



New Contract, 2015
Oil on board
20" x 16"



Girls, 2015
Oil on board
20" x 16"



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Select Bibliography/ Further Reading

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Cover: *Feely touchy*, oil on board, 18" x 14", 2014 (detail)

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SNOWED IN & FELT UP

by Alex King

Behind my desk, a window reveals the building’s wintry environs: even, white prairie finished in an almost architectural horizon, with white sky filling much of the frame. In front of me, glass doors lead to a gallery where smooth floor stops at horizontal abruptness to meet expansive, white walls. This strange enfilade, from real to abstracted winter prairie, provides both a continuation and counterpoint to the ideas and tone of *SNOWED IN & FELT UP*, a new installation by Erica Mendritzki.

A move to Winnipeg, arguably the wintriest city of all, provided Mendritzki with the geographic and meditative space that forms the backdrop of this work. Traversing winter’s physical and psychological terrain, she observes its dysfunction, structures, signs and effects. By sabotaging our habitat with darkness, cold and snow, she notes¹, the season inverts visual experiences and warps sensation. Snow, as befitting its multiple linguistic usages, transforms the world by concealing parts of it. It obscures vision and establishes a fraudulent surface. Yet winter also reveals the invisible: footsteps, breath, golden pee on white flurries. We citizens of winter conceal our bodies further to appease it. We cover skin with layers and leave only peeps of exposed flesh; souvenirs of nakedness and vulnerability. The season’s effect on our bodies is also profound. Bitter cold develops into stiff, jellied numbness where bodily extremities begin to feel like weird phantoms and alien appendages. We retreat, avoid the hostilities of the outdoors and curl into ourselves.

SNOWED IN & FELT UP sees Mendritzki using winter’s methodology to translate her own artistic concerns. These focus on a number of visual and conceptual themes, their interconnectedness (and like winter) the multiple, slippery, contradictory meanings they generate. Fluent in the language of objects, Mendritzki exploits their associative power as she explores these themes in contexts that extend beyond winter. Her seasonal observations connect to a wider network of ideas that include topics such as art history, contemporary art, the body, representation and feminism.

A peculiar congregation waits beyond the gallery doors. Visitors weave around diminutive floor-based sculptures comprised largely of found items. A row of faux shearling baby boots; a pair of hands elegantly raised to cradle an oversized peanut; a blackened cherub with arms inserted into white plastic pipes². The piping appears repetitively, as casing for a lipstick-like finger phallus or the elbow joint of a draught excluder. The bodily presence, or at least parts of it, extends even to the some of the more abstract items, such as the pipes that peek anthropomorphically from the floor as if surfacing from underground. The artist’s use of overlooked and castoff objects in this cabinet of curiosities speaks to her somewhat benevolent attitude toward them. Here, they must have meaning; they must have value. At its heart, Mendritzki’s practice exhibits a consideration of meaning, and these readymades are selected for their semiotic value. The carefully selected configurations produce a network that delights in humorous juxtapositions and an *in situ* system of meaning-making. Mendritzki relies on their object-ness, their aesthetics, connotations and former lives to give them meaning and enable them to perform as gestures.

The accompanying suite of paintings echoes the sculptures’ wintry palette of peed-on snowbanks, dead grass and road salt. To view them, one must navigate the objects on the floor. This forces the viewer to look down and tread with caution, replicating the care one takes walking on frosty streets.

Mendritzki’s wintry preoccupations and their offshoots are made manifest in patterns of motifs that appear and are reworked in both the two and three-dimensional. As in the case of the aforementioned *putti*, more vulnerable appendages (hands, feet and fingers) are sometimes encased to restrict mobility and evoke foreign sensation, as they might behave in the cold. Examples of key contact points on our bodies at which sensation is explored, and coupled with a variety of hard and soft textures present in the other objects and paintings, a subtle and abstract sense of tactility is produced. Since audience members are unable to handle these items, Mendritzki introduces an idea rooted in corporeality, but that remains tantalizingly out of reach. Instead, she seems to suggest, it must be explored in other ways. Perhaps this could be considered an analogy for her own practice, in the use of her imagination and associative ability to figure out meaning.

Motifs of crude, pendulous breasts and bellies recur, suggesting our most vulnerable intimacies, those hidden under the most layers and farthest from winter sunlight. In *Self-made* (oil on board, 2014), a pubic hair doodle hovers above soft v-shaped, nippleless breasts. The truncated torso in *Stupid bodies* (oil on canvas, 2014) has been rendered into a vessel-like shape, with belly button placed (carelessly? Thoughtfully?) outside. A stylized female nude appears in *Girls* (oil on board, 2015), a double portrait after Henry Moore’s reclining figure. The relationship between Mendritzki’s presentation of the feminine and Moore’s brings an element of critique to the installation, on beauty and its place within art history. The vessel in *Stupid bodies* is a wry joke, a literal rendering of the use of women’s bodies as tools in both life and art. Are these bodies left stupid by the stroke of the brush? Dumbed down by careless or misguided portrayal? Whether it be Moore’s model muses or Mendritzki’s droopy presentations, the question of representation hangs in the air.

Mendritzki identifies Moore as a figure she became aware of early in her artistic forays. With a popularity that extends beyond the artworld, his position as figurehead places him, and his work, as generically representative of modern art. For a contemporary feminist artist, Moore’s (and other senior male artists) iconography is problematic. A certain amount of respect for the artistic avant-garde and the significant, still visible, effects of their work is due. However, the reclining nude, so common to Moore and his ilk, typifies the objectification of the female body prevalent in art, “...to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself”³. This leaves our relationship with canonical figures complicated, or in Mendritzki’s words, somewhat awkward⁴. In her developing practice, and even her role as Instructor at the University of Manitoba, this awkwardness is frequently questioned and discussed. Her paintings’ feminist counterpoints to the passive nude are loaded with critique, particularly in their rejection of beauty. But they don’t present themselves as worthier representations. Instead, she echoes the reductive strategies of Moore’s abstraction and the male gaze by isolating the breasts, and paints them with humour to indicate their ongoing use as a signifier, for better or worse. Mendritzki’s own awkward position in the canon of art history and in the contemporary artworld must be navigated.

The patriarchal leanings of the canon and the expectations imposed on the artist are alluded to in *Man to Man* (oil on board, 2015) and *New Contract* (oil on board, 2015). “Let me talk to you man to man”, the former declares in confident cursive. This is how the relationship between canonical art history and audience can be characterized: Men talking to men about the work of men. *New Contract* repeats this phrase *ad infinitum*, this time written in the artist’s shakier left hand. The assuredness of the statement dissipates. The phrase “let me” (originally rather a red herring of a statement), shows its true linguistic colours to plead rather than insist. Ever fond of the absurd, Mendritzki repeats this phrase until it loses its meaning. What was once familiar now seems foreign, as words that once easily slipped from the mouth find their way into the world through a numb tongue’s labours. As the phrase floats around another rendering of Moore’s nude, Mendritzki seems to gently poke at the old boys club. These representations of women now exist in world where the female voice is as loud, aware and critical as ever. Talking “man to man” about art may still exist, but by identifying and rejecting the patriarchal tendencies of the canon (the male gaze and gender representation, for example) that discourse is disrupted.

One could consider artistic practice as a series of experiments to project the artist’s voice into the world. This inner voice, communicated via the objects produced and assembled, must find the best way to express itself in accordance with its maker’s sensibilities. This is the struggle of all artists: to articulate the inarticulable; to enjoy successes and deal with failures; to make work that is not entirely sure of itself 100% of the time. Does Mendritzki’s unsteady phrase “let me talk to you man to man” empathise with those vulnerable moments?

Mendritzki’s is not a clean, crisp allegory of winter, but rather its final act. As worn and dirty snow starts to melt, it leaves us excavating the layers of clutter caught over the previous months. Winter forces the boundaries between inside and outside, the visible and the obscured to the forefront of our minds. The repeated motifs of piping, thread and layered imagery suggests that *SNOWED IN & FELT UP* is a work engaged with these themes, their ‘between-ness’ and connectivity. What it offers, between its strange objects and many layers, is a consideration of Mendritzki’s own navigation of her inner and outer worlds.

1. Mendritzki interview

2. These offerings were purchased new or chanced upon in junk shops, a resource Mendritzki has used in previous work.

3. Berger, 2009, p.48

4. Mendritzki interview