

Thank you for visiting the Art Gallery of Regina to enjoy the exhibition *Embrace* by Becky Thera. Using lace, shadows and sound, the most ephemeral and ungraspable of materials, Thera draws unexpected parallels between the ill-fated Shackleton Antarctic expedition and her experiences as an artistic swimmer (formerly known as synchronized swimming) to locate non-gendered models for tenderness and touch.

However, you don't have to be a synchronized swimmer or an Antarctic explorer to identify with Becky Thera's work's fragile tenderness and perilousness. We've all experienced the isolation of COVID-19 lockdowns that Thera likens to being adrift on an ice flow.

The exhibition's construction reflects the delicacy of caring relationships and the frailty of human life; please be aware of the invisible monofilament lines that give form to the gossamer-thin textile pieces in the exhibition. We recommend not drawing too near these lacy works that sweep outward and from the wall and float above the floor to avoid walking into the fishing lines and potentially tearing these artworks down and damaging them. Please also be aware of your movements, coats, and bags. You may wish to use the coat rack in our welcome area or set large bags down inside the gallery doors. Touching artworks and walls is not permitted.

Start outside the gallery doors:

I'm Sandee Moore, curator of exhibitions and programming at the Art Gallery of Regina. Through this audio tour, I'm delighted to guide you through Regina-born and raised artist Becky Thera's exhibition *Embrace*.

We'll start the tour by going to the left through the entrance door and moving counterclockwise through the gallery. You'll see the exhibition didactic panel on the wall in front of the door. On the didactic panel, you'll see the exhibition title (*Embrace*), the artist's name (Becky Thera), exhibition dates and a short introduction I wrote for this show.

Photos *are* allowed and encouraged. If you post photographs of the exhibition online, credit the artist and tag the Art Gallery of Regina.

ANXIOUS DAYS, CLOTHESLINE, LONELY

We will start to the left of the door. You will notice a trio of fabric-based sculptures, which are, from left to right, *Anxious Days*, *Clothes Line* and *Lonely*.

During the COVID-19 lockdown and its accompanying long stretches of social isolation, Thera reflected on Ernest Shackleton's memoir *South!*, which recounts his Antarctic expedition aboard the *Endurance* from 1914-1917 and the three years that crew members from the Shackleton expedition were stranded in the Antarctic. Thera was struck by Shackleton's tender recounting of how the crew, continually wet and cold in their small craft, huddled together for warmth: "When we were not on watch, we lay in each other's arms for warmth. Our frozen suits thawed where our bodies met, and as the slightest movement exposed these comparatively warm spots to the biting air, we clung motionless, whispering each to his companion our hopes and thoughts." The artist views the story of the Shackleton expedition as survival through community.

White netting falls like bridal veils or seafoam from the ceiling and curls up at the ends like breaking waves. The rippling waves of white mesh, embroidered by the artist in ivory-coloured thread and lace applique silhouettes, are like the vast frozen expanses of the Antarctic landscape.

The small, vulnerable figures the artist has crafted from lace and shadow are drawn directly from photographs by Frank Hurley, the Shackleton expedition photographer. The artist has selected images from Hurley's archive that depict profound loneliness and tragic scenes coupled with acts of care. In the first of Thera's textile pieces, *Anxious Days*, we see the bulging hull of a lifeboat ringed with a ruffle of waves and laden with figures nearly as large as this tiny vessel.

Following *Anxious Days* is *Clothesline*, which would be unremarkably domestic were it not for the backdrop of bare survival in an inhospitable environment where the crew of the Shackleton Antarctic expedition were stranded for nearly three years in the nineteen-teens. Looking beyond the charming lace cutouts to the shadows they cast, dark shapes without foreground/background reveal the artwork's subtext of impending death; the man no longer seems to be going about the humdrum task of hanging clothes on a line to dry but seems to be hanging from the line himself.

In the last of these three fabric panels, *Lonely*, we see three figures slumped in a seated position. Each one is thoroughly isolated from the others. They exist not in relation to each other or a place but in a void, merely waiting for rescue or death. The shadows fall upon the wall with heavy despair, the net fabric reading more as a shroud than a foam-crested wave or wedding veil.

A WORLD WE ONCE KNEW, THE OTHER SIDE

Turning away from these bleak confections, we see two small artworks in unpainted wood frames on the West-facing wall. Each frame encircles a small rectangle of fabric, its edges carefully folded under to hide the raw edges, mounted on a larger ground of beige cotton printed with a discrete floral pattern.

The rectangular packet of fabric at the heart of *A World We Once Knew*, on the left, is the colour mud and splintered ice. Notable for being the most colourful thing in the exhibition, the artist has embroidered the tented flame of a single lit match in crimson, blue, cream and yellow on this enigmatic pattern. The matchstick could be a life soon stuffed out, an improvised memorial candle or a wistful reminder of warmth and comfort left behind.

Beside *A World We Once Knew*, *The Otherside* is enigmatic in a different way. We can identify swells of water, glittering light caught by splashing water droplets and a body glimpsed through the distorting lens of the water in the central fabric swatch. The body is obscure and non-specific; it is impossible to assign a gender to the undulating flesh or even identify which parts of the body these may be. *The Otherside* is an image of the body gloriously unconstrained by gravity, purpose and gender norms.

WE

Let's circle to the left to view a video entitled *We* on the monitor mounted on the free-standing wall. One of the most arresting images in this judicious montage of underwater scenes is of five girls treading water shot from below. The girls, legs hanging slackly and sometimes bumping gently against each other, are clustered in a star shape, the long sleeves of the leotards knotted together, binding them into a compliant group. This image is replaced by sunbeams piercing the darkness of the water and a swimmer whose image is doubled and layered so that she floats toward and merges with her own body. Another lone swimmer spins fiercely and flails her arms, breaking the tension of the water's surface. This last swimmer's image is flipped upside down, suggesting that water is not what she is trying to escape.

At times, large bands of black structure this montage of images like the geometric patterns of a quilt; a quadruple row of meandering red stitches superimposed over the swimmers reinforces this analogy. Relaxed fellowship, mysterious gloom, ecstatic somatic knowledge and the struggle for breath all make up our patchwork experiences of bodies in water. Water is a malleable motif throughout the exhibition, threatening to drown, offering the freedom of floatation and enveloping bodies in a liquid embrace.

At this time, I'll draw your attention to the soundtrack lightly echoing through the gallery. Chiming drips of water, the hollow clatter of air exhaled underwater, and the spooky squeal of whale song reminds us that we are not alone and tempts us to let go of what weighs us down.

NEVER ALONE

Let's continue to the adjoining free-standing wall to view *Never Alone*, another video on a television monitor. This short video awakens a deep longing to find shelter in another's arms. We see two swimmers deep under the water's surface; one launches herself into the other's waiting arms. As they close their arms around each other, nestling their heads against the other's shoulder, they ascend toward their undulating, dancing reflection in the water above.

This desire for a tender, mutually supportive, caring embrace emerges not just from the enforced isolation of the COVID-19 Pandemic but from our society's restrictive gender roles and exclusion of non-sexual, loving touch.

CHANGING THE DANCE

In the corner behind the two movable walls is a split-screen video entitled *Changing the Dance*, which uses *Thera's experiences* as an artistic swimmer to subvert what she refers to as "the idealization of gendered characteristics" and "choreography of categorization" that distinguish this female-identified sport. The two halves of the video are like synchronized swimmers out of sync, refusing to mirror each other and instead asserting their singular uniqueness. The artist herself is seen rolling and diving from under and above the water's surface; on the other side of the projection, a nearly static shot of a shower cascading down her legs to her feet encased in sequined pantyhose. There is a refusal to perform and uphold rigid aesthetic ideals: the video offers intimate, unstaged moments of play, repose and despair. Expanses of black screen deny visual pleasure, while images of calmly wafting particles and tiny organisms entice with their dreamy, weightless underwater drift.

The artist's statements about *Embrace* reveal her intentions with *Changing the Dance*, "Artistic swimming fosters a community of strong feminine sisterhood, but also enforces strict aesthetic ideals of "good" feminine

bodies and behaviour. This exhibition explores a new choreography that embraces feminine power while refusing boundaries."

WHAT REMAINS

Join me in walking to the back wall to look at *What Remains*.

Thera's artwork admits troubling aspects of stitching traditions, such as restrictive gender norms and the devaluation of traditional "women's work." The artist has embroidered a jacket with the artist's great-grandmother's embroidery patterns — child-like imagery of puppies, kittens, and flowers. The lavishly embroidered, pale pink blazer represents ideal womanhood. Drained of colour, frayed at the edges and torn asunder down the middle, *What Remains* is a rejection of buttoned-up gender ideals.

Thera's work is particularly relevant to present during PRIDE month, as *Embrace* rips apart restrictive binaries of male/female, active/passive, heroic/trivial, explorers/homemakers).

Between the two halves of the jacket, like the divided torso of the both-gender beings Aristophanes tells about in Plato's Symposium: the god Zeus, fearing an uprising of humans against gods, split human beings in half, creating the distinct male and female counterparts, we see a grey banner embroidered over and over with the words "what remains" in cursive. *What Remains* is a question the artist poses with her exhibition as a whole. What remains when we have torn down the structural sexism and notions of performing one's gender well and productively?

The rest of the exhibition answers the question posed by *What Remains* by modelling positive ways to engage in caring touch, a non-sexual tenderness in depictions of synchronized swimmers and stranded and imperilled men in the Antarctic. We can learn from these delicate and ephemeral figures made of lace and shadow or meeting themselves in the

mirrored surface of water how to support each other, how to clasp with care and float free of oppressive ways of being and suffocating expectations.

SHE'S GONE BOYS, PATIENCE CAMP

Keeping the question of *What Remains* in mind, let's continue to the East wall and two more lace applique scenes of the Shackleton expedition supported by a ghostly tulle ground.

The first of these, *She's Gone Boys*, depicts the moment when the shifting ice sheets crushed and sank Shackleton's ship, the *Endurance*, after months of being locked in the ice. Through the long and intimate process of embroidering, the artist translates her care to those shown in the images as her hand repeatedly caresses the fabric with each careful stitch. The artist reaches out across time to care for men in the 1910s with the tools of techniques her great-grandmother honed during a similar age.

The erratic circles of stitching on this impressive swag of fabric mark where the sea swallowed the ship. Each careful stitch not only documents and depicts but shows the artist's process of stitching as caring-in-action.

Next, we come to *Patience Camp*, titled after the camp the Shackleton expedition set up on a drifting ice floe after their attempts to reach cached stores on Paulet Island failed. In this panel, the postures of the four male figures communicate hopelessness and disbelief. The lace figures are confined to two irregular shapes picked out in embroidery floss representing the ice floe breaking apart and splitting up this community that survived through their physical closeness and mutual support.

Patience Camp harkens back strongly to the analogy that is central to Thera's exhibition *Embrace*, in which she imagines social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic as "being adrift on an ice floe, disconnected from a world you once knew."

WAVES

As we carefully navigate the white cube back toward the door, I will draw your attention to another small framed work on the wall facing the door. The artist has printed a fabric swatch of gently undulating black and blue wavelets and floated this little rectangle, like a life raft, on a beige floral background. Meandering runs of ultramarine stitches applied to the image of the water's surface visually connect to the video *We's* quadruple row of wavy red stitches.

This small and cozy image sews up *Embrace's* unsettling and uncontainable aspects, gently washing away the burdens of gender and the strains of isolation. *Waves* celebrates the profound power inherent in softness during a time when we often feel like we are drowning in trauma, violence, and injustice.

Thank you for visiting the Art Gallery of Regina to see *Embrace*, a solo exhibition by Becky Thera.

I wish to thank our core funders SK-Arts and the City of Regina, through their Community Partner Grant program.

I am grateful to Casino Regina for sponsoring our opening receptions.

And I am delighted to recognize SaskTel for making this audio tour possible with their sponsorship that connects people to experiences of art through communications technology.

I especially thank YOU for taking the time to listen to this audio tour and attend this exhibition. You can support the Art Gallery of Regina by becoming a member, donating, or both. Visit our website, www.artgalleryofregina.ca, for details on becoming part of our gallery's community and more information about *Embrace*, including an artist-led tour video with Becky Thera.