

ON FUTILITY AND ENDURANCE: Nature vs Culture

by Gillian McIver

“Canada? But there’s nothing but trees there!” Any Canadian calendar will tell you that: it’s a place populated only by moose, bears and the occasional red jacketed policeman, all frolicking in a vast landscape of mountains, trees and lakes.

To most of the country’s 33 million population, who cling to the southern rim, close to the US border, this perspective on the country is an affront, a stereotype that fails to acknowledge the sophistication of Canada’s cities, its Nobel prize winners, its transcultural population, its enviable “lifestyle” and its vibrant arts. And they’d be right.

Yet, it is impossible to ignore, or forget the presence of the landscape, the open space, the unknown expanse, the void.

Canada is big. It is largely uninhabited. Unlike Russia, for instance, great swathes of it are almost uninhabited. To most Europeans, for instance, its size and scope is almost unthinkable. The Canadian “experience” is marked by the ever-present consciousness of the vastness of the land mass to the north. It is a nation marked by weather, by distance, by relative isolation, by the overwhelming (even threatening) presence of the natural world. About the only news headlines featuring Canada that flash across the globe are the ones that shriek “Bear found in baby’s bedroom!” Or “Moose block major highway” etc.

And it has left its mark of the culture. From the Group of Seven, painting the “unpaintable” raw Canadian landscape, right through to James Cameron’s *Titanic*, which saw the icy depths claiming the ultimate symbol of the man-made, Canadian writers and visual artists have sought to face the problem of the natural world, in all its brutality, threat and untameable beauty, and to embrace it, not because it is “good” but because there is no other option. It so unavoidably *is*.



Canadian Rocky Mountains, photo Gillian McIver

The works in this exhibition are quite different, but also have many things in common. What brings this together for me as a “Canadian” show is precisely the interesting and diverse way that the artists have all engaged with the notions of nature and culture and the fraught relationship between these two polarities. All of the works are man-made structures that seek very deliberately to contain and re-order nature, and all of them are by definition unable to achieve it, in different ways.

In Germaine Koh’s *Fair-weather forces (water level)* we do not see the water itself rise and fall, do not hear splashes, nor feel the cold liquid. Yet we cannot escape the fact that the force behind the polite velvet and sleek polished steel is the force of nature, and it is not really contained at all.

Joe McKay’s *The Big Job* contrasts the handmade, wooden object with the virtual world of the digital progress bar. With its crude wooden frame, the creaking scroll, the rusting bell, the work feels like an improvised tool used by campers.

Some of the work draws attention to the disturbing implications of the nature vs culture dilemma. *ADB (after Deep Blue)*, Nicholas Stedman’s uncanny snake-like object lies inert and cold, until it is picked up, when it responds to the touch of human skin. Like a fragment of a dream, the animal/not-animal object confuses and

disorients, a falsely-created life-form that we ourselves bring to life by touch.

Norm White's *Helpless Robot* is more disturbing still. From the exterior, it resembles something one might find in a modern kitchen: smooth wood and convenient handles. But lurking deep inside is – what? A woman, trapped like an immured medieval saint? Or is the structure meant to contain and restrict human demands and desires? If so, that aim is futile and fruitless: the voice from within loudly expresses a steady stream of demands, complaints and wry observations.

Peter Flemming's *Canoe*, was exhibited as a video piece in the natural environment, as well as the canoe itself. Canoe makes another wry comment on futility of trying to contain nature. This canoe will never overturn, or get ripped to pieces on the rocks, or any of the other things that this iconic symbol of Canadian-ness is known for. But of course it also won't go anywhere: it remains fixed.

Nature can be just sheerly overwhelming. Once I was in the city of Toronto, walking down a street in the industrial district, when a sudden snowstorm assaulted us. There was no place to go, nowhere to shelter. Freezing wind howled, and snow just hurled itself at us, throwing us against the wall. Gasping for air, my companion said to me, through gritted teeth, nearly sobbing "Even if we had a million dollars right now, there is NOTHING we can do to escape this." And he was right. We just had to endure, wait for it to pass.

All Canadians, whether in metropolitan centres, in tiny towns or remote farms, are equally aware of our aching enormous land-mass, of the endless expanse of nature that surrounds us. We cannot escape the possibility of finding bears in the back yard, or needing the army to dig us out of an avalanche. And all the technology in our high-tech, cosmopolitan, sophisticated culture simply cannot completely protect us.

Gillian McIver is a Canadian writer, curator and film-maker. Following studies in History and Philosophy in Canada (UBC, U of Toronto), she studied Contemporary Media Practice at the University of Westminster in London. She is a founder of international art collective, Luna Nera. Her recent projects include curating an exhibition of video art, "Postindustrial Baroque," and co-curating an exhibition of book and video art "Prospero's Library" (Moscow 2007). Her film work involves detailed observation of places, landscapes and the passage of time. She has written for *Variant*, *Axis*, *Crosswalk* and *Contexts*, and for online journals.
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