

FALL 2014

CAITLIN MULLAN: AN INDEX OF SASKATCHEWAN FAUNA AND OTHER CURIOSITIES



790 RECREATION

NON-FICTION

A Review of An Index of Saskatchewan Fauna and Other Curiosities

BY DENISE SMITH, CRITICAL WRITING AWARD FOR EMERGING WRITERS WINNER

The first thing that caught my attention about the small hand-stitched book was the colour; a forest green so similar to the one often used in nature education and promotional materials that I almost mistook it for a Canada Parks Trail Guide. This is most likely what Caitlin Mullan had intended when she screen-printed this handbook for *An Index of Saskatchewan Fauna and Other Curiosities*. Mullan's aptitude as a printmaker, as well as her research and curatorial experience has made her the perfect artist-curator for this In Situ exhibition; wherein she chose artworks from the Permanent Collection of Dunlop Art Gallery and Regina Public Library to be exhibited at the Royal Saskatchewan Museum, and selected specimens from the Museum to be displayed at the Library. This collaboration leads to an interesting scavenger hunt spread between the two institutions, cleverly outlined in Mullan's handmade field guide.

With the rise in popularity of outdoor tourism, national and provincial parks over the past century, the human experience of nature is rarely unmediated. Recreation managers create informational plaques, maps, trail signs, and guides, which instruct visitors where to direct their attention, what they are looking at,



Caitlin Mullan *An Index of Saskatchewan Fauna and Other Curiosities* installation view, 2014. Photo: University of Regina Photography Department.

collection of the Royal Saskatchewan Museum

and how to interpret it. Upon picking up a copy of Mullan's booklet at Dunlop Art Gallery, in the Regina Public Library, I feel as though I am about to embark on such a mediated excursion, albeit one where I'll be meandering through rows of bookshelves rather than rows of trees to locate the landmarks outlined in her guide. I am enthusiastic about Mullan's unique subversion of the field guide format, and filled with a childlike excitement to hunt down these "curiosities."

I leave the Gallery and head into the Library to begin my tour through *An Index of Saskatchewan Fauna and Other Curiosities*. Displayed in cases and perched on the tops of bookshelves, a menagerie of taxidermy animals and molds of artifacts greet me. Unlike a museological display where they would have been displayed in accordance to their class of species, or set up as if in their natural habitat, the animals have been arranged in a purely aesthetic manner. This disruption harks back to the Victorian Era when curiosity cabinets were in fashion. Beautifully arranged on a variety of wood bases, the animals create their own narratives. A fox is posed in mid stride alongside a resting duck, a crane curves its long neck over the hunched back of a small beaver, a bobcat prowls over the top of a bookcase, and perched on a log nearby an owl surveys the library computers—the Library has been taken over by a horde of local fauna.

The Royal Saskatchewan Museum has a modest yet highly impressive presentation of the many ecological zones within the province. The installation sites of the chosen artworks are dispersed amongst wilderness displays of the Boreal Shield, Aspen Parkland, and Cypress Upland. Following the map printed in my booklet I hunt down the artworks Mullan has chosen to exhibit from the Library's art collection. I discover

four prints from Bill Burns' photographic series, *How to Help Animals Escape from Natural History*, and a pair of photographs from Brenda Pelkey's series *The Great Effect of the Imagination on the World*. Pelkey's photographs affirm the whimsical and humorous approach Mullan has taken in her curatorial selection for this exhibition. The series documents a variety of eccentric suburban yards in Saskatoon. The night-lit scenes show homeowners amongst their unusual gardens and miniature architectural replicas, addressing the human impulse to manipulate the landscape that surrounds us. The inclusion of the series in this exhibit alluded to our place in the fauna of Saskatchewan—for are humans not just another curious animal residing in this province?

Burns' photographs are my favorite of Mullan's curatorial selections. The prints capture scenes of miniature plastic animals wandering across the open pages of hardcover books. The synthetic animals look as if they may have just escaped the pages where scenes of their authentic counterparts reside. Plastic helicopters, boats and trucks are also present in the photographs approaching the animals or hovering nearby. Whether these representations of human mediation are there to assist the animals or return them to captivity within the pages of the books is uncertain. The viewer gets the feeling that the fleeing animals are intent on a freedom independent of human intervention. Mullan's placing of Burns' work alongside the meticulously-posed wildlife in the Museum's dioramas, draws attention to the ways in which our perspectives are influenced by the ways in which nature is displayed, interpreted, and consumed, leading the viewer to question their own place amongst the fauna of Saskatchewan.



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Dunlop Art Gallery researches and presents a diverse range of contemporary artworks, and promotes visual literacy through activities that include exhibitions, programs, publishing, and collecting. Central Gallery is attended by knowledgeable staff who are able to answer questions or guide you through the gallery. For more information, please visit our website, reginalibrary.ca/dunlop-art-gallery.

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Cover Image

Caitlin Mullan, *An Index of Saskatchewan Fauna and Other Curiosities* installation view, 2014. Photo: University of Regina Photography Department.