



like a conjuring

Erika DeFreitas

Erika DeFreitas' *like a conjuring* is a series of works that considers the relationships that we hold with our history and the authenticity within these narratives. The work was produced during a 2017 production residency at Mississauga Ontario's historic Bradley House. This saltbox style farmhouse was built in 1830 by the Bradley family – early Loyalist settlers originally from Savannah Georgia. The house was formerly located on the shores of Lake Ontario until 1967 when the house was moved 3km inland. Here the artist explored the site to interrupt and challenge Canadian heritage narratives by using artifacts, photographs, and video to conceptually connect the water of the nearby lake, the history of the land, and the house together. The following text comes from a conversation between DeFreitas and Collin Zipp that took place in March 2018.

COLLIN ZIPP - This work was developed in a residency at the Bradley House. Can you tell me about that experience?

ERIKA DEFREITAS - I have always wanted to work in a historical space and to have the opportunity to delve into an archive. There is an excitement behind the unknown, the potential for discovery, and creating something from new knowledge. There is also something really alluring about looking at history and re-presenting something, especially from the perspective that is often left to the margins. So, when I was invited to participate in this residency with the objective of creating new work that would allow others an opportunity to look at the history of the Bradley House through a contemporary art lens, I was all in.

I think of this experience as an informal residency as I wasn't working onsite. I made multiple site visits; the first few were unstructured and generative, more about getting a sense of the space and the archive, and then the visits gradually focused on specific elements. I found it incredibly challenging to connect in any way to the immediate history of the house that was made readily available to me, and that distance prevented me from developing any sort of nostalgic response to the house. I think that this alone, the lack of an emotional response, helped the work to be one step removed from what we normally are presented with in historical spaces.

How does further removing the work from its original location (bringing it to Winnipeg) affect its meaning and intention?

The nature of this work opens up a dialogue that can extend beyond the Bradley House. Your question has forced me to think deeper about the topic of 'the return' and what it means to replace what has been stolen or dis/re-located, especially within the context of the Canadian landscape. By further removing the work to its new location in Winnipeg, addressing the archive, or, more specifically, staged historical spaces and their legitimacy as historical truth can continue to be challenged.

How did the concept of water enter this work — specifically the movement of water?

When I was first introduced to the Bradley House, its relocation seemed to be a significant aspect of its history. I started to think about the importance of its original location and ways that I could conceptually think through its return to the lakeside. My train of thought went from thinking about the literal attempt to move a body of water to thinking about the lake as a body. I considered the varying relationships that the human body has to bodies of water; for example, there are people whose relationship with water is solely recreational, whereas others have a history with water that includes displacement and trauma. Water and its movement became this greater metaphor for migration, diaspora, and a sense of loss.

How does the physicality of your body in this work evoke/invent/activate the unseen people whose histories you are bringing to the surface? What are the ethics of revisiting and conjuring these histories?

The inclusion of my body in my work comes from my practice as a performance artist. Most times my body is referencing a number of things that aren't explicitly addressed; for example, the inclusion of my racialized body into a 'frame' where bodies like mine have historically been excluded or have been included but not from a position of power.

In this particular case, I would be hesitant to say that my use of my body in this work was intended to bring forth or allow one to reimagine the unseen people in this history because I don't feel like my presence could do that, nor would I really want to do that. I am interested in approaching all subject matter critically but that also includes coming from a place of genuine respect and empathy. I am not interested in 'acting' or pretending to be someone else or to know all about a history that I didn't live. In revisiting these histories I could never presume that the limited information I know is all that there is, so the work that I create is like a response to my understanding and questioning of things at that moment in time. In a way, I was thinking more along the lines of how the objects themselves activate these histories.

Your practice often uses objects that seem to be an extension of your body or connected to you somehow. How do you feel objects carry meaning and connection?

In 2016, I participated in an exhibition curated by Emelie Chhangur at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto called Rehearsal for Objects Lie on a Table, which was a rehearsal for Gertrude Stein's 1922 play Objects Lie on a Table. It was through the reading of this play and an introduction to the theories of Object-Oriented Ontology and the practice of Psychometry, that I started to actively consider my relationship to objects. I believe that objects carry a history and a memory that are so easy to dismiss, but what those histories and memories are, I couldn't tell you. However, this is something I've been exploring more in the work I'm creating.

I've always been a collector of things. There are times where I feel an affiliation with an object that often surpasses the place of nostalgia. There are objects that I come across that 'glow' and I gravitate to them and feel the need to share space with them. In my practice, there are many actions I do and compositions that I create where I can't quite articulate the 'why' of certain decisions, but I can confidently say that they are based on a feeling that this is what needed to be done. Often times I find myself saying, 'it just feels right'. It's this intuitive way of exploring that I'm wanting to be more committed to.

Erika DeFreitas is a Scarborough-based multidisciplinary conceptual artist. Placing an emphasis on process, gesture and documentation, her work explores the influence of language, loss and culture on the formation of identity, with the use of textile-based works, and performative actions, which are photographed. Her work has been exhibited in venues such as Project Row Houses (Houston), Gallery 44 (Toronto), Angell Gallery (Toronto), Pollock Gallery (Dallas), The Art Gallery of Mississauga, and the Art Gallery of York University (Toronto). Long listed for the 2017 Sobey Art Award, a recipient of the Toronto Friends of Visual Arts' 2016 Finalist Artist Prize and the 2016 John Hartman Award, DeFreitas holds a Master of Visual Studies from the University of Toronto. Her work can be seen at: www.erikadefreitas.com.

Collin Zipp is a multidisciplinary artist and programmer/curator who is based in Winnipeg, MB. His visual practice includes video, photo, sculpture, painting and installation and is interested in exploring ideas of institutional critique and viewer expectation and experience. Zipp currently operates and programs the nomadic artist-run centre ONE NIGHT STAND. He has a BFA from the University of Manitoba and an MFA from the University of Lethbridge.

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EXHIBITION

13 April - 19 May 2018

OPENING RECEPTION

Friday 13 April | 7 PM

ARTIST TALK

Saturday 14 April | 1 PM

PLATFORM

Director | Collin Zipp

Communications | Ray Fenwick

Admin Assistant | Genevieve Collins

IMAGE | Erika DeFreitas, from *like a conjuring*, 2018

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