

Brenda Draney: *Drink from the river*

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Brenda Draney's painting, *Rose* (2019), looks like a memory. The details are minimal: a nude couple tucked beneath the covers of a white bed; a pair of sunglasses set beside them on the nightstand; a child in a cornflower blue nightgown waiting patiently in the centre of the room; a smattering of roses strewn across the ground. A single black rectangle in the upper-left corner of the painting indicates the time of day. *Rose* is a memory, or rather, proof of someone trying to remember. It begins in a bedroom late at night. A child, awoken from sleep, makes her way into her parents' room. She calls out softly at first, uneasy about waking them and unsure whether she will be scolded or invited into bed. The moment they turn to look, with bleary eyes and messy hair, and ask what's wrong—the memory halts. The background melts away until there is nothing left but canvas, as if the scene has paused at its climax. It's awkward. It's candid. It's intimate. In retelling her story, Draney foregrounds the memory's essence and its defining moment, rather than aiming for exactitude.

Brenda Draney is a member of Sawridge First Nation, Alberta. Her work originates in her memory and personal archives but resonates with the viewer as distantly familiar. Festive images of friends and family, floral-patterned couches and cushy armchairs, afternoon naps and camping tents decorate her canvases. Her paintings in oil, gouache and watercolour evoke reflections cast on the surface of a lake, with key objects, people and colours binding the scene to the picture plane, as the backgrounds ripple and fade away. Draney's raw canvas becomes part of the finished work, grounded in the solidity of her paintings. The title of the exhibition, *Drink from the river*, comes from a quote by the Greek philosopher Heraclitus: "No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same man." *Drink from the river* proposes that viewers "imbibe the moments that have slipped away from us"¹ as an acknowledgement of the persistence of change and the futility of attempting to recover the past.

Through her painting and sculptural work, Draney explores themes of memory, intimacy, vulnerability, nostalgia and longing. *Drink from the river* invites audiences to witness the process of remembering that informs her oeuvre's theoretical underpinnings. The act of remembering, (or "recall" in psychology), is distinct from memory as a process, which reconstructs its object (the memory), through its recollection. Calling upon memories reshapes them and therefore causes new meanings to emerge—or be obscured—each time they are accessed. Like the river, memories never stay the same, and may fade in and out of existence. In *Diane* (2022), two women grin and wrap their arms around each other's shoulders, posing mid-laugh for a photograph. The colours of the painting blur together,



not unlike a Polaroid developing after being shaken aggressively. Draney recaptures the image in its highly-saturated, shifting tones. A smile blurs around the edges, still in motion.

Draney demonstrates the suggestive potential of negative space in conveying a setting without necessarily defining it. In *Flood* (2009), a verdant green pickup truck emerges out of a fog of priming gesso, rumbling along a stretch of fenced road. *Basement Party* (2022) similarly presents a lively gathering with wooden ceiling planks and an elevated basement window as the only indications of the setting. The floor and walls remain as undefined negative space. Within that space, young partygoers convene on the ground, drinking beer in front of a TV-stereo set while another couple lounges on an old floral loveseat. Draney creates spatial balance in the painting through the placement of a hanging gun rack which offsets the window. The environment is sparse yet composed through the harmonious arrangement of visual elements.

A painted watermark line extends the length of the wall on one side of the gallery. This stain alludes to a significant trauma from Draney's past due to an environmental disaster, which impacted her residence in Slave Lake in Northern Alberta. In the summer of 1988, when Draney was twelve years old, her town flooded. This event displaced hundreds of people from their homes.² Draney's house was no exception; the flooding left watermarks high up along the walls of her basement.³ In the exhibition, her fixation on basements is manifest as sculptures of walled underground rooms and bulky concrete stairs. *Parish 1-8* (2010) is a collection of miniature clay sculptures displayed on a dressing cabinet in the centre of the gallery. The exterior walls of the basements are dark brown while the stairs are a stony blue. Her empty sculptural basements contrast with the liveliness of the painted works such as *Basement Party*, which hangs directly across from it. This juxtaposition reveals the multiplicity of meanings a place may hold.

Brenda Draney, *Rose*, 2019. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries (Vancouver). Photo: Charles Cousins.

Draney energizes otherwise unremarkable subject matter through abstraction and selective decontextualization. Her painting of a ceiling fan in *Cut* (2022) calls to mind the rattling hum of fan blades on a hot summer day as they rotate warm air around a room. In *Accord* (2021), heavy brushstrokes of grey, black, white and red carry the grittiness of an aged yet reliable Honda as it sputters to life. Draney depicts tents in *Strange Invitation* (2020), *Tent City* (2010) and *Orange Tent* (2020); all of which summon the irresistible *skreskreskre* a polyurethane tent makes when the fabric rubs against itself or is scratched with one's nails. By utilizing visual abstraction and decontextualization, Draney strengthens alternative sensorial experiences of memory such as sound and touch.

Collectively, *Drink from the river* surveys different moments in the artist's life, resulting in deeply personal works, which showcase fragments of Draney's lived experiences to partially informed spectators. The strength of *Drink from the river* lies in its capacity to evoke feelings of anguish, longing, elation, tenderness and detachment that people share cross-culturally; yet the cultural context that Draney paints and sculpts from (growing up in Sawbridge First Nation), may result in certain works appearing more opaque than others, depending on the viewer. By representing these mundane moments from her memory and personal archives, Draney compels viewers to reflect on the everyday sites that hold our memories, and the feeling of *re-member-ing*.

1. Jacqueline Kok, Nancy McCain and Bill Morneau, *Brenda Draney: Drink from the river*, curatorial didactic, The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery (Toronto).
2. Kristy Trinier, *Brenda Draney: Suspend* (Alberta: Art Gallery of Alberta, 2013).
3. I spoke to the gallery attendant on duty about some of the content of Draney's work. The reappearance of basements (in painting and sculpture) particularly baffled me as there was nothing in the gallery to provide context. The attendant explained the significance of basements was due to an event from the artist's personal history; specifically of her basement flooding when she was a child. The watermark line on the gallery wall also references this personal history.

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Brenda Draney: *Drink from the River*. 2024. Installation View. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Alberta. Photo: Charles Cousins.

