

On Art, Collecting, and the Weather: An Essay Series in Three Parts

By Laura Ritchie

Part Two: University of Lethbridge Art Gallery

The Weather Collection Project is a multifaceted exploration of art, art making, and art collecting in the context of our climate crisis. From Fall 2022 until this moment of writing, its objects have been to share stories, support artists in their making, and open up conversations about it all. To that end, artist Lisa Hirmer has mentored emerging artists in the creation of online work, hosted online public story-telling sessions, and continued to talk with University of Lethbridge Art Gallery (ULAG) Director/Curator Josephine (Josie) Mills and me about public art museum collections.

Despite the project's basis in the digital realm, Lisa's own work was a feature of what we had (by then) taken to calling the "constellation" of weather projects in Winter 2023 at ULAG. Lisa's in-person exhibition *Everything we have done is Weather Now*, curated by Josie, opened on January 19, 2023, showcasing photographs of weather data such as handwritten logbooks and homemade windssock positions. The exhibition is a quiet reminder of human impact on a not-just-human world and of the potentially major implications of seemingly subtle changes in things as near to us as the weather. Lisa's presence on site for the installation, opening reception, and public artist talks proved the perfect excuse for me to travel to Lethbridge to reunite with the team, talk about exhibitions associated with the Weather Collection project, and dig through the University's permanent art collection.

For 3 days over the week of January 22, 2023, I made my self at home at the University of Lethbridge and delighted in spending time not only with Josie and Lisa, but with the incredible team at the Gallery, all of whom were so willing to help bring the project to life (and push it forward when it stalled). I had the pleasure of meeting the Curatorial Assistant hired on the project, Ooleepeeka (Oolee) Egeesiak, a prairie Inuk artist and emerging curator who had spent many months researching and organizing works of Inuit art from the permanent collection for her exhibition, *Every Possible Future Is Multispecies* (October 6, 2022 – January 13, 2023). At the same time as Lisa's exhibition, Oolee also had an exhibition on campus of her own artwork: *Coulees Remember Glaciers* (January 13 – March 24, 2023), a personal display of poetry, illustration and sculpture exploring displacement, home, and the relationship between the northern land of her birth and the territory she inhabits. Travelling back and forth between Oolee's and Lisa's exhibitions for talks and viewings, the local terrain and environs came to be as topical as the installations.

Lethbridge is a windy place. We talked about that a lot. Not just because it is the wind's relationship to land that caused the area's key topographical features—the coulees to which Oolee's show title alludes—but because it was January and getting caught outside in it while braving the steep up or down of the campus terrain was near devastating. The pedway between the ULAG main exhibition spaces and its extension space provided shelter from the bite and a perfect view of the soft, rippling river valley slopes formed 10 to 15,000 years ago when the last glaciers retreated from Southern Alberta. This is a powerful land history, and a creative one: these formations appear not so much as a scar as a sculpture.

It was fitting that one of the artworks suggested to us by ULAG staff as potentially of interest is an installation of windssocks on the uLethbridge campus. Completely unrelated yet recalling Lisa's 2016

performative *Weather Watcher* project (represented in her exhibition by photographs of her handmade windsock), the ULAG collection includes a set of windsocks erected by Scott Rogers in 2007.



Scott Rogers (Canadian, b. 1981), *Breeze*, 2007, three windsocks (nylon), 243.8 x 61 x 61 cm, and three flagpoles, 731.5 x 6 x 6 cm, University of Lethbridge Art Collection, gift of the artist, 20007.

One of three works making up Rogers' public-site exhibition *Histories, Realities, Prospects: the Erickson Building* that was on in Fall 2007, *Breeze* was located on the outdoor walkway beneath the centre of the building. Its three airport windsocks installed on flagpoles signalled the wind tunnel created by the breezeway's design—a feature unique to the building's location that leaves the space ostensibly useless. We went out to this spot to feel the wind, observe the view, and get a sense for this empty part of campus.

When it came time to actively look for weather in works from among ULAG's collection of over 15,000 artworks from Canada, America, and Europe, our long-list of desirables seemed at once obvious and location appropriate. Whereas the Beaverbook Art Gallery collection begged interrogation of British and European historical landscapes that spoke to big, Romantic philosophical projects, the works pulled out especially for us at ULAG reiterated a century of Canadian nation-building projects made manifest in paintings of the country's West. On the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, Lethbridge, is in what my father would have called 'big sky country'. With vast prairie horizons to the East, and mountain views available to the West, it's understandable that some art of the area would be markedly sky-interested. As such, we mulled over cloud studies, a variety of seasonal landscapes, and even a deliberately rain-drenched watercolour drawing (the materiality of which would come back as a topic for discussion on future collection forays).

We started looking at works in a workroom adjacent to collection storage space where a selection was laid out for us alongside works recently exhibited in *Every Possible Future Is Multispecies*. A topically appropriate stone carving by Napachie Pootoogook (Canadian Inuit, 1938-2002), *Inuk in Wind*, date unknown, hadn't made it into Oolee's exhibition—too unstable on its feet for display.



Napachie Pootoogook (Canadian Inuit, 1938-2002), *Inuk in Wind*, date unknown, stone, 20.3 x 15.2 x 5.1 cm. From the University of Lethbridge Art Collection, gift of an anonymous donor, 2003.

But the tiny, hooded figure stood for us, legs apart, arms raised and braced as if ready for battle with the elements. Oolee talked us through some weather ideas seen in the work of Inuit artists, such as weather shaping our conception of time. Seasonal migration of caribou, for example, could once be counted on to indicate the time of year, until culling and the climate changed herds' migration patterns. There are over 50 examples of caribou related works in the collection—a reminder of the animal's significance.

Thinking about the Inuit artists that interested Oolee, and art collected from the North, it was difficult not to draw squiggly connections to artworks by non-Indigenous artists as artefacts of colonial ventures for Arctic sovereignty. Like the Beaverbrook's painting by George Chamber that depicts HMS Terror's disaster in the ice along the North-West Passage (before it had yet to be determined open), renderings of icebergs and Arctic terrain by Canadian artists in the early 20th century could be construed as testament to the vastness of Canadian wilds. Painting expeditions, such as the one undertaken by painters George Pepper and Kathleen Daly Pepper in 1960 to the eastern Arctic to study Inuit art, often resulted in canvases that reiterated a national narrative. Pepper's *Ice in Resolute Bay* (date unknown, c. 1961) for instance, continues from a long tradition of capturing in paint landscapes so rugged they can hardly be told apart from non-objective abstractions. Since the Group of Seven, and their successors, the Canadian Group of Painters (of which Pepper was a founding member), Canadian artists have banded together to promote landscape painting as our most nationally unique artistic pursuit.



Lisa Hirmer in University of Lethbridge Art Collection storage, looking at Iain Baxter (Canadian, b. 1936), *B.C. Landscape*, 1965, Vacu-formed butyrate plastic, 81.3 x 95.3 x 10.2 cm; Gift on an anonymous donor, 1992.278 and George Pepper (Canadian, 1903-1962), *Ice in Resolute Bay*, c. 1961, oil, 68.6 x 91.4 cm; Gift from the Estate of Kathleen Daly Pepper, 1995, (Photo: Laura Ritchie)

Before them, of course, a more concrete nation building project was tied to landscape painting: When the Canadian Pacific Railway invaded Western Canadian lands, its General Manager, William Cornelius van Horne, built a tourism industry around it by hiring artists to show what was now accessible to anyone with a ticket. William Brymner (Canadian, 1855-1925), who first travelled to the Selkirks and the Rockies in 1886 to prove he could capture the grandeur of the mountain ranges, was commissioned by CPR to travel there again in 1892 and 1893¹. The result were canvases such as *Sir Donald and Great Glaciers, Selkirks*, date unknown, which did little to implicate the national ‘achievement’ of settling western Canada as violent colonialism.



¹ <https://www.aci-iac.ca/art-books/william-brymner/biography/> Jocelyn Anderson. “William Brymner: Life and Work” Accessed January 08, 2024.

William Brymner (Canadian, 1855-1925), *Sir Donald and Great Glaciers, Selkirks*, date unknown, oil, 153.7 x 214 cm, From the University of Lethbridge Art Collections; purchased in 1988 as a result of a gift from Mr. Gerald Pencer in 1987.

What these mountain pictures did do, however, was record, to some degree, the state of the mountain ranges at the time. Once again, a harbinger of climate conversations, ice is worth looking at where it pops up in collections.

We moved on to visit the main collection storage area, which houses large sculpture, three-dimensional works (such as Iain Baxter's *B.C. Landscape*, 1965—which was on my viewing wish-list because of the tongue in cheek use of plastic to depict a mountain) and paintings such as Brymner's. This canvas, though we couldn't see it in full because it was kept wrapped in poly-sheeting, was relevant to our conversation more for its catalogue record than its materiality. A great glacier representation, the artwork is accompanied in its documentation by a photograph taken in 2019 by former ULAG registrar Lucie Linhart. She photographed the glacier in a similar composition, demonstrating the recession that had since occurred. The snapshot is entered as a note in the gallery's collections management database.



Abbott Ridge: view of Illecillewaet Glacier and Mt. Sir Donald, 2019. Photo by Lucie Linhart.

Comparison between travel photographs and historical paintings of mountain ranges is not novel, but it is intriguing. Group of Seven member J.E.H. MacDonald's oil sketch *Snow Clouds* (not dated), for example, is a study for a larger canvas in the collection of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (J.E.H. MacDonald, *The Front of Winter*, 1928, oil on canvas, 87 x 115.2 cm, Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Max Stern, inv. 1960.1229). The view in these scenes is of Mount Owen (on the left) with Mount Duchesnay in the far distance, observed from McArthur Meadows in Lake O'Hara. Both works will be part of the upcoming Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies exhibition and corresponding publication, *To See What He Saw: J.E.H. MacDonald and the O'Hara Years, 1924-1932* (by Patricia Cucman and Stanley Munn, forthcoming, June 2024). There, MacDonald's views will be displayed alongside contemporary photos of the correlating mountain ranges.



J.E.H. MacDonald (Canadian, 1873-1932), *Snow Clouds*, not dated, oil, 20.3 x 25.4 cm, From the University of Lethbridge Art Collection; Gift of Dr. Margaret (Marmie) Perkins Hess, 2017.

The potential for comparison between an artwork and a popular snapshot vista as record of natural changes over time is also obvious in Jin-me Yoon's *Souvenirs of the Self*, 1991. The work is a set of six postcards, each featuring a photograph of the artist in a Nordic sweater and jeans, standing statue-like in front of various Banff tourist icons: a museum display, a tour bus, a Fairmont hotel vista, etc. Subsequently sized up and printed in various large portrait formats, the series is represented in both forms in the uLethbridge Art Gallery collection. Of particular interest, the shot of the artist standing in front of Lake Louise captures the most popular composition snapped by visitors to that site: the icy blue lake centers the subject below the Victoria Glacier and Mount Victoria in the background.



Jin-me Yoon (Canadian, b. 1960), *Souvenirs of the Self*, 2001, photographic emulsion, 163.8 x 101.6 cm, Collection of the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery. Purchased in 2001 with matching funds from the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance Program, 2001.94.d.

Yoon's composition is familiar to anyone who has visited that site or seen tourist snaps from friends and family, and in the context of our Weather Collection project, had me wondering what records of glacial recession are hiding in family photo albums. This had become a reality of the project for me: by the time we were standing in this huge storage vault, talking about the environment and human interventions into object lives, and care for collections, I was thinking a lot less about art than about systems and patterns.

With access to substantial art collections like ULAG's or the Beaverbrook's, it's hard not to get tangled in a big-picture puzzle about what collecting—amassing and storing objects—says about colonially based habits of intervention in the non-human world. I found it hard not think about what the data sets held within accession registrations records could reveal. Fodder for our next collection visit, surely, notions of complex systems and power stuck with me after visiting Lethbridge. By this point, I was taking notes and letting new questions percolate. Fortunately, as the home of the Weather Collection project, ULAG catalyzed that simmering brew. By Spring, I would be thinking about the complexity of weather non-stop.