



Rachael Siminovitch
BACKBONE

"It is easier, of course, to find dignity in one's solitude. Loneliness is solitude with a problem. Can blue solve the problem, or can it at least keep me company within it? No, not exactly. It cannot love me that way; it has no arms."
Maggie Nelson, *Bluets*

Among the melancholic, eyeless women and blackened, avian matriarchs populating the works of Rachael Siminovitch's *Backbone*, two landscape images stand out for their bold and sensual use of blue, drawing in the eye in tones ranging from catalina and ultramarine to Prussian and midnight, and set off by vivid saffron and burnt orange. In each painting, disembodied bones occupy the foreground, while signs of the living animal—a tangle of gesturing, feminine hands, a white wolf returning the viewer's gaze—exist in a subordinate space, overshadowed both by the vitality of colour and the stark totems of mortality. Unsurprisingly, these richly coloured works are two of the most directly conversational pieces in *Backbone*; both hands and wolf are communicating wildly, seeming to attempt a translation of their experiences in the natural world for an audience set outside of it.

Perhaps, though, they are not speaking to the viewer, but instead to the women populating the portraits that comprise the rest of the works in *Backbone*. Look closely and follow the colours of Siminovitch's landscapes as they drift into her portraits. A luminous red from an aurora-lit sky becomes the shy flush on the alabaster cheek of a Victorian beauty. The gentle mauve of birch bark shows up in hands clutching a bouquet woven not just of wildflowers, but of the very fabric of the night sky.

At first glimpse, *Backbone*'s portraits read as a northern gothic spin on iconic depictions of women in art history. There are many echoes here: of Duccio's essentialized *Madonna and Child*, of Klimt's defiantly beautiful *Judith I*, of Schiele's sensual *Seated Woman With Bent Knee*, of Kahlo's wild-yet-unflinching self-portraits, and of course, of Stieglitz's photographs of Georgia O'Keeffe, which linger on her hands, hinting at their dormant power to express. (O'Keeffe rightly makes her own appearance as an influence in *Backbone*, with Siminovitch's deft use of light, shade, scale, and texture recalling the American modernist's masterful sun-bleached surrealist bonescapes.)



Such a deliberate evocation of iconic portraiture of women sets the viewer up for a subversion of their expectations of the female body as subject. Whereas Klimt, Schiele, Kahlo, and Stieglitz all presented their women defiantly meeting the gaze of the viewer, Siminovitch not only has her subjects demure in posture—she outright refuses the possibility of eye-contact, blanking out the women's eyes and forcing the viewer to look further at the space in which these women exist. In that looking further, we drift into a subconscious space where the landscape informs our very being.

The works of *Backbone* were created in the throes of a northern fall, and the natural world's extreme displays of vitality and decay during that time have inevitably made their way onto Siminovitch's canvases. Whether surrounding her subjects with literal and symbolic representations of birth and death, blurring the line between human and animal experience, or marrying portrait and landscape through the use of colour, *Backbone* asserts role of the northern terrain in the creation of both biography and identity: here's is the inescapable reality of the material world.

While Siminovitch's portraits are intended to be an open-ended depiction of the resilience and strength of northern women, it is inevitable that work so wholeheartedly embracing the subconscious would be at least partly autobiographical. Here, the artist intentionally places herself in a long line of female settlers who came before her to find a space—both physical and psychological—to redraw their own image. It's possible the melancholic

appearance of *Backbone*'s subjects is due to loneliness—these are clearly women who have migrated from elsewhere to the traditional territory of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in.

But as Nelson writes above, loneliness is solitude with a problem. Maybe the problem is that loneliness and solitude look the same from afar. Again, the colours of the landscape hold a clue.

"Can blue solve the problem, or can it at least keep me company within it? No, not exactly. It cannot love me that way; it has no arms." Nelson writes, seemingly resigned to isolation. She continues, "[S]ometimes I do feel its presence to be a sort of wink—Here you are again, it says, and so am I."

elaine corden © 2017

elaine corden is a writer and illustrator who divides her time between Dawson City and Vancouver. Her long poem, *Chipped*, and illustration, 20202010 will appear in the December 2017 issue of *Room Magazine*.



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Backbone

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ODD Gallery

After graduating from Emily Carr University of Art and Design in 2011, **RACHAEL SIMINOVITCH** moved to The Yukon where Dawson City and the surrounding landscape has since become integral to her aesthetic. Originally an oil painter, her focus switched to a mixed-media blend of watercolour, pencil, pen, and charcoal. Working intuitively, Rachael's practise focuses on developing a personal mythology based around life (and death) in the North.

ARTIST STATEMENT

If dreams are a method with which our brain processes experiences, then this body of work functions in a similar matter. Through an intuitive process, these mixed-media drawings are a personal response towards life in the Yukon. The repetitive use of ravens, fireweed, and bones combined with ghostly human figures strive to present an interpretation of the North that is vaguely symbolic.

– Rachael Siminovitch, 2017

ODD
GALLERY

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