Overlapping Violent Histories: A Curatorial Investigation into Difficult Knowledge

Curated By Noor Bhangu

February 9 - March 9, 2018

Kitchen-Table Discussion: March 8, 12:30-1:30 PM

Winnipeg is no stranger to violence or violent histories. Its geographical position at the heart of Canada and its cultural position as a meeting ground between diverse communities have pushed it to play host to the darkest of local, national, and international currents, including the ongoing colonization of Indigenous people, Japanese internment, the settlement of Icelandic immigrants in Gimli, the influx of Russian Mennonites and Jewish holocaust survivors in the twentieth century, and the marginalization of European immigrants and immigrants of colour. In 2003, Gallery One One One's curator-in-residence, Sigrid Dahle, undertook a thoughtful and multi-layered unpacking of the city's difficult history through her year-long exhibition, The Gothic Unconscious, which put together historical and contemporary work by more than 50 artists who took up themes of trauma in the localized context of the prairies.[1] Following on the heels of such projects, Overlapping Violent Histories: A Curatorial Investigation into Difficult Knowledge brings together the work of Jackson Beardy, Caroline Dukes, Takao Tanabe, and KC Adams to consider the place of historical trauma in each artist's practice. In deliberately drawing on the cross-cultural intersection between the artists, I aim to build on the potential for visual art and exhibition spaces to function as sites for social-engaged dialogues.

But first, I would like to respond to what I anticipate will be the most frequent and (perhaps) the most valid critique of this curatorial investigation: the aesthetic, conceptual, and cultural mismatch between the artworks. In the selected pieces, trauma is seldom evocated through the surface of the work itself; instead, it lingers in the biographical sketch of the artists – out of sight and out of mind of the general audience that happens to encounter the work in the oft-decontextualized setting of the art gallery. Of course, as a curator of this exhibition I, too, plead guilty on counts of decontextualisation by favouring specific elements of a work and leaving out others. I take refuge in Luis Camnitzer's theorization of the curatorial order: "The discourse or thesis of the curator may contradict the discourse of the artist, because the curator extrapolates from the presentation of artworks in a way that is not necessarily determined by the artist's original intentions."[2] He goes on to say, "The exhibition becomes a meta-creation that uses specific creations by artists to serve the curator's purpose."[3]

To be clear – my overarching purpose is not to relegate these artists or their practices to the container of inconsolable suffering and, by doing so, ghettoize

Left: Caroline Dukes, *Prairie*, 1978, Silkscreen. Collection of the School of Art Gallery.

Right: Takao Tanabe, *Prairie Storm*, 1970-2003, Lithograph and acrylic. Collection of the School of Art Gallery.

through the lens of the cross-cultural and cross-generational that we can move towards ethical witnessing, survival, and resistance. My purpose, here, is to loosen up the boundaries erected around difficult moments so they might open up to each other and lead us, the audience, to think more critically about the production and dissemination of Canadian history.

This exhibition hopes to activate "difficult knowledge," which is theorized by education scholar, Deborah Britzman to encompass both the narratives of trauma and the act of witnessing itself. In preparing to bridge the two poles she cites a "kernel of trauma in the very capacity to know," which works to implicate the viewer/witness within the vulnerable-making encounter with difficult knowledge.[4] And yet, both the concept and action of difficult knowledge can remain essentially unattainable within the exhibition space if we are to continue thinking of art – produced from the modern period to the present – as a lofty object-based pursuit that is neutral and neutralizing. In his engaged essay, "Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in socially-Engaged Art," Grant Kester takes up Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of "dialogical art practices" that argue for the "work of art [to] be viewed as a kind of conversation; a locus of differing meanings, interpretations and points of view," to propose his own theory of "dialogical aesthetics," which puts the collaborative and emancipatory potential of conversations at the center of the work/exhibition itself.[5] In this way, conversation can become a deliberate tactic in re-presenting the works of art as an "active, generative process that can help us speak ad imagine beyond the limits of fixed identities and official discourse."[6] A feeling of possibility is presented through Bakhtin and Kester's emphasis on communication in the art and curatorial practices that can facilitate the transmission of difficult knowledge in the exhibition space.

To activate an emergent cross-cultural dialogue on the nature of difficult knowledge and its place in Canadian and, more specifically, Winnipeg history, I have selected works by Caroline Dukes, Takao, Tanabe, Jackson Beardy, and KC Adams. I begin by looking at the work of Caroline Dukes, who in her lifetime was a central figure in Winnipeg's arts community. Dukes' life – and some would argue her work – originated in a small Hungarian town outside of Budapest in 1929. As a Jewish citizen in a time of rising fascism and anti-Semitism, she was forced to leave her studies in 1939 to escape official and unofficial counts of discrimination. It was not until a few years later, in 1944 with the Nazi takeover, that Hungarian Jews were rounded up for deportation to concentration camps. At this time, Dukes went into hiding with her mother, only to be traced and taken to a ghetto, from which the two later escaped.[7] Following the Jewish Holocaust, Dukes lived through a decade of Soviet control that was similarly characterized by oppressive and exclusionary laws. At the time of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, Dukes emigrated out of the country with her family – first to Austria and then to Canada, settling in Winnipeg in 1967.[8]

The two pieces included in the exhibition are a silkscreen print, Prairie, and an untitled cast-stone sculpture. Like all but one of the other works in this exhibition, neither the print nor the sculpture is especially evocative of Dukes' violent and traumatic past. Instead, what the works attempt to frame is the artist's experience of her new environment (the prairies) and a disquieted loss accumulated over time. Prairie, like Dukes' other print-based work, is too flattened and plastic to suggest a comfortable settlement of the subject. While the fragmented sculpture – severed at the upper thigh – crouches in wait in the middle of the Gallery, to point to the rootlessness of trauma when detached from its official site.

Situated across the room from Duke's prairie is a similar scene, albeit one that can be traced to a troubled history that was home grown. Takao Tanabe was born on September 16, 1926 in what was then a predominantly Japanese-Canadian fishing community in Seal Cove, British Columbia. Of his childhood in Seal Cove, Tanabe "remembers the richness of the landscape, the vivid greens of the forest, the deep blue-green of the ocean, the moist atmosphere of the place and

and particularly the grey, wet days, his favourite kind of weather."[9] In 1937, the family relocated to bustling Vancouver, and Tanabe had the chance to engage with non-Japanese Canadians alongside members of his own community. However, the dream of Canadian multiculturalism was cut short in 1941 with the Canadian (and American) response to Japan's attack on Pearl Harbour. Japanese-Canadians came under suspicion of threatening the security of settler Canadians and were subjected to discriminatory regulations, eventually robbed of their properties, and interned to the interior of British Columbia. Some, like Tanabe and his older brothers, were able to secure seats in prairie work camps as indentured labourers. When speaking of his experiences to the writer, Goody Noisi, of being interned as a Japanese-Canadian citizen Tanabe shared that he was "angry for thirty years."[10]

It was a surprise for me to discover that both of Tanabe's works included in this exhibition can be traced to this period of pronounced bitterness, even though neither readily betrays the artist's feelings. Both prints, Prairie Storm and Gate, are rendered in the artist's largely non-figurative, abstract style. Prairie Storm presents a softened look at the vast, open prairie land. Light, tonal strokes break timidly through the surface of the expansive sky and land and, yet, standing as outsiders to the scene we cannot be sure if the storm has already taken place or if it is yet to come. Darrin J. Martens has deciphered Tanabe's depiction of prairie landscape as an exercise in capturing absence through presence. He writes, "Tanabe presents viewers with an alternative way in which to engage and experience space – one that transcends the picture plane and offers a glimpse into an absolute space; one that embodies the presence of absence."[11]

The third artist, Jackson Beardy, offers a variance on this abstracted visuality by presenting pictures that are encoded with a different history. Beardy is remembered today for his membership in the Woodland School of Art and the Indian Group of Seven, alongside his contribution to the emergent field of contemporary Indigenous art in the late 20th century. He was born on July 24, 1944 to John Beardy and Dina Monias in a single-roomed log cabin on Garden Hill Reserve, Manitoba. In his early years, Beardy was chosen from his thirteen siblings to live and learn from his paternal grandmother, who would "fill his mind with the colourful narratives of the Cree."[12] At the age of seven, he was removed from his family and grandmother's teachings to attend a residential school in Portage la Prairie, Manitoba. Like all young Indigenous children locked in the residential school system, Beardy was forbidden to connect with his siblings, to speak in his mother tongue, and to practice his traditions. His school was not unique in wanting to make a rigorous effort to de-construct the pupils' Indigeneity and re-graft what remained with white knowledge, which was seen as a progression away from so-called Indian savagery. In speaking of Beardy's experience in the schools, white art historian, James K. Hughes, proposes a problematic reading: "[Jackson] learned to see his own people as 'other.' And, so began his alienation from his own essential Indian self, a process that was to be personally destructive for a long time, but artistically fruitful in the end."[13] While it is true that Beardy was first introduced to formal arts training at his residential school, Hughes' positive spin seems to suggest that the alienating experience was somehow worth it. Although these sentiments were published in 1979, they continue to have resonance in our present time when artists' movement through difficult histories is vindicated – and if I may add: fetishized – by the profundity of their art. When looking at Beardy's work in this exhibition, Three Birds and Wind Song, we must be careful not to move farther into the works of art than was prescribed by the artist. At times, he has elaborated on his art functioning as a mediation between his Indigenous and enforced white consciousnesses––the canvas becoming the location on which years of identity crisis is spilled and worked through. But largely, his art is meant to function as a visualization of the religio-spiritual oral stories the artist inherited and retrieved following the years of destruction at within the residential school system.

Jackson Beardy, *Three Birds*, 1975, Serigraph. Collection of the School of Art Gallery.

One might be tempted to end the discussion of settler colonialism at residential schools – in fact, many have. But the work of contemporary artists such as KC Adams demonstrates the ways in which colonialism continues to seep into and affect the lives of Indigenous peoples in the present. KC Adams is a multi-media artist who was born in Yorkton, Saskatchewan in 1971. She identifies as a "Euro-Aboriginal" to signify her Aboriginal and Scottish heritage. Her identity has formed the basis of much of her work, including the Cyborg Hybrid series, where she set out to photograph individuals who were First Nations, non-First Nations, "plugged into technology," artists, and role models, to subvert notions of Indigenous bodies as under-developed and un-networked entities that did not have place in present and future time.[14] Adams' self-portrait, Cyborg Hybrid KC, is displayed apart from the works by Dukes, Tanabe, and Beardy to serve as a double signal of the work's separation from the circle of historical events and to highlight the artist's capacity to actively take part in the constructed dialogue on difficult knowledge. Notably, Britzman has identified both historical events and ongoing social injustices, including colonial and racist attitudes, as grounds for the perpetuation of difficult knowledge. As a sign of her distance from historical trauma, Adams exhibits a willingness to visually address challenging conversations. Such willingness indicates a broader cultural shift in approaching topics that were previously considered too painful to discuss openly. Adams, like her generation, is ready to be both a witness and a voice. Situated outside the historical circle yet reflecting back on it, Cyborg Hybrid KC aggravates the boundaries between codified generations, cultures, and histories without sacrificing the distinctive features of the individual artists.

When writing the biography of a particular artist, it is common practice for art historians to return to select moments in their life – anything from education to key friendships – in order to contextualize the artist in terms of her influences and placement in the general cultural milieu. With most artists, this work can be relatively straightforward: we collect the sources, hone in on a set of events, outline a context, and voila!, a biographical sketch is completed. But for others, a simple biographical sketch can be the most difficult task to complete, perhaps, because not all artists follow the trajectory of birth>home>education>work>death. There exist trajectories that have been fractured through traumatic occurrences such as war, internment, slavery and genocide. In encountering these traumatic narratives, we are put in a vulnerable position where we have to navigate through traumas uncovered in the processes of research and learning. In taking on this work, we have to ask ourselves about our responsibility in honouring these difficult histories, especially if they are not visually present in the works under study. Do we seclude them in the footnotes in efforts to keep rest of the writing on point? Or do we, somehow, flesh out these structures of difficulty in greater detail in order to promote ethical acts of witnessing? Ultimately, we have to ask ourselves if it is possible that we, in our role as art historians/curators, can resist fetishizing objects of art whose trajectories point to histories that are not our own.

Standing at the edge of these questions without the power to respond with the right answers requires patience and labour on part of the curator. The etymology of the word curator has made its rounds across critical discourse on histories of art and museum studies. But it bears repeating here: curator comes from the Latin word, "curare," which means to cure or care for.[15] In my role as a curator at the School of Art Gallery, I have drawn out select works from the collection to bring together, overlap, and think through diverse histories of trauma and conflict in order to take care of them. But as the works and by extension, the artists testify, much of this important work remains unfinished until we, as the audience and broader society, are ready to witness and take care.

ENDNOTES

1. "Sigrid Dahle's 'The Gothic Unconscious'." School of Art - Gallery One One One. Accessed February 18, 2018. https://www.umanitoba.ca/schools/art/content/galleryoneoneone/goth.html.
2. Luis Camnitzer. "Museums and Universities." E-flux 26 (June 2011). Accessed January 20, 2018. http://www.e-flux.com/journal/26/67938/museums-and-universities/.
3. Ibid.
4. Alice Pitt, and Deborah Britzman. "Speculations on Qualities of Difficult Knowledge in Teaching and Learning: An Experiment in Psychoanalytic Research." International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education 16, no. 6 (2003): 755-76. Accessed January 10, 2018. p. 756.
5. Grant Kester. "Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art." In Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985, edited by Zoya Kucor and Simon Leung. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005.
6. Ibid.
7. Hannah Keating. Caroline Dukes: Being There. School of Art Gallery: December 13 (2016): 1-4. Accessed January 15, 2018. http://umanitoba.ca/schools/art/media/Dukes_essay_-_H.Keating.pdf.
8. Ibid.
9. Ian M. Thom. "Takao Tanabe: An Artist's Life." Takao Tanabe, by Ian M. Thom, Roald Nasgaard, Nancy Tousley, and Jeffrey Spalding. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2005. p. 8.
10. Ibid., p. 9.
11. Darrin J. Martens. "The Presence of Absence in Takao Tanabe's Prairie Drawings." In Chronicles of Form and Place: Works on Paper by Takao Tanabe, by Darrin J. Martens, Denise Leclerc, and Ihor Holubizky, 69-95. Burnaby, BC: Burnaby Art Gallery, 2012. p. 71.
12. James K. Hughes. Jackson Beardy: Life and Art. Winnipeg: Canadian Dimension Publishers, 1979. p. 6.
13. Ibid., p. 7.
14. Sandra Thacker. "Cyborg Hybrids makes viewer think." CBC News. May 29, 2014. Accessed February 2, 2018. http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/cyborg-hybrids-makes-viewer-think-1.2654665.
15. Erin Kissane. "The Curate and the Curator." Incisive.nu. July 29, 2010. Accessed February 20, 2018. http://incisive.nu/2010/the-curate-and-the-curator/.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

"Sigrid Dahle's 'The Gothic Unconscious'." School of Art - Gallery One One One. Accessed February 18, 2018. https://www.umanitoba.ca/schools/art/content/galleryoneoneone/goth.html.

Camnitzer, Luis. "Museums and Universities." E-flux 26 (June 2011). Accessed January 20, 2018. http://www.e-flux.com/journal/26/67938/museums-and-universities/.

Hughes, James K. Jackson Beardy: Life and Art. Winnipeg: Canadian Dimension Publishers, 1979.

Keating, Hannah. Caroline Dukes: Being There. School of Art Gallery: December 13 (2016): 1-4. Accessed January 15, 2018. http://umanitoba.ca/schools/art/media/Dukes_essay_-_H.Keating.pdf.

Kester, Grant. "Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art." In Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985, edited by Zoya Kucor and Simon Leung. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005.

Kissane, Erin. "The Curate and the Curator." Incisive.nu. July 29, 2010. Accessed February 20, 2018. http://incisive.nu/2010/the-curate-and-the-curator/.

Martens, Darrin J. "The Presence of Absence in Takao Tanabe's Prairie Drawings." In Chronicles of Form and Place: Works on Paper by Takao Tanabe, by Darrin J. Martens, Denise Leclerc, and Ihor Holubizky, 69-95. Burnaby, BC: Burnaby Art Gallery, 2012.

Pitt, Alice and Deborah Britzman. "Speculations on Qualities of Difficult Knowledge in Teaching and Learning: An Experiment in Psychoanalytic Research." International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education 16, no. 6 (2003): 755-76. Accessed January 10, 2018.

Thacker, Sandra. "Cyborg Hybrids makes viewer think." CBC News. May 29, 2014. Accessed February 2, 2018. http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/cyborg-hybrids-makes-viewer-think-1.2654665.

Thom, Ian M. "Takao Tanabe: An Artist's Life." Takao Tanabe, by Ian M. Thom, Roald Nasgaard, Nancy Tousley, and Jeffrey Spalding. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2005.