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REBECCA BELMORE'S "KWE" EXHIBIT DOESN'T LIVE UP TO PAST WORK

Posted by: Katrina Jurjans in Arts + Culture, Latest July 8, 2014 0 76 Views



Belmore in Banff.

Rebecca Belmore, KWE

I first became acquainted with Rebecca Belmore in 2007 when studying in Toronto. I remember her piece Fountain – which was presented at the Venice Biennale in 2005 – blown up in front of a class of hundreds through a projector. In the piece, Belmore lugs buckets of water from a pristine lake, flinging them against a camera lens that eventually drips red with the blood of her ancestors: the colour of colonization, drenched me – a fresh out-of-high school art kid – in my own ignorance. The water had penetrated the screen. Bursting through the bubble of my own comfort, it poured over my body, cold and unsettling. I felt ashamed. How, after 12 years of Canadian education, was this the first time I was being exposed to the violent core of Canada's realization? With the harsh truth of Aboriginal massacre in the wake of colonial advancement swept under the rug, our history lessons turned the focus, repeatedly, to the promotion of Canada as a nation of peace, an international hero of nonviolence.

In a sum of ten minutes Belmore had not only shattered this built-up conception, but had planted in me an instrumental seed: the political power of art. Needless to say, to her I owe an insurmountable debt as now, seven years later, the vines from that seed have wrapped themselves around me, providing me with an omnipresent reminder of this power. I am writing this in order for you, reader, to understand the admiration I have for Belmore; for you to be aware of the excitement I had been carrying around with me all day on May 23rd, before going to see her most recent exhibit, KWE, at the Justina M. Barnicke gallery in Toronto.

However, that excitement slowly diminished.

Kwe, which means 'woman' in Anishinaabe – both curator Wanda Nanibush's and Belmore's native language – is an obvious address to the identity of both women – a single word that melds the oppression of two groups: women and Aboriginal. With either a controversial sparkle of enthusiasm or a quiet, harrowing subtlety, Belmore has repeatedly spoke to the agency of both with an admirable zest – however, this time, although the same issues were being confronted, they lacked the life to hold them together with any sort of assertion.

The first room of photographs – predominantly of Belmore, either kneeling, turned with her back to the camera or standing with her body folded over her legs – appeared as little more than staged portraits. There was the distinct impression that somewhere, beyond the frame, the real story fuelling Belmore's conceptual drive was taking place, leaving the actual image feeling static and torpid. Even the series of untitled photographs of Belmore's sister, hanging upside down, suspended in a white sheet-like fabric, felt like hollow repercussions of a bigger picture.

Moving from the flat surface of the wall to the three-dimensional space of the gallery proved to be more engaging. Mixed Blessing, 2011, is a sculpture of a kneeling figure in a praying position. Long black hair draping across its hidden face, the back of its sweater reads – in the most literal form of a crossword

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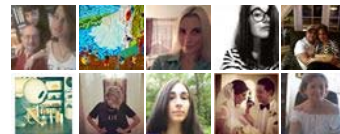
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(Christianity is another topic Belmore repeatedly addresses) – "Fuckin Artist/Fuckin Indian." The piece throws the ball in the court of the viewer, leaving them to decide.

The second, and final, room was dedicated to the simultaneous screening of three of Belmore's past performances. Intrinsic to the post-showing of time- and space-specific work, Belmore's work fell victim to the trap: how, when stretched into the present day, can the ephemerality of past performances keep from losing their magic? This is a difficulty that artists and curators must constantly overcome, and unfortunately, this time, I felt Nanibush missed the mark. As opposed to creating a space of isolation in which the viewer could focus on one video at a time, and, albeit feebly, be 'transported' back to the past of the performance, the simultaneous showing of three amounted to nothing but discordance.

Leaving the exhibit I felt disappointed. Perhaps I had placed Belmore on an unreachable pedestal, or perhaps it was because Belmore – who predominantly works in the medium of performance – was now fossilized in the photograph frame and trapped in the past of distant performances. Regardless, I noticed myself returning to the built-up Belmore of my past, as opposed to rejoicing in the Belmore of the present, in an attempt to preserve her there – to think of her as the catalyst to my awareness of the power of art.

Running: May 15th – August 9th, 2014.

For more information on the exhibition, click [HERE](#)

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ABOUT KATRINA JURJANS



Katrina is currently finishing her BFA at Concordia University in Art History and Studio Art. Both her painting practice and theoretical research find common ground by exploring the space that exists in-between: in-between two colours on a canvas, two people in a relationship, two countries divided by a border. She believes that the instability that exists in these spaces make them promising points of ignition to think about the world in both the micro sense of intimate human relations and the macro sense of social geography. Taking this fascination as a starting point, Katrina hopes to explore this concept further while pursuing her masters in spatial theory, while remaining dedicated to her practice as a painter.



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