

# DIGITAL AGNES

Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen's University  
agnes.queensu.ca

## Collection Count + Care 2.0

*Count + Care* seeks relationships within and conversations across the collection.

What stories does the collection tell?

2023

## SPEAKERS

Lisa Hirmer, Artist

Laura Ritchie, Independent Curator

*Collection Count + Care* partners with *Weather Collection*, artist Lisa Hirmer and independent curator Laura Ritchie. *Weather Collection* is a cross-Canada partnership between the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery, Lethbridge; Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, Halifax; the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton; the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queens University, Kingston; and the Yukon Arts Centre, Whitehorse. The project is primarily funded by a Digital Now grant from the Canada Council for the Arts.

## FEATURED WORKS

John Martin, *Heaven – the Rivers of Bliss*, 1824, mezzotint. From *The Paradise Lost of Milton with Illustrations Designed and Engraved by John Martin* (Septimus Prowett, London, 1827). Bequest of Adam Shortt, 1969

Florence Helena McGillivray, *Fog: Cleaning Herrings, Whitby, England*, 1919, watercolour on paper. Gift of the Gordon Conn Trust, 1964

J. E. H. MacDonald, *Wild Ducks*, 1917, oil on pressed board. Presented by Queen's University Art Foundation in Appreciation of Robert Melville Smith

## KEYWORDS

Climate change, Weather, Landscape

## TRANSCRIPT

[ Music ]

**Laura Ritchie:** My name is Laura Ritchie. I'm an independent curator operating out of Kijipuktuk, Halifax.

**Lisa Hirmer:** And my name is Lisa Hirmer. I am an artist based in Guelph. So *Weather Collection* is a large collaborative digital project looking at weather and art in the context of climate change.

**Laura Ritchie:** So Edmund Burke in 1757, he wrote, "Whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime." John Martin's compositions tend to be good examples of the sublime in action and certainly Milton's epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, which is literally about the fall of mankind. It's a good

kind of starting point for talking about ways in which the scale in a work can help us understand feeling small in the face of something really big.

**Lisa Hirmer:** Which I think is interesting in the context of where and when it was getting made, so, maybe a moment where certain people were feeling a sense of power or control over what would be called the natural world. And so looking for something bigger than the self as an antidote to that. Climate change is also a shift in scale of how humans, which means some humans more than others, are affecting the planet as a whole. So a sense of scale being both very big and very small at the same time, I think, is one of the most disorienting things about climate change.

**Laura Ritchie:** Often we'll find works by women painters that are relegated to a study collection or an education collection or, you know, they never get matted or framed or shown and, like this work, kind of get tucked away in a little bit -- they lead a very small existence in an otherwise really big collection.

**Lisa Hirmer:** Because of the title, it was probably painted in fog, but you almost feel as if that weather has soaked into the paper and become part of the material itself.

[ Music ]

**Laura Ritchie:** So we're looking at J.E.H. MacDonald's *Wild Ducks* from 1917. What drew you to this?

**Lisa Hirmer:** So I think this is another example of a figure being in a landscape with sort of that feeling of something greater than the self, so in this case, weather, these huge imposing and pretty dynamic clouds.

**Laura Ritchie:** It's rare too in J.E.H. MacDonald's compositions, having a figure that's so central. There are certainly earlier examples that have figures in them. Those examples are also quite romanticized, little tiny travellers, little tiny folks in a snowstorm on a street, you know, street scene. The weather is always bigger.

**Lisa Hirmer:** Yeah. And I think similar to sort of the role of God in the mezzotint we were just looking at, in this case, the thing that's taking the place of something greater than the self is the weather, which is interesting to think about in relation to climate change because one of the difficult things about climate change is that the weather now feels as though it's deeply implicated with human activity, a particular kind of human activity. And so it is both bigger than ourselves as individuals, but not bigger than ourselves in the way that human action accumulates into these massive planetary effects.

**Laura Ritchie:** That is in itself anxiety-inducing or emotion-inducing, and so we've kind of had a bit of a role reversal. And I like that when we think using these kind of romantic depictions of the environment and the landscape to help us understand the kind of fiction that is this romanticism in our own situation.

**Lisa Hirmer:** And I think coming back to the idea of power and control, the only way sort of a figure is able to possibly exist in what is called wilderness is because of a certain degree of power and control and privilege and access to be able to come to this space and just kind of stare at it wistfully

and not think about deeper material engagements and impacts that living in this world have on the more-than-human world.

[ Music ]