



**Rosemary Scanlon**  
**X-RAY LAKE**

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## WATCHFULNESS: A RESPONSE TO ROSEMARY SCANLON'S X-RAY LAKE

With Rosemary Scanlon's work we have the opportunity to go on a journey within a dreamscape, but not the corny "...and it was all a dream" journey. Here, with *X-Ray Lake*, we engage with a dream that the land and the painter are having together. The paper upon which the pictures float becomes a hatch that we might climb through, head first, to a space similar to the interior of a camera obscura, with bison, chairs, lakes, trees, keys, hands, flowers, and swans all silently moving upon the walls, walls are perhaps the interior of a skull—at times Scanlon's, at times our own.

The skill of Rosemary Scanlon and the strangeness of her watercolours prompt us to go beyond simple looking. She encourages watchfulness. There are symbols to decipher, dreamscapes to interpret or try to inhabit ourselves. Patience is called for—keep looking until looking becomes watchfulness and the images unfold into something revelatory.

But what is the difference between looking and watchfulness, and why does it matter here? Animals are watchful—seeking prey, avoiding becoming prey, assessing territory and any breaches. In their more complex habitats, people look to gain an idea of what's going on, but, like animals, we become watchful when there are consequences for us. With these paintings our subconscious becomes watchful, there are psychological stakes here.

There are recurring images in the works—bodies of water, stands of almost branchless trees, fences, black chairs, swans. Some appear to be conventional, art historical symbols. There are flowers, for example, scattered throughout her paintings which communicate natural beauty and fragility even in the harsh climate of the Yukon. Roses appear in a few of the works and carry traditional notions of love, passion, and beauty. But roses also recall political affiliations such as the Wild Rose Party of Alberta, and this association conjures scenes of brutal resource extraction and environmental degradation, perhaps serving as a warning. Orange fencing and black town hall chairs appear to speak to this too. Scanlon masterfully riffs on these associations, drawing on medieval tapestries, Dadaist montage, regional motifs, and northern Canadian experience.

One will also notice the recurrence of hands in these works—usually seen reaching up or pointing. There is the initial assumption of direction, but to where, for whom? In *Bison Icon*, an arm the colour of the lake in *Bison Pull*—and also of the sky in *Deep Lake*—is raised in front of a bison who seems unaware of it. Is this because the bison is a dream figure or a symbol of absence? The eye that sits upon a stem growing from a finger on the hand of the blue arm seems a Boschian warning to remain watchful of loss. The hands in *X-Ray Lake 2* recall gestures that were taught to orators to support their rhetoric—a raised flat hand signifies silence, the middle hand with two fingers crooked and the forefinger and thumb raised signifying amazement or wonder, and the hand pointing in the bottom of the painting



might indicate declamation or an order to wait.<sup>1</sup> These ancient Roman manners amplify the separateness depicted—the swan and little black birds pay them and each other no heed. Human systems are incongruous here and yet their impact—note the dead trees, the pile of car tires—is profound. Another hand draws attention to Scanlon's range and humour. To the left of the central hole within the three swans in *Swan Icon* is an elderly hand, two fingers raised. This could refer to medieval Christian paintings, where similar poses denote a blessing, but it could also be a hand imitating a gun. The wildly successful hip hop duo, Run The Jewels, employ a mummified version of this on their album covers but instead of holding their gold chain, Scanlon's fingers have a key hanging from them—another loaded image.

There are some motifs that seem impossible to fully understand, though.

In the *X-Ray Lake* paintings, incongruous objects can be seen in the water: paperclips, a lemon slice, a teacup, a cassette tape. They are not traditional symbols and we must bring our own experiences to them. Is the spoon a Prufrockian symbol for life passing?<sup>2</sup> Or has the artist playfully laid out her materials for us, just as Man Ray laid out some of his in his rayographs?<sup>3</sup> Are these objects therefore anti-authoritarian, anti-rational, anti-nationalist?

What are the psychological stakes in these works? In order to understand the implications of where we live and how we live, we must be willing to spend time observing ourselves and others. Through a kind of psychic locksmithery we open the way to understand motifs and themes in our experiences and their power and consequence. If we can be still for a moment, become watchful, and see behind the hatch, Scanlon shows us what we are part of.

- hannah\_g, 2015

*hannah\_g* is a writer, contemporary storyteller, and inter-disciplinary artist. She has exhibited, performed, and given readings in Canada, Vienna, Romania, England, & Belgium. She has a regular radio show on CKUW. hannah is currently a Co-Director of the Artist Run Centre, *aceartinc.* in Winnipeg, Canada and is the editor of the in-house annual publication, *PaperWait*.

1 <https://iconreader.wordpress.com/2011/05/26/what-does-this-hand-gesture-mean-in-icons/> accessed 3pm, 15 May 2015.

2 Eliot, T. S. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"; Poems 1909-1925. London: Faber & Faber, 1924.

3 Thanks to Rosemary Scanlon for this insight.



#### ARTIST STATEMENT

*X-Ray Lake* explores notions of beauty, romanticism, and decorative arts. Through watercolour paintings narratives appear that examine social rituals, perceptions of place, and occupy the liminal world between fantasy and reality.

The paintings are informed by iconography that represents centuries of accumulated tradition and belief. These historical references are butted up against objects from contemporary life. Everyday objects are elevated to iconographic status or alternatively reduced to a kind of ornamentation.

In some works, the lack of perspective and the deliberate shifts in scale - which can often be found in medieval painting, tapestries or even contemporary textile patterns - serve as a reordering of iconography and a re-telling of landscape and narrative. Representations - old and new - are then organized and reorganized to create new iconography; a new mythology. I am fascinated by the perceptions of kitsch - frivolous and relatively meaningless but at another time, highly valued. Likewise idols and sacred symbols can be highly worshiped but then fall from their grace.

By pushing the materiality of these works, I add another layer. In my main medium, watercolour, I experiment with the addition of iridescent paints and gold leaf to begin a dialogue between media and subject.

- Rosemary Scanlon, 2015

ROSEMARY SCANLON completed her Master's of Fine Arts degree from Glasgow School of Art in 2010, and holds a BFA from Concordia University in Montreal. Scanlon has participated in exhibitions at the Leshner Centre for the Arts (California), Centre for Contemporary Art (Glasgow), the Künstlerhaus Bethanien (Berlin), Galerie Division (Montreal), the Ottawa Art Gallery (Ottawa), and aceart.inc (Winnipeg). Her work has recently been presented in a solo exhibition at the Yukon Art Centre in Whitehorse, YT. Scanlon is a two-time recipient of the Yukon Government Advanced Artist Award, a two-time recipient of the Yukon Government Travel Grant, a recipient of the Canada Council Travel Grant and

Images: *X-Ray Lake*, 28 x 20", 2015 (front), *Swan Icon*, watercolour, 27" x 17.75", 2015 (inside), *Signal*, watercolour, 13.5 x 21.25", 2015 (back)