

Re: 2023 Eldon + Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize Nomination

The Works Art & Design Festival nominates the exhibition *Tween* by artist Madeline LeBlanc, as installed and exhibited on Sir Winston Churchill Square at The Works Art & Design Festival 2022.

LeBlanc's series *Tween* was a beautiful exploration of vulnerability in both content and form. The installation created a calming, welcoming space in a small pocket of urban nature. The flow of the sheets in the wind, like prayer flags, made visible the forces of nature that always impact us. The unusual display of original artworks on soft material in open air was like an offering to visitors to look, touch, and play in the space that they created. The paintings themselves evoked the discomfort of growing and living with both an inside and an outside world to navigate. The inevitable awkwardness of the human experience was on display on bedsheets, the innermost sanctum of the home turned outward.

Commanding in scale, three clothesline lengths were strung from large shade throwing trees — two over 55 feet in length and the third spanning just shy of 25 feet long. Twelve original artworks hung on the longest clotheslines, with the shortest span reserved for three sheets that were transformed by the public over the course of artist-facilitated workshops. Along one line hung some of the artist's earlier paintings: a diary page, humanoid forms, introspective writing, texting acronyms, and a playground slide, calling on memories of adolescence. A narrative began to form, with the sheets together embodying the highs and lows of the tweenage experience. In LeBlanc's words, "*Tween* embraces the beauty of adolescence by reflecting on experiences we wish we could relive, and sometimes forget too." Growth is evident in the content of the more recent works hanging opposite. Dream-like, abstracted paintings on neutral-toned grounds of florals and nature motifs waved along the sheets' surfaces. Madeline's mark-making gains energy and freedom over the years, breaking the constraints of what was once standard in her practice, evolving into something entirely new and unique. This transition encompasses two years of artistic practice, exposing the vulnerability in displaying a personal experience which embraces years of growth and change. Discomfort is not ignored but is accepted and welcomed; this observation of a stage in life where unease is all too familiar reminds viewers to let go and welcome the transitions we experience as humans, despite involving undesirable moments. A consistent working theme of Madeline LeBlanc's is to challenge the status quo of what art is expected to be, how it is expected to be made, and how it is intended to be interacted with.

"In my artwork, I examine the classism present in the art world and the pressure placed on artists and markets by collectors. By using cheap materials like bedsheets and wax crayons, I challenge these power dynamics and encourage viewers to reflect on who has access to participate in and consume art."

*Tween* continued to break barriers between traditional expectations surrounding artwork and her approach as an artist. Her paintings and drawings used materials familiar to most; pencils, pencil crayons, wax crayons, and acrylic paint. Even down to the work surface — bedsheets — LeBlanc further solidifies that art can be accessible and does not have to be an entirely foreign venture, especially to those who come from a place with little to no arts experience.

This accessibility-centered approach was made tangible through a series of community-colouring workshops. The artist designed large-scale colouring pages on canvas, patterned to appear as loose-leaf sheets of paper, adorned with bold outlines of original abstracted floral designs. For each of the three workshops, a 'colouring page' was removed from the clothesline, and for two-hour sessions LeBlanc

facilitated colouring the sheets in with members of the public. Post-workshop, the sheets were hung back in their original place for patrons to take in for the remainder of the festivities. People of all ages approached these workshops with eagerness and excitement — not only an opportunity to contribute to a work of art and have it on display at an art festival, but an opportunity to play, create, and converse alongside the exhibiting artist. Displaying these collaborative artworks by contributors of all ages and skill levels in the context of the artist's original work further challenged the concept of exhibition norms, shifting perceptions of 'artist' and 'authorship'.

*Tween* undoubtedly brought value to the Edmonton art scene in 2022 and made a positive lasting impact on attendees over its exhibition at The Works Art & Design Festival on Churchill Square. A diverse audience engaged in artmaking and contemplation of a presentation that embodied ever-changing ideas and approaches in an industry that can lean heavily on tradition. In *Tween*, Madeline LeBlanc presented a series of fresh artworks with a place in elevated contemporary discussions around art institutions and access, while deftly leaving pretentiousness behind.