



Sarah Crawley
ABSENT PRESENCE

MAY 22 - JUNE 27, 2014

THE LIGHT THAT GOES UNSEEN

The north focuses our anxieties. Turning to face north, face the north, we enter our own unconscious. Always, in retrospect, the journey north has the quality of a dream. ("True North", 1994)

The preceding words represent Margaret Atwood's own poetic interpretation of the vast terrain that lies at the heart of most Canadians' identity. Avoiding a definition of North solely based on geography, Atwood rather locates its essence within the malleable and infinite longitudes of the imagination. When we "turn north", she insists, we acknowledge our own participation in the construction of a deeply subjective, imaginary space, one that radiates with its inimitable beauty and complexity. Such an invocation can also be seen resonating within the landscape photographs produced by Winnipeg-based artist Sarah Crawley who, in her own nuanced vision, expresses the northern imagination as witnessed in the winter twilight of Dawson City.

Any interpretation of Crawley's work in Dawson cannot be resolved without exploring its relation to the community's own extensive photographic archive, one that every contemporary tourist still draws upon to reconstruct the town's lasting legacy as a mining icon. These historical images—rife with the surface flaws and handiwork of a still emerging medium—share the same underlying aesthetic which has guided Crawley's own practice of employing the most rudimentary equipment in the least conventional of means. Her images of Dawson, produced as past KIAC artist in residence, utilize two of the most banal image-making devices—the hand-made pinhole box camera and the Hong Kong-manufactured plastic Holga—that share with their gold rush predecessors a similar sense of frontier capriciousness.

It is only when the viewer begins to absorb the tone of Crawley's pictures that such historical associations slowly begin to fade. The title of her exhibition, *Absent Presence*, seemingly presents an oxymoron that the viewer can only reconcile by meditating upon the uncanny scenes she presents—environments wrought with mystery, yet largely absent of any colorful characters.

Crawley's Dawson, in its eerie solitude, depicts a starkly different world from the community self-proclaimed as the "Paris of the North", a society that was, at its peak, saturated with the most decadent curiosities of the day. Her images need no such spectacle to lure the viewer in, rather, the magic they exude emerges from the idiosyncratic transformation of light filtered through her unique cameras. Conjured up in numerous scenes—such as the anamorphic curves of a paddlewheeler, the hypersaturated ultramarine of a late afternoon dusk, or the microscopic particles of snow webbing the distance between willow branches—Crawley's images present an alternative, sensorial knowledge of place that normally lays frozen beneath the surface.

Indeed much of Crawley's imagination of the North would never come into clear view without the invaluable role played by the passing of time, a process that reveals the residue of its course upon closer inspection. During her residency, the artist made a nightly practice of strategically releasing a fleet of tin and cardboard voyeurs, each of whom required 15 hours of light to record their surroundings for posterity. What emerges from their mission is an aggregate view of place that forsakes the traditional control of the author for an aesthetic of indeterminacy.

The artist's ghostly portrait images—encompassing both her own body as well as those of local Dawsonites—represent the most visceral realization of a predilection towards the unexpected. More performative than pictorial in character, these static images document the contest that ensued between frigid environment and a shivering subject who remains blurred by the film's long exposure. The body's survival, in this case, hinges upon its quiet acknowledgement of the energies that reside within the surrounding landscape.

Ironically though Crawley's images could easily be described as in line with classic depictions of the Canadian North, the subjects of her portraits are privy to a sensory experience encountered by relatively few Canadians firsthand. For the many others who experience the North solely through images, the images of *Absent Presence* still fulfill a valuable need desired by our unconscious. The writer Stephen Leacock, expressing his feeling towards northern Ontario, sums up this internal desire: "I never have gone to the James Bay; I never go to it; I never shall. But somehow I'd feel lonely without it." No matter if Crawley's magical world is foreign or quite familiar, we would undoubtedly feel more lonely without the assurance that it continues onwards in the light unseen.



ARTIST STATEMENT

My current work explores the importance of place: how place impacts identity, how it effects our imagination and our sense of who we are. Spending five weeks in Dawson City, during the coldest and darkest time of the year, I explored the impact of extreme cold weather, geographical isolation, qualities of winter light and darkness, the snow itself and the silence of the north, by making long-exposure pinhole and other low-tech analogue photographs. The photographs are presented in an installation that explores endurance, loss, and intimacy with the land.

BIOGRAPHIES

SARAH CRAWLEY is a visual artist who lives and works in Winnipeg. In her art practice she works with ideas generated from lived experience using different photographic technologies and materials. Her most recent work explores the impact that place has on identity. Crawley has exhibited across Canada in solo and group shows as well as internationally. A recipient of many grants and awards, she enjoys sharing her passion for photography through teaching and mentoring and is an active member of the visual art community in Winnipeg.

EVAN RENSCH is a visual artist and writer who first moved to Dawson City in the winter of 2009. He spends much of the year in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where he is completing a Master of Fine Arts degree at NSCAD University.

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GALLERY

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Gallery Hours: 11 AM - 5 PM, Tuesday - Saturday

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