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Simon Fuh on *Greener than Grass*: Katie Lyle and Ella Dawn McGeough

Mark Making

It was mid-summer, 2019, when we left the gallery's air-conditioned walls and followed the cool wind off-river that guided us downward. Sitting on a sun-warmed concrete embankment, we watched the boats go by. I rolled up my shorts to tan my legs and held an ice cream cone far outward after each lick so that the drips fell into the water below. We remarked on the interior design, the gallery attendants, and how some of the sculptures made us want to throw up (in a good way). We sunned ourselves for a while, and when we stood up, we both gasped at the dark sweat stains that marked the surface beneath our legs. It was a surprise imprint, proof of our bodies at rest, their weight amidst the lightness of the moment. I patted my shorts for my phone to get a picture and watched in horror as the sweat evaporated before me. Each stumbling motion I made left the mark of our bodies more faded. Finally, I snapped the photo, and then forgot about it until many months later.



This September we spent some nights on an island in Northern Saskatchewan. The boreal forest appears on the drive like a wall of birch and black spruce trees, through which the road cuts like winding stitches. Black spruce trees are said to have an intimate relationship with the feather mosses below, which comprise a thick moist layer on their underside, and a drier layer on the top facing the sun. They cover much of ground near the spruce trees, keeping the roots cool and damp in the summer. In return, the abundance of conifers provides shade, while preventing the leaves of other trees to cover the moss. This moss also assists in an unusual, second way: the drier top layer speeds the travel of groundfire when the forest ignites. Black spruce are highly flammable and keep their seeds encased in waxy cones at their crown—high enough as to avoid direct flame, low enough as to melt the protective layer. After the fire runs its course, the seeds drop to the ground and regenerate the forest. A partnership in life, death, and rebirth.

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Walking atop the moss, our feet sink several inches with each step, compacting the green spongy surface like snow. Rotten deadfall crumbles with a soft muted crunch. Branches respond to the touch by cracking, bending, and slapping the person behind us. The peaks of giant rocks that lie underneath this abundant growth appear and disappear like waves crawling at eternal pace. When we reached our destination, a cliff face at the south side of the island, we jumped into the stiff, dark September water and climbed our way back up the cliffs to regain our body heat. A look back into the forest, and our tracks had all but filled to the surface. Indents in the moss sprung up like memory foam. The forest had heard us, but we'd lost our path.



I remembered in that moment the sense of loss felt on the drive up, when, after about six hours had past, and the three of us had subsumed fully into the terrarium of the vehicle, itself its own special social ecology, I noticed the tower connection that kept me tethered to the *before* had been lost. When I untether like this, either from the gradual uplifting of an airplane, or the sudden snap of a rush downstairs to catch the subway, I will sometimes, rather than putting my phone away and looking out the window, recline into my seat and take a deep look into the archive of my Photos app. I'll flick my thumb down several times like an impatient slot machine gambler; this time, as the camera roll slowed to a halt, I saw before me the green water of the South Saskatchewan river and those familiar dark stains on concrete. As the memory of that moment came back, so too did the memories of revisiting the photo months later. This time, however, I somehow saw the original, the crop, and the edits all at once, though they appeared dispersed in the default chronology of my iPhone. I wondered how it might be that these events, the supposed inception and its revisitations, might all live together at once within and through each other. I was soon reminded that quiet zones only exist between localities, and as we approached our destination my device "dinged" and vibrated. It was a friend calling me back that broke the spell: he'd rediscovered a hatchet marking on a tree made earlier to help us navigate back through the island's forest once again.

On our return, I looked for photos to share on social media, and my heart sank as I realized I'd missed the instances that held gravity in my mind. I felt the fluffy bright green moss, the lichen-covered rock face, the unforgiving water, and the sunset both tantalizingly close and already fading. I asked the others what documents they had, and we stitched them together like investigators. Recalling the events, we

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remembered the two objects that fell into the lake other than our bodies: a large loose rock we tipped over the face in a climactic crash, and a blue sock that, after a series of failed rescue attempts, tumbled off and sank to the depths. I imagine them now, sitting beside one another, wondering how they got there and what might happen next. It's not so much that I believe a sock wants to be on a foot, but that it might momentarily reconsider what it is to be in waiting until the waiting just becomes being. And then there it would be, twenty feet under the surface with the algae, beer bottles, fishing lures and stones, warmed only briefly by the glittering brown sun directly above. Heaven is a place where nothing else happens; but eventually, nothing becomes everything.

We'd been sitting atop the damp rocks for a while—time was hard to keep track of. After a beer and a shot of rye, we disrobed and left our clothes in neat piles stuffed precariously behind. We waited for the clouds to part and were graciously treated with much more than a moment. After two overcast days we happened to time this jump just right. The water hit my skin with force; I spread my body out wide to prevent from sinking too deep. I couldn't bear the cold for long. I tread in place for a moment before rushing toward the rock face and lifting myself waist high in the water. It was a challenge to navigate the slippery rocks back up, but after a few moments I emerged shivering into a towel. We warmed together, jumped once more, and warmed again, balancing along the banks of moss. A frenetic, anti-beach experience. Eventually, as if possessed by jealousy, the blue sock flew down and got caught behind a small tree growing out of the ledge directly beneath us, just out of reach. I resigned to letting the sock stay there, afraid one of us might slip and fall on an attempted rescue, but out of concern for my warmth, you sought to grab the sock using two large branches like chopsticks. The sock balanced between them for a moment before escaping your grasp and falling below. Time stood still as it floated, and we crouched, evaluating whether it was to be saved. Finally, you made the decision to enter the water once more but took your approach too gingerly and landed directly on top of the small floating mass. The water immediately swallowed the sock, and I almost felt a sigh of relief knowing that it ended its partnership with me and its match in the way it seemed to want. Diving again, you failed to locate it, and as you surfaced, I wondered how the water could be so clear and so dark at the same time.



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What impressions do impressions make? I find myself asking this question as I walk through *Greener than Grass*, a tactile experience. “I am affected not just by this one other or a set of others, but by a world in which humans, institutions, and organic and inorganic processes all *impress* themselves upon this me who is, at the outset, susceptible in ways that are radically involuntary.”¹ The leaning, weight, pressure of Katie Lyle’s painting is stretched onto a frame behind it, suspended in time like a drum skin not pounded but scraped and squeezed. Ella Dawn McGeough’s warmly frozen wax pillows document the gesture of holding a head, bring it alive, and then take it on the road with wheels. These impressions impress the artists’ touch on my memory—the ways they inhabit the space of the gallery, and the surfaces of other spaces they bring into it. Like having the sweat that your body produces unexpectedly presented to you, or the disappearing shapes that your feet squish into moss, or the sinking of a blue sock in dark water, the touches leave imprints on both surface and mind. Revisiting these imprints can make for a memory in clearer focus, but memories themselves can be bent and shaped once again by new impressions. When I revisit the photo documentation of a touch, I close my eyes and search for the tactility whose presence can only be felt deep in my memory—but I fear the day that the path overgrows.

¹ Judith Butler, *Senses of the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press), 6-7.