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Art Preview: "Mia Feuer: An Unkindness" at the Corcoran

The Canadian-born, Washington-based artist's first solo show is a spectacular meditation on the destruction of natural landscapes. (And there's an ice rink.)

By **Sophie Gilbert**



Photograph of "An Unkindness" by Paul Bothwell/courtesy of the Corcoran Gallery of Art and ConnerSmith.

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You have to respect a Canadian artist ballsy enough to construct a skating rink in her first solo museum show. **Mia Feuer's** "Rink," which occupies the Corcoran's rotunda for the next four months, is a fully functioning, ominously black oval surrounded by seemingly impenetrable black walls, and above it is "An Unkindness," a looming sculptural installation that resembles a flock of nightmarish birds poised to attack. You can, if you wish, put on the skates assembled at one side of the room, enter the rink, and look at the work from underneath in the state of contemplation that Feuer believes is inherent when you're the sole skater in a deserted landscape.

"Rink" could come across as cutesy or attention-seeking, but it does the opposite—there's something about the opaque black surface that seems designed to repel. The rink is made from a thick black polymer rather than from ice, so it's as alien to the cheery outdoor skating spaces of the holiday season as charcoal is to snow. The plastic has a dull quality that declines to reflect the magnificent atrocity suspended above it, and the lights mounted from the ceiling cast ghastly avian shadows all around the room. If Darren Aronofsky ever made a figure-skating sequel to *Black Swan*, chances are it would look a lot like this.

Feuer is the first Washington-based artist to be featured in the Corcoran's contemporary NOW series—she lives and works at a studio in Brookland and teaches at George Mason—but she was raised in Winnipeg, and her Canadian heritage is one of the focal points of the show. "An Unkindness" explores both the physical and figurative intersections between natural landscapes and humankind, specifically the ways in which the oil industry leaves vast swaths of the world barren and uninhabitable. Feuer has traveled to tar sands and oil sites in Canada, Norway, and the Arctic Circle, exploring the production process and the remains of our insatiable thirst for oil—a substance she acknowledges is essential to her craft as an artist.

Against the bleak white walls of the rotunda, "An Unkindness" is as unpalatable as a clump of hair clogging the drain, but weirdly mesmerizing nonetheless. Birds' wings flock around one side, illuminated by the light shining down from the center of the dome like a cloud-obscured sun. The installation also consists of a jumble of metal poles and rigging, and a drum covered in some kind of barnacle-like tarnish. Beneath it, "Rink" sits, sleek and smooth, the product of all this environmental carnage.

Upstairs, the show continues in another gallery with "Dog Sled," a woven, life-size sled crafted from items found by Feuer when she was on a boat in the Arctic Sea. One man's trash becomes an artist's treasure; gaudy pieces of colored string and matte tar paper form a messily constructed but efficient-looking work. Above it hangs "Midnight Sun," a star with brightly colored light bulbs built as a replica of one Feuer saw in a recreational center in a now-abandoned mining town.

Across the room is "Boreal," another large-scale tangle of opposing lines, surfaces, and textures. The work is illuminated by an eerie blue light and consists of logs, squares of polystyrene, and the shape of an uprooted tree trunk covered in feathers. The mosaic-like polystyrene tiles give the work a reptilian, scaly quality, while the suspended whole seems likely to collapse at any moment—a reminder of the fragility of our own ecosystem that's obvious without being deafening. One end of the uprooted tree appears to reach toward the suspended star, its fingers both menacing and inept. "An Unkindness" is a show that's similarly balanced, tempering a visual reminder of the destructive legacy of development with the chillingly broad appeal of the final refined product.

"Mia Feuer: An Unkindness" is at the Corcoran Gallery of Art from November 2 through February 23. More information is available at the [Corcoran's website](#). This Saturday the museum hosts a free community day with talks and activities; more information is [here](#).

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