



## INTERTWINED HISTORIES: Plants in their Social Contexts

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ISBN 978-1-77385-091-7

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# gone today, here tomorrow

*an interview with  
mia rushton & eric moschopedis*

ciara mckeown

**Mia** Rushton and **Eric** Moschopedis are artists who critically examine how we situate ourselves in relation to the natural world and our impact on it. Their curiosity about nature is specific to how we make meaning in relationship to place.

In *Hunter, Gatherer, Purveyor*,<sup>1</sup> the artists make popsicles from collected grasses, flowers, and bark in a neighbourhood, and then share those popsicles freely with the neighbourhood residents. Using humour, generosity, and elements of performance, the artists deconstruct the idea of place and present it back to the people who live there, sparking childhood nostalgia and fun.

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For over a decade, Mia and Eric have worked in public contexts, but not necessarily within the traditional confines of institutional galleries or public art commissioning. They set their own lines of inquiry without a predetermined outcome. More recently they have started to work durationally for extended periods of time in one location in order to further understand the historical and social constructs we use when we imprint human values onto nature. They create contextual responses, critically reflexive and self-aware of their role, agency, and biases toward each given site and context. Their practice is process and research based and forefronts their desire to learn about the environments and people with whom they work.

No process, no project, is ever the same way twice; they are not building an oeuvre of projects but a body of knowledge that relies on an ongoing exchange of knowledge. *Gone Today, Here Tomorrow* at the Lougheed House was an opportunity to continue their commitment to understanding the interconnected relationships between humans and their constructed ideas of the natural world, particularly in the context of colonialism and settler history in the West.

### **Can you describe the work *Gone Today, Here Tomorrow*, and your time spent on the three-month urban ecology residency at the Lougheed House?**

We were invited by curator Caroline Loewen to imagine a three-month residency at the Lougheed House in Calgary's Beltline neighbourhood based on work we had been doing as part of an urban ecology residency through the City of Calgary's Public Art Program. At the time, we were mapping opportunities for animal habitat within the community of Sunnyside. We were interested in how human built environments and animal activity overlapped. Loewen wondered if this work could be expanded in the Beltline area to include a historical lens, in relation to Canada's sesquicentennial. (The residency was funded through a Canada 150 grant.)

It is important to note that the Lougheed House wasn't built until 1891, twenty-four years after Confederation, and Alberta wasn't a province until 1905. This meant that if we were



to look at the ecology of the Beltline area over the course of 150 years, we would have to start before the building of the House, before the signing of Treaty 7, and before the yet-to-be-named city of Calgary was established. Our minds went immediately to the plains bison—their being on the land and then their quick and violent near-extinction, followed by settlement and the growth of Calgary. We did a ton of research around the bison (and a companion species, the black-billed magpie) but kept getting distracted by a phrase used to describe the land around the House before it was built. Both historical documents and contemporary marketing materials use the phrase “built on the bald prairie” to paint a picture of the landscape before construction. Yes, by the time the House was built, bison, coyote, elk, and game bird populations had been decimated, but the land was anything but lifeless.

**The phrase “bald prairie” creates an imaginary space for a “western” mythology, easier to perpetuate when there is a nothingness upon which greatness can be built.**

It was a vibrant ecosystem (it could still be!), but this kind of settler sentiment was, and still is, used to justify development and resource extraction. We dreamed of bringing bison back to the Beltline and of the effect that would have on the biodiversity of the place, but it wasn't a project that we could complete during our residency. So we shifted our focus to a type of biodiversification that we could accomplish, returning native prairie plants to the site. We did extensive research to learn about the plants that were displaced by the House and its Victorian flower beds. *Gone Today, Here Tomorrow* is the result of this research.

**Did you have expectations about what you'd learn?**

We had very little expectation about what we might learn as we set out researching the native plant species that would have existed on the plot of land that is the Lougheed House. That said, the one thing we did imagine is that it would be a very simple exercise: find one book, make a list, and we would be done. It was the exact opposite! Of course there are resources that document native plant species, but they were very difficult to

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locate. We had to dig into the archives at the Lougheed House and spend a significant amount of time in the Local History section of the public library. We also visited grass-land ecosystems that are still intact just outside of Calgary.

What was so important about this process is that we also started to unpack the practice of settlement—a feat of engineering that radically transformed the land in less than thirty years. Hundreds of thousands of acres of land were dug up, turned into sod houses, and replaced by cereal crops. When governments had an opportunity to reverse the damage done by settlement after the Depression, instead of revegetating with native plant species that for millennia had held the soil in place, attracted important insects and animals, and sustained life on the land, the Canadian government—through their experimental farms program—recommended planting crested wheat grass to combat erosion and for cattle grazing. This grass species from Asia (Russia and Siberia) is largely what we see in spaces that look natural now. These spaces are not “the prairies,” they are fabrications—spaces largely populated by introduced plant species. It is a landscape that, without the return of the bison or traditional Indigenous practices, will never fully recover.

We sourced different grass species and flowers from a greenhouse south of Okotoks. The idea was to install them on the ten different fireplace mantels throughout the house. As visitors to the house walked around, they would be confronted by these plant species that appeared radically out of place but were far more in the right place than the House itself. We invited our long-time friend and collaborator Bryce Krynski to work with us to create portraits of each of the fireplaces—a type of documentation, but also a separate work of art.

### Why did you choose the fireplace, a mode of display associated with domestication?

The fireplaces offered us a practical and aesthetic opportunity—not unlike their original use. The fireplaces were originally designed to be prominent architectural features in each room, while also being sources of heat. We essentially borrowed from their original function, knowing that guests in the house today were strongly attracted to them—meaning that the plants would intervene in the narrative experience of the house.









It wasn't until the plants were installed that we realized we wanted to create a second, more permanent piece with them. The legacy of the residency, if we can call it that, is that we established a native prairie garden on the grounds, and we have become garden volunteers. We worked with the Lougheed House staff, the Head Gardener, and the City of Calgary Parks department to extend an existing garden on a section of the property that was originally called the pasture (a small section of largely undisturbed native prairie that was left for grazing horses and other livestock). Our garden is in two parts—each extending an existing garden bed. When viewed from left to right (or right to left), viewers see native species, a formal Victorian garden with imported species, and then native species again. There is a visual narrative of what was, what is, and what is possible.

**This work is very much in keeping with your practice and projects of late, but why plants? Why at the Lougheed House?**

Caroline has always been very good to work with. We really love her enthusiasm for exploring historical themes through contemporary contexts. But the invitation to work at the Lougheed House aligned with our own priority to do more work outside of traditional art institutions. Working at the Lougheed House provided us access to different resources and different people—particularly the garden volunteers, who in the late stages of our project became instrumental to the success of the work.

This isn't the first time we have worked with plants, as you suggest. We have been very interested in the social, cultural, and political importance of plants for a long time. It is probably fair to say that our interest in ecology comes from Mia's long interest in the natural world—always a collector of leaves, sticks, rocks, acorns, and small flowers while out on walks and drawing or making other representations of these things in a previous practice. But investigating plants became a formal part of our practice in 2012 when we began developing our project *Hunter, Gatherer, Purveyor* for the Alberta Biennial. This project—which looked at the distribution of edible plant life in relation to geography and socio-economics in a city—has since toured to a number of different Canadian cities. Truthfully,

*Hunter, Gatherer, Purveyor* aesthetically feels like a bit of an outlier for us, but it certainly built a foundation for this work. We spent hundreds of hours walking through cities identifying plants and learning about the ways plants are representative of social relationships.

**The Lougheed House itself symbolizes colonial history and difficult, complex pasts. Is there a way plants open up different understandings of this history?**

We have spent a long time looking at plants and land use—but largely through a contemporary lens and largely as foragers. It wasn't until more recently that we started to realize and research the devastation that settlement had on the ecology of this place—southern Alberta in particular. You know, we have come to understand that talking about plants and working with plants cannot be done without also thinking about settlement. Most, if not all, of the plants we interact with on a daily basis are not from this place. The plants we eat are products that were introduced a hundred years ago or just shipped from elsewhere on the globe. The plants we see in the city—Kentucky bluegrass, house plants, trees, flowers—are not from here or have been radically displaced. They have simply been naturalized. Plants are complicated and fascinating, and they cannot be discussed without acknowledging the settler ecologies that have been imposed on the land. It completely negates the different First Peoples (the Blackfoot, Stoney/Nakota, Tsuut'ina) use of the land during the ten thousand-plus years that preceded the arrival of European and non-European settlers. The introduction of plants from elsewhere has forever changed the ecology, diets, sciences, and knowledges of this place. For us, reintroducing native grasses and flowers onto the land at the Lougheed House is about re-establishing biodiversity on a small plot of land in downtown Calgary.

**Thinking about the idea of “legacy” with the native plant garden, it's important that it live on as an acknowledgement of the difficult histories around a place like the Lougheed House. Also, it lives on through the relationships you built with staff and volunteers, as an ongoing process that will constantly renew as you continue your work at the House.**

**How does a project like this offer us a way forward—is biodiversity the first step?**

We have been working very hard over the past few years to find a way forward, for our practice and toward reconciliation. In short, we were not happy with our previous body of work, and we were frustrated that our practice was more than likely contributing to a social spatial model of engagement that was privileging the status quo. We felt like we were part of the problem and we were not creating solutions. We are still very much in the early stages of a long process, but we know that investigating settler spaces and ecology is setting us up to have more consequential conversations about what it means to be stewards of the land, to be Treaty 7 people, and to have meaningful relationships with Indigenous peoples. A garden at the Lougheed House is representative of a group of settler people recognizing that great damage was done to the land and to relationships with Indigenous people. Yes, a first small first step was taken. We are now excited about the hard work ahead.

**notes**

1. See <http://www.ericandmia.ca/hunter-gatherer-purveyor>.

**bibliography**

- Mia and Eric website, <http://www.ericandmia.ca/hunter-gatherer-purveyor>, accessed 6 January 2019.