

Tara Bryan: Unfolding Horizon, The Rooms Provincial Art Gallery

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EXHIBIT REVIEWS

Tara Bryan: Unfolding Horizon, The Rooms Provincial Art Gallery,
June 25–October 2, 2022

I first met Tara Bryan sometime in the early 2000s, having returned to St. John's from Halifax by way of Barcelona, full with certainty in my own prodigious talent and intellectual prowess, propped up, in my first-year post-graduation from what I'd been told (repeatedly) was a veritable institution of Conceptual art and political radicalism known as NSCAD, by my first solo exhibition and artist residency at Struts ARC in Sackville, New Brunswick.

The occasion of that first meeting was a dual artist talk I had been invited to give with Tara and, based on the small crowd of people who'd gathered that night at the Anna Templeton Centre on Duckworth Street to consume, as it were, the culture, it was evident that I, despite whatever delusions I may have carried at the time, was not the main attraction for the event.

Speaking first, thankful that my mom was unable to attend, trembling with fear and embarrassment and (if I'm being honest) derisive snark towards my audience, in front of what I assumed were middle-aged hobbyist painters and textile artists who may or may not have been prone to pearl-clutching, I proceeded to show a suite of short experimental video works in which Yours Truly was seen (masked, in bikini briefs, electrical tape on my nipples) — my artist statement at the time made the audacious claim that I was “subverting hierarchies” — to roll about on the floor of my basement apartment set to a soundtrack of Merle

Haggard songs. The videos stopped. The room was silent. I asked for questions. There were no questions.

Tara's talk, on the other hand, was much more well received — she showed slides (!) of her numerous book-works as well as several of her landscape paintings — with a lively discussion about the quality of the light in Newfoundland, and the meaning of working on the periphery — geographically, artistically, and politically — of the major cultural centres. I was, of course, much too self-absorbed to enjoy it. But the reason this first meeting has remained so memorable for me is because, after the talk, Tara approached me to say how taken she was with my work, and how important it was for artists to push against the status quo, in all its myriad forms. This was not, I sensed, merely a kind gesture on her part to comfort an obviously troubled young man whose sensibilities one might suppose were diametrically opposed to her own; rather, her intent was to create a sense of camaraderie and solidarity between two artists whose approach to art and art-making may be perceived as antagonistic to one another. And it was this ethic of Tara's, this principle — solidarity in the face of the establishment — that guided her long work in the struggle for the rights of artists in the province and everywhere.

Our initial meeting was quite front of mind, to say the least, when I visited her memorial show at The Rooms provincial art gallery. *Tara Bryan: Unfolding Horizon* features a selection of the artist's work — from her breathtaking landscape paintings to her inventive and exquisite book-works, and while memorial shows such as this are, to a certain degree, an homage to the artist in question rather than the presentation of a singular vision, one is struck by the degree to which, as Tara herself describes, she was “inspired by the process of collaboration and the unexpected outcome of working closely with other artists.” A tough, gun-collecting, transplanted Texan, Tara was possessed with a kind of cowboy energy that led, not as one would suppose, to an artistic rugged individualism — the American frontier, with all its problematic connotations, transformed into an Atlantic horizon — but rather to a collectivist approach that valued experimentation and not-knowing as the heart of artistic expression.

Straddling photo-realism with a certain expressionistic quality, Tara's painting *Clear Day At Lead Bay* (oil on canvas, 2018) reveals the dynamic flip-side to her book-work's collaborative ethic, and typifies her aesthetic and her philosophical approach to art-making. Three towering columns of ice — seafoam green and white — glowing in daylight, emerge from the deep, calm blue of the Atlantic, while in the far distance of the horizon a bank of grey fog seems to dissipate at the very edge of our vision's grasp. The paint, handled in such a way that points towards objectivity touched with an almost dreamlike luminescence, suggests the ubiquity of such an image in Newfoundland's visual culture — its well-trodden exploration by generations of previous artists, not to mention the imagery associated with our cultural tourism industry. Yet, it holds some deeper truth about our experience of seeing and of being alive. It's only when the fog clears and the sun's beams intensify the iceberg's melting that we see things as they truly are. Is the act of seeing, of inquiry itself, intrinsically penetrating? Intrinsically destructive?

She writes, *I stand on land and ponder the horizon / Waiting to see what the sea brings to me*, and it is this line from Tara's poetry that accompanies the exhibition that points to a certain spirituality with which her practice and, by extension, her work, is imbued. I am reminded of Sylvia Plath's poem "Black Rook in Rainy Weather": *The long wait for that angel. For that rare, random descent.*

Receptivity, openness, patience, and quietude. Tara's paintings — the horizons, the icebergs seen from above, the dawn light — all suggest an atmosphere of contemplative silence pregnant forever with potential and possibility, like the horizons depicted, just beyond our grasp. Likewise, her book-works — with their many folded pages, the paper accorded so that each edge, each plane, suggests the never-ending, unfolding horizon of the exhibition's title — offer commentary on the unfolding of narratives: our own, and our collective ones. As we all hurtle towards oblivion, how will we meet it? What will we leave behind? What will we take with us?

Craig Francis Power