

In Every Direction

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In Every Direction: An Expanded Geography,
essay by exhibition curator Renée van der Avoird

MaLaren Art Centre, Barrie, Ontario



Installation view of *In Every Direction*, MacLaren Art Centre, Barrie, Ontario. Photo: André Beneteau

In Every Direction: An Expanded Geography

— by RENÉE VAN DER AVOIRD

In Every Direction brings together works on paper by Jessica Hein and Sylvia Matas, two Canadian artists whose work, although dissimilar formally, shares thematic and conceptual affinities. Both Hein and Matas render shifting natural forces—clouds, light, wind, the moon—to conjure notions of disorientation and infinite space. Like cartographers, they chart natural phenomena, depicting symbolic relationships between spatial elements. However, where mapmakers strive for objective accuracy, Hein and Matas pursue a more subjective goal: to explore the threshold between the human psyche and the natural environment. Their maps, neither navigational nor to-scale, open up new possibilities for imagining the world around us.

Natural phenomena, and, specifically, meteorological events have long been present in art and literature. From Da Vinci's air and water studies to John Constable's lofty, gestural clouds, depictions of celestial activity have inspired artistic creation throughout history. Weather, it seems, is essential to a narrative of human experience.¹ However, while historical depictions of atmospheric conditions are often melodramatic or heavy-handed, *In Every Direction* takes a more subtle stance. Finding poetry in science and geography, both Hein and Matas interpret the relationships between nature, imagination and the scientific abstractions that underlie daily experience.

In Every Direction (2011)—the thematic inspiration for this exhibition—is Sylvia Matas' first artist book. Comprised of forty-five black-and-white pages, the book is a non-narrative compilation of text, photographs and drawings that focus on the boundaries between mental and physical environments. In this exhibition, select pages of the book are mounted to wood panels and installed in a partial gird spanning a corner of the gallery. Several pages include wind diagram drawings sourced from actual geographic charts online. Sets of divergent arrows illustrate the velocity and rhythm of a fictional wind, pointing to the difficulty of mapping an unpredictable, unending phenomenon. Other pages evoke fragments of nature, referencing sound and movement through time and space: a descriptive list of owl calls, the outline of a moth-eaten leaf, a photograph of a curtain blowing through an open window. The seemingly random order of subjects and the intuitive relationships between them serve as reminders that our attempts to measure nature are, at times, futile. As Matas comments, "We understand that our perception is limited and that the brain fills in many blanks. These grey areas and in-between states are of interest to me." *In Every Direction* is a testament to how little we know, to how lost we actually are.²



Installation view of *In Every Direction*, 2011, artist book, selected pages, 16 x 10 cm each, deconstructed and mounted to wood. Photo: André Beneteau

Based in Winnipeg, Matas is an explorer of both natural and urban landscapes. She is attentive to how we observe, hypothesize and record nature. Her practice, largely research-based, is informed by conceptualism, science and philosophy, with a specific emphasis on metaphysics and phenomenology. Matas favours a controlled approach, executing works with remarkable technical skill. Using minimal means and formal restraint, she illustrates unseen phenomena and inexplicable natural processes.

Matas' technical prowess as a draftsman is evident in *A Forest* (2013), a series of drawings in which the artist carefully hatches aerial views of wooded territories. Severed and floating on an otherwise blank page, her forests are sourced from actual topographical maps and then altered to create imaginary geographic regions. Matas' forests are juxtaposed with a list of dates suggesting cosmological time—a past extending backwards from the present and forwards toward various theoretical endings—and small plastic signs that taxonomically list different shapes of leaves. Such systematic classification demonstrates our endless desire to observe, map and quantify the world. For Matas, the forest is a stand-in for a psychological environment or the unconscious mind, representative of the border between the known and the unknown. Surrealist writer André Pieyre de Mandiargues expresses this sentiment in his 1956 book, *Le lis de mer*: “A characteristic of forests is to be closed and, at the same time, open on every side.”³ Similarly, in his influential writings on phenomenology, Gaston Bachelard relates forests to the notion of immensity: “We do not have to be long in the woods to experience the always rather anxious impression of *going deeper and deeper* into a limitless world.”⁴



Sylvia Matas, *In Every Direction* (detail), 2011, artist book, 45 pages, 16 x 10 cm each. Courtesy of the artist



Installation view of *In Every Direction*, MacLaren Art Centre, Barrie, Ontario. Photo: André Beneteau

Immensity and limitless space carry through in *Over Night* and *Slow Light* (both 2015), two groups of four meticulously rendered drawings. Using just a pencil, Matas builds layered scenes where celestial cycles are viewed from multiple perspectives in time and space. In *Over Night*, a house glows brightly in a deep graphite sky, rendered with tightly controlled, methodical marks. The corners of an empty room are highlighted, perhaps by moonlight, against flat black walls and a heavily penciled ceiling. The drawings—austere and tranquil—evoke the coming together and dismantling of quotidian binaries such as darkness and light, sound and silence, movement and stillness.

Matas' profound curiosity for meteorological and geographic phenomena is shared by Toronto-based artist Jessica Hein. Hein originates from Sudbury, an industrial city on the southern edge of the boreal forest. She maintains close ties to the Canadian Shield and visits regularly, but still appreciates the varied skylines and sidewalks of her current Toronto setting. Her immediate perceptions and physical experiences in the landscape—both urban and natural—are the backbone of her artistic practice.

In 2013, Hein completed a series of mineral-and-water drawings based on walks. Large in scale, the drawings portray billowing expanses evocative of the Earth's topography and meteorological systems. Four of these drawings are featured in *In Every Direction*. In this series, Hein's process begins with walking. Using cloud patterns as directional cues, she lets the interactions between sky and ground guide her as she travels. She focuses on the present and becomes immersed in her surroundings—a feeling she also experiences in the studio,



Jessica Hein, *The blue of distance E'NE* (left) and *The blue of distance N'NW* (right), both 2014, mineral pigments on paper, 56 x 76 cm each. Photo: André Beneteau



Jessica Hein, *The colour of there from here E'N*, 2013, graphite on paper, 130 x 130 cm. Courtesy of the artist

where mind and body work in an almost automatic unison. The parallel between the walks and drawings is clear: Hein brings the choreography of her walks into the studio, translating her physical journey into quietly beautiful compositions on paper that record her own physical movements and those of her materials. Her media are spare: just water and powdered minerals, most often graphite but also metals and iron oxides. As she pours the water it meanders and stakes its claim on the paper, which, in turn, buckles gently under the weight of the liquid. She then drops slurries of pigment or graphite into the water, which disperse into rills and pools, sometimes guided with a paintbrush, sometimes following routes of their own. In *The colour of there from here E'N* and *The colour of there from here E'NE'E*, raincloud-like forms command the centre of the paper, rendered in shades of graphite ranging from ash grey to velvety black. The forms suggest a heavy atmospheric mass or a glimpse of a misty mountain range through a momentary break in cloud cover. In *The blue of distance N'NW* and *The blue of distance E'NE*, two smaller pieces made with vivid indigo minerals, are also geographic in their imagery. Enclosed forms that suggest water movement bring to mind aerial views of drainage basins or river deltas.

In a series of smaller, more recent drawings, Hein is inspired by observations of the Toronto night sky and the many sources of light that illuminate it. She considers that which we cannot see in the sky, inviting us to embrace the unknown. Hundreds of tiny graphite specks animate the paper in *Scatter Drawing*. Working on wet paper coated with matte medium, Hein delicately drops graphite onto the page using a small brush and a handmade wooden tool. The graphite follows a configuration reminiscent of satellite data. It is as if we are viewing the sky from earth or, vice versa, our planet from space, conjuring the cascading effect of a constellation or a sprawling city. Lately, Hein has

been researching stardust, matter that falls to Earth from space, contributing to the makeup of our natural world, including the human body. Even graphite—a naturally occurring form of carbon—can be made up of stardust.

Coming from Sudbury, one of Canada's major mining centres, Hein has an engrained understanding of minerals, rocks and metals. This knowledge carries over into the studio, where recent explorations have led to modestly scaled drawings made with shimmering powdered metals. Hein fuses stainless steel, silver, and other naturally occurring metals with water to create ethereal depictions of celestial bodies. A series of imagined moons, not necessarily our moon, transfix the viewer with their gleaming, translucent surfaces. Similarly, her *Asteroid Drawings*, smaller still, glow like gems in their vitrine. An asteroid is rarely visible, a shattered remnant of a planet, falling inevitably, like stardust, from space to Earth.

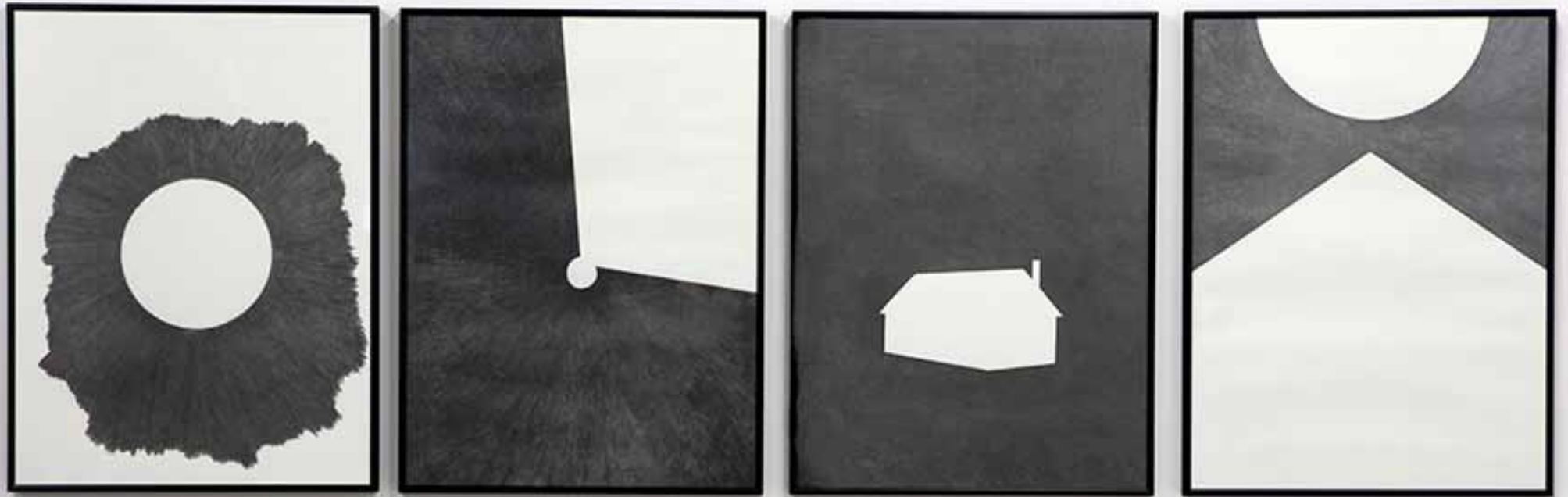
Both Hein and Matas share an enchantment with the undefinable forces that shape our environment—those natural phenomena without bounds. Their work maps the metaphysical aspects of our environment, combining aspects from science and geography with subjective experiences in the landscape. Together, their work inspires reflection on the complex nature of human experience, and an appreciation for the mystery and poetic potential of our environment.

¹ In 1892 Mark Twain attempted to write a fictitious work without the mention of weather. Indeed, in *The American Claimant*, he did not mention weather in the body copy, but included an appendix in which all the weather is contained. In that book he famously admits that, "of course, weather is necessary to a narrative of human experience."

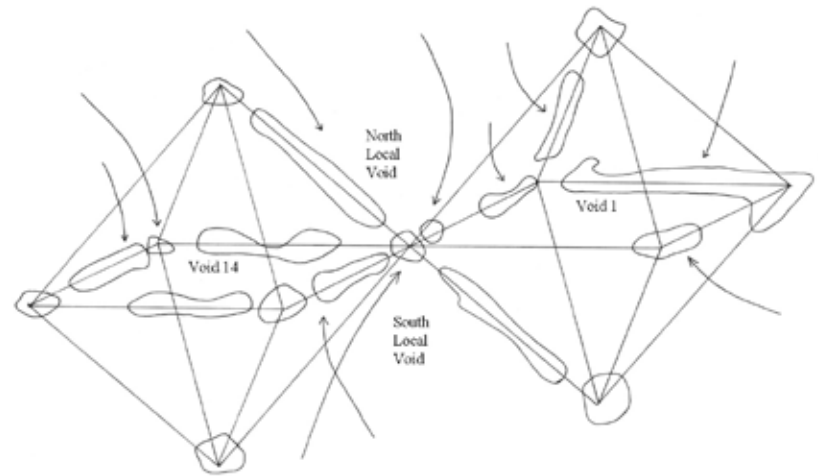
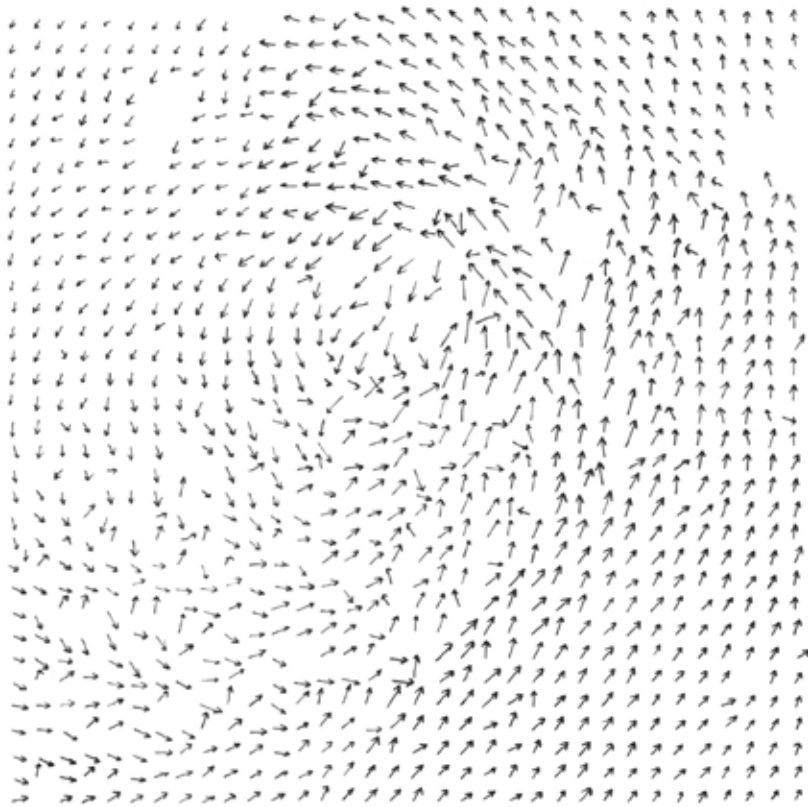
² *A Forest: New Work by Sylvia Matas*, Interview with the artist by Kerri-Lynn Reeves, One Night Stand Gallery, Winnipeg, 2013.

³ André Pieyre de Mandiargues, *Le lis de mer*. R Laffront, Paris, 1956, p. 57.

⁴ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1958, p. 185.



Sylvia Matas, *Slow Light*, 2015, suite of four graphite drawings on paper, 46 x 61 cm each. Photo: Karen Asher



Sylvia Matas, *In Every Direction* (details), 2011, artist book, 45 pages, 16 x 10 cm each. Courtesy of the artist.



Jessica Hein, *Moon Drawings*, 2016, metals and graphite on paper, 28 x 28 cm each. Photo: André Beneteau

Artists' Biographies

Jessica Hein studied visual art at NSCAD University in Halifax and received her Master of Visual Studies at the University of Toronto in 2013. She has exhibited her work across Canada at venues including the Khyber Institute of Contemporary Art, Halifax; Musée des beaux-arts de Mont-Saint-Hilaire, Mont-Saint-Hilaire, Québec; Latcham Gallery, Stouffville, Ontario; and the Art Museum at the University of Toronto. Originally from Sudbury, she currently lives in Toronto.

Sylvia Matas is an interdisciplinary artist from Winnipeg. She received a Master of Fine Arts from the Chelsea College in London, England in 2008. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, most recently at The Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg; AKA Gallery, Saskatoon; Útúrdúr, Reykjavik; MKG127, Toronto; and the Art Museum at the University of Toronto.

Works in Exhibition

Jessica Hein

The colour of there from here E'NE'E, 2013, graphite on paper, 130 x 183 cm

The colour of there from here E'N, 2013, graphite on paper, 130 x 130 cm

The blue of distance E'NE, 2014, mineral pigments on paper, 56 x 76 cm

The blue of distance N'NW, 2014, mineral pigments on paper, 56 x 76 cm

Asteroid Drawings, 2016, metals and graphite on paper, 20 x 20 cm each

Moon Drawings, 2016, metals and graphite on paper, 28 x 28 cm each

Scatter Drawing, 2016, graphite on paper, 28 x 38 cm

Sylvia Matas

In Every Direction, 2011, deconstructed bookwork (selected pages), 16 x 10 cm each, mounted to wood

A Forest, 2013, graphite drawings on paper, plastic signs, text, dimensions variable

At Night, 2013, various media on paper, 12 pages, 28 x 35.5 cm each, Collection of TD Bank Group, Toronto

Over Night, 2015, graphite drawings on paper, 46 x 61 cm each

Slow Light, 2015, graphite drawings on paper, 46 x 61 cm each



Jessica Hein, *The colour of there from here E'NE'E*, 2013, graphite on paper, 130 x 183 cm (left); *The colour of there from here E'N*, 2013, graphite on paper, 130 x 130 cm (right). Photo: André Beneteau



Installation view of *In Every Direction*, MaLaren Art Centre, Barrie, Ontario. Photo: André Beneteau

Acknowledgements

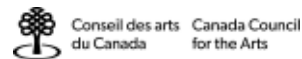
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Cover image: Sylvia Matas, *In Every Direction* (detail), 2011, artist book, 45 pages, 16 x 10 cm each. Courtesy of the artist

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