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## And Even Dust Can Burst into Flames, Genevieve Robertson—Carbon Studies: Walking in the Dark

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# And Even Dust Can Burst into Flames, Genevieve Robertson—Carbon Studies: Walking in the Dark

by Caitlin Chaisson



## *About the Author*

*Caitlin Chaisson is an independent curator and critic. Her research-based practices intersect around questions pertaining to cultural production and the environment. She is Founder and Director of Far Afield, an artist-led initiative that supports regionally connected artistic and curatorial practices. Elsewhere, she has held positions and short-term contracts at e-flux (New York), Bard College (Annandale-on-Hudson), Emily Carr University of Art and Design (Vancouver), AKA Artist-Run Centre (Saskatoon), and the Anvil Centre (New Westminster). Her writing has appeared in Canadian Art, C Magazine, Espace Magazine, Hyperallergic, and MOMUS, among others. She is currently an MA candidate in Curatorial Studies at CCS Bard.*



## *About the Artist*

*Genevieve Robertson is a visual artist with a background in environmental studies. Her work involves place-based, often collaborative projects that respond to land and water in a time of large-scale industrial exploitation and climate precarity. She has presented her work in venues including the Libby Leshgold Gallery (Vancouver), the Pensacola Museum (Florida), Or Gallery (Vancouver), The New Gallery (Calgary), Walter Philips Gallery (Banff), Access Gallery (Vancouver), the Burnaby Art Gallery (Burnaby), and the Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery (UBC). Her work has been published with the Centre for Alterity Studies (Scotland), The Capilano Review (Vancouver) and The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (Toronto).*

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*... even after millennia they [artworks] have the ability to shine for us, as they did on the day that brought them into the world. That is why they are the most worldly of all things. They are the only ones that are produced for a world supposed to outlast each mortal human being.*

—Hannah Arendt

*Lichen* (2019) is the largest drawing in a new body of work by Genevieve Robertson titled *Carbon Studies: Walking in the Dark* (2019), which was presented in a solo exhibition of the same name at Access Gallery, Vancouver, Canada (see Fig. 1). Branching out like bronchioles, the smokey tonal values of *Lichen* are created using carbon-based compounds—specifically the coal, graphite, and forest-fire derived charcoal the artist found and collected on walks in the Kootenay region of interior British Columbia. Grinding the materials with a pestle and mixing them with water and gum arabic, the pigments are then dispersed in inky plumes that produce alluvial patterns as the granular sediments are brushed across the surface of the paper.

*Carbon Studies* emerges on the heels of 2018, a year where British Columbia was ravaged by fire and endured a nearly month-long state of emergency. The worst fire season on record—and the second record-setting season in a row—2,115 fires burned 1.35 million hectares (Strong and Wang 2019), disproportionately affecting on-reserve First Nations populations, and surrounding Indigenous territories (Teegee 2018). For the majority of the province's population however, the experience of the fires materialized in the haze of smoke that travelled vast distances on global jet streams, prompted advisories



Figure 1. Robertson, Genevieve. *Carbon Studies: Walking in the Dark*, 2019. Detail of Lichen. Rachel Topham photo.

for children, elderly, and the immunocompromised in local meteorological reporting, and carried particulate matter that reduced visibility and darkened even the longest days of summer. While the sun was rising at 5:55 a.m. in some of the northern parts of the province, sensor-controlled streetlights remained lit until well into the late morning.

Smoke complicated the diurnal cycles of daily activities, but the conditions of darkness invoked by *Carbon Studies* (2019) suggest the complications of much longer temporalities. The bulbous, spiny, biomorphic shapes Robertson draws depict fossils from the Carboniferous Period of the late Paleozoic era (see Fig. 2–3). Once-living plants that died in prehistoric times—and after millions of years became the source of synthetic hydrocarbons now burned at accelerated rates—are drawn by Robertson using the remains of materials from landscapes decimated by climate-induced wildfire in the present era. *Carbon Studies* (2019) makes possible an understanding that fossils are not ancient harbingers of times past, but complex couplings that “manifest and in manifesting indicate something about the state of affairs in the current form and organization of existents” (Povinelli 2016, 68). The drawings in the series are resolutely present in their immediacy, and as viewers, we are able to “feel a trace of something that

exists in it before it” (Povinelli 2016, 76). Temporalities are much more entangled than simple distinctions between past and present. The material vitality of *feeling something in it before it* connects vast temporal spectrums.



Figure 2. Robertson, Genevieve. *Carbon Studies: Walking in the Dark*, 2019. Installation view. Rachel Topham photo.

Lichen are a complex mutualistic arrangement of fungi and cyanobacteria, one of the oldest living organisms, and a vital feature of the delicate boreal ecosystems in Northern Alberta. The environments that support lichen are made increasingly vulnerable from fracking and pipeline construction in that region. The “burning ambitions of fossil-making man” are creating “hot projects” (Haraway 2016, 46) that are accelerating the warming and drying of ecosystems. The arboreal landscape of British Columbia, for instance, is being made increasingly prone to megafires. Robertson’s drawings expose the filaments that conjoin the rapid pace of extraction to the long duration of ancient life forms.

The metaphor of darkness that frames *Carbon Studies* can be interpreted in a number of ways: the darkness of the smoke-filled trails Robertson walked in order to collect the drawing materials; the darkness of not knowing the extent of the sacrifices and extinctions of life that will be made as ecological breakdown accelerates; the darkness of grief and eco-melancholy. Each of these interpretations are certainly possible, and in fact crucial, to understanding Robertson’s process and artistic motivations. But the darkness suggested by the series is complicated by an unusual sparkle in the drawings—a quality observed by one of my upper-level drawing students, who excitedly pointed the detail out to me. The crystalline carbon in graphite, which Robertson found in the West Kootenay region where it is mined in large quantities, produces a shimmer that does not document well in reproductions (see Fig. 4–5). It can only be experienced in a close and intimate view of the drawing itself. Initially wary and dismissive of my student’s excitement about the prettiness of this aspect of the materials, I’m now inclined to think through Hannah Arendt’s repeated assertion that artworks possess the capacity to shine. For Arendt, artworks are shimmering antidotes to the futility of mortal life. Even though the course of nature wills all fire to ash, Arendt suggests that art can revert and reinvigorate such that “even dust can burst into flames” (Arendt 1998, 168). The shiny and combustion-centered conditions of artwork in Arendt’s formulation are unusually specific observations from the political theorist, but perhaps the regenerative possibilities of fire are perfectly aligned for someone who “is preeminently the theorist of beginnings” (Canovan 1998, vii). While the contemporary conditions and effects of megafire are quite different from previous incarnations of naturally occurring fire, I’m nevertheless proposing a close examination of *Carbon Studies* alongside Arendt’s consideration of artworks as involving qualities of luminosity, durability, deadness, and fire (Arendt 1998, 69). What relationships might the *Carbon Studies* series have to life, death, and environment, and how might it be possible to take the glimmer seriously when navigating futures, geographies, and climates that are becoming rapidly unrecognizable?



Figure 3. Robertson, Genevieve. *Carbon Studies: Walking in the Dark*, 2019. Detail of Broad Leaf. Rachel Topham photo.

Arendt's political theories rely on distinctions between the world and the earth, and between the lasting and the passing, which has grounded some of the most pivotal contemporary social theory and cultural studies available to the environmental humanities, including Donna Haraway's temporalities that linger in a present of ongoingness in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016) and Elizabeth Povinelli's investigation of the conditions of categories of existents, particularly Life and Nonlife, in *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (2016). In Arendt's analysis, the earth is the natural environment while the world is everything that is built by human work. The world is meant to outlast the mortality of human life and transcend the entropic tendencies of nature by way of work, which is vital to "bestow a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human time" (Povinelli 2016, 8). This is the foundation of Arendt's analysis: a durable human world, built upon the earth. Work always does violence to nature, according to Arendt, because work is always unnatural. Writing in the aftermath of the Second World War, the beginning of the Cold War, the advent of the space race, and under the shadow of the atomic bomb, the destructiveness of the formation of the world to the earth was never

something Arendt doubted, but rather, she perceived the scale of *just how* destructive the making of the world would be to natural and organic life “a political question of the first order” (3). The world for Arendt was also never fully encompassing, informed by her experience as a stateless citizen adrift during the fascist worldings of Nazi Germany. Alongside the world, there also exist conditions of worldlessness.

Since the time of Arendt’s writing, the lastingness of the world, particularly the lastingness of the world-as-globalized-capital, is radically in question. The antagonism between the world and the earth has reached a feverish pitch. Whereas Arendt’s analysis considers the earth as a necessary condition for—but also only ever *a victim to*—the world, today’s eco-theorists consider the way the earth exacts its own bids upon the formation of the world. Arendt might be re-considered today through Povinelli’s prompt: “the question is not *whether* these meteorological and geological forms of existence are playing a part in the current government of the demos. Clearly, they already do, economically, politically, and socially. The question is what role has been assigned to them as they emerge from a low background hum to making a demand on the political order” (Povinelli 2016, 143). The formation of the world comes at the expense of the earth, but the earth has always been instructive in the formation of the world. The world is only manifest through human invention and work, which can be alienating and fallible—leaving some forms of life worldless. As the earth makes new demands on the world, certain formations of existence will be extinguished, and new organizations between the worldly and the worldless will be configured.

Endless states of emergency are generally incompatible with any sense of lasting durability of the world. And yet fire, one of the primary causes of declarations of emergency in the Canadian west, “is an essential element for ongoing, as well as an agent of double death, the killing of ongoingness” (Haraway 2016, 44). Liveliness and death are the multipronged effects of fire. Resurgence and regeneration accompany loss. This seemingly paradoxical relationship can also be understood in Haraway’s analogous understanding of grief: “Grief is a path to understanding entangled shared living and dying . . . . We are at stake in each other’s company” (39). Grief is central to Robertson’s practice, appearing in many of the artist’s writings and personal statements, and was a motif that appeared repeatedly throughout the exhibition at Access Gallery. The drawings are made using a figure-ground relationship that results in the depiction of the fossil floating in an empty pictorial space. While the isolation and groundlessness of the subject on the page, arranged in linear grids, evokes some form of scientific process, the drawings remain—in many ways—ambiguous and abstract. Robertson’s drawings don’t follow the traditions of scientific taxonomy that would lend themselves to easy identification and classification. The suggestiveness of scientific study appears otherwise

in the collective view of the installation, which creates moments where some mark-making appears mirrored, or one drawing seems to be continued on the adjacent page. The formal effect is very reminiscent of Rorschach ink blots used in psychological testing. *Carbon Studies* (2019) is not a disentangled view from the withdrawn point of an objective observer, but a personal and emotive investigation.



Figure 4–5. Robertson, Genevieve. *Carbon Studies: Walking in the Dark*, 2019. Detail of Scapula and Apoida (Bee). Rachel Topham and Blaine Campbell photos.

Is it possible to take up the sparkling quality of *Carbon Studies* (2019) whilst being resistant to materialist silvery linings? Reflecting on Haraway’s understanding of grief, living is not the silver lining of dying, but instead, grief enables the implications and entanglements of living and dying to be experienced. The sparkle, then, does not need to be the light at the end of a tunnel, or a pretty aesthetic trick. The luminous quality could be considered useful in considering how we navigate under conditions of low visibility, in times of uncertainty—despite the feeling of walking in the dark. The sparkle could be considered in relation to wayfinding in circumstances where there is no explicitly defined scopic terminus. The sparkle is multifaceted and diffuse, it complicates the clear distinctions of the borders of the object. Wayfinding, for Robertson, is an integral component of research that is motivated by a practice of visiting. Robertson visits contested sites of extraction by walking through them; visits contaminated shorelines



Figure 6. Robertson, Genevieve. *Carbon Studies: Walking in the Dark*, 2019. Detail of Protorthoptera. Blaine Campbell photo.

by swimming in them; visits with the residents, scientists, conservationists, and activists who have deep stakes in the places that inform her artwork. Visiting these people and these sites allows Robertson to either collect—or be gifted—the silt, salt, crude bitumen, coal, charcoal, graphite, lichen, calcium, algae, and plant dyes used to create her drawings. But even more so, with each visit, Robertson becomes more deeply entangled (see Fig. 6). As Haraway takes up from Arendt, “to think with an enlarged mentality means that one trains one’s imagination to go visiting” (Haraway 2016, 127), and visiting is not an easy practice. It not only requires a sustained effort, but it begins a commitment to relationships that configure new relations as well as new obligations.

*Carbon Studies: Walking in the Dark* continues Robertson’s pursuit of a “sustained effort to capture an elemental and lively quality embedded in these fossil and plant derived materials” (Belcher 2019), and certainly, the carbon-based sparkle manifests that liveliness. For Arendt, the shine of the artwork exists outside of all mortal time, and for Robertson, the sparkle is an effect of co-emergence. But for both theorist and artist, the glimmer is an important conduit for a temporal long view of commonality and lastingness.

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