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Songs of warning

Exhibition by four artists with disabilities highlights unique perspectives and overlooked dangers

By: Steven Leyden Cochrane

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OPINION

Hey there, time traveller!

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Each of us moves through the world differently, seeing it through the lens of our unique strengths, limitations, opportunities and challenges. Not all points of view get equal airtime, though, and we all miss out. We miss out on one another's insights, on the chance to see our own perspectives reflected and valued, and we run the risk of missing signs that things are going badly wrong.

The experiences of people who live with physical and mental disabilities challenge widely held but inadequate ideas about how brains and bodies "should" work. The obstacles people with disabilities face disturb the comforting illusion of equal opportunity and access, and their

Art review

Canary in the Coal Mine

Martha Street Studio

Susan Aydan Abbott, Sandra Campbell, Yvette Cenerini and Marie LeBlanc

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perspectives shed light on problems that many have the privilege to ignore.

The four artists in *Canary in the Coal Mine*, an exhibition by members of Arts & Disability Manitoba at Martha Street Studio, explore environments that are hostile to life in different ways. Creatively exploiting a range of print-based media, they examine the ecologies of nature, society and the mind from unique vantage points. We'd all do well to take notice.



Supplied Yvette Cenerini's Songbird Decrescendo

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Known for her surreal and poignant digital collages, Yvette Cenerini's work fosters empathy with the animal world. For this show, she's made a hushed but urgent suite of hand-drawn etchings, *Songbird Decrescendo*. Ten restrained, naturalistic illustrations of local bird species are arranged from large to small like a diminishing soundwave, coming to a point with the tiny ruby-throated hummingbird. Ending on a full stop with the image of a brittle bird skeleton, the piece raises a silent alarm about threats of pollution, habitat loss and climate change.

To create *My Garden*, her salon-style installation, Sandra Campbell did a bit of clandestine botany. Collecting plants from friends' yards and downtown planters, she pressed these onto plates and screens to create a series of prints recalling botanical illustration, pressed flowers and early experiments in photography. The prints and plates, some with plant matter still attached, hang on a wall painted caution yellow. Unlike her buggy garden-grown specimens, Campbell notes in a statement, the downtown plants were worryingly insect-free.

Marie LeBlanc also has to survive in spaces that are literally toxic to her: she lives with environmental sensitivities that put finding safe work,



housing and recreation frustratingly out of reach. Lightly redacted letters from doctors and support agencies tell a maddening, bureaucratic side of her story. Her photographs give another, richer account. We catch LeBlanc's image in the glass of zoo enclosures, shop windows and curved security mirrors, a world of distorted reflections and invisible barriers. We stand in her place, face to face, from a position of impossible remove. Unable to attend the opening in person, LeBlanc staged an "avatar performance," interacting with audience members via video chat and powerfully extending her work's themes of connection and distance.


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Susan Aydon Abbott, meanwhile, looks further inward, finding outward expression for emotional trauma. *Septic Wound*, a perverse welcome mat of sorts, greets visitors at the front entrance. The sheet of filthy linoleum is covered with paint, studded with cigarette butts and carved all over with accusations ("crazy," "joke," "witness," "whore"). Condoms, a beer bottle and more cigarettes are swept under one corner, and a ghostly replica cast in resin and fibreglass, *Battle Scar*, hangs overhead like a ripped-off scab or bandage. A stuttering tower of self-portraits similarly pair naked, even artless emotion with a sensitive, savage and formally inventive approach to material and process. Abbott's images feel hard-won, and they command attention.

Programming around identity raises issues for artists and curators alike, and exhibition curator Sigrid Dahle acknowledges her good fortune that these four artists and their work so naturally support each other.

There's a free public panel discussion on disability and curating at Martha Street Studio on Saturday, March 19 at 3 p.m., with Sigrid Dahle, Jenel Shaw and Jess Turner.

Steven Leyden Cochrane is a Winnipeg-based artist, writer and educator.





Supplied Zoo by Marie LeBlanc





HISTORY

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Opinion

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