

Saskatchewan Artist Linda Duvall Sits in a Hole

by Portia Priegert
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Linda Duvall, "Untitled (The Hole)," 2013-2017, shot with a trail camera

Tim Lilburn lived for a time in the arid lands of rural Saskatchewan, sleeping outdoors, watching the deer and digging a root cellar, all the while yearning for a union with the natural world. "You dig in the ground because you want to see," he wrote in his 1994 poetry collection, *Moosewood Sandhills*, and: "You will wait here / in the slow place. / You will wait in a hole."

Artist Linda Duvall lives on similar land an hour's drive south of Saskatoon, and she too has dug a hole, although in her case it is more accurately described as a trench, five feet wide and

six feet deep, that circumnavigates a rose bush. Her initial impulse was more prosaic than poetic – she was curious about the plant’s root system, which extends deep into the glacial till above the South Saskatchewan River.



Linda Duvall, "Untitled (The Hole)," 2013-2017

“There’s something about the hole that’s so beautiful and so moving,” says Duvall, who is known for social art projects that explore things like grief, truth and intimacy, often through one-on-one conversations with strangers. “This land has never been tilled, so it’s this thick sod over your head, and the wind blowing through these grasses.”

After living with the hole for five years, and documenting it in photographs, Duvall decided she wanted to share it with others. She put out a call inviting applications for informal short-term residencies, unsure what to expect. The response was overwhelming.

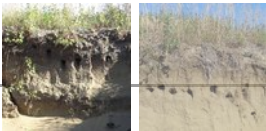


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Last week, 44 people from across Canada, and as far away as Europe, began arriving to spend a six-hour shift in the hole with Duvall. Some will read or sing. Others will meditate or dig. "There are a certain number of people who just want to be with the dirt," says Duvall. "Often it was a combination of being physically in the space and open to what might happen. I say that on an emotional level, as well as the physical."

The sessions, which continue until June 17, are being videotaped and screened the following day at **Paved Arts**, an artist-run centre in Saskatoon, as part of a collaborative exhibition, *In the Hole*.

We often dig holes to hide something, but digging is also an act of discovery. One of Duvall's surprises was the presence of other creatures, such as deer, skunks and coyotes. Soon after she first dug the hole, a 10-minute walk from her house, cavities began appearing in its walls. "I found that a little disconcerting because the holes started getting bigger and I wasn't sure what they were," she says.

Ultimately, she decided to think of the hole as a shared space. She even made a series of rice-paper pillows as a gesture of welcome to the gophers that had taken up residence. They chewed through the paper and ate the barley she had used as stuffing. The remnants of those pillows are part of Duvall's concurrent show at the [Void Gallery](#), not far from Paved, where she'll also display her photographs.





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It's hard to imagine a richer metaphor than a hole in the ground. It is rife with age-old mythical and religious allusions to death, burial and the dark wells of the human psyche. It can evoke ideas about family history, as well as contested issues around indigeneity and settler culture. The English language is full of idioms related to digging. You can dig yourself into a hole in a problematic way. But digging can also be admirable, when it refers to someone who does ample research. And, of course, to dig something is to like it.

Duvall has watched the hole weather snowstorms and floods, and has sat quietly in its depths as hawks circle overhead and nestlings squawk in the rose bush. It has become a fixture in her life. She's not sure what will happen next with it, but figures something will emerge organically.

Artists, she observes, do things that hold personal meaning. Sometimes the unlikeliest project – like sitting in a hole in the ground – will trigger an intuitive response in others, allowing it to take on a new life. Sometimes a void can become a presence.

As Lilburn writes: “What does it mean to become nothing? / You've dug a cave in the earth, / room of knowing, room of tears. / It means to place yourself beneath irrational things / and know they are without blame. / The potato smell of the dark. / You've given up.”

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