

Catherine Bolduc, La femme dans la lune / Her Head in the Clouds, The Rooms Provincial Art Gallery, St. John's, Nfld.

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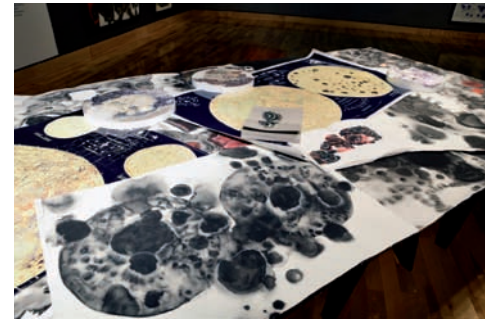
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Catherine Bolduc

La femme dans la lune / Her head in the Clouds, installation views, The Rooms, St. John's, 2017.

Photos : © Catherine Bolduc

Catherine Bolduc

La femme dans la lune / Her Head in the Clouds

Maps can embody a hubristic fantasy of exploration and discovery, with their authoritative interpretations of place, even places very recently encountered by the travellers or cartographers who drew them. This confident expression of often-inaccurate knowledge has been significant in exploitation and colonization throughout history. Catherine Bolduc disrupts this problematic narrative with darkness, uncertainty, and erasure.

The exhibition space recalls the tent of an early explorer. In the middle of the gallery, a trestle table is covered with maps, drawings, and samples; the walls are lined with photographs, archival maps, and tourism posters that Bolduc has altered and drawn over. The place to which these objects refer, though, is not simple to define.

Bolduc produced this work during her time as artist-in-residence at Gros Morne National Park, on the west coast of the island of Newfoundland. This landscape is composed of barren rock thought to be part of the earth's crust pushed to the surface through plate tectonics. Perhaps it was this desolate atmosphere, or its connection to the origins of the planet, that led Bolduc to read the diaries of Christopher Columbus and traverse the park using lunar maps. A video shot from the artist's point of view shows her struggling to walk with a map of the moon—strands of hair whip into view—to a soundtrack of howling wind.

The gallery walls are painted with a horizon, silver below and black above, perhaps like the moon in space. Lunar maps spread over the table are perforated with round holes that make the moon resemble Swiss cheese. Sketchbooks are open to drawings of what might be geological formations, and the plaster casts that weigh them down portray a planetary surface that seems embedded with glitter and jewellery. Under all this is a large scroll of paper covered in ink drawing. Bolduc uses ink washes overworked with gestural

marks to create echoes of mould, human hair, fissures, and volcanic eruptions punctuated with tiny human figures falling through the air.

Similar drawing infects the wall-mounted works, mutating with each iteration. A portrait of Columbus is obscured with a bright-red cloud reminiscent of blood and tissue. A photograph of a desiccated animal carcass is overlain with dark, oozing holes in gravel in the foreground. Bolduc also edits her found documents—an early map of “The Inhabited Areas of Canada” is altered to read “nada”—deft wordplay reflecting the erasure that created the false notion of this land as empty before European contact. This wordplay is continued in drawings over contemporary tourism posters that turn Newfoundland into “New land”, destabilizing the concept of discovery. Finally, in a self-portrait of the artist at work, her face is hidden by barnacle-like forms.

The island of Newfoundland was one of the first features of North America to take shape on maps created by Columbus's contemporaries. The gallery housing Bolduc's work overlooks St. John's Harbour, the first land claimed as an overseas colony of the English crown. This place has a long history of possession, erasure, and exploitation by multiple powers. The marks that Bolduc makes on this narrative are important, especially here. Dark, complicated, and human, they remind us that what we accept as authority is often anything but.

Jennifer McVeigh

The Rooms Provincial Art Gallery,

St. John's, Nfld., February 4
—April 23, 2017