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Profile: Lynn Richardson

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Artist Lynn Richardson pulls from her journeys between Canada and the United States to examine the differences, and find they collide within her own work.

Richardson's new installation "Arctic Garden" will open at Gallery 107, 107 Main St., on Thursday, June 28.

"Arctic Garden" looks to the far north and how it is affected by global warming, especially within the context of Canada. As glaciers melt, new resources are revealed, and national interests begin to circle areas of Northern Canada, as well as the rest of the Arctic.

"I grew up in Winnipeg, which is considered the coldest city in the world with a population over 5,000," she said, "so even though it wasn't the Arctic, when we're having minus-55 degrees Celsius winters, you're constantly thinking, 'Wow how can global warming help me? How can it change?'" "

"Definitely landscape-wise, it would shift our landscape, and then economically, it would impact the U.S. Everyone's up there drilling for oil and looking for diamonds. They've got it all going on already."

Richardson's installation foretells of a new colonization movement spurred on by a shift in growing seasons, and pulls from the idea of an English garden as a symbol for maintaining civilization over the reality of nature.

These are concerns that have been part of her artwork for years and their roots began growing during Richardson's own migration to south of the border — in her case, from her home in Winnipeg to graduate school in Texas, what she describes as "my polar opposite background."

These differences are most apparent to Richardson when she looks at her own evolution as an artist — it's one that is affected not merely by a move to the United States, but an immigration to a foreign country.

"When I moved originally down to the U.S. to graduate school, everything I made was little

buffalo, little sheep, little cows, everything was crafted out of wood, everything was mechanized, so everything moved," she said. "My professors just looked at me and asked, 'Why do you use this wood?' and I realized that growing up in Winnipeg, we barely had huge contemporary shows come through our galleries. Your aesthetics are formed by crafts more."

Richardson says her work slowly became more American, and that started with what she encountered during that time in Texas — the very landscape affected her artistic scope.

"I had never seen gigantic billboards, one after another, after another, after another, and so it was like everything started to shift," said Richardson. "Even my work was originally small, and I started thinking about sculpture as theater and building these environments and installations that people would be part of, theatrical as opposed to small sculpture objects."

She moved back to Canada, and then returned to the United States after getting a teaching job. Her work, "The Interglacial Free Trade Agency" had to do with her experiences in that cross-border life, specifically realities brought to life by NAFTA, and her observations on the differences in the ways the two countries treated that, and social issues in general.

Over time, this melded with Richardson's interest about the landscape and resources, and the impact of global warming, all of which are addressed differently in Canada.

"It's just in our dialogue," Richardson said. "All the reservations that are up there and the Inuit people who live up there, and the government, because it's a social government, helps support everybody, so just what happens to those communities always reflects and filters down to our areas."

Having global warming on their doorstep, causing direct impacts in their lives, is just one part of the cultural divide between the United States and Canada — and it's a divide that Canadians are far more aware of than their southern neighbors.

"I've heard it's 'America-lite' where I live, in Canada," said Richardson. "I knew nothing about being in the U.S. coming down here except for TV and politics, the Olympics, things like that. So I started realizing how our health-care systems differ. I don't think my work takes a negative side to anything really, rather it's there to start a conversation, because now I see benefits to each of the two systems."

The wider economics of each country come into play, in that it effects what materials an artist can make use of within their budgets.

"There are plastics I can buy in the U.S. that are so much cheaper than what I can get my hands on in Canada," Richardson said. "Part of working with a lot of wood was that it was next to free. Sometimes I look around and it's like, 'oh, I bought 10 extension cords for this show and it cost me \$30, whereas in Canada it would be \$200.' That effects a lot of how people are working."

The final component for Richardson was exposure to work — or, rather, the non-exposure. She points to her love of the work of German kinetic sculptor Rebecca Horn, which she had only see pictures of, and built up in her head what is moved and sounded like. The reality came when

she got the opportunity to see the work in a gallery.

“I walked into a gallery and saw her pieces and they were actually all broken,” said Richardson. “Then I was more intrigued, it was like wow, my imagination had created this body of work that didn’t exist.

“Then I realized my whole art practice started to shift because I didn’t see anything. Everything I knew about art was from a book, so being able to be in an environment with a large scale video blasting at you started changing things.”

From her current home in New Hampshire, Richardson sees her work as a hybrid of the two sensibilities, one that keeps a certain smirk that she finds very Canadian, while embracing materials and presentation modes that are decidedly not.

“In Canadian art, I always feel like there’s this sarcastic humor than runs through everything,” she said. “And I definitely have it, too. And I always feel like there’s an outsider art aesthetic. It’s not true that it is that way, but it appears that way on the surface. They beat that out of me in graduate school, aesthetically I feel like I’ve left a little bit of Canada.”

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