

Alisha Piercy, SWAMPSTILLS, Centre Clark, Montréal

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Alisha Piercy

SWAMPSTILLS, installation views,
Centre Clark, Montréal, 2018.

Photos: Paul Litherland

Alisha Piercy *SWAMPSTILLS*

My first impression of artist and author Alisha Piercy's installation, *SWAMPSTILLS*, was of an informally and even casually arranged pile of materials whose colours and textures merged indistinctly together. This perception was prompted by the discarded look of half-empty orange sandbags punctuating rumpled bolts of drably tie-dyed canvas unfurled and draped over a small platform and stretched up a wall. Atop this dais stood vaguely canine-shaped sculptures in rough papier-mâché, one of them seemingly doused with tar, along with small outcroppings of untreated clay. Hung up an adjacent wall, a very large, sensitively handled pencil and ink drawing in purplish hues comprised similarly washed-out ranges and fuzzy mirroring Rorschach geometries. Coloured gels tinted the fluorescent tubes above, nudging the tones of the room further toward murky ambiguity. More sandbags were laid in a corner with a chapbook and a note: *Hush, lie down. Read (7 mins)*.

The writing in the booklet, apparently an excerpt from a forthcoming novel, orbited mostly around a pack of plantation dogs in the Deep South, and their path to a swamp refuge, as well as murmurings of weather events far away that would soon force an implied transformative encounter. Various links emerged between the materials around the booklet and the language within it: the flowing and blotted marks on paper and cloth now rhymed with hurricane cloud shapes, the stained canvas evoked sunken mud, and the gruff dog poetry annotated deceptively frank-looking objects: "Dogs don't see much red so the pack reads this as popsicle tones: a cascade of bland leading down toward ultraviolet."¹ The installation was thereby narrativized, its components behaving less like illustrations and more like the extension and blurring of the edges of the story. In its larger narrative effect, the elements blended the human, animal, and environmental stories into a single interdependent ambiance, recalling

the theories of Donna Haraway or Anna Lowenhaupt-Tsing, where the hierarchies of sentience break down upon closer inspection. "The hurricane speaks to the tree that speaks to the dogs sleeping under it and the message of trouble passes from dog to girl."²

However, Piercy chose to locate her theatre of characters in the specific physical and historical context of a swamp to which marooned slaves had fled after escaping their bondage. These circumstances, while providing a heavy premise, led me to wonder about the implications of Piercy's choice within the current debates around representation and identity. Specifically, the issue of the representation of non-white—and more pointedly Black—suffering and trauma by white artists has become an explosive topic within museums and in the art press (and even on mainstream TV), but especially across social media platforms. I do not mean to equate *SWAMPSTILLS* with Dana Schutz at the Whitney Biennial. Notwithstanding, Piercy's exhibition offers a possible case where we could examine nuances between empathy and appropriation. After all, her chapbook's title was *Hush, this story doesn't belong to you*. Whose belonging in this arrangement was she addressing? The humans, the dogs ("Hush" being the name of one of them), any particular element in the installation, or else herself as author, or myself as viewer?

Because Piercy writes novels, there is the possibility of a different emphasis regarding the assumption of voices. Many kinds of fiction are rooted in imagining the experiences of characters vastly different from the author. The process of building up characters can produce forms of identification different from those in image-based artwork. Visual art's links to spectacular presentations, public space, and commodities can seem to heighten the ambivalence behind the intentions of artists, whereas narrative writing is slower and seemingly less associated with profit and exploitation.



Of course, the publishing industry is diverse and just as marked by power imbalances, and for their own part visual artists don't all embody the cool, uncritical luxury goods producers that seem to crowd the art world's society pages. These caricatures only help us to see certain risks and potentialities in choices of form.

Perhaps this delay explains the initially reserved mood of Piercy's installation, the quiet abstractness before the storm of narration. In fact, as an excerpt, the chapbook only gave us a thumbnail of what the story could develop into, and thus as a text in a gallery it could be associated more with the press release model. It was not yet the kind of novel writing where we feel for the characters. Despite the absurdity and surreality of Piercy's 2014 novel *Bunny and Shark*, we still felt the pathos of her protagonist, who is filled with all of the baggage and contradictions of a human being. Taking what Piercy laid down here, however, we sensed faint signals of a trauma more conceptually fielded than graphically depicted. These sentences came close: "Teeth ripping flesh and those sounds they make while running en masse. The dog packs are what the maroons will report later to be the most terrible."³ The scenario here with its consciousness of animal and plant life, its location in a period now removed from firsthand experience, and its fishing from a lost history, somehow caused the assemblage to resemble the elements of a fable. So what to do with its gestures toward a persistent, structuring trauma? Did this installation, and the forthcoming novel, traffic in the Black body as commodity, and gloss over material differences in the cultural and economic lives of Black and white people, as problematized by critics such as Aruna D'Souza? Or because of its oblique references and representational blurriness, did it outmanoeuvre such charges? In truth and fiction the question has become, what stakes did Piercy have in this story?

There were signs that Piercy was conscious of the territory she was stepping into in this principally evocative work, but we didn't find clear perspectives on these weighty questions. The sense of the interconnectedness of things and the foreboding tone of a world of uneasy allies (dogs as authoritarian killers and as subversive agents) glimmer as a potential allegory about harrowing survival and empathy in a police state of ecological upheaval.

But to be sure, we'll have to wait for the book.

Michael Eddy

1 — Alisha Piercy, *Hush, this story doesn't belong to you* (Montreal: Centre Clark, 2018)

2 — *Ibid.*

3 — *Ibid.*

Centre Clark, Montréal

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