



Main Space

Xpace Cultural Centre
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Swallowed

Alexandra Mackenzie

September 11 – October 17, 2015

Don't underestimate the power of celebration and joy. Pleasure is an almost radical idea, especially when confronted with the ongoing effects of colonialism, capitalism and environmental destruction on the land and people of Canada and the world.

Alexandra Mackenzie's wall-to-wall screen-printed wallpaper, in a variety of complementary and opposing patterns, and animated gifs projected onto the walls work to create an environment for her music performance project Petra Glynt. An infinity symbol repeats indefinitely throughout the work, particularly notable in her text piece (also the title track of her forthcoming album) "Fell into a h ∞ le". The patterns of the wallpaper are mesmerizing, overwhelming in their maximalism and most importantly, celebratory. The sense of joy is palpable and incredibly refreshing. But make no mistake, as the energy harnessed from Mackenzie's art and music practice is not singularly rooted in joy alone, but also in a passionate dedication to social change. Mackenzie often addresses issues of environmental and social justice in her music in order to communicate more succinctly certain topics that she finds more challenging to convey with her visual practice. In her words, "by combining my practices, I hope they can resonate more effectually."¹

Living in Canada under a Conservative government that refuses to acknowledge some of the most pressing issues this country has ever faced is frustrating and downright depressing. Imagine being told, if you are a First Nations woman, that the overwhelming amount of violence: community violence, societal violence, and systemic violence you face is, in the very words of

¹ Conversation with the artist, (August 31, 2015)

Prime Minister Stephen Harper, "...isn't really high on our radar, to be honest."² Then take into consideration the ongoing theft of land and identity, and cultural and literal genocide that First Nations peoples in Canada have faced since European colonists first arrived here.

As a white woman living on the colonized land of Toronto (of the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation) I am deeply grateful to First Nations peoples fighting on the front lines of climate change protest. As I write this, a standoff is taking place between the Crown/RCMP and the Unist'ot'en clan in BC holding off Chevron (and many other oil companies) who are fighting to set up pipelines through their territory without their consent, despite the fact that these projects explicitly violate Wet'suwet'en Law.³

In Mackenzie's music project Petra Glynt, she writes intricately layered, looped and passionate songs questioning our roles and place within a capitalist and colonialist country. In "Fell into a Hole" she writes,

"Surf the dwarfed landscape,
they're in the know, they're in the know.
Many secrets to behold- sold our souls for phony gold
...
Haven't we had our time to shine?
Haven't we plucked what's left of the vine?"

Mackenzie has been a vocal opponent to many pipeline projects that have been approved to begin or expand in Canada as of late, despite the criticism, doubt and fear from many Canadians that these projects have a very high potential to devastate the communities they run through. In a recent track she released titled 'Murder' (which was openly addressed to Prime Minister Harper) she sings,

"Call it what it is: murder.
Call it what it is: murder.

² CBC News, Full text of Peter Mansbridge's interview with Stephen Harper, December 17, 2014.

³ Unist'ot'en Declaration, <http://unistotencamp.com/?cat=7>

Choosing the economy over a real future
Call it what it is: murder.

All I see is dirty hands and dirty money
I got a fire in my heart and a fire in the belly
Don't try and sell me a green car
All the green is the colour of tar.”

Classically trained in opera as a teenager, Mackenzie’s voice is strong and commanding, and often gives me shivers. Her art practice, in some of its nods to psychedelia, DIY culture and craft based making, look to the past for its embodiment of holistic, green living, while she simultaneously and stubbornly pushes forward, imagining a future that cares for the earth and its people. Her drawings often depict a female form as a revolutionary figure standing against violence enacted on the environment. In her hand screen-printed wallpapers lining Xpace’s walls, the colourful infinity loop reminds us that what happens in our lives and in history is often a pattern. We should pay attention to the patterns and listen to what the past has told us, otherwise we are doomed to repeat the same mistakes over and over again.

The in-your-face pulsating colours and patterns of the immersive environment she has created provide a pleasure and a joy to be found when hopelessness can be crushing. Her songs are crafted as a call to action, for us to realize our own agency in an unjust structure, and to protect and take joy in the beautiful, strange, and incredibly diverse planet we have, for the time being.

- Alicia Nauta