

HOLIDAY 2014-2015
LISA BIRKE: RED CARPET
(RED STRIPE PAINTING; WALKING THE LINE)



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EXHIBITIONS | CENTRAL MEDIATHEQUE

Lisa Birke: red carpet (red stripe painting; walking the line)

Curated by Blair Fornwald, Assistant Curator

NOVEMBER 14, 2014 TO JANUARY 18, 2015

Woman in a Landscape

by Blair Fornwald, Assistant Curator

red carpet follows its female subject (the artist herself), elegantly attired in a sparkly, form-fitting black gown and three inch black stiletto heels as she sashays down a seemingly-endless red carpet. She is slim, pale-skinned, and youthful-looking. Her blonde hair is pinned up in a chignon and long black feather earrings dust her shoulders. She carries a chic black clutch in one hand while the other is poised gracefully on her hip. She struts down the carpet, always away from the camera, away from us, never returning our gaze, never showing her face.

A loaded signifier, the red carpet has its origins in myth. Its earliest-known mention is Aeschylus' play, *Agamemnon* – the titular character is hesitant to walk the red carpet his wife has laid out for him, knowing that such luxuries were reserved for the gods, who would not set foot on this lowly earth. Until recent



ceremonial events. Today, it is most often associated with film premieres, awards ceremonies, and galas, welcoming the arrival of celebrities and other VIPs. It is a place to be admired, photographed, put on display.

The red carpet marking the path our solitary heroine follows is strangely out of place, cutting through ever-changing Canadian landscapes: forests and fields, uphill and down, atop snowdrifts, tall grasses, and sand dunes. In this perhaps more mythic context, the red carpet denotes the creation of a binary separating nature and culture. As the video's subtitle, *red stripe painting*, suggests, the red carpet also acts as a compositional device, breaking the picture plane – land framed as landscape by the camera lens – into near-symmetrical swathes, like a Barnett Newman zip painting. It brings to mind the transcendent aspirations of modernist abstraction and landscape painting traditions alike.

The space that Birke's protagonist occupies is cinematic and painterly, earthly, but somewhat surreal. When we first encounter her, she is in a lush and leafy forest; she struts confidently and with ease down the path marked by the carpet in front of her. In the next scene, however, the carpet dips down into a creek bed, is submerged in the water, and resurfaces on the other side of the creek. Unfettered, she hops into the water, regains her composure, and resumes her journey. Subsequent scenes present her with more arduous challenges: she struggles to maintain her balance on a red-carpeted log, her bare legs and shoulders are subjected to the bitter cold as she scrambles up a steep and snowy



mountain path on all fours. Her gait becomes clumsy and graceless as her heels sink into sand and squish into mud.

The video finds its humour, gravitas, and purpose in these moments of necessary inelegance. Birke is continually negotiating her surroundings, vacillating between a performance of femininity that is reinforced by images of women in myth, art history, cinema, and pop culture, and slipping out of this performative mode when it proves to be untenable. In the work's ambiguous coda, the red carpet leads our protagonist to the beach, then into the water, where she disappears under the waves. Is this an act of self-preservation or self-negation, or both?

Artist Biography

Lisa Birke is a Canadian artist whose work is situated between traditions of painting, digital video, and performance art. She is a recent MFA graduate from the University of Waterloo (2013). Birke has had solo exhibitions, performances, and screenings across Canada and her short films and videos have been presented at festivals internationally.

CREDITS

LISA BIRKE, *red carpet (red stripe painting; walking the line)*, 2012-13, digital video loop, 20:00. Image courtesy of the artist and Vtape
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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. For more information, please visit our website, www.dunlopartgallery.org.

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