respond, depending on your own subjective history. (238)

This attention to cliché, felt tension, the viewer's subjective response, and creating objects that have a sense of desire and repulsion is an interest in my own work. Gallaccio's installation *they said there was a paradise way out west*, 1997 (Fig. 14), seems to be one of the more closely relatable of Gallaccio's works in terms of subject matter and approach to communicate an empathetic and embodied representation of an impression of a place.

Home Décor began with a request to a hunter friend of mine for a set of antlers that were anything but trophy worthy. Months later I was sent me a cell phone photograph and the antlers were mailed to me in a comically oversized box. The box rattled its way across the country for three weeks before finally arriving. It is humorous to imagine the reaction of a postal employee had he or she opened the box. The dark grisly humour in this story behind *Home Décor* is a part of the process that informs the work. The antlers, the initial photo and the work itself are objects that have been tamed for display. This taming of relatively common objects for display highlights their cultural contexts. An appropriation of everyday objects to a kind of 'cabinet of curiosities of contemporary cultural experience' gallery space is a notion that has become a feature of the process that prompts me to choose the objects that I do.³

Often my work appears surreal; this is a visual reference to a psychologically altered reality. It seems that in contemporary thinking surrealism could be viewed as being somewhat personally indulgent, and perhaps not adequately critical. I consciously make works that border on surreal precisely because it refers to the internally psychological, a state of discomfort. As such, I see the work as offering a meditation on some kind of social or personal disturbance or state.

The space of the rec room and its allusion to the men's lodge or lair intensifies the sense of the surreal. The proximity of such spaces in the basement of the house to the cellar invokes Bachelard's sense of the cellar as menacing:

The cellar dreamer knows that the walls of the cellar are buried walls...that have the entire earth behind them. And so the situation becomes more dramatic, and fear becomes exaggerated...The cellar becomes buried madness, walled in tragedy. (Bachelard 20)

The rec room at once resists this interpretation of the cellar, yet resonates with it. My installation intentionally evokes this uncomfortable paradox. The fake wood panelling speaks of the near past as well as the dated and spotted present. The lodge is a space of masculine recreation and contact with the wilderness that transmutes into the rec room, which is also a domestic space that embraces a certain repressive kind of femininity. The rec room is affected by the weight of its context.

The wood panelling also refers to a notion captured in an aesthetic, since it can never really be the thing it refers to and has become something else that seems like a metaphor for 'longing' and the cultural myths inherent in the concept of 'north,' Canadiana and provincial regionalism. The rec room imitates some other space that would be in some kind of harmonious relationship with the wilderness. The rec room is affected by the weight of its context, buried but also supported and contained, and although the rec room exists everywhere and it is not specifically Canadian or northern, this seems to relate to the Canadian context and its problematic relationship with the violence in its not terribly distant past, and the thought clouding qualities of its nationalism and cultural myths. The mental

processes that are encapsulated in this installation are the result of an attempt at using objects to convey meaningful metaphors.

The Context

My installation uses elements of Canadiana and examines regional contexts as a means of navigating my own experience vis-à-vis such myths, yet finding them problematic. The apparent disjuncture is a manifestation of my ambivalence to the concepts of regional contexts.

Regionalism is often defined by kitsch. While the objects I alter and install may not all be strictly kitsch, they do share characteristics with it as they are outlined by Celeste Olalquiaga in *The Artificial Kingdom*: "kitsch is [the] scattered fragments of the aura, traces of dream images turned loose from their matrix, multiplied by the incessant beat of industrialization, covering the emptiness left by both the aura's demise and modernity's failure to deliver its promise of a radiant future" (Olalquiaga 84). My installation also recalls the nautical and the oceanic with its references to the east coast, empty canvas, and prairie grass. Related to this are objects that I have altered that invert safe and unsafe in the everyday. This way of working seems related to:

the polarity between the irrational and the rational, which in the West has been cast as an irreconcilable opposition between the threat of unknown maritime depths (alternatively projected into outer space) and the safety of a sunny, visible surface. This duality, a staple of Romantic thought... would be systematically articulated in the theory of the unconscious, [and] accounts for both the nineteenth century's sense of boundless entitlement and, paradoxically, its inability to gaze into its own contradictions. (Olalquiaga 114)

My work recalls this Romantic theology of the unconscious; it is disturbing, contradictory and full of duality. Violence is also implied.

The objects that I choose are artefacts of an experience that is invisible, yet in the insistence on the phenomenological, prompts a "feeling of awe or wonder, best described as a state of suspension, of 'held breath'- a literal arresting of the emotions" (Olalquiaga 212). The experiences and anecdotes that the individual works refer to run the gamut from sublime to banal experiences in a regional everyday. I attempt to concretise, using elements of kitsch, some illusory sense of place and object.

My use of kitsch seems related to the idea of Canadiana articulated in Sherrill Grace's *Canada and the Idea of North*. Grace discusses common themes in created works about the Canadian North. Such work is often chauvinistic and reinforces the perceptions of the majority. The myths about the north are a kind of kitsch largely created by outsiders, although grounded in a kind of authentic experience. The preponderance of antlers culled from animals hunted either for their meat or simply as trophies, and perhaps even the taxidermy squirrel holding the sequined deer mask, offers wry comments upon the relatively sliding definition of 'north' and its relationship with authenticity.

Since the antlers and the taxidermy squirrel are not true trophies or used for scientific analysis, they exist within the realm of kitsch taxidermy.⁴ Poliquin wrote that:

In the North American imagination, second hand hunting trophies have long been synonymous with all things hick, kitsch or tongue in cheek. Dusty heads and antlers mounted in restaurants, gas stations, and bowling alleys are as much a part of backwater American landscape as plastic flamingos and velvet paintings of Elvis. The heads offer a peculiar aura of failure and ruin... the [Daniel] Boone aesthetic belongs to log cabins and hunting lodges, red plaid shirts, lamps made from deer hooves, and, of course, tacky taxidermy... A victory of style over content and aesthetics over ethics, camp deposes the serious with playfulness. (Poliquin 165-166)

The use of deer antlers in *The Jackalope in the Room* references the hunting trophy. Hunting is a cultural practice and the hunting trophy represents a type of encounter with an animal that results in the animal's death and the trophy as a physical representation of a narrative around that human experience and an animal sacrifice. Rachel Poliquin also writes that:

The fact that trophies exist without bodies distinctly mark them as something different from all other genres of taxidermy...the violent spectacles expressed something of the beast, or at least a fantasy of the beast. And while some scenes may have been accompanied by a hunter's narrative, the spectacles ultimately sidestepped the specifics of a particular animal's death and participated in a larger imaginary of imperial pleasures and self-appointed license over colonial landscapes. A trophy head is similarly a spectacle of prowess and similarly ties into cultural assumptions of license over nature...Of the genres of taxidermy, hunting trophies are the souvenirs and the story tellers, which is to say, of the genres of taxidermy, hunting trophies are among the most deeply personal and so perhaps the rawest...In a sense, trophies epitomize everything that is disliked about taxidermy in general...It could be argued that trophies are more appreciative of animal form than leather belts, since trophy heads preserve some semblance of the beast...Adverse reactions to trophies potentially highlight a hypocrisy for anyone who routinely uses products made from purposely killed animals...[except that]

trophies arouse negative reactions not simply because they are evidence that a human killed an animal...they are evidence of a human's desire to kill an animal (148-151)

It seems important to mention that all of the antlers used in this installation come from animals that were hunted for their meat in addition to being a product of the hunter's participation in sportsperson's culture. Had I not requested the antlers they would have been discarded. This is indicated by the relatively low trophy quality of the individual antlers. The taxidermy squirrel that appears in this installation died as a result of an accidental poisoning and would also have been destroyed if it had not been preserved either by me for my work, or by the artist and taxidermist that I had been interning under when the work was created. That these particular antlers failed to be exemplary is another dimension that could be considered to reinforce the melancholic quality of the installation as a whole. The installation itself though, suggests the trophy, and an understanding of its cultural meaning is important in reading my work.⁴

The title of my exhibition, *The Jackalope in the Room*, prompts such meditation, for the essence of the jackalope, is not a "lived reality but a stylized extravagance, foolishly amusing and altogether disengaged from the ethics of animal death... We can indulge in irresponsible fantasies when they are not of our own... Ethics and camp do not sit well together" (166-167).

In the context of northern Alberta this installation also critiques and problematizes what could be perceived as "lip service, moral unreliability and conformist subjugation" (Berardi 44) in the stereotyped discourses of northern Alberta, industry and Fort McMurray. The region is a liminal space in the near north that is subject to similar discursive formations as the North as it is discussed in Grace's *Canada and the Idea of North*. The way the region is characterised relies on an awareness of the North as a place formed in the minds of most by its relationship to chauvinistic, European-centric narratives about individuals seeking fortune through exploitation.⁵ While there is some accuracy in that people move to the area for work in a mining industry, (and thus some reasonable comparisons to the Klondike

rush have been made) the narrative of "the North as a playground for white adventure or as a source of southern wealth" (Grace 152) which also leads to the moral depravity of its residents is far too simplistic. Indeed, such "discursive formation...ensures its longevity and flexibility, because each new play/text/statement repeats and then adds to the story, even when the clear intention of the [text] is to critique and problematize ideas of north" (Grace 155). The narrative plays upon the "the symbolic conversion of things into representations" (Olalquiaga 140) to portray northern Alberta as a signifier for all of the evils of fossil fuel exploitation. The area is usually represented in terms of the sublime: the visually vast, black and overwhelming. Edward Burtynsky's images of the oil sands have become iconic as the 'toxic sublime.'⁶ The characterisation of the 'types' of people who inhabit the region also reinforces the dominant narrative. As with the abyss of the sublime, the idiosyncratic becomes submerged.

The work in this exhibition focuses in part on the same region of Canada that inspired Sherri Chaba's 2011 installation *The Silence of Chaos* and that was filmed in Jason de Haan's project *The Wood and the Wave Each Other Know*. Both of these artists' works are related to interactions with conditions arising in northern Alberta. The experience of an individual responding to the pressures of a physical and cultural landscape is recorded.

Sherri Chaba's installation used industrial detritus and other collected objects en masse to create sculptural forms that sit on a bed of dark gravel like material in the centre of the gallery space, and also in a wooden display case at the back of the space. A webbing of dark wire surrounded the central gravel bed and masses in the corners of the room. The wire surrounds viewers as they navigate the space. The installation is a meditation on the affects of industrialisation on human beings through an alteration of the landscape expressed in post-apocalyptic tones.⁷

A contrast to Chaba's dark depiction is Jason de Haan's video recording of a self-taught cellist playing an improvised instrument that uses a lookout platform in the boreal forest as a resonance chamber. The project is described on the artist's website:

Daniel Bosch is a wildfire lookout in Northern Alberta, Canada. Every day, from April to October, he looks out upon the treetops from the eight by eight foot cabin of the tallest tower in the province. While living in the woods, he crafted a cello from a solid block of spruce and then taught himself to play it. Dan made a body-less version, allowing him to practice during his many hours inside the tower's cabin. By wedging the practice cello between the edge of a small worktable and the cabin's fiberglass octagonal cupola, Dan discovered that he could more than compensate for the instrument's lack of a body. The cabin itself becomes the resonant chamber and the tower becomes the instrument within which the cellist plays. Now, the lookout tower broadcasts Dan's music into the immensity of the landscape and the trees become his audience. *The Wood and Wave Each Other Know* is a video work documenting this activity; the camera constantly pans 360 degrees out of the cupola's windows, while Dan plays a number of improvised compositions.⁸

De Haan's video documents an individual's relationship with the conditions of the boreal forest in northern Alberta in a way that refers to the landscape as somewhat spiritual, romanticised and is in reference to the Canadian landscape's history in the concept of the sublime.

My work ambiguously responds to the sentiments that seem to be addressed in both of these works, and is in some ways focussed on similar themes. The history and cultural associations of some of the objects that appear in the installation are also a kind of documentary style reference to instances where Canadiana seems to appear in real life. Likewise, similar issues are explored in both mine and Sherri Chaba's work. And like Chaba I convey a regional experience in the form of an art installation in a gallery space using found objects that have been altered.

These sculptures inhabit some kind of regionalist domestic space and thus critique the discourse. The character typing in regionalist discourse about Alberta is similar to the way that Newfoundland is perceived, an interesting affinity especially since the Municipality of Wood Buffalo (in which Fort McMurray is situated) is sometimes touted as having Canada's largest population of mainland Newfoundlanders (Takach 171). Furthermore, both Alberta and Newfoundland also share a troubled

history in regards to their relationship with central Canadian government and management of their resources, and both have campaigned to have a comparable amount of control as other provinces in terms of the development of their natural resources (see Appendix).⁹ This resonates for me personally since my own family moved to Fort McMurray in the mid-1990s in response to social pressures.

In *Nationalism in Stateless Nations* Robert C. Thomsen wrote about the two Newfoundlander stereotypes:

one is positive and described the Newfoundlander as brave, hardy, self-reliant and valiant... The other is negative and portrays the Newfoundlander as a 'barely civilised' half-brute who had been beaten into submission and stupefaction by... centuries of neglect, oppression, and ceaseless grinding poverty. (57)

Similarly, Albertans are characterised as hardworking, independent people with a strong relationship to the land that is based on a mixture of spiritual and utilitarian interactions, or conversely:

In certain parts of the province, the dominant historical moving force has been the fight to preserve group culture against Alberta's dominant Ontario-American political and social culture. Yet the province remains coloured by an increasingly small and remote caricature of that culture: the backwater, nouveau-riche, cowboy-maverick-redneck...eco-killing, selfish-redneck, backwater-dwelling, political sheep. (Takach 333-338)

The connection here is that residents of both places are portrayed as inadequately 'intelligibly cultured.' Thomsen remarks that such outward perceptions of one's self may be internalised,¹⁰ and this internalisation of regionalist stereotypes and myths is a fundamental component of my work. The street lamps that have been caught in the net in the installation, for example, allude to suburbia and reference a clash between the romantic folk image perpetuated in the Atlantic provinces, aspirations and mixed feelings about natural resource exploitation, and the social problems that go with isolation, a poor economy, or a booming one, and underdeveloped social systems. Ultimately my work attempts to communicate a kind of critical awareness of regional tropes, but it is not necessarily seeking to categorically debunk them when they have an important relationship to a reality that needs to be addressed. The work seeks to utilise the potential weight of these images and their possible

deconstruction for a poetics that might prompt a greater level of criticality in an audience, or, at the very least, give them an interesting experience.

I use humour and irony to address a problematic situation, thus avoiding mere cynicism and passivity. Franco Berardi writes in "Irony, Cynicism and the Lunacy of the Italian Media Power" that "there remains a kind of consistency between the ancient notion of cynicism- rigorous truthfulness, individualism, ascetic behaviour and disdain of power -and our own, which consists largely of lip service, moral unreliability and conformist subjugation to those in power" (44). This body of work uses humour to maintain a level of self-awareness about a reliance on institutions and as a way of bypassing at least some of the instances where it is problematic. The sarcasm (Berardi's aggressive irony) that I try to employ is different from cynicism in that it is motivated by sympathy and is an attempt at prompting criticism. The rhetoric in humour is obvious, highlighting that as an artist I am a dictator in the institution of the gallery (Groys).

My pieces are often a play on what Boris Groys calls "defunctionalised autonomous objects" (Groys 2). The objects often have implied functions that are ambiguous or inaccessible. They attempt to make the gallery space more domestic but inevitably fail. It is also unclear whether or not some of the installed objects are parts of the physical institution. This is the case with the exit sign, and *In Case of Emergency*. The tension and this lack of clarity highlight the inherent fallibility of the institution to truly be inclusive and intellectually free, in spite of itself:

The artist reveals the hidden sovereign dimension of the contemporary democratic order that politics, for the most part tries to conceal. The installation space is where we are immediately confronted with the ambiguous character of the contemporary notion of freedom that functions in our democracies as a tension between sovereign and institutional freedom. The artistic installation space is thus a space of unconcealment (in the Heideggerian sense) of the heterotopic, sovereign power that is concealed behind the obscure transparency of the democratic order. (Groys 10)

Installation art, then, is particularly suited to addressing the failure of institutional systems and to highlight problematic cultural perceptions. Safe systems, like stereotypes, fail and become ridiculous and thus become more menacing.

The work addresses the everyday. I want to make the everyday strange in order to highlight the greater forces at play. The everyday has associations with the banal, which in and of itself can prompt the sublime: Henri Lefebvre writes that the everyday can be "the springboard for sublime actions [and]...to study the everyday life of the state would thus be to study *en vivo and en concreto* the functioning of bureaucratic apparatuses and their relation to social praxis" (Lefebvre 29). Using elements of the domestic and everyday I critique the institution, the type and Canadian culture more generally.

Gene Ray discusses a function for the sublime in contemporary art and positions its use as being in addressing cultural trauma and communicating it without desensitising an audience. The sublime experience "marks the limit of conventionalised assimilable experience and the vulnerability of the psychic organization to disrupting penetrations from outside" (Ray 1). The sublime is suited to this task because it is a thing that is an invisible feeling of intensity beyond easy codification. The sublime can allow for a collective mourning of events from which people are removed, yet from which they also suffer. Ray uses psychoanalytic theory to discuss what he describes as a need for collective mourning possible through art with sublime features. The sublime is a tool for understanding the scale of and meaning in catastrophic world events in the past, but also for addressing current world political situations by forcing reconsideration. The everyday also embraces trauma and the sublime in trauma. *Misprint Mary* refers to trauma and violence in the Catholic Church, and this is another layer to my use of the rec room which can also be evocative of childhood abuse for some.

In *Misprint Mary* there is an attempt in the work to address the transcendental aims of the religiosity of the references in the object, but the work can only do so authentically by using

contemporary contexts and means, which are signified here by the use of plastic items. This has a relationship to the failure of religion that is called to mind by the Catholic Church, and many extreme claims to religious piety, in reference to the church's above-mentioned catastrophic failures. The wooden speech bubble refers to 'the word' of biblical creation, as does the black headphone padding. The awkwardness of these materials and their references is uncomfortable. The horn was originally from a souvenir wine bottle holder in the shape of an animal head, and this context could be read as a comment on a critical collapse in the systems that the work references.

My work plays on the uncanny, alluding in spirit to David Hoffos' *Scenes from the House Dream* set of installations in his references to film genres and depictions of popular culture of everyday life that have been made strange. Likewise, a narrative is suggested in Hoffos' work, but a specific one is never really constructed. Nancy Tousley wrote in the Spring 2009 issue of *Canadian Art* that

As windows into the unconscious mind, the scenes [in Hoffos' installation dioramas] develop a poetics of the dream or the dreamer rather than the story of a dream. They take place at night, when the normal world of the everyday is displaced by the fears, anxieties, loneliness, depression and mysteries that arise and take hold as darkness falls.¹¹

The uncanny is evoked in my own work in a similar way in that both Hoffos' installations and my own operate within a framework of familiar cultural references that have been employed poetically to in some way address cultural anxiety and trauma by evoking strangeness.

Ultimately, my installation makes use of cultural associations with found objects as a way of examining the internal conditions of individuals coping with contemporary life. Dry humour and irony are employed as a means of highlighting the absurdities of Canadian culture and its relationship with natural resources, geographical isolation, and regionalism. Nostalgia also plays a role. It is deceptive and often based in felt notions and this issue is rife within the popular narratives of our traumatised pasts, of Canada's relationship to the north, industry, and provincial regionalism. My work attempts to

complicate an understanding of the situations that I have outlined based on the assumption that complication is in this case a more accurate reflection of a reality.

Appendix

In the interest of contextualizing northern Alberta as having been in some instances a victim of regionalist discourses I will elaborate on some of these discourses on the following pages.

The definition of, and the northern experience itself, has been curated to suit to the needs of the narrator. While I am referring specifically to a provincial north, this phenomenon is still a factor in discourses about the area. Rob Shields' article "Feral Suburbs: Cultural Topologies of Social Reproduction" has moments where its description of Northern Alberta aligns in a phenomenological way with my own experiences, especially when he describes a strangeness vying with normality. However, it seems as though his interpretation makes conclusions about what the strangeness of the competing forms in the area mean. He appears to be concluding that those who relocate to the region to work in the oil sands industry or originate in the region and work in or with the industry, are not able to positively and authentically come to some cognitive resolution about their situation that is legitimate, and not 'lumpen' in the pursuit of some kind of unattainable and inauthentic domestic fantasy. I would say that the competing forms of the North American middle class, the working class, aboriginal cultures, industry and wilderness that he is referring to in his article are being hybridised under the pressures of a novel situation and that this is not necessarily problematic, though the symptoms of this situation are not all positive. The people in the region are attempting to reconcile a variety of seemingly disparate influences, and according to Crisp and Turner's "Cognitive Adaption to the Experience of Social and Cultural Diversity," this might be resulting in increased cognitive flexibility but this is not generally how the region is perceived.

In "The Spatial Distribution of Hope In and Beyond Fort McMurray," Sara Dorow and Goze Dogu attempt to reconceptualise hope in terms of social relations. Hope is compared across residents and is shown to be contingent upon the flexibility of the residents' own conceptualisations of hope. Dorow and Dogu conclude that cosmopolitan residents who were able to place hope in a variety of

physical places, in the present and future “were somewhat buffered from the neo-liberal state’s withdrawal from ensuring an equitable distribution of hope, and they could in fact self-actualize because of [a] flexibilized accumulation” (Dorow and Dugo 287) of hope. This approach was something of a departure from typical depictions of the region that often describes it as a petroleum culture induced dystopia. Such works often do so using stereotypical narratives that ignore the complexities of the situation in favour of something more easily digestible and in line with the schema of a particular worldview.

The online documentary videogame *Fort McMoney* by David Dufresne has been played by 370,000 users (more than 3 times the actual population of Fort McMurray) according to the games website.¹¹ The game features many types of characters, who are actual residents of the area, chosen by the game’s creators to represent life in the region. Game play is limited to documentary videos selected by the author to characterise life in the city. While playing the game you are able to ask people questions that are answered by pre-recorded interviews. This media is problematic in design since the role-player format of the game suggests a measure of objective experience that is impossible because the interactions that you are able to have, and the questions that you are able to ask, seem to conform to an agenda that privileges a type of experience and seems in some instances to be a reflection of a selective bias in footage use. There is an illusion of authenticity in this design that is reinforced by another part of the game's purpose that suggests that you are able to influence the future of the town from the point that your character starts making decisions. The premise of the game, taken from the *Doclab* website promoting it, is related to "data visualizations of odometers that go in the red illustrate that it’s five minutes to midnight. What is the fate of McMurray? Will it keep descending into a spiral of oil dollars and greed, or is there more space for pine forests, rivers and snowy mountains? The choice is up to you, as you stand with your feet in the mud in this web documentary just like journalists, politicians, spokesmen and policymakers."¹² From this summary it seems that there are two ways of

thinking about the issues associated with this area, and it is obvious what the right way to see it is from the phrasing of the supposed 'dilemmas' that you are going to be confronted with in your increased awareness of this situation as it is produced by the game. It is suggested by the various texts surrounding this documentary, and from interviews given on this webpage by the game's creators, that Fort McMurray's online twin will be a version of the town influenced by an ethical internet audience's new awareness of a real world problem. This documentary is in some instances problematic and representative of the way that region has been cast in discourses.

It is often implied in many texts and contexts that this particular industry is a turning point for the problems outlined in the quoted text above. It has been said that following the demise of the fur industry that had previously helped to support communities of aboriginal groups in the region, as the Chief of the Fort Mckay First Nations Jim Boucher has mentioned in interviews given to the media, the oil sands industry is an imperfect alternative to a situation that became unviable. The relationship that local aboriginal communities have to this situation is complex and greatly varied in its degree of positivity in regards to this relationship.¹³ One of these communities, in one instance, has outlined a point of view on the Fort Mckay website in a link to a video¹⁴ produced by the community which refers to a "Fort Mckay Plan" for a balance between responsible industrial endeavours and the better future maintenance of their health, land rights, and cultural interests. It is occasionally presented as a given that individuals in aboriginal groups are categorically opposed to all natural resource exploitation regardless of the context. Speaking as an outsider on their behalf could undermine the agency of individuals in such groups and this seems like a new kind of pseudo enlightened intellectual colonialism. It is a way of thinking that fails to grasp the complexities of such situations by homogenising an experience to align it with something that is only on the surface unproblematic.

The homogenisation is equally apparent with respect to Newfoundland. The somewhat sanitised, spiritualistic, folk heavy advertisements from Newfoundland and Labrador Tourism are a point of

special interest. Many of these advertisements show clothes on a clothesline blowing in the wind in front of an ocean scene, and a picket (or stick) fence near a colourful heritage style home. One of the ads is composed almost entirely of clotheslines. The colour in the footage is very saturated, and everything appears to be freshly painted.

Endnotes

¹The act of weaving and unweaving is explored in terms of classical references in Ruth Scheuing's "The Unravelling of History: Penelope and Other Stories," that in the Greek myths about Penelope, Arachne and Philomela the characters "weaving [and unweaving] enabled them to assert their own wills against a dominating power structure, for which they were either punished, maligned, misrepresented or, even worse, forgotten... In each situation, weaving is more strongly connected to storytelling than it is to domestic needs" (Scheuing 201). These contexts position the processes involved in producing my work as having a relationship to social critique and the value of narrative and anecdote in understanding cultural perceptions.

²The instances where gender is in focus in *The Jackalope in the Room* is in the interest of discussing gender in relation to a potentially hegemonic culture. The commentary on gender in my work is related to the female being conceived of through discourse on the concept of the North as a sublime uncanny other, as is outlined in survey in Grace's *Canada and the Idea of North*.

³This way of understanding taming and display was a point of departure for my work that began from reading "On Necro-Orthenologies" by Merle Patchett and "Ruffling Feathers: Exhibiting the Monstrous Geographies of the Plumage Trade" by Merle Patchett, Kate Foster, Liz Gomez and Andrea Roe in *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*, Issue 20.

⁴There seems to be some connection between the hunting trophy, democracy and eventually, capitalism, when the history of settlers hunting in North America is described in *The Breathless Zoo*. Poliquin writes that

over the course of the nineteenth century, a romantic culture of imperialist hunting developed. In a search for raw wilderness, European adventurers...sought out bigger, bolder beasts in North America...In contrast to European land enclosures and generational privilege, hunting was the unrestricted pleasure of all citizens in North America for much of the nineteenth century...in North America hunting became a declaration of democratic values, and the

American Wilderness emerged as a paradise for the hardy, adventuresome, industrious, and independent spirit. (161)

This myth seems like it could easily relate the antler to Canadian regionalist mythology, as the words and general sentiments used to describe the North American wilderness used here are also used there. That my work has been created in response to a context related to natural resource exploitation, and that the antlers used here are from an area that has come to represent the abuses of natural resource exploitation, brings in a connection to capitalism, as oil culture is generally connected to capitalist exploitation in the Canadian imagination.

⁵This impulse is not resisted in academic and popular media depictions of Fort McMurray although such writing often attempts to be antithetical to that historically exploitative discourse and acts as something of a "plea for understanding, sensitivity, realism, and the rejection of arrogant, colonizing, racist attitudes" (Grace 152). Yet there remains an adherence to telling a particular type story.

⁶Given contemporary discourse on the colonialist history of the sublime in landscape painting, in regards to representing an occupied land as empty, this could be seen as ironic for some people in the area who might find the situation more complicated than obviously empty of any indemnifying rationality.

⁷Chaba has discussed the work as being related to the personal impact of an oil pipeline that was installed through her family's property.

⁸http://www.jasondehaan.net/Site/Jason_de_Haan_%28Wood_and_Wave%29_.html

⁹Confederation was for Newfoundland a "marriage of convenience, not love...and Newfoundlanders at that time would have been looking, pragmatically to the immediate and long term benefits which confederation promised to deliver" (Thomsen 43). In confederation "they were voting for...a variety of transfer payments from Canada to Newfoundland families: 'baby bonuses,' old-age pensions, the possibility of unemployment insurance for fishermen...and so forth" (Thomsen 43). In more recent

history in Newfoundland there as a sense that central Canadian government mismanagement "of fish quotas led to a moratorium on cod fisheries" (Thomsen 46) and at a time of high outward immigration from the province and high unemployment, "Hibernia was still underdeveloped due to declining international oil prices from 1985, the many attempts at renegotiating the Upper Churchill contract with Hydro-Quebec had been unsuccessful, and Lower Churchill remained underdeveloped" (Thomsen 147).

¹⁰Robert Thomsen outlines

Cohen's analysis of Newfoundland's negative self-perception as curtailing the power of the society to 'grapple radically' with the structures of the system, may at this point have become a reality. Indeed, the declining level of self-confidence would, according to the writers of a late wave of the Newfoundland cultural renaissance...owe a great deal to [in their exposing the problems of, and problematizing] the defeatist myth inherent in Newfoundland's culture. (148)

¹¹<http://www.canadianart.ca/features/2009/03/01/dream-scenes/#sthash.PE2UjAe4.dpuf>

¹²<http://www.fortmcmoney.com/#/fortmcmoney>

¹³<http://www.doclab.org/2013/fort-mcmoney/>

¹⁴http://business.financialpost.com/2013/03/22/fort-mckay-aboriginals-take-good-with-the-bad-of-the-oil-sands/?__lsa=9ae0-57f3

¹⁵<http://www.fortmckay.com/media.html>

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