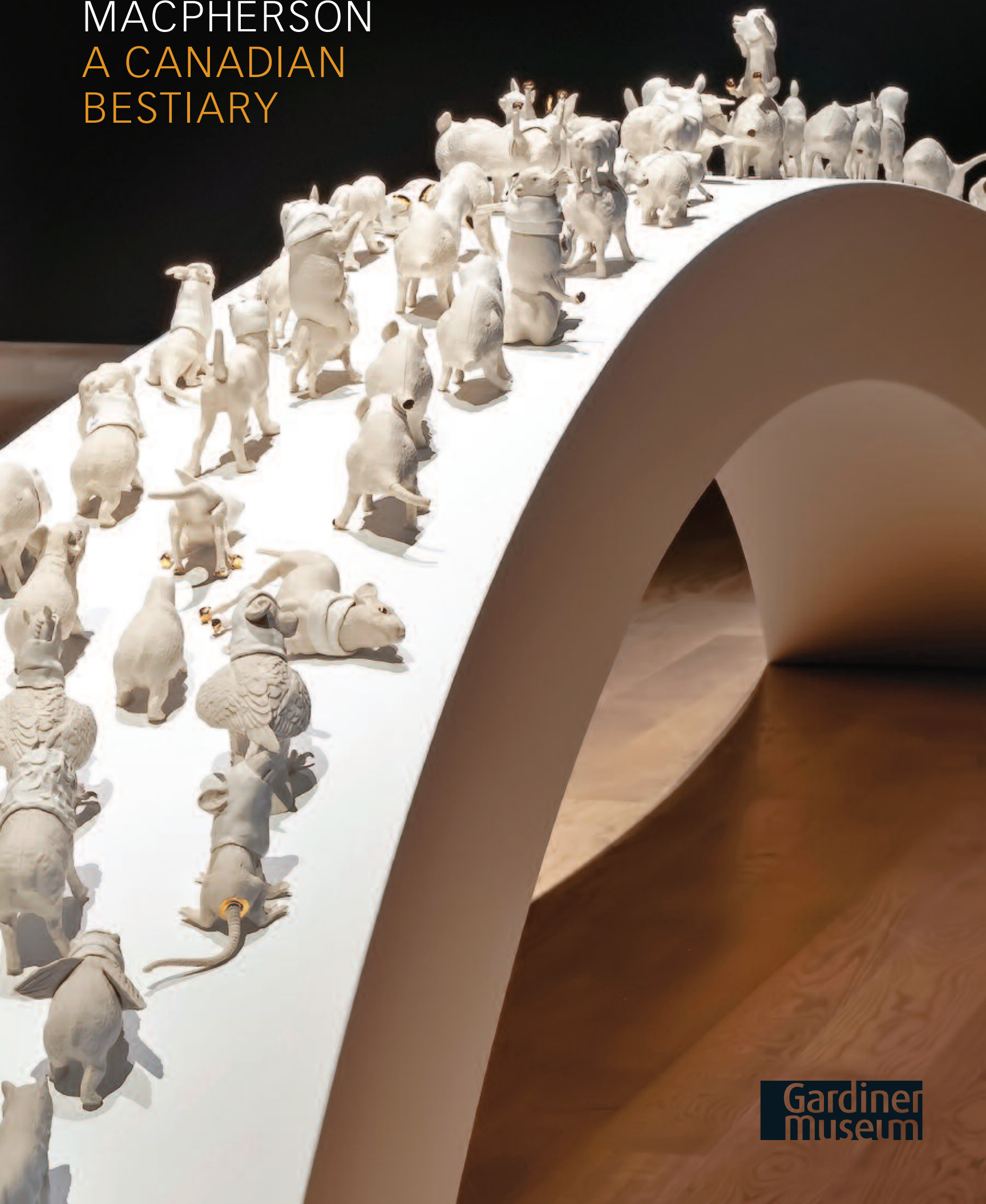


JANET  
MACPHERSON  
A CANADIAN  
BESTIARY






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JANET MACPHERSON

A CANADIAN BESTIARY



MY HEART IS EMPTY AND UPSIDE DOWN  
BLOOD ON THE LEAVES, AND THROUGH THE TREES  
YOU SEE MY SMILE, THE WRONG WAY AROUND

YOU'VE CLIMBED UP SO HIGH  
BUT YOUR ROPES HAVE BEEN TIED

AND YOU SWING IN AN ARC  
AND YOU FALL FROM A SMILE  
THIS WILL BE A NEW SOUND

*Unwound*, song lyrics by Janet Macpherson











**PREVIOUS**  
Exhibition view of *Reliquary*  
and *Decoy*

**THIS PAGE**  
*North of North* (detail), 2016



## FOREWORD

TO CELEBRATE CANADA'S SESQUICENTENNIAL, **the Gardiner Museum wanted to recognize the creativity that helped Canada forge a unique and thoughtful place in the world.**

We decided to commission an artist to interpret the idea of what embodies the soul of Canada. Janet Macpherson responded with a provocative conversation of concepts essential to our lives, for instance, about the North and nature. Despite knowing where this kind of investigation begins, the thrill and excitement of working with great artists entails never knowing the outcome, or how an exhibition will unfold. With Janet, the rational and intuitive converge, and my ideas for the exhibition were radically eclipsed by her own profound vision, coupled with her wonderful music and the video projection by Renée Lear.

This exploration is all made possible by the generous donors Tom Kierans and Mary Janigan, whose adventurous spirits freely empowered both the Museum and artist to take creative risks and realize their visions. Similarly, Victoria Jackman and the Hal Jackman Foundation, who sponsored many projects in the past, have once again helped us accomplish something original, individual, and truly Canadian.

**KELVIN BROWNE** EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR & CEO





The artist in her studio.  
Photography by Renée Lear



## HYBRID BODIES

THE BORDERS BETWEEN HUMANS AND ANIMALS, **the manufactured and the natural, the spiritual and the visceral are distinct yet permeable, illustrating differences while creating spaces for wonder and uncertainty.**

Hybrids present us with two things that happen simultaneously; they are in flux, one always alluding to and challenging the other. Influenced by my Catholic upbringing, I investigate hybridity within the context of Christian ideology, examining an array of sources from the margins of illuminated manuscripts and lives of saints and martyrs to the depictions of medieval monsters.

My work has also been inspired by visits to the Ohio State Fair, where farm animals were clothed in protective fabrics and tethered tightly to posts, awaiting exhibition and judging. Using moulds cast from found toy animals, hunting decoys, and religious statues, I dismantle and re-compose these objects to create forms that subtly reveal a discomfiting reality. Animal heads and bodies are interchanged, vegetation grows in peculiar places, and faces are masked and obscured. Wrapping forms in damp porcelain sheets—binding, bandaging the figures, contemplating the intentions of these gestures—I examine the boundaries between devotion and coercion, pleasure and pain, animal impulse and domesticity.

JANET MACPHERSON

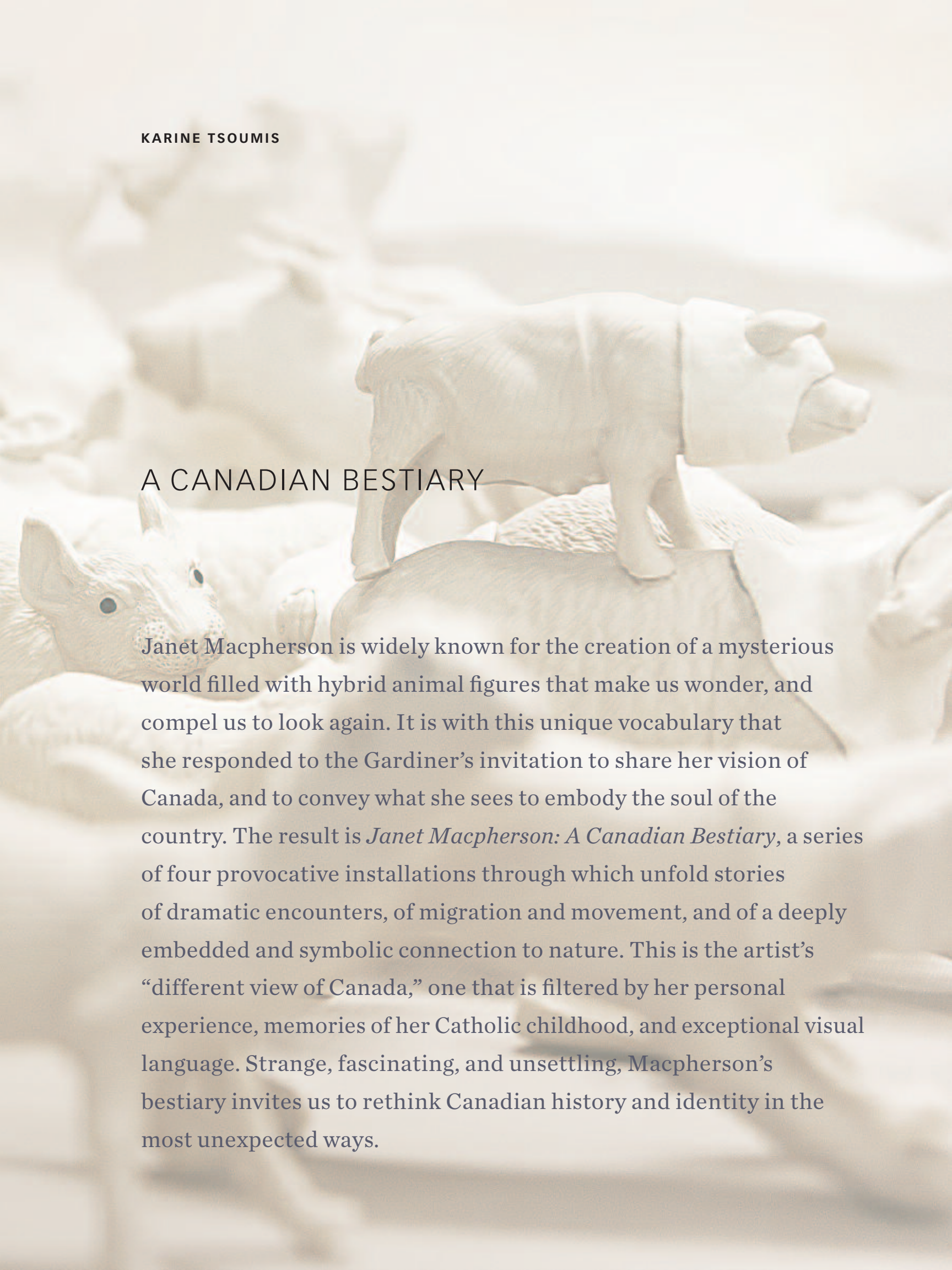
MIGRATION

DECOY

NORTH OF NORTH

RELIQUARY





KARINE TSOUMIS

## A CANADIAN BESTIARY

Janet Macpherson is widely known for the creation of a mysterious world filled with hybrid animal figures that make us wonder, and compel us to look again. It is with this unique vocabulary that she responded to the Gardiner's invitation to share her vision of Canada, and to convey what she sees to embody the soul of the country. The result is *Janet Macpherson: A Canadian Bestiary*, a series of four provocative installations through which unfold stories of dramatic encounters, of migration and movement, and of a deeply embedded and symbolic connection to nature. This is the artist's "different view of Canada," one that is filtered by her personal experience, memories of her Catholic childhood, and exceptional visual language. Strange, fascinating, and unsettling, Macpherson's bestiary invites us to rethink Canadian history and identity in the most unexpected ways.

## MACPHERSON'S BESTIARY



Macpherson was born in 1974 in Barrie, Ontario, where she grew up. She studied philosophy at York University before embracing ceramics as a serious endeavour. While the possibility of earning a living out of functional objects initially attracted her to the medium of clay, it is in the creation of figures that she found her voice and bloomed as a storyteller. Her vocabulary of animals and unique creative process took shape during her master's degree at The Ohio State University (2008-2010). There, she took her first course in mould-making and started to experiment with casting. She used found objects, exploring the repertoire of more than a thousand plaster moulds available at the school. Nativity figures, dolls, and animals were employed and transformed in the composition of unexpected sculptural objects, acquiring through this process new, and darker narratives. This was the beginning of her practice of assemblage and transformation, and of her use of slip-cast porcelain as her primary medium.

Macpherson started to build her own collection of toys, developing a menagerie of some thirty carefully selected plastic animal figures that form the basis of her vocabulary. These are beasts either common to the Northern Forest or that live on farms, their ordinariness making them particularly attractive. At the same time, she is fascinated by figurines where physical attributes and physiognomies have been so generalized or exaggerated that they no longer offer a true representation, conveying instead someone's idea of what a goat, a mouse, or a sheep looks like.



**PREVIOUS**

Objects in the artist's studio.  
Photography by Renée Lear

**OPPOSITE**

Psalm 106 from the *Luttrell Psalter*,  
England, c.1325-1335. British  
Library, London, UK / © British  
Library Board/Bridgeman Images

**BELOW**

Exhibition view of *Decoy*









## OPPOSITE

Janet Macpherson, *Angelus*, 2012.  
Slip-cast porcelain and lustre.  
(*Myriad*, Art Gallery of Burlington;  
*Deer Head Saints*, Private Collection;  
*Golden Idol*, Collection of the Artist).  
Photography by Toni Hafkenscheid

## THIS PAGE

"The Panther", folio 9r (detail),  
*Aberdeen Bestiary*, England, c.1200.  
Aberdeen University Library MS 24.  
Courtesy of the University of  
Aberdeen

These plastic figures provide the source for her plaster moulds, which are then broken down into parts—limbs, heads, torsos—and reassembled in most unusual ways. The mixing of parts is always experimental, and meaning emerges only when the figure is completed.<sup>1</sup>

Surprising and sometimes even disturbing, Macpherson's hybrids also suggest innocence and elicit a certain tenderness. This may be due to the familiarity of the forms themselves, as they derive from common toys and trinkets. Furthermore, they continue the tradition of the ceramic animal figure—once a ubiquitous domestic ornament.<sup>2</sup> In Western art, the tradition of animal sculpture in ceramics harks back to the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> The Meissen manufactory—the first to produce true porcelain in Europe—played a pivotal role in establishing the porcelain animal as a genre in European art. In 1730, about two decades after the factory's founding, Augustus the Strong commissioned the creation of a menagerie of life-size animal and bird figures. This commission was the result of his unparalleled passions for porcelain, hunting, and wild beasts. Initiated by Johann Gottlieb Kirchner, the series was largely completed by his successor Johann Joachim Kändler.<sup>4</sup> Kändler later produced small-scale animals which were admired and emulated throughout Europe. Many of the emerging porcelain factories on the continent and in England responded to market demand by embracing the form. First produced as table decorations, and later as ornaments for the mantel, these pieces brought nature indoors, enlivening domestic spaces with representations of both familiar and exotic beasts.

While Macpherson is cognizant of the history of forms in ceramics, the influences that have most profoundly shaped her work belong to the medieval period.<sup>5</sup> These range from images of hybrids and monsters, to religious painting and narratives on the lives of saints. Hybrids



held a privileged place in the marginalia of illuminated manuscripts. Whether animal-human, vegetal-animal, or a combination of different animal forms, hybrids conveyed the prevalent taste for parody, play, and humour, while expressing a certain uneasiness towards the unknown and the anomalous.<sup>6</sup> The bestiary, or "book of beasts," is another important source that shows the understanding of animals as symbols and their use to express concepts. A popular type of nature book, the bestiary flourished from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, offering beautifully illustrated compilations of legend, folklore, and pseudoscientific observations on both real and imaginary animals.<sup>7</sup> In this tradition, animals provided a mirror of humanity by acting as surrogates for aspects of human character and psychology. This introduced a certain distance that made some observations easier to accept.<sup>8</sup> The medieval interpretation of animals as symbols of moral truths, as expressed in bestiaries, informs Macpherson's use of animals as language.<sup>9</sup>

The fantastic figures that populate the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch, as well as books of monsters and marvels, further expand Macpherson's source material. In the late

## TOP

Janet Macpherson, *Vegetable Lamb*, 2014. White earthenware with sgraffito decoration. Photography by Ryan Legassicke

## BELOW

Boucicaut Master (and workshop), "Monsters from the land of the Merkites," folio 29v (detail) and "Wolf-headed people of the Andaman Islands in the Indian Ocean," folio 76v (detail), *Livre des Merveilles du Monde*, c. 1410-12. Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, France / Archives Charmet / Bridgeman Images

## OPPOSITE

*Migration* (detail), 2016



medieval and Renaissance periods, monsters were considered sources of wonder and curiosity, a testament to God's power of creation. At the same time, they were perceived as divine signs and omens, accidents imbued with meaning.<sup>10</sup> These images appeared in manuscript form and were later widely disseminated through the medium of print. Anatomical treatises on monsters published in the sixteenth century, for instance, served to convey a double conception of the world, at once scientific and imaginary.<sup>11</sup> Macpherson is here drawn to creatures that show an abundance of or lack of something; this absence or excess of parts translates into her practice of fragmentation and assemblage.

While this vast range of imagery feeds the artist's imagination freely, some of her work takes shape in direct response to popular descriptions of mystical creatures that circulated throughout medieval Europe. This is the case for the mysterious Vegetable Lamb of Tartary, a plant-animal hybrid believed to supply a soft, white type of wool. Hand-modelled as opposed to slip-cast, the work was made during a residency at the Zentrum Für Keramik in Berlin, Germany (2014).

Finally, religion is a dominant theme in Macpherson's work, one that is motivated by her interest in religious painting from the medieval period and her own religious upbringing and experience.<sup>12</sup> The artist was raised as a Catholic, and while she stopped practicing at the age of twelve, she remains fascinated by the language of religious symbols and signs, holy objects, rituals, and by narratives on the lives of saints.<sup>13</sup> Figures of saints and the Virgin Mary feature in her work and may be conceived as "freely and intuitively assembled quotations of religious symbols that have left an inexplicable impression, attraction and perhaps a sense of horror."<sup>14</sup>















THIS PAGE  
Exhibition view of *Migration*

PREVIOUS  
Exhibition view of *Reliquary,  
Decoy and Migration*





## A DIFFERENT VIEW OF CANADA

*Janet Macpherson: A Canadian Bestiary* offers four new immersive installations, each to be experienced as a distinct environment. For the first time in her career, the artist has transcended the realm of ceramics, enhancing the contemplative dimension of the porcelain figures through the inclusion of music and video. While independent experiences, the vignettes are tied together conceptually through overlapping themes and questions, namely, conceptions about Canadian identity and history, the symbolic meanings attached to nature and the consequences of human action upon it, and the idea of the North.

### MIGRATION

The vastness of the land and the immigration of many diverse peoples are central to Canadian history and identity. The installation entitled *Migration* features a herd of hybrid animals crossing a low bridge. The image encapsulates thousands of years of migratory movements from the Palaeolithic migration across the Bering Strait land bridge, the movements of nomadic populations, and the journeys of early European settlers to present-day migration.

The bridge, a symbol of this journey, appears monumental in scale in comparison to the ninety-four miniature animals walking over it. These are hybrid creatures, beautiful

monsters at once charming, curious, and strange. Through this work, we understand how Macpherson's finite number of forms can be combined into innumerable possibilities. Upon scrutiny, we discover, for example, a two-headed goat with a rat's body and sheep's legs, a two-headed bear, and a pig with the legs of a goat. A small number of creatures marry animal and human parts, such as a rat-horse hybrid with human arms. An eagle is the only animal to have been given a human physiognomy, its face a portrait of the artist based on a 3D scan of her head. Situated at the centre of the installation, she partakes in the procession taking place, a motif that recalls the insertion of artists' self-portraits as witnesses to religious drama in Renaissance painting.

Through the image of the animals walking in a line over the bridge, Macpherson suggests various forms of association. On the one hand, it is reminiscent of a liturgical procession, a ritual she finds extremely powerful and evocative. On the other, the low vantage point from which the procession is seen mimics the bird's-eye view common in nature documentaries, with movement appearing slow, steady, and even uncompromised. As we approach the bridge, the animals reveal their struggles through their own bodies, postures, and gestures, and we are quickly led to understand that their fate will vary. While some stand upright and confident, others have fallen from exhaustion, unable to move forward. Creatures are sometimes tied together in ways that can either inhibit movement completely or, more often, allow one animal to carry a companion on its back. Some are blinded by bandages that cover their eyes or entire heads, jeopardizing their ability to follow the route. Made of paper clay applied over the cast porcelain figure, these wrappings are inspired by visits at the Ohio State Fair, where the artist saw farm animals covered with cloaks and hoods in order to be kept clean before

THIS PAGE  
*Migration* (detail), 2016

OPPOSITE  
Exhibition view of *Migration*







## TOP

*Migration* (detail), 2016

## BELOW

Sheep at the Ohio State Fair.  
Photography by Janet Macpherson

## OPPOSITE

*North of North* (detail), 2016



judgement. Macpherson interprets this gesture as a symbol of “the unequal relationship between the judged on one side and the judge on the other,”<sup>15</sup> and has included the motif in her work as a way of examining “the boundaries between devotion and coercion, pleasure and pain, animal impulse and domesticity.”<sup>16</sup> In *Migration*, the motif highlights the vulnerability and fragility that lie within each one of us.

The animals act as symbols for the people who had and still have to face the realities of migration—the possible obstacles, the need for support and community—as well as individual strength and determination. Their precariousness alludes to the difficult circumstances under which some individuals or entire populations are forced to migrate today, suggesting a sense of urgency, a need to find safety in another land. Macpherson, however, leaves *Migration* open to multiple readings. According to her, the bridge as a form is ambiguous in nature, the sense of direction remaining unclear. Whether one is leaving a place or

going somewhere shifts according to perception. This ambivalence is here emphasized by the fact that this specific bridge is not attached to anything; the points of departure and arrival remain unknown.

In *Migration*, animals act as surrogates for human beings, yet the installation is also about the animals themselves, the herd alluding to compromised migratory paths due to habitat destruction and climate change. It is to this aspect of the work that video artist Renée Lear reacts. For this exhibition, Lear was invited to create a large-scale projection to complement Macpherson’s work. The video entitled *The Migration Stops Here* is Lear’s personal response to the ceramic installation, providing a contemplative backdrop to the procession. Lear animated images of hunting decoys of Canada geese onto video scenes of fall landscapes that she filmed during high peak migration times. The plastic birds now fly, float in water, and interact with real waterfowl in the Toronto ponds and lakes where the scenes were shot: Grenadier Pond in High Park, Tommy Thompson Park on Toronto’s waterfront, and Cherry Beach on Lake Ontario.

While Macpherson leaves the outcome of the animals’ journey open-ended, allowing both drama and hope to coexist, it is to the tragedy suggested by the individual pieces that Lear responds. To Lear, the vulnerability of each animal is palpable; they might not survive but are unaware of this. Her choice of imagery for the video was inspired by Macpherson’s own use of decoys as sources for moulds she employed to make other work for this exhibition. Moreover, the photos selected echo the manipulations to which Macpherson’s creatures have been submitted. As product shots aimed at hunters, each image highlights a certain feature. Some geese sit on crude pieces of metal while others

















PREVIOUS

Exhibition view of *Migration*  
with *The Migration Stops Here*  
by Renée Lear

THIS PAGE

Exhibition view of *Decoy*

OPPOSITE

*Migration* (detail), 2016







are cut in half to show consumers their interiors. These “deformities,” as Lear conceives of them, act as metaphors for the obstacles Canada geese face: namely hunting and the loss of wetlands habitat.

*The Migration Stops Here* illustrates how large populations of Canada geese no longer migrate due to habitat destruction and because of their ability to adapt to human-altered landscapes. The birds’ urge to migrate nevertheless remains innate. In the video, the anxiety experienced by birds whose profound nature has been modified is conveyed by their uninterrupted flight; they fly from dawn to dusk, yet never leave.

A second video installation entitled *Zugunruhe* complements *The Migration Stops Here*. Lear has altered a short clip from a laboratory experiment at Pennsylvania State University in which a bird experiences migration anxiety: the bird is restless and flaps its wings uncontrollably at specific times of the night during a migratory period. The video shows a phenomenon that avian biologists have termed ‘Zugunruhe,’ German for “nocturnal migratory restlessness.” Occurring every spring and fall, it provides evidence of the “internal clock that guides the timing of migration.”<sup>17</sup> Lear looped the video endlessly to exacerbate the bird’s impulse, and set it in a small enclosure suggestive of a bird’s house with a peephole.

## DECOY

The fragility of our ecosystems and the impact of human actions on the natural world are central themes in *Decoy*. Macpherson here introduces life-size figures as opposed to the small scale in which she usually works. An owl, a coyote, and a deer placed on top of one another

are at the core of the installation. A single coyote and a deer, both masked and bandaged, surround them. An owl with animal heads and human parts randomly assembled around its feet overlooks the scene from the periphery.

Representing two predators and one prey, these animals call attention to the role of each living creature in nature. Interdependence as a crucial factor in maintaining balance and ensuring survival is envisioned through the central pyramidal composition. This relationship is real and essential, yet fragile. How human action may affect the balance is expressed by the three isolated figures whose vulnerability is emphasized by the manipulations their bodies have been subjected to. The use of plaster bandages used in hospitals for orthopaedic casts—as opposed to the porcelain sheets Macpherson usually employs—to wrap the coyote’s and the deer’s heads particularly highlights this state of fragility and helplessness.

A vast wilderness with nature so close at hand is a common image of Canada and an intrinsic part of our sense of who we are as Canadians. Both symbolic and real, this relationship is long-standing yet conflicted, with humans and nature often at odds. Macpherson’s use of decoys, used by hunters to attract or frighten living animals, as sources for the forms seen in this installation accentuates this. It also speaks to the importance of hunting and trapping as a foundational part of Canada’s history, as well as to the recent surge of interest in hunting. While remaining a controversial activity, its rise in popularity is explained by many as an “ethical way of putting meat on the table,”<sup>18</sup> or a desire to return to a traditional way of life.

*Decoy* is composed of very few elements, being intentionally sparse in comparison to the other installations in the

## THIS PAGE

*Migration* (detail), 2016

## OPPOSITE

*North of North* (detail), 2016

exhibition. The small number of pieces that we encounter directly—as most of the figures are positioned on the floor—encourages viewers to further reflect upon the reality of Canada as a vast territory that has continually been exploited for its resources.

## NORTH OF NORTH

*As a Canadian who lives in densely populated Southern Ontario, I am like many people in this country who do not have first-hand experience of what the North really is. It is a place that is closely associated with Canada's identity, but many of us have never experienced it.*

JANET MACPHERSON

The symbolic relationship to nature that *Decoy* touches upon is further explored in *North of North*, an installation inspired by what Macpherson describes as “commonly held impressions of Canada as a snow-covered northern wasteland inhabited by people who thrive in cold and harsh environments.”<sup>19</sup> The North is an intrinsic part of Canadian mythology, yet the actual North is unknown to the majority of the population concentrated on the southern part of a vast geographical territory. As Mark Kingwell notes, despite Canada's image as a northern nation, it isn't one.<sup>20</sup>

In this installation, Macpherson envisions what the North may be and how relative it is to each individual. She defines it as “somewhere to the North of where I've been, a place I haven't seen,”<sup>21</sup> and for her, this could be anywhere north of Sudbury. The artist started to reflect on the meaning of the North during her years at The Ohio State University, when, as the only Canadian among her colleagues, she came to embody it. She even acquired the nickname “Canada.”

In *North of North*, animals are placed in an enclosed space with lighting effects simulating the aurora borealis, thus compelling visions both of a place and of a phenomenon the artist has never seen. Macpherson's North is filled with mysterious creatures, their strangeness emphasizing the role of fantasy in conceptions of the unknown.

The installation offers a visual pendant to *Decoy* by using the forms of the owl, the deer, and the coyote as starting points for the artist's process of fragmentation, deconstruction, and assemblage. Among the creatures that populate this space, we encounter an owl with miniature animals trapped under the wrappings that cover its head, their protruding shapes deforming the bird's physiognomy. A coyote's head with a gilded eye is wrapped in bandages, and the four legs of a deer are tied together.

Throughout the exhibition, the works have mostly been left white and unglazed—Macpherson's favoured aesthetic—with the precision of the casts revealing the texture of the original model. Gilding is applied sparsely to details such as hooves, claws, horns, beaks, tongues, and eyes. In this installation, the artist introduces ornament, covering the skins of animal parts with a foliage pattern rendered in *sgraffito*. The decoration is here scratched or incised into a black underglaze to reveal the white porcelain body. The leafy motif that gives the impression of a woodblock print is reminiscent of her finely hatched drawings on clay and sketches rendered on paper plates.

In this chapter of her bestiary, Macpherson builds an imaginary landscape. Her use of animals that do not inhabit the Arctic is intentional and seeks to reveal the limits of our knowledge. These creatures stand metaphorically













THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE  
*North of North* (details), 2016

PREVIOUS  
Exhibition view of *Reliquary*  
and *North of North*







for the fauna that is indigenous to the territory, their modifications—sometimes tragic, such as the smashed head of a deer—speaking to the precariousness of this ecosystem, with climate change being one of the greatest perils this wildlife faces. At the same time, the animals symbolize the harshness of human experience in northern territories. The Aboriginal peoples who live in the towns of the North bear the memory of the past, of ongoing injustices, societal problems associated with unemployment and poverty, and the lack of political influence.<sup>22</sup>

### RELIQUARY

Macpherson's view of Canada is filtered by her own personal experience. In *North of North*, she sees the North as part of her own Canadian identity, while recognizing that it is in reality only an abstraction. The installation entitled *Reliquary* is informed by her religious upbringing and personal connection to a particular place, the Martyrs' Shrine in Midland, Ontario. In this work, she reflects on a specific historical moment marked by the first encounters between Aboriginal peoples and European settlers in the context of the early explorations of Canada.

*Reliquary* invites visitors to walk through a forest of truncated trees with human hearts hovering above them. The experience of the forest is enhanced by the music that emanates from some of the trees: instrumental music and songs interpreted a cappella by the artist herself. Drawing on her family's ancestry, some are traditional

English and Scottish folk songs about love, loss, and nature, while others are her own original compositions.<sup>23</sup> All songs are performed in the same key and when played simultaneously are sometimes in harmony and sometimes dissonant. Macpherson here collaborated with sound engineer Justin Haynes, who worked on the recordings and sound design of the installation.

Whereas the forest symbolizes the abundance of untouched resources that drew Europeans to Canada, the felled trees evoke the exploitation of those very resources. From the early seventeenth century, the fur trade was a vast, competitive commercial enterprise. Opening a wild, forested land to exploration and settlement, it also fostered important relations between European settlers and Aboriginal inhabitants.<sup>24</sup> The latter were an intrinsic part of this trade, teaching Europeans basic survival skills in a harsh land. Permanent settlement on the territory led to the establishment of Roman Catholic missions that sought to convert Native populations to the Christian faith. The earliest mission was established in 1615 among the Huron-Wendat with whom the French had forged alliances at Sainte-Marie among the Hurons near Georgian Bay.<sup>25</sup> First established by the Récollets, it was renewed by the Jesuits and developed as a missionary centre, which served as a retreat to priests who proselytized throughout Huronia, aiming to become the centre of a Huron Christian Community.<sup>26</sup> During the Iroquois Wars, a series of devastating attacks on the Hurons brought the death of five Jesuit missionaries, including Jean de Brébeuf (1648) and Gabriel Lalemant (1649).<sup>27</sup> Martyrs' Shrine was erected in their honour near the site of the mission in 1926 (the five martyred Jesuits were canonized in 1930). Each year, thousands of pilgrims from all over the world flock to visit the sacred relics it holds, the most precious being the skull of Saint Jean de Brébeuf.<sup>28</sup>

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*Reliquary* (detail), 2016

## OPPOSITE

Exhibition view of *Reliquary*

Macpherson has, since her childhood, been fascinated by the imagery and objects housed at Martyrs' Shrine—the wall of crutches and the wheelchairs left by people who have been miraculously cured—and the stories about the saints and martyrs venerated on the site. The porcelain hearts that crown the trees in *Reliquary* were inspired by the legend of Jean de Brébeuf, whose heart was allegedly ripped out and eaten as the culmination of his martyrdom. The artist does not seek to illustrate the saint's legend. Instead, she appropriates the motif of the heart as a symbol of the tragedy and suffering that resulted from the encounter between European and Aboriginal peoples.

The hearts serve to visualize some of the most visceral aspects of religious rituals, as well as the profound dichotomy between the worship of flesh through the suffering bodies of Christ, saints, and martyrs, and the renunciation and shame of the body in the Catholic faith. Macpherson conveys what she conceives as a play between gore and sanitization through the repetition of the human organ and its rendering in pure, white porcelain. The form itself is also connected to Macpherson's deep interest in sacred objects and the mysteries associated with them, most particularly reliquaries that are often shaped in the form of the body part from which the relic comes. The hearts in the installation can, therefore, be understood both as relics—evidence that someone existed—and reliquaries.

Cast in a mould made from an anatomical model, each heart presents an appendage of some kind that serves to anthropomorphize the organ, turning it into a hybrid creature in the manner of the artist's animal compositions. The iconography is sometimes suggestive of despair and suffering, by extended arms with imploring hands, and

sometimes of hope and regeneration, with arteries decorated as branches covered in leaves. Associations with liturgical symbols are also suggested, such as a lamb attached on the side of one of the organs, or arms entwined in the shape of a cross. Bleeding is suggested through traces of gold applied to a heart covered in feathered wings.

In *Reliquary*, the hearts represent the people who experienced a traumatic interaction with each other and the landscape. They are a metaphor for human emotion, a shrine to the human struggles that have shaped the colonial history of our country.

Profound and rich, Macpherson's Canadian Bestiary invites us to step into a world where the familiar and the unknown coexist, inspiring us to revisit moments in history and delve into themes that stand at the heart of our shared identity, collective consciousness and mythology.

*I would like to thank Janet Macpherson, Renée Lear, Meredith Chilton, Kelvin Browne, and Siobhan Boyd for reading this essay and for their thoughtful comments.*









The artist's studio.  
Photography by Renée Lear



*Kelvin Browne, Gardiner Museum Executive Director and CEO, in conversation with Janet Macpherson in Toronto, September 21, 2016.*

## IN CONVERSATION

**Kelvin Browne:** When we first discussed the potential for an exhibition with the Gardiner Museum about a different view of Canada, what did you think?

**Janet Macpherson:** My first thought was a practical one: how was I going to use the exhibition space. My work is mostly small-scale, and it's a large room. How do I make small work have impact in this gallery? We spoke about the goal to make it an immersive experience, and this was something new to me, so the approach didn't come right away.

One of the first decisions was to keep it a personal response to Canadian identity, that is, not to use other people's words or ideas and animate them or use them as inspiration. I didn't want to be didactic or too literal either. I decided to continue working with the animal forms from my current body of work, while exploring how themes about Canada could shape the installation.

**KB:** There are many classic Canadian themes; how did you choose the ones you did?

**JM:** Canada has always been so much about the environment for me, a relationship to nature, so that was the first idea I wanted to explore. I wanted to create a feeling in the exhibition of the vastness of the country, that we live with a great wildness so close. Because I use mostly animals in my work, this really fit the theme well. The North, or the question "what is the North" had to be part of this too. The interdependence of species in nature, our relationship

to the Canadian landscape, and that we as humans are dependent on the natural world, were among my initial ideas.

**KB:** Tell us about the themes as they are experienced in the show.

**JM:** The first area a visitor experiences focuses on Canada as a relatively new country, the encounters of Aboriginal people and settlers, and for Europeans, an introduction to a vast wildness that was likely unexpected.

In this section, there are various heights of real trees, on top of each is a life-sized human heart. It's a bit like a reliquary with the heart being symbolic of human emotion, not of settlers or Aboriginal people but of human experience in general. The hearts are of all the people involved in the shaping of the Canada we live in now. The blood from these hearts literally and metaphorically spilled on the land. It's like a shrine that bears the scars of the past, including colonization.

The truncated trees are a memory of our exploitation of the landscape, "hewers of wood," deforestation, but also of vast resources and open spaces—Canada's image for so much of the world.

The hearts and trees reference my childhood experiences at the Martyrs' Shrine in Midland, Ontario, where eight Jesuit missionaries, including St. Jean de Brébeuf and St. Gabriel Lalemant, are commemorated. The shrine is meant to memorialize the idea that it was a good and noble endeavour to bring Christianity to the First Peoples. For me, it was a strange and ominous place with conflicting interpretations.

The audio that accompanies this section is a collection of songs I've written, as well as traditional folk songs from England and Scotland (which is where my ancestors are from). These songs resonate with me personally and

*Migration (detail), 2016*

are mainly songs about how we cope with loss and change. The songs are all in one key, play simultaneously, and create a certain dissonance. As you walk through the trees, you'll hear these songs; the intent is to make them both familiar and unknowable, sort of like our history. I want to create a contemplative space where one can experience what it must be like to encounter a new place, while leaving his or her past behind. The idea is that discovery is disorienting.

**KB:** Then it's the North?

**JM:** People outside of Canada think of us as a northern country, and I think many Canadians link our identity to the North. I call this section "North of North." It's a room that's made of fabric, the walls shift as you walk past them, a reference to the shifting idea of the North. I've never been North, not north of Sudbury, and even those who live in the North still reference something "north" of where they are. In a way, it's unknowable, and that's part of its fascination. What is North depends, of course, on your perspective. It's a potent idea. Glenn Gould's famous radio series was the *Idea of North*, and this is mine. So few live there, and even those that visit from the "South" can't really say they know what it's like to live there. It has a mythic sense to it, and this myth is part of our collective consciousness.

The sculptures are intentionally strange combinations of scale, the miniature and the giant placed next to each other. These animals are my mythic idea of the North confronting the real I know. The sculptures are attached to the plinths, and hence have a symbiotic relationship; they need each other to survive. The lighting in this section references the aurora borealis, evoking the mysterious quality of this natural phenomenon.

**KB:** And next?

**JM:** Migration. Human migration and animal migration.

The history of Canada is connected to this phenomenon, and the reality that the majority of us came here from somewhere else. The symbol of this journey is the bridge. Like the land bridge across the Bering Strait, it suggests the precariousness of the route here. Some animals are falling on their way. These animals are fragile and vulnerable, but tenacious too. Just like people. I don't mean to be morbid, but this is the reality of migration, and the sense of needing to change to survive or fit into a new world is suggested as well. I see these animals as all seeking safety, maybe my sense of why people migrate today—not just for opportunity but something more urgent.

There is a video projection in this section by Renée Lear complementing my work. She's using animated images of bird decoys to suggest the migratory paths of birds, and the obstacles that could make this journey more difficult and disorienting.

**KB:** Then you move to the installation that has large-scale, almost life-sized animals.

**JM:** Normally I use toys as my moulds for animals, but for these larger ones I used decoys that hunters use. There is a deer, a coyote, and an owl—two predatory animals and one prey. This combination speaks to the interdependence of these different animals, and also suggests that we risk our own survival when we disrupt the basic balance of nature, when we don't see ourselves in this equation.

**KB:** How is this section about Canada?

**JM:** I think Canadians still relate to the landscape and many of us live relatively close to nature, even in our cities. Our sense of who we are has nature in it, and we instinctively feel its importance. It's not always pleasant, for instance the relationship of predator and prey, but it's real and essential; we can destroy its balance so easily, and hence lose something vital that defines us—not to mention something that literally sustains us.



**CANADA HAS ALWAYS BEEN**  
SO MUCH ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT  
FOR ME, A RELATIONSHIP TO  
NATURE, SO THAT WAS THE FIRST  
IDEA I WANTED TO EXPLORE.

**KB:** I understand how these sections are ideas about Canada, but why a “bestiary” or a *Canadian* bestiary?

**JM:** In the past few years, my work has been expanding, focusing not solely on the individual objects but on their relationships to each other and the environments they inhabit. The exhibition is an extension of this process. I am using real trees, architectural elements, and I’m now working with collaborators to add sound and video. Things are happening on a larger scale, but the animals are part of my continuing fascination. The title suggests that the exhibition is about my notions of Canada, but the language I’m using is primarily the animals I create. A bestiary is a compendium of beasts, both real and imaginary, and they are often found in Christian allegories. Each beast in this context was often associated with a moral lesson and meant to be a metaphor for a specific human quality. In a world where few people were literate, it was a way of communicating ideas, and there was an implicit connection between the animals and people, the traits of the animals and human nature. A bestiary provided a vocabulary then, and it does for me now.

Some allegorical animals were hybrids, and I make animals that are combinations of various species. The animals are in flux: some are wrapped in ways that can seem like they are being masked and bandaged for their own protection, or bound and blindfolded to restrict their freedom. It’s reminiscent of images of Christian saints and martyrs, images from my Catholic past, but their hybrid, transformational nature is symbolic of the complexity of people, the sacred and profane, and to a degree, the difficulty of knowing anything or defining something with absolute certainty.

*A Canadian Bestiary* is my rumination about Canada, using a vocabulary of animals and images I find compelling, but like the animals, these installations are ideas, thoughts, an attempt to define the ephemeral, starting a conversation, not ending it.

**Janet Macpherson** was born in Barrie, Ontario, in 1974, where she grew up. She moved to Toronto to pursue her studies, obtaining her Bachelor of Arts degree in philosophy at York University in 1996.

While at university, she discovered the medium of clay through pottery classes, a hobby at the time. Training in ceramics continued at Sheridan College in Oakville from 1999 to 2002, and for the following six years she maintained a studio practice in Toronto, making functional objects.

Macpherson started exploring a more figurative approach to ceramics at the Ohio State University, where she earned a Master of Fine Arts in 2010. In 2013 she received the Winifred Shantz Award for Ceramics from the Clay and Glass Gallery in Waterloo, Ontario. Her work has also been supported by grants from the Canada Council for the Arts (2013, 2015), the Ontario Arts Council (2013, 2014, 2015), and the Toronto Arts Council. Macpherson was an artist in residence at the Harbourfront Centre in Toronto (2011–2014), and more recently at the Zentrum Für Keramik in Berlin, Germany, (2014).

Solo exhibitions include *Mirabilia* at VERSO Gallery (2015) in Toronto, and *Processional* at the Sculpture Center (2014) in Cleveland, Ohio. The 2015 NCECA Biennial in Providence, Rhode Island, included her work. Her most recent work, *Pilgrimage*, was part of *Épisode, the Second Virginia McClure Ceramic Biennale* at McClure Gallery (2016) in Montreal. Her work is in the permanent collection of the Art Gallery of Burlington in Ontario. Macpherson lives and works in Toronto.

**Renée Lear** is a video artist, performer, photographer, and filmmaker. She holds a BFA in new media from the School of Image Arts at Ryerson University, Toronto, and received an MFA from York University, Toronto.

Her recent work includes experimental video, site-specific video installation, video performance, and video mixing in live environments. She works both solo and in collaboration with musicians, DJs, chefs, and dancers. Her work has been shown in art galleries, festivals, underground cinemas, performance spaces, dance clubs, music venues, and ad hoc public spaces, and has been exhibited in Canada, the United States, Europe, and China. Renée Lear lives and works in Toronto, Canada.

## ARTIST'S

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Janet Macpherson

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## INSTALLATIONS

**Reliquary, 2016**

Slip-cast porcelain, paper clay, gold lustre, black underglaze, wood (maple and oak), sound

Sound design by Justin Haynes

Music interpreted by Janet Macpherson

**North of North, 2016**

Slip-cast porcelain, paper clay, gold lustre, black underglaze, felt

**Decoy, 2016**

Slip-cast porcelain, paper clay, gold lustre, plaster

**Migration, 2016**

Slip-cast porcelain, paper clay, gold lustre, wooden bridge, video

Renée Lear, *The Migration Stops Here*, 2017. Video projection, 41 min., 26 sec., looped

Renée Lear, *Zugunruhe*, 2017. Video installation, 14 sec., looped

## NOTES

1. Over the past decades animals have been omnipresent on the contemporary art scene, with artists working in different media using their image to question the human impulse to control, dominate, and domesticate nature, or address environmental issues and ethical concerns raised by advances in the field of science.

2. Linda Swanson, "Épisode," in *Episode: 2<sup>e</sup> Biennale de Céramique Virginia McClure—2nd Virginia McClure Ceramic Biennale* (Montreal: Visual Arts Centre, McClure Gallery, 2016), 46.

3. For an overview of the origins of animal sculpture in ceramic and its social context see Karine Tsoumis, *Animal Stories: Friends, Foes, Fables and Fantasy* (Toronto: Gardiner Museum, 2013).

4. See Samuel Wittwer, *A Royal Menagerie: Meissen Porcelain Animals* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2001). An eagle after a Japanese original modelled by Johann Gottlieb Kirchner in the Gardiner Museum's collection was part of this commission.

5. Information on Janet Macpherson's process, artistic influences and the work in this exhibition was obtained in conversations with the artist throughout the preparation of this exhibition.

6. Christian Heck and Rémy Cordonnier, *The Grand Medieval Bestiary: Animals in Illuminated Manuscripts* (New York: Abbeville Press, 2012), 86–87.

7. Nona C. Flores, "Introduction," in *Animals in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays*, ed. Nona C. Flores (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), x.

8. Heck and Cordonnier, *The Grand Medieval Bestiary*, 10.

9. Flores, "Introduction," x.

10. Michel Jeanneret, *Perpetuum mobile: Métamorphoses des corps et des œuvres de Vinci à Montaigne* (Paris: Macula, 1997), 131–136.

11. Marie Fraser, *Zoo* (Montreal: Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2012), 35.

12. Janet Macpherson, "Angelus: Artist Statement," RBC Emerging Artist People's Choice Award, Gardiner Museum, 2012.

13. Theoretical source material also informs Macpherson's work, including the work of medievalist Caroline Walker Bynum.

14. Anja Sommer, "Tame Piglets and Holy Cows—The Ceramics of Artist Janet Macpherson," in *New Ceramics*, July/August 2015, 21.

15. Ibid., 19.

16. Janet Macpherson, "Artist Statement" in *Janet Macpherson: A Canadian Bestiary* (Toronto: Gardiner Museum, 2017), 7.

17. David Pacchioli, "On the Wing: Understanding the Biological Clocks that Determine when Birds Migrate and Reproduce," *Penn State News*, March 22, 2012, accessed December 19, 2016, <http://news.psu.edu/story/141941/2012/03/22/research/wing>.

18. Alanna Mitchell, "Why More Women Are Taking Up Hunting," *Globe and Mail*, August 22, 2014, accessed December 19, 2016, <http://www.the-globeandmail.com/life/why-more-women-are-taking-up-hunting/article20179382/?page=all>.

19. Janet Macpherson, author in conversation with the artist, Toronto, June 29, 2016.

20. Mark Kingwell, "The Idea of North Revisited: Nordic Myths and Modernisms," in *True Nordic: How Scandinavia Influenced Design in Canada* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2016), 48–49.

21. Janet Macpherson, author in conversation with the artist, Toronto, June 29, 2016.

22. Ibid., 48.

23. The songs interpreted by Janet Macpherson include "Now Westlin Winds," words by Robert Burns, 1775; "The Recruited Collier"; "Bonny May"; "Barbara Allen"; "Forsaken Mermaid." Macpherson's original compositions (music and lyrics) include "Unwound," 2006; "Loved You More," 2011; "Solo Ukulele," 2016.

24. William John Eccles and John E. Foster, "Fur Trade," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, published July, 23, 2013, accessed December 23, 2016, <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/fur-trade/>.

25. Ibid.; and R. Douglas Francis, Richard Jones, Donald B. Smith, and Dr. Robert A. Wardhaugh, *Origins: Canadian History to Confederation*, 7th ed. (Toronto: Nelson Education, 2013), 69.

26. Francis et al., *Origins: Canadian History to Confederation*, 61.

27. Ibid., 73.

28. "The Story of the Shrine," *Martyrs' Shrine*, accessed December 23, 2016, <http://martyrs-shrine.com/about-the-shrine/the-story-of-the-shrine/>.



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Janet Macpherson

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