



**Donna White**  
*Prevailing Past*

July 4<sup>th</sup> - August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2008  
Reception: Friday, July 4<sup>th</sup>, 8pm  
*(for members and invited guests only)*

Note...

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THE ADDRESS TO BE WRITTEN ON THIS SIDE

## PREVAILING PAST

It's Stampede time. Welcome to Calgary, Canada's fast growing, oil-rich boom city, Heart of the New West and Home of The Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth. If you come by plane, on the drive from the airport you'll notice oil storage tanks painted with friendly working characters doffing their hats to you. This July, if you drive downtown on 9th Avenue, you might notice a tri-fold billboard with photographs of two women with cowboy hats. As the slats turn, you can see that they too are making a kind of gesture with their hats. And you can see that the hats are not exactly what they seem.

The billboard is Donna White's first project since her recent return to the Calgary area from Grand Prairie, and a stint in Saskatoon where she got her MFA at the University of Saskatchewan. There she made a series of provocative billboards, also of normal-looking women of different ages, who also wore something unusual, in this case strange Elizabethan-looking paper ruffs around their necks. If you went to the Mendel Art Gallery where the 2006 exhibition, Beautiful as well as Brutal, was held, you could see the Cyborg Collars more closely. The lace patterns were virtually tatted by joining digital photographic details of the office buildings at the intersection where the billboards stood. Essentially, the women on the billboards wore the architecture of the buildings where they hypothetically worked. The photographic paper and steel needle construction of the anachronistic collars made for a bizarre, perilous and uncomfortable fit. One unexpected outcome of the event is that people in Saskatoon still drive by the billboard location in hope of seeing something interesting again.



*Cyborg Project #1, 2006*



A closer look at the billboard on the south side of 9th Avenue and 8th Street SW, Calgary (across from the construction site where the legendary "Cowboys" bar used to be) and a visit to the exhibition at The Stride Gallery reveal a similar modus operandi. Here the fabrics of the hats are made in PhotoShop with photographs of details of iconic Calgary buildings. The white felt of the hat that the older woman discards is made from the repeated image of the painted brickwork of the old St. Louis Hotel and the straw texture of the hat the younger woman picks up is woven with the multiplication of a tiny image of the reflective windows of Bankers Hall. White sets rules for herself. When working with PhotoShop, she allows adjustments only in scale, but in this case she modified the colour so that the hats, like the twin towers of Bankers Hall are available in two colours – straw and brick. The hats themselves are cut from a flat piece of paper and folded so that the brim fits around the head, and the crown sticks up like the false façades of early Western towns. (In her research, White learned that the architects of Bankers Tower, Cohos Evamy, envisioned the tops of the towers as the crowns of cowboy hats.) The models on the billboard are strikingly confident. White works with everyday people as models who can stand in for a group – in this case, older and younger women, recalling the method of Toronto artists Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge in staging photos of workers.

White grew up in Calgary, and as a young woman worked in one of the office towers downtown before making the commitment to be an artist. She says that if she weren't an artist, she would be a sociologist. Her intense scrutiny of what it is to be part of our society, especially as a woman, is at the heart of her work. As an artist with a sculptural bent, she finds the materials and processes that best express her ideas, mastering new techniques from felting to woodwork to Photoshop as she goes.

Seeing Calgary change from the vantage point of living away, White set herself the challenge of assessing where we Calgarians have been and where we are going, a topic that is being talked about a lot these days. Even the business magazine Alberta Venture entered the dialogue in the June 2008 issue with the cover story "Think: A New Idea of Alberta", with the byline "Alberta is enjoying an era of unprecedented prosperity. Now is the time to turn the province from an economic powerhouse to a centre of civilization too."



**Artist Biography:** *Donna White* received her MFA from the University of Saskatchewan in 2006. During this period she studied with Milutin Gubash and has since incorporated photographic processes into her artwork. She completed her first public billboard artwork in Saskatoon in 2006.

White received her BFA (with Distinction) in Interdisciplinary Studies at the Alberta College of Art and Design in 1995 where she studied with Walter May and Katie Ohe, faculty of the sculpture dept.

Between periods of art study, White has worked in both artist-run centres and public art galleries within Alberta and has artwork in the collections of the Alberta Government and the University of Saskatchewan. White has recently returned to the Calgary area after ten years of living and working in Grande Prairie.

**Writer Biography:** *Katherine Ylitalo* is a Calgary writer and independent curator with a special interest in art and gardens.



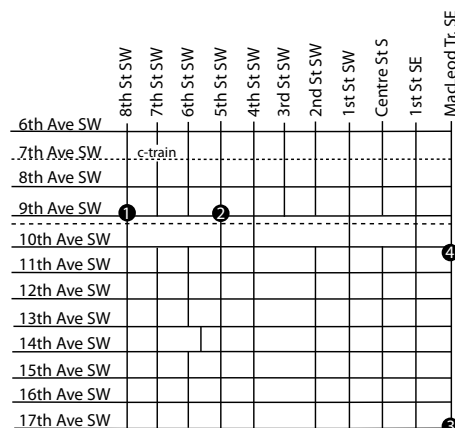
It was essential for White to take the dialogue to the streets. The timing would have to be during the Calgary Stampede, and the location would have to be along 9th Avenue for both visibility and history: the main road into downtown, the parade route, the road that parallels the railroad and links the central business district and new buildings like Bankers Hall, with its shopping atrium and premier office space, to the East Village, the run-down area where old buildings like the St. Louis await their fate.

White negotiated the billboard project with the media company CBS. The location is one of the most prominent in Calgary and the timing is during the most desirable advertising season, so to rent the space for a creative project that doesn't even have explanatory text, was a form of support for the arts in Calgary.

Over one million people attend the Stampede during ten days in July. Visitors come from all over the world to see the rodeo and exhibition at the Stampede Grounds, and get caught up in the swing of pancake breakfasts, country music and dress-up. In a recent annual report, the Calgary Stampede defined itself: "The Calgary Exhibition and Stampede is a volunteer supported, not-for-profit organization that preserves and promotes western heritage and values. Our organization began as an agricultural fair in 1886, but continues to grow and evolve in step with Calgary."

White's billboard project opens up questions about how Calgary defines itself, the power of the Stampede legacy, and the possibility and necessity for change.

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#### EXHIBITION LOCATIONS:

1. CBS Billboard • 9th Ave & 8th St SW
2. Transit Shelter • 9th Ave & 5th St SW
3. Transit Shelter • 17th Ave & MacLeod Tr
4. Stride Gallery • 1004 MacLeod Trail SE

#### THE CITY OF CALGARY WHITE HAT PLEDGE:

*"I, (speaker inserts his or her name), havin' visited the only genuine Western city in Canada, namely Calgary, and havin' been duly treated to exceptional amounts of heart-warmin', hand-shakin', tongue-loosenin', back-slappin', neighbor-lovin' Western spirit, do solemnly promise to spread this here brand of hospitality to all folks and critters who cross my trail hereafter. On the count of three, we will all raise our hats and give a loud 'Yahoo!'"*

#### ARTIST THANKS

The artist thanks the many people who have supported and played a role in the completion of this project. My deepest gratitude to Bart Gazzola and Shane Clintberg who have assisted with their extensive knowledge of PhotoShop. Rob Ganzeveld of FX Photographic Inc. for participating in the completion of the photography, Katherine Ylitalo for her generous offer to write about the project, Hilary Knutson & the staff and board of Stride for their enthusiasm, and the members of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts February, 2008 Project Grant jury who generously funded this project. A special thank you to my two billboard models who gave the gift of letting me photograph them without which the images would not be as I had envisioned. I am very fortunate to enjoy the support of many good people but it is my husband who has become a true partner in all my projects. My loving thanks to Brad Barrett for sharing and supporting my goals.



Hilary Knutson - Director  
Caitlin Thompson - Assistant Director  
Kyle Whitehead - Archive and Outreach Assistant

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#### STRIDE GALLERY

1004 Macleod Trail SE  
Calgary, AB, Canada T2G 2M7  
T: 403.262.8507 F: 403.269.5220  
WWW.STRIDE.AB.CA

Gallery hours: 11 AM - 5 PM, Tuesday - Saturday  
Admission is free and everyone is welcome.

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