

*Indeterminate Limits: Expressions Toward a Better Tomorrow*  
By Scotland Cook, Curatorial Intern

Exploring the space between figurative and abstract art, *Indeterminate Limits* brings together five artists from the Canadian Prairies whose iterative and experimental practices push towards a future which is unknown and undefined. Working in various mediums, the artists employ gestural, intuitive, and systematic processes which germinate from their lived experiences and specific views on the world. Although they work with a diverse selection of mediums, Jesse Dyck, Madelyn Gowler, Keeley Haftner, Aralia Maxwell, and Rhayne Vermette have similar modes of production. These artists use materials in discursive and boundary-pushing ways. Working methodically and with care, their processes involving intuitive layering as a means of production.

The title of this exhibition alludes to the infinite possibilities that we always have before us. In math, an indeterminate limit occurs when a set of functions approaches a limit and advances infinitely, never meeting it. This happens, for instance, when zero divided by zero, or one is raised to the power of infinity. Even as the expression approaches its limit, changes occur as it inches closer to that value. Art functions similarly: even though it seems as if every possible photograph has already been taken, every colour of paint has already been mixed, the human project of art making and innovation is never complete. Through their art practices, the artists in *Indeterminate Limits* push towards a future that isn't constrained by the past but is built upon it.

This exhibition developed in response to my desire to better understand the state of contemporary abstract art on the Canadian Prairies. The narrative surrounding abstraction from the region is largely focused on mid-century hard-edge painting by artists like Regina Five and the influence of art world heavyweights such as Barnett Newman and Clement Greenberg, who had visited and lectured at the University of Saskatchewan's Emma Lake Campus in the late fifties and sixties. But this narrative neglects the artistic evolution which has occurred since that point.

While many artists in the Prairies, particularly painters, continue working within the traditions of hard-edge abstraction, or abstract expressionism, and while many others make work that reframes or troubles the legacies of modernism, speaking back to history, there are also artists currently working within abstraction who are pushing the genre past the limits of modernism by using representational imagery or figurative references as a raw material in their art. They cut up, degrade, or overwhelm the figurative elements until they are destroyed, and something new comes about. These artworks straddle the line between abstract and figurative as they approach the aesthetic infinity of the non-representational. They often incorporate or reference older technologies, imbuing them with a sense of melancholy and nostalgia, but they are not backward-looking. Nor do they feel as ideologically bound to the current moment as figurative and representational work tends to be. Instead, these artists allow their works to be undefined and ambiguous, pushing toward an unknown and open-ended tomorrow.

Madelyn Gowler's work often begins with the artist capturing scenes from their daily life with Polaroid photographs. Working intuitively, they then manipulate these images by transferring fragments of the Polaroid onto clear film leader via water emulsion. These delicate pieces of film are then used as negatives to produce analog prints for their Polaroid Frame series while the visual information left behind on the Polaroid post-emulsion transfer is digitally scanned to produce their Emulsion Melt series.

Gowler's film and video installation, *Film about film (1st 2nd and 4th cut)* overlays three different edits of a short film, which is, as the title suggests, a mediation on the process of film development. A stack of three DVD players play transfers of the videos, which can be mixed together by the viewer on a video synthesizer inside of a beat up old iPhone box. A mass of black RCA cables feeds signals into a CRT television balanced on the stack of DVD players. In all of these works, Gowler takes seemingly mundane moments and old technology and repurposes them to create something unconventional and experimental.

In Aralia Maxwell's ongoing *Satisfactions* series, the artist meticulously applies star-shaped dollops of brightly coloured acrylic paint from pastry piping bags to small, blocky supports creating organic, fractal-like forms. Works in the series were initially figurative, referencing pastries and cakes, but over time, Maxwell delved into abstraction, seeing it as a more productive and open-ended way of working. Maxwell is from Saskatchewan, a province with a rich history of modernist painting, particularly hard-edge abstraction. In her work, she subverts nearly every modernist tenet of painting – rejecting the monumental in favour of the miniature, media specificity in favour of hybridity, and the flat surface of the picture plane in favour of one that is deliciously textural. She has developed a specific concoction of acrylic medium, paint, and pigment which supports itself and allows her to intuitively yet methodically produce these small objects that are not quite sculpture, not quite painting, not quite representational, and not fully abstract. She pushes both the limits of what paint can do, and the limits of representation—at what point do her works, which are the same size as baked goods, and piped with candy-coloured icing-like paint, no longer read as such? She pushes this reference past the point of obliteration, into a new realm.

Jesse Dyck works with a large collection of found family photographs documenting scenes of everyday life in Winnipeg in the 1990s. These images were retrieved by the artist from a dumpster behind his Osborne Village apartment. To create the works in this exhibition, Dyck has scratched into, torn, burnt, painted, and otherwise distressed the images in a way that mimics the deterioration and wear that affects materials, cities, and living beings over time. Winnipeg is a neglected city with few champions, and the treatment of these discarded family photos speaks to the realities of life in Winnipeg and many other Canadian cities. The truth within these works is material, gestural, and formal. They address adjacent forms of expression and existence, while being honest about the ways that geography, place and class inform our subjective experience.

Rhayne Vermette's video, *Black Rectangle* was made by attaching various strips of repurposed 8mm film to clear leader, then digitally scanning it, destroying the original analog copy in the process. This meticulous operation of cutting, splicing and attaching film fragments Vermette took several months; labour is integral to the aesthetic and concept of this work. An undulating and rhythmic churn of distorted static and white noise, captured during the digitization process of the spliced film reel, plays throughout the runtime of the piece. The unplayable and half-destroyed film reel is on display in a nearby vitrine, presented in conversation with the ninety second video and underlining the physical nature of the work. The labour of creation—of building a future from the materials of the past—is necessary, important, and worthy of celebration.

In Keeley Haftner's *Tesselescence (Woven Photograph)* series, the artist cut up what she terms "salvaged photos" into strips, weaving them into tessellated diamond patterns, reminiscent of the geometric op artworks of the 1960s and 70s. These images were unwanted, donated to Haftner by her friends and family. The modernist references here are obvious, and powerful - especially as the artist is woman working referencing a discourse dominated primarily by men. Haftner also alludes to the gendered nature of labour in her process: weaving is seen as a feminine craft and does not get the respect it deserves. By using this process, as well as the smaller scale and serial nature of works which reference the hyper masculine world of abstract painting, Haftner is making a powerful statement about aesthetics and the underlying power structures which support these fields of art.

These artists' processes are both destructive and generative. By using salvaged materials, old photographs, and outdated technologies, they illustrate how the future must eat the past, or to put it more kindly, how we must build tomorrow with the raw materials of yesterday. They model honesty, humility, sustainability, and empathy as they orient us toward a future that is undetermined and indeterminate, full of possibility.