

Brenda Draney at The Power Plant, Toronto

By Terence Dick

At a time when art too often aspires to the status of an essay, it's refreshing to see an exhibition of work that hews closer to the character of poetry. **Brenda Draney's** retrospective exhibition *Drink from the river*, currently on view at **The Power Plant**, forgoes argument and persuasion in favour of suggestion and evocation. Her paintings leave so much empty space – always an audacious and risky gesture – that viewers are left, as with all that's unsaid in a poem, to complete the picture. The invitation and expectation are both liberating and daunting, and remind one of the demands art places on artist and viewer.



Brenda Draney, *Rest*, 2021, oil on canvas

An undulating line of dry brushed paint evokes in its simplicity the outline of a body reclined on a couch. Having spent a good number of nights sleeping this way, the image resonates as do the circumstances that lead me to collapse there. That's all it takes to occupy that representational space; that's all it takes to open up the memory. Draney is adept at depicting the fragments of the past that we retain, the odd details that remain and serve as anchors for what's left hidden: fabric patterns on a chesterfield or a figure's posture, but none of the defining elements.



Brenda Draney, *Visit*, 2021, oil on canvas

It's easy to see it as reflective of trauma – absences as evidence of defensive mechanisms that hide what is most significant but also intolerable. The power of these images is that the viewer fills the void not with details, but their own negative zones. Our voids as voids are what we have in common. Everyone has their collection of gaps. They are what constitute us. They make us who we are and blind us to our selves.



Brenda Draney, *The Righteous*, 2010, oil on linen

This is what Draney does so well: huge sections of her canvases are left unpainted. She goes so far as to leave the raw linen, absent primer, as if the surface of the painting hadn't even entered the picture. What is one left to see there? How else to capture nothing? How to even think of what nothing is? What does it mean to picture nothing? And why might our pictures, our vision of the world, have fields of nothing predominate?



Brenda Draney, *Flood*, 2009, oil on canvas

Clearly, and it shouldn't surprise us, there are things we don't want to remember. Just as clear and unsurprising, there are things we don't remember. If we are our collected experiences, it helps to recognize the barren fields that make up much of the landscape of our past. Brenda Draney's paintings speak to that way in which a slight gesture, an expression on a phantom face, an object in the distance, or a picture that has lost details like a fading photograph are all that remain of who we once were. They are, on the one hand, a reminder of how fragmented and scattered our interior lives become. On the other hand, they encourage us to read deeply into those bits and pieces, dwelling on them like disparate images in a poem that form a picture only through the effort of our attention.

Brenda Draney: Drink from the river continues until May 14.

The Power Plant: <https://www.thepowerplant.org/>

The gallery is currently partially accessible.

Terence Dick is a freelance writer living in Toronto. His art criticism has appeared in *Canadian Art*, *BorderCrossings*, *Prefix Photo*, *Camera Austria*, *Fuse*, *Mix*, *C Magazine*, *Azure*, and *The Globe and Mail*. He is the editor of *Akimblog*. You can follow him on Twitter [@TerenceDick](https://twitter.com/TerenceDick).