

# STORIES IN THE BLANK SPACES: BRENDA DRANEY'S "ASPEN"

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Brenda Draney, *Aspen*, 2013. Oil on linen, 122.3 x 152.6 x 4.1 cm. Purchased 2017. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. © Brenda Draney Photo: NGC

Brenda Draney is a storyteller, concerned with personal memory, narratology and stories, while questioning who has the authority to tell them. Her practice is based on her experiences as a Cree woman from the Sawridge First Nation and the relationships formed between her current hometown of Edmonton and the northern community of Slave Lake in Alberta, where she was raised. Winner of the 2009 RBC Painting Competition and shortlisted for the 2016 Sobey Award, Draney is primarily known for her paintings which have been included in multiple exhibitions in Edmonton, Toronto, Winnipeg, Nelson and currently on Fogo Island where she has been completing her art residency.

Her painting *Aspen*, simultaneously beautiful and challenging, is the first by Draney to join the collection of the National Gallery of Canada. The work reflects the bleak situation in Slave Lake following disastrous fires in 2011 and features the painter's signature style of leaving parts of the composition blank, inviting viewers' imagination to fill the space. In a 2018 video interview with *Canadian Art*, she commented that leaving all of this space was like "some kind of doorway or entry point for a viewer to come and bring their own stories to bear and enter the work on their terms."

Draney often works from a combination of memories and photographs, given to her by family or community members. Even if she doesn't know the person or remember the event in a photograph, she searches for something that catches her eye and begins piecing a narrative together, working out the composition in a watercolour sketch before moving to works on canvas or linen. As Draney's practice has evolved, she has been stripping her paintings of anything non-essential. The interplay of blank, minimal canvas and isolated representational images is key to her practice. She does not subscribe to any linear logic or depict complete stories and histories, but instead chooses to focus on particular fragments. She sees her work as a gesture toward a remembered thing, person or event. Artist Ben Reeves in his monographic essay *Less and More: The Painting of Brenda Draney* quotes the painter commenting that "Narrative is based on what is missing, and that absence is important and present in my work." This kind of ambiguity is often present in Draney's works – capturing a brief moment in time – making them seem like a fragmented memory.

Despite its bright colour, *Aspen* is a truly haunting and sombre image. The lower half of the linen has been left blank, leading the viewer's imagination to fill it in. The upper half is painted bright yellow in seemingly quick, broad brushstrokes that give it an unfinished look. Three tall, sparse trees refer to the Trembling Aspen tree, which is widespread throughout Alberta and considered a dominant species in the north-central part of the province, where Draney's hometown is located.

Slave Lake came to national attention in May of 2011 when wildfires swept through the town, blocking highways, trapping residents and destroying many homes and businesses. Although living in Edmonton at the time, the fires directly affected many of Draney's friends and relatives. Created in the aftermath of the disaster, *Aspen* reflects the bleak situation in Slave Lake following the fires. The yellow hues reflect the raging fire, while the blank space in the work could signify a garden, park or house, missing in the aftermath of the destruction. There is no suggestion of human activity or life, the people have been forced out, leaving only three damaged but tenacious trees.

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