

## The Quest for the True North(s)

“Landscape is a natural scene mediated by culture. It is both a represented and presented space, both a signifier and a signified, both a frame and what a frame contains, both a real place and its simulacrum, both a package and the commodity inside the package.”

-W. J. T. Mitchell

“Any landscape is a condition of the spirit.”

-Henri Frederic Amiel

W. J. T. Mitchell opens his oft-cited essay “Imperial Landscape” with the statement “landscape is not a genre of art but a medium.”<sup>1</sup> A medium for defining a nation, a vessel carrying ideas about individualism, politics, the environment, and also, a place that we physically inhabit. Although enclosed by a frame (both physically and metaphorically) the form of the landscape painting speaks to something much more vast. Beyond the frame, and beyond the pines of the Canadian landscape – those lone, windswept trees so common in paintings by the Group of Seven - are both the physical expanse of land, and the idea of the great Northern wilderness that so trenchantly informs collective understandings of this nation. Homer Watson, while perhaps not known to as many as Tom Thompson and company, made a significant impact on the Canadian landscape painting tradition, and was called by J. Russell Harper, a former curator at the National Gallery of Canada as “the man who first saw Canada as Canada.”<sup>2</sup> Watson, over the course of his prolific, decades-long career, sought to find a way to create a “truthful representation”<sup>3</sup> of the Canadian landscape. This is certainly a loaded term, as land, and indeed landscape is hardly neutral or something about which ‘objective’ truth can be discovered. However, on a more conceptual level, the idea of truthful representation spans artistic traditions, and whether its invocation is in support of pictorial realism, emotional authenticity, or political activism, a quest for truthful representation is perhaps the common ground all artists share. While this exhibition does not aim to address the political implications of the ideology of Canadian landscape, it does illustrate how, across 150 years, Watson and the contemporary artists whose work is juxtaposed alongside his, are, each in their own way, exploring what truthful representation of Canada’s landscape looks like to them.

For Watson, Canada required a painting tradition distinct from that popular in the depiction of English and European landscapes, one which captured the pure wilderness of the great North. Western landscape painting tradition, particularly between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, showed a marked movement towards hyperrealism, a desire to break down the barrier between the representation and the Real.<sup>4</sup> However Watson, over the course of his career, moved away from this hyperrealism - seen in *Untitled (Summer Landscape)* - toward more expressive, almost allegorical forms. Perhaps it was the

---

<sup>1</sup> Mitchell, “Imperial Landscape,” 5.

<sup>2</sup> Gerald Noonan, *Refining the Real Canada: Homer Watson's Spiritual Landscape* (Waterloo: MLR Editions Canada, 1997), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Muriel Miller, *Homer Watson: The Man of Doon* (Toronto: Summerhill Press, 1988), 64.

<sup>4</sup> Mitchell, “Imperial Landscape.”

tragic circumstances of Watson's youth, as detailed in Faith Hieblinger's essay in this volume, that lead him to view the landscape of his home through the lens of the sublime – potentially dangerous, and yet, in its vast and, at that time uncultivated state, a link to the unknowable and divine – but his work suggests that his quest for truth, or purity, as Mitchell would have it, was for a spiritual or emotional truth, rather than for objective or realist visual representation. But where Watson sought the emotional, spiritual power in landscape, the quest for the truth of the Canadian landscape as it plays out in the work of the contemporary artists in *Beyond the Pines* seems to fall into three other categories: the epistemological, the environmental, and the political.

That ideas of place and landscape are cultural constructs is hardly new concept, but one that is not often addressed through the medium of landscape itself. Gavin Lynch's and Monica Tap's work forces us to ask how we know what we know about landscape, how we recognize and define it. Lynch's collage-like work speaks to the uneasiness with which we conceptualize a post-modern understanding of landscape as an artistic or indeed political medium. Collage, as a format, implies a picking and choosing, resulting in a carefully constructed final image, composed from multiple sources. This runs very counter to Watson's, and many other 19<sup>th</sup> century painters, ideas of 'pure nature,' as they "erased[d] the signs of ... constructive activity in the formation of landscape as meaning or value, to produce an art that conceals its own artifice."<sup>5</sup> In *For Janus # 1* and *For Janus #2*, Lynch suggests that what appears 'natural' is highly mediated. Monica Tap too makes evident much of the artifice involved in 'capturing' landscape in paint. Her interest lies in the qualities of time and light, and how, while they affect our emotional processing of landscape, they are not as readily captured in the painterly result. *A Thousand Steps* is the result of Tap's common practice of painting from highly modified photographs or video; in this case, a photograph of a wooded area was taken late at night in almost complete darkness, with flashes set up to illuminate the trees. The result is an image that, through the unnatural hues of yellow, orange, blue and purple, and the incandescence of the trees, suggests the inchoate power of a forest enveloped in darkness that is felt, but not visible to the naked eye or expressed in artworks, particularly those of Homer Watson's time.

April Hickox's, Reinhard Reitzenstein's, and Jennifer Carvalho's work all speaks to how current, post-modern ideas around landscape have been informed by the growth of the environmental movement since the 1960's. In Homer Watson's day, landscape, and its ultimate form of 'wilderness,' was a boundless resource to be explored (and exploited); now the relationship between human activity and the landscape is much more fraught and indeed precarious. April Hickox illustrates the delicate equilibrium between civilization and nature as it plays out on the Toronto Islands, through images that bear subtle evidence of human interaction with the landscape. The islands are both protected parkland and a car-free residential area, and residents have fought over the years to both preserve the natural setting, but also to prevent their expulsion to make way for designated parkland. Reinhard Reitzenstein's bronze and stone sculptures, while of perhaps the most ubiquitous subject in landscape – trees – also illustrate what is not seen in landscape, both physical and artistic. Tree roots that prevent soil erosion, and the nitrogen-fixing fungi locked in symbiosis with them are the components of landscape that are essential to its functioning and to its longevity; by placing them in sharp relief in his

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 16.

sculptures, Reitzenstein forces us to consider the interconnectedness and interdependence of the lone pine within a larger ecosystem. Jennifer Carvalho's eerie landscapes suggest a post-apocalyptic future in which landscape has reasserted its dominance, and only traces of human inhabitation are visible in it. For Carvalho, who is interested in depictions of the Anthropocene (the proposed geological epoch which begins when human activity has made an irreversible impact on global ecosystems), landscape both carries the weight of history and a foreshadowing of the future.

Although Homer Watson's work (within the Western landscape painting tradition) can be tied into a proposed connection between landscape painting and the expansion of imperialism<sup>6</sup>, Jason Brown and Brian Jungen and Duane Linklater take a more overt look at the effects of industrialization and imperialism on landscape. Brown's photographs of scenes along Highway 69 depict the unsettled, tumultuous relationship between urban and industrial expansion and the natural environment. Roads and cars have enabled exploration of the Canadian landscape, but they rarely feature in its depiction. With wild grasses overgrowing abandoned parking lots, and rusted cars taking up residence in pine forests, our pristine vision of Northern wilderness is made uncomfortable by the presence of the very things that allow us access to it. Brian Jungen and Duane Linklater also take this idea of Northern wilderness, which in the cultural consciousness is boundless and open to exploration, and ask whether it is really accessible to all? For colonial settlers, Homer Watson, and for Canadians of European heritage today, the Canadian landscape is something one can easily place oneself in, whereas for First Nations peoples, interactions with the Canadian landscape are much more politicized. To even consider a truthful representation of landscape we must ask who lives in this landscape and how are they allowed to interact with it?

Landscape as a physical place in the world will never cease to be a source of inspiration and wonder, and it seems unlikely that landscape as an artistic form will ever disappear entirely from view. There will always be a desire to step out of doors, to marvel at nature, and to attempt to capture – on paper, canvas, screen or stone – physical beauty and the emotion it engenders, to render permanent a fleeting moment. However, if we accept Mitchell's statement that landscape is a medium in the fullest sense of the word, that it is "a material 'means' ... like language or paint, embedded in a tradition of cultural signification and communication, a body of symbolic forms capable of being invoked and reshaped to express meaning and values,"<sup>7</sup> then this quest for "truthful representation" of, or in, landscape is futile on its face. But, as a medium in this same sense, landscape can send us on a much bigger quest. For if it is through landscape that we unconsciously express meanings and values, then seeking the truth in landscape can only set us on a course towards a better understanding of ourselves. Homer Watson and these contemporary artists encourage us to question what it is that we seek when we consider landscape and its attendant 'truths,' and how these quests come to shape the understanding of a nation.

---

<sup>6</sup> Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape."

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 14.