



clearing

# clearing

works by Carrie Allison

May 25 – September 8, 2019  
curated by Claire Dykhuis

**msvu art gallery**



## Introduction

Carrie and I met at MSVU Art Gallery in the fall of 2016 while working on *Walking With Our Sisters*, a community-based memorial for missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit folks, and their families. We spent a lot of time together over a few months and quickly developed an affinity for one another. Although we shared a common interest in art and were both pursuing professional careers in the field, it was not our first point of connection.

It wasn't until later in 2017 that I became familiar with the particulars of Carrie's practice and I was quickly drawn to it. Since then, I have had the privilege of witnessing Carrie's career develop, as she adeptly

combines critically engaged research, lived experience and technical skill. At first glance, her work may belie simple beauty, but her practice is weighted with the complexities of Indigenous sovereignty, intergenerational loss, colonial archives and collections, and environmental destruction. I deeply appreciate how Carrie's work is conceptually and materially connected to the land and how she makes new surfaces and mediums with organic matter from the territory in which her work is positioned.

After engaging with Carrie's practice for a few years now, it was so rewarding to see *clearing* come to fruition. However, it was important to me that the project be

animated beyond the work on display. So, in conjunction with the exhibition, Carrie and I developed a series of public workshops and Carrie was an artist in residence at MSVU Art Gallery for the summer of 2019. During her residency, Carrie developed new work and engaged with visitors who were invited to drop in and (learn how to) bead with her, regardless of skill level. The public workshops experimented with photosensitive drawing techniques and alternative forms of mapping. Participants began each workshop with a walk to a nearby site of clear-cut woods, which was the subject of a communal drawing created over the series of workshops.

Carrie's practice is theoretically and creatively rich and I am grateful that we can work collaboratively with ease and trust.

I would like to thank my colleagues at MSVU Art Gallery: Laura Ritchie, Director, for the opportunity to present the exhibition; David Dahms, Technician, for his assistance in executing my vision for the installation of Carrie's work; and Traci Steylen, Administrative Assistant, for her ongoing administrative support.

— *Claire Dykhuis, curator*



## In conversation...

The following is an abridged transcript of a conversation between *clearing* curator Claire Dykhuis and artist Carrie Allison

*June 26, 2019*

**Claire (CD):** Carrie, how would you like to introduce yourself?

**Carrie (CA):** My name is Carrie Allison and I am a Cree, Metis, and European-descent visual artist. I work with a lot of different mediums. Right now, I'm working predominantly in beading, but I'm trained in painting and drawing; a lot of my older work utilizes those mediums.

**CD:** One thing I thought it might be useful to start with is that, from my perspective, you invoke a fairly consistent aesthetic and use of imagery throughout your practice, but quite a broad variation in mediums and your use of materials. Is this intentional or by chance?

**CA:** I would say intentional. I was formally trained at NSCAD University in painting and drawing and used paints, charcoal and graphite on a regular basis while in school. I was predominantly taught about Western art histories while at NSCAD, so I think that those mediums speak to that formal training.

I grew up without being rooted in Indigenous community, but the more comfortable I became within the Indigenous arts community, the more I began to look at different mediums. But I didn't want to claim mediums without having a history or knowledge of them, so I did a lot of research, talked to family members, and looked at what was coming out of High Prairie when my grandmother and great grandparents lived there; it was a lot of beadwork and

quillwork. I began gravitating toward those mediums and started integrating them in my own practice, but very much in a drawing kind of way. There hasn't been beadwork in my family that I know of, but there were a lot of bead workers in the community that my aunts are from. There is also a lot of sewing and embroidery within my family. I personally don't sew very much, but I do like embroidery and have gravitated towards beading.

My practice is heavily based in gesture and repetition, so when I started beading, I fell in love with the repetitiousness of it. There's a quality to my beading style and techniques that echo my drawing practice. It was really exciting to explore beading within the drawing language that I had already developed.

**CD:** It's interesting because I've been able to witness the continuity in your thought process, your research and style, which, as you've said to me, hasn't always been obvious to others. Perhaps that's because you experiment with different materials, responding to each project. To me, there is a continuity in your practice, but not necessarily in a single direction; there's a lot of looping and crossover between different mediums and materials, as well as your ongoing dialogue with the land throughout your practice.

**CA:** I think that goes back to Indigenous understandings and material usage. There's always been this practice of working with the land, from the land, alongside the land, and sometimes the physical use of land as a mark-maker or as a way to make something that will make a mark.

**CD:** In a previous project, you quote botanist Clarence Frankton's description of weeds. He states,

A weed is a plant that grows where man does not want it to grow, in grain fields, on row crops, pastures, hayfields, lawns, and other disturbed habitats. Many plants designated as weeds could not survive or occur in their present abundance if these artificial habitats did not exist. In fact, we are largely responsible for creating a suitable environment for the growth of the plants that we are most anxious to eliminate.

Could you speak about how you came upon this statement and about how it relates to your work?

**CA:** I was doing research for the series *Displaced* and I came across this statement by a British-Canadian, white, male botanist. As he describes, all these spaces that he's talking about—grain fields, row crops, pastures, hayfields, lawns—are models of

how to produce food and “manage” land that are conducive to weeds proliferating. The inherent structure of these spaces creates the perfect habitat for things to “go wrong.” However, all weeds are not always weeds but are just plants that have been designated and coded as such within these Western models.

**CD:** A single dandelion can symbolize a much larger history. That leads me to ask, what prompted you to make *Displaced*, the series of watercolour on paper and photosensitive drawings on wood panels?

**CA:** When I made these drawings in 2017, I was taking my dog for a walk every day and would go to a nearby baseball field and wooded area to throw a ball for my dog. That summer, construction began on the adjacent forest to make two more baseball diamonds. I would visit this park every day and there would be more and more clearing of this wooded land. I saw this progression of erasure; how the trees were cut down, the land was levelled out, and then the laying of sod. As soon as the ground was sodded, hundreds of dandelions popped up everywhere. It was like they were taking the place of plants that thrive in forested areas. I do think there's a place for sports, but I was upset by this loss of forested space, especially when there's so much

urbanization and sprawl.

At the same time that this was happening, I was watching my neighbor (who is a realtor and really likes his lawn to be “manicured”) spend a lot of time killing dandelions in his yard. He would complain to me about them and how frustrating it was that these dandelions would come back every month.

So I was thinking about weeds and how some plants come to be designated as weeds, and therefore undesirable. But many such plants are actually really essential to a healthy ecosystem. In the spring, dandelions are one of the first plants to come up, so for bees and other pollinators, they're pretty important. But dandelions have been labelled as aesthetically unpleasing, which is really bizarre to me too because they're actually quite beautiful. This made me want to focus on clearcutting and the idea of erasure for some new work, which resulted in the series *Displaced*.

**CD:** Part of the reason I admire your practice so much is the way you think through and work with the land, both conceptually and materially. Could you speak to how you had the idea to create this photosensitive ink and how you realized you wanted to use it in this way?



**CA:** That summer of 2017 was in between the first and second year of my MFA. My friend Ursula Handleigh (a fellow MFA student and camera-less photographer) and I had a studio visit one day and discussed my interest in clearcutting and erasure. She told me about anotype prints, a process of negative image making that uses a plant-derived, photosensitive emulsion. I was already working with plants in other ways, so this intrigued me and I started to experiment with using this as a medium.

I ended up going to the new baseball field and harvesting some of the dandelions to make the photosensitive ink used for the drawings of the clear-cut landscape before it became the baseball fields.

The accompanying watercolour paintings depict Indigenous plants in Nova Scotia that need forested areas to survive but are losing their habitat through deforestation due to industrial forestry, development projects and urbanization.

**CD:** As I understand, to make an anotype print, you make an emulsion from crushed flower petals and coat a piece of paper with the emulsion. Once dry, you place objects on the paper and expose to direct sunlight for a period of time. The sun will fade the ink of the exposed parts of the paper and the emulsion/ink remains visible only where

the objects were placed. But instead of making a print, you use the emulsion like a drawing ink.

**CA:** Yes, and any pigment derived from a plant must be stabilized with a fixer to keep it from fading over time due to its plant-based photosensitivity.

**CD:** So, fading is inherent to the material here, but you embrace it. If the drawings were exposed to certain light spectrums they would eventually disappear, correct? In theory, then, all that would remain is the surface that the drawing was on, a commercially-produced wood panel that likely would have been made from clear-cut trees

**CA:** Yes, and this can function as a symbolic placeholder for the consequence of industrial, commercial forestry and deforestation.

**CD:** The history of botanical watercolour painting is affiliated with the colonial practices of documentation, classification and collection of flora. In *Displaced* you're referencing that history alongside these photosensitive drawings that could eventually disappear, erasing the hand of the artist and the residue of the plants that you harvested from that land.

**CA:** Ephemerality is something I like to work with and I also work a lot with memory, in terms of ancestral memory, blood memory, and how I relate to the world... like, my Indigenous family and what was lost but I am now exploring and reclaiming. It's an unlearning and then a learning process of Indigenous methodologies and of looking at my family and trying to work through those processes of decolonization.

**CD:** I was hoping we could speak a bit about *Plot*, which is the new series of work that is included in *clearing*. In our early conversations, we talked about your research and how grass has been used both historically and contemporarily as a way to claim land and control it. Could you tell me a bit more about that research and how it informed your creation of the beaded portraits in *Plot*.

**CA:** Grass became of interest to me a very long time ago, probably six or seven years ago, maybe longer. My friends and I were sitting in a park and the subject of grass came up. My friend told me about how historically grass spaces and lawns were associated with royalty and were considered symbols of wealth within Europe. For some reason, that idea stuck with me for so long. Whenever I'd see grass, this thought came back up, so obviously it just needed to sit

for a while before I delved into it.

I love gardens and botanical gardens, but they're not often rooted in any sort of natural geography within the context of North America. They're based on models that were developed in Europe and then placed here through the processes of colonization. I started to think more critically about lawns, gardens, and parks, both historically and contemporarily, and I really wanted to take this idea and sit with it. A lot of my beading practice is about mediating on the subject for a while.

I also love to do series, so I felt like I really wanted to grow some fancy lawn grass because I just wanted to see if I could do it, see how easy it would be to grow, how easy it would be to kill, if it was easy to kill, etc. But then, also, I wanted to individualize the pieces [of grass] and create this space around them too—I don't really know why—they are living things.

**CD:** Each beading is a replica of an actual piece of grass that you grew, correct?

**CA:** I grew it, picked it, digitally scanned it, traced it, and beaded it. So that was the process for each of the sixteen pieces. Just to think about what they are as individual plants and to think about how they function and live together.

**CD:** I'm glad we agreed to display the container of live grass that you grew as source material for the beadings. How often do we see a whole individual blade of grass, root system and all? Usually we have a birds-eye view of just the top section, so it is interesting to see the whole plant depicted and made visible.

I find myself identifying each beeding in *Plot* as a portrait. Does this resonate with you at all?

**CA:** They can definitely can be seen like that and I understand why you'd use that word. When I was beading this grass I saw that they are so different, they are so individualized, they are a portrait of each plant. If that's something that everyone wants to think about, I don't know, but I did. I liked spending the time with this very small plant that has a very tricky history.

**CD:** Thinking back to the quotation by Clarence Frankton, I'm intrigued by a possible tension between *Displaced* and *Plot*. You've used a so-called weed, dandelions, to illustrate destruction of an urban forest but you've also given care and detail to each blade of grass. Do you see a relationship between these plants?

**CA:** At first, they could be seen as opposing subjects but I look at it as more of a

metaphor for interconnectedness. These plants have shared histories and underlying currents that are the same, or they touch on different things but come together in other ways. I think that it speaks to the complexity of different histories, narratives, and relationships to one another and the land in North America.

**CD:** One last thing I wanted to acknowledge is your nuanced pairing of beautiful imagery and understated aesthetic with heavily researched and theoretically deep subject matter. Using beauty to prompt consideration of dense or challenging topics can be difficult to do well.

**CA:** I think it speaks to my family. Being a formally trained artist, I was taught and work within a certain canon. But I'm also integrating Indigenous histories and prioritizing my family's High Prairie and Plains' history. Both my parents are electricians and, extending further, contractors and social workers. By making pretty paintings I am able to speak with them about my art practice, my job. I want to make work that is accessible for the everyday, and I consider my family the everyday.

**CD:** Thank you, Carrie, for the lovely conversation and opportunity to reflect on your work—it's been a pleasure.



**Carrie Allison** is an Indigenous mixed-ancestry visual artist born and raised on unceded and unsundered Coast Salish Territory (Vancouver), with roots in High Prairie, Alberta. Situated in K'jipuktuk (Halifax) since 2010, Carrie's practice responds to her maternal Nêhiyaw/Cree and Metis ancestry, thinking through intergenerational cultural loss and acts of reclaiming, resilience, kinship and visiting. Carrie received her Master and Bachelor in Fine Art and Bachelor in Art History from NSCAD University.

**Claire Dykhuis** is a visual arts administrator and curator of settler decent, based in K'jipuktuk (Halifax).

## works

Carrie Allison, *Displaced* 2017

4 paintings, watercolour on paper, framed, 28 × 28"

3 drawings, photosensitive organic pigment on birch panels, 36 × 36"

Courtesy of the Artist

Carrie Allison, *Plot* 2019

16 beadings, glass beads on linen, framed, 7 × 7"

Courtesy of the Artist

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*Carrie Allison: clearing*

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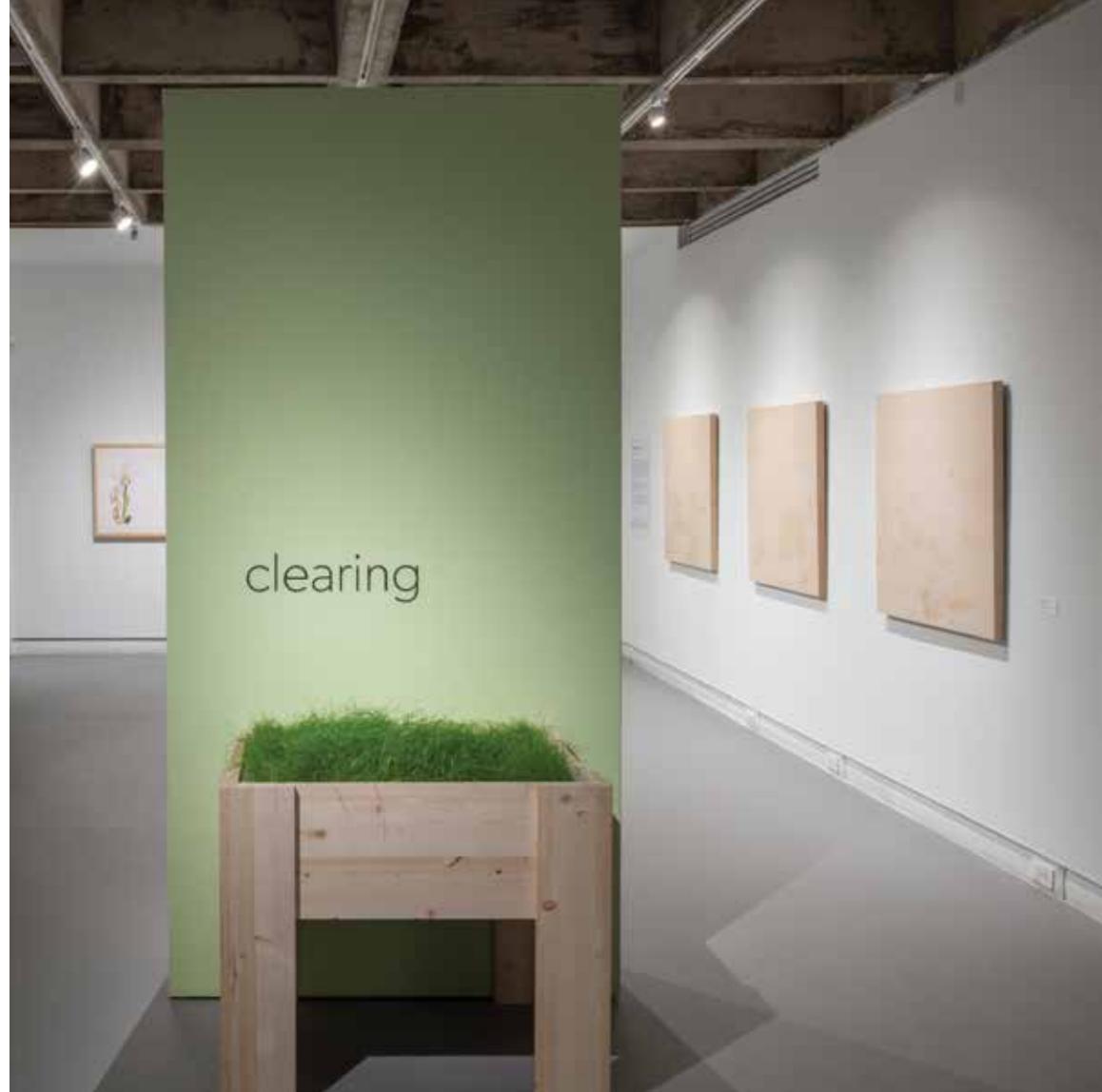
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