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Tenalach : two stories

Department of Art

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TENALACH: TWO STORIES

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TENALACH: TWO STORIES

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ABSTRACT

This body of work is comprised of two parts. The first being my thesis exhibition, Tenalach, comprised of work completed as research through studio practice. The second component is this essay in which I will further illustrate the concepts that influenced my thesis exhibition. Focusing on liminal spaces, this essay will discuss how geographic locations have influenced my own emotional states and changed my studio practice as a whole.
First and foremost, I would like to thank my mother, who has given me unconditional and ongoing encouragement through this degree and life in general.

I wish to thank the faculty at the University of Lethbridge Art Department. Your generosity and kindness in your time and expertise has been well received. Thank you to my committee members, Annie Martin, Mary Kavanagh, and Denton Fredrickson. An extended thank you to my supervisor, Annie Martin for her understanding and empathy through the writing process.

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Lastly, I would like to acknowledge that this degree was completed on traditional Blackfoot land.
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1. INTRODUCTION

My arrival in Lethbridge Alberta was marked with sadness. Uncontrolled and unavoidable events piled up, leaving me in a perpetual state of anxiety and crisis. I have spent the last two years bleeding.

In my scramble to find things that kept me grounded I found myself reaching for things that were immediately tangible. I began hiking in the Rocky Mountains, collecting crystals, practicing small forms of personal ritual, actions with focused intent. These actions informed a negotiation of place as a way of reconciliation of the self integral to my studio production. The consequence of this being I had ultimately uprooted myself from my home in Ontario through my own practice without feeling fully committed to Alberta.

I used my studio time in Lethbridge as a way of reconciling the self through the process of making. Where for the longest time I could not express my own dislocation and displacement of self, I could reclaim agency through the work of the hand. Art, in it’s own way, became a silent space for healing where I created silent works that whispered of my own silences.

The works presented in my Thesis Exhibition, Tenalach, use physical space, gender, and writing as sites of negotiation of identity in this new physical space. In the following paper, I will discuss the process of my work and the significance of the collection that I have created for my exhibition.
2. LIMINAL

2.1 Stories of Homesickness

On August 16, 2014 I leave Ontario. The car is full and the cat cries for the first hour every time we stop.

When I arrive in Lethbridge I am homesick. Now out of place and province, starting anew in the prairies was a daunting task that seemed near impossible. Where does one begin when everything is telling you to pack your things and return home to the comfort of familiarity? Uprooted and displaced, I began to wonder why it was that I couldn’t feel settled in this new local, and why the lines that appear only in maps have had such an acute effect on my person.

On March 5, 2014 I have a missed call from my father. He doesn’t leave a message. I imagine what I would say to him. I haven’t spoken to you in more than four years. It’s been a long time. I’ve moved houses since I saw you last saw you and I wish I could have left you in those walls but I’ve been carrying you around in my lungs. I hope you’ve been well. I call back. I don’t leave a message.

Liminality in constructing identity is often marked by ritual process; the movement from one identity state to another (girl to woman, living body to dead corpse) where social importance is culturally observed. The transition involves a space of ambiguity wherein they are outside definition and socially invisible, where negotiation of inner dialogues and outer social identity
become misconstrued and then repositioned into the new self.¹ Rather than constructing this liminal space as separate singular events, I would argue that there is an ongoing experience of ambiguity, that involves a process of experimentation and reflection in order come to resolution.²

Moving provinces is the event that I mark as my entrance into emotional liminal space. While the transition from living at home to living independently went rather seamlessly, subsequent changes in other aspects of my life stripped me of my experience of solidity and self-identification.


On October 13, 2014 I speak to a therapist. She tells me to compartmentalize my emotional responses and practice my breathing. She says “focusing on your breathing reminds your body that it is ok.” We meet three times after that. It works until it doesn’t work any more.

Borders are sites and sources of violence. Even in Canada, where peace is heralded and celebrated, provincial lines divide peoples, conserve cultures, and hide political tensions, where the issues that resonate across borders mark as much difference as those that are whispered only to neighbours.

Moving from Ontario to Alberta brought to light my own relative cultural difference. It was oddly apparent the strangeness that three provinces of difference could make. People in

² Ibid, 290
Alberta are more conservative than those in Ontario, there is a strange culture around driving long distances, and I’ve never known as many people who owned firearms as I do now. I had always considered myself to be Canadian, but I began to wonder what that meant, and I eventually came to the conclusion that I was more a product of Ontario than Canada. But when I returned to Ontario after nearly a year of being away, it became just as clear that Alberta had changed me as well, and I no longer fit perfectly into the social structure that I once occupied. People commented on my affiliation with the outdoors, my growing collection of plaid, and quality of the voice I now spoke with. Alienated from the dominant culture of my new home, and simultaneously alienated from the “motherland”, I felt more alone than I ever had.

On February 24, 2015 I try to say goodbye but all that comes out is I love you, I’ll see you later.

On April 6, 2015 my mother’s mother passes away. My mother calls.

In her novel, Borderlands, Gloria Anzaldúa speaks to her experiences of living on the Mexican-American border, both physically and emotionally.

I have been straddling that tejas-Mexican border, and others, all my life. It’s not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions… However, there have been compensations for the mestizo, and certain joys. Living on borders and in margins, keeping contact with one’s own shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an “alien element”… And yes, the “alien” element has become familiar – never comfortable…

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While my own experiences of borders were significantly less fraught with violence, the move into border territory had a lasting and violent impression on my person. I imagine that the shift from province to province was less a contributing factor in my own turbulence, but rather the emotional struggle that followed me and almost immediately disintegrated what remained of my support system.

On December 16, 2015 my mother says she has something important to tell me as I’m drinking my morning coffee. “I can tell you now, or later.” Now, I say, not knowing is worse than knowing. She tells me that she’s been suffering from an eating disorder since I left for Alberta. But it isn’t my fault.

On April 14, 2016 my mom publishes an autobiographical piece in a new blog dedicated to mental illness. She admits to having suicidal tendencies.

On April 17, 2016 I have the courage to read it. I cry six times the following day.

The experience of dislocation, loss of control or origin is frequently associated with the uncanny.\(^4\) Loss and non-presence, displacement, and anxiety create a vision of the invisible, and place a measure of stability on ideas that are not yet wholly manifested. That which is new and frightening leads back to what is old and long familiar.\(^5\)


On February 1, 2016 she is admitted to a three week in-patient program at the Credit Valley Hospital. I call her every day in her room after 5pm. I ask her how she is. She tells me it is difficult. I don’t have the courage to say it is difficult for me too.

On April 6, 2016 my mother calls and tells me she’s having a rough time. Me too, I say. “It isn’t really the same”.

2.2 Tenalach

*Tenalach* is an Irish term used to describe the relationship one has with the land, air and water; a deep connection that allows one to literally hear the earth sing. It is an invitation to be wherever you are. When I first arrived in Lethbridge I felt entirely separated from myself, those who surrounded me, and the landscape in general. If I could not identify with myself, or those around me, it felt silly to find solace in mountains and trees, but it’s funny how we’ll always find ourselves back at the beginning. Long walks become like migration without destination.

I would argue that exploring a landscape is, in its own way, an experience of unfamiliar familiarity. I’ve always lived in cities and my own memories of outdoor experiences are sparse and far between. As a city girl arriving in Alberta I was hardly equipped to handle The Rocky Mountains. But hiking alone has a way of forcing you to focus on yourself; encourages you to constantly check in on your current wellbeing. The emotional between space that I feel so acutely when I am in the city nearly vanishes.
Shona FitzGerald Laing - Tenalach

Sometimes a spontaneous attraction to place is really an emotional response to the landscape, which is place at a distance, visual rather than sensual, seen rather than felt in all of its affective power. It suggests an imagining of a relationship with nature that:

But hiking is temporary. Returning to the city is always a disappointment. Setting to work in the studio, I set out to recapture the reverence of new terrain and the deliberate way of living that comes with actively pursuing those places. My work has become, if not an attempt to recapture those moments of stability through drawing and sculpture, then a conscious meditation on those displacements and lack thereof.

2.3 The Crystal

Crystals and similar geological formations, as a visual reference, exist within liminal space. The earliest known historical reference the crystal metaphor appears in Plato’s Timaeus, using the crystalline as a way to describe the unseen forces that worked to control the everyday reality. Everything within the natural world fit into a larger organizational structure that functioned like a unique organism. The crystal became a way of explaining the shift between inorganic matter and humanity. They grow into existence but never inherently “die”. An outlier in what was seen as a natural order, there is an argument as to whether or not the crystal had its own inherent living existence.

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As Donna Haraway has argued, the crystal and the regular morphologies of crystallography have been guiding metaphors in biological fields, perhaps because crystals are eminently visualizable. Mark Cheetham expands on this as it relates to contemporary visual arts.

Crystals are compelling because they are indexical of existential questions, poised at the crossingpoint of life and death. While their perfect forms appear lifeless, they suggest life because they “grow” and move. Even as “corpses” they function as physical reminders of life… They are prevalent in contemporary art, not primarily because crystals are thought to be timeless, pure and stable forms nor because they offer references to earlier art practices. Crystals appear so widely and potently in art today because they help us to articulate the line between the animate and the inanimate…

Crystals exist within a liminal space of representation. Without a concrete basis for metaphorical, the impulse towards the use of the crystal has less to do with the crystal form itself, but rather takes a large array of disparate notions and forces them towards the crystal imagery. The beauty of the crystal metaphor lies in its ability to be entirely transformative, bringing together disciplines in a way that other metaphors cannot.

Jane Bennett discusses the crystal as part of a larger construct of “thing-power”, the unseen forces that change human bodies. For Bennett, certain objects or assemblages of objects have the power to come and meet the viewer to form narratives of understanding. In one moment they may present themselves as passive and just as quickly they may form enough agency to sway opinion. Crystals, in the theory of Vibrant Matter, hold a peculiar place. While crystals themselves appear, the crystallization of objects and materials has it’s own peculiar form of

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9 Cheetham, 251
agency and interest. The human body, composed of crystals as it is, shares a unique relationship with the crystallization of outside matter.\textsuperscript{11}

My inclination towards the crystal metaphor is largely emotional. Sharing afternoons with my father making science experiments, the fascination with crystallography.

2.4 Stories

“I am so tired.” She whispered, her soft voice cracking, “I am so tired of being afraid. I have been scared for so long.”

“Rest, Kira, there is nothing to fear.”

“Isn’t there?” She asked dully.

Marik sighed heavily, a weight falling in his chest as he watched her search his face with her lightless gaze.

Kira closed her eyes once more, “I hardly know who I am without the fear.” A sad laugh passed her lips, “So much fear. I am so tired.”

Storytelling and narrative have been a strong focus of mine for many years. Having spent several years writing novels and short stories as a form of escapism and self-soothing, I often consider writing to be the first step in my artistic process. What begins in words can then be translated into figures.

Stories the power of repositioning the their teller as heroine. They are not neutral in their recounting and do not ask us to remain neutral in our responses.\textsuperscript{12} More importantly, the tracking

\textsuperscript{11} Bennett, 59
of progress shifts the concept of loss as a quantitative experience to that of an experience of transition.

Fiction is personable without the need to be overt in its representation of emotion or experience. It is the screen with which I can most freely frame personal experience in a web of external references.

2.5 Gender and Non-Gender

During this period of transition that my gender identity was in flux until it was. Judith Butler argues that gender reality is performance, that genders in and of themselves are socially constructed. Falling between genders, rather than confronting the issues pressed by one or the other, poses its own set of unique issues. Expectations and assumptions of social roles and sexualities become intertwined and constantly negotiated.

Gender non-conformity manifests itself in my practice in both the physical craft and aesthetic overtones of my work. Whiteness, traditionally coded masculine in its minimalism, is considered to be the counterpart of the feminine obsession with texture. Similarly, through the creation of large welded pieces, I create work using traditionally masculine tools and methods. Through my studio practice, I use masculine tools to explore the feminine.

2.6 White and Whiteness


My own experience of whiteness came as an abrupt and unchangeable aesthetic when I arrived in Lethbridge. Surrounded by white prairie fields, fog that conceals landscape, a lack of cultural and aesthetic diversity, responded in my practice with a constricted tonal range as a to a changing field of vision. Prior to my move I felt the use of colour was important. Colours could communicate emotions and evoke references and new material. My first act of self-sabotage was to drain myself of it; to place my new work within the same emotional void that I had come to occupy.

Pure whiteness is fundamentally a Western preoccupation.14 Related and upholding virtues of the regal, imperialism, religion, purity, whiteness as an aesthetic choice finds itself inherently linked to a minimalist discourse. Showing all an object has to offer its viewer without the seduction of colour to distort its true nature. David Batchelor describes the loathing of colour and fear of corruption through colour as chromophobia,

Chromophobia manifests itself in the many and varies attempts to purge colour from culture, to devalue colour, to diminish its significance, to deny its complexity. More specifically: this purging of colour is usually accomplished in one of two ways. In the first, colour is made out to be the property of some ‘foreign’ body – usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological. In the second, colour is relegated to the realm of the superficial, the supplementary, the inessential or the cosmetic. In one, colour is regarded as alien and therefore dangerous; in the other, it is perceived merely as a secondary quality of experience, and this unworthy of serious consideration. Colour is dangerous, or it is trivial, or it is both.15

By this definition, my own relationship to white and whiteness is immediately complicated and compromised by my own socialized identity. I fall into the category of the foreign body as a woman and a member of the queer community. Whiteness, as an aesthetic tool, does not inherently belong to me.

15 Batchelor, 22-23
Similarly, the construct of line and drawing holds similar binary connotations that are immediately related to the gender binary. Ornamentation, and similar dispositions are associated with the feminine, and subsequently fraudulence and deception. Lack of ornamentation of any sort, by the same thought, is a sign of intellectual power and reason.\textsuperscript{16}

Ornamentation and whiteness: it is at this point that my own material practice becomes liminal. I exploit and complicate traditional notions of masculine and feminine through the combination of line, adornment, and a minimalist colour pallet.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Prairie Studies

“She moves like the wind!” I laughed brightly. “It is as though her feet never touch the sands.”

Prairies Studies began as an exploration of materials that slowly began to accumulate into an installation of objects that correlate, some more directly than others, to the new landscape of Lethbridge. Pieces, like memories of observations came together in a tonal pallet that was reminiscent of the whiteness of the barren landscape. For me, the works was a way of reclaiming through collection. In a place that was not my own, I could take objects and physically make them mine.

The work became a collection. Small fragments became collected and preserved in identical frames and amassed into a larger installation of precious objects. Additionally, the works represent a record of my time completing my degree, of which many of the themes, materials, and treatments within the installation reappear throughout the exhibition.

3.2 Kshama

*Kshama* is a running series of landscape paintings that seek to expand on some of the material explorations that arise from the *Prairie Studies* product. While exact representations of landscape forms, the works use local imagery and textures to recreate the atmospheric tension of the sprawling prairies on any given day.

“I do not wish to be called Sand Dog either, but I have nothing else. I have not been given another name.”

The first painting of this series was created in response to the six-year anniversary of silence with my father. It is a portrait of silence; a snapshot of emotional haze that surrounded
the event in its entirety. (Resting silent. Sediment, sediment, sediment, resting silent. Silence. Growing, crystalizing. Silent.) Inspired by the thick massing of fog that often appears when the weather shifts in the spring and fall seasons, the text is distorted by shifting white glazes, impossible to see.

The subsequent workings of this project were drawn from the conditions present on specific days. For me, they act as journal entries for moments wherein the oddness of my current placement was most acutely felt. Rainy days spent alone on prairie highways, the anxiety of the yellow summer sun that cuts shadows like paper, and the seemingly endless drift of snow on farmlands are captured within the series.

“You could choose one.”

*Kshama,* as a series, was created to compliment the sculptural works that appear in the exhibition in addition to their direct correlation to the material studies they are born from. Text and imagery that are present within the series reflect and compliment the ominous crystalline figures that roam the gallery space as well as offer more subtle hints towards the literary aspects of my practice.

“The name of patience and forgiveness in your land is Kshama.”

3.3 Jupiter
Jupiter was the first of several large scale sculpture projects and most significantly marks my move towards more industrial ways of creating art. Spilled glass meeting metal framework speaks to a conflicted narrative of ornamentation and line as it relates to traditional gendered practices as they relate to aesthetics.

3.4 Ephraim

“Why did he never ask?”

Ephraim is a large scale sculpture project, that in contrast to earlier work, places its focus on line and drawing as opposed to ornamentation. The piece is a collection of six sculptural sketches of crystals I have collected in my studio and used as references in my practice.

“Because it did not matter.”

3.5 Studies

The work studies was created as a way of investigating the specimens that I had been working from in my studio. Focusing once again on drawing in space, the work focuses on three-dimensional sketches accompanied by their crystal counterparts.

3.6 Kira

Kira functions as the work that brings the exhibition to a circular close. Comprised of several small art books, the works seeks to bring together the chaotic nature of my working practice into singular objects that both reflect and expand on some of the notions that I have been
experimenting with over the past two years. Medical imagery, star charts, crystal formations, writing, and magic will meet in a singular form.

While each of the books could be paired most directly with a singular project, the intent of the work at large is to create an over-arching theme with which the viewer can draw conclusions about the body of work as a whole. Many of the literary and visual reference cross over from sister works, though not always in the same form. The intent of this work is to quietly speak to the questions that the works themselves pose.
4. CONCLUSION

My dearest,

My dearest, I cannot make a promise. Light and soft, you are your best self when you make room for your worst self.

The past two and half years have been an opportunity and an invitation to explore the act of negotiation of new and fragile spaces. Studio work became a method of self-reclamation and preservation, creating works that reflected my new landscape and allowed me to become reacquainted with myself above all else. Working with new materials and considering spaces that I had not previously allowed myself to occupy, created a cohesive body of work that speaks to itself in silent understanding.

As of now, I am writing about work that is incomplete. My intention is to create a well-rounded exhibition that is unified through the tonal aesthetic of whiteness and thematic gestures of liminality, loss, and geography. Ranging from immediate gestures to highly polished work, the exhibition will be a true representation of studio practice in its entirety. Through my studio practice, I have worked to negotiate and mediate the experiences of moving from Toronto to Southern Alberta, and the personal sadness that I have endured during my time in Lethbridge. Geography, cultural differences, a crisis of gendered identities fell between familiar spaces and these experiences manifested themselves in an all-encompassing feeling of anxiety and lack of belonging that demanded attention. It is through this conflict and demand for resolution that I found the inspiration to create the work through my thesis exhibition using a multitude of media
Shona FitzGerald Laing - *Tenalach*

and techniques that allowed playfulness to mediate the exchange of ideas. It has been a great privilege to work through my own anxieties through sculpture.

The works, as they are installed in the gallery, are a record of time and fleeting notions as they occurred to me. Mounting an exhibition as a cohesive project will make apparent themes of gendered narrative, landscape and whiteness as the works correspond to one another and react to both the space and one another.
Figures

Fig 1: *Prairie Studies* installation
Fig 2: *Prairie Studies* installation
Prairie Studies’ “Every step never touching down.”
2014-2016

| 1. Rag Paper | 39. Canvas and Plaster |
| 2. Paraffin Wax | 40. Paraffin Wax |
| 3. Crushed Shell and Resin | 41. Lighthouse Park, British Columbia |
| 4. Linen | 42. Birch Bark |
| 5. Parchment Paper and Resin | 43. Artificial Glass |
| 6. Embroidery | 44. In the very least, it is fine to say that you are suffering |
| 7. Parchment Paper and Paraffin Wax | 45. Linen |
| 8. Resin | 46. Clay |
| 9. Plaster | 47. Linen Paper |
| 11. Traditionally, we hang the horseshoe this way to ensure the good luck doesn’t fall out. | 49. Parchment Paper and Resin |
| 12. Steel | 50. Paper |
| 13. Is that so? | 51. Thread and Velum |
| 14. Glass | 52. Inonotus Obliquus |
| 15. Pearlescent Ink | 53. Spray Paint |
| 16. Nuttallia Obscurata | 54. Radium, British Columbia |
| 17. Linen | 55. Rough Grain Sand |
| 18. Canvas | 56. Artificial Water |
| 19. Gold Leaf Paint | 57. Steel |
| 20. Beeswax | 58. Plaster |
| 21. Prairie Grass | 59. Thread and Velum |
| 22. Sharper, more concise, more precious | 60. Kitimat, British Columbia |
| 23. Tile Sample | 61. Carpenter’s Glue |
| 25. Canvas and Plaster | 63. Chalk |
| 26. Birch Bark | 64. Carpenter’s Glue |
| 27. Feathers | 65. Sandpaper |
| 29. Lavender | 67. Canvas and Beeswax |
| 30. It will begin again in the morning. | 68. Standing tall by our choice to forgive. |
| 31. Parchment Paper and Paraffin Wax | 69. Our kindness put to a stop |
| 32. Tile Sample | 70. Clay and Acrylic |
| 33. Mixed Grain Sand | 71. Plaster |
| 34. You are so very precious to me | 72. Paper |
| 35. Beeswax | 73. Clay and Acrylic |
| 36. Table Salt, Rust | 74. Pail Paint |
| 37. Nuttallia Obscurata | 75. Chalk |
| 38. Moxonstone and Resin | 76. Fine Grain Sand |
| | 77. Plaster |
| | 78. Actual Rock |
| | 79. Synthetic Filler |
| | 80. Sediment/Sentiment |
| | 81. Clay and Acrylic |
| | 82. Steel and Rust |
| | 83. Amethyst |
| | 84. Yarn |
| | 85. Sediment, resting silent, silent, silent |
| | 86. Chalk |
| | 87. Masking Tape |
| | 88. Clay |
| | 89. Mid Grain Sand |
| | 90. Plaster |
| | 91. Lace |
| | 92. Kindness, kindness, kindness |
| | 93. I am saying a prayer for courage |
| | 94. Rock Salt |
| | 95. Rough Grain Sand |
| | 96. Pseudolimosomeus Nix |
| | 97. Carpenter’s Glue |
| | 98. Crushed Shell and Resin |
| | 99. Mylar |
| | 100. Plaster |
| | 101. Bubble Wrap |
| | 102. Canvas and Plaster |
| | 103. Clay Dust |
| | 104. Canvas and Beeswax |
| | 105. Be gentle, gentle, gentle |
| | 106. Plaster, Lavender |
| | 107. What someone said and how it harmed me |
| | 108. Crushed Amethyst |
| | 109. Plaster |
| | 110. A20-1 Clay and Acrylic |
| | 111. Mother of Pearl |
| | 112. Birch Bark |
| | 113. Sand Paper |
| | 114. Baltic Birch |
| | 115. Lavender and Resin |
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Fig 3: Prairie Studies exhibition panel
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