

8 JUNE – 6 JULY | 24

Lara Felsing

listeningtotheland

CURATED BY CHRISTINA BATTLE



GALLERY@FAB

listeningtotheland:

Lara Felsing and the delicate nature of response

AN ESSAY BY CHRISTINA BATTLE | APRIL – MAY 2024



Lara Felsing
Blanket Ceremony for the Forest, May 21, 2023
second-hand cotton thread, linen, canvas and floral
broaddcloth dyed with spruce cones, saskatoon
berries, sweetgrass, tobacco, cedar, sage, chaga,
strawberries, dandelion and bee pollen, 2023
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

When I was first approached to work on an exhibition for the Fine Arts Building Gallery (FAB Gallery) by April Dean, FAB Gallery’s Manager, I was invited to work as both artist and curator. April envisioned a semesters-long series dedicated to projects by Indigenous and Black artists and curators. For her, the series—a first time for the gallery—was one of ‘curatorial intervention.’ April’s invitation came with the hope “that these projects would reinforce the importance of the curatorial lens and innovative curatorial practices while also centering access to professional artistic works on campus for students.”¹ Struck by the potential of the concept of intervention—to occur or lie between two things²—I saw the invitation as an opportunity to deeply consider my own relationship to curatorial practice, as both an artist and as a curator. The two roles are often kept separate within the ethos of the gallery, but for me they hold a space of hybridity that is difficult to easily tease apart.

As an artist/curator, my approach is to facilitate; to support artists in ways that can be individualized to their practices (not only for the sake of one exhibition but on into the future); and to bring people together. My practice is invested in collaboration as a methodology: in getting to know artists, the ways they practice, how they make work, how they think about it, and how they want it to be seen and shared. Kirsty Robertson reminds us that, “curating—the assembling of objects, people, ideas—can offer a moment for pause and reflection,”³ a sort of slowing down that I find necessary in order to engage with the act of curating, itself a framework rooted in care.⁴ As a curator, I want to learn from the artists I work with. I see relationship building as an integral strategy for better understanding artists’ perspectives. I turn to conversation as a strategy of approach; I see it as an essential tool for helping me learn more about how artists practice—to discover what they care about and why. Active conversation, when given time to unfold, plays a critical role in making and sustaining connections—it’s an important underlying framework for me as a curator.

*In conversation we tend to one another. (The word itself is kinetic; it’s derived from words that mean to move, together.)
We can attend to tone and nuance. In conversation, we are called upon to see things from another’s point of view” (2012).⁵*



Lara Felsing
Reclaimate
embroidery thread on found birch bark
9.5 x 8", 2023
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

I first came to know Lara Felsing and her work in the summer of 2023, when she was defending her MFA thesis at Emily Carr University of Art and Design. That summer was an extreme one—intense heat, endless wildfires, and a visible shift in the conversations here in Treaty 6 around the now persistently felt realities of climate change. Lara’s work engaged in these discussions directly; her thesis paper begins with a section titled ‘Sacred Lands,’ which quotes Ojibwe writer Richard Wagamese: “Walk gently on the earth and do each other no harm.”⁶ I learned so much from reading about Lara’s practice and spending time with her work; I knew I wanted to know more. I saw April’s invitation to work on an exhibition with FAB as a great opportunity to do so.

Across the fall and winter of 2023, and now the spring of 2024, Lara and I have had many conversations to help support the slow process of getting to know one another. Knowledge sharing is an integral part of the relationship building afforded by prolonged conversation, and I’m grateful to Lara for all that she has shared across these many months.

It is impossible not to consider this exhibition in anticipation of wildfire season, for it is also entwined with how I first came to know Lara’s work. When her MFA exhibition preparations were disrupted by evacuation—on two separate occasions—due to out-of-control wildfires near the town of Edson where she lives, Lara enfolded the experience, along with the realities of living through a time of not knowing, directly into her work.

This engagement with response manifests directly in the delicate and urgent *Blanket Ceremony for the Forest, May 21, 2023*. With gratitude and respect for the forest she lives in, Lara placed a series of hand-dyed and sewn blankets around the trees, “similar to how one would wrap a loved one in a blanket to keep them warm, protected and cared for during a time of trauma or illness.”⁷ The series of Gratitude Blankets are made from plant pigments (spruce cones, saskatoon berries, sweetgrass, tobacco, cedar, sage, chaga, strawberries, dandelion and bee pollen) harvested and hand-dyed onto second-hand fabric and then sewn into civil defense blankets from 1952, part of the National

Emergency Strategic Stockpile (NESS).⁸ Lara discovered the blankets, which had been stored for decades in the town’s Post Office basement, at a fundraiser for the Galloway Station Museum. Lara conceived of *Blanket Ceremony for the Forest, May 21, 2023* during her first evacuation in early May, and came to see their making as a comfort in a heavy and scary time.⁹ Just hours before her second evacuation that month, due to Alberta wildfire EWF-031 encroaching the town of Edson again, Lara placed the blankets in the forest near her home and documented the ceremony using photography.

Enacted as a gesture of gratitude, I asked Lara to share more about the May 21, 2023, blanket ceremony:

*When I did the ceremony in the forest of black spruce trees I was quite nervous. It was on a very thick, smoky wildfire day just before we were evacuated. It was right between the two evacuations and it was hard to breathe outside. The ceremony wasn’t intended to be shared, I just knew I wanted to show gratitude for the forest where I live. It was just me and my partner, and fortunately he took a few photographs. I feel something important has come from sharing documentation of the Blanket Ceremony.*¹⁰



Lara Felsing
**Harvesting Tray with Deerskin
Medicine Bag**
second-hand cotton fabric, canvas,
floral broadcloth, burlap and cotton
thread dyed with sweetgrass, tobacco,
cedar, sage, chaga, moss, spruce cones
and needles, saskatoon berries, straw-
berries, dandelion, yarrow, wild mint,
bee pollen, shale and charcoal, buffalo
wool, wood hoops
12" across x 5" deep, 2023
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

The ways in which her artistic work responded to the experience, along with how she drew attention to it for others to engage with and better understand, has stayed with me. And now as I write this, as the start of the wildfire season was called 10 days early this year, and as looming drought has instilled a fear of increased fire activity this coming summer—here we are again. This response that Lara engages with across her practice is critical to learn from; her acts of listening to and learning from the land as a part of process, and the ways in which her artistic work shares this knowledge with an audience in delicate and caring ways, offer an openness for engagement.

Lara’s relationship to the land, her desire to both learn and make from it, comes from a worldview informed by two-eyed seeing:

I feel two-eyed seeing is an excellent strategy, especially for sharing knowledge. At its basis it encourages relationship building, and opens up a scope of inclusion to see different perspectives and support problem solving.

In my practice, I honor both Indigenous knowledge and reference Western science as methods of acknowledging our human fascination with the natural world and our place in it.

Finding dialogue across differing worldviews also illuminates moments of divide within Lara’s work. In *Polluted Medicine, Sweetgrass and flagging tape* (2022), for example, Lara’s multifaceted approach to forest care and management is made visible. The work is a delicate melding of two perspectives, made from braiding the medicinal and culturally significant sweetgrass together with plastic flagging tape gathered from the forest floor. The unassuming form delivers a strong statement using minimal materials and intervention. Upon first making the work, Lara shared feeling discomfort with sacrificing sweetgrass for an artwork in this way; but as she astutely affirms: “its medicine takes on a new form, which I think is very powerful.”¹¹ The flagging tape, initially collected from the forest floor out of concern for

how it might injure or impair animals who come across it, soon made its way into a number of Lara’s works:

Flagging tape intervenes in my work in a way that has such strong visual contrast to the soft natural colors of the materials found in the forest. It also represents our relationship with the land as humans, both positive and flawed.”¹²

This attention to materials gathered when moving through a forest, to listening to what is discovered through the experience, and to caring for what is found, is an integral part of Lara’s practice.



Lara Felsing
Interwoven
sweetgrass, floral broadcloth, deer
hide, flagging cord, twine, wood and
moss on found wood
6 x 6", 2021
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

As you move through the exhibition, consider what it feels like to walk through a forest of pine trees. Consider the textures, colours, and smells that you might encounter. These sensibilities are all embedded in Lara’s work.

When I smell the forest, it’s uplifting and rejuvenating, and I want that to translate to the audience through the work. We have a natural bond with the Earth and a kinship to the land—it’s built into us—we

*might deny it or we might be removed from it, but it's there, and that's why scent is so important in my practice. It's one of the key components of gathering, smudging, and creating with plant medicines.*¹³

Lara has a kinship with her chosen materials that extends beyond the gathering and making of artworks; it is palpable in the exhibition. These material considerations ground the work in nature as a way of helping viewers engage with them on another level. Audiences are encouraged to pick things up, to feel them, to smell them: “that’s exactly what we do when we’re in nature: we touch things, we pick things up, we want to engage and we’re meant to—it’s healing for us. I want the work to appeal to as many senses as possible, not just the eyes.”¹⁴

And for Lara, this kinship extends across the life of the artworks as well. She works with natural plant pigments, whose colours will eventually fade; these works, in fact, will one day return to the earth:

These pieces could go back to the forest, back to where they came from and be of benefit and not detriment to the land.”

There’s a beauty in the materials returning to the land, and when they return home they benefit other organisms. The intention of my practice is always to honor the land and the more than human species I’m in community with.”

As a curator, it’s important for me to learn more about what the artists I work with care about, and to make sure that the exhibition space—both in preparation and in how the gallery is experienced—reflects those concerns. Across our exhibition you won’t see any vinyl lettering—an (out of touch) tradition in galleries that both Lara and I hope isn’t long for the future. As an artist, I can attest to these elements of exhibition practice that often work in direct opposition to an artist’s work. Consider the flagging tape present



Lara Felsing

Alberta Wildfire EWF-031 (a timeline through photographs)

cyanotypes on handmade paper, harvested plant pigments, remnant embroidery thread, wildfire charcoal from Alberta Wildfire EWF-031, dandelion tea, clay and found paint

7 x 5" each, 2023

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

across Lara’s practice—an intentional gesture that draws attention to misguided interventions within our natural landscape—and how that work might be framed differently within the presence of vinyl lettering, an oil based one-time use product.

I want to bring awareness to the stories embedded in the land, old and new, and look closely and critically at the human relationship to land, and how, more often than not, it is extremely unbalanced where, as humans, we take more than we give.

In order to truly have reciprocity with the land, and with the more than humans we share community, we need to situate ourselves in an equally beneficial relationship where we not only exist together, but thrive.”¹⁵

Feel free to gently touch, smell, and feel, as much as you see across the exhibition—a goal of *Listening to the Land* is to consider how conversations might be raised as audiences move through it, how memories might be evoked, and how considerations about our relationships to the land might



Lara Felsing

Wildfire EWF-031 Timeline Windows

photographs on secondhand fabric, spruce, dandelion and saskatoon berry pigments and cut-out wood frames found at the Banff Centre for the Arts & Creativity wood shop
11.5 x 11.5" each, 2024

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

be found anew. Lara's artworks offer the space and the opportunity to consider these concerns more deeply, and to start conversations with one another around new ways forward.



FOOTNOTES

- ¹ April Dean, email message to author, October 17, 2023.
- ² Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. "intervention," accessed April 23, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intervention>.
- ³ Kirsty Robertson, Curating in a Time of Crisis, video, 7.14 minutes, Art-Lab, 2020. <https://vimeo.com/566679501>
- ⁴ Robertson goes on: "the Latin root of the English word curate is curare, meaning care. To care for objects and collections, but also to care for the relations between those objects and people who might come to see them." *Curating in a Time of Crisis*, 2020.
- ⁵ Turkle, Sherry. "The Flight From Conversation," *New York Times*, 21 April, 2012. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/22/opinion/sunday/the-flight-from-conversation.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>. Accessed 8 December 2021.
- ⁶ Richard Wagamese. *Embers: One Ojibway's Meditations*, (Douglas & McIntyre, 2016), 34.
- ⁷ Lara Felsing, "Wáhkóhtowin: Gestures in Kinship, Reciprocity, & Rematriation Towards Healing the Land and Ourselves" (Master's thesis, Emily Carr University of Art and Design, 2023), 35.
- ⁸ The federally owned NESS consists of medical assets managed by the Public Health Agency of Canada. Distributing assets to provinces during public health emergencies, the NESS came more widely into view across the COVID-19 pandemic when it was triggered and provided PPE and medical devices across the country. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/emergency-preparedness-response/national-emergency-strategic-stockpile.html>
In May 2023, the NESS was again engaged, providing supplies to support those impacted by wildfires across Alberta. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-safety-canada/news/2023/05/government-of-canada-to-provide-assistance-to-alberta-in-response-to-ongoing-wildfire-situation.html>
- ⁹ Lara Felsing, interview with the author, digital recording, March 26, 2024.
- ¹⁰ Felsing interview, 2024.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Ibid
- ¹³ Ibid
- ¹⁴ Ibid
- ¹⁵ Ibid

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Fine Art Building Gallery respectfully acknowledge that we are located on Treaty 6 territory, a traditional gathering place for diverse Indigenous peoples including the Cree, Blackfoot, Métis, Nakota Sioux, Iroquois, Dene, Ojibway, Sauteaux, Anishinaabe, Inuit, and many others whose histories, languages, and cultures continue to influence our vibrant community.

We are grateful to the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit artists, designers, curators, researchers, and scholars who generously share their creative work and traditional knowledge with the University community through exhibitions and related programs.



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