



Detail from Installation of *Makeshift Tales*, 2017

Makeshift Tales  
Elizabeth D'Agostino

EXHIBITION: APRIL 20 - JUNE 01, 2018  
OPENING RECEPTION : APRIL 20, 2018, 7:00PM - 9:00PM



Alberta Printmakers Gallery  
4025 4 Street SE, Calgary AB

# Makehift Tales

Essay by Jenn Law

*Let it... be borne in mind how infinitely complex and close-fitting are the mutual relations of all organic beings to each other and to their physical conditions of life; and consequently what infinitely varied diversities of structure might be of use to each being under changing conditions of life.*<sup>1</sup>

In the story of evolution, the most successful organisms are the ones most able to adapt to their surroundings. A form of creative problem-solving, adaptation is a process steered by contact and exchange between diverse species in a shared environment. Evolution cannot be predictably mapped, however, but rather develops in often makeshift, happenstance ways and owes a great deal to random events and mutations. Indeed, often the most elegant evolutionary advances are the result of accidental, haphazard or repeated attempts at mediating complex challenges—eyes, for example, which independently evolved dozens of times; or feathers, which did not originally develop for flight, but were first employed for warmth and display. While makeshift solutions may be imperfect, they may nevertheless be lauded as strategies of adaptive innovation, requiring resourceful ingenuity and a creative capacity to adjust, regroup, and ultimately resolve seemingly insurmountable problems using the materials at hand.


In *Makehift Tales*, Elizabeth D'Agostino embraces improvisational experimentation and adaptive problem-solving in both her technical approach to material making and in the conceptual issues she chooses to engage. Drawing on environmental debates surrounding species extinction, biotechnology, genetic engineering, climate change, urban expansion and population pressures, D'Agostino creates a fantastical floating world of miniature architectures and hybrid life forms. Set against a printed backdrop of layered narrative veils illustrating a complex history of sociobiological interactions, her mixed media prints and sculptural assemblages model evolutionary processes in their very construction, tapping into print's historical propensity for adapting and combining rapidly transforming technologies and strategies of mimetic reproduction.

Semi-transparent layers of silkscreened, etched, and mono-printed Japanese washi paper (*gampi*) are grafted onto wood, ceramic, and paper clay surfaces. Tissue-thin, this delicate paper is sensitive to its surroundings, becoming gently animated with the shifting movements of the viewer in the gallery space. Though seemingly fragile, *gampi* is made with long inner plant-based fibres, which are stretched rather than chopped and is thus deceptively stronger and more resilient than Western rag or pulp-based papers, which are made with shorter fibres.

D'Agostino's work regularly plays with such material and conceptual contradictions—strength in fragility, variability in originality, singularity in multiplicity.

A natural story teller, D'Agostino is inspired by nineteenth century natural history collections, curiosity cabinets, and print-based botanical illustrations, combining empirical data with imaginative elements to construct multiple interconnected story lines. She is a keen observer and collector of the world, gathering specimens from her surroundings that often make their way, in one form or other, into the images that compose her multi-species ethnographies.<sup>2</sup> The urban Canadian landscape here serves as the artist's primary field-site, the ideal creative laboratory for studying adaptation among competing species in overlapping niches.

Against this backdrop, D'Agostino combines botanical, entomological, ornithological, and mammalian specimens with manmade forms to create new hybrid structures and organisms, where nature and culture become at times indistinguishable. In the artist's hands, a butterfly wing is repurposed as a door, foliage masquerades as architectural tiles, a ladder mimics a DNA chain, molecular cellular structures become wallpaper. Through the lens of hybridity, D'Agostino challenges an anthropocentric approach to the world which places humanity at the centre of the universe, while unveiling the mechanisms by which such illusions are upheld. Rather, her narratives allow multiple species and object ontologies to intersect and mutually inform one another, breaking down traditional binary oppositions between human/non-human; nature/culture; fact/fiction.

We have been engineering the world since the beginning of humanity, but along with great technological advances, human interventions and adaptations have irreversibly damaged fragile ecosystems, altered climate patterns, and decreased the planet's biodiversity. D'Agostino reminds us that life is a complex entanglement of interlocked agencies and storylines in constant process of shared becoming.<sup>3</sup> In response, the makeshift becomes the artist's *modus operandi* – a type of miniature world-making that finds compromise in adversity, seeking sympathy in difference. Hers is a strategy of becoming that embraces every adaptation as speculative and every contact as an opportunity for creative collaboration, allowing for unexpected evolutions to be revealed in the process. 

<sup>1</sup> Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, fourth British edition (1866), [darwin-online.org.uk/Variorum/1866/1866-91-c-1861.html](http://darwin-online.org.uk/Variorum/1866/1866-91-c-1861.html) (accessed January 16, 2018)

<sup>2</sup> For more information on post-human anthropology and multi-species ethnographies refer to Eben Kirksey, ed., *The Multispecies Salon* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> See Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, *Material Ecocriticism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014).

## WRITER BIOGRAPHY

*Jenn Law is an artist, writer, and researcher living in Toronto. A member of Loop Gallery and Open Studio Contemporary Printmaking Centre, her multi-disciplinary practice explores book culture, the historical archive/library, and print-based strategies of preservation and problem-solving. Law holds a PhD in Anthropology from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, England, a BA in Anthropology from McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, and a BFA from Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario. She has exhibited her work internationally and has published on Canadian, South African, and Caribbean contemporary art and culture. She is the co-editor, with Tara Cooper, of Printopolis, published in 2016 by Open Studio, Toronto. In 2017, Law co-founded Arts + Letters Press with Penelope Stewart, and will be launching the periodical journal Art + Reading in 2018.*

## ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Elizabeth D'Agostino holds a BFA from the University of Windsor and a MFA from Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. Her work has been exhibited in Canada and internationally including Iziko: Museum of Cape Town, South Africa, Manhattan Graphics Center, New York, and The Print Center, Philadelphia. In addition, D'Agostino's prints can also be found in many private and public collections including the University of Changchun Jilin, China; Anchor Graphics at Columbia College Chicago, Illinois, Department of Foreign Affairs Canada, and Ernst and Young, Canada. D'Agostino is the recipient of many awards and including the Hexagon Special Projects Fellowship at Open Studio, Toronto.

In 2015, she was selected by the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada to create the custom carpet design for the Ontario Room in the newly renovated Canada House, London, England.

Elizabeth D'Agostino lives and works in Toronto and is a member of Open Studio Fine Art Printmaking Centre and Loop Gallery.

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Alberta Printmakers (A/P) is a non-profit, artist-run centre founded in 1989 in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. The organization's goals are to increase public awareness of print media, to engage a diverse audience, to provide resources for the artistic community and production facilities for printmaking.

A/P has an open membership, and is governed by a board of directors. Management and administration of A/P's activities are the responsibilities of its Directors, who reach out to volunteers in accomplishing A/P's goals. A/P also hosts residency and summer student programs.

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