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 artic. I immediately knew this book would be the source of my new project and over the course of a year, I would be working on 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 looking at snow crystals, in snow as an object, the abstract shapes of snow was the perfect solution.

DG: 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?

LT: You've said this work follows WJT Mitchell's assertion that landscape is a 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 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 becomes a language just like photography is a language. These shapes are ultimately read not by 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 snow, 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 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 our conceptions of it, 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 natural world more 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 cathedral that were specific, 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 line between the artifacts of the world 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 and it is a way of thinking. This sort of contingency implicit in seeing is wrapped up in this project as well.