

Curator's Preface, January 2016:

In *The Lowest Relief* (2014 –) Toronto-based artist Maria Flawia Litwin works in the Polish tradition of *wycinanki*, a folk art of paper cut images. This medium has longstanding roots in Eastern European cultures and many other decorative art traditions globally, from Asia to the Americas. Litwin applies this technique as a contemporary statement that integrates the struggles and enrichment of her own experiences with a complex melding of cultural influences. The magnitude of recent global migration amplifies the timeliness of this work. The Syrian refugee crisis has catalyzed contentious debates about government policies on immigration and the complicated process of resettlement. Litwin's reimagination of her own migratory journey, paired with her choice of medium, engages with our escalating awareness of the impact of and on people integrating into new cultures and communities.

This series was first shown in Toronto in the fall of 2015. For her inaugural exhibition in Vancouver at Back Gallery Project, Litwin created additional illustrations to further investigate significant personal memories or emotions. Each story entwines with early Slavic myths and Polish iconography, framed within European critical theory and philosophy. The end result is magical and inviting. At the same time, the images are cutting, as the artist reflects on and rejects ideologies and expectations that define her reality.

The following excerpt is adapted from the original curatorial essay highlighting the imagery, stories and influences from a select number of works on display. The full essay can be read in the accompanying catalogue, which includes an interview with the artist, artist statement and biography.

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Cutting Myth: new works by Maria Flawia Litwin

Excerpt adapted from the curatorial essay *The Lowest Relief*, August 2015
Katherine Dennis

In the face of absurdity “one must imagine Sisyphus happy.”ⁱ Condemned by the gods, the tragic hero is compelled to find contentment in the pointless repetition of pushing a boulder to the summit of a mountain, whereupon it is doomed to fall back of its own weight. The futile act itself gives life meaning.

Litwin shares French philosopher Albert Camus' existential worldview articulated in “The Myth of Sisyphus.” Through his interpretation of this Greek tale Camus explains how “the workman of today works everyday in his life at

the same tasks, and his fate is no less absurd.”ⁱⁱ Yet, in knowing and accepting that the toil of life is nothing but “futile and hopeless labour” one becomes the “master of his days.”ⁱⁱⁱ Litwin brings her own purposeless yet significant moments to the fore in the series *The Lowest Relief*. Senseless as any task may be—pushing the boulder, cutting the paper, waking for work, washing the dishes—within these acts exist contentment and worth. Inspired by existential and feminist theory, Litwin's own daily toil becomes one of self-determination and choice. Her art stems from a personal acceptance of life's inevitable conclusion—death—while still finding meaning and intention in all the moments, large and small, which build to this end.

Litwin was born in Wrocław, Poland where she was immersed in communism and the effects of a post-World War II Eastern Europe. A city with a complicated history, Wrocław (also known as Breslau in German and Vratislav in Czech) has, throughout its history, been part of Poland, Hungary, the Austrian Empire, Prussia, and Germany. Growing up she moved from Poland to Australia and back again, her formative youth divided between two radically different worlds. Her exposure to the capitalist and consumerist ideologies of the West clashed and intermingled with her view of the changing political landscape of Poland. She also lived in Paris, France and travelled extensively throughout Europe, in the Baltic States and India, finally immigrating to Canada nearly twenty years ago. This intersection of cultural and political forces did much to shape her selfhood and in turn her nomadic life and her immigrant identity permeates her artwork.

Ideas about landscape and a strong attachment to place are central to Litwin's oeuvre. While rarely the primary subject of her often narrative practice, the physical location or implied settings are crucial to the conceptual framework of her art. Many images from this series reference significant places from the artist's life. Well-travelled viewers might recognize Alberta's Rocky Mountains (*être ma propre cause* (2014), *mensenges du rêves* (2014)), the Parisian skyline or the Australian East Coast (*cul-de-sac* (2014)). In *Nulliparous* (2014) the cold apartment block evokes the dreary Communist neighbourhood of her childhood. When describing this body of work, the artist draws insight from a quotation by writer Kazuo Kamimura (loosely translated by Litwin): “Those things which mark a person the most, aren't so much past experiences, but the landscapes in which one has lived.” This dismissal of past experiences complicates the reading of her work, which starts from personal events, but eventually reveals how the construction of identity is formed through our physical, ideological, and cultural landscapes.

Composed through iconography and myths—some intentional, others incidental—each scene is open to multiple readings. The title *Nulliparous* defines a female who has not borne offspring. Litwin complicates this reference by employing the familiar disneyfied image of a stork carrying a baby. Here the work recalls children’s fairytale illustrations, like those popularized in the 19th century by Hans Christian Andersen, with their dark warnings on the ways of the world. Yet Litwin’s narratives provide no clear conclusions or single lessons in morality. Instead, each detail further obscures the image. For example, the white crosses marring the trees might be read as a religious symbol but may equally suggest trees slated for deforestation.

In Canada the poppy flower makes inescapable allusion to the First World War and the famous poem “In Flanders Field.” However, the stream of vivid red poppies in *Anima* (2015) originates from a different military history. In “The Red Poppies on Monte Cassino,” a Polish military song from the Second World War, these flowers are said to be red for they drink blood rather than water. In this image there is violence to their beauty, punctuated by their dark centres of tiny crows. *Anima* commemorates this cultural history while suggesting a personal remembrance. This unnamed violence is evident beneath the magnifying glass. Even on paper the grip on the redheaded figure’s wrist is aggressive and her legs unnervingly splayed. By not showing the act of abuse, however, the scene goes beyond edifying depiction and moves into the realm of introspection.

Against the dark blue background of *Aqua-cide* (2014) the scene gives way to the artist’s memory of near drowning. In her artist statement, Litwin explains how a visceral childhood memory, brought back by the journey to and from the artist’s temporary studio on Toronto Islands, prompted this new series of images. While the title evokes death, the ambiguous depiction of the submerged woman raises important narrative questions regarding such an evocation. In *Aqua-cide* is the figure drowning, succumbing to the pull of the water, or kicking upwards to escape a watery death? Would either fate be an imprisonment or release?

In contrast to the trauma unfolding in these images, works like *être ma propre cause* and *cul-de-sac* present moments of profound happiness and passion. In *être ma propre cause* the figure in furs interacts with a deer by a tangled web of red. Intimately connected, the deer and woman gaze into one another’s eyes. Set amidst the mountains where fantasy and reality meet, the scene obliquely references Litwin’s artistic practice. While in *cul-de-sac*, the embracing lovers hover above two distinct, identifiable land formations. Here

too a cross shape, placed upon her belly, marks the woman. Below, the Parisian skyline might be recognizable, but it is the elaborate, ornamented building to the left that captures attention. The image deliberately references a particular place and time. In 1995 Litwin moved from Wrocław to Paris, a decision that greatly influenced her future. The gothic building carefully constructed of intricate cuts, patterns and colors depicts the landmark old town hall of Wrocław, a memory palace to the artist’s past.

Illustrations such as those in *être ma propre cause* and *cul-de-sac* express the artist’s revelations about identity, purpose, and ways to contribute to the world, defined in large part by her role as an artist. The title *être ma propre cause* references a quotation by Simone de Beauvoir about choosing one’s own destiny. Litwin often draws from thinkers and artists such as de Beauvoir and Frida Kahlo who both, due to personal decision and circumstances, never had children, finding instead purpose within their art. *The Lowest Relief* acknowledges moments of significance in which a decision of the artist changed the course of her life. The specifics of these decisions are not important. The pivotal event takes place outside the frame, no more meaningful than the Sisyphian boulder’s ascent.

If life has no inherent meaning beyond what we generate for ourselves, then each cut of the paper, each roll of the rock signals the creation of a life lived. According to Camus, Sisyphus finds happiness within his punishment because “his fate belongs to him.”^{iv} In creating *The Lowest Relief*, Litwin reflects on moments, events, decisions, and places that built her identity and sense of self. In sharing and transmuting these intimate details, she reveals more than a memoir. Beyond the realm of the personal, Litwin is able to confuse and deconstruct stereotypes and cultural references. Litwin cuts across self-reflection to examine and critique the societal expectations of women and the ongoing negotiation of immigrant and transient bodies within new locations and cultures. In creating new mythologies, the biographical becomes the fantastical. Within this transformation each story takes on a political power and agency. *The Lowest Relief* is at once two and three dimensional, both individual and communal and detailed as the images are vague.

ⁱ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus: And Other Essays*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Random House, 2012), 123.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 121.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 123.

^{iv} *Ibid.*