

The electric fence enacts the European relation to nature: enclosures mark property boundaries connected with a sedentary way of life. The animals have their own territoriality, but it is not sedentary; it is enacted through movement through the territory, movement impeded by fences and boundaries. The animals of the Nova Scotia forest, like the western plains First Nations, are nomadic; settled territory and fenced property threaten them and at the same time hold them at a distance from European interlopers.

So who or what is being protected: Wilson or the animals? Her work documents her efforts to communicate with animal nature while being alienated from it, wanting to connect with nature at the very moment when self-imposed territorial boundaries separate her from nature. The fence that “protects” the animals, like our park boundaries, is at the same time a gesture of enclosure and domination.

The laughter produced by Whidden and Wilson’s works is not the good-natured, complacent laughter of the self-satisfied; it is the critical laughter of the satirist, who reminds us of what we would prefer to forget. It is not far from tears.

Dr. Bruce Baugh teaches at Thompson Rivers University, Kamloops BC. His varied interests include continental philosophy: phenomenology, existentialism, post-structuralism, and surrealism.

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Elinor Whidden and D'Arcy Wilson

Essay by Bruce Baugh

Humour, parody and play can make us aware of our alienation from nature and history. So we learn from Elinor Whidden's work, which combines photography, sculpture and performance to awaken and disturb our historical consciousness. D'Arcy Wilson's work likewise uses performance and photography to remind us of how we have separated ourselves from the very nature which we cherish and want to protect.



Elinor Whidden's present-day parodic re-creations of the past force us to re-examine the past and its legacy. Canadian school-children are taught to revere the voyageurs who entered the Canadian west in canoes; Whidden's Mountain Man persona, featured in earlier works, portages disassembled automobiles through mountain passes and has a walking stick equipped with a car rear-view mirror. The rivers and paths of the voyageurs and First Nations have become today's highways, and highways and cars continue the

project of colonial domination and exploitation begun by the voyageurs. There is continuity here, but also disruption: the received, heroic version of the past is called into question by its present-day parody, and the domination and conquest of the landscape by the automobile is portrayed as a later manifestation of the project of colonial conquest and settlement.

Head-Smashed-In-Engine-Block-Buffalo-Jump continues Whidden's parodic critique of the domination of the car and the use of mythic iconography to repress memories of the coercive force used by Europeans who "settled"—that is, seized control of—the western plains of North America. Instead of the Mountain Man persona, Whidden poses as an Annie Oakley sharpshooter, rifle in hand, or as Buffalo Bill, her foot planted atop the skull of a bison. But the bison head is in fact an assemblage of scavenged car muffler and exhaust parts.

In the image which gives the show its title, we see a mountainous pile of these muffler-exhaust bison heads. *Head-Smashed-In-Buffalo-Jump* is a famous archaeological and UNESCO World Heritage site in southwest Alberta; it is the place where the Blackfoot, Peigan and Blood First Nations would stampede herds of bison over a cliff; the killed bison were used for food, clothing, shelter and tools. The coming of the railroad and European settlement led to the near extinction of the plains bison in 1881. Buffalo Bill earned his name through his prodigious slaughter of bison for Union armies in the US Civil War and later served as a scout for the US Army making war against native Americans; his Wild West show began in 1883, after the nearly total destruction of the bison at the hands of rifle-toting Euro-Americans and Euro-Canadians and the subjugation of First Nation peoples. Annie Oakley was a major star of his show. Whidden's work reminds us that the replacement of the bison by the automobile is part of the heritage of the destruction of the way of life and sovereignty of the First Nations way of life, and that Buffalo Bill and Annie Oakley are far from the benign figures portrayed in American films and musicals. Yet, her work is not a fulminating tirade or a history lesson: it uses parody and humour to provoke thought and reflection.

D'Arcy Wilson uses elements of the absurd and parody to awaken us to how we have separated ourselves from nature in our efforts to dominate it. Her show, *Protect Your Love*, is based on her travels to wilderness areas throughout Nova Scotia, where she set up campsites and surrounded them with an electric fence "for protection." She placed groupings of walkie-talkies at some distance from the sites, but still visible with binoculars. Standing within the perimeter of her fence, Wilson used the walkie-talkie to speak to the wildlife around her while still maintaining "a safe distance."

