



LIBBY HAGUE
**THE PAST IS
NEVER OVER**
A RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION

NOVEMBER 2, 2017—JANUARY 1, 2018

AGM
ART GALLERY OF MISSISSAUGA

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

The AGM is pleased to present this retrospective of Libby Hague, not only one of Canada's most recognized print-based artists, but one who is near and dear to the AGM. Hague's prints and drawings are well-represented in the AGM Permanent Art Collection and we are thrilled to have the opportunity to provide a platform to showcase the breadth of her work.

Thank you to our funders, the City of Mississauga, the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council and the Ontario Trillium Foundation for their continuing support of our programming, to Kendra Ainsworth, Curator of Contemporary Art for curating this exhibition, and for the collaborative support of AGM staff members Terry Jenkins-Bricell, Sadaf Zuberi, Laura Carusi, Melanie Lowe, Sharada Eswar, and Jessica Palada, and our incredible roster of volunteers.



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ARTIST BIO

Libby Hague's work examines human and complex social relationships in our precarious and interconnected world. Her curiosity and love of invention led her to a hybrid practice of printmaking and installation. Her solo exhibitions include *Inventing Hope*, Idea Exchange, Cambridge; *Walk With Me*, Centre Clark, Montréal; *Sympathetic Connections*, Art Gallery of Ontario; *Be Brave! We are in this together*, YYY Artists' Outlet, Toronto; and *One Step at a Time*, Art Gallery of Mississauga. Group exhibitions include *Habitat*, Harbourfront Centre, Toronto and Kelowna Art Gallery; *Build...Build Better*, Zion Schoolhouse, Toronto; and *All that glows*, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax.

LIBBY HAGUE

THE PAST IS NEVER OVER | A RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION

“We tell stories in order to change, remaking the past in a constant and not always barren *spirit d’escalier*.” – Barbara Hardyⁱ

The retrospective exhibition is a seemingly static genre within the art world. An artist’s works are presented in a linear, chronological fashion, drawing the viewer on a journey from the outset of the artist’s career, along a path of learning, experimentation, and growth to the presumable culmination in mastery of the chosen medium, and respect among peers and audiences alike. However, like any story we choose to tell, the narrative of an exhibition is an inherently constructed format. No artist’s career, or indeed their approach to artistic practice is a purely linear, teleological journey. This is particularly true for Libby Hague.

Hague has worked in a variety of media over the course of her career, including painting, drawing, printmaking, video and installation, but the one constant has been a capacity to see any work, or body of work not so much as finished, but as merely a waypoint in a much larger process. Artists often find that inspiration for new projects is sparked by current or past work, but for Hague, this process of creation and recreation takes a particularly rhizomatic form. Two dimensional print works are cut up and repurposed as components of sculptures or installations. Drawings become the backdrops for animated videos. All of these elements can be combined together to create chimeric installations that seem to grow organically, almost playfully of their own accord.

Creative play is a central component of Hague’s practice, as well as something of a life philosophy. Hague characterizes her work as something through which she addresses the question of “how can we be good in the world?” and believes that the act of making things and taking joy in the creative process are redemptive. There is an immediately evident joy, an exuberance, to her work, and it seems only fitting to infuse this spirit of ebullience into the traditionally staid and rigid format of the retrospective. The exhibition is anchored, rather than by a sense of chronology, by two massive wall installations, one at each end of the gallery space. Hague jokingly referred to them as birth and death; birth as the looser, more colourful, riotous space at the entrance to the gallery; death, the dark, dense and imposing tableaux at the end. In between these two points is the messy space we all inhabit, attempting to create our own moments of quiet and order in a chaotic world.

One of the main ways we create order in our world and in our lives is through narrative; the stories we tell to ourselves and to others. Hague, in her use of text and figure, references component parts of narrative, but never explicitly sets out to tell a prescriptive story. Texts are poetic fragments, rife with associations, but open to interpretation. Figures seem to lead us through a visual landscape, but these playful characters may be protagonists or simply observers of the odysseys unfolding around them. Works jostle against each other, connected at times by geometric printed bands (suggestive perhaps of a timeline) and the paper chain (a chain of thought? Of associations?) that circumscribes the gallery; contained at others by paper “frames” handmade by Hague. Where the apparently natural quality of the chronological exhibition can lock the viewer into a prescriptive way of looking and thinkingⁱⁱ, the absence of an immediately recognizable conceptual structure within this exhibition opens up a space to free associate, to play. The traditional exhibition format is again subtly subverted through the replacement of standard gallery labels with Hague’s hand-printed ones.

Through all the varied works included in this expansive exhibition, the narrative thread that is most prominent is that of the cyclical character of life, nature and history, embodied as

it is in the title of the exhibition, and called out in many of the text fragments. Biological systems, negotiating narrow, meandering and organic paths between order and chaos, paths that are re-trodden in different variations over the course of millions of life cycles: the three *Sunflower* works at the entrance to the gallery, each flower captured at a different stage; the trio of *Broken conga line*, *It isn't enough to be fast*, and *Martian Odyssey* and their sense of playful, frantic and determined movement, call to mind journeys embarked upon at different points in our lives. The cycles of our environment, both natural and man-made are also hinted at, with the *Enchanted forest* installation visually intruding upon the urban imagery of print installation *Everything needs everything*, photo series *3 Ways Into Town*, and *Looming building* print.

In breaking apart existing narratives, of the exhibition, of the artist's practice and creating new stories and connections, Hague creates a sense of precarity, but also one of chance and opportunity: the opportunity that comes with picking up an object, image, an idea, or a phrase, leaving its past behind and instead imagining what it could be.

Kendra Ainsworth
Curator of Contemporary Art

ⁱ Barbara Hardy, *Towards a Poetics of Fiction*

ⁱⁱ Steve Lubar, *Timelines in Exhibitions*

A GUIDE FOR THE CURIOUS AND PERPLEXED: BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT SOME OF THE WORK IN LIBBY HAGUE'S *THE PAST IS NEVER OVER*.

Sunnybrook ravine and the other larger landscape painting were my effort to try to recapture the freedom I felt when I travelled around South East Australia in 1983 on my motorcycle, stopping to paint its spectacular, old testament-like landscape. Coming back to Canada, I learned to drive, and, beginning with the ravines around Toronto and ending up around lake Superior, did plein air landscape painting. These were intense experiences full of joy and fear, since as much as I loved being in nature, I am, quite reasonably, afraid of snakes, bears and drunken hunters.

The double vision painting series was begun during a residency on Toronto Island. Inspired by the gentleness of the place and season, I decided to return to landscape painting, something I had loved twenty years earlier. Small, intense paintings, done from nature and later from the imagination. Acrylic with oil superimposed; each method with its own tension and pleasure.

The colourful image at the top centre of wall at the entrance to the gallery is part of *Resting spots*, a new project I am developing at OCADU in their Digital Painting residency. The project riffs on a protein map by Dr. Franklin Pugh. (Credit: B. Franklin Pugh, Penn State University, Willaman Professor of Molecular Biology and Evan Pugh University Professor, Director, Centre for eukaryotic Gene Regulation, with permission).

In the top left corner of the wall at the entrance, is *Come Back Crazy Jane*, one of the first prints I made at SGWU (now Concordia University) in the 60s in Barry Wainwright's class.

Close to home is an exhibition of mixed media dioramas in six parts with accompanying booklet, which was first exhibited at Gallery 788 in Toronto in November 1995. It was based on a newspaper article that had me wondering what it was like to be the mother who was judged to have failed to protect her child, someone who elicited sympathy but also blame. The dioramas later became the storyboard for an animation of the same name that swallowed at least a year of my life.

Hand and eye connection. I keep returning to interconnection as a metaphor for cooperation and also as an actual network of cords that bind and link discrete elements and provide structural integrity in my work. More connection points provide more support and allow greater, and increasing, complexity. The first connection however, is a human one, a willingness to be open and to engage with others and the world.

This piece is a psychological portrait suggesting the fragile and precarious vulnerability of being human. The eye belongs to a head, which is a personality that barely integrates its own inner contradictions. At the same time it reaches out to help or to consider the child it holds at arm's length.



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Scottish puppet and the other puppets throughout the exhibition. Puppets touch my heart somehow. Almost abstract, they read as sculpture when at rest. Yet when they are moved, they are conspicuously dependent and haltingly alive. When we initiate a gesture through them, they engage our willingness to enter a fiction and project meaning. They have small but tenaciously held ambitions: to stand, to communicate, to recite Shakespeare. They never learn. They never remember. But they are always willing to begin again if only we try together. Thus they speak to agency and commitment in a bleak world and to our capacity for wonder.

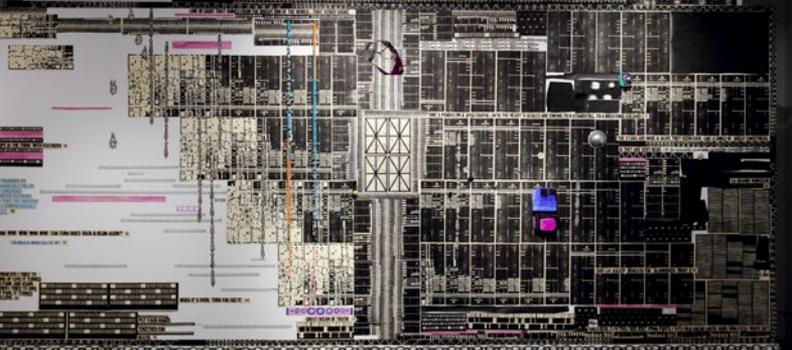
The ones I have made aren't high achievers. Part creature and part object, they stand and sit. Then they stand and sit again, in a lower-case ideal of continued effort. By moving them, they are given a half-life that engenders in us a strange empathy and impatience. They test our patience by their repeated and almost inevitable failures; they test our optimism with their inability to learn or show gratitude. Although I can see that they are pieces of paper and wood – just stuff – they work their magic when they perform a gesture that animates them, and once again I believe and am filled with pity and wonder.

Big head big heart, the happy child was part of *Family Dynamics*, an exhibition of puppet-like sculptures at Verso in 2013 curated by Julie Jenkinson and assisted by the good eye of Kate Eisen. This is probably one of my favourite shows. The premise was that a dysfunctional family was meeting for an annual birthday party and you were expected to draw on your own life experiences to imagine how it played out.

"Spectacular setting 2 hrs from Huntsville, **hot and cold running water**, wild life, must see. Too good to be true?"

This work was installed at Lennox Contemporary as part of Nancy Jacobi's Washi Summit in 2008. The installation parallels a misleading advertisement that sells us what we want to hear – in this case the Canadian dream of having a cottage up north. However, this cottage and by extension nature, are presented as sentimental projections that ultimately prevent us from really seeing what we are up against.

Sunflower prints and watercolours: All the sunflower work can be seen in the context of the story I am going to tell you. When I was painting about 30 miles



from Temagami, there was a gentle and tenacious lodge owner's wife who had created a beautiful sunflower garden in a clearing in the forest. She had slowly made and maintained something of beauty by bringing in sand, composting, and keeping the forest, the animals, the weeds at bay. If she hadn't worked at it, the wilderness would have quickly taken it back. It was a perfect metaphor for the fragility of civilized life or, as Martha Nussbaum titled her book, *The Fragility of Goodness*.

The sculptures below these works are a nod to the floral arrangements often seen beneath sculpture in Italy, where works of art are also considered devotional objects.

3 Ways Into Town is from the exhibition *What Difference Does John Doe Make?* which contrasted public and private lives, acknowledging the former through public records and the latter through imaginary portraits. In doing so it questions "official history" and considers the broader process of forgetting. It was first exhibited at Whitby's Station Gallery in 1997. For these photographs I took three people on a train to Whitby: a young man, Jono Gooch, an elderly man, Lou Anisman, and a young woman, Maya Cho. The text superimposed on Maya is an excerpt from the subtle, superb, 1959 film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, directed by Alain Renais, with a script by Marguerite Duras.

Everything needs everything, first shown at Loop Gallery in Toronto in 2005 and then combined with another work, *Rehearsal for disaster*, in 2009, for my last show at AGM, curated by the late Robert Freeman, the gentleman curator. A post-apocalyptic world set under the Gardiner Expressway, where the possibility of rescue and hope is suggested by a tiny, young acrobat who leaps down from the sky towards an even smaller baby. There is a lot riding on this small girl's mighty shoulders. She personifies how top athletes inspire us with their physical beauty, courage and strength; I recall the stunning performances of the tiny Romanian gymnast, Nadia Comaneci, winning her perfect 10s in the Montréal Olympics in 1976.

Leap of faith is probably my favourite lithograph. I produced it at Open Studio at a time when I felt lithography could perfectly integrate the physical, intellectual and emotional forces that you want to triangulate in artwork. I felt in my groove. I always wanted to exhibit the complete edition moving forward together like the Valkyrie.

The figure floats above the *Five portraits* because I wanted to use woodcut to recognize my indebtedness and inspiration to work of the past and to acknowledge that we are part of a long trajectory of ideas.

Hold me tight (reconfigured) was first shown at La Centrale in Montréal in 2010. Weaving suggests to me that we can maintain our individual distinctiveness within a more ambitious structure that allows others to do the same.

The print figure, *Sprinter* on the left wall of the main gallery is from *It isn't enough to be fast*, first shown in 1994 at Gallery 788, Toronto, curated by the late Egidio del Bello. Figures of sprinters, wrestlers, high jumpers, and hockey players ran around the perimeter of the gallery. Despite the presence of officials, the rules and goals were neither obvious nor consistent. The installation reflected my admiration for people who try as hard as they can, in full recognition of the possible futility of their efforts.

Synchromesh lemon, Elsa and Florentine. With these pieces, I was attempting to connect my most vivid visual memories of growing up in Quebec with my current studio practice, moving backward and forward in time. Like a net cast over different elements, thread, rope and wire combine to hold these past and present components in a delicate tension, presenting an abstracted view of Quebec from afar, but close to the heart of an Anglophone who left.

Broken conga: In this work, a group of dancers that might have formed a traditional conga line in happier times are separated from each other. Although they share the same orientation and desire, they reach towards each other but never quite connect. Each of the 12 lithograph figures are mounted on plywood, and the general construction is modelled on the form of a pull toy model. First shown in *Search*, an Open Studio exhibition co-curated by Alysa-Beth Engel, Brian Hobbs and Dana Holst in 2000.

Martian Odyssey

"To find the right road out of this despair, civilized man must enlarge his heart as he has enlarged his mind." – Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness*, 1975

Martian Odyssey is an experiment in social change where children, as foreigners in their precarious digital world, try to sidestep disaster and make their own happiness through art, restorative justice (forgiveness) and friendship. I am preoccupied with disaster but also, and perhaps more importantly, with the possibility of rescue and the need for hope in a time of disaster. Why shouldn't art try to imagine this?

The works are structured loosely on the conventions of the epic, the utopian novel, science fiction films and the video game. They explore ideas from literature, philosophy, ethical theory and modern science. The full series consists of 30 works with a small print publication accompanying each one.

Enchanted forest installation is reconfigured from its original iteration at Centre Clarke, Montréal in 2015. Here it includes two puppets from the exhibition *Be Brave! We are in this together* at YYZ in Toronto in 2012, and two celestial puppets, (*Queen of Heaven, filly foal*) from *Free Radicals*, a series of short video puppet plays from 2010.

Habitat, which is found in the back left corner of the Main Gallery, was first exhibited at Harbourfront Centre in 2016, curated by Patrick Macaulay, and was later adapted for a show at the Kelowna Art Gallery, curated by Liz Wylie in 2017. *Habitat* is an enormous apartment complex, filled with the messy lives of its occupants: overheard conversations, smells, sounds, thoughts, misunderstandings, "real" people and figments of their imagination. It is intended as a choice between two ways of living in the world. It is inspired by Spinoza who said that we are either increasing the joy or the sadness in the world, a shocking and empowering thought, as if we each come to a crossroads and must decide which way to turn.

Libby Hague

IMAGE CREDIT

Cover

Libby Hague, *the past is never over* (installation detail), 2017. Image courtesy of the artist.

Inside

- 1 Libby Hague, *the past is never over* (installation view), 2017. Image courtesy of the artist.
- 2 Libby Hague, *Synchromesh Lemon*, 2013, papier mâché, Aqua-Resin, woodcuts, wire, cord, tacks.
Photo: Sadaf Zuberi.
- 3 Libby Hague, *the past is never over* (installation view), 2017, reduction woodcuts, quotations, coloured paper, pins, cord, disassembled accordion parts, sculpture, beads, plaster and intergalactic bling consisting of mother of pearl buttons, mirrors, silver bells, a yellow bear bell, disheveled rhinestone jewelry, a kitchen strainer, sequins and chandelier crystals. Image courtesy of the artist.

PROGRAMMING

Artist Talk

Saturday, December 2, 1 pm

Puppet-making workshop with Libby Hague

Saturday, December 9, 1–3 pm

Libby Hague leads a puppet-making workshop based on sculptures in her immersive installation. The puppet is a figure that has inspired Hague and makes playful appearances in her work.

Please check artgalleryofmississauga.com for the latest information on events and programming.

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First. New. Next. The AGM provides platforms for exhibitions, collections and experimentation in contemporary culture with a recent focus on artists and cultural producers from Indigenous, newcomer and youth communities. Through a broad range of educational programs, artist projects and other forms of critical dialogue, the AGM seeks to transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries, foster community, and provide spaces where alternative modes of thought are supported and activated in tangible ways.

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