

Welcome to the exhibition *We Are All Electric Beings* at the Art Gallery of Regina. Exhibiting artists Rachel Broussard, Alyssa Ellis, Heather Shillinglaw and Laurel Terlesky draw on traditional knowledge, Western science, and empathy to elucidate the complex interconnectedness of humans and plants through textile, collage, electronics and performance artworks.

This exhibition, *We Are All Electric Beings*, answers the interest many people have today in understanding their place in the world, their responsibilities to others, and their role in the ecosystem. Sometimes messages about land and the environment can be sanctimonious; the artworks presented in *We Are All Electric Beings* are remarkable for their air of welcoming kindness for viewers to explore human/plant interfaces.

The title of this exhibition comes from knowledge passed from Elder Shirley Norris Shillinglaw to her daughter, artist Heather Shillinglaw. Shirley's poetic insight - that we are all electric beings - was recognized by biologists with whom I spoke as a fact. Following in the footsteps of traditional knowledge, science has measured an electric charge on the cell surface of every living being, whether plant, animal or fungi. *We Are All Electric Beings* asks viewers to consider the spark of life that unites us with other living things. To consider plants as equals to engage in a reciprocal relationship of care, not as commodities to be exploited.

Start outside the gallery doors:

Like many plants and ecosystems, some artworks in this exhibition are fragile. I, therefore, urge you only to touch artworks where interaction is desired and an essential component of the artwork.

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.

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 *We Are All Electric Beings*, an exhibition I curated.

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, flanked by an easy chair and a video monitor playing a discussion between the exhibiting artists and a biologist.

On the didactic panel, you'll see the exhibition title (*We Are All Electric Beings*), the artists' names (Rachel Broussard, Alyssa Ellis, Heather Shillinglaw and Laurel Terlesky), exhibition dates and a short introduction to the show written by me.

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

TENACITY OF HOPE

We will start to the left of the door with *Tenacity of Hope*, a trio of sculptures by Laurel Terlesky. You'll see a long column of white leaves as you gaze up the rope toward the gallery's 15-foot high ceiling. The artist directly cast each pale, overlapping leaf form using air-dry clay from a living leaf of the salal shrub.

The long twisted ropes spiralling down toward the floor are reminiscent of those used to ring bells, like those in church or fire towers.

You may wish to pull these ropes, but a light tug or gentle shake is all that is required to impact these leaf clusters, which erupt with an array of blinking lights, making clear how our most minor actions can impact plant life and the environment around us.

Terlesky chose salal as a plant species native to the area where she lives; she noticed these once plentiful shrubs disappearing due to climate change, extreme weather and loss of habitat. The artist has manufactured a pale facsimile of the original plant that will withstand many adverse conditions but fails to fill the role in the ecosystem that living salal does.

In some ways, the dull clatter of the clay leaves when the rope is tugged is like sounding an alarm bell: we should wake up to how our actions impact our environment.

CLIMATE ANXIETY

If we continue through this corridor and turn right, we will see an array of sculptural collages perched on pedestals and mounted high on the wall by Saskatoon-based artist Rachel Broussard.

Broussard cuts idealized and romanticized photographs of nature from glossy coffee table books. Through her collage process, she reassembles and rewrites their narratives.

Broussard has exposed the crafty, low-tech materials and techniques used to create the magical impact of her installation about threatened ecosystems. She has precariously

placed three small lamps on pedestals, flooding each fragile paper assemblage with light. The word fear, a shadowy message of doom, is projected as a large shadow upon the wall behind. One might wonder, what is the artist afraid of?

The title of this artwork, *Climate Anxiety*, is a clue. Broussard has focused on Canadian wildlife - plant, animal and fungi - for this series and has selected species, such as orcas, polar bears and owls, that are threatened, at risk or endangered.

As someone who is increasingly troubled by the spectre of climate change and the loss of species, Broussard addresses a future where photographs or memories, as insubstantial and ephemeral as shadows, maybe all we have left of these crucial components of our environment.

PLANT SPA

Behind Broussard's work is a large vinyl greenhouse hung with swags of pennants. On the side closest to Broussard's installation, the banner spells out " PLANT SPA," a live performance artwork by artist and horticulturist Alyssa Ellis.

Ellis invited people to pamper their plants with a spa treatment in the gallery as an integral part of her performance. Ellis shifts the emphasis of spa treatments from human self-care to pampering for house plants who contribute so much to our mental well-being. Plants were assessed for the types of pampering and rejuvenation treatment needed, detailed on the intake forms mounted on the pony wall. Treatments included:

- a change of scenery, rejuvenating soil exchange root massage and pot cleaning,
- the greenhouse drizzle, beginning with a gentle dusting and finishing with a relaxing shower to ensure your leaves are looking their best
- just a trim, a light pruning that focuses on symmetry and removal of any dead ends
- or, the blanket treatment of tender loving care, a sampling of all of plant spa treatments.

Ellis attended to the needs of her plant patients while wearing a foliage-printed nurses uniform complete with cap. She performed plant spa treatments accompanied by a soundtrack that included high-pitched chiming sounds. Somewhat flakey mid-century experiments into the consciousness of plants proposed that such sounds make plants happy.

You can see the remnants of the plant spa performance beside the greenhouse:

- A row of chairs and plant spa intake forms.
- Plant stakes with patient numbers.

- Completed forms stuck with Polaroid ID photos of each plant patient lining the adjoining wall.

Potting soil and discarded garden tools litter the greenhouse floor.

PLANT ADOPTION

The entrance around the opposite side of the greenhouse is marked by another swag of pennants spelling out "PLANT ADOPTION." Plant adoption is a participatory artwork by Alyssa Ellis, meaning that members of the public taking up her call to adopt plants rescued from the garbage is her artwork.

Ellis ministered to these plants, discarded by retailers who could no longer sell them, using her training as a horticulturist to restore them to health.

The plant adoption contract is a conceptual framework for entering into a long-term relationship with a plant with due consideration of the plant's needs. Those adopting a plant must bring a vessel to the gallery. The plant parent must agree to house the plant in this vessel for the rest of its life. The point is not to create an unhealthy situation for the plant but to provoke consideration for its needs as it grows. People must enter into this long-term relationship with a plant adoptee with attention to its well-being.

We can contrast this mindset to situations we often see - that people put the needs of their decor ahead of those of plants, placing them in areas with unsuitable light, environmental conditions, pots that are too small, or improper soil conditions.

Indeed, the entire history of house plants is one of humans exploiting members of the Plant Kingdom. In the age of European Imperialism, explorers stole plants from other lands and climates, turning them into home decor commodities.

Ellis consciously chose the word "adoption" for her project, proposing a radical empathy for plants as living beings, not as commodities to be objectified, exploited and ill-considered.

Visitors to the gallery may choose a plant to adopt.

SÂPOTAWÊW SHE LOOKS OVER A MEADOW (CONCEPT DRAWING) & NÂNITAWÂPAMÊW SAKÂW NÂTAWIHOWIN SHE SEARCHES FOR FOREST MEDICINE (CONCEPT DRAWING)

If we move around the greenhouse to our free-standing pony walls, you will see two mixed-media collage drawings by artist Heather Shillinglaw. These mixed-media collages, which the artist refers to as concept drawings, provide startling insights into

the artist's thought process as she prepares to create her large-scale textile-based artworks.

Each composition details a variety of nourishing and medicinal plants that Shillinglaw has been learning about from her mother, Elder Shirley Norris Shillinglaw. All native plants to Shillinglaw's home territory in Northern Alberta, the plants and their uses depicted here may be familiar or strange to observers. We can see a puffball mushroom, wild Rose, Indian paintbrush, prairie lily, wild onion, sweet grass, sage and more in sâpotawêw. We can observe important cultural plants like lodge pole pine, kinnikinnik and moss, as well as medicines like pine cones and tree mushrooms in nânitawâpamêw sakâw nâtawihowin.

Knowledge transferred from mother to daughter extends far beyond plant identification. It's essential to know how to prepare and dose them, when and where to harvest them, and to make an offering of thanks back to the land and creator. As viewers, we can learn alongside the artist as she reconnects to ancestral traditions.

If we turn to the gallery's back wall, we can see Heather's impressive, large-scale textile works, comprised of many smaller parts tacked directly to the wall with dressmakers' pins. We can recognize the triangular composition of nânitawâpamêw sakâw nâtawihowin she searches for forest medicine from the drawing.

The enormous size of this artwork conveys the towering importance of these plants, whether they are used for food, shelter, sanitary products or medicine. Each connects the artist to her cultural practices and traditional knowledge.

By gathering them inside the teepee form, Shillinglaw indicates the vital role these plants play in a household. While I cannot speak authoritatively about each plant and its uses, I can describe some of the elements in this composition and recount some of the stories the artist and her mother told about them. Almost directly under the inverted V of the teepee poles on either side of a cow parsnip, an antimicrobial plant that can be both toxic and edible, are a pair of pinecones that Elder Shirley Shillinglaw describes as nature's Vicks VapoRub.

A richly textured felted birch log anchors the bottom of this composition. Above the birch log sits a moss-covered rock and colourful tree fungus. Elder Shirley Shillinglaw shared that moss was used for many things, including baby diapers and women's menstrual pads. Instead of throwing these things in the garbage and creating waste, Indigenous people deposited the soiled moss back in the forest, returning nutrients to the earth.

Can you see other important plants, such as bright pink fireweed, the blushing bells of kinnikinnik, and the arrow-shaped leaf and round bulbs of arrowroot?

Shillinglaw expresses her Metis identity in the content of her work and her techniques; she uses European textile traditions, such as quilting, applique and embroidery, alongside Indigenous practices, such as tufting, beading and weaving. The moss-covered rock is richly tufted, as are the fireweed and pussy willow. The artist has also invented new methods of working in fabric. Shillinglaw's use of dozens of pearly flower-shaped buttons to create the frothy bloom of the cow parsnip is most strikingly original. Notably, she recycles and repurposes materials in her work in a full-circle process of caring for the earth.

Moving to the left, we can view Shillinglaw's other large-scale textile piece: she looks over the meadow or *sâpotawêw*.

Again a mushroom, a velvet gray puffball, anchors the composition. This composition is bursting with nourishing edibles: wild onions, mushrooms, wild roses (an essential source of vitamin C), prairie lilies (whose bulbs are edible) and Indian paintbrushes. I didn't know that Indian paintbrush was an edible plant and was delighted when Heather shared her childhood memories of sucking the ends of the stems, which she recalled were as sweet as candy.

The delicate leaves and small clustered blooms of yarrow contrast against the smooth, rounded mushroom; the artist refers to yarrow as nature's Band-Aid. A poultice of yarrow applied to a wound will stop bleeding, speed healing and reduce scarring. It excited me to learn that we don't need to depend upon pharmaceutical companies and retailers but are surrounded by what we need to heal and nourish ourselves.

It is crucial not to monetize these traditions and bring them into the capitalist system but to continue to practice them with respect for and connection to the land. It would be disrespectful of these healing and nourishing gifts to harvest them all; taking only what is needed ensures that the plants will flourish to be harvested again in the future. When something is taken from the land, it is customary to offer something back to the land.

Beyond the corporeal body, Shillinglaw's work acknowledges plants that heal and nourish the spirit and are important vectors for humans to connect to the rest of the world. *Sâpotawêw* she looks over the meadow is framed by a sweet grass braid and sage bundle sending prayers riding on a diaphanous trail of smoke to the skies and creator.

TENACITY OF HOPE

Finally, moving behind the portable wall toward the Gallery entrance door, we see six framed works by Laurel Terlesky. Like her sculptures, these drawings are also titled *Tenacity of Hope*. These drawings are collaged with tracing paper adhered by strips of white tape, which coincidentally mimic how biologists mount botanical specimens before they are dried, pressed and taken into a herbarium's collection to be preserved for all

time. Some of these detailed graphite drawings emit light from tiny glowing bulbs; others are stuck with small round Band-Aids. If you touch the Band-Aid with your finger, your body will complete the circuit. Your touch brings the drawing to life and makes explicit the fact that all living beings - human and plant - carry an electrical charge (the spark of light life) on the surface of their cells. This is the electricity that unites all living beings.

Terlesky's drawings are mended in multiple ways: tenderly stitched with gray and red thread, punctuated with Band-Aids or taped together. Each method of repair presents the narrative that the plants she depicts are damaged and suffering and that we must care for them.

Thank you for visiting the Art Gallery of Regina to see *We Are All Electric Beings*, sponsored by TD investment services.

The Art Gallery of Regina is a nonprofit, public art gallery that programs contemporary art that tells the stories of Saskatchewan artists and those from adjoining treaty territories.

We are grateful to our core funders, Sk-arts and the city of Regina, who enable us to make our exhibitions free to the public while compensating artists for their work.

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 *We Are All Electric Beings*. You might want to check out a video-recorded talk between the exhibiting artists and a biologist from the George Ledingham Herbarium at the University of Regina, artists' biographies and documentation of our participatory Culture Days activities.