

# Embodiment: Mapping the Land and Body

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In 2002, Marsha Kennedy began a new series of figurative works, featuring large-scale, full-body portraits, that are embedded with maps, diagrams and text, to explore the embodiment of land and place and address the impacts of settler history, colonialism, industry and modern progress on the natural environment.

Presented on grounds of gold leaf, these monumental portraits are centred, isolated and decontextualized, a common practice of Kennedy's compositions, to encourage examination and position her subjects within new contexts. The images of female and male nudes, which "stand floating amidst fields of gold leaf" like religious icons, are depicted holding natural specimens - bones, eggs, antlers, or the remains of birds and animals - that are, or once were, native to Saskatchewan.<sup>i</sup> These species range from being threatened and endangered by human activities, to being extirpated or extinct. Saskatchewan, as in previous bodies of work, is the focus of Kennedy's ecological concern and inquiry, a land that she knows and loves. The province is represented, not only in its animal species, but in the topographic, geographic and historical maps embedded on the figures. The maps feature its roadways, rail lines and traditional Indigenous territories, as well as locations of grain elevators, historic church missions and trading posts, and battles of the North-West Rebellion, thereby "charting places, events and conditions imposed on the body of the earth", of this land. The molecular diagrams represent the pesticides that are regularly used in Saskatchewan for farming. Overlaid with maps, scientific diagrams and texts, like full-body tattoos, the bodies of these iconic figures become sites of past and present, ecological, post-colonial, social and political inquiry. These figures are presented, too, as specimens to be examined, illustrating the history of human interaction and currency with the land, and positioning humanity as implicit in the ecological impacts of progress on the environment and natural species. Embodied with the facts, geography and history of the land, Kennedy's figures also emphasize that we are not separate from the land and its creatures - human impacts on nature are impacts upon ourselves.

Gail Chin in her essay on Kennedy's work in 2004, stated, ". . . essential to understanding the paintings is the sense of embodiment"<sup>iii</sup> . . . "a term that collapses the duality of mind and body, essentially infusing the body with the mind".<sup>iv</sup> "When Descartes declared the separation from mind and body in the seventeenth century, the empirical mind began to overshadow the workings of the spiritual to form a rational world. But the modern ideals of rationality and progress have not served the land well. Modern humanity was insensitive to the creatures surrounding our communities and we sought to take more than what the land could bear. Kennedy argues that we are not distinct from the land and its creatures anymore than our bodies are separate from our minds . . . . Humanity embodies the land, and just as we have abused the land, we have done harm to ourselves."<sup>v</sup>

Completing this series in 2004, Kennedy exhibited the work at the Rosemont Art Gallery (now the Art Gallery of Regina) in the exhibition, *Mapping the Land and Body*, curated by Karen Schoonover, which then toured to the Prairie Art Gallery (now the Art Gallery of Grande Prairie) in Grande Prairie, AB and the Vernon Public Art Gallery in Vernon, BC. *Cougar* from this series was included in a group exhibition at the Art Gallery of Regina in 2008, titled *Pale Blue Dot*, curated by Wendy Peart, which featured works by provincial and national artists addressing human impacts on the natural world and other environmental concerns.

<sup>i</sup>Gail Chin, *Mapping the Land and Body* (Regina: Rosemont Art Gallery, 2004), exhibition catalogue.

<sup>ii</sup>Jack Anderson, *Mapping the Land and Body* (Regina: Rosemont Art Gallery, 2004), exhibition catalogue.

<sup>iii</sup>Gail Chin, *Mapping the Land and Body*.

<sup>iv</sup>Andrew Strather, *Body Thoughts*, (Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan University Press, 1999), p. 181, as quoted in, Gail Chin, *Mapping the Land and Body* (Regina: Rosemont Art Gallery, 2004), exhibition catalogue.

<sup>v</sup>Gail Chin, *Mapping the Land and Body*.