



**D'Arcy Wilson**  
*FLESHOLD*



**Belinda Harrow**  
*GIANT BINGO*

# Animals and Lines of Desire

Text by Meg Walker

Come with me to October. Half asleep and half awake, we tumble from our warm houses into the snowy autumn and start up the fossil-fuel-fed van. Part city-dwellers and part rural, our goal for the morning is hunting caribou.

With our lenses. None of us three know how to shoot a rifle, much less field-dress any animal; we ate caribou last week thanks to a generous neighbour who wants to nurture our desire for the northern wild. This day our desire is more emotional, psychological. We want to see them walking. Running. Streaming across the tundra.

All the movies and photos in the world aren't enough to answer the question, "What do caribou *do* out there?" and its companion query, "How do I fit into all this?" We want to gather the knowledge first-hand, even if it takes all day and a tank of gas.

There are dozens of paths this discussion could follow from here. As a writer living in Yukon, conservation issues quickly come to mind. The territory is a complicated place where some of the planet's most untouched swathes of wilderness and some of the most relentless resource extraction activities bring out conflicting human priorities.

At the same time, human-animal interactions and, importantly, opportunities for straight-up coexistence, are more visible in places like Yukon because there is literally more space for events to unfold.

So on a psychological level, an experience of healthy wilderness inhabited by robust animals, insects and birds tempers the fear that we are driving the planet into exhaustion. Watching caribou from the side of the Dempster Highway, a surge of pleasure and longing can refresh our optimism.

Here in the month of May, I think of those moments on the Dempster because I see the surge of desire for meaningful relationships – with wild animals in the one exhibition, and through wild animals as metaphor in the other exhibition – in the current artworks showing at the ODD Gallery.

One thing that intrigues me about *Fleshhold* by D'Arcy Wilson (Halifax) and *Giant Bingo* by Belinda Harrow (Regina) is how the human-to-animal lines of desire cluster when these artists consider wild creatures in urban settings.

As of 2008, more than 50 per cent of humans now live in urban settings, worldwide, for the first time in history. It's going to take time for us to figure out how to exist this way. Analyzing our relationships with other creatures, not just how to protect, eat, harvest or photograph them, needs to be part of that since we are animals too.



A secondary observation: as much as we might experience longing and awe when we see wild creatures, they initially don't desire connection with us. And they only do if we train them into thinking of us (or our built structures) as sources of food and shelter.

*Fleshhold* is one of Wilson's ongoing projects in which she become a character who tries to interact with wildlife to "protect" it, but each time, something doesn't quite work.

"The wild animal has become a constructed being. I am subsequently interested in the absence of wildlife in its original form for this culture, and the psychological consequences for the human victim," she says.

For *Fleshhold*, Wilson poured her longing into action by interacting with animals at a wildlife rescue centre in New Brunswick (a university-level art instructor, she worked in Fredricton until her recent move to Halifax).

She hand-stitched nine "comforting" quilts for wild animals in rehabilitation and gave the animals the quilts to chew, shred and paw until the fabric suited their own needs. What ends up in the gallery are excerpts from videos documenting the animals' interactions with the quilts and, strikingly, the remains of the quilts, once the animals are moved to wilder locations.

One side of the split-screen video footage shows the animals messing around with the quilts. Most of the animals are rescued babies, zooming the "cute" factor to high. This is seductive visual territory for humans. To give just one example, an amateur video of a baby penguin, filmed at the Cincinnati Zoo in January 2010, has been viewed more than 5 million times on YouTube. The penguin comes to its name and, when it's tickled, it leans into the caretaker's hand with delightful sounds. "Adorable" and "cute" are the two top words in the comments streams.

In *Fleshhold*, the first animal we see is a kit (a baby fox) at play. It dives under a wrinkle in the blanket, burrows there for a moment, pops out again, runs to the other side where it just came from, and scoots under the fabric again. Another segment shows multiple, noisy, chattering squirrels jumping onto, off, onto, off, their quilt, which is suspended in their cage.

It's impossible not to grin.

But Wilson is wise to the human-response energy, and handles it calmly. One half of the video screen shows her hands slowly, methodically, stitching the quilt that's being *actively lived with* in the other half of the screen. The serene, working hands shape a secure, warming cloth for the young animals to bounce around in. Caretaking happens when one being takes on the role of a steady presence and creates a framework for the juvenile energy that needs nurturing.

Nurturing involves many paradoxes, one of which is this: I want to care for you, but I also want to feel good about how I care for you.

Before *Fleshold* was *Mother*. Wilson dunked Canadian wildlife toys in maple syrup and licked them clean, as if she was their “mother” animal. She did this for a week, and became a little sick from all the sugar, feeling less than good.

Last summer, she wrote lullabies for taxidermy specimens in the Banff Park Museum National Historic site. *Tuck* is her video of wandering the exhibition space at night, moving from glass case to glass case singing to the animals, asking them to close their eyes and sleep.

This time the fatigue of caretaking happens in the privacy of Wilson's apartment. This time the animals being nurtured are alive. The tiredness shifts into a loop of energy exchange when the animals meet the quilts, especially when the animals have unexpected responses.

“There was an uncomfortable element to filming them and interacting with them,” Wilson says.

“What was happening, I realized after, was that my scent (all over the quilts) was invading their space. The gesture of giving security blankets became almost an aggressive way to put myself in their midst.”

Aggression fades between animals and humans in this case. The baby animals clearly benefit physically from the care they receive at the shelter. I consider *Fleshold* a form of reverse taxidermy, though we don't get to see how the creatures age. Living animals, in their early months, get to manipulate humanly constructed fabrics and we humans view the results of those actions, instead of seeing animal corpses stuffed and shaped into poses that humans find attractive.

As for what humans find attractive, that's another mystery involving lines of desire, and another place in the human psyche where we discover how much we don't want to be alone – as a species or as individuals.

Harrow looks to animals' mating habits and playfully, yet poetically, explores questions about human rituals of seduction. *Giant Bingo* is a progression of drawings and soft sculptures that combine Bingo cards and beavers.

Beavers are monogamous and mate for life, while humans act out an impressive range of complicated actions when it comes to finding, seducing and keeping a mate.

“These are characteristics I would find attractive in a male,” Harrow says. “And they build nice homes.”

The lines on the Bingo cards are made from headlines and profiles Harrow found during her own online dating experience, spelling quirks and all:



*I am single looking for a companion. Is it Friday yet? Simply looking for interesting people. Honest, Caring and Fun :)*

*My previous account was deleted still again so here goes again. I am looking for a younger woman who needs some help in some way.*

*Lowered expectations?*

What kind of email would a beaver send, I wonder as I read the “hey, I'm out heeerrr!” signals from users like *03 bad*, *government 51 mule*, *Thunderbeing 20*, *19 AdventurLicious*. Harrow fictionalizes usernames a little to make the numbers fit with the patterns of Bingo cards, but the core of the texts remain documentary.

“The world of internet dating is a challenging one,” Harrow muses. “It takes patience, effort and a lot of courage to wade through hundreds, even thousands of pictures, headlines, and profiles. Emails, chats and first dates all lead to the possibility of a potential connection.”

The experience is similar to Bingo in that the cards are what you have to play with.

“Perhaps it is the city you live in, your age, your looks, likes, emotional baggage. These are the things that you can't change. When you play a game of bingo, you have your cards that you are given, and that's what you have to win with. You sit, listen, wait for the right numbers to be called. It is similar with the internet. You read, filter, chat, work your way through the numbers to find the right person you are looking for.”

Harrow lived in Whitehorse for several years, just before relocating to her current home in Regina.

“Living in the Yukon definitely gave me an opportunity to get up close and personal with animals that had been part of my art practice for the last few years,” she says. Some of her sculptures use real beaver fur, purchased from trappers living and working in the North.

Her use of fur is not for shock value. "I am hoping that using part of the real animal, the fur, will make the beaver metaphor more substantial, concrete.... It is an incredible material to work with, and I am honoured to be able to use it."

Part of the gesture, too, is to challenge our stereotypes about animals as groups, clusters of beings that live under one species label. "These are real animals, individuals."

In fact, Harrow blends the humour in the idea of daubing your way to romantic bliss with the humour of the sexually punning beaver-fur sculptures. Using fur, least of all for humour, is rare in the contemporary art world. Harrow was turned down for an art exhibition in Whitehorse last year when the gallery owners learned, and did not take time to understand why, she would use animal parts in her work.

"I am interested in the overlap, where animals and humans cross over into each others' physical space. I am also interested in how we, as a human race, have impacted on animal species." Harrow has taught art in China, India and New Zealand in recent years, actively developing her vision of human-animal interactions and showing her work in these locations.

Harrow and Wilson applied to the ODD Gallery independently. The room holds their work generously, giving visual space for Harrow's colours (the design hues for the popular online dating site "Plenty of Fish" are the colours of her drawings) and offering easy access to walk around Wilson's stained, chewed, torn quilts and see them from both sides.

Viewed together, *Fleshhold* and *Giant Bingo* reveal hours of meticulous, care-full and intricate attention to the nuances of human yearning for connection with other animals, including other humans. I was surprised to notice that the lines of desire – messy and endlessly emotional as longing can be – appear partly in grid form. Wilson stitches the structurally supportive latticework onto the backs of her quilts; and Harrow recreates Bingo squares with her hand-drawn lettering.

These x and y axes are clearly part of the tradition of bingo and quilts. Metaphorically, they also point to how we share our lines of desire when we first meet another human, or another animal: we often turn to rituals, notations of boundary, emotional safety nets. As yearning for connection unfolds into lived experiences with unexpected moments, maybe those grids relax into hammocks we can rest in. For a little while, catching our breath until the next conflicting cluster of desires appears.

*Meg Walker is a writer and visual artist living in Dawson City, Yukon*

Image Credits:  
Page 2: D'Arcy Wilson, Detail, *Fleshhold*  
Page 4: Belinda Harrow, Detail, *Giant Bingo*  
Page 6: D'Arcy Wilson, Video Still, *Fleshhold*  
Back: Belinda Harrow, *Giant Bingo*



## ARTIST STATEMENTS

### GIANT BINGO

When it comes to love in the animal world, mating practices are considered instinctive to nature. Beavers for example are monogamous and remain with their mates for life. They usually live in family units working together to build their homes.

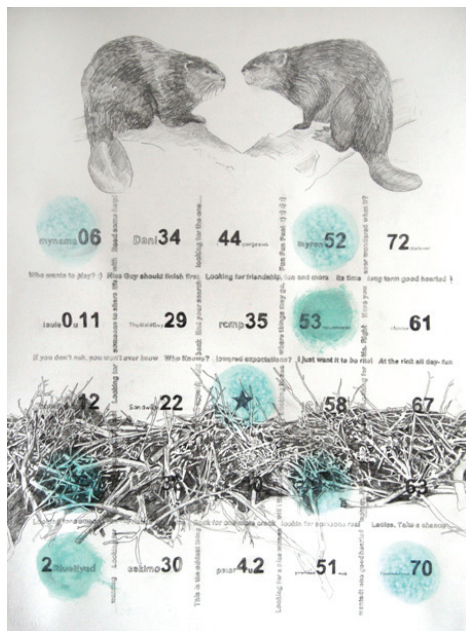
Humans, on the other hand, have more varied mating practices. Finding a perfect match can feel like an impossible task. Modern singles have turned to the Internet to aid in the selection of a partner and improve their odds. The world of Internet dating is a challenging one. It takes patience, effort and a lot of courage to wade through hundreds, even thousands of pictures, headlines, and profiles. Emails, chats and first dates all lead to the possibility of a potential connection.

*Giant Bingo* is about keeping fingers crossed as you play the ultimate game, while maintaining faith that you may eventually beat the odds and win big!

- Belinda Harrow

**FLESHOLD** is a project that explores the ability of humans to nurture wild animals. Using the wildlife rehabilitation centre as a backdrop, the project documents the hand sewing of a series of custom quilts intended as security blankets for injured and orphaned wildlife. *Fleshhold* witnesses the animals' reaction to the human gesture of kindness, and sees the return of the blankets to the artist upon the release of the animals. The used quilts are preserved as relics of the wild animals' brief time in human care, recalling their vulnerability, and that of the crafter.

- D'Arcy Wilson



**D'Arcy Wilson**  
**FLESHOLD**

**& Belinda Harrow**  
**GIANT BINGO**

May 17 - June 16, 2012  
Opening Reception:  
Thursday, May 17, 2012

**D'ARCY WILSON** is currently based out of Halifax, after spending two years in Fredericton NB, where she has been teaching in the Fine Arts Department at St. Thomas University. She holds a BFA from Mount Allison University, and an MFA from The University of Calgary. Her performance practice considers the human as an isolated species of animal in search of a connection to or role within nature. In her multidisciplinary exploration of postcolonial relationships to wildlife, she presents themes of absence, loss, and vulnerability. Her work has been exhibited across Canada and she has participated in residencies at the Banff Centre and the Confederation Centre (Charlottetown, PE). She has received grants from The New Brunswick Arts Board, The Alberta Foundation for the Arts, and the Canada Council.

**BELINDA HARROW** was born in New Zealand but immigrated to Canada with her family as a child, growing up in Saskatchewan. She received a BA Honours in English from the University of Saskatchewan in 2003, a BFA from NSCAD University in 1996, and a MFA from Canterbury University, in Christchurch New Zealand in 2005. In 2000 she represented Canada as the Royal Overseas Travel Scholarship recipient. Belinda has exhibited in Canada, New Zealand, the UK, China and Thailand. She currently lives and works in Regina, Saskatchewan.

**ODD**  
GALLERY

**Klondike Institute of Art & Culture**  
Box 8000 | Dawson City, Yukon | Y0B 1G0  
[www.kiac.ca](http://www.kiac.ca)

**KIAC**

The **ODD** Gallery gratefully acknowledges the ongoing support of the Yukon Government Department of Tourism and Culture