



**ALLY
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Art Gallery of Alberta
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In her latest series of paintings, Ally McIntyre has cast animals as her protagonists. The main characters are a horse and a fox, but other animals are included as well. These animals are shown in confinement, fleeing, and at rest. There is an open narrative structure in McIntyre's artworks and a dynamic interplay emerges amongst the characters and between those characters and viewers. Although humans are not prominently depicted in her paintings, their presence is palpable and human influence can easily be inferred within the works. It quickly becomes evident that human actions pose the primary threat to the welfare of the animal protagonists. Smoke, indicated by a glowing sun and sky, also becomes a character in the work and can be interpreted as a specter of the unseen human.

The choice of the horse and the fox as central characters is intriguing. Both animals, being semi-domesticated, share a complex and tenuous relationship with humans. Here, as in previous bodies of work, McIntyre explores the social construction of 'wildlife.' There are wild horses and wild foxes but both animals can also live on the fringes of human connection; even as domesticated animals they are not quite pets. There is also an interesting power dynamic with humans. The fox can be seen as a pest or a threat to property, whereas the horse is property.

When considering the character of the horse two books come to mind, *Black Beauty* and *The Black Stallion*. *Black Beauty*, written in 1877 by Anna Sewell, is an animal autobiography narrated from the perspective of a horse. Sewell intended to raise awareness about animal welfare and discourage cruelty toward animals by giving the horse a rich and intelligent point of view. It is worth noting that, due to a childhood injury, Sewell had physical disabilities and relied on horses for her independence. *The Black Stallion*, on the other hand, is a series of stories that star a black stallion and a young boy following a shipwreck. Their reliance on each other becomes crucial for their mutual survival. Dependence and interdependence emerge as prominent themes in these fictional works and are mirrored in McIntyre's paintings.

McIntyre employs these animal protagonists as allegories for broader ecological themes, utilizing their symbolic qualities to convey meaning. The horse, often used as a symbol of strength in art history, exudes an aura of steadfastness, and its presence conveys a sense of stability. However, the horse



Ally McIntyre, *Sea & Smoke*, 2023. Acrylic paint and spray paint on canvas. Courtesy of the Artist.

more accurately represents human imposition, human intervention and the molding and contorting of nature to human will. In general, the “broken” horse is a “good” horse. Indeed, a less romantic interpretation of *The Black Stallion* reveals that the young boy in the story is required to tame the horse for his own survival, symbolically representing the need to conquer nature and promoting the notion that humans need to defeat/control/break/alter our environment in order to thrive.

In *Kindling*, the wild and resourceful spirit of the horse has been broken and domesticated. McIntyre’s fox, on the other hand, offers some guidance to the horse and signifies the adaptability required to thrive in a world of shifting habitats and diminished resources. While the fox is known for its intelligence and cunning, in *Kindling* it is frequently portrayed in distress. In English culture, the fox is an object of traditional sport hunting and represents domination over nature as leisure activity and class signifier. Furthermore, within the foxhunt, the relationship between the fox and the horse is complicated by the fact that the animals are used against each other.

McIntyre’s world is more complex than just human versus animal, however, and, as in nature, there are inter-animal tensions and conflicts. Across this intricate interconnectedness, dynamics and alliances are constantly shifting and relationships are as fluid and as tenuous as the land on which we live. In *Sea & Smoke*, 2023 it appears as though the fox is frantically coaxing the horse into the water. The two are likely not friends in a storybook sort of way but, whatever their circumstances, they have come together in this moment, and we understand the fox as the helpful leader.

In the painting *4 Degrees*, 2023 the foxes are also in distress. Mouth agape, one fox pants or yells out. The red glowing sun is a now familiar sight during the ever-increasing number of wildfires and forest fires. The altered sun is not the only sign of human destruction of the landscape. Hearts and initials are carved into the bark of a foreground tree. This is not a classic Canadian landscape painting divorced from human contact but one that is drenched in the insidiousness of human disregard. The work references Winslow Homer’s (1836-1910) *The Fox Hunt*, 1893. In that work, where Homer represents the brutal reality of winter, a fox is being pursued by crows. In McIntyre’s work, the relationship between the



Ally McIntyre, *4 Degrees*, 2023. Acrylic paint and spray paint on canvas. Courtesy of the Artist.





Ally McIntyre, *Wobbly Knees*, 2023. Acrylic paint and spray paint on canvas. Courtesy of the Artist.

foxes and the crows is less clear. If we consider this alongside *Sea & Smoke*, is the fox again the knowledgeable leader showing the crows to safety? Is it the fox that now needs help and the crows are leading the foxes away from a threat? Or, like Homer's work, are the crows hunting these foxes in an ominous symbol of transformation and death?

As viewers piece together the images that McIntyre presents, there is an ever-shifting dynamic between the characters and the desire or need to inject the human into the works. By elevating the animals as central figures, McIntyre challenges us to reconsider our place within the world. In *Wobbly Knees*, 2023 a shadowy human figure is regarded with apprehension by a horse and a foal. In *4 Degrees* the specter of human caused climate collapse is seen in the glowing orange sun. In *Far Away*, 2023 the horses' confinement in an environment of human making is more obvious and the tension explicit. The narrative and alliances, however, are less clear. Is the dog in the foreground taunting or berating a stabled horse? Does the dog represent an authorial voice of control? Like the fox in *Sea & Smoke*, is this dog trying to convince the horse of its ability to be free? After all, it likely could free itself quite easily. Perhaps the painting is a conversation between two highly domesticated species and a reminder that control of their wild instinct is tenuous.

Here, it is interesting to consider again the notion of "breaking" animals. Although this dog can be read as an antagonist in this scene it has still retained its independence even in the face of human domestication and intervention. The horses stand quiet and obedient—"broken"—while the dog resists. The dog appears to be a King Charles Spaniel. The breed indicates that this is an upper-class sporting or recreation stable rather than a working-class farm. Historically these dogs were used in English aristocratic hunting parties but were more common as lap dogs. In the painting, it is impossible to determine if these animals are functioning independently or as tools or extensions of human will.

Entwined within the exhibition are elements that direct viewers toward ideas of rewilding. Rewilding is a conservation approach where an environment's natural processes are allowed to return after human intervention or destruction. On a micro or domestic level, this looks like planting native species of grasses and wildflowers instead of cultivating monoculture like lawns in urban greenpaces.



The landscape and animal species have been altered by human touch and rewilding is one approach to enable our world to become more resilient and defy the monocultures that we have created. The question of if the farm horse, urban fox and overbred spaniel could survive without further human invention remains unanswered.

Through allegorical imagery, McIntyre breathes life into the effects of climate change. Once-vibrant meadows lose their luster. Replaced by muted tones that mirror the fading resilience of the natural world, these tones are permeated by slashes of artificial orange that should not be, yet are now, commonly found in nature. A palpable sense of strain and vulnerability saturates the scenes as the fox and the horse confront diminishing resources, altered habitats, and the ominous specter of an increasingly inhospitable climate. Without being explicit, this exhibition offers a salient reminder of the plight of animals in our shared and changing climate, while also considering the oft-times contingent relationships, power structures and collaborations that can hold us back and propel us forward with shared purpose and responsibility.

Opposite: Ally McIntyre, *Far Aways*, 2023. Acrylic paint and spray paint on canvas. Courtesy of the Artist.

ARTIST'S BIOGRAPHY

Ally McIntyre

Ally McIntyre (b. 1991) is a painter who works with acrylic and spray paint. McIntyre skillfully blends various painting techniques, creating a distinct fusion of formal elements through the use of figuration, symbolism, abstract expressionism and graffiti. Through this medium, she delves into cultural perceptions of human/animal relationships, the canon, and the natural world.

Ally McIntyre, who holds an MA in Fine Art from Goldsmiths University of London, has been the recipient of several prestigious awards. These include the Jealous Prize 2015 and the HIX Award 2015, which were presented to her by renowned artist Tracey Emin. In 2018, she was also named a finalist in the RBC Canadian Painting Competition. More recently, in 2022, McIntyre was honoured with the Lieutenant Governor of Alberta Emerging Artists Award. Her contributions to the arts have been recognized in 2023, with the awarding of the Queen Elizabeth II Platinum Jubilee medal. McIntyre's print edition 'Moon Cries for Ferdinand' forms part of London's Victoria and Albert Museum Permanent Print Collection.

Exhibitions include solo shows at Saatchi Gallery, Jealous Gallery, and CnB Gallery in London, UK. Recently, showing in Seoul, Republic of Korea with Artspace Hohwa, Hoban Cultural Foundation and Unplugged Gallery. Art Fairs include Moniker Art Fair, The Original Print Fair at the Royal Academy, The London Art Fair, Start Art Fair at the Saatchi Gallery and Art Toronto.

Her work can be found in private collections in Asia, Australia, Canada, Europe, United Kingdom, USA

WRITER'S BIOGRAPHY

Lindsey Sharman

Lindsey V. Sharman is Curator at the Art Gallery of Alberta. She has studied Art History and Curating in Canada, England, Switzerland and Austria, earning degrees from the University of Saskatchewan and the University of the Arts, Zurich.

Opposite: Ally McIntyre, *Clouds*, 2023. Acrylic paint and spray paint on canvas. Courtesy of the Artist.



List of Works

4 Degrees, 2022

Acrylic paint and spray paint on canvas.

Courtesy of the Artist.

Far Away, 2023

Acrylic paint on canvas.

Courtesy of the Artist.

Clouds, 2023

Acrylic paint and spray paint on canvas.

Courtesy of the Artist.

Sea & Smoke, 2023

Acrylic paint and spray paint on canvas.

Courtesy of the Artist.

Wobbly Knees, 2023

Acrylic paint on canvas.

Courtesy of the Artist.

The RBC New Works Gallery features new works by Alberta artists. Initiated in 1998 and named the RBC New Works Gallery in 2008, this gallery space continues the Art Gallery of Alberta's commitment to supporting Alberta artists.

Organized by the Art Gallery of Alberta.



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Cover Image: Ally McIntyre, *Wobbly Knees* (detail), 2023. Acrylic paint on canvas. Courtesy of the Artist.

