



Laura Vickerson

The Between



Laura Vickerson *The Between*

Nickle Galleries

29 January – 2 April 2016

Curated by Michele Hardy
Essay by Mackenzie Kelly-Frère



UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
Nickle Galleries



Michele Hardy *Foreword*

On behalf of Nickle Galleries, it is a pleasure to reintroduce *Series*, a program of exhibitions begun in 1999 that ran until the former Nickle Arts Museum closed in 2010 in preparation for its move into the new Taylor Family Digital Library. *Series* was developed for mid-career artists to create and show new works – something not regularly provided by other public galleries in Calgary. The program was well received and featured many well-known Western Canadian artists including: Suzanne Franks, Gord Ferguson, Shelley Ouellet and Amy Gogarty.

Laura Vickerson is an artist I have watched with great interest since meeting her a decade ago. Although she has participated in group exhibitions at the Nickle (*There and Gone*, 2005; *Folly: Château Mathieu*, 2014), *The Between* is her first solo exhibition and wonderful addition to *Series*. Vickerson's work draws on the familiar, on the stuff of daily life, piled up, re-arranged, altered, and reimagined. Through her intervention chairs, newspapers, doilies and laundry take on new proportions and demand renewed consideration. Abundance is an ongoing theme in her work as is the body. *The Between* references both, with hundreds of white clothing items salvaged, stitched together, and suspended in a cloud-like mass. The garments blur much as individuals, viewed from a distance or through the dispassionate lens of the media, merge. Vickerson's absent bodies are further united in some common aim. Facing downward, they are oriented in the same direction as if they are heading slightly east of north.

The Between is surrounded on four sides by rows and rows of precious, hand-woven Asian carpets drawn from the Nickle's collections. They offer an intriguing counterpoint to Vickerson's white cloth cloud. Many are madder

red – a root dye that produces a warm, rich red. The colour of blood. Their thick, luscious wool surfaces contrast with the crisp white cottons and linens. Both clothes and carpets were made by anonymous workers – likely women – obscured by history, economics, and gender politics.

In juxtaposing these abundant discarded clothes and massed carpet artefacts, *The Between* alludes to the lives and productive bodies of women knowable only through the textiles they have left behind. The installation recalls the global movement of cloth but also of bodies – most recently those of Syrian refugees. They move through time and space, yet, so often remain fettered, coloured by their ‘otherness.’ Like carpets. Although some carpets may have been made for local use, many were made specifically for Western markets. Even prayer carpets – so linked in Western minds with Muslim religiosity – were often made to satisfy Western demand.

Museums have long been compared to cemeteries or mausoleums – places where artefacts come to rest. Many artists have worked with museum collections, offering different voices, different views of history and exposing museums’ staid traditions of display and interpretation. *The Between* adds to this genre a sensitive, original pairing that provokes new ways of seeing and of understanding the Nickle’s holdings and Vickerson’s own, evolving oeuvre.

I would like to thank Laura Vickerson for creating such a profoundly beautiful installation. I look forward to sharing it with the public and receiving their feedback. I would also like to thank Vickerson’s studio assistants: Jennifer Crighton, Monica Boyd, Abbey Bennett, Kasia Koralewska-Gallant and Carmela Di Flumeri as well as our installation assistant Brenda Fox. I am fortunate to work with a terrific team at the Nickle – thank you all for your creativity and help. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the ongoing support of Libraries and Cultural Resources at the University of Calgary as well as the Alberta Foundation of the Arts. We couldn’t do it without you.

Michele Hardy, Curator

Engsi (door carpet),
Turkmen, circa 1900
Jean and Marie Erikson Collection
Nickle Galleries





Laura Vickerson *Statement*

I am interested in the stuff of life. In this installation my intention is to transport viewers to a fictional timeless space. In essence, I aim to transport them to *The Between*, a place that explores different planes of existence and the passage through life to death. There are elements that are delicate, luminous and ethereal, symbolic now that their function as garments have been removed. The carpets stand in apparent contrast, rich artifacts made dense by the embedded histories of past lives. Voices emerge and fade and through them, past, present and future co-exist, revealing the complexities of “being”.

White is the absence of colour. It is the colour representing death and mourning in many Asian cultures, while in the West it is associated with purity and innocence. In choosing to work with white clothing, both of these meanings are significant. All are born into this world in a state of purity. Upon death, everyone is entitled to reclaim this status. The cloud of clothing is ephemeral, silent and ghostly.

The clothing was collected from secondhand stores, selected because of the intuitive and haptic responses I had to the cloth and the garments. While sewing them together I pondered each item – who wore it and what was the personal story attached to it? How did they come to the Goodwill? Did children simply grow out of their clothes? Had someone died, their clothes donated after the ritual of family members cleaning out closets? What

about the pretty white summer dress –brand new for a girl of six with the tags still on – did something happen to her? Clothing speaks about identity and the outward appearance an individual chooses to present. I think of this too when working with these garments. Cloth is an intimate, sensual material that we wear on our bodies next to our skin to keep us warm and, at times, to comfort us. I am mindful of all these associations when handling these individual pieces of clothing: I find a camisole; soft, fragile and lovingly worn out, or a bright white cotton dress reminiscent of freshly laundered sheets. Gravity comes into play when the clothing is hung – a skirt billows out and arms hang down, implying the corporeal.

The Asian carpets that line the walls belong to the collections of Nickle Galleries. In having the privilege to work with these artifacts, my intention was to integrate them into the installation, working in tandem with the clothing piece, not in its service. They are sumptuous artifacts that were also once living objects used in daily life to contribute to the beauty and comfort of the domestic setting. They are robust with vibrant colour and rich patterns. They are the colour of blood pulsing through veins. They are heavy, dense and grounded, echoing the voices of families who walked and sat upon them. Their decorative patterns reveal cultural narratives. They are sturdy and meant to last and my intention is to utilize the embedded meanings and pay tribute to them both as artifacts while at the same time acknowledging their purpose in past lives.

The collaboration of historical pieces within contemporary art provides a rich conceptual territory to mine. Like the rugs, the clothing is no longer functional and serves as a symbol of lives lived. Many garments are sewn together to create a whole. Similarly, each carpet is recognized as an individual object but also contributes to a whole: moving the reading of the work back and forth from the personal to the collective. There are differences too, between the labour-intensive production of handmade carpets and mass-produced, machined clothing, between the historical and the contemporary. There are also meanings to be explored with regard to cultural and ethnic differences

Laura Vickerson in studio, 2015
photograph by Kasia Koralewska-Gallant



between societies, religions and our lives within these realities. Consequently, I see this installation as a means to coax out of these textile objects what lies enmeshed in their threads.

I have incorporated recorded ambient sounds of people in public outdoor spaces into the work. Voices emerge and then fade out of range. There are children, exuberant and joyful. Bikes ride by and dogs scamper past along side their owners, tags jingling. Groups of people stroll along, speaking different languages – English, Hindi, Arabic, Cantonese, and others. A patient father answers his child’s question. These are examples of everyday humanity at its finest. When recorded, it was the present but is now the past, providing small points of focus for the viewer within the installation.

I take great pleasure in being present and observing all facets of humanity. The world is a fascinating place. My pleasure, however, is always matched by a kind of sorrow, the recognition of the ongoing forces at play that may take it all away from us.

Laura Vickerson



Laura Vickerson and Mackenzie Kelly-Frère, 2015, photograph by Kasia Koralewska-Gallant



Mackenzie
Kelly-Frère *Touching Absence*

... it is hard for us to live with the dead, not knowing what to do with their clothes, in which they still hang, inhabiting their closets and dressers; not knowing how to cloth them¹ Peter Stallybrass

The Between conjures an uncanny space in which absence is palpable. A canopy composed of hundreds of pieces of empty clothing is lit from within, looming above walls covered with hand woven carpets. Conversations, children playing and noises from the street are audible. Fading in and out of earshot, disembodied voices are reified with a nebulous corporeality in a space lined with somatic cloth(ing). Skirt, carpet, blouse, t-shirt – each is different in typology yet all speak to and of the body. At once intimate and overwhelming, Laura Vickerson’s *The Between* invites the contemplation of losses both personal and communal.

Vickerson’s body of work is woven from strands familiar and strange. Fascinated with “the stuff of life”² the artist has always worked with the materials she finds at hand. Ticket stubs, flowers from the garden, clothing, wax and thread are transformed through accumulation and careful reconfiguration. With patience, Vickerson will pin, stitch or string many smaller elements together to create a form or alter a space. This methodology is labour intensive, involving odd practicalities like collecting bags of flower petals or painstakingly stitching paper detritus to cloth in a pattern drawn from a Ming dynasty robe. The artist’s work requires equal measures of complex planning and intuitive material sensitivity. Vickerson’s artworks evoke an immediate intimacy, partially because of the familiar, everyday quality of her materials. Following recognition and the corollary comfort it elicits is often the sense of something new, less familiar or even unsettling.





Two older works *Cataract* (1992) and *Velvet* (1995) exemplify the intimate uncanniness that Vickerson's oeuvre often manifests. In *Cataract*, Vickerson strung together hundreds of pieces of household glassware forming a suspended screen, jostled slightly by fans placed on either side. Images of hands were projected onto the cascade of glass objects suspended in an endless fall through space. The sound of glass tinkling as the pieces gently collided with one another was unsettling when paired with the imagery of disembodied hands – at once threatening and vulnerable. In *Velvet*, Vickerson and a group of assistants hand-pinned thousands of rose petals in a fish-scale fashion to two massive veils of bridal netting. Each veil descended into and then flooded the space with the colour of blood and the scent of roses. Shown at two galleries in Canada, the final iteration of this work was installed in an ancient fourth century church in Istanbul. *Velvet* was an abstract, visceral fairy tale more akin to the Gothic re-tellings of fairy tales by author Angela Carter than the ones we may remember from childhood. In her own words, the artist wishes to encourage her viewer to “reconsider the familiar.”³ In these and other works Vickerson goes much further. Her work transports us into unfamiliar, uncanny spaces inhabited by disquiet and implicit violence. If the materials of domestic comfort are gendered, analogous to a traditional performance of the feminine, then Vickerson's intentional transmutation of otherwise harmless material resists tropes of the happy home, and eviscerates of romantic clichés of so-called feminine domesticity.

In recent work, Laura Vickerson has used embroidery on cloth and clothing as a signifier of labour (particularly women's labour) and connection between individuals and generations. In 2009, Laura Vickerson participated in an experimental residency at the Château Mathieu. Here the artist immersed herself in an investigation of the isolation of aristocratic women. She writes,

*Responding to specific sites at the château, the chapel, garden, grounds and domestic spaces, it was my intention to use embroidery, as well as materials related to opulent domestic interiors of these “ladies of leisure,” in a subversive way to speak about these women's isolation, lack of agency and stifled creativity.*⁴

Vickerson produced a variety of art objects and small interventions at the site using lace trim, doilies, organza and upholstery fabric. Empathizing with her subject via the praxis of embroidery and appliqué, the artist engaged in a matrilineal conversation across generations.

Bloodline, produced by the artist in 2012 for an exhibition documenting the Château Mathieu residency, is composed of antique linens and clothing. The pieces are stitched together and traversed with a single red line of embroidery, “linking them,” Vickerson writes “to the Château Mathieu’s history and its matriarchal lineage.”⁵ A textile document of familial connection, *Bloodline* is an object imbued with haunting presence, but perhaps more significantly a profound absence. Who were the women who wore these clothes or stitched these linens? Where have they gone? Vickerson’s emphasis on connection and lineage in these works and her interest in historical textiles are relevant as we consider *The Between*.

The cloud of clothing that is the centrepiece of *The Between* was stitched together by hand. Seam to seam in some places, overlapping in others, the work progressed organically following the irregular shapes of each unique garment. During this process Vickerson handled each piece, contemplating who wore it and how it made its way to the secondhand store.⁶ There is an ethic of care in the artist’s methodology that engenders a kind of material empathy in the work; empathy embodied via the repetitive handling, pinning, then stitching of each piece of clothing to another.

Clothing is analogous to the body. Even in an era of disposable fast fashion, clothing means and reads “body.” Recognizing the importance of cloth and its inherent ontology as our second skin, artist Ann Hamilton has said “Clothing is the first house of the body.”⁷ It is because of this that clothing is so inextricably linked with the construction of personal identity, status and belonging to a particular tribe. The clothing in Vickerson’s installation is mostly of the mass-produced variety to be worn for a season only. Still, this mass of clothes resonates with the absence of those who wore them.

The carpets used in *The Between* are objects drawn from the Nickle Galleries’ extensive textile collection. Working with curator Michele Hardy, Vickerson has endeavoured to use the carpets in a way that recognizes

their cultural and material integrity, while exploring the latent potential of charged textile objects to make new meaning. Several of the carpets used in the installation are among the finest in the collection and evince the skill and ingenuity of the individuals who wove them. Like clothing, there is a human presence embodied in these textile objects. For some they will be immediately recognized as objects of wealth or status signifying not only home, but likely a well-appointed one. For others a carpet is a simple floor covering. Like the thousands of stitches that connect the pieces of clothing above, the carpets included in *The Between* are composed of millions of knots – each one hand tied. As in knitting or embroidery, these textiles document a sequence of intentional gestures enacted through time. A single action, taking only seconds is repeated over and over until the text(tile) is complete. Labour is enmeshed in the very structure of these carpets; as legible as the story or the particular cultural meaning attached to the motifs or patterns that play across their surfaces.

The carpets in *The Between* span numerous cultures and intended uses. Tribal carpets hang next to war rugs woven for a collector's market; floral abstraction is juxtaposed with narrative imagery. Their colours provide a record of the plant dyes available in the region each was woven. It is significant that the carpets contain the colour and vitality the clothing lacks. Vickerson intentionally chose carpets containing the colour red to signify blood and perhaps intergenerational connection. Of course the lives of carpets also span a longer time frame than that of clothing. If well made, a carpet may endure longer than its weavers. A particularly valuable or handsome carpet will be handed down to successive generations or possibly donated to a museum as these objects have been. In *The Between* the carpets are mounted on the walls and envelop the entire space creating a kind of symbolic architecture, indicating home, family and safety.

The soundscape in the installation focuses our attention back on the personal, the everyday and the inter-relationship of parents and children, friends and strangers. Individual voices are audible in snippets only, and we are given the sense of moving through space, perhaps walking or riding a bicycle down the street. Individual voices draw our attention to specific pieces of clothing. Listening to the sounds of children playing, our gaze may fall on a garden scene depicted on one of the carpets. The specificity of the voices in the soundscape manifests those who





photograph courtesy of Laura Vickerson

are absent from the space. Somehow this amplifies the disquiet and the uncanny sense of dread embodied by the abandoned clothing hovering overhead and the almost suffocating material density of the carpets lining the walls.

Ultimately *The Between* expands to embody personal loss(es) on a much larger scale, reminding us of the upheaval occurring daily to families caught in the ongoing global refugee crisis. Using this lens, Vickerson's installation becomes a nightmarish living room where abandoned clothing has escaped the closet and the rugs are climbing the walls. An irrevocable emotional rupture of unimaginable loss permeates *The Between*. Initiated as an elegy to personal grief, it is an expansive, unfolding artwork. In the accumulation of abandoned clothing, the loss of one becomes the loss of many. Although the owners of these garments are unknown to us, our somatic familiarity with the act of wearing a garment causes an immediate sense of tactile recognition. They are gone and yet we may touch their absence.

Mackenzie Kelly-Frère

Endnotes

1. "Worn Worlds: Clothes, Mourning and the Life of Things," in *The Textile Reader*, Editor Jessica Hemmings (London/NewYork: Berg, 2012) page 76.
2. Laura Vickerson, *Artist Statement* (www.lauravickerson.com, 2014)
3. Laura Vickerson, *Artist Statement* (www.lauravickerson.com, 2014)
4. Laura Vickerson, *Artist Statement for Folly: Château Mathieu*, exhibition at the Esplanade Art Gallery, Medicine Hat Alberta 2012 & Nickle Galleries 2014 (www.lauravickerson.com, 2014)
5. *ibid.*
6. Laura Vickerson in conversation with the author November 11, 2015
7. Ann Hamilton in conversation with Krista Tippett, "Making and the Spaces We Share" *On Being*, (podcast: <http://www.onbeing.org/program/ann-hamilton-making-and-the-spaces-we-share/6147>: November 19, 2015)

Biographies

Laura Vickerson is a multi-media installation artist and educator who lives and works in Calgary. She presently teaches at the Alberta College of Art + Design. She has exhibited extensively in Canada as well as in the U.S., Britain, Turkey, Poland and China. She has produced site-specific installations for various international exhibitions and venues including the *Istanbul Biennial*, *le Manifestation Internationale d'Art de Quebec*, as well as a project through Locus + titled *Fairytales and Factories* creating a work for an old Textiles mill in the Yorkshire Dales (Britain). She has participated in artist residencies at The Banff Centre for the Arts (Banff, Alberta) and the *Sympo-Fibres International* in Ste-Hyacinth, Quebec. She has been the recipient of numerous grants and awards through the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, The Canada Council for the Arts, Foreign Affairs and International Trade and the Arts Council of England. Laura Vickerson's full CV is available at www.lauravickerson.com.

Mackenzie Kelly-Frère is an artist, writer and educator. He has contributed texts to various Canadian and international publications. Mackenzie has exhibited his work in Canada, China, Japan, Korea and the United States. He teaches in the School of Craft + Emerging Media at the Alberta College of Art + Design in Calgary, where he lives with his husband Kristofer Kelly-Frère and daughter Elizabeth.

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Nickle Galleries, Libraries and Cultural Resources

University of Calgary
2500 University Drive NW
Calgary, AB T2N 1N4
403 210 6201
www.nickle.ucalgary.ca

Laura Vickerson: The Between

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