



Inner worlds and cast-off memories in Tonya Corkey's *Sweet Dreams*

By Haley Sarfeld

Spring, summer, and autumn find wet laundry airing slowly in the warm sun, but by January, clothes are tumbling in the dryer, and lint piles up like fallen snow. In the chilly onslaught of winter, Tonya Corkey presents *Sweet Dreams*, an ode to inner worlds and cast-off memories fashioned from repurposed laundry lint. Corkey's fibre of choice is an unassuming archive of everyday life, moulded into sculptures and pressed into needle-felted illustrations, some representational, some surreal, that adorn large swaths of canvas and quilted bedspread in the Main Gallery at Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre.

Tucked into the upper floor of the Tett Centre, Modern Fuel acts as a makeshift bedroom, its vaulted ceiling looming above a large bed at the centre of the gallery—the titular *Sweet Dreams* (2025). The tall, rounded headboard doubles as a projector screen for a stop-motion animation of a bat hunting moths for a midnight meal. Daylight creeps in from western windows across the hall, and dark walls, not black, but Eigengrau—the greyish tone our eyes show us in the absence of visible light—caress the room, creating a soft backdrop for artwork that pulls between night and day, dreaming and waking, safety and peril.

It's not only shades of grey that have emerged from the lint trap—in Corkey's search for unique lint samples, she's collected bright reds, yellows, purples, and blues, carefully cultivated and set aside by family and friends. This colour palette is on full display in *Vulnerability* (2025), *Comfort* (2025), and *Betrayal* (2025)—three diamond-shaped quilts on the western wall—with detailed depictions of moths that, at first glance, appear to be painted or drawn on the padded canvas. The triptych evokes at once the quiet awe of perusing an old-fashioned field guide and the gut-flipping guilt of watching a beautiful insect land on a glue trap, looking for safety and instead finding a painful, drawn-out death. These dainty quilts are situated in view of the bed, where the animated bat performs its nighttime hunt in a never-ending loop, each frame of the sequence laid out in felted circles on the bedspread. While their cousins remain frozen on the wall, the stop-motion moths don't have the luxury of rest—they flutter, flap, twitch, and writhe as the slowest ones meet their fate in the jaws of the hungry bat.

While the scene on the bed is fitful, a group of three-dimensional bat sculptures, *Dorment* (2025)—fashioned from wads of grey and whitish lint using an experimental casting process—hang suspended in cosy slumber along the eastern wall. Velvety ears and puppyish snouts peek out below wings wrapped snugly around slender, almost chrysalis-like bodies. Meanwhile, a smattering of smaller bats from the *Stealth* (2023) series crawl lopsidedly up the southern wall, looking vulnerable as they stretch out delicate, awkward wings to climb. Situated outside the predator-prey dynamic of the bed scene, these bats, much like the moths, are legible as soft, winged beauties. Maligned as either creature may be by humans for their perceived uncleanness—sweater-eating, disease-carrying, and all the other knee-jerk allegations—these beings are as much nature's children as we are, no more or less innocent or brutal in their pursuit of survival.

This exhibition is a homecoming for *Two Figures Hauling More Than They Can Carry* (2022), a large tapestry inspired by Icelandic folklore that fills the gallery's northern wall. Corkey first began creating *Two Figures* at Modern Fuel during a Long Days Artist Residency several summers ago, using lint and Icelandic wool on canvas. Distorted self-portraits fill the contours of Reynisdrangar, a group of basalt sea stacks that stand in the ocean outside the village of Vík í Mýrdal in southern Iceland. Legend has it that these stone figures were formed one night when a pair of trolls tried to drag a three-mast ship to shore, and, failing to pull its weight, found themselves stranded at sea when the sun came up, turning into stone. Though *Two Figures* was conceived in summertime, something about it feels quintessentially January—a month when joints stiffen, colds gestate, motivation wanes, and vehicles get stuck under heaping blankets of snow. The season of stillness and burden. Perhaps, if this tapestry had been made a few hundred years earlier, the columns would be thicker, the portraits wider, but like memory, these ancient stones have eroded over time.

Stepping closer to Corkey's creations, bits of hair, fur, flecks of skin—the assorted crud of daily living—come into view, a reminder that, for all its beauty, this artwork is made of discarded material. On my first visit to *Sweet Dreams*, a little white feather escaped the ripped lining of my coat, as if it, too, wanted to be part of the story. Those tiny, tender pieces of the world that we normally brush away are an essential part of the work's texture, and after the initial impulse to wipe them away wears off, the sight of these oft-overlooked particles becomes engrossing, almost dreamlike. After all, what is a dream if not a collection of fallen-off impressions of the day, scooped from the back of the mind and shaped into something at once strange and familiar?