

## From the Edge of Disaster to A Quiet Kitchen Opera: Amalie Atkins' Enigmatic Other Worlds

A girl in a red and white gingham dress and large, hand-made wolf's head carries a pair of shears in one hand and a ladder in the other; two women in Victorian winter skirts and coats hold large listening devices to their ears as they skate in circular motions on a large northern prairie lake; a group of intensely focused, uniformed younger women roller-skate in formation near a deserted prairie field; two older women work together in a modest farm kitchen as one of them costumes herself in about 40 handmade vintage aprons. Who is this cast of characters, and what are they up to in these geographically isolated yet imaginatively charged prairie settings?

Much of the imagery in Amalie Atkins' films, installations, and photographic works hovers on the edge of logical comprehension, as if leading us beyond the rational into a cryptic space where delightfully absurd narratives loom large. But the humour and absurdity have an underbelly, and Atkins' enigmatic, meticulously fabricated, and inventive worlds are multi-layered, transporting her audience into enchanting yet surreal and sometimes disturbing realms where boundaries between reality and fiction blur. As if shining a flashlight into the shadows of a darkened room, Atkins' work places us within immersive elsewheres. In these unknown and uncanny places she plays with a heightened sense of perception, animating psychological registers stored out of view and just below the surface.

This sense of an exaggerated yet plausible make-believe world, an example of what novelist Madeline Thien calls “worlds buried within other worlds,”<sup>[1]</sup> permeates Atkins’ recent project ...(2012-ongoing). In this body of work, which features a series of interrelated narrative films and large-format photographs and film stills, the viewer is constantly positioned at the tipping point of what previously seemed familiar.

In many of the films and photographs included in this multi-media project, an all-female cast of characters methodically and intently engage in peculiar and captivating renditions of seemingly everyday activities. An interpretive staging of both fictitious and autobiographical events, often inspired by the inheritance of family history, Atkins’ work is rooted in persistent dream-like images that emerge as forces to be reckoned with. Atkins has stated that her starting points often involve notions of “ritual and initiation, and the intricacies of sisterhood and matriarchy.” Her exploration of this terrain, guided by an agile imagination, presents us with a fluidity of time and space and many unexpected crossings and revelations.

In one photo titled *The Summoning II* (2013), a determined looking group of six young women, costumed in 70s style knee-length orange jumpers and long-sleeved yellow sweaters, rises out of a barren prairie autumn field like some energetic, rhizomatic force. In a synchronized formation, as if they are a posse carrying out an important secret mission, they roller skate together in a deserted landscape. Despite their unlikely presence in this

setting, the uniformed troop radiates an aura of purposefulness, their destination and the focus of their determined gaze beyond our view.

The film *Braid Harvesters* (2013, 5:01 min.), set on a sandy unpopulated beach by the South Saskatchewan River, features a mother and daughter modestly clad in matching yellow gingham skirts, yellow sweaters, white aprons, and black rubber boots, a costume that Atkins refers to as “a mash-up of pre- and post-modern Mennonite, prairie farm fashion.” The twosome appear totally absorbed as they carefully gather long braids of dark brown hair from small pools of water and ceremoniously hang them on a makeshift clothesline, presumably to dry. One cannot escape the implications of such tender gestures, reminiscent of caring for injured bodies or loved ones, or responding to and processing a traumatic event or loss. Clearly, these are “severed” braids; the eerie undertone is pronounced. Who did these braids belong to? What has transpired? Given the mother’s and daughter’s identical braids, how are they entangled in this implied collective and tragic history?

In another memorable scene from Atkins’ recent film *The Diamond Eye Assembly* (2017-ongoing, 20:35 min.), a group of adolescent girls in Ukrainian dance costumes band together in a grove of trees and then in unison climb a large, freshly bulldozed dirt hill. Embroidered white blouses, yellow and red skirts, and red dance boots create a striking contrast to the steep slope of raw black soil. Their choreographed, graceful movements are reminiscent of the agile patterns created by a flock of birds, yet a distinct undercurrent

of vulnerability emanates from their youthful abandon as they navigate this stark and remote environment.

Despite some of the darker connotations in Atkins' images, women and girls are rarely shown in isolation but travel in each other's company, as if escorted by a resilient collectivity. Their traces on the prairie landscape appear elusive and ephemeral and their idiosyncratic, focused actions seem oddly out of place in these sparse outdoor environments; yet their sheer presence is somehow poignant, breathtakingly beautiful, and resolute. An intimate layering of superimpositions is created, whose scale, impact, and rhythm suggest trance-like reenactments of, or meditations on, an interconnected but often unacknowledged history.

Another form of excavation is enacted in Atkins' film *Listening to the Past/Listening to the Future* (2014, 3:02 min.). Two women skaters, wearing elaborate hand-made black Victorian skirts and coats, each hold two large black funnel-like "listening devices" to their ears. But what is being listened to in this wide-open prairie winter setting on an empty, frozen, icy-blue northern lake? While the two costumed skaters twirl around in circles, it may first appear that they are spinning out of control – but then it becomes clear that the repetitive choreographed movement is very precise and focused. Like an antenna, each funnel-like "listening device" seems to be channeling transmissions of sounds, energy, memories, and stories from the vast prairie landscape into the core of the rotating, inquisitive, receptive female body. It appears that something deeply symbolic, lost, or out

of view is being returned to, magnified, or experienced anew. Within the space of the exhibition, the viewer's participation is required to activate this particular piece. As one sits at an old treadle sewing machine and pumps the foot pedal, power is triggered to run the film – a further insistence upon a combination of resonant and untapped forces, and a symbolic reminder of all the behind-the-scenes domestic labour required to sustain an interconnected social eco-system.

At the centre of the work included in Atkins' Vienna Wundermärchen exhibition (2017) is *Aprons* (2017, 5:00 min.), a narrative film set in a modest prairie farm kitchen where two older women, presumably sisters, are absorbed in two very different domestic actions. One woman sits quietly near a large sunny window at a worn wooden table, her full attention directed towards the mesmerizing, repetitive task of shelling peas. A second woman enters the kitchen and without any communication or acknowledgement of the other's presence, methodically begins to put on approximately 40 vintage aprons – a physical draping of the body in what appears to be a type of protective armor or layered communal past. Eventually, the seated woman abandons the more practical task of shelling peas and offers to assist with the apron ritual. The variety of styles, colours, and fabrics is extensive: some are sheer, some embroidered, some floral, some gingham, some full length and some shorter, waist aprons. When the camera zooms in on the back of the tied aprons, the spectacle of overlapping bows, patterns, and colors resembles exotic plumage, reminiscent of embellishment on a unique home-made party frock.

As the woman puts on each unique hand-crafted apron, she gently smooths its surface; through this caress she appears to create a space for remembering the maker and her ingenuity, welcoming the garment into a larger and more significant domestic and cultural history. Each apron is given its own moment of tribute, conjuring up interconnected generations of women who performed their own quiet kitchen operas in silence, and often in isolation.

Since the collection of aprons came primarily from Atkins' aunts (the two actresses in the film) and many were made by her grandmother, the film functions as a type of memorial, family portrait, and symbolic rebirthing – an embodiment of a matriarchal history and a reassessment of the value of this specific material archive. The film ends with the excessively aproned sister exiting and buoyantly walking away from the farm house, the actual home of Atkins' grandparents. Like an unwavering heroine marching into the line of action, her cloak of aprons seems to endow her with supernatural powers – a richly layered history which she now visibly and comfortably carries with her.

We again meet this character in Atkins' most recent body of work titled *The Diamond Eye Assembly* (2017-ongoing), a companion piece to *Aprons*. In a large-format photograph (a film still) that is also included in the Vienna exhibition, the elderly aproned woman is shown standing on a country road against the spaciousness of an autumn prairie field, one of the few instances where a female character is shown on her own. It is worth noting, however, that in the context of the film she is surrounded by her daughter, young twin

granddaughters, and a troupe of Ukrainian dancers. The photograph captures a moment when the woman is in transit, walking away from the farm house where she first cloaked herself with aprons, the talismans of secret powers. Although it is not completely apparent in the photograph, she is still wearing her protective armour, and on her journey in the transition from summer to fall it has served her well. In some ways her appearance is that of an ordinary older woman; her stooped shoulders, wrinkled face, and quiet and meditative presence seem familiar in this rural setting. But her pensive, reflective gaze suggests more than an observant, attentive listening. The woman appears to see something that we do not, perhaps a premonition, perhaps an actual event. She projects concern, possibly remembering or anticipating a trauma. It is as if she knows more than she can possibly say.

Like the listening device in *Listening to the Past/Listening to the Future*, this elderly woman seems to act as a conduit for transmissions of sounds, energy, memories, and stories from the vast prairie landscape. But she also seems to be a source of this knowledge, and she literally and figuratively carries a history that others might tap into. In her reflective presence we are acutely aware of the charged inner worlds of Atkins' other films, installations, and photographs, as well as the processing of events, relationships, and interactions to which they seem to allude. The woman's attentiveness and stillness reveal a poignant interiority, animating the ways some worlds are often concealed within the structure and appearance of other worlds. Her shield of aprons symbolically suggests that when they are needed, we are capable of envisioning, discovering, and exercising our own superpowers.

For Atkins' all-female cast, these superpowers seem to be rooted in and nurtured by the knowledge of, and delight in, each other's company, efforts, and antics. They are also fueled by the energy and history of Canadian prairie landscapes, a cultural and social geography Atkins and her family have occupied and explored for three generations, and the location where most of her work is staged. Within the ritualized actions of summoning, dancing, gathering, listening, and roller-skating, a constant reassessment of aesthetics and cultural values is being proposed. This amplified sense of attentiveness unearths a space between what is visible and known and a new awareness – a retrieval, a discovery, and an awakening. As we perch on the edge of Atkins' wondrous, immersive, and make-believe elsewheres, a renewed sense of possibility and interconnectedness seems within our reach.

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BIO: (use first sentence or whatever portion there is room for)

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