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Flipping the Island

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Flipping the Island

by Jay Pahre



About the Artist

Jay Pahre is a queer and trans settler artist and writer currently based on the unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and Səlilwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) peoples. Weaving between drawing, sculpture and writing, his work queries trans and queer nonhuman ecologies as they intersect with the human. He completed his MFA in visual art at the University of British Columbia in 2020, and was selected for the 2020 Transgender Studies Chair Fellowship at the University of Victoria. In 2021 he was artist-in-residence at Isle Royale National Park.

Flipping the Island

Jay Pahre

It wasn't sight, but the wind-carried stench of decomposition that alerted them to the tangle of bones in the mine.

It is a gleaming-bright summer day on the shores of Gitchi-Gami or Lake Superior. I am surrounded by a mausoleum of meticulously labeled moose bones as I listen to Rolf and Candy Peterson tell me the story of how one of their volunteers for the wolf-moose study found the wolf Romeo and his two packmates drowned in a copper mine shaft a few summers back. These volunteers cast themselves out over the island each summer, gathering moose bones and figuring out where the wolves are, what they're up to, which moose they're eating, and why. With enough wolves, they will maintain the moose population on the island; with too few, the moose will over browse and starve themselves. In this instance, the volunteer thought at first it was a moose that had drowned; it wasn't until they'd begun to pull out the sodden, decomposed bodies and picked out the radio collars that they realized they were looking at three wolves, and not one heaping moose. At this moment, the find was devastating; the wolf population had dwindled to five that past summer, and with three wolves drowned, and the last two intimately related, there was no longer a viable wolf population on the island.

The wolf-moose study on Minong or Isle Royale—this island I'm standing on in the middle of Gitchi-Gami or Lake Superior—is the longest running scientific study of predator-prey relationships anywhere in the world. Rolf directed the study for many years. He and Candy still live on the island in the summertime in an old fishery cabin and are still involved in the study, although formally retired. The rows of sunbaked moose bones tell me such.

I'm not here as a scientist but as an artist-in-residence. My current body of work, *Flipping the Island* (2019-ongoing), asks about human and nonhuman ecologies that rely on

change as a part of their ongoing set of ecological relationships. Rather than reacting to change, the work queries ecologies that place change at their center, that rely on a tipping over or shifting as part of the way they sustain themselves. I am thinking through these ecologies as queer ecologies (Ahmed 2006; Barad 2011; Muñoz et al. 2015) and trans ecologies. Coming to a place that has had one consistent predator-prey relationship observed by a western scientific study seems antithetical to this idea.

But, this is not the only ecology the island has sustained.



Figure 1. Pahre, Jay. Piebald Undercoat. 2019. Copper Plated Steel Wire, Aluminum Wire, Gauze. Approx. 21x27".

Beyond scents, the wind carries many other beings here. Most of the nonhuman animals on this cluster of islands came over floating on the wind or clinging to logs that bobbed miles across the open waves. A few other larger ones—wolves, moose, foxes, and previously coyotes, caribou, and lynx—stretched out to the island from the mainland when the water froze to thick ice in cold winters. Some, like winter ticks, clung to the animals that were walking or swimming over. These are movements of speculation. This hopping on logs, drifting on the wind, clinging to a hair, or straining out over the ice are not exercises in drifting towards the known. This is a reaching towards something that lays at the fringes, at an edge, at something your gut twists at and tells you *might* be there.

So too is it with transness. I grew up in the Midwest and Great-Lakes regions and have come to this island again and again with different names and different bodies over the course of my transition. Transness is an act of speculation. I do not mean transness as in the shift from one side to the other, but rather, as an ongoing act of speculation, of wondering, of feeling something at the edge of your senses and leaning into it (Barad 2015). It is feeling the electric drag of air over your skin, shivering at goosebumps rising over your flesh at that frictive brush, and wondering if things changed. These goosebumps you feel are the residuals of guard hairs; hairs that signal affectual shift, that protect against the elements, and raise with electric charge. It is an ongoing act of movement, of shifting, of changing, of flipping over, and it hinges at the edges of your body.



Figure 2. Pahre, Jay. *Skinwelt*. 2020. Steel. Approx. 23X28".

In May 2019, two years before this residency, my father and I flipped the island. Colloquially, *Flipping the Island* refers to walking fifty miles from one end of the island to the other, and then turning around and doing it again. The island we flipped is the largest island in Gitchi-Gami or Lake Superior and is called Minong or Isle Royale. It is a part of the territory of the Grand Portage Ojibwe and has been used for hunting and mining by Indigenous people around the lake for thousands of years (Cochrane 2009). European settlers have been frequenting this island since the 1800s for fishing, logging, and mining

(Oikarinen 2008). Several families built vacation homes on the island in the early 1900s, one of which I am staying at now as an artist-in-residence. The network of hiking trails we followed are largely the residuals of game, mining, and fishing trails formally made into walking trails when this island, and four hundred smaller ones surrounding it, was designated Isle Royale National Park in 1940.

Establishing this archipelago as a national park coincides roughly with when the first wolves were brought over to the island. Before wolves, there were coyotes or lynx and caribou on the island. The lynx left, and the wolves killed off the coyotes. The wolves were brought here hand-reared from zoos (Mech 1966). They became pests to the people that brought them over. Sometimes they would steal laundry put out to dry at the cabins, and sometimes they would eat the chickens vacation-goers brought over to farm. Two of the wolves were shot, and one of them was relocated off the island. The last one evaded capture by swimming up and down the archipelago for months and months all summer. That the last wolf dove into the water, seeking that heaving aquatic body until more of its kin could walk over across the ice in wintertime, speaks worlds to leaning at the fringes. This is diving headlong into an atmosphere you cannot fully anticipate, but know you must subsume yourself in.

Since the 1940s, due to warming temperatures and less lake ice freeze-up in winter, the wolf population periodically collapses. In part to maintain the study, in part to control the moose population, in part because it's what was done before, and in part because the island is now famous for wolves, the National Park brought more wolves over from the mainland. This is an isolated ecology being maintained in part because the climate itself is flipping.

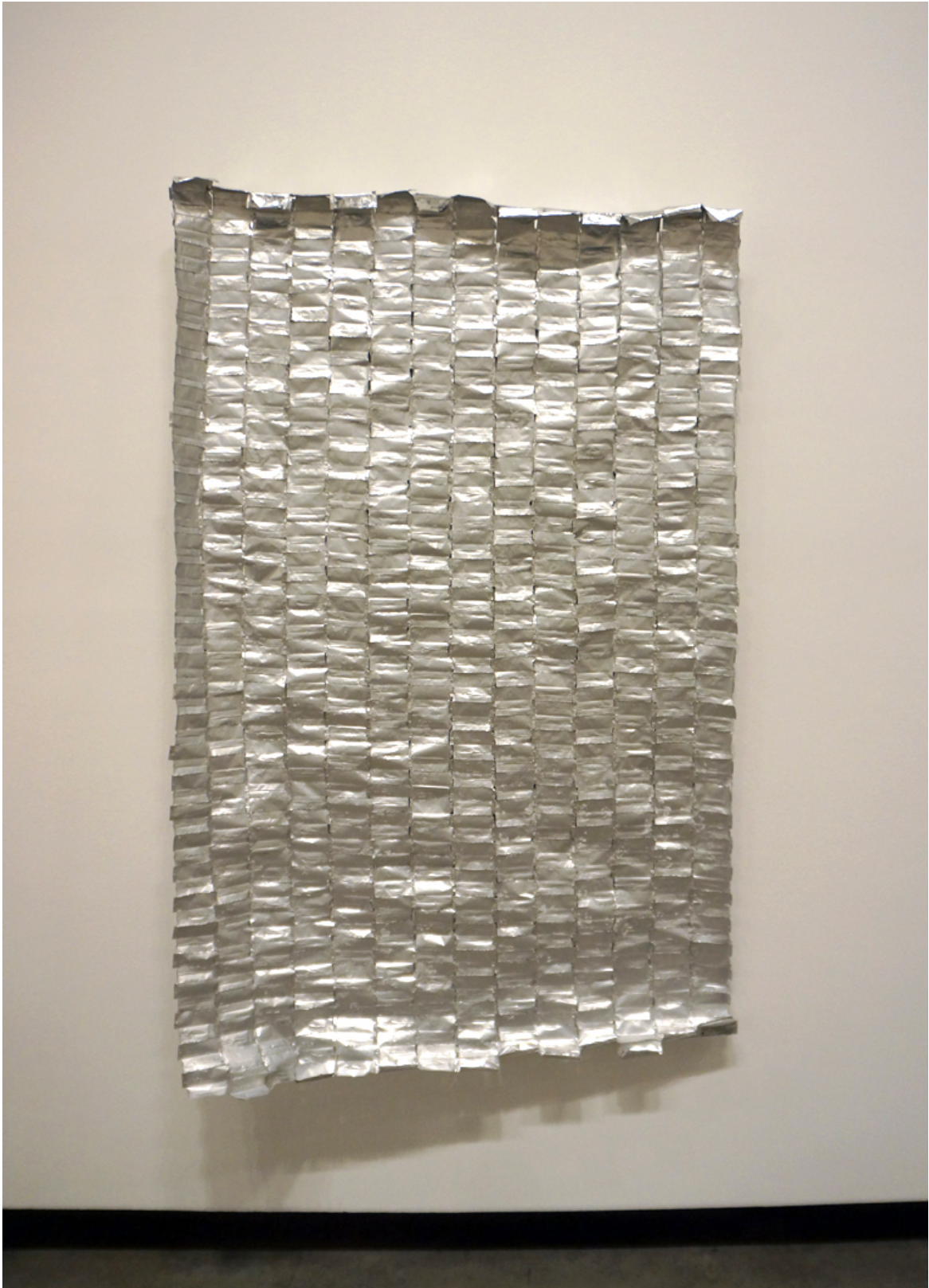


Figure 3. Pahre, Jay. *Space Blanket*. 2019. Aluminum Testosterone Gel Packets, Monofilament Thread. Dimensions Variable.

Flipping the Island (2019–ongoing) hearkens back to this flipping of bodies, movement, leaning on with atmospheres, and of the changing human and nonhuman ecologies on the island. But it also refers to another kind of flipping: that flipping intrinsic to copper itself.



Figure 4. Pahre, Jay. *Guard Hairs*. 2019. Copper Plated Steel Wire, Gauze. Dimensions Variable.

Copper is sensitive to electricity and to heat. Minong or Isle Royale is known for having some of the purest copper anywhere in the world. Among things like coins, copper is used for thermocoupling. A thermocouple is something made of two wires from different materials; it uses an electric charge to measure temperature. The wire I use is like this: transference of heat, of temperature. A charge runs down through it, bends, and whips and twists and shoots out the tip. Against something else. Think of this friction: this rubbing up of two materials against one another for this charge. A loop. Touching itself. Two atmospheric bodies in collision and contact to measure temperature.

The wire I'm using in my work looks just like solid copper, but it is copper plated over steel. This wire is used for welding; it conjures the joining of metal through heat and electricity. In working with electricity there is a ground and a charge. This ground is less

like a surface or platform than it is like a tether. It links something to something else so that a current may flow. This tether allows this charge to happen, allows that arc to loop out. Allows that arc to lean farther and farther away, changing and charging before circling back on itself again. It loops back and touches itself again, differently, and along another trajectory.



Figure 5. Pahre, Jay. *Guard Hairs*. 2019. Detail. Copper Plated Steel Wire, Gauze. Dimensions Variable.

This electric heat-touch sparks changes at the vestiges of your body, too. The stretch of this bristling, woven copper is roughly my height from where the little prickles begin to where it touches down and grounds itself against the floor. It is called *Guard Hairs*. Those goosebumps you felt, rising against the chill, are the residuals of guard hairs. Long ago, humans shed our guard hairs. Through the friction our movement created, the thick hairs generated too much heat. Guard hairs are a type of fur that many other mammals still have: a long upper coat that traverses down along the spine, from the crown of the head to the tail. They are long to keep the undercoat dry, like the part that warms the animal up when it's cold. They protect against UV rays. They camouflage. They lift up as an animal moves or lift up if an animal is excited or afraid. They respond to temperature and affectual shift.

Bristling with that capacity, I want to pull transness through in this manner. I want to speak with it at the edge of this precipice we are feeling through rising temperatures, a growing quiet. These are atmospheres on the move, bodies on the move, ecologies on the move. This is knowing that you may strain out over the ice, latch yourself to a log, or float on the wind, not knowing what lays on the other side. This is knowing that you may keep going and may not come back at all. That you will drown in a mine, initially mistaken for another, and that your radio collar will settle amongst moose bones.



Figure 6. Pahre, Jay. *Studies for Flipping the Island*. 2021. Gouache on Paper. 18x25.”

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