

IN SESSION – ONE

Megan Dickie | Laura Dutton | d. bradley muir | Tara Nicholson



University of Victoria
LEGACY ART GALLERIES

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January 17 to March 28, 2015

Curator: Mary Jo Hughes

Copy proofing: Caroline Riedel, Katie Hughes

Brochure design: Naomi Shields

Photography: the artists

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University of Victoria

Legacy Art Galleries

630 Yates Street

Victoria, BC V8W 1K0

www.legacy.uvic.ca

Cover Image

d. bradley muir

The Supernova Scene

Facing Page

Megan Dickie

The Gleamer

Back Cover Image

Tara Nicholson

Michelberger Hotel, Berlin



Message from the Chair of Visual Arts

Megan Dickie, Laura Dutton, d. bradley muir, and Tara Nicholson are four excellent artists who also happen to be excellent teachers; this combination of talents is rare, and as such they represent true assets to the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Victoria. We are very fortunate to be able to hire professional artists from within the community to teach on a part-time basis. Sessional instructors enliven art departments across the country with their professional experience. They enable us to expose our students to a much wider array of professional practitioners than would be possible if teaching duties were left to full time faculty alone. Often students do not realize that many of their favourite instructors are in fact successful professional artists who leave their busy studios to come and teach a few times a week. As teachers, these artists are instrumental in shaping and preparing the next generation of artists. Their contribution in this role cannot be overstated.

It should be obvious to anyone seeing this exhibition that the artists represented are some of the finest practicing in Victoria today. It is both apt and poignant that Mary Jo Hughes has brought them together to explore the timeless nature of photographic and digital media in an era where Twitter and Facebook accustom us to excessive disposability. As Department Chair of Visual Arts, it is a rare honour to be invited to introduce their work to you as we celebrate the professional practices of these artists in this exhibition. We hope that *IN SESSION - ONE* will be but the first of a series of exhibitions over the years that explores the art of the many sessionals who contribute to establishing UVic's reputation in the visual arts.

Paul Walde
Chair, Department of Visual Arts



Tara Nicholson - Künstlerhaus Studio, Dortmund

Photography in the Instagram Age

I have heard that well over a third of North Americans between 18 and 29 have Instagram accounts. Fifty-five million images are uploaded daily. Compounded with the popularity of Tumblr, Facebook, Snapchat and other social media sites featuring photos emanating from their omnipresent smart phones, the number of images young people see daily is, to put it lightly, staggering.

Given this, it interests me that the teaching of photography and digital media thrives in studio programs across Canada and that remarkably original work emerges from them. How can instructors such as d. bradley muir, Tara Nicholson, Megan Dickie and Laura Dutton communicate to their students the differences between fine art and the relentless tide of social media and commercial photography? Primarily, they have developed a complex array of strategies for teaching the upcoming generations of artists and, most importantly, they have demonstrated by doing. *IN SESSION - ONE* looks at the photography and video-based works of these four sessional instructors and how their work rises above the ubiquity of visual overload to the subtle, nuanced, and inspirational.

The challenge of our art professors at UVic, like at art schools everywhere, is to encourage students to slow down, enabling them to apply all the digital media at their fingertips with awareness and sensitivity.

Although Megan Dickie often finds it mentally and physically exhausting to carve out studio time while teaching courses, she appreciates that teaching has inspired her to stay abreast of contemporary art practices. "I am constantly in a dialogue about art making and thinking. This type of daily investment in art definitely feeds my own interests as an artist"¹ To inspire students to create original work, her challenge is to have them question their relationship with technology and their surroundings. Without this questioning and without the requisite time taken, only banality is produced. She notes, that when a student learns to break through the distancing that comes with technology the results can be brilliant:

I was completely surprised by the work one of my sculpture students produced for his photo class. I saw this student taking a portrait of another student outside. He was very close to his subject, holding up her chin with his hand as he captured the

¹ Megan Dickie email to the author, December 2, 2014.

*photo. Yesterday, the photographs were displayed in the hallway, and I was completely taken by their newness. Each photograph was of a different student, with the artist's hand contacting the subject in the photo. Some were tender, some were humorous and some were aggressive. What impressed me was how the artist acknowledged himself and the subject within the same image. There was a remarkable amount of intimacy in the series that I have not seen in student photography for a really long time.*²

Dickie, who primarily practices sculpture, applies photography and video to extend sculpture into something animated – something she calls a “performative object”. *The Gleamer, Dueling*, like all of her work, embodies humour and play. The video aspect allows the humour to come across in a way that it cannot as a sculpture or as a still image. This, Dickie believes, is because we are more accustomed to seeing humour conveyed in moving images.

Dickie recounts the original performance of *The Gleamer* as a struggle: moving it was a struggle, even getting under the blanket-like sculpture was a struggle. But she is interested in that moment when struggle breaks down into play. *The Gleamer, Dueling*, like sports, professional wrestling, and video games is manufactured struggle. It is not necessary; however we still insist on indulging. The video appears extremely low-tech in its stop motion-like quality. It shows the effect of the sculpture when animated by movement, as if it were alive. This concise relationship between sculpture and video extends the temporal existence of the being. The video becomes the interactive substitute that allows us to see the juxtaposition of the feminine qualities (the sexy high-heeled pumps) one would not expect to see in such a battle.

d. bradley muir also feels the negative and positive dichotomy of sessional teaching, admitting that as a teacher he has to dip in and out of class and practice and that finding time for his own work can be frustrating. At the same time it forces him to be adaptive, which is a definite asset in this ever-changing world. Like Dickie, he feels his own work benefits from the interaction with students: “My process in this work has come from experience and ideas I have been putting to my students about originality, chance taking, and at risk of sounding cliché, creating propositions.”³

² Dickie email.

³ d. bradley muir email to the author, November 25, 2014.

As a teacher and practicing artist, muir feels he must continually produce new work to model to his students the pushing of boundaries: "As teachers, we are ambassadors for being working artists – we have to inspire students to want to be professional artists."⁴

His current work asks us to consider the physicality of the photograph. French theorist and critic Roland Barthes famously asserted, "Whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see."⁵ Conversely, muir invites our consideration of the photograph as an *it* (a physical object beyond the image it may reflect).

Throughout his practice, landscape and domestic presence remain of interest to muir. However, in his current work it is the "objectness" of the photographs that is primary. He explores what they can do as physical beings. In *It Didn't Stop You Coming Through* he rolls up landscape photos into tubes so that you cannot fully see the images. Mounting several of the tubes side by side, together they form a revised landscape that is no longer about the singular image on the two-dimensional surface of the paper. With *Pictures Came and Broke Your Heart*, muir allows a large rolled landscape photograph to unroll itself casually on the floor much like Richard Serra's rolled lead sculptures do. It becomes sculptural; a three-dimensional form that contains the image while asserting itself physically. In the series, *The Supernova Scene*, he wraps landscape photographs around objects forcing them to be crumpled and essentially ruined. They are then re-photographed and framed. The preciousness of the photographs are destroyed and then brought back when the objects are reconstituted as photographs.

Like muir's work, Tara Nicholson's photography has held a focus on landscape that in recent years has extended beyond traditional approaches to the theme. Her work is technically superb and thematically cohesive in its concern with imagery and what it says. In her work she encourages us to slow down and look and think about that very act of slowing down, the essential need for creative space that all artists require. In her series *Tether*, Nicholson explores the theme of the artist's space, both as a physical and external location and an interior retreat of one's mind. Emerging out of her 2013 residency in Dortmund, Germany, she began exploring the European

⁴ Interview with d. bradley muir, September 16, 2014.

⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard, [New York: Hill and Wang, 1981], p. 6.

urban green spaces as a counterpoint to the wilderness retreats of Canada she had examined in previous years. She found her initial interest in the controlled architectural gardens transformed into a fascination with public and private creative spaces that artists of that city made for themselves. She asked herself, what does creative inspiration look like in an urban setting? From the traditional messy studio, to the quiet space of a room of one's own, to the banks of a canal where artists swim to free themselves, to the rented garden plots that people personalize, she found the distinction between a walled artist studio and a public space can be blurred. She found it possible to find evidence of retreat everywhere.

Nicholson finds it almost impossible to produce her own work during the academic term. Instead she often relies on residencies such as the one in Germany to give her the physical and psychic energy to focus and produce. Nonetheless, as a teacher, she likes the challenge of waking up students from their image-overload induced slumber to engage them. She taps into the students' new perspectives coming out of their completely different ways of thinking. She notes that, most often, their appetites for inquiry are sated as if by too much porn or too much sugar. In class, she tries to override this by showing them naturally interesting and unexpected material (she says anything with nudity and sex works initially). Then she introduces the quieter, subtler subjects, like a bare room with light coming through it. Of this Nicholson notes: "They adapt, moving from their instantaneous tendency to scan and reject, to a slower pace that is more contemplative. They start to think of an image in a more critical way and begin developing skills to make their own photographs more interesting."⁶

Laura Dutton does not feel the need to separate teaching from art production. She is invigorated by the back and forth between the two – having all the balls in the air at once. Being around students making art is exciting and "nourishing" for her own creative ideas.⁷ Like all the other instructors she struggles to draw her first year students into meaningful discussions. Being so accustomed to commercial and social media photography flashing before their eyes, she observes that her students often do not recognize that there are difference in what they see daily on their screens and what they should be considering in art school. Like Nicholson, Dutton attempts to develop the appreciation for nuance in photography.

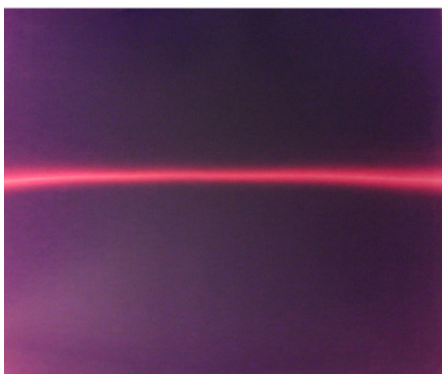
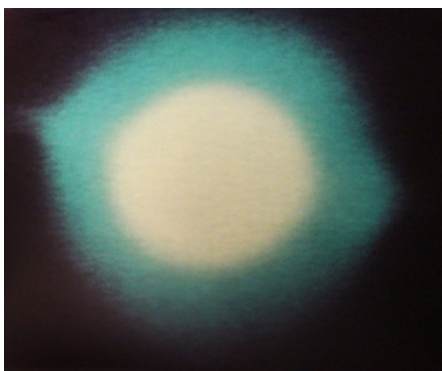
⁶ Interview with Tara Nicholson, September 23, 2014.

⁷ Interview with Laura Dutton, September 25, 2014.

In her video classes, she forces students to work within the realm of the mundane, with the goal to develop something with no perceived entertainment value or pop song sound track in a deliberate attempt to break from the mainstream.

For her, Dutton's photography and video practice is about the subtlety of drawing with light. At its crux is an interest in time and the movement of light. In *Cape Spear/Cape Scott* she watches the sun draw a line across the sky, as the sun rises in the east at Cape Spear, Newfoundland and moves across the sky, from one video screen to another and over the land before it sets in the west at Cape Scott on Vancouver Island, BC. She hopes this light line drawing make us think about the enormous space traversed in between and the passing of time over a whole day. Like a moving photo, it is a portrait of the landscape that is outside of the image of the sky, articulated through time and space.

Her chromographic print series, *Sunspots & Horizons*, are indeed literal light drawings. Created in a dark closet she blindly drew a flashlight across (often expired) photographic paper. What began as a blind experiment to produce perfect forms, these gestural and expressive drawings that come to life through brilliant and unexpected hues created by arbitrary use of varying light sources and filters, are accidental but brilliant failures. With this work, Dutton demonstrates the desire to experiment with photography in order to escape an outside reference beyond the gesture of its making. In this way Dutton, like muir, is intrigued by the concept of photograph as material, similarly challenging



Laura Dutton - *Sunspots & Horizons*

Roland Barthes's assertion that the medium cannot escape the reference.⁸ Working on this series over a long period of time, Dutton never recognized the connection to her video installation *Cape Spear/Cape Scott* until one day she turned the light drawings 90 degrees and realized they were really like landscapes – still complements to the moving pictures, they lined up thematically in a subconscious way. In this way, the apparent subject or referent of the image was created for her by her blind actions. Dutton demonstrates for her students in this series that indeed nuance can produce powerful fresh results, far from ubiquity, and that connections can be forged outside of conscious intentions.

More than 35 years ago Susan Sontag bemoaned the ubiquity of photography: "Taking photographs has set up a chronic voyeuristic relation to the world which levels the meaning of all events."⁹ Astutely in touch with culture but also human nature, she must have foreseen that this path would only continue on an inevitable spiral downward. She recognized that "by limiting experience to a search for the photographic... we were in fact... refusing [experience]."¹⁰ What would Sontag think of today's smart phones and the social media sites overflowing with photos and videos of every thirteen-year-old's dressed up cat or plate of spaghetti? Today, it may seem that real experience is squelched not only by the act of taking photographs and videos but also by the sheer number of our living moments spent sorting through them in the newsfeeds of our Facebook accounts.

But just as the 1980s (or any other time of artistic upheaval) did not truly commemorate the death of painting, 2015 does not mark the death of photography. Like anything in our society, photography and other digital art media will inevitably evolve. These artistic practices will persist and transform with changes in technology and social mores. As they do, they may bridge genres, cross disciplines and meld with other media, offering sensitive artists ever new means to express ideas that are significant, rare, original, and reflective of new experiences.

Mary Jo Hughes
Director, Legacy Art Galleries

⁸ Barthes, p. 5.

⁹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, [New York, NY: Picador, 1973], p. 11.

¹⁰ Sontag, p. 9.



Laura Dutton - *Cape Scott*



Laura Dutton - *Cape Spear*

Megan Dickie's work uses play and physicality to expose the human tendency to indulge in spectacle. She has exhibited across Canada and in the United States, with recent exhibitions at Oxygen Art Centre, Nelson, BC, Latitude 53, Edmonton, AB, Stride Gallery, Calgary, AB, Grunt Gallery, Vancouver BC, the Nanaimo Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, the Kenderdine Art Gallery, Saskatoon, SK, and Deluge Contemporary Art, Victoria, BC. She holds a BFA from the University of Calgary and an MFA from the University of Saskatchewan. Dickie has been awarded several grants from both the British Columbia Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts. She teaches sculpture and printmaking at the University of Victoria.

Megan Dickie

In my work I take structures and subvert their stability through the use of humour and playfulness.

The Gleamer teases the structural integrity out of one of the strongest forms in the universe, the triangle. The strength and rigidity of the form is most apparent in architecture. *The Gleamer* parodies the value systems associated with architecture, allowing the triangle to be fluid instead of rigid, playful instead of austere, absurd instead of functional.

Slapstick is an integral tool in the practice of parody. My sculpture and video projects incorporate serial patterns and the same potential for endless action that you find in a slapstick movie. For this exhibition, a new video work has been produced entitled *Dueling*. Two identical *Gleamers* are pitted against each other as imaginary opponents. The choreographed actions are jerky, aggressive and mesmerizing. The piece explores our enduring fascination with watching struggle; be it comical or combative.

In my practice, video is strategically used to represent the transformable aspects of my sculptures. The forms I produce can be punched, pushed and grappled with. Video is used as a tool to display these interactions as physically comedic.



Megan Dickie - *Dueling*

Laura Dutton holds a BFA in Photography from Concordia University, Montreal and an MFA in Visual Arts from the University of Victoria. Her work has been exhibited across Canada, most recently at PAVED Arts in Saskatoon, VU Photo in Quebec City, and as part of the emerging artists exhibition *Ensuing Pictures* during the inaugural year of the Contacts Photography Festival in Vancouver. She has recently received grants from the Canada Council for the Arts and the BC Arts Council as well as the Canwest Global Scholarship in Film and Video. She has represented Quebec in the BMO 1st Art! nationwide competition and in 2010 she was selected to design the École Polytechnique Memorial Plaque at UVic. Currently she teaches studio-based courses in photography and video art in UVic's Department of Visual Arts.

Laura Dutton

Cape Spear / Cape Scott is a two-channel video installation that situates the viewer in the middle of an unending cycle of real-time sunrises and sunsets. It is comprised of footage from the eastern and western coasts of Canada as seen from Cape Spear, Newfoundland (the most easterly point on the continent), and Cape Scott, BC (the northwestern tip of Vancouver Island). The three-hour segments track the motion of the sun as it makes its slow journey through the stationary frame, drawing an arching line between both points. The simultaneous ascent and descent of the solar sphere suggests an overlapping of time by folding our experience in on itself and drawing our attention to the cyclical nature of our existence and the synonymous relationship of beginning and end. The installation bridges the physical distance between the two locations, extending the span of the gallery space into an implication of the geographical vastness of the continent. The piece is an understated document of the distant edges of our land, depicting nothing but the ends, while suggesting all that lies between.

The Sunspots & Horizons are a series of chromogenic prints that were created in the darkroom without the use of a photographic negative, but instead resulted from experiments with different light sources and colour filters. They may be described as 'light drawings'. The process was a continued attempt, and failure, to draw a centralized form on light sensitive paper while working in complete darkness. During the making of this project, I began to see the correlation between the abstract imagery therein and the coastal horizon I had been looking at for so long during the making of *Cape Spear / Cape Scott*. Here again is the sea, sky, and sun, albeit slightly less obvious. Viewers join the sun to its horizon line and complete the landscape in their mind. Reflecting their experience of standing at the edge of land and watching that sun rise and set.



Laura Dutton - *Sunspots & Horizons*

d.bradley muir is an artist whose practice focuses on contemporary photography, video, sculpture and installation. He holds a BFA with distinction from Concordia University and an MFA, with Fellowship, from the University of Victoria. muir teaches photography and video at the University of Victoria as well as film/video, art critique, drawing and sculpture at Camosun College. His work shows on a national and international basis, and is in numerous public and private collections. muir's interdisciplinary art practice explores the formation and plurality of meaning between; stillness and motion, idea and realization, history and materiality.

d. bradley muir

The act of making a picture is about transforming or directly engaging physical space, time, and materiality with a consideration of the two-dimensional. Creating a contemporary photographic landscape picture, which remains reliant upon these systems, seems predisposed to a number of additional complicating factors. Recent developments within photographic and landscape history, have caused me to re-examine the unpredictable state of contemporary photography through the equally, if not more unpredictable, state of the Canadian landscape.

The veracity and physicality of a photograph has become my point of entry into a new scrutiny of landscape and by extension, our shared history. As I ponder the rigid European views of the Canadian landscape that we have inherited, I cannot help but consider Vilém Flusser's reflection on photography when he suggested "the information sits loosely on the surface and can easily be conveyed to another surface. To this extent, the photograph demonstrates the defeat of the material thing and of the concept of 'ownership.'" My current work proposes to explore ideas of surface, image and our mediated relationship with pictures and landscape alike (both on and off paper) in a reactive, contradictory in an implicitly confounded way.

My recent works explore, through varied and related strategies, the interconnected relationships we have with photographs and the landscape of the 21st century. What meaning do we ascribe to photographs and landscape? How do our expectations affect the structure and materiality of either? How does our illusionary perception endure within an endlessly replicated multi-contextual information environment? And what becomes of surface if the imagined referent has failed?



d. bradley muir - *Pictures Came and Broke Your Heart*

Tara Nicholson incorporates photography and video to investigate remote and often disputed territories. The notion of modern-day pilgrimage has been repeated throughout her large-scale projects for the past four years to invite reflection on the desire to retreat and escape. Nicholson has exhibited and attended residencies internationally and since 2010 has taught sessionally at the University of Victoria. In 2013, Nicholson was invited to be the artist-in-residence at the Künstlerhaus Dortmund in Germany where she completed a two-month residency and solo exhibition. Recently, Nicholson has received a BC Arts Project Grant, a BC Arts Travel Grant and a Curatorial Celebration Grant. Nicholson received her BFA from Ryerson University, her MFA from Concordia University and completed post-graduate studies at University of British Columbia.

Tara Nicholson

For the past several years my work has explored ideals of wilderness, notions of retreat and questioned isolated landmasses within Canada. Producing work in Haida Gwaii, northern Quebec and along British Columbia's rural coast, my projects have included, *Somewhere Beyond Nowhere*, *Further North and Wilderness* and *Other Utopias* which have investigated the importance of isolation for renewal and reprise. Last summer, I was invited to be an artist-in-residence at the Künstlerhaus Dortmund in Germany where I began producing new work exploring ideas of creative retreat focusing specifically on the urban environment. While in Germany, I produced work examining ideas of reflection within artist's studios, city greenspaces, outdoor pools, canal swimming holes and in private gardens.

Tether asks the viewer to reflect on the processes behind creative thought and to consider where the 'work' of artists takes place. So far the series consists of images of artist's studios, apartments and communal living spaces, along side images of outdoor recreational spaces, gardens and courtyards. Photographing within artists' apartments, studios and other creative spaces has led me to question where ideas of inspiration occur and what shape or form urban retreat can compose for productive thought.

Mixing images of artists' spaces from my home in Victoria with images from my residency in Germany has produced common threads, expanding my own ideas about the creative process and how one might visualize these ideas.



Tara Nicholson - *Schreber Garden, Dortmund*

Exhibition List

Megan Dickie

The Gleamer, Dueling 2012/2014

Aluminum, organza, adhesive

HD stop motion animation

Dimensions and duration variable

Laura Dutton

Cape Spear / Cape Scott 2014

Two-channel video & audio installation

3 hour loop

Sunspots & Horizons 2014

C-prints transmounted to Plexiglas with Sintra backing

20" x 24" each

d. bradley muir

It Didn't Stop You Coming Through 2014

C-prints

8' x 8'

The Supernova Scene 2014

C-prints

16" x 20" each

Pictures Came and Broke Your Heart 2014

C-print

50" x 100"

Tara Nicholson

Tether 2014

Installation, series of C-prints

Various sizes



d. bradley muir - *The Supernova Scene*



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