

LAUREN CRAZYBULL

in between endings

Opening: Thursday, September 19, 6-8pm

September 19 - November 16, 2024

An Indigenous Aesthetics of Absence: On Lauren Crazybull's in-between endings

Billy-Ray Belcourt

Absence:

1. "a state or condition in which something expected, wanted, or looked for is not present or does not exist";
2. "a failure to be present at a usual or expected place";
3. "inattention to present surroundings or occurrences"¹

Our usual language of absence is insufficient for the work of describing Indigenous existence with the required emotional and political complexity. Non-existence, failure, inattention – all of these words suggest a mode of being in the world that injures and should be avoided. The genius of Lauren Crazybull's in-between endings is in the rethinking of absence as a stance or posture that capaciously describes the Indigenous condition of being in a world one did not image for themselves or have much part in making to begin with.

When I first viewed Lauren's paintings in person, I kept thinking of a line by the poet and painter Richard Siken: "If you don't believe in the world it would be / stupid to paint it."² On the contrary, what Lauren does is paint into this feeling or experience of disbelief. We can surmise this stance at the level of the visual: the obscured and only partly-rendered backgrounds disrupt the world's clarity. The natural landscape, usually so imbued with symbolism in the history of painting and of paintings of Indigenous peoples specifically, comes in and out of focus depending on the work, though it is always depicted incompletely. Further, the figures, positioned away from the viewer, faces obscured, withhold the representational appeal that governs the beginning and end of some audiences' interest in Indigenous art. The viewer is kept at a distance from the painting, but not out of hostility or neglect. What is withheld is as vital as what is depicted. We are asked to be in a relation of proximity with loss, with the incomplete.

When talking to Lauren about the exhibition, she told me that she is interested in the melancholia

1 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/absence>

2 Richard Siken, *War of the Foxes* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press): 2015.

macaulay+co.

of painting, which made immediate sense to me as a writer. I often feel like I'm writing against the normative demand to make indigeneity legible to non-Indigenous audiences when what I really want to do is grieve and imagine otherwise and situate myself within a scene of feeling that will not always cohere to some people but will hopefully feel honest and real to other Indigenous peoples. When I view Lauren's work, a resonance reverberates inside my body. I'm very deeply moved by these paintings for what they say about the ordinariness of grief, for how the softness of the lines and the muted color scheme hold the ambivalence I feel about the colonial scene I was born into. But also and just as urgently I feel the weight of what can't be said or depicted about Indigenous life, both individual and collective. And I'm given permission to continue to not say or depict it.

We might then argue that it is necessary to paint the world if you don't wholly believe in it, and that this is an act of contention and theorization. in-between endings enables me to locate myself in this position of disbelief without shame or critique. Lauren's aesthetic realm is quiet and contemplative as well as mournful and complicated, and it is precisely through these qualities that a new aesthetics of Indigenous absence and life becomes possible.

Lauren Crazybull (b.1994) is a Niitsítapi (Member of Kainai First Nation), Dené artist currently living in Vancouver, BC. In her work, Lauren considers Indigenous presence and multiplicity through paintings, creating worlds where honest portrayals trespass onto romantic representations of Indigeneity. Lauren uses her practice as a way to assert her own humanity, and advocate, in diverse and subtle ways, for the innate intellectual, spiritual, creative and political fortitude of Indigenous peoples.