

For her museum debut, Mia Feuer traveled to a nightmarish oil-industry site, sculpted on a boat in the Arctic, and built a skating rink in the Corcoran. Easy.

By **Kriston Capps** • November 1, 2013

Suspended in the rotunda of the Corcoran Gallery of Art is a mass of feathers, foam, tar paper, shredded tires, powdered glass, wire, and black enamel paint. It hangs like a still spiral galaxy made of dark matter. Below it is a black oval void: a skating rink built from furniture-grade plywood and synthetic polymer plastic. Black skating rink, black ice. Mia Feuer, the Brookland artist responsible for the sculptures, calls it a quiet room.

That it is. But “An Unkindness,” Feuer’s first museum show and one of the boldest contemporary-art exhibits the Corcoran has ever mounted, is a proclamation. For the first time in recent memory, the Corcoran has tapped a local Washington artist for a milestone exhibition. At 32, she’s one of the youngest artists to fetch the spotlight at the museum. Among those artists who are ever so fortunate as to get a museum show, Feuer is well ahead of the career curve.

“Her work is very strange in that it’s like a melding of oppositions,” says Sarah Newman, the curator of contemporary art at the Corcoran. “Seething with energy and life but also collapsing in on itself.”

Local artists rarely skate into Washington’s museums, public or private. But it was inevitable for Mia Feuer. Since her D.C. debut in 2010 at Logan Circle’s Transformer gallery, she has emerged as a rising star in a city not known for its sculpture. She won the \$10,000 Trawick Prize in 2011, got a full-time job teaching studio art at George Mason University last year, and landed representation at Connersmith, one of D.C.’s highest-profile art galleries.

Feuer’s research for the show (which she conducted not knowing a museum stint was in her future) took her from an industrial nightmare in the wilds of Alberta to a ghost town locked in the ice of the Arctic Circle. The thread connecting them is oil. Feuer grew up in Winnipeg, and all five sculptures in this economical exhibit are meditations on the ways that



Photographs by Darrov

oil threatens to fundamentally alter the Canadian landscape. Skating on black ice, under a mass of suspended beams, girders, and cranes, viewers will feel the weight of Feuer's dark ideation. But they should also feel at ease.

"When you're skating, unlike anything else, you're weightless, and there's this physical exhilaration that happens when you're gliding," Feuer says.

Nothing about "An Unkindness" was ever so easy. However fitting the show might be for the Corcoran, it is the culmination of an almost-impossible series of asks. Feuer finagled her way into a secretive "reclamation" site in the oil sands of Alberta. She turned the deck of a three-masted ship anchored in Arctic waters into her studio. And she persuaded a stranger in Bethesda to help her make sense of it all by building a skating rink out of synthetic black ice. The show is a dark one, but "An Unkindness" is the product of the kindness of strangers.

It's hard to say whether Feuer works in fugitive materials because she's always on the road or vice versa.

Although she took a fairly direct path to the District—after graduating from the University of Manitoba, she got a master's degree from the world-famous sculpture program at Virginia Commonwealth University in 2009, then percolated north to D.C.—her life as an artist has been a nomadic one. In the past few years, she's worked a circuit of the nation's most prestigious artist residencies, including the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire and the Millay Colony for the Arts in New York, driving back to D.C. after each with a moving truck's worth of sculpture.

"She is a force of nature," says Don Russell, director of Provisions Library and research faculty at George Mason University, where Feuer started teaching full-time last year. "When she stands, she speaks so powerfully about her work."

Feuer is a bright, even brash presence in the D.C. gallery scene. Her confidence stands out. She is louder than other artists. She earns trust quickly because she doesn't hold much back. People who meet her might be surprised that there is a political dimension to her work, because she is casual and accessible and never, ever self-serious. Her Bettie Page bangs and working-sculptor scrubs don't scream Beltway anything.

In part with the support of her native Canada, Feuer's made several work and research mission trips to the Middle East. In 2007, with funding from the Winnipeg Arts Council, she traveled to the West Bank to lead sculpture workshops for Palestinian children. Last year she was an artist in residency at the El Sahara residency in Dahab, Egypt. In 2012 she also won travel and research grants from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Joseph S. Stauffer Prize in Outstanding Promise of a Canadian Artist, one of Ottawa's top arts prizes.

"She is able to integrate social ideas or political ideas without it being kitschy or dictatorial," Russell says. "That's a gift." But Russell, who met her at her first show at Trinidad's Connersmith gallery in 2011, hastens to note that Feuer is a "born sculptor," first and foremost. "She needs to physically interact with materials." Specifically, the material she taps most is foamcore, whose light weight and malleable texture allows her to depict structures such as oil derricks unbound by gravity. "An Unkindness"—the 30-foot-long storm of sculpture hanging in the rotunda—is as "light as a feather," Feuer says.

So when Feuer spent the fall of 2011 emailing every person she could find with a connection to the Alberta oil industry, it was her usual hustle at work—travel, research, create, repeat. This time, though, no gallery or residency could help her get a foot in the door. She says she pinged at least 12 different companies operating in Fort McMurray, where the petroleum industry is working to extract the majority of Canada's 170 billion barrels of heavy oil. Feuer blind-pitched one email address that she found on a flyer for an oil-company family barbecue posted online. It turned out to be a fateful find: The person on the other end forwarded the message to a relative who was taking a Sunday-morning watercolor class with a site manager for Suncor Energy, Canada's largest oil company. Two days after Feuer sent her email, she received an invitation.

“They were excited about my work, they were excited about this artist coming,” Feuer says. “I think they thought I was a way bigger deal than I really am, because they were like, ‘We would love to house you, we’re going to give you an artist’s talk at the local community center, artists never come here, this is so exciting.’”

And so, in December 2011, she boarded a flight to Edmonton. From there she took a Greyhound bus the remaining 270 miles to the Athabasca oil sands, the largest deposit of crude bitumen on the planet, in the hopes of understanding the engine changing contemporary Canada.

What she found was a landscape twice transformed by industry. Oil-sands extraction is an intensive project: After machines clear away boreal forest and remove the top layer of unusable sand and clay (called “overburden”), giant excavators scoop up the tar sands. At Fort McMurray, oil companies pump water from the Athabasca River to create slurries, from which viscous bitumen can be collected. “It’s almost like a giant washing machine,” Feuer says. The process devastates the environment. More haunting than the disturbed environment and toxic tailing ponds, though, are Suncor’s efforts to right the ship.

“All the dirt, the sand, all the stuff that was washed out, gets dumped back into the crater that they dug,” Feuer says. “What they do is try to replant the forest. But nothing will grow, because the soil is now so sick.”

“When I went there the first time, what really, really hit me, was when I went to a reclamation site,” Feuer says. With her contact, a site manager and hobby painter she identifies only as Brian, Feuer visited Wapisiw Lookout, a restricted Suncor reclamation site—though only after Brian asked her to sign a waiver that she would never share pictures of what she saw.

“I always in the back of my mind just assumed that somebody somewhere was cleaning this up. I just always thought someone had a plan,” Feuer says. “There I was, standing with this guy, and he’s telling me, ‘This is the solution.’ This is not a solution. This to me was clearly like, we’re doomed.”

The landscape she describes looks like a Boschian nightmare: a remedial field of wheat, planted to leach out the toxins and metals that remain in the soil, surrounded at the perimeter by refinery flares. The wheat, an unexpected newcomer to what had once been boreal forest, attracted mice—the basic foodstuff of any animal ecosystem. In order to kill the mice and contain the toxins, the geo-engineers at Suncor brought in a top predator. They planted inverted birch trees, roots reaching into the air, which serve as roosts for imported birds of prey—an unkindness of ravens.

“When you see an inverted cross, an inverted flag, something’s not right,” Feuer says. “These inverted trees in the landscape are anti-nature.” (Ravens are historically also a bad scene.)

Representatives at Suncor did not respond to a request for comment. Nor has anyone from Suncor answered the invitations that Feuer sent for her show. She isn’t entirely surprised—though she rejects the suggestion that Suncor might read “An Unkindness” as kneejerk criticism of their work.



“[The show] is not a critique on the industry, even. It can’t be,” Feuer says. “Because I’m implicated in it. All that shit’s made out of petroleum derivatives. Every single thing. Obviously the rink is, clearly. But all of it—the tar, the tar paper, the polypropylene, all the ropes washed up—it’s all synthetic. All the adhesives, all the paints, all the styrofoam. The whole show.”

Nevertheless, “An Unkindness” speaks to a myopia at Suncor—that workers would invite to such a place an artist who planned to depict what she saw. And not once, but twice: Feuer returned in December 2012. Perhaps they thought Feuer would be sympathetic to the good intentions of land reclamation, even though environmental groups haven’t been seduced: The Natural Resources Defense Council and the Sierra Club of Canada lambaste the Athabasca operation as greenwashing. Respecting Aboriginal Values and Environmental Needs—a Canadian Aboriginal Nations nonprofit with an inadvertently relevant acronym, RAVEN—says reclamation is “not a credible solution.”

For her part, Feuer says she was open about what she came to do. “I took an angle that was not like, I’m a bratty activist or a hungry journalist. I went in as a curious artist.”

“An Unkindness,” the title piece that hangs in the Corcoran Rotunda, draws on Feuer’s expeditions to the heart of the North American oil industry. Elsewhere in the Corcoran, three sculptures speak to Feuer’s visits to oil’s next frontier.

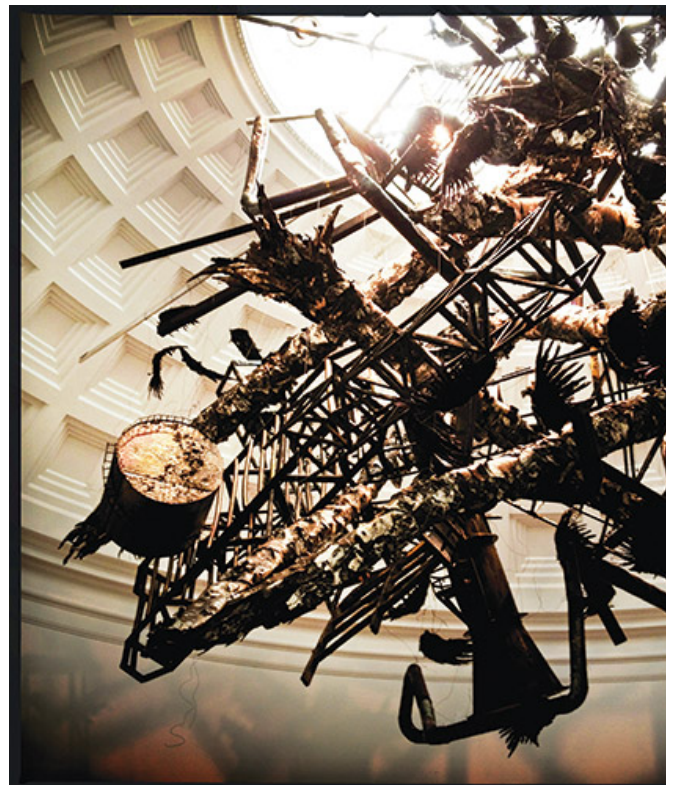
In June and July, Feuer participated in a month-long Arctic residency, docked in international waters off Longyearbyen, a town of 2,040 people in Svalbard, an island off Norway. She traveled courtesy of The Arctic Circle, an organization that mounts residencies in the Arctic for scientists, architects, artists, and others.

In Svalbard, Feuer got an opportunity to visit Pyramiden, a former Soviet coal-mining town that was shut down in 1998. Its nearly 1,000 inhabitants picked up and left after the town was visited by twin disasters. A Soviet jet liner crashed in Svalbard in 1996, killing 141 people, many of them Pyramiden residents; a year later, a mine collapsed, killing dozens more. “It ended in tragedy,” Feuer says. “The whole town was just left.”

The ghost town of Pyramiden stands largely unchanged. “There’s tools everywhere, there’s toys, there’s clothing, all this residue of the life that happened there at one point,” Feuer says. “Midnight Sun,” a large, pendant-shaped steel and light bulb sculpture by Feuer, is a replica of a Soviet-looking clock-shaped chandelier she found hanging in a lobby space in Pyramiden’s community center.

The Arctic Circle proved to be fertile ground for new ideas—but not the greatest studio. For three weeks, Feuer lived on a three-masted barquentine called the SV Antigua. “I thought I might write a children’s book,” she says, recalling that her shipmates were all there working on projects. “What else can I do?”

Feuer started making sculpture using whatever she could gather. “I found this roll of tar paper while I was crawling around one of



these old coal mines that had collapsed,” she says. “I dragged the tar paper onto the boat. I didn’t really know what I was going to do with it. I started collecting Arctic sea trash that had washed up on the shores. I didn’t really have any tools. I just used whatever the captain was willing to lend me. He was forever pissed off at me. He couldn’t believe I was making a mess. I was trying to build this thing on the deck of his boat.”

“She transformed the deck into her studio space. She worked under the most impossible of conditions,” says Aaron O’Connor, director of The Arctic Circle residency. “It was a project in itself to make that happen. If your studio is a deck of a ship, then your studio is pitching at multiple meters up and down in every direction. There’s wind, waves, and subzero temperatures. In the High Arctic, you’re dealing with limited resources—no tools or power. She worked tirelessly.”

“Dog Sled,” on view at the Corcoran, is the resulting work: a sled made out of jetsam from the end of the world. Feuer says she was inspired by Theres Arulf, a guide who was there to protect the group from polar bear attacks. “She was talking about the experiential difference between experiencing the landscape by way of a dogsled as opposed to a gasoline-powered automobile,” Feuer says. “It was really beautiful.”

“Boreal,” the third piece at the Corcoran related to her Arctic voyage, is more typical of Feuer’s work: a mass of objects caught up in a powerful current. An ominous, oily, feather-covered shape in coitus with an archway might reference a trip she made to the Suez Canal. “Boreal” also depicts the collapsed Arctic mine as she found it, a timber pile. Blue tarps installed over the lay lights gives the piece an eerie subterranean atmosphere.

“Using this blue foam, this Dow Chemical yucky material—if I light it the right way, it really does glow like the Arctic ice,” Feuer says. “There is something really mysterious about really ancient ice. It gets very blue. We were all trying to figure out why. No one knows why this ancient ice is really blue.”

It won’t stay that way. Pyramiden was ultimately deserted when the cost of maintaining the city grew too great, but the prospect of drilling in Arctic waters newly opened by melting glaciers is driving a global rush of prospectors north.

“You can see in all the settlements all of the ConocoPhillipses, all these different global oil companies starting to build structures. All these treaties are being negotiated, who gets access to what,” Feuer says. Whereas tar-sands extraction in Alberta has changed Canadian society, Arctic oil extraction may tilt the politics for every near-Arctic nation in the Northern Hemisphere. “There was a lot of tension, being in that place.”

Feuer initially left “Dog Sled” in Longyearbyen—one more abandoned object in what is, for the time being, essentially untouched land. There was simply no way to load it into a Penske and drive it back. She later had it shipped.

Of the works in the show, “Dog Sled” is the most intimate. It was built onsite, alone, and by hand. It stands in contrast to “Rink,” the first piece Feuer has ever manufactured, a project that involved dozens of people.

The Corcoran’s Newman first visited Feuer’s Brookland studio in early 2012. “I had been incredibly impressed by her ambition and by the scale of her work, even in limited quarters, like Transformer,” she says, referring to the Logan Circle gallery where Feuer had a solo exhibit in 2010. “It seemed like the work was much bigger than the space she was allotted.” Their talks eventually evolved into an invitation to do a show as part of the Corcoran’s “Now” exhibition series.

A few months after Feuer got back from her second visit to Fort McMurray, Feuer told Newman that “she had a crazy idea she wanted to run by me,” Newman says. “She didn’t think it would happen, but it was something her mind was fixated on but she couldn’t let go of.”

“Rink”—a 16-by-27-foot skating rink, and the centerpiece of “An Unkindness”—melds the opposing qualities of being ominous and inviting. Viewers can strap on skates and hit the ice, but only one at a time. Not for liability reasons or because it’s small, but rather because Feuer remembers watching her father, back when he played as a goalie, skating long laps on the ice alone before games. Her dad was a blue-collar guy, she says, a lot like the Suncor workers she befriended on her visits. She drank beer with them, stayed with them, and saw how they lived their lives, from midlevel executives on down. “They took me into the camps and the trailer parks,” she says. “They took me on their own tour to the aboriginal reservation.”

When she first pitched it to Newman, Feuer wanted to build an entire ice-skating rink herself. The scope and potential liability of that idea horrified the Corcoran. “I laughed when she said it,” Newman says. But Feuer and Newman kept talking about it. Newman brought exhibitions director Elizabeth Parr inside the circle. They started to lay the groundwork institutionally, Newman says. “The first person we talked to was the Corcoran’s lawyer.”

Meanwhile, Feuer started plotting. She had no idea how to build a hockey rink or what it might cost. A CrossFit enthusiast, Feuer started asking around at her gym in Old Town. “One day, I went in there, and I said to my friend Meredith, I really want to build a hockey rink. Do you think anybody knows how to build a hockey rink? And she said, well, that guy really likes the Caps. You should ask him.”

That guy, it turned out, had photographed a bar mitzvah hosted by a woman who had a hockey rink built in her house. So Feuer dropped by the woman’s home in Bethesda, skated on her ice, and shared her story.

That woman, who does not wish to be named and declined to comment for the story, set Feuer up with her contractor. One hurdle down.

“At the time it was going to a different part of the museum, and it was going to be larger,” says Howard Kandel, who built the rink for Feuer. “For a while it needed to be disassembled and reassembled to be removed for events for space. After several meetings with staff and people there, and my urging that that was a terrible idea—if it’s part of her art it should stay in place, and engineering it would be almost impossible to do, let alone very expensive—they decided to put it in the rotunda, where it wouldn’t be in the way of any events. That was a pivotal change.”

Kandel, who runs a design-build firm in Potomac, says the biggest challenge was finding black synthetic ice. “They make a lot of synthetic ice in white, a polymer-type plastic. It skates pretty well. They don’t really make a black one,” he says. “We had a lot of people hanging up on us thinking we were nuts when we first asked for it. Finally, it was only a few months ago that we got a break—and it works beautiful. I think we had an option of one at the end of the day.”

“The hockey rink is such a Canadian symbol, but to make it out of this nasty synthetic material,” Feuer says. “It’s an inverted symbol of Canada.”

Feuer wasn’t convinced that “Rink” would make it into her show until the late October Tuesday when the disassembled piece arrived. The Corcoran booked four days for installing the piece in the rotunda. It was up in five hours.

“Working with artists commissions, there’s an element of theater to it. You never know what it’s going to be until it’s actually there,” Newman says. “With this one there was probably a little more of that nervousness.”

Feuer produced “An Unkindness” in record time with virtually no guidance. (Who could mentor her? Few museums have installed an indoor skating rink before.) But she didn’t do it without help. When it came time to fundraise to build “Rink”—a \$30,000 undertaking—she turned to her entire network. Between 40 and 50 friends and colleagues gave

money, including one of her collectors and the director of The Arctic Circle. Most people gave money in the form of small donations, \$100 here and there. Feuer's Bethesda benefactor was the work's first donor, and also its largest.

On its surface, "An Unkindness" resembles the larger trend of spectacle-driven exhibits in the museum world. Here comes young local artist Mia Feuer, tackling the global petro-industrial complex by building a skating rink for Corcoran visitors. Yet the piece is scaled for the personal, not for the institution, unlike Carsten Höller's museum-filling slide at the New Museum in 2011. And the Corcoran show doesn't stink of celebrity and splash like Doug Aitken's projection of Tilda Swinton, Beck, and X's John Doe on the exterior of the Hirshhorn Museum last year. "An Unkindness" is marked by oil, sweat, and tears—despite or in addition to the popular sell of an indoor skating rink.



"She's young. The scale of ambition at this point is nothing that she should be attempting at this point in her career," Newman says. "There's no studio backing her up. For her to take this on is a very big deal."

And it will be a very big deal when viewers queue up to don skates and experience the sculpture, one at a time. That part is almost an afterthought for Feuer, who never set out to build a museum show and didn't think it would ever come together. After this, she doesn't know what happens with it next—or what she will do now. She doesn't seem to care.

"It's here. It's a fucking miracle. Now I own it," Feuer says. "What the hell am I going to do with it?"

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