

# Brenda Draney *Smelling Salts*

2019 FOGO ISLAND GALLERY EXHIBITION



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May 17 to Sept 2, 2019

The Fogo Island Gallery presented a solo exhibition by celebrated Canadian painter, Brenda Draney. *Smelling Salts* softly, yet bravely, unravels personal memories of times spent in the hospital and is a reminder of the universal vulnerability inherent in our finite narratives.

Brenda Draney's paintings have a gentle way of welcoming in a viewer. Working often from personal stories, Draney obscures definitive details and leaves surfaces bare, allowing the viewing experience to come undone. She employs an intuitive yet conservative amount of gestural brush strokes revealing just enough information for the compositions to feel familiar. In the case of *Smelling Salts*, the works feel more like a visit to a loved one than an encounter with a painting. Painted moments, like glimpses through doorways into rooms, recollections, or emotions, stitch together a different story for each witness. Flickering between suffering and healing, silence and screaming, subject and void, the observer passes between sterile rooms, mundane views and the warmth and animation of human bodies.

With one of the gallery walls painted a subtle, clinical pink, *Smelling Salts* draws a link between medical and art institutions, questioning the structure of these spaces to house softness. Both establishments attempt to, in the most efficient way, facilitate, organize, and systematize centres for healing and creation. These environments are reductions of form, allowing operations to remain focal. They are simultaneously an achievement and a failure because humans do not fit so easily into simplified boxes. Like scaffolding, hospitals, galleries, and even stretchers provide a framework perhaps too rigid for the soft, vulnerable, and intensely human processes that are being performed within.



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This body of work surfaced somewhat subconsciously during Draney's residency with Fogo Island Arts (FIA) in 2017. After working on *Trapline*, a three-year public art project on loan to MacEwan University commissioned by the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, Draney experienced a pronounced shift into a new space, physically, mentally, and emotionally. For three years her ongoing focus was centred largely around place, and specifically the traplines in the northern Alberta landscape. Transplanted to a completely new place, Draney faced a spacious amount of time to reflect deeply on personal experiences and interrogate how and if these can hold relevance in a universal discourse. Beginning with *Waiting Room*, an emotional confrontation poured out, guiding this chapter of paintings.

Draney's works, alike the title *Smelling Salts*, are fluid and interpretive in definition. Smelling salts can be thought of in terms that extend beyond a Victorian mechanism for abrupt revival; smelling, the strongest of the senses for evoking memory, and salts, the minerals of the body and earth. *Smelling Salts* provides a space to practice empathy and unravelling.

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Curators: AlexandraMcIntosh and Nicolaus Schafhausen

Artist: Brenda Draney

(born 1976, Canada) is Cree from Sawridge First Nation, Treaty 8, with a strong connection to Slave Lake. Draney's work is acquired by institutional and private collectors, including the National Gallery of Canada, the Embassy of Canada Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of Alberta, and the Sobey Collection. She holds a BA in English and a BFA in Painting from the University of Alberta, as well as an MA from the Emily Carr University of Art and Design. She won both the 2009 RBC Painting Competition and 2014's Eldon and Anne Foote Visual Arts Prize in Edmonton and was short-listed for the 2016 Sobey Art Award. Her practice is based on her experiences and relationships formed. Draney's work provides just enough information for viewers to place their own narrative, encouraging an empathic approach to spatial voids. Draney's work visually represents the moment when vulnerability is exposed, while encouraging the viewer to reject the notion to dominate the void where horror, poignancy, or powerful moments exist. Draney encourages her viewer to face this void head on, but as an empath. She provides enough tools for the viewer to place their own narrative within her typical imaginary spaces.

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