

HOLIDAY 2014-2015
BILIANA VELKOVA: SPLENDID



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EXHIBITIONS | SHERWOOD GALLERY

Biliana Velkova: Splendid

Curated by Blair Fornwald, Assistant Curator

DECEMBER 6, 2014 TO FEBRUARY 4, 2015

Artist Talk: Saturday, December 6, 1:00 pm, Sherwood Village Meeting Room

Opening Reception: Saturday, December 6, 2:00 pm

A Splendid Situation

by Leah Taylor

Biliana Velkova's interdisciplinary art practice has been shaped by her investigations into the manifestations of cultural Othering. Born in Sofia, Bulgaria, Velkova lived under the Communist regime until it ended in 1990, immigrating to Canada with her family at the age of fifteen. Her memories of communism have deeply impacted the way in which she perceives the "West," moreover; it has shaped how she locates herself as a Bulgarian-Canadian. A lack of access to consumer products during her formative years fuelled Velkova to interrogate issues of capitalism, branding, appropriation and Western femininity. She asserts, "My interest in researching the Western commercial environment stems from my role as an outsider looking in."¹ Her experience of cultural Othering implicitly exoticizes her view on everyday popular culture, and in this body of work, Velkova takes on the roles of both tourist and ethnographer.



Splendid is comprised of four artworks that purport Velkova's experience of the natural Canadian landscape. While living in Saskatchewan, she spent time researching the commercial tourist industry, and found the term "splendid" was often used to characterize the prairie landscape. "Splendid" is defined as magnificent, shiny, illustrious and grand; all of which describe this body of work. In this exhibition, Velkova focuses on the branding and commodification of nature, and how this consumerist notion of the natural world relates to tourism in Alberta's Rocky Mountains and the Saskatchewan Prairies. Although Velkova's concepts deliberately center on critical examinations of social and political issues, her work is also lively, genial, and often humorous.

In 2011, Velkova participated in a Banff Artist in Residence program titled *The Soiree Retreat - A bit of a Chekhovian situation*, led by Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson. *The Soiree Retreat* unpacked Situationist ideologies, focusing on performance and spectacles that were imbued with romanticism, melodrama and irony. Situational art can be described as "a means of rethinking the way in which contemporary artists respond to, produce and destabilize place and locality."² The Situationist International, active from 1961-1970, introduced important concepts in art, such as "the spectacle" and "art of the everyday." During her participation in the Banff residency, Velkova produced *Landscape with a Horse at Bow River* and *Lake Louise Scene*. The character Velkova portrays in these two photographs transcends any particular identity, and, similar to the Situationists' ideologies, she blurs the line of "having" versus "appearing to have." Velkova's

use of détournement is further exaggerated by the grandeur and drama of Alberta's natural landscape.

In *Landscape with a Horse at Bow River*, the majestic Rocky Mountains act as a backdrop for her theatrical props, comprised of a flowing cape and a horse-drawn carriage. The already-exquisite landscape is exaggerated by her theatrical presence, and becomes almost absurdly idyllic. Velkova states: "It originally began with looking at Banff as a symbol of the Canadian landscape and how this perception has been constructed through the countless souvenir objects."³ The cinematic moment captured in the photograph is indicative of Velkova's oeuvre in performance art, which creates magical moments out of the everyday.

Yet behind all the Disneyfication, there remains a stoic, distancing quality between Velkova and her environment. Her lack of genuine emotion draws on the Situationist writing of Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, where he asserts, "in a consumer society, social life is not about living, but about having; the spectacle uses the image to convey what people need and must have."⁴ Velkova's disillusioned gaze extends past the horse-drawn carriage and remains seemingly disconnected from her luxurious surroundings, thereby emphasizing her narrative of the outsider looking in.

The site-specificity of Velkova's photographs also constructs a narrative regarding regionalism and environment. In *Northern Saskatchewan Landscape with Dogs* (after *Pieter Bruegel the Elder*), she explores the "spirit of the North." The



subtitle references the genre painting of Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel, known for his portrayal of sweeping landscapes and country peasants at play. The parallel between Velkova's photograph and Bruegel's painting is illustrated by the vivid winterscape, where Velkova rides a dogsled through the Prairie, beneath an endless blue sky, trailed by a long red cape flowing behind the sled.

Dogsledding, also known as mushing, is a traditional form of transportation in Northern Saskatchewan, and remains a contemporary tourist attraction, advertised as a "unique winter adventure." Historically, Europeans used dogsleds to explore the Canadian Shield. In *Northern Saskatchewan Landscape with Dogs (after Pieter Bruegel the Elder)*, Velkova imbued the photograph with an optimistic conviviality. She represents both a naive tourist and an ethnographer, exploring the Indigenous Prairie land that holds a long and contested colonial history. In this photograph, romanticized notions of Northern Saskatchewan winter are emphasized by Velkova's dramatic aesthetic choices that create a mirage of heightened beauty.

A departure from her photographic works, the twenty-seven foot long, warm white fluorescent light of *Untitled (Saskatchewan Landscape)*, introduces a new medium to Velkova's practice. The minimalist aesthetic of this piece symbolizes the low horizon lines found in the badlands of Southern Saskatchewan. The installation of the light tube plays with the architecture of the gallery space, drawing a distinct horizontal line with minor undulations across the gallery wall.

Untitled (Saskatchewan Landscape) is reminiscent of the fluorescent light works by American artist Dan Flavin. Flavin often remarked on the irony of this material, in that the bulbs hold a lifespan, therefore deeming the work temporal. This ephemeral quality of light, paired with the industrial nature of neon bulbs, speaks to Velkova's concerns regarding disposability in consumer culture.

The Canadian landscape is incredibly vast in its natural beauty, delivering images worthy of postcards, souvenirs, and tourist commodities. In it, Velkova complicates and exaggerates the commercial exploitation of nature, and nature as artifice. Through her Bulgarian lens, she inserts the narrative of the Other by presenting alternative ways of viewing and interpreting the Canadian landscape. Moreover, she problematizes the ubiquitous images of Canadian identity, creating space for a more polycentric, multicultural history.

¹ Biliana Velkova, *The Landscape Project*, accessed on September 5, 2014, <http://bilianavelkova.wordpress.com/photographs/the-landscape-project/>.

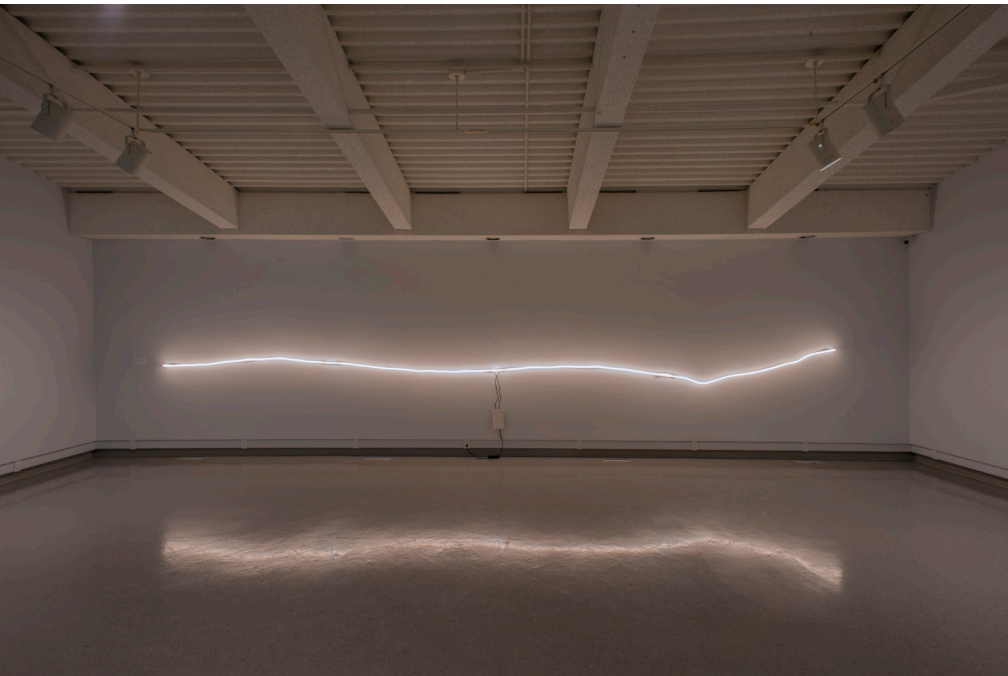
² Claire Doherty, *Situation*, (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2009), 13.

³ Velkova

⁴ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, (New York, Zone Books, 1994), from thesis 192: "The critical truth of this destruction the real life of modern poetry and art is obviously hidden, since the spectacle, whose function is to make history forgotten within culture."

Artist Biography

Originally from Sophia, Bulgaria, Biliana Velkova is currently based in Vancouver. She has an MFA from the University of Saskatchewan and a BFA from Concordia University



CREDITS

BILIANA VELKOVA, *Lake Louise Scene* (detail), 2012, digital print on Dibond

Photo: courtesy of the artist

BILIANA VELKOVA, *Northern Saskatchewan Landscape with Dogs* (after Pieter Bruegel the Elder), 2012, digital print on Dibond

Photo: courtesy of the artist

BILIANA VELKOVA, *Landscape with a Horse at Bow River*, 2012, digital print on Dibond

Photo: courtesy of the artist

BILIANA VELKOVA, *Untitled Saskatchewan Landscape*, 2014, French white neon

Photo: Don Hall



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