

RAW CANVAS RIOT:

BRENDA DRANEY'S NEGATIVE SPACE

By Matthew Ryan Smith

BRENDA DRANEY'S EXHIBITION "Drink from the river" features new and existing works that draw on the artist's experiences living in Edmonton. Themes like nostalgia, autobiography, and community recur among these paintings, but Draney's use of composition and her subject matter invite the viewer's subjective response, encouraging one's own personal history and lived experience as legitimate tools of understanding. Draney employs space itself to make room for this dialogue.

Space, in Draney's work, is a site of contestation. In these paintings, negative space is full of interpretive potential. Visual vacancies produce meaning and confirm that there is great substance in nothingness. The blank space of her canvases can often speak louder than any gesture or brushstroke. By leaving large swaths of these spaces in her paintings, the viewer has moments for pause. Time ticks by. This stands in contrast to the figurative elements of her work that are executed in vigorous, dry-brushed wisps of colour and line. Whether the subject matter is a pair of bruised legs, a smiling portrait, or a basement party, Draney's figures and objects oscillate between states of appearing and disappearing. Sometimes the paint is so thin that they are barely recognizable, as if the passing of time corrupts memories of people, places, and things into distorted, abstract pictures that recede before our eyes.

Much has already been made of negative space in art's history. Looking to the Western canon, some popular examples stand out: the blue ceiling of Giotto's Scrovegni Chapel, Kazimir Malevich's austere black squares, and Kara Walker's silhouettes of the antebellum South, to name a few. What remains less discussed are examples from Canada. For millennia, from Kwakwaka'wakw architectural design to Cape Dorset printmaking and the Woodland School of painters, negative space has been considered equally alongside line, form, and colour. For the Woodland School artists in particular, figure and ground are nearly integrated, as are foreground and background, so that all compositional space is supercharged with

aesthetic impact. There's a lyric from an Edie Brickell song—it goes "filling in the negative space with positively everything"—that hints at this idea.

The sophisticated approach to negative space developed by these artists, including Norval Morrisseau and Daphne Odjig, derives from birch bark scrolls, visual records of ceremonial procedures, legends, and stories for future generations. So, when we view Jackson Beardy's serpentine creatures or Benjamin Chee Chee's sinuous birds, we're also witnessing an utterly different aesthetic approach to negative space, one that is fundamentally at odds with the linear perspective developed by Filippo Brunelleschi during the Italian Renaissance. Draney, who is Cree, thinks about space differently, in a way that seems to undermine the Eurocentric science of visual spatialization.

Of course, the conceptualisation of space is imbued with a breadth of connotations in Canada, given its relationship to land, gentrification, homelessness, treaty rights, sovereignty, reserves, and more. Spatial discourse is everywhere, including galleries and museums, where questions of curation, collection, colonialism, and funding are asked daily. Space is likewise political in Draney's paintings. Works such as *Tent City* (2010), which features a grouping of blue tents, or *Theatre* (2019), a large-scale representation of a hospital room, demonstrates how negative space can become part of larger conversations about political space in Canada. These empty spaces are filled with the unseen, and so prompt the viewer to imagine the personal and political relationships in the lives depicted.

Draney's paintings employ multiple memories. Though much of her work is based on intimate experiences, her negative spaces invoke the viewer's own remembrances. Literary theorist Nancy K. Miller argues that autobiographical writing presents an opportunity to connect with the reader in extraordinary ways. Miller calls this "interactive remembering,"¹ an experiential process whereby

1 Nancy K. Miller, *But Enough About Me: Why We Read Each Other's Lives* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2005), 10.



"[o]ther people's memories help give you back your life, reshape your story [and] restart the memory practice."² Autobiographical art like Draney's acts as a stimulus for memory and affect. What Draney's work articulates, much like any good memoir, is that in getting to know the artist's lived experience, the viewer can better understand their own. The process of self-discovery starts with other people. This is why paintings like *Pray* (2020) prompted me to think of the goodness of my late grandmother.

In part, Draney's paintings illustrate a viewer's compulsion to fill negative space with interpretive noise. Like John Cage's silent 4'33", which holds no notes but plays out in a live performance as a cacophony of coughs, movement, sniffles, laughter, whispers, etc., Delaney's work activates a passive audience in unprecedented ways, suggesting that there should be no quiet bystanders in *Drink from the river*.

Take, for instance, *Visit* (2021). Here, a seated woman hunches forward on a velour couch, smoking a cigarette. The 70s couch is flowered with red and maroon motifs and set against a wooden wall. On the left and dressed in black are two police officers, hurriedly abstracted, save for the right boot of the officer closest to the viewer. As they look upon the woman on the couch, she gazes directly at the viewer, implicating us in the scene. Again, Draney's unconventional

use of negative space facilitates slippery allusions. Do viewers encounter a wellness check, a questioning, a search warrant, or an arrest? Without knowing, and with the negative space separating them, who's to say that the police and the woman occupy the same room, the same building, or are part of the same event? Even the painting's title, *Visit*, is inconclusive and shrouded in uncertainty, asking viewers: what do you see and why do you see it?

Draney's work constantly reminds us that what we see on the canvas is unstable, evolving. In some ways, this mimics the peculiar characteristics of memory itself. With her work, we don't always know what we're looking at and, in the end, that sense of ambiguity is deeply engrossing. It's refreshing not being told how to feel or what to think. ■

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2 Miller, *But Enough About Me*, 25.



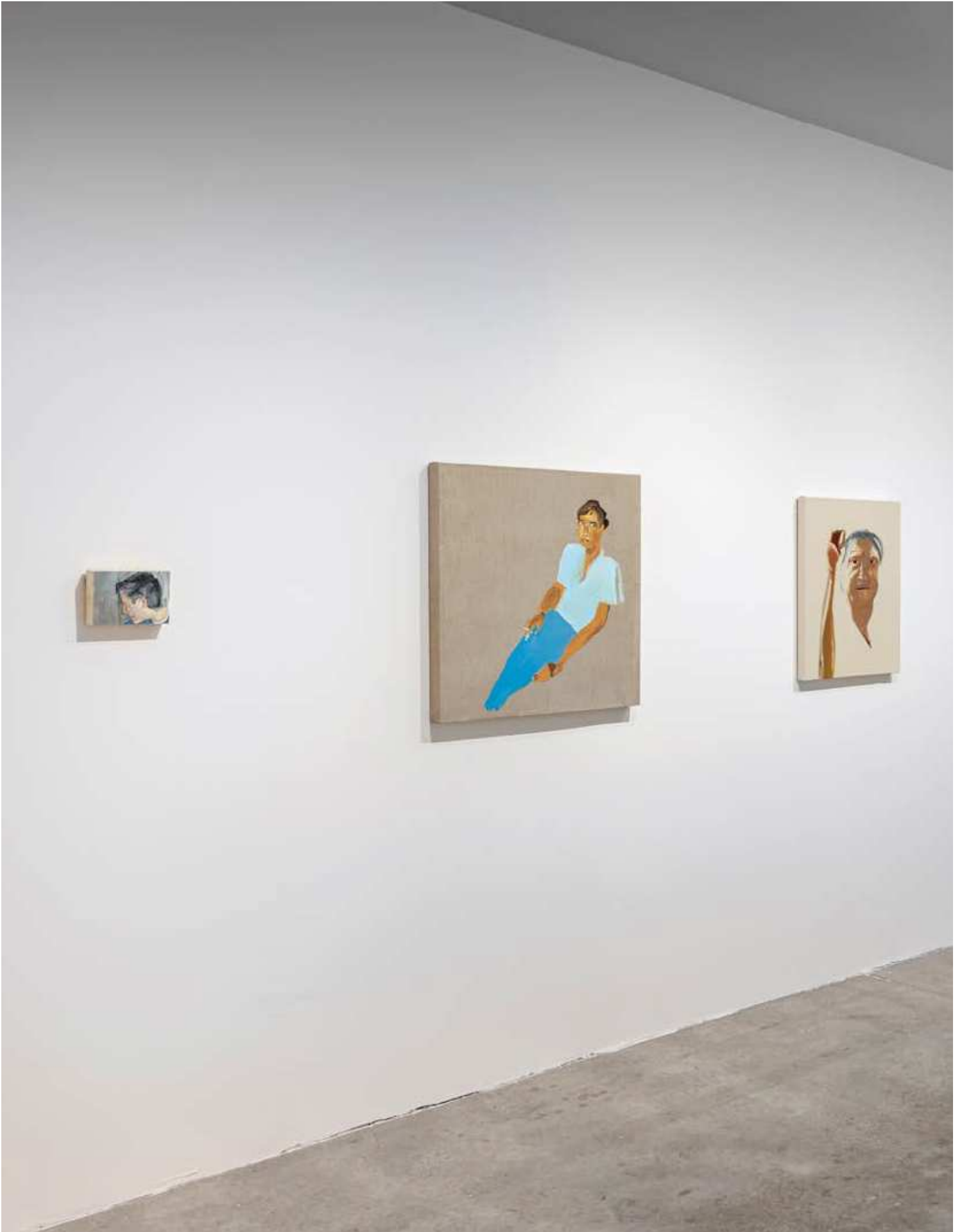
Top: Brenda Braney, *Visit*, 2021. Oil on canvas, 170 x 277 cm. Photograph by Hafkenschied, Toni. Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver BC.

Pg. 48: Tini Hafkenschied, *Drink from the river* (installation view), 2023. Photograph. *Drink from the River: The Power Plant*, Toronto ON. Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver BC.



Pg. 50-53: Tini Hafkenschied, *Drink from the river* (installation view), 2023. Photograph. *Drink from the River: The Power Plant*, Toronto ON. Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver BC.





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