

What Do Ranchers and Heavy-Duty Mechanics Say to the Ocean?

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I live in the mountainous landscape of southwestern Alberta, about as far from the sea as one can be. What do ranchers, heavy-duty mechanics, teachers, and secretaries from this part of Canada *say* to the ocean? How do we see Canada's extensive coastal waters in relation to our wheat fields and coalmines? Admittedly, the inquiry became personal; I had not considered Canada as an ocean nation.

In my hopes to engage all kinds of individuals in conversations about their relationship with the ocean, I painted a three-part piece that was intentionally large and visually accessible for us *inlanders*: a single humpback whale to represent Ocean; a grouping of hands representative of Humanity; and three strips of overlapping canvas for the conversation between the two. The intent was to invite community members to write their imagined dialogue onto these strips. Prior to the global pandemic, arrangements had been made at Calgary's new Central Library, a cafe in Lethbridge, a rural K-12 school, and several smaller local gatherings with the hopes of accessing and interacting with a broad demographic. I ran pilot "test runs" at a coffee shop, a seniors' complex, and a fellow artist's studio. But social restrictions took place the day a group of enthusiastic kindergarteners visited my studio to "talk to the whale," and the day before I was to head into Calgary; as the pandemic spread across the globe, my access to Alberta's free-ranging populous was suddenly cut off.

Social media became my new platform to gather contributions. Invitations to contribute through personal emails, Instagram, and Facebook were open to anyone from the three prairie provinces. I noticed a marked difference in comments from all three social media platforms. Now, individuals had time to think about what they wanted to say. Some pondered the question for weeks, had conversations together, played with ideas, and gathered quotes. Original poetry and songs were created. Entire families got involved. Individuals within their circle were invited to participate. Everything that was sent to me was transcribed onto the canvas strips with permanent coloured markers. Each contributor received a photo of their comment so they could visualize their words amongst the others. An unexpected outcome was the cohesive nature of the writing. As the lone scribe, I could lay out text as its own design element. Sentences wove in and out of undulating lines created by papers collaged onto the canvas strips to provide compositional structure. I was also able to ensure that each contribution was legible, even where one overlapped with another—something that would have been difficult to ensure under my original plan.

The middle "conversation" piece is composed of two narrower strips of canvas pinned over a larger base canvas. Colours from the two flanking paintings, Ocean and Humanity, were applied to unify the entire piece. It is on this piece that the kindergartners wrote their words to the whale. Their large, wobbly letters interact with selected fragments of text I found particularly poignant, repeated over and over for emphasis. These words, combined with the handwritten words of the very young, seemed a fitting foundation for the thoughtful, provocative lines contributed by so many individuals.

What Was Accomplished?

There were conversations. Memories were evoked and stories were shared, some of which I was privileged to hear. But more importantly, I participated in the asking of searching questions. What actually got written on these canvases

was a fraction of what was spoken. How does one measure that? One individual shared that she and her friends had an animated discussion ranging from plastics to politics, mixed with memories of clam digs and surfing. It got too much to summarize; she simply wrote, “Thank-you.”

And quiet gazes. Individuals stood in front of the whale long moments and spoke no words at all. “Why does this make me want to cry...?” one person asked. Another stood in front of the hands and wondered at the clamorous nature of them. I hadn’t intended them to be that way, I replied. We’re takers, he said, we must change.

As for the artist? She spent days, weeks, in the solitude of her studio, painting a great whale she knew nothing about. As the whale took form, the two of them began a dialogue, spaced out between stretches of silence as they observed one another, curious, thinking about the other’s world. They are not the same after this encounter, of that I am certain.