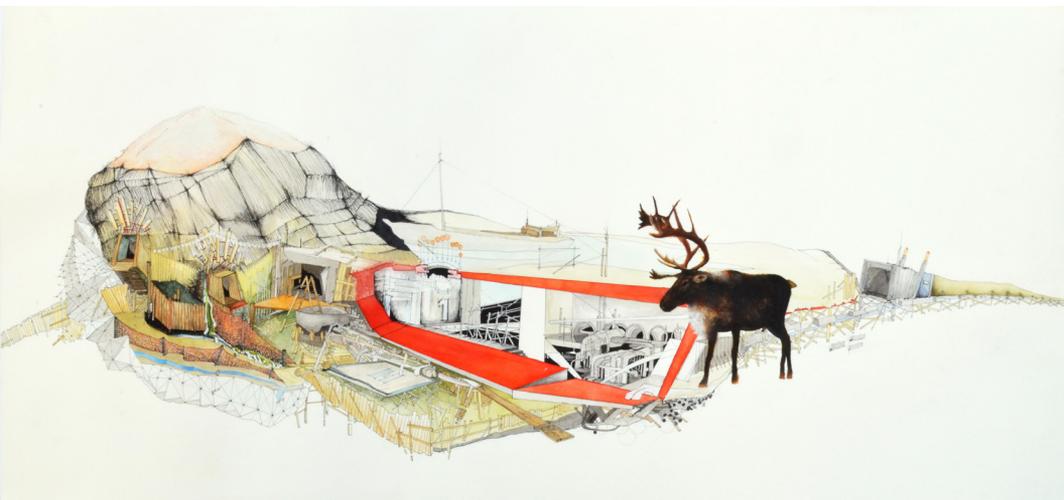




FALL 2016

Bruce Montcombroux: Site, Sight, Cite



Bruce Montcombroux, *One* (from the series *Site, Sight, Cite*), 2016, ink and watercolour on paper. Photo courtesy of the artist.

BRUCE MONTCOMBROUX: SITE, SIGHT, CITE

NOVEMBER 5, 2016 TO JANUARY 4, 2017
CURATED BY BLAIR FORNWALD, ASSISTANT CURATOR

On Being Somewhere

BY BLAIR FORNWALD, ASSISTANT CURATOR

Bruce Montcombroux's exhibition, *Site, Sight, Cite* explores what it means to be somewhere – the ways that we occupy, survey, and describe a place. Montcombroux notes that his work is motivated in part by Northrop Frye's observation that the Canadian identity "is less perplexed by the question 'Who am I?' than by some such riddle as 'Where is here?'"¹, a statement emphasizing the impact that geography and landscape have on the (particularly Canadian) psyche. As the places we inhabit are in a state of constant change, often contested, and increasingly virtual, the question of "where is here?" becomes deceptively difficult, if not impossible to answer.

The first six of Montcombroux's seven drawings are numerically-titled and sequentially ordered; suggesting an algorithmic sequence or series of steps needed to bring one closer to an understanding of the intangible

"somewhere." Their compositions combine hand-renderings of virtual, analog, and diagrammatic conduits of movement – highways, factory conveyor belts, mine shafts, overhead power lines, and arrows – winding through and connecting nodes of density, little shanty-towns. These sites are a confluence of cobbled-together machines, factories, mines, and temporary structures like hunting blinds, cabins, and tents, populated by clusters of wildlife, and situated within sparse landscapes, crystalline mountains, and rolling hills seemingly constructed with AutoCAD software. Repeating elements – helicopter landing pads, trestle and marquee signage, and a larger-than-scale caribou appear in all or nearly all drawings, creating the sense that while one is following an ascribed linear sequence, they are also going in circles, lost.



Bruce Montcombroux, *Five* (from the series *Site, Sight, Cite*), 2016, ink and watercolour on paper. Photo courtesy of the artist.



The caribou is an emblem of Canada, specifically of its expansive wilderness. Canada is an enormous, complex, culturally-diverse, and colonialist nation, mapped out and overlaid upon some six hundred other nations. Its collective identity is largely defined by what it is not –not English, French, or American. The land and its wildlife serve ideological functions, conjuring up a notion of a “True North” that unites disparate parts and population. Although this image inflects heavily on the national psyche, most Canadians, who reside along the nations’ southerly longitudinal border, hardly know it. Its climate is inhospitable, its terrain difficult, its populations small and scattered. Seventy percent of Canada’s landmass is inaccessible by road or rail.² Vast territories still remain unmapped by Google satellite cameras. Where is here?

Montcombroux’s work conceptualizes the site, the “here” in Frye’s question, as malleable, fluctuating between coalescence and entropy, between real and imagined, real and virtual, and real and symbolic. He draws and paints faux digital artifacts into images that contain analog artifacts like smudges and sketch lines. His drawings contain information found in maps, models, diagrams, instructions, and signage – wayfinding tools we use to make sense of a site or object too large or complex to comprehend – yet they do not function this way. Compositionally, they resemble landscapes – a tradition that also transforms incomprehensibly vague “land” into an image with a fixed focal point, comprehensible dimensions and defined perimeters, yet the scale and

arrangement of elements within the images disorients. His small sculptures resemble basic objects found in digital rendering programs, but are hand-built, like a hobbyist’s balsawood plane or an architect’s maquette. The miniature, Claude-Levi Strauss reasoned, is visually and intellectually gratifying because it gives the viewer a vantage point where “knowledge of the whole precedes knowledge of the parts”³, – a satisfying illusion of omnipotence and dominion over the represented whole. Yet, these miniatures have no real-life, scaled-up referent to which they would seem comparatively and satisfyingly simple to comprehend.

The final drawing in Montcombroux’s series is the only one that bears a non-numeric title. In it, big trestle arrows all point to hand-lettered text that pronounces “YOOOUUUUU ARE NOT HERE.” The statement emphasizes the spatial, temporal, and relational distance between the artist, the work, and the viewer – in short, it speaks to the uniquely singular and subjective experience of being, and being somewhere.



Bruce Montcombroux, *Artifact I*, *Artifact II*, and *Artifact III*, 2016, mixed media and wood.
Photo: Don Hall.



Bruce Montcombroux, *You are not here* (from the series *Site, Sight, Cite*) 2016, ink and watercolour on paper. Photo courtesy of the artist.





ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Bruce Montcombroux was born in Oxford, England and immigrated to Canada as a child. He has lived in numerous locations across Canada and currently resides in Edmonton, where he is Assistant Professor of Fine Art at MacEwan University. Montcombroux exhibits nationally and internationally, has attended residencies in the United States and Iceland, and has been the recipient of a Pollock-Krasner Foundation grant.

¹ Bruce Montcombroux, unpublished artist statement quoting Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1971), 220.

² Cheryl Santa Maria, "Canada's infrastructure issue and a return of the Zeppelin?" *The Weather Network*, 23 September 2015, accessed 3 August 2016, <https://www.theweathernetwork.com/news/articles/70-of-canadas-land-has-no-access-to-year-round-roads/57638/>

³ Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 23-24.



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COVER IMAGE

Bruce Montcombroux, *Artifact I* (detail), 2016, mixed media and wood. Photo: Don Hall.



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