

# Environmental Memories: Genevieve Robertson's Carbon Drawings at Access Gallery

Fiorela Argueta

It was a cloudy afternoon when I entered Access Gallery—the grey palette of the sky was echoed by the large-scale drawings hung on the walls of the artist-run centre. My curiosity guided me through the space, where I noticed the small details of the drawings: their lustrous grittiness and their naturalistic impressions of leaves and bugs. There was one drawing that was made up of four white buckling papers that showed the shadow of a tree... or a brain... or even a cell under a microscope. These drawings looked like impressions a science or art student would make if they were investigating or recording naturalistic phenomena.

On exhibition at Access Gallery were the carbon drawings from Genevieve Robertson's *carbon study: walking in the dark*, curated by Katie Belcher, which ran from January 12 to February 28, 2019. Robertson's practice includes going on walks in unfamiliar landscapes, and it was during one of her walks that she began collecting carbon from the debris left by the constant fires in the Kootenay area of British Columbia, which have lately occurred at an almost annual rate. The drawings were an exploration for Robertson as she reverted back to the fundamental mediums of carbon and imprinted fauna onto the white buckling paper. It was from Robertson's return to the origins of nature that her large-scale carbon drawings began taking form.

From December 5 to January 5, 2019, Robertson was invited to be an Artist-in-Residence at Access Gallery where she worked on actualizing her investigations into

works that would later be exhibited. During this time, she had already begun such investigations during her walks in the Kootenay: moments to pause and reflect in the world where climate change is daunting and, unfortunately, forthcoming. Our current political climate seems to make no effort in employing more sustainable methods for a greener and less polluted future. The detriment of industrial damage towards biological life has been widely denied by North American politicians and passed over as "fake news," but it is very much real. An eerily prescient occurrence experienced by Robertson was discussed during her artist talk at Access Gallery: just when she was about to finish her drawings for the upcoming exhibition, she ran out of carbon and had to contact a blacksmith to obtain the material so she could finish her works. It is an ironic microcosmic occurrence, yet it is not an improbable one for the macrocosm: one day the earth will completely run out of fossil fuels and there will not be anyone to turn to.

It is no coincidence that a scientific rhetoric can be applied to Robertson's work as her media are extracted natural resources. Furthermore, the end result of her studies speaks to a fossilized and preserved existence of life itself. The biological imprint of nature will soon go into its half-life period where the elements in her works will go through the process of decay and nature will recycle it in future processes. This scientific reference ties in to world politics and the underwhelming response by political structures to address the depletion of Earth's resources. Apart



Installation view, *carbon study: walking in the dark* by Genevieve Robertson at Access Gallery. Photo by Rachel Topham.



Installation view, *carbon study: walking in the dark* by Genevieve Robertson at Access Gallery. Photo by Rachel Topham.

from a biological understanding, there was a collective psychological aspect to these drawings as well: they appear to be Rorschach drawings, calling out differing meanings from a myriad of people.

Robertson's work is a result of mixing various media that speak to different environmental concerns. Alongside carbon, she uses honey—a resource that will soon be considered a luxury if the bee population continues to dramatically deplete. It is worth noting that Robertson's carbon drawings signal the artist returning to Earth-derived resources for their works. As a result of all these media combined, there is a grittiness to Robertson's carbon drawings: they are not smooth and refined; rather, they are pur-

posefully left rough—similar to the beautiful imperfections found in nature itself. This also adds a textural quality to her work that entices a sensorial apparatus, as though the gallery has turned into an encapsulated environment that demands our physiological attention. This experience is similar to the curiosity we would have if we were walking in a forest: we notice minute details, such as small insects or a weirdly-shaped tree. This is further emphasized by the organic impressions present in the carbon drawings as Robertson used insects and plants as stamps. In a sense, Robertson begins a process of fossilization of organic beings in her study, and a viewer is left to walk in this environment of fossilized organic life, attempting to make



sense of the space the artist has created in the gallery.

Robertson's *carbon study: walking in the dark* exhibits carbon drawings that reflect on our environmental blueprint and the political climate surrounding sustainability concerns. Robertson simply leaves us with an impression of what once existed, which as a viewer raises the existential and taxonomic questions: What about humans? Will our personal memory remain only as a faded impression in the distant future?



Installation view, *carbon study: walking in the dark* by Genevieve Robertson at Access Gallery. Photo by Rachel Topham.