

The UNdesirables

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I have this book called *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* by William H Whyte. One of the chapters of the book is titled "The 'Undesirables'", with the word "undesirables" in quotation marks. This is a thing that comes up in discussions about public space, the "problem" marginalized people being in those spaces. And when you talk about the undesirability of certain people within certain spaces, it leads to thinking about my proposals for projects in public spaces — a lot of what is in the exhibition is from proposals that were rejected. What makes something more desirable, or less?

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Primrose is actually based on a news story I saw in 2012. You know how they often end a news broadcast, after whatever horrifying events have happened in that day, with an upbeat story. The upbeat story was about *Primrose* the donkey who was born prematurely, and her legs didn't develop, and she had these little pink casts on her leg. When I was shortlisted for this competition in Toronto I remembered the story, partially because the site is in front of a church. The church, St. Basil's, had sold some land to a developer and the developer gifted back part of that land to increase the size of a park. I was thinking about this donkey's story in relation to the church and the story of Jesus meeting humble outcasts or healing the sick. It weirdly took something that's very transient, like this little odd news item and sort of solidified it into this massive monument, a 12 foot high bronze donkey. It also plays on the history of the Western equestrian monument in public spaces.

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This is a maquette for the original proposal that I did for the Olympic Village site. The city had put out a call asking for work that somehow had something to do with the Olympics, because often in a call for proposals there's something about the specificities of the site. I had already been thinking about the connection between the tree stump and the Greek column, and I decided to make five massive tree stumps, referencing the five Olympic rings but also the history of the site, and the old growth forest that was once there. Shockingly I won, but the landscape architect was not very happy because the stumps would be thirty feet across, just huge. The public art consultant called me and said they wanted a new proposal, and I didn't have to reference the Olympics this time, so I went back to what had been my original idea, a bird in the plaza, and *The Birds* ended up being made. The *Stumps* were my first rejection, in a way.

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Playtime was for the B.C. Childrens' Hospital and B.C. Women's Hospital and Health Center. I thought about the site, and proposed to work with Shannon Oksanen, who's a very good friend who I've known for a very long time, and who had cancer as a kid and had spent a lot of time at the hospital. It seemed to me she had a real insight into that sort of experience and what that actually means. I think they had hoped we would do a series of sculptures that would go around the "wellness walkway", as a sort of journey. But when we looked at the space and where we could put things, in fact that site was quite limited for placing sculpture.

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The figure of *The Dandy* was from a piece for a private developer in Burnaby for Station Square. It's really a difficult site because it's like right where there's sort of a sort of SkyTrain comes zone and it's like there's a Holiday Inn Express there's a Starbucks, there are big giant signs for Bed Bath and Beyond and Boston Pizza. I started thinking about all that, the shopping center and everything that brings together. Because when you think about the origin of the shopping centre, the dandy belongs to that. And I was thinking about the game Monopoly as well; I wanted to make these figures that were like Monopoly game pieces, but not the actual game pieces. So there's a melon, there's a dog, there's an octopus, there's a dandy and there's a shoe.

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Sheherazade is the name of a strain of cannabis, taken from name of the story-telling woman from *One Thousand and One Nights*. Sometimes they use these very romantic or exotic names for types of marijuana. Scheherazade is a woman who saves her life by recounting these tales and we think about the court that that being under the influence of marijuana. Don't watch the reverie associated with bad and everything which I thought was kind of very in keeping with that sort of ideas as well. I'm really desperate to make a very large bud, but it seems like no one is having it.

Another great title for this would be *Dejeuner sur l'herbe*.

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I came across a funny story about how someone tried to use camels on the gold trail. There was a bit of a hubbub because I used the wrong kind of camel — originally they used the Bactrian camel, but I don't like the Bactrian camel. I think it's an unattractive camel. So I chose to use the one-hump Dromedary. I liked this idea of this animal because they didn't actually fit in. Which is another case of undesirability. There was an ad in the paper about the camels that had been brought in to work. and then it was an article about how the camels actually couldn't get along with the pack mules or with dogs, and their feet got cut up on the rocks and so on. I guess they ended up putting them up to pasture and then some of them escaped and were running in the woods. The last sighting was in the thirties and the idea that somehow there were camels running around in the woods made me laugh. I kept thinking about how we have a kind of mythology where animals are symbols that represent Canada. The beaver, the moose, here in BC it's the orca, but the camel is not part of that. And there's also again this idea of the equestrian monument but the camel is such an ungainly creature in a way.

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Give A Little Bit was a project for a traffic island in Montreal North, in an area that gets described as ‘troubled’. There was a lot of gentrification happening in this neighbourhood, and there had been police shootings, and I was thinking about these temporary memorials to people that spring up in public spaces. I was thinking that actually people need to talk about those things, about death, about police brutality, even though those are things you're not supposed to talk about at Thanksgiving dinner, along with religion or politics or some other things. These are just no go areas. But I think I'm always quite keen to talk about those things.

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Lifeboat was for a community pool in Surrey. They did this thing where the public art people did a call, but the call had like a theme to it, and the theme was "a journey". That's always tricky for me. One of the things that I really hate is being given thematics that you have to work to because it makes me feel like I'm doing a social studies project and I'm in Grade 6. I don't think I really need help coming up with ideas.

I think a really big focus of Surrey's public art program, and that call, was the fact that it's a city that's really growing quickly. There's a lot of immigration into the city and constant demographic shifts. And so I was thinking about the lifeboat as something that shows "we're all in this together". But at the same time probably a lifeboat is not the smartest idea for a pool.

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The *Birds* should actually be the first on the list because that was the first one I did. That would've been 2008. Rush Limbaugh was like banging on about immigrants taking 'our jobs' But there was an article the Province too about invasive species — the toads, the giant hogweed. When I was doing my research because I tried to figure out what kind of birds to use. I came up with a sparrow because the sparrow was also a bird that's been introduced but people don't actually realize it's not a native species. I was thinking about what is alien and what is not alien, which is very problematic when you get into it. And then I made it so big that it becomes kind of otherworldly in a way. Of course we're showing the tiny ones, but those are still bigger than actual sparrows.

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We had to refurbish *The Birds* because they got trashed, as you know. And then there was the ornithological conference* that we were basically aiming toward. I've never been as popular. Seriously. When we reinstalled them like we were working toward launching for the conference and I said to Eric Fredericksen, the head of public art at the City of Vancouver, that I really wanted to do a temporary piece, like something using the bus shelters which I think I had applied for before but had been turned down. I wanted something that wasn't going to require massive infrastructure and he said why don't you propose something. So I proposed to do this series of watercolors of birds for the transit shelters. I decided to create this kind of conference of birds, which is also the name of a famous Persian book, *The Conference of the Birds*, where all the birds get together to name a king. And that ties in to the ornithological conference.

* *The 27th International Ornithological Congress and International Bird Festival was held in Vancouver in August, 2018*

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Beekeeping for All was a project that I did for *Climate is Culture* which was a project of the Cape Farewell Foundation in Toronto in 2013, in collaboration with an architect friend of mine, Janna Levitt. I think I got invited because someone thought I was really environmentalist, and I don't think I am but I feel like my work has become about that in a weird way because I'm interested in animals. Janna and I proposed to go to Japan and do research on honeybees. We met with a Japanese architect called Fujimori, and we went to the Ginza Honeybee Project and then spoke to them as well. The honeybee project has these hives on top of these buildings in the middle of the city. When we got back to Toronto we decided to propose an information kiosk, a prototype for a kiosk that would could go into low income neighbourhoods, because there's a big issue with food deserts and be used in education for kids, and then also start a beekeeping school, like the one in Paris in the Luxembourg Gardens. The project is a kind of anomaly for me because it wasn't so much sculpture as it was a social project, actually about the interaction.

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I was shortlisted for this project in the West Don Lands, which is a new area of Toronto. A lot of the time you look at a new site is being built up, and lot of these developments and buildings and everything all looks really generic. And so it's a strange kind of thing where you're trying to think it's like oh how can I make this interesting for myself but mostly for myself and for other people too. So I was thinking about *Jane Jacobs* in particular sort of like because I know she was just so iconic in Toronto. So I decided it's like I would propose like a monument to her. You know so many statues of women in public spaces or statues of women in general are not statues of actual people, but instead are of the idea of a woman, representing justice or some other kind of thing. It's not a real woman who's done anything. I she was eighty-nine when she died and she had glasses on in this one photograph. I decided to cool mirror-lensed glasses because I thought those would reflect people, maybe showing them that they are capable of doing the kind of activism that she was known for. It's like a call to arms in a way. And you know, so many statues of women in public spaces are not statues of actual people, they are more often the figure of a woman representing justice or the figure of a representing some other kind of thing. They're not statues of a real woman who's done anything.

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So this was the last thing that I've been shortlisted for which is for a memorial for Terry Fox in Toronto. It was very confusing in terms of a brief because they wanted something that was about Terry Fox but not about Terry Fox — they really were very clear about not wanting something that was representational, because they said there were a lot of existing monuments to Terry Fox out there. So I took them at their word and did not do that. They wanted something that would embody his spirit. Emily Dickinson said 'hope is a thing with feathers', which I think is beautiful. And I also thought about the idea of the fable, and the story was *The Robin and the Fox*. I had real difficulty with it because I don't want to make another monument to another guy doing something heroic. And I also wanted to make a space that was really for people. I wanted to make a space that was going to be good for old people, and for young people, because I find the way we design spaces it's not great for them and it's not great for people who have any kind of disability, and they're usually not places where women and vulnerable people feel safe. I wanted to make something that was welcoming and maybe slightly girly, with flowers and benches and some nice places to sit.

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