



SHANDRA MACNEILL

THERE IS ALWAYS A HUNTER

DECEMBER 13, 2018 – FEBRUARY 9, 2019

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Text by Natalia Lebedinskaia

Curated by Natalia Lebedinskaia

EXHIBITION: DECEMBER 13, 2018 – FEBRUARY 9, 2019

OPENING RECEPTION: DECEMBER 13, 7:30PM

LUNCH AND LOOK: DECEMBER 14, 12PM



There is always a hunter. There are acts of protection and sacrifice. There looms the threat of violence, until there is running and then, sometimes, there is escape. Through materials that link the women in her family—needle and thread, clay, plant, and wood—Shandra MacNeill’s installation begins with a story of her grandmother and great-aunt brought from Romania and left in a convent in

COVER: Shandra MacNeill, *Ghost Mother*, Polymer clay, wire, cotton bed sheet, paper, silk, thread, 2016

OPPOSITE PAGE: Shandra MacNeill, *Mask #1*, Clay, unspun silk, cotton, paintbrush handle, 2018



ABOVE: Shandra MacNeill, *Antler Woman*, Polymer clay, wire, cotton bed sheet, wedding dress silk, thread, 2016

rural Saskatchewan as young girls. The girls came across the ocean carrying cherry saplings. They were fleeing a threat that has since been lost; what is remembered is the escape, memorialized in the cherry orchard that continues to grow at the convent. It is family history that has shifted into a founding myth and—as myth does—it provides the foundation on which MacNeill builds an understanding of her own experience, and through which these women continue to give her tools for survival.

MacNeill's practice is a process of bringing together references that span centuries, finding flashes of recognition and threads of connection between personal histories and shared mythologies, between fairytales and childhood memories. Materials carry these narratives through age-old embroidery techniques, found photo frames, and repurposed fabric. Bodies are kept safe from harm wrapped in blankets, bandaged, and guarded under the protection of lullabies, antlers, and saints. They are dressed in layers of white and cream, taken apart wedding dresses, bed sheets, paper, and unspun silk. They carry their stories; they are weighted down and held up by them. They sway lightly.

The women are masked as deer or caribou, antlers reaching up like tree branches. Their habitat is marked by overlapping memories of home and displacement. Their ecosystem is the forest that

wraps around North America and Northern Europe, creating parallels between the mythology of the land and its inhabitants: deer, caribou, larch, ash, pine, willow.

MacNeill's work centers on the role that storytelling plays in cultivating empathy, and therefore acts as a way of countering violence. In this context, myths and fairytales are acts of resistance against the disorienting effects of psychological trauma. They are imaginative and generative ways of making sense of the world under constant threat.

Imagery from Romania connects the work to MacNeill's ancestral home and its visual language: fringe, embroidery, and animal masks. Masked deer dances are a tradition that continues in Romania at the time of the Winter Solstice. The dances are remnants of ancient ceremonies that marked the periodical return of the dead, where the deer dance followed the familiar narrative arc of killing, weeping, burial, and resurrection. MacNeill's antler women would be welcome guests there.

One of the lesser known Brothers Grimm fairytales called *The Little Brother and Little Sister* is a story of two orphans abandoned in the woods in time of hunger by their evil stepmother. The little brother, turned into a young deer, is nourished and protected by his sister. The children long for their mother, whose ghost comes to visit them. She calls to the deer to



TOP & BOTTOM: Shandra MacNeill, *When They Married, He Took Her Home* (details)
Wood, canvas, embroideries on wedding dress silk and cotton bed sheets, wire, polymer clay, rock, Grandmother's chest, old ships, cotton tag paper, grape vine, salt, tin foil, 2018



ABOVE: Shandra MacNeill, *The Salt House* (detail), Quilted wedding dress silk, unspun silk, cotton thread, brass hinges, stone, cotton bed sheets, salt, birch and elm, 2018

emerge out of the woods and to see her. Ghosts and deer once again; in mourning and protection.

In a small chapel in Rome, a statue of a woman lays lifeless on a white marble slab. It is one of the most strikingly realistic depictions of a martyr, Saint Cecilia. Punished for converting her husband and brother to Christianity, she was locked in her own steam bath for two days and emerged unscathed, singing. Shocked, soldiers attempted to sever her head with three blows, failing once again. She became the patron saint of musicians. Catholic traditions reach across time in MacNeill's practice to connect with their Pagan roots: deer dances, reliquary boxes, and martyred saints tell the same stories. In MacNeill's world, the marble slab is the bathroom floor in *The Honeymoon*.

She is curled onto herself, exposing her spine. The hairs on her back stand up; they make her seem larger, like a threatened animal. The gesture protects her abdomen against the threat of violence; the threat that runs as an undercurrent in the rest of the exhibition is made manifest here. It brings the other stories closer, pulls them away from myth into recent memory.

In the centre of the exhibition is an enclosed octagonal room, guarded by a white antler figure, *When They Married, He Took Her Home*. There are two



doors that remain closed. On the inside, the space is at once welcoming and oppressive, claustrophobic and homely. The room is furnished with parlour chairs, although one is never quite sure when the door is going to open again so the feeling of privacy is both immediate and impossible. The chair creates a vantage point for reading the framed embroidered pieces on the walls.

ABOVE: Shandra MacNeill, *When They Married, He Took Her Home* (detail), Wood, canvas, embroideries on wedding dress silk and cotton bed sheets, wire, polymer clay, rock, Grandmother's chest, old ships, cotton tag paper, grape vine, salt, tin foil, 2018



The room has its own light source, illuminating the pieces that speak in a pace of inner dialogue: *you are good enough, you are never good enough, run, hide, submit, resist, don't make a scene, stand up for yourself, you can't change any of it.* It is an archive of psychological violence and its effects on the body, felt within the confined space of the room. Like the other works in the show, the embroideries exist in the tradition

ABOVE: Shandra MacNeill, *When They Married, He Took Her Home* (detail), Wood, canvas, embroideries on wedding dress silk and cotton bed sheets, wire, polymer clay, rock, Grandmother's chest, old ships, cotton tag paper, grape vine, salt, tin foil, 2018

of resistance: suffragette samplers, which often contained expressions of personal histories and experiences of oppression, distributed among women in a time and place where such expression was violently kept out of the public eye.

These are stories of survival and resilience, of escape, of rebuilding again and again. Materially, they are practices of mending: with thread, fabric, clay, and wood. The trajectory of violence, protection, and repair moves through the exhibition—bodies bandaged and held together with string and twigs, sutures, thread, scraps of a wedding dress; limbs wrapped in blankets and bandages. Antlers too are mechanisms of protection: female caribou grow antlers every year to guard their young. Meanwhile, small ships are scattered around the perimeter of the octagonal room, surrounded by salt crystals. As if brought from the sea to ward off evil, the salt glistens like fresh snow.



ABOVE: Shandra MacNeill, *The Alters (the Apparently Normal Part of the Personality and her two sisters, one who protects and one who hides)* (detail), Polymer clay, tin foil, unspun silk, wood, wire, wedding dress silk, cotton bed sheet, antique kid leather, thread, 2018

LIST OF WORKS:

Grovel and Submit

2018, Wire, polymer clay, cotton bed sheet, batting, tin foil, unspun silk, stone

She Knew What She Was Getting Into

2018, Wire, cotton bed sheet, batting, acrylic, zip ties, thread, batting, glue

When They Married, He Took Her Home

2018, Wood, canvas, embroideries on wedding dress silk and cotton bed sheets, batting, wire, polymer clay, rock, Grandmother's chest, old ships, cotton tag paper, grape vine, salt, tin foil

The Alters (the Apparently Normal Part of the Personality and her two sisters, one who protects and one who hides)

2018, Polymer clay, tin foil, unspun silk, wood, wire, wedding dress silk, cotton bed sheet, batting, antique kid leather, thread

The Honeymoon - get used to sleeping on bathroom floors

2018, Wedding dress silk, polymer clay, cotton bed sheets, batting, wire, unspun silk, marble, tin foil

The Salt House

2018, Quilted wedding dress silk, unspun silk, cotton thread, brass hinges, stone, cotton bed sheets, salt, birch and elm

Failed Attempts

2018, Polymer clay, wire, salt

Ghost Mother

2016, Polymer clay, wire, cotton bed sheet, batting, paper, silk, thread

Antler Woman

2016, Polymer clay, wire, cotton bed sheet, batting, wedding dress silk, thread

UP NEXT:

AMY MALBEUF

TENSIONS

FEBRUARY 28 – APRIL 20, 2019

The AGSM is supported by the Canada Council for the Arts, the Manitoba Arts Council and the City of Brandon.





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MON 4 - 9PM
TUE, WED, FRI 10AM - 5PM
THU 10AM - 9PM
SAT 12 - 5PM SUN CLOSED