

# BELINDA HARROW: Giant Bingo

April 10 to May 13, 2013

**ART GALLERY OF REGINA**  
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Belinda Harrow was born in New Zealand but immigrated to Canada with her family as a child, growing up in Saskatchewan. She received a BA Honours in English from the University of Saskatchewan in 2003, a BFA from NSCAD University in 1996, and a MFA from Canterbury University, in Christchurch New Zealand in 2005. In 2000 she represented Canada as the Royal Overseas Travel Scholarship recipient. Belinda has exhibited in Canada, New Zealand, the UK, China and Thailand. She currently lives and works in Regina.



Installation view: Soft sculpture and drawings



Lodge, Acrylic on canvas, 76 x 152 cm, 2013

Cover: Giant Bingo II, Graphite and acrylic on paper, 57 x 76.5 cm, 2012

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If you have been in the dating scene at all in the last decade you most likely have some level of familiarity with online dating. A multi-billion dollar industry, online dating has quickly moved into the mainstream. It is reportedly the second most common way for people to meet, only following behind the more traditional, and now somewhat folksy sounding – being introduced through friends.<sup>1</sup> Internet dating sites enable users to search for potential mates beyond the usual social circles we were once restricted by. In a technology driven society, with busy schedules and longer working hours, online dating is replacing our matchmaking friends as the way to meet “someone new”. Plenty of Fish, one of the largest on-line dating sites, claims that every day millions of singles send billions of messages and arrange millions of dates.<sup>2</sup> With this kind of volume, singles need to be prepared for the work ahead as they make their way seeking out that one right match.

With playful humour and sincere insight Belinda Harrow’s exhibition *Giant Bingo* addresses the online dating experience. Equating an online dating search to a game of chance, Harrow employs aspects of the game of bingo to illustrate this comparison. Tables are set up in the gallery displaying stacks of prints reminiscent of bingo cards. The prints are laid out as though Harrow is inviting us to the table to partake in the game. Online dating, although easily accessed, does not come without a sizeable investment of time and emotion. But as Harrow states, if you are willing to take the chance, and have the courage to wade through the hundreds of pictures and profiles, send messages, initiate chats, and go on many first dates, you may beat the odds and win big. The prints are created using a combination of linocut and letterpress techniques. Each print depicts the letters and numbers associated with the familiar bingo game. The prints contain one of three beaver motifs: single beaver, coupled beaver, or beaver family.

The beaver as subject is continued throughout the artwork in the gallery. Mixed media drawings, paintings and sculptures exhibited on the gallery walls all reference the rodent. In using the beaver as subject matter, Harrow is acknowledging our animal instincts to mate. All animals carry this instinctual behavior. It seems for humans though the demands of our complex contemporary lives make finding a mate feel like an unmanageable task. This iconic animal, known for its industrious nature, is a befitting subject for Harrow’s work specifically due to its mating habits. The beaver is monogamous and mates for life. Living in family units, beavers build and maintain homes together. Harrow submits these are relationship-focused traits that many women would appreciate in a human mate.<sup>3</sup>

Graphite and mixed media drawings are exhibited on the gallery walls. In these detailed works Harrow again combines the representation of bingo cards with beaver motifs. Similar to the prints, the beavers occur in three manners: solo, coupled and family. The bingo card depicted in each drawing is elaborately created. The numbers are derived from numerals used in online usernames, such as: *faithfultoyou4eva* and *getting2old*. Due to the volume of online users, hundreds of similar usernames could be in use on any given site, usernames therefore often include a number. Harrow has appropriated actual online usernames in her drawings, changing the numbers so they fit within the range of numerals used in actual bingo cards. Some of the numbers in Harrow’s drawings bare circular “dabber” marks. The Plenty of Fish logo colour, teal blue, is used for the painted “dabber” markings. Close inspection also reveals that the lines forming the grids in the drawings are made up of lines of text. The text, taken from actual online profiles, is comprised of headers - teaser lines used to attract attention such as: *Looking for a Fun Loving Woman, Starting Over and I’m That Good*.

Adding to the challenges in this dating game of chance, singles may encounter a barrage of obstructions. To suggest the barriers to finding your mate, Harrow has drawn beaver dams over the bottom portions of the bingo card renderings. The dams allude to the shoring up of

emotions, or the emotional walls many people feel they need. The drawings also reflect the investment of time needed to participate in this search, as each labour-intensive artwork is manually printed or drawn, and each number hand stamped.

The beaver as subject rematerializes in the form of soft sculptures arranged around the gallery. The soft sculptures depict beavers in silhouetted profile. Some of the sculptures are made with unembellished black fabric. Others are made with fabric and fur, and feature a rendering of a bingo card. The beavers displaying the bingo cards are singular, while the ones in shadow without the cards (apparently successful in finding their match) are paired and humping. The silhouettes offer only generalized information, much like an individual’s online profile only offers broad attributes. In a sea of format fitting profiles, communicating distinctiveness can be a challenge. Harrow adds fur to some of the sculptures as an endeavor to add some individuality to what would otherwise be uniform silhouettes.

The idea of the silhouette is reiterated in the acrylic paintings. The subjects of the paintings, the beaver dam and the beaver lodge, are both structures in which large masses of materials are brought together in one place (much like a huge online dating site). In Harrow’s paintings, considerable amounts of the subject matter is left blank, giving us only a generalized picture. For Harrow, the blank masses in the paintings reference the masses of user profiles to wade through, which become increasingly more difficult to distinguish from each other.

Through her paintings, drawings, prints and soft sculptures, Harrow suggests that wading into the world of Internet dating and match making algorithms can feel like you are taking part in a large game. In this case, a big game of bingo populated with beavers. Harrow does aim to create a humorous tone. The broader intent of the work, however, offers a sincere acknowledgment of our human desire to connect with one another.

Holly Fay  
2013

<sup>1</sup> Reis, Harry. “Cupid’s Arrow Turns Digital.” Rochester.edu. 6 Feb. 2012. Web. Feb. 4, 2013

<sup>2</sup> POF.com. Plenty of Fish, Web. Feb. 4, 2013

<sup>3</sup> From an interview with the artist on Jan. 13, 2013.



*Bingo 2*, Fabric, batting, graphite and beaver fur, 58 x 34 x 15 cm, 2012



*Bingo Beavers*, Letter press and lino cut print, 25 x 56 cm each, 2013