

Momus

Abstraction, Legibility, and Desire in the Work of Brenda Draney

2024-02-14 17:02:09 Lois Taylor Biggs

Sawridge First Nation artist Brenda Draney paints open-ended memories, what might have been or should have been or could have been otherwise. Her solo exhibition *Drink from the river* opened at Toronto's [Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery](#) in February 2023, traveled to the [Arts Club of Chicago](#) in June, and is now on view at the [Art Gallery of Alberta](#), Edmonton, through May 5.

Draney's work evokes scenes from Edmonton, her current city, and Slave Lake, where she grew up, but their references stretch and reach beyond the specificities of place and firsthand experience. Friends pose mid-laughter with empty beer bottles, sheets lie disheveled in beds, a mustachioed uncle stirs from his sleeping bag. People gesture, grimace, and slouch on floral-print furniture.

Rest is the sparsest work in a sparse exhibition, and it is the one that haunts me the most. It's a living-room scene: a woman sprawled across a lopsided couch. Thick brown strokes of paint mark out her form against the cream canvas. Some carve pools of shadow on the edges and ends of the couch, some are so light I can imagine the ease of their making, some stutter and break apart.

The first time I saw it I *wanted* in a way that's unnamable. To touch it? To inhabit it? To somehow burn it into my mind, taste the way it fuses with the vague outlines of my own memories?

I can't say, but the wanting-without-saying is where I now dwell.

Draney's work is known for ambiguity, ambivalence, and evocation. In a 2017 interview with *Border Crossings*, she addresses her hesitation to answer questions about it: "It feels a little heavy-handed or dramatic to say this, but I'm trying to cultivate desire. If I confirm it for you, you can put it to bed. And if I tell you you're wrong, then I've pushed you out and said you don't understand it, you're not invited in."



Brenda Draney, *Diane*, 2022. Installation view of *Brenda Draney: Drink from the river*, Art Gallery of Alberta, 2024. Photo: Charles Cousins. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Alberta.

A recurring tendency in my writing: I want to be as specific as possible without revealing the whole (the whole as stand-in for “too much”) of what I write about. I want to tiptoe as close to divulgence as possible, partly because it thrills me. I want to share details that are precise only if you were there, or somewhere like it. I love Draney’s work because we share this *desire* and, through abstraction, protect it.

The outlines of the couch and the woman’s body merge. Below the neck, the curves of her arm, hips, and knees form an upholstered topography. I think of Remedios Varo’s [painting of a woman who has sat for so long she’s turning into her chair](#), but this collapsing of body with furniture doesn’t flag stagnancy to me. The word that comes to mind is *repose*.

Repose means rest, but its second syllable recalls portraiture. I can lie about in bed, but I wouldn’t say I’m in repose without a viewer, a maker sketching my outlines. This posture hangs in suspension between the languor of the subject and the focus of their observer.

In most portraiture this suspension feels dangerous, uneven—greed for another’s fleeting rest. I think of twentieth-century odalisques; I think of the tragic grasping in Caroline Polachek’s “[Crude Drawing of an Angel](#),” whose narrator draws a lover before they wake and depart for the last time:

**Draw your brow with shaky hand
So that after you’re gone
I got something to hold on to**

The grasping turns to menace:

**Draw your blood, draw your breath
Skip the whites of your eyes
'Til you wake up and watch me**

There’s similar desire in Draney’s “crude drawing” of repose, but it reads without Polachek’s quiet terror. I wonder if this is because Draney doesn’t try to *hold on to* anything, at least not its details.

The chair is turned away from the couch. For a second, this minor aspect of orientation brings the rest of the room into being. It’s haphazard, dim, familiar; it’s a basement or a room for sitting around together, and its layout lacks logic besides this. The chair is part of a circle shaped by partygoers. The air smells stale, like too much breath caught in wood-paneled walls. Everyone went home hours ago, but the woman is crashing on the couch, drifting in and out of sleep in the dark pockets before sunrise. Her bent elbow and half-awake left eye laugh at her observer, endeared and annoyed.

The image holds for a moment and slips away again. I return to what I wrote, and it all rings false. I look at the painting again and want to talk about my own basements. Simpson Street. The couch in my ex’s basement. Apartments on roads I can’t remember. Lumley Ave. They pain me and I need to pause, catch my breath. I remember dozing off on couches like this one, loving and hating and speaking half-truths. I remember waking up the next morning and remembering only the night’s sharpest edges and softest exhales. I remember how it feels to walk up out of the basement, into new conditions of reality that make me seasick. I hope that the woman in the painting can stay in this hazy state a big longer. I hope someone kind meets her at the top of the stairs.

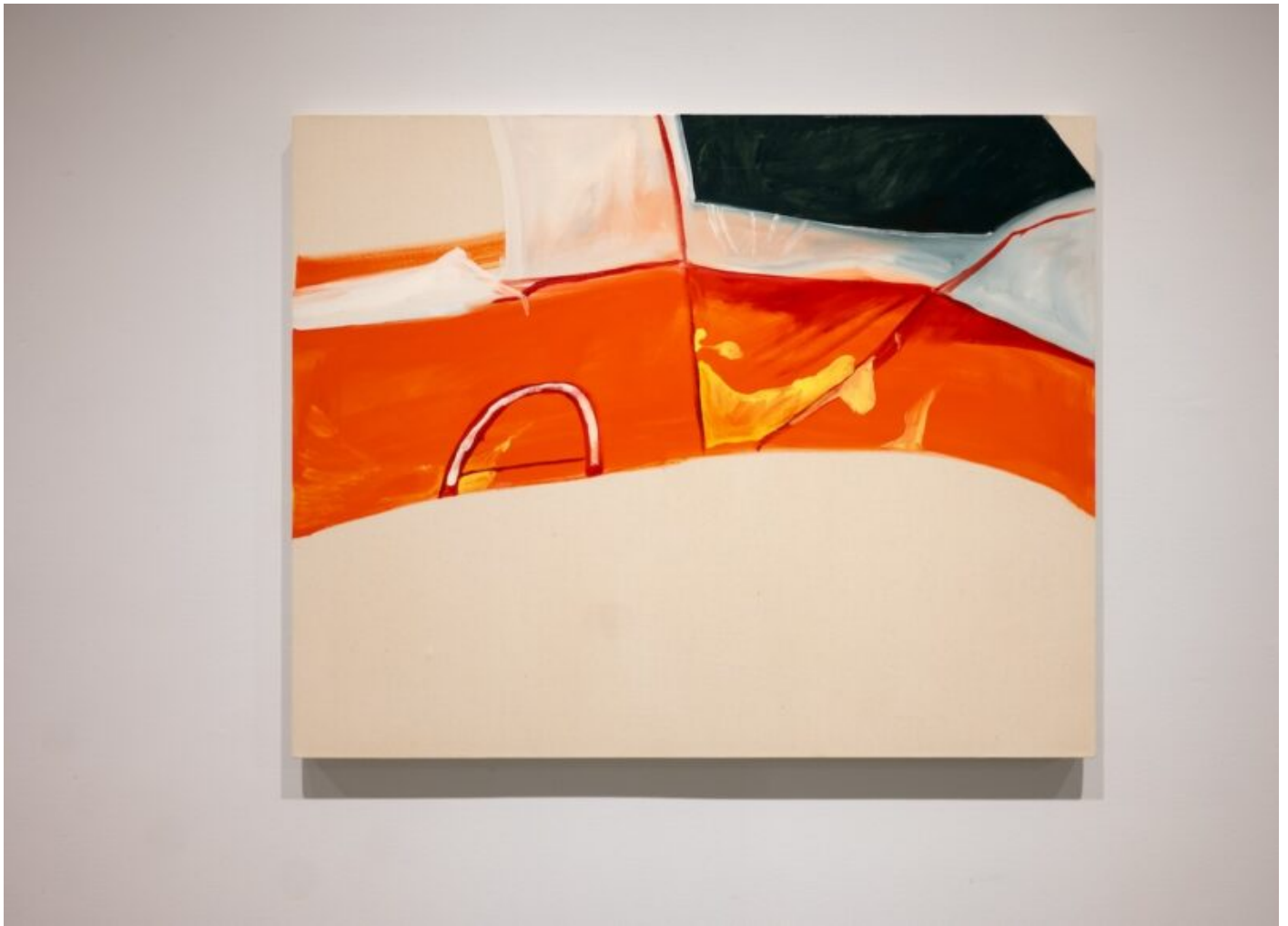
I’m racing away from the artwork. I’m trying not to be aware of everyone in the museum cafe, trying not to seek out familiar faces. I haven’t been here in ages, and I wonder if the labels still read like they’re suggesting a certain casual friendship with the artist. Last night I met up with Joe and we talked about opacity in art. He suggested that instead of trying to better explain artworks, museums and curators should do more to protect them from overdetermination.

I’ve been wondering about abstraction as protection because I wonder if it can bring me back to the object. Sometimes—particularly for Indigenous art—the space between artwork and viewer is so loaded that becomes a cloudy prerequisite to looking. I first tried to understand this space as a distinct entity in 2018, when I wrote about philosopher Jacques Rancière’s “aesthetic break” in relation to the brazen graffiti and painted walls of the Alcatraz occupation. Rancière argues that there is no direct line between artwork and viewer, just a sensuous clash that throws both into uncertain light.

The aesthetic break, Rancière explains, often thwarts critical art’s desire to change hearts and minds by making its viewer *aware*. Its indeterminacy is also what makes sudden, irrevocable shifts in understanding—in the fabric of reality itself—possible. On Alcatraz, a carceral symbol became a space for self-determination. In *Rest*, a woman’s repose shakes up the relationship between the general and the particular, the actual and the imagined.

We return to that cloudy space between Indigenous art and its viewer. The cloudiness, however, may be wishful thinking. Within art markets and art worlds, this space is loaded with demands for legibility. In her 2006 article “[Native American Cosmopolitan Modernism\(s\): A Re-articulation of Presence through Time and Space](#),” Diné art historian Shanna Ketchum-Heap of Birds considers this. “It has always been the case,” she writes, “that acceptability of Native works of art depended on subject matter that was identifiable and representative of cultural affiliation, irrespective of the chosen medium.” She articulates an evolution from salvage anthropology’s demand for “authentic” Indigenous art to a contemporary expectation that Indigenous artists will provide political exposition in their work.

The ethnographic demand for authenticity, Ketchum-Heap of Birds argues, never disappeared but simply shifted realms. She addresses the political implications of this change, but I’m unsettled by its linked affective ones. They are harder to put into words, but I see them swarm below the surfaces of curatorial texts and reviews, hear them echo in the backgrounds of consultations and artists panels. Non-Indigenous people want to *know more*, want to *feel* the pain of history. There is a demand for detail, a polite-but-insistent request that artists open up as they trace the contours of colonial violence—both structurally and within their lives, memories, and bodies.



Brenda Draney, *Orange Tent*, 2020. Installation view of *Brenda Draney: Drink from the river*, Art Gallery of Alberta, 2024. Photo: Charles Cousins. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Alberta.

In this climate, our practices hold the tension between two truths. One, a wound: anthropologists, museums, and art markets have ripped our works from context, fixing them outside the flow of time. Two, its festering: the demand for context and legibility in our work builds conditions for a similar confinement—a smothering line between artwork and viewer. With no felt connection to place and relations, how do works live? With no space for indeterminacy, how do they breathe?

I don't know what to do with this tension, but I feel its twist in my stomach, and feel that twist start to uncoil when I look at the paintings in *Drink from the river*. They are almost painfully legible but slide, sly and sure, under the radar of certainty. Their generosity teases.

Why opacity? What is the relationship between desire and opacity?

In December 2023, the US Department of the Interior issued revisions to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) with the goal of expediting repatriation while centering tribal knowledge. In response to these changes, some major museums [recently covered](#) their Indigenous art installations. Others [took cultural belongings off view](#), bringing them back to art storage in preparation for consultation. I imagine walking through rows of drop cloths and blank labels, imagine ancestors' shallow rest in climate-controlled rooms as they anticipate reunion.

NAGPRA offers retroactive protection, and in the best cases, a way home. Its new guise fosters opacity, and I can't help but linger there. For contemporary Indigenous artists, what does protection look like within a market that demands the legibility of our pain, of our memory? Can abstraction as protection leave space for desire?

Before quitting his job at the National Museum of Man (now Canadian Museum of History), Saulteaux First Nation artist Robert Houle sketched the parfleches in the gallery; he later told *Muse* that he [wanted](#) to "liberate them," return them to "life and reality." (Before this, the last straw: Houle watched a visiting ethnographer open up a medicine bundle. The wound of opening up—no wonder I crave opacity, imagine armor around my chest that burns to the touch.)

I'm thinking about art as something living and about desire as a vital sign, like breathing. Brenda Draney says that she wants her works to instill desire.



Brenda Draney, *Dodge*, 2023. Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver. Installation view of *Brenda Draney: Drink from the river*, Art Gallery of Alberta, 2024. Photo: Charles Cousins. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Alberta

Desire can harm and desire can heal, and I think it has everything to do with how tightly it grasps. For an ethnographer, to open a bundle is an unspeakable violation. For Houle, to sketch captured parfleches was a liberation that opened doors to the life of his practice. A desire that fixes; a desire that loosens.

I come back to the question of repose and the thin line it walks between fixing and loosening. I remember Polachek's drawn blood and drawn breath, the deadly desire to *have something to hold on to*. In *Rest*, Draney doesn't hold on to the woman's and couch's broad-stroked outlines very tightly at all. Whatever precedes or follows her repose, she is here in a half-dream that we can never fully enter.

My words move slowly today. I've used up so many of them on hours of meetings and phone calls. The flax seeds in my yogurt and fruit bowl tasted off so I'm eating the cold dregs of lentil soup. A few flecks flew onto the floor when I took the lid off; I scraped them off as best as I could but then wondered if the turmeric would haunt whoever sits here after my fellowship ends in a few years.

Today I gave a practice presentation on *Cinq études d'indiens Ojibwas*, Delacroix's 1845 sketch of Ojibwe dancers—I'll be talking about its role in Houle's installation *Paris/Ojibwa* (2010) at a conference in a few weeks. When I printed an image of *Rest* to keep on my desk at home, I printed out the sketch, too. I didn't mean to write about them together, but as they sat on my desk, I noticed a certain kinship.

The dancers in Delacroix's sketch, some cloaked in robes and some half-nude, turn away from the viewer. Two—one almost out of frame—stand straight, but the others stay close to the ground, legs crossed or body sprawled out. Viewed next to *Rest*, the dancer in the center recalls the woman on the couch.

I've been considering how the swift lines of Delacroix's sketch refuse detail and its dregs (that word again). Houle caught on to their abstraction, tugging them into smooth colored forms with barely any detail beyond lines that mark out their spiritual power against the Lake Manitoba horizon.

I've described the central posture in Delacroix's sketch as repose before. Together on my desk, the dancer and the woman on the couch ease into a slippery, knowing rest. Perhaps one day they'll stand to face the horizon.

There is much more to *Drink from the river*. I meant to write about the rest of the exhibition in these fragments—fleshier portraiture with a similar indeterminacy, washed-out interiors, a subtle painted river snaking through the gallery space—but I feel called to let one work haunt me.

When I'm looking at *Rest*, my own memories threaten to barge in and fill its hazy outlines. My fear of inertness/*being made inert*, my urge to protect my words, my longing for longing itself, bleed out on the canvas. When I try to do a close reading, I come back to platitudes on the tension of opposites. *It's impossible to tell whether the woman's posture is one of exhaustion or contentedness, whether her eyelids blink open or clasp tightly in sleep*. An objective critical voice can only waver back and forth, suspended. There is very little in the work to hold on to, only impressions.

I take a closer look at the woman's face. The curve of eyelids, the curve of an eyebrow, the curve of a blanket or pillow tucked under and not wrapped around the body. A swoop of dark hair. I'm not so sure this is even a woman anymore, but I feel invested in their rest whether it is posed or not. I look and long; I reach for the abstract and imagine curling up in a pocket of loving illegibility, still but not inert in the sights of desire.