

Inside/Outside: Images of the LAND in Artexte's Collection

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It's all about framing, isn't it? Telling a story, curating an exhibition, taking a photograph, or designing a billboard: you cannot make something out of nothing without putting a boundary around it. Like curating, writing a history is also about framing facts and ideas, making them coherent and legible. Not to be a relativist but the old adage, "history is written by the victors," most recently attributed to Walter Benjamin, who was writing in a period of overwhelming European fascism, continues to be a relevant acknowledgment of the limits of writing history. In contravention to the cold and empirical approach to history, Benjamin believed that history-writing must be a practice steeped in empathy. With those on the outside of the narrative. Brushing history against the grain is only the start of a complicated practice that must "[...] despair of grasping and holding the genuine historical image as it flares up briefly."¹ With this in mind, I want to walk lightly into history's frame in this accompanying curatorial essay, fully aware that the present is ever becoming the past and that empathy is my strongest tool of interpretation.

Framing the Exhibition

By highlighting the vast practice of critical land-based image-making in Canada, *Inside/Outside: Images of the LAND in Artexte's Collection* aims to challenge the traditional reading of landscape photography as a neutral form of observational looking to incorporate notions of belonging, identity-formation, and place-making through the appreciation of artistic interactions and interventions with land. Many of these photographic approaches have developed according to particular individual perspectives on land: an internal perspective, which seeks to bring forth experiential and subjective readings, as well as an external position of photographer as outsider, recording transformations as critical observer. In between (inside/outside), lies work which explores the absences in the land (of its original stewards, of animals, of underrepresented and disenfranchised communities) and which aims to activate places within their histories of human and animal belonging.

In this exhibition, the frame acts as a conceptual device, one which allows us as viewers and lovers of photography to ask ourselves: who is outside looking in? And who is inside wanting out? Photography curator John Szarkowski once wrote that the frame was, "[t]he central act of photography, the act of choosing and eliminating. [which] forces a concentration on the picture edge—the line that separates in from out—and on the shapes that are created by it."² But instead of privileging a purely formal understanding of the frame, one steeped in modernist ideas of artistic genius and vision and neutrality, why don't we turn this idea on its head? Instead, let's ask ourselves: what have photographers deliberately included? Rather than shapes and forms, lines and gradations, what feelings and identities has the photographic frame helped to bring to our attention?

In 1993, the Mendel Art Gallery held an exhibition that took place outside the gallery on the streets of downtown Saskatoon entitled, *The Post-Colonial Landscape: A Billboard Exhibition*.³ First Nations curator Joyce Whitebear Reed invited four artists—Edward Poitras, Grant McConnell, Jamalie Hassan, and Kay Walkingstick—to make work responding to the "differences in the use of the land by Native peoples throughout its early history, its recent use by European colonizers or its current, widespread use as an ideologically defined resource" using billboards as their media.⁴ Edward Poitras' work *1885* uses an archival photograph taken of children and their teachers outside of the Lebret Indian Residential School in Mission Lake, Saskatchewan. The title *1885* references an important event in the history of the province, the prairie region, and the nation: the five-month violent uprising of a group of Métis activists and Indigenous allies against the Canadian government that became known as the Northwest Resistance. At the top of the image, Poitras places black bold text stating, "the Amazon is Burning." In a smaller font, in the left-hand corner, he rejoins "while you play bingo." By referencing another more current moment of environmental and cultural injustice, that of the deforestation of the Amazon Rainforest and the displacement of many

Indigenous Amazonians, Poitras brings the image of a colonized landscape and people into the then-present day and makes the past part of a larger and ongoing history. By placing this image on the streets of Saskatoon in 1993, Poitras is engaging his audience of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike (as well as those who do and don't play bingo) in a conversation about personal and collective responsibility to the land over time and across space.

Inside/Outside is meant to evoke a dialectic of belonging, one that is sharply informed by the oppressive truths of settler-colonialism in our present-day Canada, as well as the ways that land has been a weapon of both violence and dominance in the country's past. Yet, like any good dialectic, this sense of exclusion engendered by some of the photography in the exhibition is meant to be balanced by the truly celebratory and powerful acts of claiming that many artists have engaged in.

From the work of Jeff Thomas, to Jin-Me Yoon, to Marlene Creates, image-makers from many backgrounds have produced work that puts them into the frame and onto the land, enacting their identities as people of this land. By placing in dialogue the practices of contemporary Indigenous, settler, and migrant photographers whose work integrates the human-altered landscape as both subject and representational form, I am responding to the necessity to create spaces for discussion and dialogue around our country's history of structural and physical colonial violence towards Indigenous people. As Métis artist and scholar David Garneau has recently written, rather than rushing towards a utopian reconciled future, "our focus should be on creating the conditions that engender the sharing of facts in forms that cannot be as easily appropriated, measured, and contained."⁵ In the wake of two emotionally and politically fraught milestones, the culmination of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Report in 2015, which resulted from the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, and the official celebration of Canada's one-hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Confederation in 2017, this conversation must continue to complicate the easy understanding of progress or resolution.

#This is Indian Land

In 2014, as a lead-up to the Canada 150 events, a significant aesthetic and ideological intervention in the land occurred. Parks Canada launched their "red chair experience program." Meant to encourage Canadians to get outside and visit historically and environmentally significant habitats, this marketing campaign uses the land as a framing device meant to capture the flickering attention spans of people in the digital age. According to Parks Canada's website, "Whether it's a quiet place to enjoy an awe-inspiring view or an «I made it!» marker at the end of a rugged hike, a Red Chair offers you a place to relax and truly discover the best that Parks Canada has to offer."⁶ By deploying vibrant red Adirondack chairs, they rely on an iconic design form that is quintessentially linked in many people's minds to North American settler cottage culture and outdoor recreation and leisure. In doing so, Parks Canada inadvertently evokes its own history of settler-colonial violence against the land and its original inhabitants,⁷ while encouraging users, "to connect with nature and with each other."⁸ Not only are you welcome to sit and contemplate nature from the comfortable position, but you are also encouraged to take your photo and share it on social media, completing the cycle of consuming nature. Just as social media, and its complementary technology the camera-phone, teaches us to long for the aspirational photographic experience, the #sharethechair campaign turns the land into a consumable object and experience. [#non-ironic] I'm reminded of W. J. T. Mitchell's now classic reflection on the way that landscape painting and, by extension, photography is a secondary interpretation of something that is already encoded in symbolic form: made up of nature (rocks, mountains, trees). He writes: "Dig out all the gold in a mountainside, and its wealth is exhausted. But how many photographs, postcards, paintings, and awestruck «sightings» of the Grand Canyon will it take to exhaust its value as landscape? Could we fill up Grand Canyon with its representations? How do we exhaust the value of a medium like landscape?"⁹

While I don't believe we can exhaust the value of a medium like landscape, I do think we can render it banal through overuse and abuse. In the Concise Oxford Dictionary, the

original meaning of the word landscape refers to natural scenery or a pictorial representation, a way of framing or containing or consuming land, of hanging it on your wall. What then does it suggest if we reject this word completely? What if we make and celebrate images of the land that complicate this consumptive narrative, this history of colonizing nature, and instead think about the land as a collaborative partner, one with the generative ability to talk about identity, history, and colonialism?

The large photo-mural installed in the exhibition *Inside/Outside* depicts the famous rail bridge at the Canada-U.S. border on the land of the Garden River First Nation, just outside of Sault Ste. Marie. As both a scenic and graphically dynamic spot that has been photographed over and over again by people driving along the old TransCanada Highway, and shared on social media almost to the point of banality, it nevertheless makes a powerful statement about Indigenous sovereignty and history on the land through its iconicity. Part of photographer Andreas Rutkauskas' *Borderline* series, this mural is meant to act as a provocation to viewers and invite them to have their own red chair experience in the gallery space.¹⁰ [#InsideOutside]

Adjacent to Rutkauskas' mural, a group of publications are installed in such a way as to reveal their visual and conceptual allegiance to complicating easy readings of land photography. Drawing from Artexte's vast collection including critical compilations, exhibition catalogues and pamphlets, postcards, handouts, artist books and photobooks, these works help to affirm the expansive breadth of photographic relations to land in Canada. While this exhibition focuses on photographs made in Canada, it isn't Canadian identity or nationhood that necessarily connects these artworks. Instead, it is the frame of settler-colonialism that binds these images together, informs the way we look at land, as well as the photography of land. Such a framework can remind us, as viewers as well as citizens, to consider what we share in common and, further, what we need to work towards.¹¹

In the wake of the Canada 150 celebrations, Métis curator Lee-Ann Martin, with the

support of MAWA (Mentoring Artists for Women's Art, Winnipeg), produced a new billboard exhibition that spanned the country. From June 1 to August 1, 2018, "Resilience: The National Billboard Exhibition" featured the work of fifty Indigenous women artists on 81 billboards across the country. Including many images made with photography and video, but also sculptures, beadworks, illustrations, and paintings, Martin describes the mural project as an act of making space in the land for Indigenous women who have suffered from both official and individual acts of exclusion, stereotyping, and racism. Martin writes that, "this project presents the work of Indigenous women artists writ LARGE, with significant physical presence that cannot be ignored or erased. The space is created by Indigenous women with images of self-definition and self-representation. The images insert themselves into rural and urban landscapes as a form of artistic sovereignty."¹² This project breaks the frame and reaches people in regions of Canada where contemporary art is not always available, not only in the space of the land but also on the web as it continues to circulate online. It also celebrates the land as a form that can be activated as a subject, as it is in Patricia Deadman's photograph *Beyond the Mist* (2001) of Glacier National Park, where practices of Canadian settler mountain-climbing originate. Resilience embodies the positive power of art to frame the conversation about land, identity, and belonging across Canada through empathy and the resurgence of a history that recovers rather than erases.

Through our struggles over land in Canada in the form of ongoing Indigenous Land Claims and contested Treaties, in the battles over pipelines and expanding resource exploitation (jobs, jobs, jobs), in the fight to protect key habitat for species like the caribou and the orca we continue to reproduce and reinforce the values of settler-colonial statehood. These are the same ideological perspectives on land that have turned nature into seife moments and acts of reconciliation into empty gestures.¹³ It is time to think about land, the representation of the land, and our shared experiences on the land, in new ways.

Endnotes

1. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, 1st ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 256.
2. John Szarkowski, "Introduction," in *The Photographer's Eye* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966), n.p.
3. For further analysis of this exhibition see: Michael Rattray, "Mapping the Post-Colonial Landscape Project: A Critical Analysis" (M.A., Concordia University, 2008).
4. Joyce Whitebear Reed, *The Post-Colonial Landscape: A Billboard Exhibition* (Saskatoon, Sask.: Mendel Art Gallery, 1993), 3. <https://e-artexte.ca/id/eprint/7223/>.
5. David Garneau, "Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation: Art, Curation, Healing," in *Arts of Engagement: Taking Aesthetic Action In and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, ed. Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2016), 39. <https://e-artexte.ca/id/eprint/29037/>.
6. Government of Canada Parks Canada Agency, "Red Chair Program – Thousand Islands National Park," January 25, 2017. <https://www.pc.gc.ca/en/pn-np/on/1000/activ/experiences/chaiserouge-redchair/>.
7. For more discussion on the history of displacement and exclusion of Indigenous people from national parks, see the work of: John Sandlos, "Federal Spaces, Local Conflicts: National Parks and the Exclusionary Politics of the Conservation Movement in Ontario, 1900-1935," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 16, no. 1 (2005): 293. <https://doi.org/10.7202/015735ar>.
8. Government of Canada Parks Canada Agency, "Red Chairs – Glacier National Park," June 11, 2018. <https://www.pc.gc.ca/en/pn-np/bc/glacier/activ/rouge-red>.
9. W.J.T. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W. J. T Mitchell, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 15.
10. "Borderline" Andreas Rutkauskas, accessed October 5, 2018. <http://www.andreasrutkauskas.com/borderline/>.
11. For a thoughtful analysis of what settler-colonial art history can offer as a methodological model see: Skinner, Darnian. "Settler-Colonial Art History: A Proposition in Two Parts," *Journal of Canadian Art History* 35, no. 1 (January 1, 2014): 131-175.
12. Lee-Ann Martin, "The Resilient Body," Resilience: The National Billboard Exhibition Project, 2018. <https://resilienceproject.ca/en/essay>.
13. For an in depth discussion of how reconciliation has been perceived by scholars and artists of Indigenous descent, see: Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill and Sophie McCall, eds., *The Land We Are: Artists and Writers Unsettle the Politics of Reconciliation* (Winnipeg, Man.: Arp Books, 2015). <https://e-artexte.ca/id/eprint/26718/>.

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