

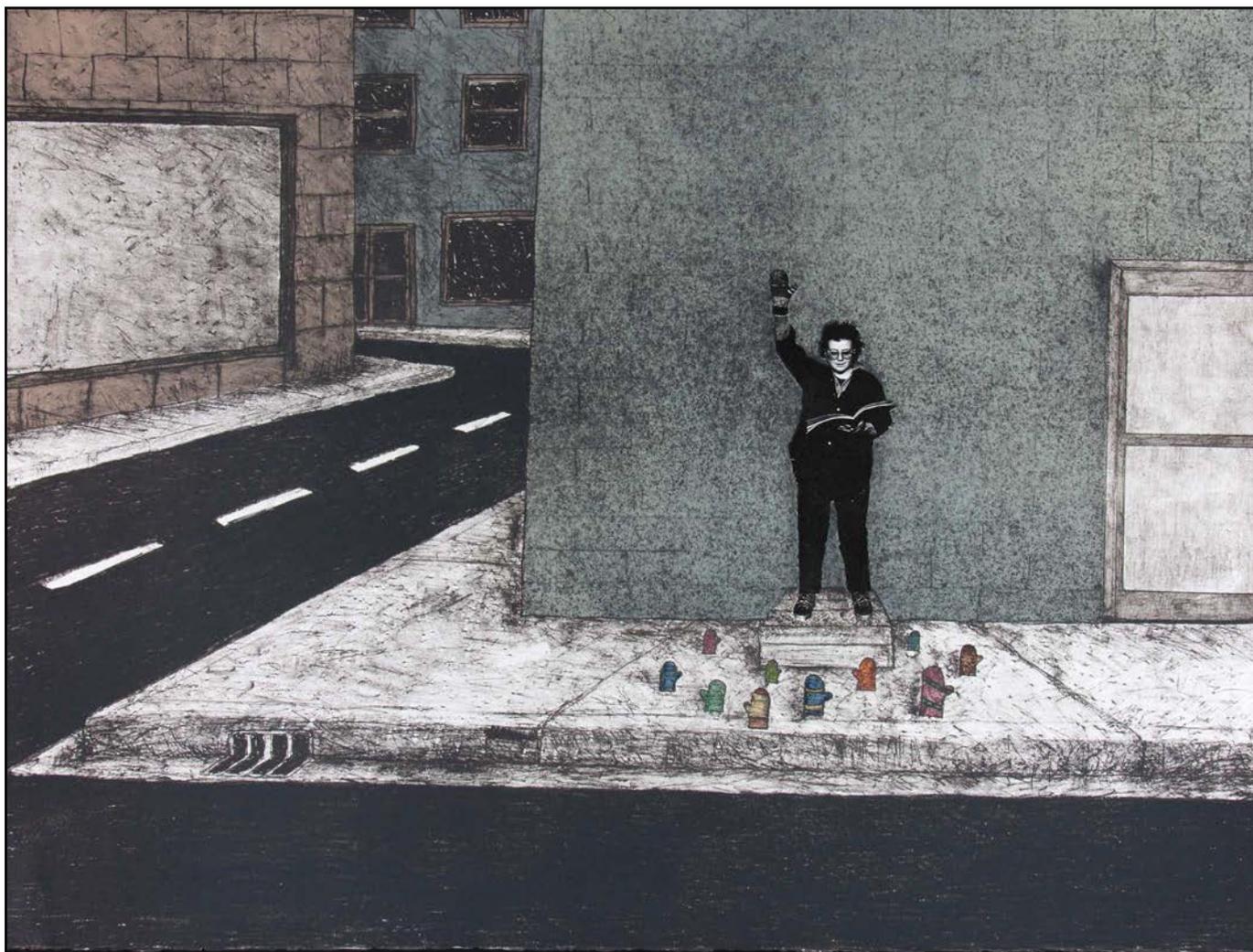




# *Mittenism and the Quest for Empathy*

*Etching and Lithography Prints by Rita McKeough*

*Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program*



“For my MFA exhibition in 1979 at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, I exhibited my prints in an installation of a cast concrete roadway and sidewalk. I wrote a Manifesto to accompany the exhibition, which was entitled the *Manifesto of Mittenism*. It was bound with handmade paper and printed from hand set type and offset lithography plates at the NSCAD print shop. It was a statement about my work in the form of a poetic manifesto using humour and a metaphor of mittens vs. gloves as a strategy to position my work within the context of NSCAD and my perceived sense of the art world at the time. *The Manifesto of Mittenism* print is a depiction of me promoting Mittenism as a philosophy of art and life on a soapbox on a street corner and the only listeners I could attract were a group of enthusiastic mittens. The print is a lithograph printed from multiple aluminum plates with hand colouring on the mittens. The image of me is printed on a photo litho print.” RM

Above: *Manifesto of Mittenism*, 1981, collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts

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## About the Esplanade

The Esplanade Arts and Heritage Centre is where the stories of our great collective culture are told through music and dance, painting and sculpture, plays and concerts, exhibitions and installations, artifacts and art, education programs and private events. Featuring a 700-seat main stage balcony theatre which boasts superior technology and striking design, the Esplanade is where Medicine Hat celebrates arts and heritage.

A marvel of contemporary Canadian architecture on traditional Blackfoot territory just steps from the South Saskatchewan River, the Esplanade occupies an eminent position on downtown's historic First Street Southeast. From its rooftop terrace, you can see Saamis, the dramatic shoreline escarpment which is the setting for the story of how Medicine Hat got its name.

Inside, visitors discover the vibrant Esplanade Art Gallery, the prized Esplanade Museum, the Esplanade Studio Theatre across the lobby from the Esplanade Main Stage Theatre, the expansive Esplanade Archives and Reading Room, an art education space called the Discovery Centre and the catering-friendly Cutbanks Room.

In the northeast corner of the Esplanade grounds stands the oldest remaining brick home in Alberta, the Ewart-Duggan House. With its gingerbread trim and quaint heritage gardens, it now serves as a charming venue for select cultural events and a home away from home for artists in residence.

The Esplanade opened in celebration of Alberta's centennial in 2005 and ever since, Medicine Hat has welcomed a steady procession of artists and audiences, storytellers and story-lovers from around the region and around the globe. The celebration continues today.



## About The AFA Travelling Exhibition Program

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts (AFA) has supported a provincial travelling exhibition program since 1981. The mandate of the AFA Travelling Exhibition Program is to provide every Albertan with the opportunity to enjoy visual art exhibitions in their community.

Three regional galleries and one arts organization coordinate the program for the AFA:

Northwest Region: The Art Gallery of Grande Prairie, Grande Prairie

Northeast and North Central Region: The Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton

Southwest Region: The Alberta Society of Artists, Calgary

Southeast Region: The Esplanade Arts and Heritage Centre, Medicine Hat



Each year, more than 300,000 Albertans enjoy many exhibitions in communities ranging from High Level in the north to Milk River in the south and virtually everywhere in between. The AFA Travelling Exhibition Program also offers educational support material to help educators integrate the visual arts into the school curriculum.

Exhibitions for the TREX program are curated from a variety of sources, including private and public collections. A major part of the program assists in making the AFA's extensive art collection available to Albertans. This growing art collection consists of over 8,000 artworks showcasing the creative talents of more than 2000 artists. As the only provincial art collection in Alberta, the AFA collection reflects the development of the vibrant visual arts community in the province and has become an important cultural legacy for all Albertans.





*Above: OH OH!!, 1981, collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts*

## Curatorial Statement

Artists often choose to ignore societal norms and embrace their uniqueness. They move through life communicating freely, determined to address what concerns them through self-expression—vocally, visually or physically. Throughout her impressive career, artist Rita McKeough has done just that. No one is like Rita. Her drive, creativity and diverse skill-set fuel her practice, making her one of the most renowned interdisciplinary artists in Canada.

Over the last thirty years, McKeough has been a major contributor to Canada's strong reputation in audio, media installation and performance-based visual art. Early in her career, she translated her ideas through etching and lithography techniques which are highlighted in this exhibition. She created several series of works that use inanimate objects to explore the complex emotion of empathy. McKeough articulates a narrative through her prints, installations and performances, explaining, "It was a desire to make the experience of looking at the prints more meaningful. The narrative was complex and the prints were there to show the various components of the narrative, which were supported by the installation."

*Mittenism and the Quest for Empathy* features fifteen etching and lithography prints from the Alberta Foundation for the Arts permanent collection. *Is this ball ok?*; *The Canadian Cookie Association*; and *The Manifesto of Mittenism* address the idea of extending empathy to inanimate objects. "I imagined a world where mercy and care is applied equally to inanimate objects as well as to animals, plants and people," says McKeough. The imagery within these works offers a naïve first impression, but quickly reveals a conceptually complex narrative balanced with a quirky and sometimes dark absurdity.



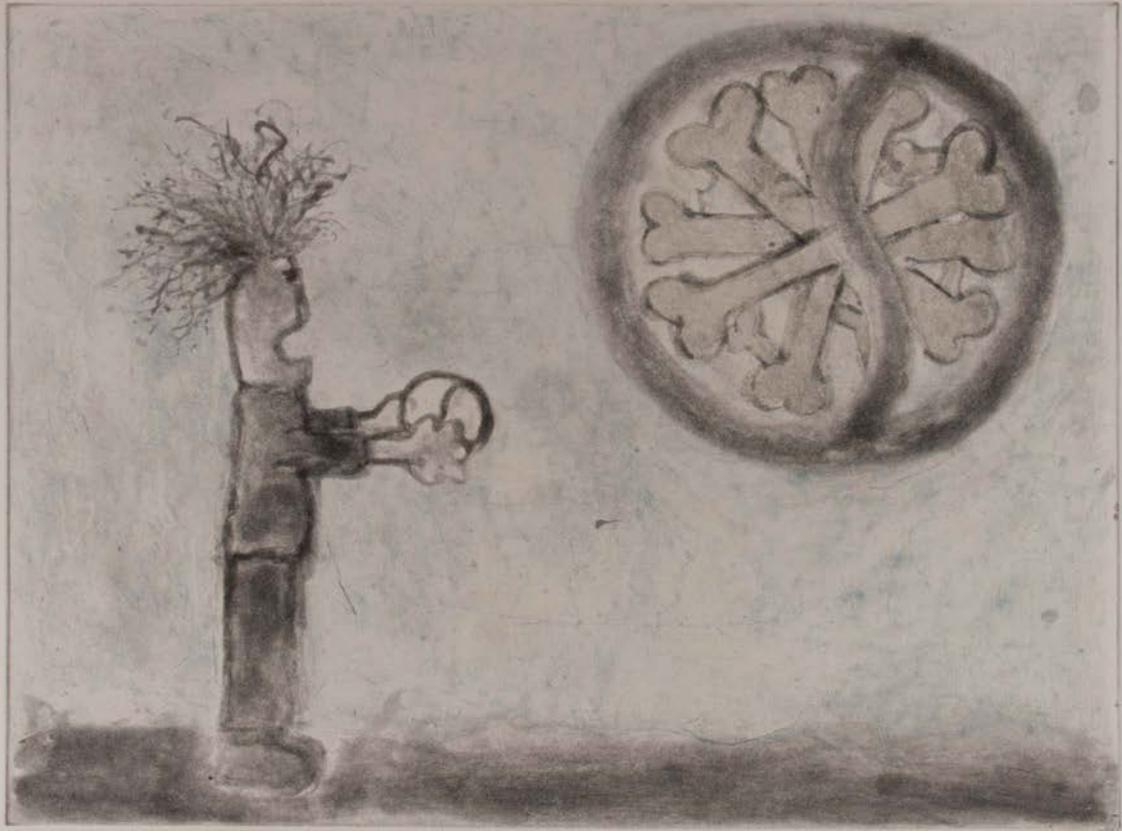
*Above: Maybe the Whole Ball is a Heart?, 1978-1979, Collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts*

## Biography

Rita McKeough (1951 - ) was born in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, studied printmaking and sculpture at the University of Calgary and received her BFA in 1975. She returned to the east coast to attend the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) in Halifax and was awarded her MFA in 1979. Throughout her career she has instructed at numerous universities and art colleges across Canada, including: NSCAD, the University of Calgary and Manitoba, the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, and since 2007, instructs full time at the Alberta College of Art and Design (ACAD). She has become an influential role model and mentor, who inspires colleagues and encourages younger artists.

McKeough is a senior Alberta artist who has been working as an interdisciplinary artist for over thirty years. She has been a major contributor to Canada's strong reputation in audio, media installation and performance art. McKeough began her art studies in the medium of printmaking at the notorious Tamarind Institute in New Mexico. Studying under master printers, John Will and Bob Rogers, she became a highly accomplished printmaker in the mediums of etching and lithography. She embedded her prints in a series of interwoven narratives. Early in her career she began to incorporate performance and installation art that integrated the prints and enacted the narratives. Eventually she directed her artistic passion solely to installation and performance art. Her experience as a radio station disc jockey and drummer led to the introduction of sound elements in her elaborate installations, and later to the development of electronic and mechanical objects in interactive environments. Her practice is informed by her interest in social issues, idealism and a belief in art's ability to spur social change.

McKeough is well respected and admired in the artistic community and has been the recipient of several awards, including the prestigious Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts (2009), Canada Council for the Arts International Residency Program in Sydney Australia (2014) and most recently the Rauschenberg Residency in Captiva Florida (2015). She has exhibited extensively in group and solo exhibitions across Canada and internationally, and was featured in the 2010 Alberta Biennial of Contemporary Art, and represented Alberta in the 2012 "Oh Canada" exhibition developed by the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art's.



*Above: Does a Ball Have Bones?, 1978-1979, collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts*

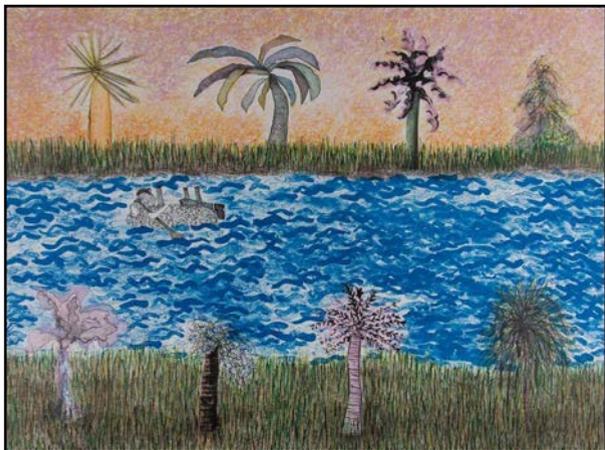
## Artist Statement

"I created a body of work from 1979 – 1982 that included installations, books and prints that enacted a narrative about a ball that is run over by a truck. The work was from the point of view of various characters including those of the ball and of Monty the character who witnessed the accident. The work started with a performance at Eye Level Gallery in Halifax where I recreated the accident as an installation and I performed a reading of poetry that was written by a poet (who was a rabbit) named Bunny. The book of poetry was Bunny's interpretation of the accident from the ball's perspective. The poetry was of course in a complete unique rabbit like language and my performance was a live translation of the book of poetry into English. The book of poetry entitled "I Want to get Run Over and Roll Over and Do it Over" was subsequently included in the artists' book collection at the MOMA in New York in 1979.

The suite of prints "Is this ball OK?" was a two-year project to document the entire narrative. It was a combination of lithography and etchings, using lithography for the colors and a technique in etching called "spit bite". In this process, acid is brushed directly on to an aquatint tonal ground and the image is etched away with darker tones being created by the acid that is left on the etching plate for the longest duration.

I was interested in ideas of empathy being extended to inanimate objects, as a proposition for social relationships that enacted empathy for all. When the injuries sustained by a person are imagined for the ball, Monty examines the ball with the same care and compassion that would be given to a person. I imagined a world where mercy and care is applied equally to inanimate objects as well as to animals, plants and people." RM

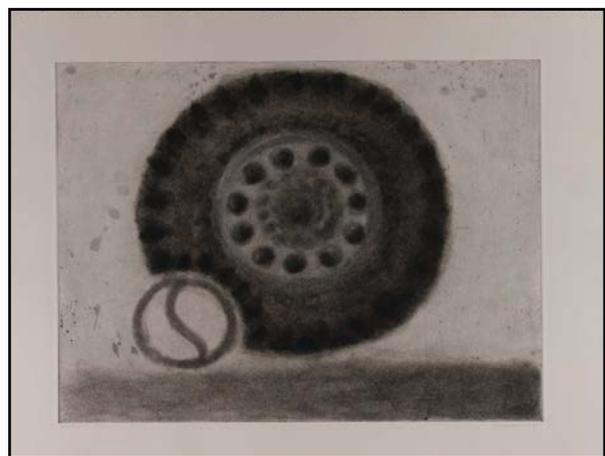
## Visual Inventory - List of Works



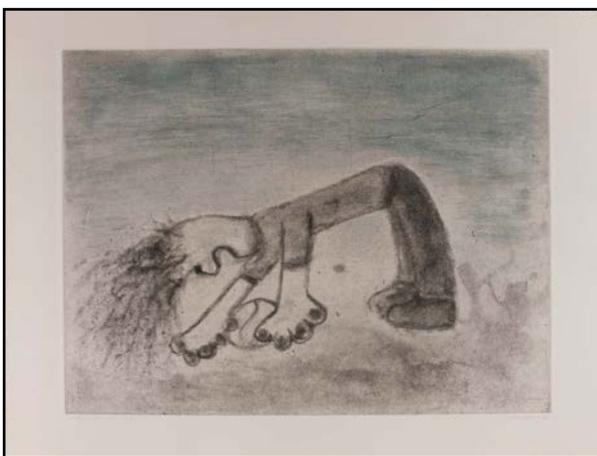
Rita McKeough, *Ancient African Passenger Sheep*, 1978, lithography on paper, 22 x 29 inches, collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts



Rita McKeough, *The Accident*, 1978-1979, etching and lithography on paper, 22 x 29 inches, collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts



Rita McKeough, *HHHHGU!!!*, 1978-1979, etching and lithography on paper, 22 x 29 inches, collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts



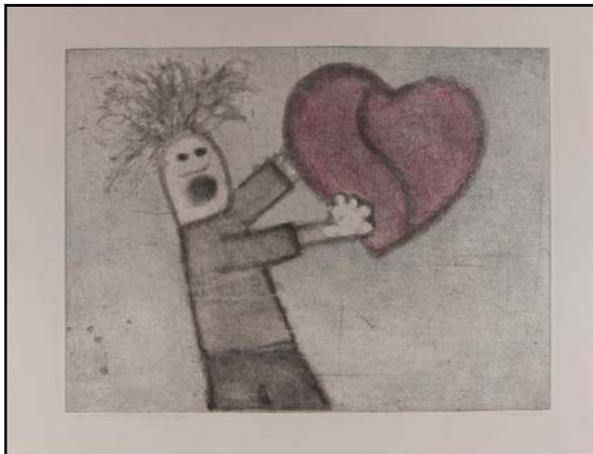
Rita McKeough, *Is This Ball Ok?*, 1978-1979, etching and lithography on paper, 22 x 29 inches, collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts



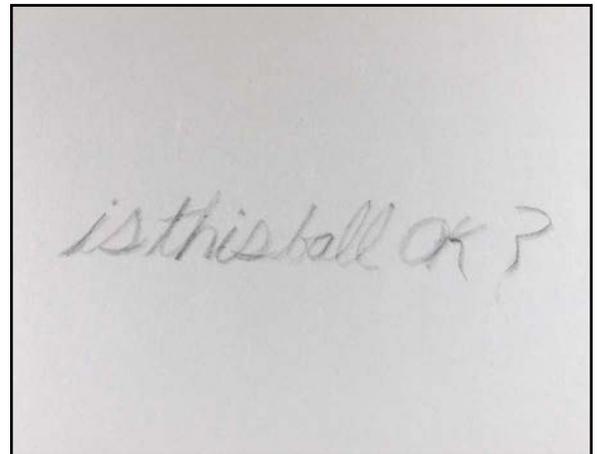
Rita McKeough, *Does a Ball Have Bones?*, 1978-1979, etching and lithography on paper, 22 x 29 inches, collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts



Rita McKeough, *Does a Ball Have a Heart?*, 1978-1979, etching and lithography on paper, 22 x 29 inches, collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts

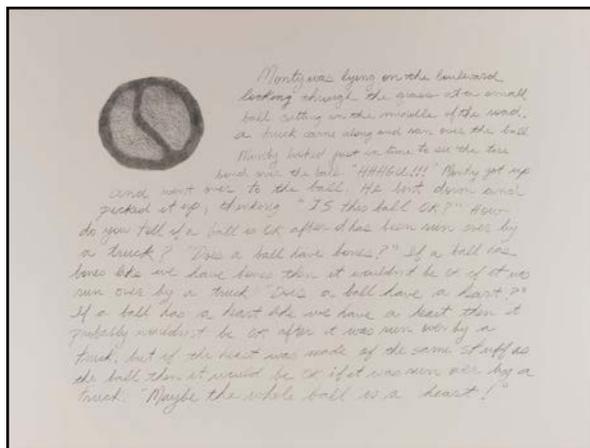


Rita McKeough, *Maybe the Whole Ball is a Heart?*, 1978-1979, etching and lithography on paper, 22 x 29 inches, collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts

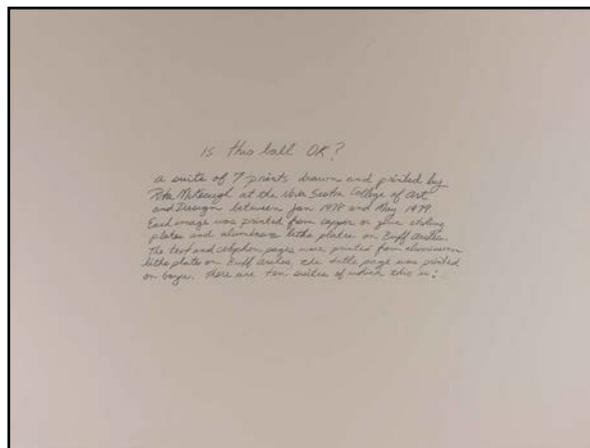


Rita McKeough, *Title Page*, 1978-1979, etching and lithography on paper, 22 x 29 inches, collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts

## Visual Inventory - List of Works



Rita McKeough, *Is This Ball Ok?*, 1978-1979, etching and lithography on paper, 22 x 29 inches, collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts



Rita McKeough, *Colophon*, 1978-1979, etching and lithography on paper, 22 x 29 inches, collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts



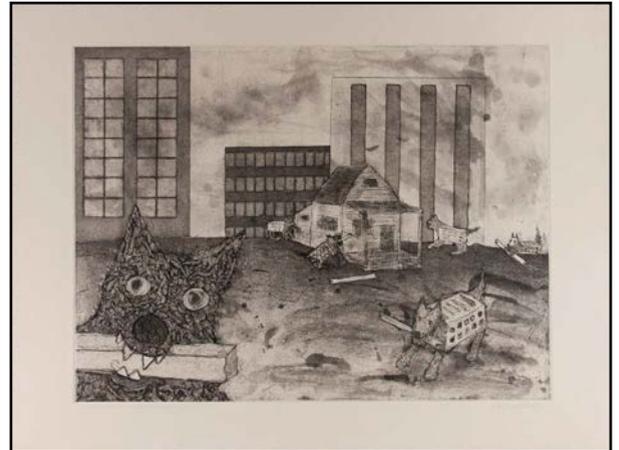
Rita McKeough, *OH OH!!*, 1981, etching on paper, 20 x 29 inches, collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts



Rita McKeough, *I'm Hiding*, 1980, etching and lithography on paper, 22 x 29 inches, collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts



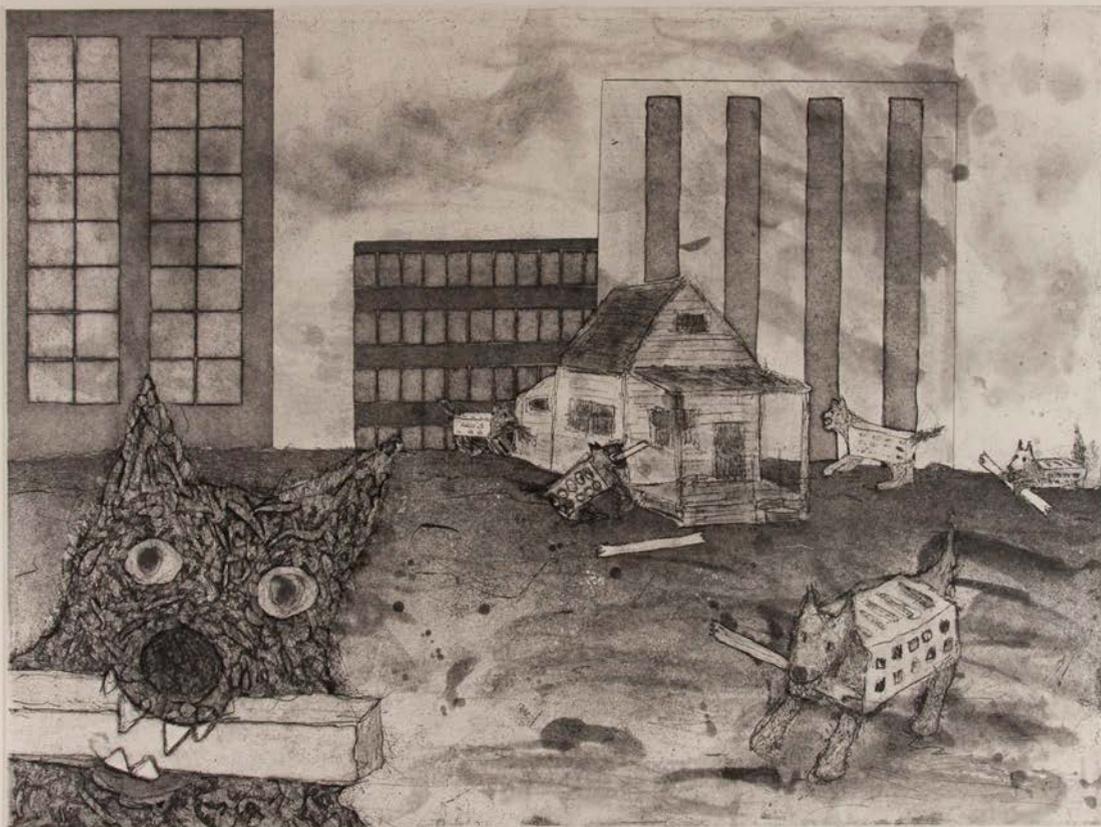
Rita McKeough, *Manifesto of Mittenism*, 1981, lithograph with hand coloured mittens on paper, 22 x 29 inches, collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts



Rita McKeough, *Urban Uprising*, 1984, etching on paper, 22 x 29 inches, collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts



Rita McKeough, *Cookie Cookie in the Night*, 1981, etching and lithography on paper, 29 x 22 inches, collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts



"Urban Uprising continued the narrative that I had started in my installation Skeletal Development at the Walter Philips Gallery in Banff in 1983. The print documented the invasion of the Urban Scroungers in the development areas where all of the older homes were being demolished. As the houses were being torn down the urban scroungers were roaming the downtown core and to survive they were digging up all of the house bones. As they consumed the bones of the demolished houses their bodies developed into hi rise buildings and they expanded and replaced the houses. The print is a terrifying image of a close up look at the scroungers consuming the last remnants of the house skeletons." RM

Above: Urban Uprising, 1984, collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts

## Introduction to Educators' Guide and Lesson Plans

*The AFA Travelling Exhibition Program Southeast created this educators' guide based on the exhibition's themes and concepts. It is composed of lesson plans and informative material. We strive to create projects that will inspire individuals to experience our exhibitions beyond the decorative and to explore their own creativity. Educators', writers, curators and artists have all contributed content; we hope you create something amazing from it.*

# Lesson 1: Still Life Block Printing Project (Grades 9–12)

## Overview

This project provides an opportunity for students to explore printmaking through designing, creating and printing a unique block print. Students are asked to use a still-life object as inspiration. They should choose how best to represent it using negative and positive space, and then translate it to a relief printing. This project utilizes *subtractive relief printing*, as the area that is not meant to be printed is carved away from the block's surface.

## Objectives

Students will:

- plan, design, carve and print a block print
- practice craftsmanship and following step-by-step instructions
- call upon their knowledge of positive and negative space, composition, and observational drawing to create an art piece

## Materials

*For printing block:*

Still-life object for inspiration

Speed ball Speedy-Carve printing block

Linocut cutters

Pencil

Paper (copy paper, as well as nicer absorptive paper for printing—rice paper or paper meant for sumi ink painting works well)

Blank newsprint for practice prints

*For printing (traditional printmaking method):*

Water-based ink

Brayer (hand-held printmaking roller)

Piece of glass or Plexiglas for rolling out printing ink

Large metal spoon for burnishing the paper onto printing block

Good quality paper for final prints (lightweight, absorptive paper works best)

## Preparation

This project is a multi-phased one. Allot sufficient time to design, carve, and print the blocks. Carving is the most laborious part of this process, and depending on the block's size, will likely take the most time.

*Preparation for design and block cutting:*

Have pencils, erasers and paper handy. The blocks can be used for measuring purposes but should stay wrapped until they are ready to be used.

*Preparation for printing:*

Have Plexiglas, ink and brayer handy. Work on top of old newspaper so you can quickly clean ink smears, etc. Keep paper towels and other clean-up supplies handy as well.



Example of a completed block and print



Materials

## Instructions

### Step One

Trace the block onto a piece of paper to determine the print's maximum dimensions. Designs can be made right up to the edge of the printing block. After some initial brainstorming/sketching, create a neat, finalized design of the still-life object to transfer onto the block print. Discuss how negative and positive space, line, and shape, create effective designs.

### Step Two

Transfer pencil drawings onto the Speedy-Carve block by simply laying them face down onto it and lightly rubbing the back of the paper (image 1). For a tidier transfer, ensure that the paper does not move. While the resulting image will be reversed, once it is carved and printed, it will revert back to its original orientation.

### Step Three

*Demonstrate safe carving techniques to the students.*

Ensure the hand that is holding the Speedy-Carve block steady is always behind the carving tool, and that carving is always done in a motion away from the body (image 2). *Safety tutorials are available online.*

### Step Four

After placing a small amount of ink on the Plexiglas, use the brayer to spread it evenly over the glass (image 3). The ink will be sticky and thick, but this is the correct consistency for block printing. Roll the ink onto the printing block in different directions until the design is consistently covered. Place a sheet of paper face down on the Speedy-Carve block and, using the back of a spoon, lightly burnish the paper onto the block in small circular motions. Lift the edge of the print and look underneath to see if ink has been applied evenly. Gently peel the print off the block and lay aside to dry.

### Step Five

If you use water-based ink, clean-up will be straightforward. Wash the carved blocks gently with warm water immediately after printing. Use a very soft sponge or soft paintbrush to clean any stubborn ink out of crevices.

## Variation

Use good-quality stamp pads for printing instead of the rolled-on, water-based ink (especially for small prints). For the best results, press the pads themselves down onto the block prints, but you will need to experiment to achieve the best results for the particular stamp pad used. Follow the same process outlined above.



Image 1

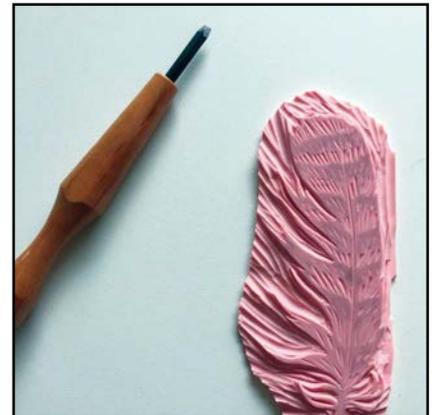


Image 2

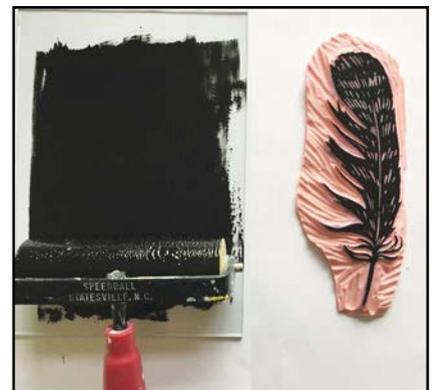


Image 3

## Lesson 2: Turn an Everyday Object into a Photo Comic-Strip Character (Grades 6 plus)

### Overview

This project asks students to consider the life of an everyday object. Similar to the way Rita McKeough uses the character of a ball in her work, students must extend empathy to (and anthropomorphize) a common object. They are invited to use their imaginations to invent a story, in comic-strip form, that integrates the object's reactions and emotions into the narrative. The lesson is useful in developing creative writing and visual communication skills. Students can choose to either put a face on the object itself prior to photographing (using googly eyes, stickers, markers, etc.) or to draw on the photographs (either digitally or directly on the printed pictures).

### Objectives

Students will:

- further develop their creative writing and visual communication skills
- plan, develop and design an illustrated short story in comic-strip form
- practice following detailed, step-by-step instructions

### Instructions

#### Step One

Choose an everyday object to be the star of your story. Brainstorm ideas about what kind of feelings this object might experience. Does an orange get excited when it is picked off a tree? Do shoes get tired when they walk all day long? Does a sock look forward to being washed?

#### Step Two

After brainstorming, write a short story as the basis for your comic strip. The object should experience human feelings as it navigates through a typical day or an out-of-the-ordinary experience. After writing the story, decide how many comic strip panels you would like to create and divide the story into that number of panels.



Example of completed piece

### Step Three

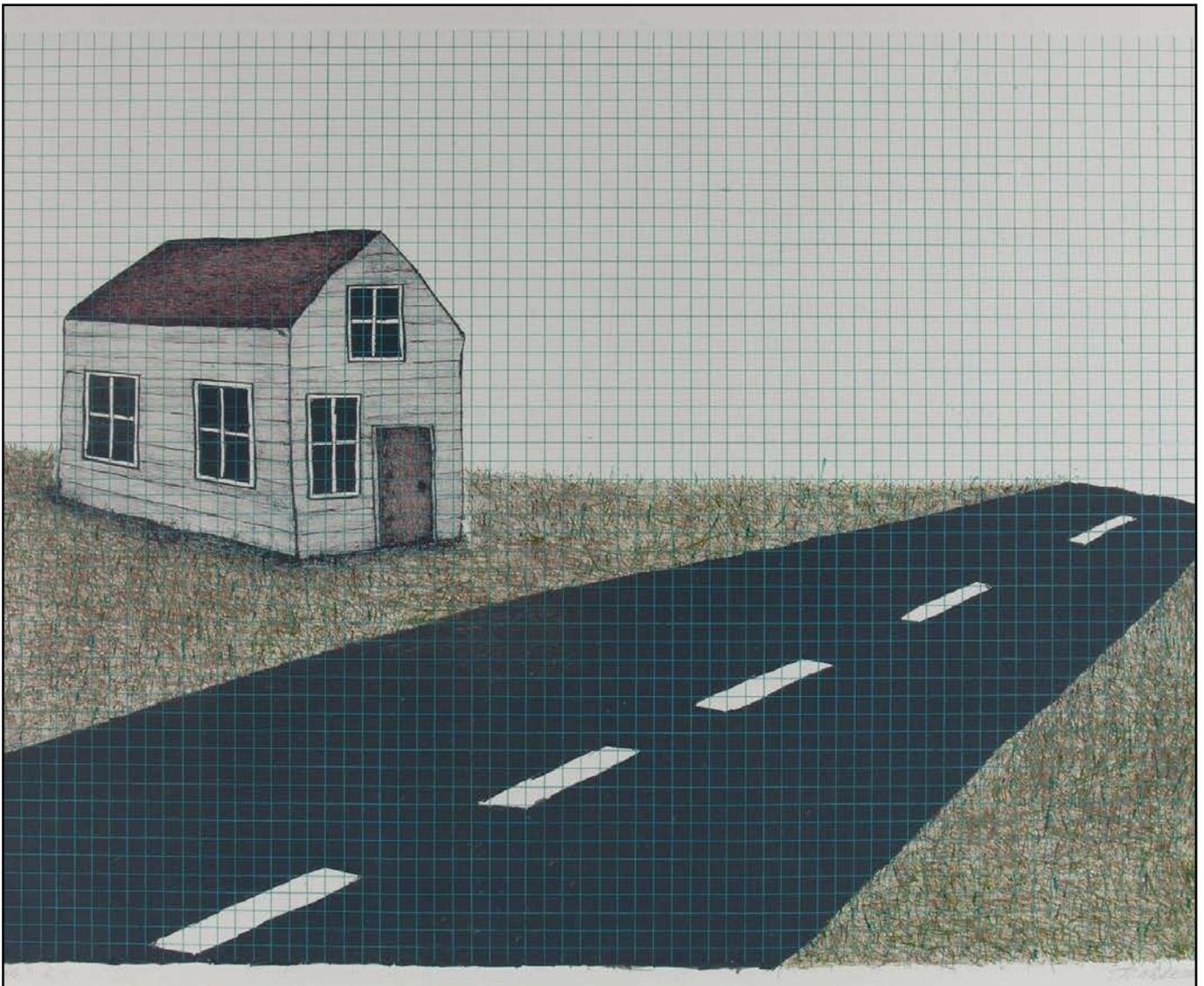
Create a storyboard to plan out the story's steps. A storyboard is a quickly sketched planning tool to help you decide what your illustrations will look like and how they will explain the story's steps. Creating a storyboard will also help you decide what shots you need to photograph.

### Step Four

Apply facial features to your object and then photograph it. Or, if you are applying these features to the printed photographs themselves (or applying them digitally using photo-editing software), simply shoot photos of the object in the desired poses and then add the features.

### Step Five

If you have access to a print layout program, assemble the images and text on a computer. Otherwise, the photos can be printed and then glued to a larger piece of paper in sequence, with the story written underneath.



# Lesson 3: Writing a Letter to Someone Who Needs It: Practicing Empathy (Grades 3-12)

“Empathy”: the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner; also : the capacity for this.

-Merriam-Webster dictionary

## Overview

Throughout her career as an artist, Rita McKeough has worked with the theme of empathy. This letter-writing project leads students through an empathetic process. It asks them to think about the feelings and experiences of someone they are connected to, and to extend themselves to that person in the form of a letter.

The diagram process that precedes the letter-writing requires students to consider another person’s perspective. They must think about the pressures that person is experiencing, how that person is dealing with these pressures, and what words or phrases might show understanding and support for the individual. Students can then use this diagram as a reference when writing their letters.

## Objective

Students will engage in an empathetic-diagramming and letter-writing exercise to practice using empathy in an intentional and productive way.

## Instructions

### Step One

Decide to whom you would like to write a letter. Keep in mind that you do not necessarily need to give the letter to this person—this can just be a writing exercise. But if you want to, you can use this as an opportunity to show support for someone in your life who has expressed that they are experiencing difficulty.



### Step Two

2.1 Draw a small figure in the centre of your page. This figure represents the recipient of your letter. Around the figure, write down the troubles that this person is dealing with (image 1). Keep in mind that in order to respect this person's privacy, it is best not to use names, and to describe things generally. For example, "Feeling bad about the mark on the test," "Worried about getting along with new step-siblings" and "Doesn't want to move schools next semester" are all general ways to describe issues that people might be having.

2.2 Draw a circle around these worries. On the outside of this circle, write down how the person is reacting to these worries—for example, "Grumpy with their friends," "Having trouble focusing in school," and "Feels like no one understands them."

2.3 Draw another circle around these thoughts. Use your imagination to pretend you were that individual. Consider what kinds of thing you would find comforting to hear if you were faced with these issues. Write down these words of encouragement and support around the last circle you drew. Use the completed diagram to help you write your letter to this person.

### Step Three

Write a letter to the individual you have been thinking of throughout this process (image 2). While we can never really know how someone else actually feels, we can certainly use empathy to imagine how certain challenges might feel. When we put ourselves in someone else's shoes, we can better understand our relationship and interactions with this person. This will allow us to demonstrate compassion for them.

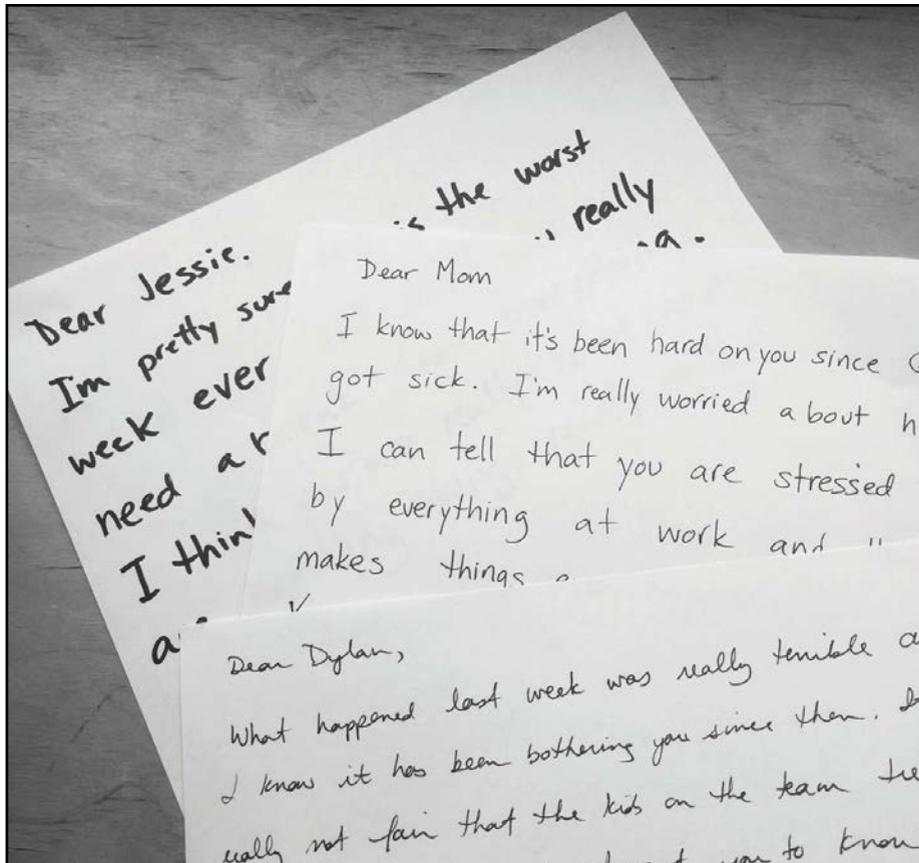


Image 2

## Acknowledgments

This publication was produced in conjunction with the TREX exhibition *Mittenism and the Quest for Empathy* by the AFA Travelling Exhibition Program (Trex) Southeast Region 4, at the Esplanade Arts and Heritage Centre. *Mittenism and the Quest for Empathy* will tour throughout Alberta to non-traditional gallery spaces August 2017-February 2020. Visit [www.trexprogramsoutheast.ca](http://www.trexprogramsoutheast.ca) to find out more about the program and locations of each exhibition.

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