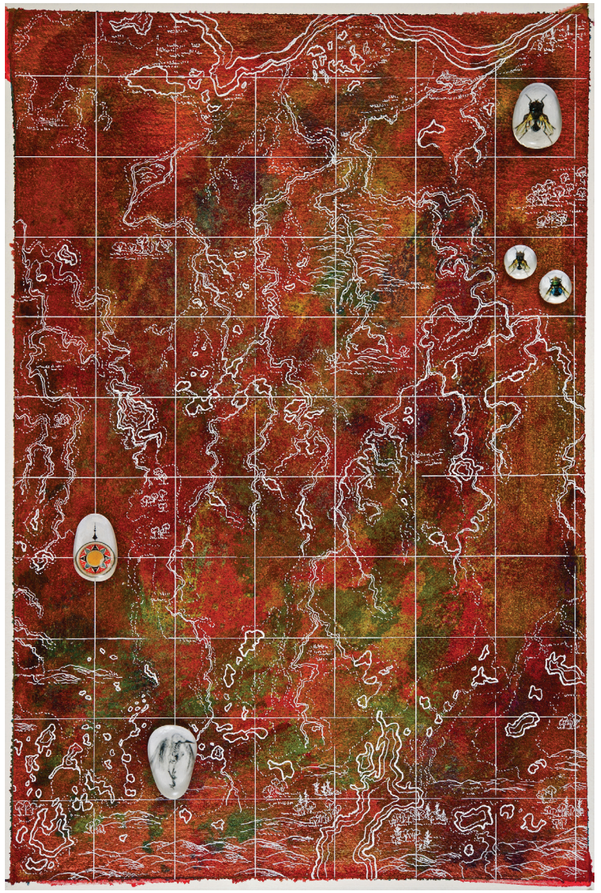
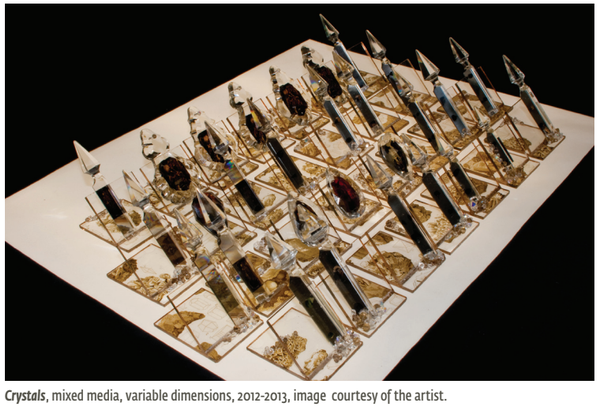


Watershed, mixed media on paper, 23" x 15", 2011, image courtesy of the artist.



Crystals, mixed media, variable dimensions, 2012-2013, image courtesy of the artist.

SHIRLEY BROWN

Shirley Brown uses paint and mixed media to explore her interests in celebrity, power, and unexpected disaster. She has been a mentee and a mentor through Mentoring Artists for Women's Arts (MAWA), and has shown her work extensively throughout Canada and abroad. She is a founding member of the "Coterie of Malcontents", a group working for the artist-run concept and in support of contemporary art and artists in isolated rural Manitoba. Brown lives near Deloraine in Southwestern Manitoba, where she works from her farm studio.

Purple Velvet (closed), mixed media, 5 ½" x 9" x 2 ¾", 2012-2013, image courtesy of the artist.

Purple Velvet (open), mixed media, 5 ½" x 9" x 2 ¾", 2012-2013, image courtesy of the artist.

Crystals (detail), mixed media, variable dimensions, 2012-2013, image courtesy of the artist.

Bird Island, mixed media on paper, 23" x 30", 2011, image courtesy of the artist.

Cork (detail), mixed media, 8 ¾" x 7 ¼" x 2 ¼", 2012-2013, image courtesy of the artist.

Purple, mixed media, 7 1/2 x 6 1/2 x 3 1/2, 2012-2013, image courtesy of the artist.

AGSM

Emerging, mixed media, 9 ¼" x 5 ½" x 4", 2012-2013, image courtesy of the artist.

OSSUARY
SHIRLEY BROWN

CURATED BY NATALIA LEBEDINSKAIA
JANUARY 16 – MARCH22, 2014

ART GALLERY OF SOUTHWESTERN MANITOBA
710 ROSSER AVENUE, UNIT 2
BRANDON, MANITOBA. R7A 0K9

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"I want to show life and death as worthwhile things, worthy of our reverence."
Shirley Brown[i]

While cleaning an old cook stove of her parents' abandoned farmhouse in 1996, Shirley Brown discovered a cache of twenty-nine bird skeletons. The birds have flown into the stove over the years, become trapped, and died. Brown found the bones to be beautiful, poignant, and mysterious. There was something in their vulnerability and power, as if they were presenting her with an inheritance and a pathway to ancient wisdom. They came as an omen during a difficult time: mourning the deaths of her parents, Brown was dealing with a recent diagnosis of diabetes; her daughter also almost died during this time. Eighteen years later, Brown has completed a vast body of work about the delicate bird remains, reconstructing a fictional avian civilization through paintings, mixed media, installation work, and now a series of sculptural sarcophagi that mark the end of both the birds' world and Brown's project.

Brown is fascinated with unexpected disaster, which she explored previously in her series of large paintings of tornadoes swallowing up unsuspecting homes and towns. The bird skeletons again draw on this interest, while pushing it further to address loss and the irreversibility of time. The birds become Memento Mori - physical reminders of inevitable death, both of individual physical bodies and of whole civilizations; worlds that cease to exist, leaving only shards of evidence that spur attempts at their reconstruction. The birds' world ended in war and strife, through battles fought by elaborately decorated armies in armour encrusted with jewels and crystals. In the exhibition, the battles are laid out on ornate maps, surrounded by the remains of the war dead interred in lush ossuary boxes. Brown placed the individual skeletons in containers made of heavy clay, onto velvet beds, or ornate chests. These are the twenty-nine skeletons from her parents' cook stove, laid to their final rest.

Brown's fascination with opulence and excess are characteristic of the Neo-Baroque movement in contemporary art.[ii] The historical Baroque was marked by chaotic and exuberant forms that refused the order of Neo-Classicism.[iii] In opposition to classical restrained beauty and ideal proportions, drama, extravagance, extreme virtuosity, and excess were characteristics of this new style in art and music, as well as of a time and place of colonial seventeenth century Europe.[iv] Taken into today's world, this diversity of styles and materials parallels the conditions of contemporary art making that strives to address our own diverse culture and its associated fluidity of boundaries.[v] In addition to the emphasis on visual opulence, Neo-Baroque responds to the complexity of contemporary life through a system that parallels that of the original seventeenth century Baroque movement, in which time and space do not appear to be quite finite.[vi] In this context, Brown's birds occupy a complex position between the past, present, and future.

As the birds' civilization expands, it folds into Brown's personal world - her passion for glitter, love of shiny objects, and the building of small collections of these recovered treasures of contemporary life. Brown's desire locates itself in the birds': to make the glittery treasures into armour, to give these objects a space to be seen as beautiful. As the birds' cosmos develops, so does its mythology and its relationship to us as the audience. Its complexity and history (however imagined) draws attention to the existence of alternate worlds, decentering the human one in favour of a reality of parallel universes. Just as the central characteristic of the Baroque is its lack of respect for the limits of the frame, these histories also refuse to be contained, breaking out into sequences and series.[vii] The multiple armies, boxes, and paintings that repeat skeleton images help make sense of the chaos that arises when confronted with an alternate universe. The viewer is invited to make sense of the objects as well, to locate the armies on the maps, play the chess set, contemplate contents of the boxes.

The dualism at the core of Baroque painting, "the desire to be drawn into and duped by the illusion being produced, while simultaneously being cognitively aware of the means of the illusion's construction," forms a direct lineage to the nineteenth century optical toys like magic lanterns and the invention of film technology.[viii] This is an instance of the Baroque refusing to fit into the confines assigned to it by historians, proving to be more than a seventeenth century movement in painting and music. The self-reflexivity of these visual technologies, combined with fascination with the illusion that is created through their use, can also be seen as directly influencing Brown's work, whose previous series referenced popular culture. Bringing these interests into the new project, Brown has taken on the construction of the illusion: a civilization of birds that obeys its own logic, and in which we as audience believe fully, while accepting its fiction.

Baroque style was also at the centre of Catholic religious revival known as the Counter-Reformation, which came as a response to the rise of Protestant resistance against the perceived opulence, excess, and corruption within the Catholic Church. To oppose the visual austerity associated with Protestant values, there was an explosion of practices that would make visible and facilitate expression of emotion, and a rise in rituals that venerated relics in the Catholic Church. The blurring of boundaries associated with the Baroque, therefore, had a strong parallel to already existing traditions that refused to delineate between the living and the dead, such as relic veneration, charnel houses, and lushly decorated skeletons of martyrs and saints.[ix] These practices made visible and facilitated relationships with death, which was not seen as a final state but a boundary across which wisdom, assistance, and tradition could be passed.[x] While this characteristic of the Baroque is rarely referenced in the theories surrounding its contemporary revival, it is extremely pertinent to Brown's project. The space created within the gallery, the "Ossuary" in the exhibition title, is a location of such exchange. Brown's encounter with the bones in 1996, its coincidence with her parents' recent deaths and a reminder of her own mortality, led to the body of work that serves as a connecting thread between Brown's own life and the lives lost around her.

Initially, the term "ossuary" referred to a container that held a single body. However, it grew to become synonymous with charnel houses, places where multiple remains were stored together on view. The term "ossuary" is based on Latin 'os,' meaning 'bone'.[xi] During the fourteenth through the nineteenth centuries, the ossuaries' corridors and vaults filled with human bones of ancestors and relatives provided their visitors with an opportunity to connect and create meaningful exchanges between the living and the dead.[xii] Then, the line between life and death underwent a radical change during the Enlightenment with death becoming an impassible barrier that no longer permitted dialogue.[xiii] Brown's birds and their *Ossuary* is a place in which these silent dialogues can once again take place, in a radically different way that crosses species and disregards the lines between our reality and their fiction. Brown's treatment of the bones creates a striking connection to the birds' lives. The ability of their delicate remains to remind us of our own mortality, and to empathize with the tragedy of their deaths, brings to the fore the blurring of a different line: one between humans and animals.

Bird burial traditions provide an important framework for Brown's project, such as those of burying remains of sea birds with the dead in Beothuk traditions in Newfoundland, and the ancient Egyptian practices of mummifying sacred birds. The Beothuk buried birds to accompany their dead, who were placed into coastal caves and enclaves close to nesting grounds. The birds served as spiritual messengers who guided souls to an island afterlife. The souls of the dead were tied to the birds' migratory paths, taking the souls from the nesting islands surrounding their traditional Beothuk lands to the places where the birds migrated in fall.[xiv] The Ancient Egyptians similarly paralleled the birds' ability to travel between realms to the journey of the soul in afterlife. The tightly wrapped mummified body could not move, but the *ba*, depicted with a human head on a bird's body, was released after death to experience full freedom: its flight from the world of the dead into the world of the living was the ultimate liberation that came after physical death.[xv] This belief was accompanied by a cult of raising, venerating, and mummifying millions of ibises and other birds, accompanied by their discarded eggs, remains of nests, and even shed feathers that would have been collected by the caretakers of the sanctuary.[xvi] These ossuaries of millions of birds, embalmed and wrapped in linen, provide a haunting counterpart to Brown's project. Such practices are just a few examples of numerous others, placing birds as perfect transitory creatures whose ability to move through realms of water, earth, and air suggest a similar ease of movement between the living and the dead. Birds become perfectly Neo-Baroque creatures, refusing these boundaries.

At the core of these burial practices, in addition to embodying the fluidity of the transition between life and death, is also the power to transcend species. Similarly, Brown's work brings together Neo-Baroque strategies with ancient animal burial rituals and personal history to create a space in which the birds are no longer foreign creatures, but appear as shared ancestors. Elizabeth Grosz writes, "the most artistic is also the most bestial."[xvii] She proposes the artistic impulse as the place where the boundary is the thinnest between the human and the animal. The artistic is located at the place of excess in the animal: the opulent plumage, incredible colour-changing properties, elaborate mating rituals. Art comes from this excess in living things: "Art is the consequence of that excess, that energy or force, that puts life at risk for the sake of intensification."[xviii] For example, Bowerbirds collect bright leaves and flowers, found trinkets, and bits of string and garbage to construct incredible nests to attract mates, even though the nests themselves serve no reproductive or camouflaging purpose. These aesthetic overflows are often undertaken to the detriment of the animals' own survival - fish that glow in ocean depths where it cannot be seen except by predators, birds' plumage that sets them apart instead of providing protection.[xix]

The human echoing of these practices in art, music, and architecture is not a memorial to the common past with the animals, but a constant shared transformation of unexpected materials into new resources. It is a continual creation of new ways of being and feeling that become available when simple materials are transformed, "the human borrows them from a conscious or long forgotten treasury of earthly and animal excess."[xx] Brown's birds are such creatures, achieving their aims with unmistakably human means - crystals, jewels, lace, small photographs of sunsets. Their encrusted armies would reflect the sun's rays, demonstrate the wealth and creative force of the birds' civilization; these materials belong equally to the bird domain as to ours, carrying with them a shared wisdom.

Brown's chosen materials become the birds' armour and protection through assigned significance and magic. She invites the audience to use them – to place the armies on the central map, to play the chess set - but their 'original' function *in the birds' world* remains out of reach, lost with the world that the armies failed to defend. Were those armies signifiers of real battles, or talismans that protected flocks somewhere out there, so *that* the birds died knowing that their crystal counterparts will live on? The civilization vanished, leaving just the delicate bones in a wood stove for Brown to discover. Her reconstruction of the birds' world gives the bones meaning and names: a history. Like any project of recovering small histories, it is a retelling of stories that at first appear insignificant, but then grow and take shape until entire civilizations rise out of the ashes to take on a life of their own.

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Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba

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[i] Shirley Brown, Mary Reid, and Cathy Mattes, 2005, *Shirley Brown: Vestiges*, Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, Brandon: Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba.
[ii] Recent exhibitions exploring Neo-Baroque in Canada include *Misled by Nature: Contemporary Art and the Baroque* (2012), produced by the National Gallery of Canada and the Art Gallery of Alberta; and *Barroco Nova: Neo-Baroque Moves in Contemporary Art* (2012), organized by ArtLab Gallery, McIntosh Gallery, The University of Western Ontario, and Museum London.
[iii] Angela Ndalianis, "From Neo-Baroque to Neo-Baroques?," *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*, Vol. 33, No. 1, Otoño 2008, p. 268.
[iv] Kelly Ann Wacker, 2007, *Baroque Tendencies in Contemporary Art*. Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars, p.15.
[v] Wacker, p. 17.
[vi] Wacker, pp. 11, 12.
[vii] Wacker, pp. 12-13.
[viii] Ndalianis, p. 269.
[ix] See: Koudounaris, Paul, 2011, *The Empire of Death: a Cultural History of Ossuaries and Charnel Houses*, New York: Thames &Hudson; and Paul Koudounaris, 2013, *Heavenly Bodies: Cult Treasures & Spectacular Saints from the Catacombs*. London: Thames and Hudson.
[x] Koudunaris (2011), p. 11.
[xi] Koudunaris (2011), p. 19.
[xii] Koudunaris (2011), p. 16.
[xiii] Koudunaris (2011), p. 13.
[xiv] Todd J. Kristensen and Donald H. Holly, Jr, 2013, "Birds, Burials and Sacred Cosmology of the Indigenous Beothuk of Newfoundland, Canada," *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 23, pp 41-53 , p. 54.
[xv] Rozenn Bailleul-LeSuer and Anna R. Ressman, 2012, *Between Heaven and Earth: Birds in Ancient Egypt*, Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, p.16.
[xvi] Bailleul-LeSuer p.30.
[xvii] Elizabeth Grosz, 2008, "Art and the Animal," *Farimani* Vol.1, No.1, p. 2.
[xviii] Grosz, p. 2.
[xix] Grosz, p. 5.
[xx] Grosz, p. 5.