

Brenda Draney *Smelling Salts*

2019 FOGO ISLAND GALLERY EXHIBITION



© FOGO ISLAND ARTS

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.



© FOGO ISLAND ARTS

1/3

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.

Curators: Alexandra McIntosh 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.

The foregoing texts and images are provided and copyrighted by: <https://www.fogoislandarts.ca/news/news/brenda-draney-smelling-salts/#more-3075>

▲ THE GALLERY IS TEMPORARILY CLOSED. WE LOOK FORWARD TO WELCOMING YOU BACK SOON. [LEARN MORE](#)

STORIES IN THE BLANK SPACES: BRENDA DRANEY'S "ASPEN"

Jasmine Inglis

June 21, 2019

[Magazine](#)



Brenda Draney, *Aspen*, 2013. Oil on linen, 122.3 x 152.6 x 4.1 cm. Purchased 2017. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. © Brenda Draney Photo: NGC

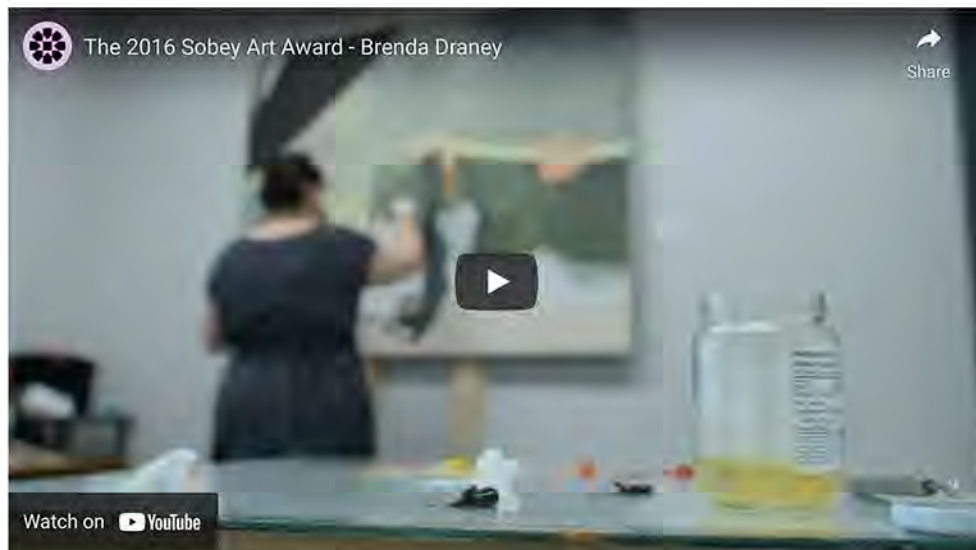
Brenda Draney is a storyteller, concerned with personal memory, narratology and stories, while questioning who has the authority to tell them. Her practice is based on her experiences as a Cree woman from the Sawridge First Nation and the relationships formed between her current hometown of Edmonton and the northern community of Slave Lake in Alberta, where she was raised. Winner of the 2009 RBC Painting Competition and shortlisted for the 2016 Sobey Award, Draney is primarily known for her paintings which have been included in multiple exhibitions in Edmonton, Toronto, Winnipeg, Nelson and currently on Fogo Island where she has been completing her art residency.

Her painting *Aspen*, simultaneously beautiful and challenging, is the first by Draney to join the collection of the [National Gallery of Canada](#). The work reflects the bleak situation in Slave Lake following disastrous fires in 2011 and features the painter's signature style of leaving parts of the composition blank, inviting viewers' imagination to fill the space. In a 2018 video interview with *Canadian Art*, she commented that leaving all of this space was like "some kind of doorway or entry point for a viewer to come and bring their own stories to bear and enter the work on their terms."

Draney often works from a combination of memories and photographs, given to her by family or community members. Even if she doesn't know the person or remember the event in a photograph, she searches for something that catches her eye and begins piecing a narrative together, working out the composition in a watercolour sketch before moving to works on canvas or linen. As Draney's practice has evolved, she has been stripping her paintings of anything non-essential. The interplay of blank, minimal canvas and isolated representational images is key to her practice. She does not subscribe to any linear logic or depict complete stories and histories, but instead chooses to focus on particular fragments. She sees her work as a gesture toward a remembered thing, person or event. Artist Ben Reeves in his monographic essay *Less and More: The Painting of Brenda Draney* quotes the painter commenting that "Narrative is based on what is missing, and that absence is important and present in my work." This kind of ambiguity is often present in Draney's works – capturing a brief moment in time – making them seem like a fragmented memory.

Despite its bright colour, *Aspen* is a truly haunting and sombre image. The lower half of the linen has been left blank, leading the viewer's imagination to fill it in. The upper half is painted bright yellow in seemingly quick, broad brushstrokes that give it an unfinished look. Three tall, sparse trees refer to the Trembling Aspen tree, which is widespread throughout Alberta and considered a dominant species in the north-central part of the province, where Draney's hometown is located.

Slave Lake came to national attention in May of 2011 when wildfires swept through the town, blocking highways, trapping residents and destroying many homes and businesses. Although living in Edmonton at the time, the fires directly affected many of Draney's friends and relatives. Created in the aftermath of the disaster, *Aspen* reflects the bleak situation in Slave Lake following the fires. The yellow hues reflect the raging fire, while the blank space in the work could signify a garden, park or house, missing in the aftermath of the destruction. There is no suggestion of human activity or life, the people have been forced out, leaving only three damaged but tenacious trees.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jasmine Inglis is Curatorial Assistant of Indigenous Art at the National Gallery of Canada.

VISUAL ARTS **OPINION**

At Oakville Galleries, Brenda Draney asks you to complete the picture

The Edmonton-based painter's Summer Nap, filtered through the fog of memory, seems much more loaded than its innocent title suggests.



By **Murray Whyte** Visual Arts Critic

▲ **Mon., July 23, 2018** 3 min. read

Article was updated Jul. 24, 2018

[READ THE CONVERSATION](#)



You just don't know what's going to move you on any given day in an art museum. That's partly why you go — to test the fluidity of emotion and mood against the stolidness of form. Artworks don't change, for the most part — some do, but that's another story — but what moves you might, depending on the turbulence of your morning or which way the wind might be blowing; a single artwork might soothe or provoke, disturb or comfort, depending on what you bring to it.

Put another way, the best artworks aren't sealed systems, with resolution permanently carved in immutable strokes. They leave room for you to come inside and find your own way. The Edmonton-based painter Brenda Draney, with her spare scenes often painted on raw linen, leaves the door open wider than most.

Three of her paintings on view at Oakville Galleries' summer show *An Assembly of Shapes* make the appeal plain: An unfinished (though they're not) quality pervades, inviting you to complete the picture. Her linen surfaces are often left unprimed, the weave of the fabric exposed. They heighten a sense of incompleteness, of something interrupted or left unresolved. One of these on view in Oakville is the tiny *Summer Nap*, a neutral title for what, to me, is an intensely loaded image.

A figure — man or boy, age indistinct, back turned, black hair, bronze skin — lies curled on his side, his back to the viewer. Draney has his knees tucked up, her brush carving the back of a sharp rib cage with soft, gestural strokes — a painterly feat of technique on its own. It's an image made with such attention and care, you're left on a knife's edge of anxious wonder: Was the picture made from affection, concern, or both? The figure seems almost to seep through the raw linen surface itself — adrift in its rough texture, unstuck; drowning, maybe, or dissolving before your eyes. Draney's brush is doing its best to fix him in place, but the slippage is clear and, suggestively, inevitable.

Draney, a Sobey Art Award finalist in 2016, has said that she paints from memory. Part of what she looks to capture — and does, with riveting aplomb — is that sensation of thought and image eroded by time, from certainty to the soft-edged haze of the partly recalled. Her landscapes have an almost abstract quality: a dense, golden fog storming across the wheat-coloured surface, anchored to reality by spindly black trees, or an eruption of fiery orange beside which a loose cobbling of rectangles forms the side wall and angled roofline of a small house. It's as though the image in her mind is slipping away even as she tries to freeze it in time, loading her pictures with an unstable dynamism; they appear almost to shift before your eyes.

Summer Nap seems an innocuous label for so fluid and troubling an image, but, I think, that's the point. With language, Draney leads you in a direction that seems clear — then, with her brush, dares you to stray from the obvious path. I have some ideas about *Summer Nap* that don't have much to do with repose, but that would be giving too much away. It's beautiful, fragile and laced with dread — or it was for me, that rainy Sunday afternoon; you never know how a piece of art will play on your mood, or your mood on it, and that exchange is part of what keeps me coming back.

The best art leaves room for you to have your own experience, and *Summer Nap* does that with deft, affecting poise. I'm not going to take that away from you. You'll have to see for yourself.

An Assembly of Shapes continues at Oakville Galleries to Sept. 1. For more information see oakvillegalleries.com



Murray Whyte is the Star's art critic based in Toronto. Follow him on Twitter: [@untitledtoronto](https://twitter.com/untitledtoronto)

SHARE:



 **REPORT AN ERROR**

 **JOURNALISTIC STANDARDS**

 **ABOUT THE STAR**

REVIEWS / MARCH 25, 2010

Brenda Draney: Thanks for the Memories

The 2009 RBC Canadian Painting Competition winner, Brenda Draney, shows new works in a current Edmonton show. As critic Amy Fung observes, Draney's art continues to evolve a bold, less-is-more approach to the fluid field of human remembrance



by Amy Fung

Less is more with Brenda Draney. Just as the power of words increases when they are used sparingly, the affect of images receives spartan emphasis in Draney's pursuit of memory. Following Arabella Campbell and Jeremy Hof, two previous winners of the RBC Canadian Painting Competition, Draney, like her Vancouver-trained peers, demonstrates a sparse approach that focuses more on the idea of paint than its representational capabilities.

In Draney's new exhibition, "Hold Still," the Edmonton-based Emily Carr graduate cuts away even more from her fragmented memories, emphasizing absence—or paradoxically, the absence of presence—in her images. Fresh from a residency in Banff, Draney premiered her new work at Latitude 53, where she has boldly chosen to show merely six new paintings alongside two clusters of paper-based drawings and watercolours. With plenty of space in between each work, the presentation of the exhibition reflects how each piece demands more room in order to be realized.

Carrying forward the approach that characterized her award-winning RBC entry *Aim Is Important*, Draney conjures up a cast of crude characters, often half-formed, blurring out all other context with the vastness of a muted, blank canvas. In *Hair Puller*, it becomes clear that the isolation within each image is not a snapshot inspired by a literal visual reference; rather, it is a visible formation of the process of remembering. Rendering an uncertain figure of a torso slumped forward, with arms tensely holding onto something, and someone pulling the figure's long hair, Draney composes a moment in the manner in which we remember—informed by what has not been represented, by what is not known. It's akin to recounting a story where memories of blue jeans and red hair might stand out, but the colour of a shirt or the make of a shoe remains absent. *Hair Puller* most effectively displays how absence is able to conjure a stronger impression than presence; the apex of its composition centres on a clown-like figure with arms outstretched, one reaching toward the slumped figure and the other toward an upside-down pink *t*.

Sourced directly from the fluid realm of personal memory, the works engage more with the act of remembering than with the representation of narratives stored in memory. Forgoing the articulation of a beginning, middle or end, Draney successfully obliterates a linear narrative in favour of an open concept of how memory shifts and changes in non-sequential tangents. The works themselves are difficult to remember once one leaves the gallery, like recalling the details of dreams once one has started one's day.

Playing with a variety of gesso-primed canvases that add a thin, fog-like layer, Draney's new series explore sparse clouds of imagery on dark linen, delivering new depth. Though a variety of surfaces, sizes and papers might suggest to some an uncertainty in voice, there is undeniably a specific aesthetic here that hinges on ambiguity and vagueness.

REVIEWS / MARCH 25, 2010

Draney's artworks are concerned with what is missing; they emphasize the bareness of how we do (and do not) remember. In this way, the scant remains that are visible become that much more powerful. There is no doubt that the artist's marks are of human figures, marks imbued with sentiment and meaning. With a childlike palette of colours and a simple crudeness to her figures, Draney appears to be drawing on memories from all stages of her life—but their rendering is still one of childhood wonder.

Given that evocation of childhood memories, the exhibition title is reminiscent of being scolded, of being told to "hold still." But as in all aspects of Draney's work, there is also the space for open interpretation, for reflecting the inability of memories to stay still. As there is no possible way to differentiate what we knew from what we have come to know, the act of remembering is in fact an active gesture, one that continually morphs itself into existence through each breath and gesture.

Amy Fung

Amy Fung is a writer and organizer working across intersections of histories and identities. Her first book, *Before I Was a Critic, I Was a Human Being* (Artspeak and Book*hug 2019) addresses Canada's mythologies of multiculturalism and settler colonialism through the lens of a national art critic.

[VIEW RECENT ARTICLES BY AMY FUNG](#)