

**All things being equal.**

Jessica Bell

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Department of Visual Arts  
Faculty of Arts  
University of Ottawa

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## Abstract

Jessica Bell's MFA thesis exhibition, *All things being equal.*, presents the very idea of constructing a painting as a way of making sense of the world. Simple materials and formal devices make allusions to ordinary events and experiences. The works bear the marks of incidental studio occurrences, which conjure a conversation between the will of objects and the artist's intention to activate them. Canvas and stretchers appear like characters, assuming the posture of active participants instead of subservient structure. The pieces engage with and resonate in one another, emphasizing the temporal relationship with the physical space. The forms are deliberately abstract and minimal, drawing our attention to subtle differences in the surfaces of material, gentle play with volume and light, and the quiet passage of time.

*All things being equal.* was exhibited at the Ottawa Art Gallery's Firestone Gallery in Ottawa from August 21 through September 13, 2015.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the enthusiastic support of Ola Wlusek, the Ottawa Art Gallery and the Department of Visual Arts technicians in helping me realize *All things being equal*.

Individuals whose care and conversation gave buoyant form to my MFA studies are Stanzie Tooth, Julia Martin, Florence Vallières, Heather Craig, Joe Friday, Grant Jameson, and Ian Bell.

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## Exhibition Images



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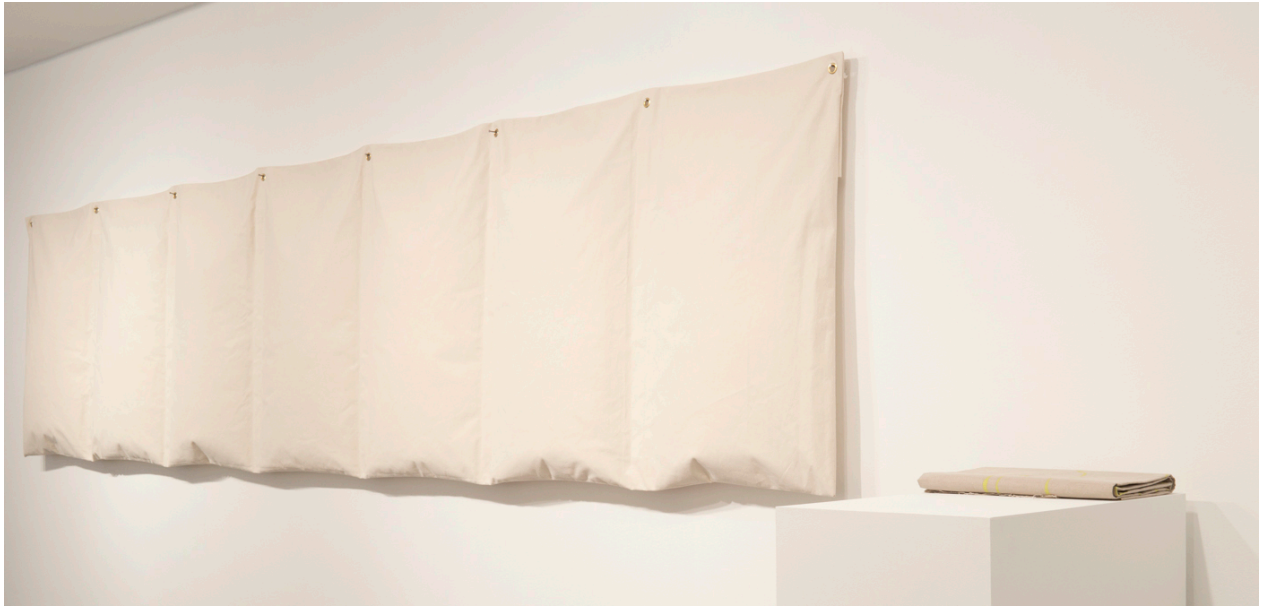




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## List of Images

1

Installation view

Shown: vinyl wall text and the five-part photographic series

*Life and times* (2015)

Inkjet prints on paper

20 x 30 inches each

2

Installation view

Shown: *Life and times* (2015) and central plinth-based installation

3

Installation view

Shown: central plinth-based installation, *Life and times* (2015) and *Folly (mound)* (2015)

4

Detail view

Shown: assorted works mounted on the central plinth-based installation including

*Constable* (2015)

Ink on canvas, cotton drop-sheet, thread, Velcro, inflatable poly-woven dunnage bag

48 x 48 inches x variable depth

*Three Days* (2015)

Ink on muslin, cardboard tube

Painting: 252 x 63 inches; tube: 72 x 3-inch diameter; orientation variable

*Painting of a plinth* (2015)

Ink on canvas, thread, Velcro, inflatable poly-woven dunnage bag

18 x 30 x 36; orientation variable

*Landscape with history* (2015)

Laundered ink on canvas, gesso, thread, Velcro, inflatable poly-woven dunnage bag

36 x 66 inches x variable depth

*weights + measures 1* (2015)

Plaster

12 x 12 x 8 inches

5

Installation view

Shown: *Life and times* (2015), assorted works on the central plinth-based installation, *A kind of map to a type of landscape* (2015) and *Incident/Accident* (2014)

6

Installation view, wide

Shown: *Incident/Accident* (2014), *Calendar Piece* (2014), *Catch + Release* (2014) and assorted works on the central plinth-based installation in the foreground including

*Folly (relief)* (2015)

Graphite and ink on canvas, thread, Velcro, inflatable poly-woven dunnage bag  
48 x 48 inches x variable depth

*Folly (with skin)* (2015)

Ink on canvas, muslin, thread, Velcro, inflatable poly-woven dunnage bag  
48 x 48 inches x variable depth

*weights + measures 2* (2015)

Plaster

11 x 13 x 9 inches

7

Installation view

Shown: assorted works on the central plinth-based installation, *Folly (mound)* (2015) and *Catch + Release* (2014)

8

Installation view, wide

Shown: *Catch + Release* (2014), assorted works on the central plinth-based installation, *Folly (mound)* (2015) and *A kind of map to a type of landscape* (2015)

9

Detail view

Shown:

*Folly (mound)* (2015)

Ink on canvas, thread, nails

Four parts; installation size and orientation variable

*A kind of map to a type of landscape* (2015) with accompanying plinth

Laundered ink on canvas, thread, Velcro, inflatable poly-woven dunnage bag  
36 x 66 inches x variable depth

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Installation view

Shown: *Folly (fold)* (2015) and *Catch + Release* (2014) with their respective supporting plinths

11

Detail view

Shown (with *Calendar Piece* (2015) and *Folly (fold)* (2015) in background):

*Catch + Release* (2014)

Plaster, found object

16 x 19 x 16 inches

12

Detail view

Shown (with a portion of *Calendar Piece* (2015) visible on the left):

*Folly (fold)* (2015)

Ink on linen

54 x 78 inches; orientation variable, to be folded according to the surface it sits on

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Installation view

Shown: *Folly (fold)* (2015) with

*Calendar Piece* (2015)

Canvas, thread, grommets, common nails and seven inflatable poly-woven dunnage bags

196 x 45 inches x variable depth

14

Installation view

Shown: *Folly (fold)* (2015), *Calendar Piece* (2015) and *Incident/Accident* (2014)

15

Detail view

Shown: wall-based projection of

*Incident/Accident* (2014)

Digital video constructed from digital photographic stills, colour; 22 minutes, 39 seconds

Dimensions variable

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Detail view

Shown: selected details from the photographic series *Life and times* (2015)

Left to right: *Life and times (premonition)*, *Life and times (naysayers)*, and *Life and times (star-crossed)*

17

Installation view

Shown: *Catch + Release* (2014), central plinth-based installation, *Life and times* (2015) and *Incident/Accident* (2014)

18

Installation view

Shown: *Folly (mound)* (2015), central plinth-based installation and *Life and times* (2015)

19

Installation view, wide

Shown: *Calendar Piece* (2015), *Folly (fold)* (2015), *Catch + Release* (2014) and central plinth-based installation

20

Installation view

Shown: *Calendar Piece* (2015) and detail of central plinth-based installation including

*Folly (pressure)* (2015)

Graphite and ink on canvas, thread, Velcro, poly-woven dunnage bag

48 x 48 inches x variable depth

*Painting of a plinth* (2015)

Ink on canvas, thread, Velcro, inflatable poly-woven dunnage bag

18 x 30 x 36; orientation variable

21

Installation view

Shown: a portion of central plinth-based installation, *Folly (mound)* (2015), *A kind of map to a type of landscape* (2015) with accompanying plinth and *Life and times (premonition)* (2015)

22

Detail view

Shown (with *Calendar Piece* (2015) and *Catch + Release* (2015) in background): *Folly (relief)* (2015), *Constable* (2015), *Folly (with skin)* (2015) and *weights + measures 2* (2015)

23

Installation view, wide

Shown: two photographs from *Life and times* (2015), details of central-plinth based installation, projection of *Incident/Accident* (2014) and a portion of *Calendar Piece* (2015)

## Exhibition Statement

I live in a house with two doors: a porch door and a main door.

The main door is painted cherry red, marking it the proper point of entry for the house. The main door leads to a small foyer; its function is specific and inspires a posture of formality. From the foyer of the main door, the house unfolds. The location of the main door in my house is practical and deliberately orienting but, in spite of this, I like to enter my house through the porch door.

The porch door brings me into the *lived-in-ness* of my house. Coming in the porch door leads to the space that holds the most living: a kitchen. Here there are the elements of what a kitchen should be: appliances and dishes and a pantry. There is a table and chairs for dining and entertaining but that table also serves as a desk, an extra countertop and a catchall for things that have no exact place to be. The surfaces of this room often bear evidence of labour, correspondence and intimacy. Sometimes there are shirts to be pressed and parcels ready to leave. The porch door opens onto a space that is identifiable by its name—‘kitchen’—but unspecific in what it facilitates: cooking, eating, working, writing, talking, thinking. I like the idea that significance can establish itself from within the physical evidence of ritual and routine. I also like the idea that something, anything, can always be more than its name says it is.

The title for this exhibition, *All things being equal.*, describes a tendency in my graduate study for entering through the porch door. The work I’ve completed during my MFA has played with the multiplicity of meaning that can exist in the identity of a thing and in many ways this play has involved ideas about painting. It is important for me to acknowledge painting here because, for my thesis exhibition, I was given the opportunity to make work for the Ottawa Art Gallery’s Firestone Gallery—another ‘house’ with two doors—where painting is very much at home.

When I speak of painting, I am not describing its media-specificity or proximity of location and orientation, but rather its opposite. What is compelling to me about the idea of

painting is how it is folded into all other things. Isabelle Graw speaks of this in *Thinking through Painting: Reflexivity and Agency beyond the Canvas* (2014). She writes of painting as a non-specific index that is an active omnipresence in other forms of art. This index is a trace: a series of signs wherein the physical manifestation of material and thought and labour is connected very tangibly to those who facilitated it. Graw calls this “an index of agency”.<sup>1</sup> Whether presented like photograph, video, fibre, sculpture or drawing, the work I have chosen to show in my thesis exhibition has thinking about painting as a sort of negotiation of wills. The works are folded, free-form, photographed and inflated, each possessing the ability to refashion and remodel themselves and each other.<sup>2</sup> Most significant to me is their posture, their quality of flexibility and *lived-in-ness*. I would characterize these works as active, the way the kitchen is. They are not animated exactly but are subject to unconventional structures that lend them the potential to become something perpetually new. These pieces serve as traces of their own history of production while steadily producing new forms. They have the ability to facilitate more living.

My thesis exhibition is an expanded exploration of an idea I had in my last term of MFA study. I conceived then of my abstract language (in which painting is present) as being akin to the practice of making architectural follies. Architectural follies come out an affection for fragment: of pieces, disassociated from their original forms, organized into false ruins that were indulgences for their creators but were meant to serve as sites of contemplative potential for those who came upon them. Follies embody some of the qualities of architecture while being several steps removed from its intended function. Most follies do not exist in the conventional way that architecture does, to provide shelter or protection from the outside world. Instead, follies wear on the outside the means of their own making—and breaking—as evidence for consideration through time.

In this way, my work presented here is an extension of the posture of the folly. These pieces do not hold traditional forms or structures but they each act as fragments, parts that exist to observe, to move between and connect together. They are strange but exude a familiarity that is

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<sup>1</sup> Isabelle Graw, “The Value of Painting: Notes on Unspecificity, Indexicality and Highly Valuable Quasi-Persons” in *Thinking Through Painting: Reflexivity and Agency beyond the Canvas*, ed. Isabelle Graw, Daniel Birnbaum, Nikolaus Hirsh, Institut für Kunstkritik, Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Stadelshule, Frankfurt am Main (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), 45-46.

<sup>2</sup> Graw, “The Value of Painting”, 47.

akin to being amidst the working parts of a home. The familiar being made strange is that which engages me most. Paul Valéry wrote, "Any view of things that is not strange is false."<sup>3</sup> In this exhibition I have attempted to make strange things so known that they are hard to recognize as significant, or as true. If this is painting, it is by way of the porch door.

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<sup>3</sup> As quoted in Douglas Coupland, "On Craft" in *Shopping in Jail: Ideas, Essays and Stories for the Increasingly Real Twenty-First Century*, ed. Leah Whitman-Salkin (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 21.