

Breaking Down a Hymn

By Nura Ali

Emily Neufeld's work is an unhurried looking at how things have, and do, interact. It's an invitation into observation. A tracing of the complex web of interactions between the people, places and patterns of thought that followed in the wake of European colonisation of Canada.

In the interventions she performs in forgotten, abandoned spaces, and the sculptural formulations they finally take on, there is a mnemonic recall, a digging down through the strata of history. Dionne Brand touches on this process when she says, "One enters a room and history follows; one enters a room and history precedes. History is already seated in the chair in the empty room when one arrives. Where one stands in a society seems always related to this historical experience. Where one can be observed is relative to that history."

Far from approaching history, both familial and societal, from the position of a detached spectator, Neufeld instead pulls up a chair and invites the viewer to sit down with her alongside the history loitering in ruins, and reckon with our collective haunted inheritance.

We are in the midst of a breakdown of the historic and ongoing practice of sidelining our factual past and replacing it with national stories of denial and innocence. We can, however, rethink the necessity and utility of breakdowns as Alain De Botton does: "[Breakdowns are] an attempt by one part of our mind to force the other into a process of growth, self-understanding and self-development that it has hitherto refused to undertake."

Part of our current breakdown rests on our refusal to shift ourselves away from an "invasive species" mentality. Plants fall roughly into three categories: native, introduced and invasive. Introduced species integrate into a native environment without negatively affecting surrounding ecosystems. Invasive species, by contrast, are characterised by the harm they cause through over consumption of resources and direct attacks on native species. Neufeld's work offers us a way to think about our legacy as an "invasive species" and how to orient ourselves towards becoming an "introduced species", one who at minimum does not actively harm this ecosystem, but who, instead, lives up to our infinite potential to be a positive addition to this place we call home.

Neufeld uses certain plant and animal species to open up wider conversations around colonial legacies that resulted in complex consequences for multiple species in our ecosystem. Brown Eyed Susans crop up in several places in the show. They are native to the prairies and were used medicinally by Indigenous communities to treat parasitic worms,

snakebites, minor cuts, scrapes and burns. The construction of farms across the prairies destroyed much of the Brown Eyes Susan's natural habitat. Despite this, Brown Eyed Susans have not been completely eradicated, but still grow plentifully in the ditches alongside roads, a painful parallel to the way Indigenous people were pushed into geographic margins or, in the case of the Metis Nation in Alberta, pushed off their lands and forced to construct temporary encampments on road allowances.

In *Beatch's House*, Brown Eyed Susans are meticulously pinned to the wall, following the pattern of the wallpaper beneath. This intervention is an honorific to the spirit and labour of tough settler prairie women, but it's an honorific acknowledging the part they, wittingly or otherwise, played in the larger story of colonialism and conquest. Pinning the Brown Eyed Susans atop the wallpaper is a way to side-step the dogged relativism that divorces the lives of prairie women from the facts of colonialism. Even the new title of the show, is a subtle shift in word choice — from *Prairie Invasion: A Lullaby* to *Prairie Invasion: A Hymn* — that echoes the same call to love and respect your community while also, out of that same love, hold them accountable.

Neufeld's work holds space for multiple kinds of storytelling. Space enough for layered narratives that are loving, nostalgic, reverent, implicating, critical. There's enough space for all the complexity and contradiction because it stems from a deep respect for the people whose stories bedrock her work. No one is let off the hook within Neufeld's work, but no one is labelled an irredeemable monster either.