

Robyn Anderson

Robyn Anderson is an emerging artist from Corner Brook, Newfoundland. After her undergraduate studies in Corner Brook she studied art history as well as contemporary and historical curatorial practices for a short time in Harlow, England. She received a master's degree in Visual Arts in 2016 from the University of Saskatchewan. She recently returned to Corner Brook, where she now works as the Visual Arts Coordinator at the Rotary Arts Centre and pursues her art practice. Her work explores the necessity of negative emotions such as anxiety, depression, failure and the need for narrative and escapism to express these emotions.

Image List

All images are details of the *Nature and Other Terrible Things* installation, Estevan Art Gallery & Museum, 2017.

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Director/Curator: Amber Andersen
Curator of Collections: Sarah Durham
Educator: Karly Garnier
Curatorial Essay: Sarah Durham
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In a deep dark wood...

"The oldest and strongest emotion known to mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown."

-H. P. Lovecraft, "Supernatural Horror in Literature", 1927.

We tell each other stories all the time, recounting our day, sharing tales around a campfire, or even when watching a movie. In this way narratives comprise a significant means of communication. Fables, fairy tales, folklore, and other forms of narrative are used frequently as a means of imparting societal expectations to the next generations, like Charles Perrault's *Little Red Riding Hood* and the Brothers Grimm's *Hansel and Gretel*, both stress the consequences of failing to obey parents and the danger strangers pose. These tales can justify our anxieties and fears, but not everything is often so transparent as the morals in fairy tales; we must peel back the layers to discover the depth of meaning before us. How we use narrative to understand these potent negative emotions is a point of interest for Robyn Anderson.¹

Anderson's practice centres on the notion that anxiety and similar negative emotions can be understood through narrative,² and that these seemingly destructive and debilitating forces can serve a greater purpose. Our anxieties and fears can at times be helpful, perhaps intuitively warning us of danger³, or as Anderson suggests, fuelling the fires of creativity.⁴ Her large-scale charcoal drawings and print installation invites the audience to re-examine their initial perceptions of the world around them.

Her art draws upon her own struggles with anxiety. By creating these massive fantastical beasts that embody a whimsically dark interpretation of nature,⁵ Anderson's work immerses her audience in an imaginative world, where first impressions can be misleading. Transforming the gallery space in to a dark, foreboding wood, the inhabitants of this land personify the complexities of her anxieties. Figures are thoughtfully placed throughout the gallery; many of these creatures are humanoid in general appearance from the shape and formation of their bodies to the garments they wear. But the similarity ends there; frequently their heads are of animals, or give the distinct impression of being non-human. One such figure stands upright with arms held loosely behind its back, a tunic belted around its waist over RCMP breeches. Instead of riding boots, exposed hairy hind legs give way to hooves. Its head is that of a

caribou, caught in motion, with various positions shadowed behind it, its antlers are a variety of trees.

The installation is reminiscent of a fable, where the protagonist, while venturing through a deep dark wood, encounters all manner of surreal anthropomorphic beasts. From a cursory glance the story told may seem predictable. An oversized wolf, visible among the trees, lunges at visitors from the wall. The other woodland inhabitants, such that they are, stand or sit with an appearance of relative ease. It is after all a wolf; typically such an encounter in the woods would be unfavourable. However, upon closer examination, the wolf exhibits contradictory evidence to this assumed nature. While its visage appears aggressive, fangs barred contorting the mouth into a fierce grimace, the beast does not lunge with the intent to bite. Between its powerful maw is an uprooted tree. The duality of the wolf's nature is further represented by the animal's hairy forearms, one of which ends in a massive paw, claws scraping at the ground before it, and the other ending in a very human hand, upturned in supplication, the luminous absence of a moth perched in the open palm. A bestial, primal representation in the paw versus a gentle, peaceable promise in the hand. Is the wolf friend, or foe?

What of the presumed harmlessness of the others? Upon closer scrutiny, most wield tools. Are these implements benign in their care, or are they intended for inflicting harm as impromptu weapons? The tools they carry are commonplace items easily recognised; a sewing needle, a rake, or a telephone pole.

These other beings are equally complex, their existence dreamlike. Their overall forms seemingly more human than the wolf, but increasingly less tangible. A blue jay headed being crouches on massive curled talons instead of feet. A bat with a collar of twigs and foliage rests above a body comprised of beach and open surf on nondescript legs in sneakers. It seems the more you see the less defined the reality.

Anderson's exhibition, similarly to fables, is meant to teach a lesson. Therein lies her inversion of the fable though, instead of teaching a lesson about human weakness or folly she embraces our rashness as a way to discuss mental health.⁶ Anderson invites her viewers into her storybook installation, and while its themes are common enough, those foolish enough to stray from the path may risk the trials and tribulations presented by each meeting of these otherworldly creatures. This situation continuously builds the protagonist's anxiety. Anxiety may be affected by certain situations, especially when the circumstances are perceived as far more dangerous than the reality.⁷ Anderson plays with

⁶ "Florida Centre for Reading Research, 2010.

⁷ Canadian Mental Health Association, 2014.

¹ Anderson, Robyn. 2016.

² Ibid.

³ Canadian Mental Health Association, 2014.

⁴ Anderson, Robyn. 2016.

⁵ Brophy, Geraldine. 2016, and Anderson, Robyn. 2016.



perception by altering the gallery space with her drawings of creatures and characters. She balances

between giving the viewer enough to recognise, whether it is the actual space or the artwork itself, to encourage them to tread forward but with great uncertainty.

Echoing Descartes' infamous philosophical prose, *cogito ergo sum*,⁸ *Nature and Other Terrible Things* posits a similar theory. We are the architects of our own realities. How we see the world around us tends to conform to our expectations. In an interview with the *4 O'clock Whistle*, Anderson admits that nature can only be as bad, or *terrible*, as an individual believes.

The allusion to fairy tales is intentional. Anderson wants to encourage her audience to consider the deeper meanings in the common tales we, as a society, share.⁹ There is no clear-cut right or wrong, or black or white interpretation to these narratives. Deliberately creating a space to challenge the preconceived notions of good and evil. To Anderson, narratives are not so clean; they exist in varying shades of grey.¹⁰

Nature and Other Terrible Things reveals the darker aspects of human nature, the despair and futility that manifest when facing our fears. Anderson's work shows us that these crippling emotions have their place and they can be understood. Understanding the unknown diminishes the power fear or anxiety has over us. We are shaped by our experiences, physically and mentally.

⁸ Translated in English to "I think, therefore I am", is the Latin phrase immortalised by French philosopher, scientist, and mathematician, René Descartes (1596 – 1650), in his *Principles of Philosophy (Principia Philosophiae)*.

⁹ Bush, Meghan. 2016.

¹⁰ Ibid, pg. 29.