

CUTTING OUT THE SNOW

Dagmara Genda

October 23, 2015 – January 2, 2016

Cutting out the snow explores the construction of landscape through visual codes and social histories. Picturing the arctic through a series of found images of the Canadian North, which Genda has carefully cut to remove the snow, the collaged fragments of snow disrupt an easy reading of the landscape, playing on photographic tropes of presence and absence.

Dagmara Genda's installations, collages and drawings are formally and conceptually structured by opposition: order and chaos, landscape and architecture, East and West, nature and culture. Knowing that many of these dichotomies are arbitrary, Genda uses them not as essential propositions but as organizational strategies whose rules might be manipulated or broken. The resulting works depend on a viewer's misinterpretation and misrecognition in order to propose new ways of looking at the world. Over the past two years Genda has been primarily interested in the construction of landscape. Using WJT Mitchell's assertion that landscape is not a genre but a medium, she conceives of landscape as a network of art historical and social codes that affect how we approach nature, how we distinguish between nature and culture, and how we place ourselves within that framework.

Leila Timmins: Much of your work suggests a highly intuitive understanding of your chosen materials, your collage work especially, as well as your earlier large-scale paintings. What informs your approach to selecting and utilizing particular materials, and, in particular, your source material for this work?

Dagmara Genda: The work happened rather organically. I had been making these brightly coloured ornate collages that incorporated drawing and paint, but I wanted to do something more minimal to allow me to explore the more formal aspects of this process. At the time, I was collecting books on Canadiana and my mother, who knew I was doing this, bought me a beautiful, kitschy coffee table book on the arctic. I immediately knew this book would be the source of my new project and over the course of a year, in the background of the other collage pieces, I would methodically cut out every image of snow from this book. For me, these pieces of snow were the perfect way of looking at the logic of collage, composition and drawing. I felt like these formal concerns were getting lost with the fantastical imagery in my earlier work, delighting only in a sort of childlike appreciation of recognizing animals and images, so the abstract shapes of snow was the perfect solution.

LT: You've said this work follows WJT Mitchell's assertion that landscape is not a genre but a medium. Could you talk about the strategies you are using and how presence and absence are working in this piece?

DG: The snow becomes metaphorical—the work is really about landscape. I am not interested in looking at snow crystals, in snow as an object, I'm interested in our conception of landscape, specifically the North and how it is framed within popular imagination. The snow became an interesting metaphor not only because I am creating an absence through cutting and removing the snow, but snow itself has an ephemeral sort of existence—it changes the landscape by covering it and taking the shape of other things. As it appears, other things disappear. All of these different metaphors are inherent to the material.

I always like to choose something from the outside world to which I can react. I find that there is no tabula rasa, there is no blank slate from which I can start; that approach invariably leads to cliché and a sort of repetition of habit that becomes banal to me. I am attracted to things that are outside of the artworld, kitsch or lower brow references like coffee table books, stuff I'm not actually interested in. These rather benign references form a sort of wallpaper to our perception. They aren't controversial enough to be shocking, interesting enough to be paid much attention to, but they are ubiquitous and often fly under the radar.

LT: I am interested in how the North gets constructed within a southern imagination. Can you talk about how you are approaching

landscape as a cultural marker and specifically as a tool in the creation of national and social identities?

DG: Most of the Canadian population lives near the United States border. We don't extend that far north and yet we have a huge stake in the North, both politically and environmentally. The Canadian government has historically relocated populations into the far North to claim ownership over that land and there are, of course, issues of sovereignty relating to the melting of the Northwest Passage and the potential for resource exploitation. The idea of North is also explicitly tied to the southern consciousness and the imperialist imperative to view it as pristine, available territory. The North is a kind of litmus test for the health of the environment—how fast it's melting is very much an indicator of what we're doing in the south. North and South are thus linked both pragmatically as well as conceptually. They are dependent on one another in many ways.

LT: *Cutting out the snow* is a very pragmatic title for the work, which emphasizes the work involved in the creation of the project. Do you see the meticulous labour of removing the snow as intrinsic to an understanding of the project?

DG: *Cutting out the snow* became the title because that was what I told people I was doing. It became a sort of funny way of talking about the work. On its own, it sounds like I'm trying to get rid of a bad habit, like I'm cutting out coffee, but I'm cutting out snow. As I would cut out the pieces I would proceed to scan them until I accumulated this giant compendium of shapes that I am using in many different ways. I am working on a bookwork that organizes all the pieces from smallest to largest as laser cuts on blank pages. In its size and encyclopedic breadth, it will be not dissimilar to a James Audubon book. But for me, doing this action, cutting out the 3000+ pieces, was in itself a meditative sort of labor. It prompted me to think about how we situate ourselves in relation to an idea or a country, or an environment, or our world. It has also become a means of creating a new type of visual language.

LT: Together the collaged pieces of snow seem to form a visual language. The shapes, which almost look like continents, appear to be remapping the space that they depict. Could you talk about how you hope this work is read?

DG: It definitely does become a language just like photography is a language. These shapes are ultimately photographs. The way they're framed relates to the language of the photograph, specifically landscape photography, though I install them in portrait format which invariably abstracts the photo and makes it something else. . . Sometimes there are letters printed on the page that were cut out, at other times you can recognize what was in the photo and then at other points, the shapes are completely

abstract. It's not a language that can be read as such, but it's about the potential meaning in a certain substance (snow) that already holds such a strong place in our imagination. The vocabulary constructed here is one that we can't even take stock of yet. When I was cutting out the snow, I also had to cut out polar bears, or abstract shapes that were actually pieces of rock, or letters. All of these lost shapes are in other envelopes that are labeled "things that you lose when you cut out the snow." Obviously we lose the polar bears if the arctic melts but we also lose a lot of other things. We lose things that we have no idea we even have right now—ways of imagining the world and ourselves, poetics, mythologies. We don't have words for everything that we'll lose, we don't have a vocabulary for it; it's completely abstract and it will only hit us if we reach that point of loss.

LT: Lastly, I want to speak about abstraction. Although this work engages in a dialogue about the North and issues of sovereignty, it is only part of what the work is about. It also deals equally with many formal concerns. I am hoping you could you speak to how abstraction is working in the project.

DG: I'm interested in form and politics just as much as I am in abstraction. I think abstraction is more interesting when it has a link to the outside world. I think the world is fundamentally abstract and reorienting it quickly reveals that. We make the world into something falsely concrete when we represent it and then, conversely, we proceed to project that representation out onto the world. But how we define things, where we draw lines and create shapes is a very cultural product. The way every culture that does that is very, very different. It could be as simple as seeing a tree as a resource or something that produces oxygen or a spiritual entity, or as an extension of the earth rather than a separate object for that matter. The way we define boundaries shapes how we look at things. Redrawing them changes the way we see. I remember this anecdote a professor recounted when I was in the UK. He went into a famous cathedral with his art historian wife, and he said he didn't see anything, he just saw this big stone edifice that was highly ornate but couldn't see any specifics in the architecture or craftsmanship. His wife started identifying specific architectural features and he began to differentiate between aspects of the carving, aspects of the layering and so began identifying something. Drawing a shape around a given thing endows it with a name, but it also does so falsely. We can draw the shape here, but we can also draw it elsewhere, and how we see the world will be fundamentally different in relation to that. Language shapes identity—it's also a delineation that we draw onto our perception. I think this sort of contingency implicit in seeing is wrapped up in this project as well.

Dagmara Genda

Dagmara Genda (Koszalin, Poland 1981) is an artist and freelance writer. She has exhibited nationally including solo exhibitions at the Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff, the Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina, and the Esker Foundation, Calgary. Group exhibitions include the touring show *Ecotopia*, curated by Amanda Cachia, Contemporary Art Forum Kitchener + Area Biennial 2014, as well as various artist-run and public gallery show across the country. Internationally she has shown in Brooklyn, NY, Durham, NC, and attended residencies in the UK, China and US. Genda has an MA from the London Consortium, Birkbeck College and an MFA from Western University.