

Eldon + Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize
CARFAC Alberta
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Edmonton, AB T5K 1M7

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Subject: 2019 Eldon + Anne Foote Prize | Samantha Walrod | Nomination

Dear Eldon + Anne Foote Foundation,

The Art Gallery of Alberta is pleased to nominate Samantha Walrod for the 2019 Eldon and Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize for her cohesive installation in the Art Gallery of Alberta's RBC Work Room, titled *Vanitas*. *Vanitas* was open to the public from July 20 to October 7, 2018. With the finished exhibition opening on September 1 following a six-week residency at the AGA where Walrod worked in the exhibition space and interacted with the public.

The AGA has chosen to nominate Walrod's installation for her exploration of loss and decay through a contemporary examination of the historical genre of still life. During her residence and exhibition, Walrod explored these ideas through a series of works on paper and canvas, painting still lifes of floral bouquets that inevitably wilted while on display in the gallery. The project became a visual manifestation and metaphor for grief, as the artist meditated on death and loss within her personal life. Walrod emphasized the subject of loss by bringing the actual process of decay to the forefront of the viewers' minds as they witnessed how the artist captured death and time in the moment. Through this project, Walrod was also able to push her own artistic boundaries as she, like the subjects of her work, became a displayed presence for visitors to interact with.

In the accompanying publication, curator Laura Ritchie writes about the historical importance of this project and the unique opportunity it offered both artist and audience:

"For six weeks, from July 21 to August 31, 2018, Samantha Walrod is in residence at the Art Gallery of Alberta's RBC Work Room. Walrod—I will call her Sam—is a painter. Her regular studio is covered in paint, spotted with colour and littered with bits of texture. She uses these bits—tissues, wrapping and shopping mall branded papers—on the surfaces of canvases that are not quite *not* paintings: collages that are painterly. A skilled draughtswoman, Sam makes representational compositions. Her images of animals betray a facility with realism that sometimes masks (while somehow constituting) the conceptual underpinnings of each work. There is more to that bear than its beauty, but it is beautiful.

Sam does not deny the surface of things, certainly not of painting. It is the surface, in fact, that is central to her most recent investigations into loss and decay. Visual manifestations of time passing, of life, age and death; depictions of animal encounters with humans that speak to inevitable deterioration of species whose territory we encroach upon; depictions of flowers in vases that wilt with love; depictions of moths that literally turn to dust upon contact. These are the mainstay of the explorations that will make up the static exhibition at the culmination of this Work Room project.

At this writing, Sam's studio period in the Work Room is not yet concluded. It is only the mid-point of the 6-week residency. *Vanitas* (as the exhibition has been predeterminedly titled) is not yet realized, and just as well. The room, in its half-dishevelled, half deliberately ordered state, better reflects both the work and the practice of the artist it houses. If only it were possible to see all makers in this light: open and surrounded by their tools, materials, inspirations and preparatory works. While for me, the Work Room experience smacks only faintly of a peek behind a curtain at the all-powerful Wizard of Oz, for the AGA visitor, it may be something of a revelation: an opportunity to see what goes into making a work. A visit to Sam's studio feels like a privilege. Not that artists, gallerists, or guest curators like me are the only people typically welcome, but others seldom seek admission, and so the opportunity for access and permission to witness her working seems rare. Here, we see that in a process of washing, silk screening, drawing,

photo-pasting and finally painting on top, the layers and figure/ground relationship come to life. As the Work Room platform promises, the visitor to *Vanitas* truly gets to see the exhibition progress, a scenario befitting the subject.

A vanitas is a type of still life artwork that uses symbolic objects to remind viewers of the inevitability of their death and the ultimate worthlessness of both worldly pleasures and goods. Popularized by 17th century Dutch painters, vanitas are akin to *memento mori* still lifes, wherein symbols such as skulls, extinguished candles and rotting fruit evoke the English translation: “remember that you must die.” Clocks, too, recall the passage of time that leads to death. In traditional vanitas, those worldly pleasures that are worthless in our own mortality are represented symbolically by goods: a book, an instrument, an opulent tapestry. In Sam’s space, where the paintings and drawings exist as worldly pleasures themselves, withering bouquets emphasize the passage of time—their decay, a visual metaphor for loss.

Memory seems to have been at issue for Sam since coming out of graduate school in 2013. When she explores wildlife, or wilderness encounters, in paintings of solitary animals, the fleeting moment of proximity to the animal is central. The viewer recognizes instantly in these paintings the moment of roadside sightings and quick pull overs or near misses. They are snap shots, tourist pictures, a simple kind of memento. In the new works on paper for her exhibition *Vanitas*, the attempt to capture the moment persists, but it is more contemplative, more personal. For years, the flowers, berries, sticks, what Sam called ‘figures’, have been referred to as diaries: keepers of memory. Today, the funeral bouquet that decays ornamentally in the front space of Sam’s Work Room brings that figure both closer to the viewer and closer to home, so to speak. You see, Sam’s father recently passed away. Ever a true artist, Sam processes this loss, her own grief and understanding of death through her practice. For this project, she proposed memorializing the death and decay of the funerary bouquet in a series of still lifes that would, like *memento mori*, highlight them as she studied it. No more than a week in, however, Sam realized it wasn’t appealing as a subject. This is studio life. Sometimes things fail.

Where the funerary bouquet shines, however, is as a beacon in the exhibition space. It is, as Sam says in an audio recorded message to me, “working really well to talk about the passage of time.” A couple new, smaller bouquets likewise animate decay. This is working for Sam: “the decomposition of the flowers has, in fact, felt like a clock.” The taller of the three bouquets even allows a sundial reading and keeps her “focused on thinking about how the shadows are moving around the floral.” It, as it turns out, is a better subject for the drawings and collages and a better motivator for the progression of her figure paintings, as they have manifested in radial composition form since 2017. For Sam, these four-panel grids relate again to the body, the branches composing a figure, now with a central locus at the intersection of panel edges.

The radial compositions are celebratory. For Sam, these are bursts of energy and form: quick leaps instead of slow burns. Whereas the others convey the passage of time, in the grid the fragmentation of the subject—its replication and subdivision—serves to enhance the idea that this is a slice, a snapshot, a part. A visual synecdoche perhaps: this branch stands for the whole of the tree, its life of many stages and ultimate death and decay and journey towards being brittle under foot. It’s refreshing that there are two moods at work conveying the death theme; one fresh and one stale. Again, the trajectory of the project reinforces studio life. There are ups and downs. Sam tells me about how the capricious Work Room environment, and her situation on display for the visiting public, affects her: “They mostly just shower me with love, which is nice. But they’re also always there. So, I find the public amplifies however I’m feeling. And if I’m already in a good mood they’ll make me feel even better and if I’m kind of grumpy they’ll make me feel more so.”

The visiting public want to talk to her, and this can be distracting. She would rather work next to them. “I’m a visual artist,” she tells me, “not a verbal artist. I want them to see what I’m doing rather than ask me what I’m doing.” Employing the work, and like the protestor placing a daisy in the barrel of a rifle, Sam makes an offering she hopes will help: “This is for you.” The text, on the wash-withered page, reads like the greeting card sent in the bouquet. This is for you. To the audience. To the public. “This drawing is for you, not my conversation skills,” Sam elaborates. It’s sentimental, and that is fitting.

Where once the subject of Sam's painting seemed to be the form of the work itself—asking, how can this painting/collage thing approximate the multifaceted experience of thinking, remembering, feeling?—In *Vanitas*, it appears to be more pointedly the time, space, and physical composition of something tangible. Rather than a thought-project applied to a figure—e.g. the subject of collage, explored through the figure of a deer—the subject is now a lived thing: time, loss and decay captured in the image of time worn flowers that we witness just as the artist does. Of course, we can be disruptive: “It’s not a very meditative space,” she tells me. Is it still a meditation on her father’s passing, she asks herself? She hopes so.”
-Laura Ritchie, 2018

The Foote Award celebrates Edmonton artists based on merit, relevance to artistic traditions and exemplary work in the field. The Art Gallery of Alberta believes that Samantha Walrod's *Vanitas* is deserving of this award for its artistic and personal exploration of loss, and the methodical process in which the artist has explored the historical genre of still life through not only the exemplary mastery of her artistic craft but her interactions with audience as well.

Sincerely,



Lindsey Sharman
Curator
Art Gallery of Alberta