



*Traversing the line, with no fixed point - Installation detail*

**Briana Palmer**

***Traversing the line, with no fixed point***

April 26 - June 7, 2019

Opening Reception: April 26, 7:00PM - 9:00PM



**Main Space Gallery**

## Traversing the line, with no fixed point

by Sally McKay

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Briana Palmer's multi-layered installation might appear whimsical at first glance - a miniature world designed for entertainment and delight. But her references to trains, toys and childhood all have deeper, troubling meanings.

Palmer grew up in Revelstoke, BC, a small city near the western edge of Canada's colonial frontier. The railway passed through town. Towering trestles featured in everyday life. At night, the sound of rail cars crashing over the tracks soothed children to sleep in their beds. For Palmer it was a comfortable life. Troubling terms like "settler" and "colonial" only emerged for her after she left Revelstoke, gained more life experience, and began to question what she calls the "white bread" assumptions of her upbringing.

In Canada's dominant mythology, the railway brought the nation together and fostered economic wealth. But Palmer's train disrupts this narrative. It chugs along from place to place, not a symbol of prosperity, but a vehicle of disruption. Palmer wants us to consider colonizers' displacements of Indigenous communities that severed their embodied connections with the land; as well as the forced labour of Chinese and Italian immigrants, many of whom died while building the railway, and all of whom were subjected to racist violence on the project.

Model trains, invented in the late 19th century, had become a popular toy for middle-class boys by the 1950s. Palmer asks, "Historically, who gets to play with model trains? Who creates these miniature Utopian worlds, constructing their own idealized versions of society?" Palmer's diorama does not present a comprehensible social order, but rather a world of floating and disjointed biomorphic forms in which absurdist juxtapositions defy structured, Western narratives of home and place.

Prints and wall drawings further extend Palmer's critique. Trained as a print-maker, she conceptually connects the printing press and the railway because both disseminate Western ideologies. The Gutenberg Press was used for the first mass-produced Bibles, spreading literacy but also imposing top-down models for social behaviour in a burgeoning capitalist economy. Further probing her own "white bread" upbringing, Palmer uses print-making to repurpose nostalgic illustrations from children's encyclopaedias. She disrupts their familiar narratives with quotes from racist micro-aggressions that she has personally witnessed in her daily life.

A large, black and white woodcut banner spans the gallery walls. While aesthetically sumptuous, the imagery of barbed wire and ruined landscape speaks of war and devastation. During a recent residency in Slovenia, Palmer was struck by a stone road made by Russian POWs in WWI, thousands of whom lost their lives. "Now," she says, "it's just a route for tourists hiking up a mountain to a park." The barbed wire also resonates with a Canadian war-time context. "Slocan, one of Canada's biggest internment camps, was just down the road from where I grew up," Palmer explains. Again, Palmer invokes a sense of home, but, no longer comfortable and complacent, this home is fraught and troubled with the settler-inflicted violence of Canada's colonial past.

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## Writer Biography

Sally McKay is an artist and writer based in Hamilton, Ontario.

## Artist Biography

Briana Palmer lives in Hamilton Ontario, and teaches in the studio arts program at McMaster University. Originally from the west coast Briana received her BFA from the Alberta Collage of Art and Design and her MFA from the University of Alberta. Her primary practice is in printmaking, sculpture and installation; creating works that reflect an intersection between perception, experience, and social ideologies taken from her own cultural practices, up-bringing and daily experiences.

Her works have been exhibited in Canada, the U.S and Europe. Her prints are in the collections of Alberta Foundation for the Arts, Southern Graphics Print Council, and University of Alberta.

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