March 1, 2022



I am excited to nominate Dwayne Martineau and his work *Strange Jury*, 2020 for this year's Eldon + Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize. Martineau is a visual artist, musician and composer interested in the physicality of light and experimental landscape photography. Living in Treaty 6 territory, in Amiskwaciwâskahikan $\langle \Gamma^{n}b \cdot \cap \dot{d} \cdot n b^{m} \Delta b^{n}$ (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada) Martineau is a member of the Frog Lake First Nation, descended from a complex frontier mix of early French, Scottish and Irish settlers, Plains Cree, Métis and Iroquois.

Many of Martineau's work spurs from an intimate interaction with the Edmonton river valley and a reverence and curiosity for the natural world. Martineau feels that few stop to marvel at the wonders that surround us—even in the city—and his works makes you confront the complex and sometimes frightening things that we typically overlook. Using optics, found glass, mirrors, multiple exposures, and a combination of historic and contemporary photographic techniques, Martineau introduces distortion, symmetry and animism into exhaustive studies of forests and trees.

Martineau's *Strange Jury*, 2020 was one of the most captivating and enthralling works featured in *The Scene*, an exhibition of Edmonton artists installed at the Art Gallery of Alberta throughout the summer of 2021. This installation is meant to convey an unnoticed natural world which we often ignore but within which many are ill equipped outsiders. *Strange Jury* was an installation comprised of 5 semi-transparent mylar panels suspended from the ceiling of a darkened room arranged almost in a complete circle with an opening in the circle towards one side. The layout of the works beckoned visitors into this entrance where one found themselves standing in the circle. The images on those 5 panels come from photographs of trees and bushes in the Mill Creek Ravine. By placing the viewer inside the work, Martineau flips the gaze of traditional landscape.

The 5 images (Judge, Deer, Death, Ghost, and Monkey) begin with multiple exposures of the same view using large-format 4"x5" black and white negatives created in a vintage bellows camera, a laborious process. Martineau layered those negatives together on a homemade light table and then investigated the resulting images with a macro lens on a digital SLR camera. He plays with the layout of each work to create symmetries where individual trees appear mirrored from their centre points. This mirrored symmetrical effect gave the trees human, animal, or creature-like faces and characteristics; knots in bark became eyes and mouths, and branches became arms, antlers, and antennae. Even though the photos are taken in black and white subtle colour is added by the reflections of Martineau's hands on the shiny negatives when he photographs them on the light table.

The installation took advantage of the height of the gallery and the panels were hung in a way that required you to gaze upward at this circle of strange creatures who were both looming over and looking down on you. This is definitely *their* domain; *we* are visiting. Martineau also created an audio work that accompanies the piece. It's an eery soundscape



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that made the air vibrate around you, and caused the suspended mylar panels to reverberate, creating water like ripples of light on the floor of the space. The tenor of the audio is meant to convey a breathing forest and the arch of sound is designed to mimic the arch of a court proceeding. The 13-layer, 20-minute audio track builds to a crescendo meant to give the impression heated court proceedings including a cold mechanical element which Martineau thinks of as a court clerk and a booming judge's gavel that signals the start and end of discussions. The combination of the audio track and the creature-like trees was meant to put you on edge and scratch at the surface of human vulnerability.

Within the installation you can't help but feel intimidated and out of place. It's a strange place to be for a human, realizing that you're being judged by the non-human. It's interesting to speculate on how one would fair under the jurisdiction of this jury. Martineau sets up a fantastical proposition for visitors to consider. What would happen if our non-human neighbours were our judges, juries, and executioners? What sorts of criteria would they use to determine our worth and our fate? Our culture teaches us to believe that we are above nature, at the "top of the food chain" or that we have "dominion over nature." Martineau's work reminds us that this is a construct and events like floods, fires, pandemics or finding oneself at the centre of *Strange Jury* remind us that many things are beyond our control.

Martineau's jury look like they are alien or foreign but the images he used come from the Mill Creek Ravine. The audio too contains some sounds that Martineau has recorded in the river valley but they have been distorted and slowed down to a point where they become unfamiliar and unrecognizable. Martineau wants us to consider that even though we might be occupying the same familiar spaces, trees are living in almost a parallel universe that we have little insight into-and vice versa. It's easy to consider the similarities between you standing over a small sprout in your garden trying to determine what it is, where it came from and if its welcome. The types of criteria used to decide value in this case would be so completely untranslatable. How could that sprout possibly convey its worth or potential harm? How could we convey our worth or potential harm to Martineau's Strange Jury? The audio echoes the otherworldliness that Martineau is creating and further expands upon notions of separate realities in shared spaces. Although we are sharing spaces with trees our understanding of reality is completely different. This is its most evident in our experience of time. The audio contains forest sounds that should be familiar but experienced at a different speed and they distort to the point that instead of being calming they make you uneasy.

This work is important because it takes direct aim at the assumption that humans are separate from nature and pushes back at the belief that there is a self that exists outside our environment or that we can serve the self to the exclusion of all else. The work shifts perspective and creates a bit of space for a more holistic, scientific, compassionate worldview. Martineau's use of symmetry evokes our ancient hard-wired pattern recognition for bilateral symmetry and stokes our sense of animism. We see the familiar symmetry of human life and ascribe personality and intent to things we normally see as



inanimate objects, or don't see at all. This animism, or perhaps more poetically—sensing the "spirit" of a place—ignites a feeling that, as Martineau puts it "nature's got its own thing going on, and there are significant, intense, worthwhile lives and events happening all around us, whether we're there to observe them or not."

We've been trained to see the self as central and superior, *Strange Jury* really teases us with that by making us central and inferior. When we see the ground, forest, water, air, as separate from us, we don't give a thought to abusing and using them. We will burn our life support system, and exterminate our evolutionary cousins, in the name of our own survival, not realizing we are killing ourselves in the process. The viewpoint that we are central and superior also prevent us from participating in the extreme joy and wonder that is around us everywhere, at all times.

Strange Jury gives the chance to set aside our ego and appreciate the infinitely complex web of life— the network of mycelium on the tree roots, the ants ranching aphids on the underside of a leaf, bugs living on the surface tension of water, the epic stories happening under a slab of concrete— we gain a better understanding of our place in the universe. For Martineau, this opens up a more truthful and joyous perspective that can lead to a more fulfilling and meaningful life.

Sincerely, Lindsey Sharman

Curator