



BELINDA  
HARROW:  
UNSETTLED

## Belinda Harrow: Unsettled

By Margaret Bessai

The wildlife in Belinda Harrow's paintings, drawings, and sculptures are animals and birds that she has encountered, not on a nature hike, but in the city. Known scientifically as synanthropes,<sup>1</sup> they are wild jackrabbits, coyotes, gophers, geese, and pelicans that have adapted to urban life. Like Harrow, their home is in Regina, the capital of Saskatchewan, on Treaty 4 territory. Originally, the grassy homeland for migratory herds of bison and the Nêhiyawak (Plains Cree), Nahkawé (Saulteaux), and Nakota, Lakota and Dakota (Assiniboine) peoples, the Prairies have changed dramatically through colonial settlement. In the 1880s, railway development and coercive government policy forcibly displaced Indigenous peoples, animals and plants. The land was surveyed into fields and gridded by roads; towns were planned at convenient intervals along the rail lines; and the territory capital was (somewhat arbitrarily) established where the Canadian Pacific Railway crossed the Pile of Bones Creek. At the capital site, settlers dug a lake out of the creek and created parks, planting trees by hand. Regina and the surrounding farmlands are, in essence, an architecture built following colonial blueprints. Harrow's images reflect on these spaces and the animal life here, and open a number of questions: How does colonialization and our past shape our present life? What is our role in nature, and in supporting sustainable ecologies? What is our responsibility to the future?

Belinda Harrow's connection to this place is both as settler and immigrant. Born in New Zealand, her family moved to a small town in rural Saskatchewan when she was three. Her childhood was rich with animals, both domestic and wild. As an adult, Harrow has travelled extensively for university, residencies, and work. With every move, to the Maritimes, Scotland, New Zealand, the Canadian North, and to Regina, her art practice has been her method for connecting to place, whether through the camera, or through making work.

Imagine turning a corner in the heart of the city, and finding a field dotted with white-tailed jackrabbits? This is the sense of wonder at the heart of Harrow's drawings. *Hamilton Super Moon*, for example, captures an evening on Hamilton Street in downtown Regina, magically transformed, as rabbits gather on a moonlit lawn. Based on a photograph, it illustrates the visual dance between photography and the graphic arts. As the photojournalist Henri Cartier-Bresson observed, "Photography is an immediate reaction, drawing is a meditation."<sup>2</sup> Both mediums are central in Harrow's practice. Photos serve as inspiration and visual reference in the studio; drawings are thinking time, and fundamental to Harrow's work in printmaking, painting and sculpture.

The animals in Harrow's sculptures and paintings are often realistically close to life-size, beautifully and meticulously rendered. In paintings such as *The Burn Off* she uses a shallow depth of field to foreground her subject in the landscape; in this case, it is a coyote in a field during the late fall when rows of tough flax straw are burnt. The naturalistic size, details, and inclusion of habitat in Harrow's work are all compositional methods present in many historical images of wildlife by biologist-artists, such as James Audubon, or Maria Sibylla Merian.<sup>3</sup> However, the animals that Harrow depicts are not scientific subjects. Nor are they idealized, as in the work of Romantic painter, Edwin Landseer, whose painting of a stag, *Monarch of the Glen* (c. 1851), encapsulates the Victorian vision of nature.<sup>4</sup> Instead, animals and birds function as a lens for Harrow's critical vision, providing focus for her thoughts on current events, climate change, and social issues.

Our entry point into Harrow's philosophical inquiry is through her titles. In the painting *The Great Leap Forward*, a jackrabbit soars over the Saskatchewan Legislative Building. The title is inspired by a song written by Billy Bragg,<sup>5</sup> and refers to an event in Chinese history: the 'second Five-Year Plan'. Implemented by Chairman Mao to





(left to right) *Governing*, *Hamilton Super Moon*, *Downtown Coterie*; graphite coloured pencil, gesso on teraskin, 84.0 x 63.5 cm (each), 2017

rapidly modernize the Chinese economy, the plan resulted in displacing and starving millions.<sup>6</sup> In Bragg's song, the slogan becomes ironic, a warning that the rhetoric of progress is not always as straightforward as it sounds. Saskatchewan's past century of progress has been precarious, boom and bust years exacerbated by climate disasters, agricultural practices, and political intervention.<sup>7</sup> In Harrow's painting, *The Camp*, jackrabbits gather on the lawn in Wascana Park, the dome of the Legislative Building hovers over the trees in the background. The title refers to a political protest that took place in the summer of 2018. Each rabbit is situated where a tipi stood during the "Justice for Our Stolen Children" encampment at the public park beside the Saskatchewan Legislative Building.<sup>8</sup> The protest began as a response to two high-profile murder cases of Indigenous youth, in which the accused were acquitted: Gerald Stanley for the murder of Colten Boushie, and Raymond Cormier for the murder of Tina Fontaine. Over the summer, the encampment opened discussion on systemic

racism in both the justice and corrections systems, and in the child welfare system. The organizers also welcomed any grieving for missing and murdered family and friends.<sup>9</sup> In Harrow's painting, the rabbits do not stand in for the protestors; they hold space for the disenfranchised; they stand for the right to be heard and protected.

While Harrow's work is primarily based in realism, she often takes an approach that resembles collage, arranging visual elements to create surreal, dream-like scenes. The drawing *East Winds* mixes the mundane (a rabbit in the field beside the oil refinery) with the magical (a wooden ship in the clouds sailing through the smoke from the factory). The juxtaposition links our colonial past with the industrial present. In other drawings, such as *Victoria Stampede* or *Downtown Coterie*, Harrow uses the conventions of a graphic novel to ponder the conversations that animals might have. In *Old Times*, a wild jackrabbit addresses a family of domestic cows. In the jackrabbit's speech bubble is an image of a bison family.<sup>10</sup> Is the rabbit telling a



Installation view; left to right: *Raymore*, *Elrose*, *Biggar*; Hydrocal, charcoal, steel, various dimensions, 2018



*The Great Leap Forward*, acrylic on birch, 101.5 x 101.5 cm, 2020

story of the times when the bison grazed the plains? Those familiar with the landmarks in Regina may recognize this family of cows; they are bronze sculptures by another Saskatchewan artist, Joe Fafard. Situated in front of the MacKenzie Art Gallery, their placement honours domestic agriculture and the animals that sustain us.<sup>11</sup> In this drawing, Harrow shares with us the influence that Fafard's work has had on her own: his deep respect for animals on their own terms, his concentration on personal and local experience as worthy subject matter in art, and the belief that art belongs to all of us, not just an elite.

This exhibition includes two bodies of Harrow's sculptural work. Both are life-size: a series of jackrabbits, and a colony of gophers (aka Richardson's Ground Squirrels). To create these, Harrow developed a method of monoprinting with cast Hydrocal gypsum cement. She begins each by drawing with charcoal onto pieces of tightly woven cloth. Then she sews the drawings into a form for casting the Hydrocal. After the mixture



*The Burn Off*, acrylic on birch, 121.5 x 121.5 cm, 2019

cures, Harrow removes the fabric. The finished artwork, depending on the angle of view, pivots between naturalism and the uncanny, as the detailed realism in the transferred drawings is different on each side of the cushion-like form of the animals.<sup>12</sup> Harrow has titled these sculptures with names that suggest they are anthropomorphic portraits, such as *Rose* or *Bruno*. Other names, *Victoria* and *Albert* and *Dewdney* indicate that she is also referencing the colonial system of naming Regina city streets and Saskatchewan towns to honour the British Royal Family (Queen Victoria and her consort), the government officials and executives of the Canadian Pacific Railway (Hon. Edgar Dewdney and Sir John Rose), and the men who were important to the early settler community (Rev. Bruno Doerfler).<sup>13</sup> In naming these animals, Harrow is acknowledging their colonization. Like the land, they have been changed through contact with settlers. Names and languages are not arbitrary; they reflect our values and shape our thoughts. In recent years, citizens in Regina have reflected on Edgar Dewdney's chilling record of



*Unsettled* is my exploration of the place I am living. I am looking closely at this city where I have chosen to live. As an immigrant with settler heritage, I am looking at this space and the privilege that permits me to make a place for myself here. Prairie animals and birds share this urban space, some more successfully than others. It brings me joy that they continue to find a place in this city despite our overwhelming presence. I am considering the past, the present and our collective future.

Belinda Harrow

oppression and opportunism<sup>14</sup> and are petitioning to rename Dewdney Avenue, proposing instead “Tatanka Avenue” in honour of the Lakota word for bison.<sup>15</sup>

Development has changed more than the land. The contrails that cross the sky in Harrow’s painting *Between the Lines* are a reminder that when American white pelicans travel north for nesting each year they must fly through “our” air space. For Canadian Geese, migration patterns are affected by favourable conditions: life in the city offers enough food and shelter for the birds to stay all year. Regina’s substantial flock of wild geese are well known for their fearlessness, even walking across major roads. In *Walk the Line*, Harrow depicts geese on a road near the oil refinery. Geese walk because they are simply not able to fly during nesting season. They are molting and re-growing flight feathers. Urban life protects them from predators at a precarious time. It is no different for us. Cities are part of a system of human adaptation that provides safety and shelter. However, there are aspects to our adaptation that we are beginning to question. While painting this image, Harrow reflected on the 2019 strike at the Co-op Refinery, remembering the impact of a similar event in her childhood, when a strike at the potash mine in her small town caused financial hardship for her family and community. Refineries and mines are part of the resource economy, which is becoming increasingly precarious. The road that the geese are on is part of the city that shelters them, but it is

a dangerous path to take; the urban life that we have built is dependent on resources that are running out. We too are walking a dangerous road.

*Unsettled*, the title of this exhibition, is a word with several possible meanings: “uninhabited, not occupied by settlement” and “not fixed nor established; not calm, not tranquil—disturbed”.<sup>16</sup> It carries a sense of uneasiness, uncertainty. On the surface, the birds and animals in Harrow’s work are representative of those unsettled by colonization, urbanization and the massive human developments that mark the Anthropocene.<sup>17</sup> Entering more deeply into Harrow’s work, we find a space filled with questions and no definite answers. Uncertain and unsettling as this may be, we need to question our past, and challenge our present, so that we can adapt for the unsettled future.

<sup>1</sup> Synanthropes are species which exist between domestic and wild, who benefit from living in close proximity to humans yet remain beyond their control. See article: Sarah Gunawan. “Knowing the Synanthrope”.

*The Expanded Environment*. 6 April, 2016.

<http://www.expandedenvironment.org/knowing-the-synanthrope/>, accessed 2 September 2021.

<sup>2</sup> David Priestley. “The Greatest Henri Cartier-Bresson Quotes.” *Photogpedia*, 14 Apr 2021, <https://photogpedia.com/henri-cartier-bresson-quotes/>, accessed 2 September, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> S. Grace Touzel. (2015) “Maria Sibylla Merian: Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium.” *Rare Treasures From the Library of the Natural History Museum*, (ed) Judith Magee, 2017. Natural History Museum: London. 54 - 61.  
Paul M. Cooper. (2015) “John James Audubon: The Birds of America.” *Rare Treasures from the Library of the Natural History Museum*, (ed) Judith Magee, 2017. Natural History Museum: London. 150 - 157.



Installation view of the exhibition, *Unsettled*, at the Moose Jaw Museum & Art Gallery.

<sup>4</sup> Sir Edwin Landseer. *The Monarch of the Glen*. c.1851. *European Romanticisms in Association*, 11 Sep 2020, <https://www.euromanticism.org/sir-edwin-landseers-monarch-of-the-glen-c-1851/>, accessed 2 September, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Billy Bragg. "Waiting for the Great leap Forwards." B side, Track 6, on *Worker's Playtime*. Go! Discs. (1988) online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qKXgc5AXhM0>. The song underscores Bragg's cynicism about politics in general.

<sup>6</sup> Between 1958 and early 1960, Mao Zedong and the Chinese communists organized China's vast population into large-scale rural communes to address China's industrial and agricultural problems which resulted in economic disaster, wide-spread starvation, death, and in many cases, torture. Rana Mitter, "Tombstone: The Untold Story of Mao's Great Famine by Yang Jisheng – review." *The Guardian*, online review, December 7, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/dec/07/tombstone-mao-great-famine-yang-jisheng-review>, accessed 2 September, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Curtis R. McManus. "Happyland: a history of the 'dirty thirties' in Saskatchewan, 1914-1937." Series: *The West series 5*. University of Calgary Press, Calgary, Alberta, 2011. McManus contends that the "Dirty Thirties", with social dislocation, moral corrosion, and inconsistent and inept government policy, actually began much earlier and it was connected only peripherally to the Depression.

<sup>8</sup> See article: Ryan McKenna. "Premier Scott Moe wants Regina police to remove teepees from park." *The Canadian Press CBC News*, 28 Jun 2018, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/moe-wants-teepees-down-1.4726630>, accessed 2 September, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> "Idle No More." *Justice for Our Stolen Children – Idle No More*, 2021, <https://idlenomore.ca/justice-for-our-stolen-children/>, accessed 2 September, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Before settlement and farms, an estimated 60 million bison were the keystone species in the short grass steppes and tall grass prairies, and a source of food for Indigenous peoples. "Species: Plains Bison." *World Wildlife Fund (WWF)*, 2021, <https://www.worldwildlife.org/species/plains-bison>, accessed 2 September, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Sculptures by Joe Fafard, citation online at: "Exhibitions: Outdoor Sculpture Garden." *MacKenzie Art Gallery*, 2021, <https://mackenzie.art/exhibition/outdoor-sculpture-garden>, accessed 2 September, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> The gophers are double-sided, while the rabbits have images of prairie grasses, buildings or other urban references on their backs. Two of the rabbits, *Victoria* and *Albert* have fur on their reverse, similar to previous soft-sculpture work in which Harrow incorporated printed cloth and hide. From an interview with the artist in her studio on July 25, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Edmund T. Russell. *What's in a Name? The Story Behind Saskatchewan Place Names*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Western Producer Prairie Books, 1980.

Dale Simmons (ed). Regina: *The Street Where You Live*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Regina Public Library, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> See Legacy of Edgar Dewdney, Lieutenant Governor of the NWT (1881 – 1888).

S. Niessen. "Edgar Dewdney: Industrial Schools in the N.W.T." *Shattering the silence: The hidden history of Indian residential schools in Saskatchewan*. Regina, SK: Faculty of Education, University of Regina, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Lynn Giesbrecht. "Buffalo art project on Dewdney Avenue continues call for street's name change." *Regina Leader-Post*, 18 Oct 2020. <https://leaderpost.com/news/local-news/buffalo-art-project-on-dewdney-avenue-continues-call-for-streets-name-change>, accessed 2 September, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> "Unsettled." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/unsettled>, accessed 2 September, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Coined by the atmospheric chemist and Nobel Prize laureate Paul J. Crutzen, the term "Anthropocene" describes the idea of a new geological era shaped by deep interventions into nature by humans as biological and geological agents.

## LIST OF WORKS

### PANTINGS & DRAWINGS:

1. *The Burn Off*, acrylic on birch, 121.5 x 121.5 cm, 2019
2. *The Great Leap Forward*, acrylic on birch, 101.5 x 101.5 cm, 2020
3. *Between the Lines*, acrylic on birch, 121.5 x 91.5 cm, 2020
4. *Burrowed*, acrylic on birch, 101.5 x 76.3 cm, 2020
5. *The Camp*, acrylic on birch, 91.5 x 121.5 cm, 2020
6. *Garden Patrol*, acrylic on birch, 91.5 x 121.5 cm, 2020
7. *Walk the Line*, acrylic on birch, 101.5 x 76.3 cm, 2020
8. *Dividing Line*, acrylic on birch, 76.3 x 101.5 cm, 2018
9. *Sherman*, acrylic on birch, 40.6 x 40.6 cm, 2019
10. *Selinger*, acrylic on birch, 40.6 x 40.6 cm, 2019
11. *Wilson*, acrylic on birch, 25.4 x 25.4 cm, 2019
12. *Victoria*, acrylic on birch, 30.5 x 30.5 cm, 2019
13. *Navigating Wascana*, graphite, coloured pencil, gesso on teraskin, 63.5 x 84.0 cm, 2017
14. *East Winds*, graphite, coloured pencil, on teraskin, 63.5 x 84.0 cm, 2017
15. *Old Times*, graphite, coloured pencil, on teraskin, 63.5 x 84.0 cm, 2017
16. *Downtown Coterie*, graphite, coloured pencil, gesso on teraskin, 84.0 x 63.5 cm, 2017
17. *Victoria Stampede*, graphite, coloured pencil, gesso on teraskin, 63.5 x 84.0 cm, 2017
18. *Flight Path*, graphite, coloured pencil, gesso on teraskin, 63.5 x 84.0 cm, 2017
19. *Governing*, graphite, coloured pencil, gesso on teraskin, 84.0 x 63.5 cm, 2017
20. *Hamilton Super Moon*, graphite, coloured pencil, gesso on teraskin, 84.0 x 63.5 cm, 2017
21. *The Audience*, graphite, coloured pencil, on teraskin, 63.5 x 84.0 cm, 2017

### SCULPTURES:

(rabbits): Hydrocal, charcoal, felt, steel, various dimensions, 2016-2019

*Victoria and Albert*  
Angus  
Hamilton  
Dewdney  
Leopold  
Rose  
McIntyre  
Robinson

(gophers): Hydrocal, charcoal, steel, various dimensions, 2018

*Pense*  
Val Marie  
Muenster  
Young  
Hoey and St. Louis  
Francis  
Raymore  
Wadena  
Osler  
Leroy  
Camduff  
Elrose  
Imperial  
Carlyle  
Herbert  
Bredenbury  
Biggar  
Arcola

### BIOGRAPHIES

**Belinda Harrow** was born in Christchurch, New Zealand, and then immigrated to Saskatchewan at the age of three. She holds a BA from the University of Saskatchewan (1993), a BFA from the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design (1996), and a MFA from Canterbury University (2005), Christchurch, New Zealand. She works in painting, sculpture, printmaking, and drawing. Harrow has completed artist residencies in Scotland as well as in Canada, including the Yukon and Inuvik. Her work has been exhibited in Canada, New Zealand, England, China, and Thailand and is represented by Slate Fine Art Gallery. Belinda Harrow lives and works on Treaty 4 in Regina, Saskatchewan.

**Margaret Bessai**, B.A. (she/her) is a writer and artist living in Regina, Treaty 4 territory. Her writing on contemporary visual art has been published nationally. Born and raised in Regina, her family roots are as settlers, homesteading near Southey, SK.

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**Cover:** *The Camp*, acrylic on birch, 91.5 x 121.5 cm, 2020



*Hamilton*, Hydrocal, charcoal, felt, steel, 86.2 x 30.2 x 30.2 cm, 2019