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KELTY MCKINNON

SUPERNATURAL

THE BURDEN OF WILDERNESS

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SURNATUREL LE FARDEAU DE LA NATURE SAUVAGE

En Colombie-Britannique, où la nature occupe une place importante, la campagne publicitaire de la province, dont le mot clé est « SuperNatural », renforce la primauté de la nature sur la culture dans la définition de l'identité civique. Les architectes paysagistes ont dû composer avec le fardeau de la nature sauvage, où le « paysage » a été assimilé de force à la « Nature ».

L'obsession vancouvéroise de la nature est conforme à l'engouement des Canadiens pour leur environnement, si bien représenté par les peintures du Groupe des Sept. L'auteure souligne toutefois le travail de la peintre britanno-colombienne Emily Carr pour donner une autre image de la nature canadienne, celle la côte ouest. Bien que l'archétype du paysage canadien du Groupe des Sept ait été le grand espace vierge et sauvage, le paysage de Carr est celui d'une nature active et intime avec les gens.

L'œuvre de Carr augurait une pratique alternative des architectes paysagistes qui explorent le mythe de la nature virginale. L'essai montre comment son écriture et sa peinture incarnent des caractéristiques du paysage qui suggèrent des approches de conception alternatives.

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IN VANCOUVER, NATURE looms large. Snow capped mountains form a dramatic backdrop to the city skyline, a thousand acre temperate rainforest is located just blocks from the downtown core, and water surrounds the city on three sides in the form of bays, inlets and rivers. In the 1980s, the British Columbia Ministry of Small Business, Tourism and Culture developed the campaign 'SuperNatural BC,' promoting and defining the province by its spectacular and diverse Edenic scenery. The SuperNatural campaign reinforced the primacy of nature over culture, placing wilderness at the fore of provincial and civic identity. Landscape architects working in this context have had to contend with the burden of wilderness, where 'landscape' has been forcibly equated to 'Nature.'

Vancouver's obsession with its natural environment is in keeping with a general Canadian preoccupation with wilderness. "Above all, [Canada] is a country in which nature makes a direct impression on the... mind," Northrop Frye writes, "...a country divided by...great stretches of wilderness, so that its frontier is a circumference rather than a boundary; a country with huge rivers and islands that most of its natives have never seen... this is the environment that [Canadians] have to grapple with, and many of the imaginative problems it presents have no counterpart in the United States, or anywhere else."[1]

A PREOCCUPATION WITH WILDERNESS

In size, Canada is second only to Russia, yet its population, a mere 33 million (almost a tenth of the USA), largely huddles close to the American border. The myth of the great, unpeopled Canadian north was elaborated by the Group of Seven, whose collective manifesto was to capture in paint what they saw as a distinctly Canadian consciousness. Finding Old World approaches to painting ineffective in expressing the "authentic" Canadian landscape, the group sought to paint what they saw as the "essence" of the land through a grounded knowledge of particular, remote Northern landscapes.

AN ACTIVE AND INTIMATE WILDERNESS

While the Group of Seven's imagery reflected a predominant focus on Eastern and Northern Canada, the British Columbian painter Emily Carr, loosely affiliated with the Group, offered a divergent image of Canadian nature, one particular to the Pacific West Coast. Carr joined the Group's quest to express the nation's cultural identity by painting the coastal landscape, but her style and choice of subject matter redefined what landscape could be. While the archetypal Canadian landscape for the Group of Seven was one of pristine and rugged emptiness, Carr's was an active and intimate wilderness inhabited by

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1 VIEW OVER BURRARD INLET TO COAL HARBOUR. FOR COASTAL FIRST NATIONS, PUBLIC LIFE PLAYED OUT PRIMARILY ON WATER AND BEACH. TODAY, INTERACTION IS NO LESS COMPLEX AND ENGAGING: THE SEA AND SEAWALL ACT AS PUBLIC FORUM. **2** LANGARA COLLEGE LIBRARY | **1** VUE AUX DESSOUS DE L'INLET BURRARD: POUR LES AUTOCHTONES DES CÔTES, LA VIE PUBLIQUE SE PASSAIT ESSENTIELLEMENT SUR L'EAU ET SUR LA PLAGE. AUJOURD'HUI, L'INTERACTION N'EST PAS MOINS COMPLEX. **2** BIBLIOTHÈQUE DU COLLÈGE LANGARA

PHOTO 1 SITE PHOTOGRAPHY SCOTT MASSEY **2** SHAI GIL PHOTOGRAPHY

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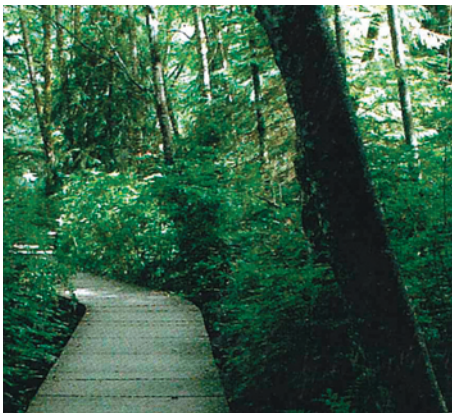

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Perhaps Carr's proclivities grew out of a reaction to the sheer bigness and density of things.| Les propensions d'Emily Carr étaient peut-être des réactions à la démesure et à la densité du réel.

people, where people and nature were closely intertwined.

Carr's writing at times seems old fashioned in its fascination with transcendentalism and the sublime, but in her painting there is a persistent determination to articulate something beyond, and perhaps counter to these concepts. Her assertion that nature projects its own subjectivity, and that it is intertwined with culture, anticipated an alternate practice for landscape architects working through the myth of virginal Nature as the "scenographic other." Carr's writing and painting embody three related landscape characteristics that distinguish her conception of nature from her contemporaries and suggest alternative approaches to design.

A CONFLATION OF NATURE AND CULTURE

First, Carr communicates a vision of nature that is not antithetical to culture. The Group of Seven, and indeed most North American landscape painters and photographers of the time including Ansel Adams, actively constructed images of virgin wilderness by cropping any signs of people or history from the frame. The aesthetic they sought was one of purity: an image of land before human occupation. Lawren Harris described this idealized space as, "... a vast expanse of immensely varied, virgin land reaching into the remote north," and goes on to laud the purifying effects of nature: "Our whole country is cleansed by the pristine and replenishing air which sweeps out of that great hinterland."[2]

But while the British Columbian coast is exceptionally wild, it was also densely occupied for over ten thousand years by a number of cultural groups including the Haida, Tsimshian, Nuxalk, Northern Wakashan, Kwakwakw'wakw, Nuu-chah-nulth and the Coast Salish. By the time Emily Carr began to record these landscapes, an estimated ninety percent of native populations had been decimated by smallpox and other diseases introduced by Europeans. While many communities have thrived since that time, others were abandoned and gradually overtaken by forest. Carr painted both the imagery of everyday village life—children playing in front of cedar longhouses, Native canoes pulled up onto beaches—and the abandoned villages with their totems, welcome figures and longhouses overtaken by foliage. In both the peopled and unpeopled villages, there is an integration, indeed, a conflation of nature and culture.[3] The forest is seen as historical, occupied and mutable, and the products of settlement seem to grow out of it.

Carr's depiction of nature also included mined and forested landscapes.[4] But rather than depicting resource extraction as destructive, her landscapes were rendered with a "mood ...not one of despair, but of renewal and regeneration."[5] Unlike the Group of Seven, Carr depicted landscapes as bound up with culture, and constantly changing.

INSIDER OR OUTSIDER?

Second, Emily Carr's work departs from a scenographic approach to landscape that addresses the land as a distanced, aestheticized object in favour of an embedded and embodied intimacy. In his essay "Eidetic Operations and New Landscapes," James Corner contrasts these attitudes in his description of landskip versus landschaft.[6] The old English term landskip "...at first referred not to land but a picture of it, as in the later selectively framed representations of seventeenth century Dutch Landschaf paintings. Soon after the appearance of this genre of painting, the scenic concept was applied to the land itself in the form of large scale rural vistas, designed estates, and ornamental garden art."

In contrast, the Old German term landschaft refers to "the environment of a working community, a setting comprising dwellings, pastures, meadows and fields and surrounded by unimproved forest or meadow." In other words, it was a relational amalgam of nature and culture requiring the situatedness of an insider versus the point of view of an outsider.

The distancing and detachment of traditional landscape painting was simply not possible in the rainforests of British Columbia. BC's coastal temperate rainforest is characterized in part by its numerous canopy layers, its wide range of tree sizes and ages, the abundance of epiphytes (plants living on the surface of other plants such as mosses, lichens and ferns), and its impenetrable understory of rapidly growing salal, salmonberry, alder and fern. Perhaps Carr's proclivities grew out of a reaction to the sheer bigness and density of things. Her forest interiors are cropped close, stretched to the edge of the picture frame, "with no sky above and no anchoring earth below...."[7] In a letter to Eric Brown she writes, "Woods and skies out west are big. You can't pin them down."[8] Rather than lapsing into the folly of attempting to see and portray things in their totality, Carr layered numerous gradations of green to depict either an impenetrable, living wall or light, air, and the space between branches. On positioning herself in these woods, she writes, "You go, find a space wide enough to sit in and clear enough so that the undergrowth is not drowning you....Everything is green. Everything is waiting and still. Slowly things begin to move, to slip into their place....Nothing is still now. Life is sweeping through the spaces....You must be still in order to hear and see."[9]

Carr strove to paint a multisensory landscape, one that went beyond the visual to include sound, smell, touch and the kinesthetic:

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senses that require proximity and interaction. She was interested in synesthesia, where a secondary sensation accompanies an actual perception. In pondering this sensory overlap she wrote, "If the air is jam full of sounds which we can tune in with, why should it not also be full of feels and smells...."[10] Of course as a painter, she did not discard the visual, but attempted to communicate the sensual density of particular, intimate and relational environments.

OBJECTS DISSOLVE...IN PURE MOVEMENT

Third, in Carr's later paintings, objects dissolve. Form gives way to process and movement. As she became more and more interested in capturing the dynamic landscape around her, the "well defined, contained and very tangible sculpted forms" of her painted trees, poles, rocks, leaves and skies "lost their defining edges, their particular substance...as they sway(ed) and merge(d) in a mutual life of movement."[11] Likewise, her earlier work positioned objects in the fore, middle and background as a device to express space and to frame a central object as the focus of the painting. As Carr concentrated more and more on expressing movement, these objects were discarded or merged together into one sweeping gesture of energy. "Direction, that's what I'm after, everything moving together, relative movement, sympathetic movement, connected movement, flowing, liquid, universal movement, all directions summing up in one grand direction, leading the eye forward, and satisfying. So to control direction of movement that the whole structure sways, vibrates and rocks...."[12] Tree, earth and the spaces between were whorled dynamically together in the depiction of pure movement.

This particular characteristic grew out of an intimate familiarity with the rapid, dense growth of BC's coastal forests and the dynamic relationship between air, sea, rain and vegetation. Carr's

THIS ESSAY IS EXCERPTED FROM GROUNDED: THE WORK OF PHILLIPS FAREVAAG SMALLENBERG, *EDITED BY KELTY MCKINNON. FOR A REVIEW, SEE PAGE 50*

1-3 CATES PARK/WHEY-AH-WICHEN PARK . THE MASTER PLAN EMPHASIZES THE QUALITY OF BEING EMBEDDED WITHIN THE FOREST WHILE CHEOREOGRAPHING SCENIC VIEWS ACROSS THE WATER **4** ALONG THE SEAWALL TO COAL HARBOUR COMMUNITY CENTRE **5** COAL HARBOUR PROMENADE **6** EMILY CARR, CEDAR, 1942, OIL ON CANVAS **7** LANGARA COLLEGE LIBRARY: WATER IS DISRUPTED INTO DISCRETE REFLECTIONS: AN ABSTRACTED SCATTERING OF NATURE AND CULTURE. THE SENSORY EXPERIENCE ECHOES EMILY CARR'S DEPICTIONS OF NATURE AS PURE MOVEMENT, "COILS, SPURTS AND CASCADES OF GROWTH." **1-3** CATES PARK/WHEY-AH-WICHEN PARK : LE PLAN DIRECTEUR ACCENTUE LA QUALITÉ DU CADRE FORESTIER TOUT EN CHORÉGRAPHIANT LES VUES MAGNIFIQUES DE L'AUTRE CÔTÉ DES EAUX. **4** LE LONG DE LA DIGUE MENANT AU CENTRE COMMUNAUTAIRE DE COAL HARBOUR **5** LA PROMENADE DE COAL HARBOUR **6** EMILY CARR, CÈDRE, 1942, HUILE SUR TOILE **7** LA BIBLIOTHÈQUE DU COLLÈGE LANGARA : L'EAU ÉPARPILLE SES REFLETS DE LA NATURE ET DE LA CULTURE. L'EXPÉRIENCE SENSORIELLE ÉVOQUE LES DESCRIPTIONS DE LA NATURE D'EMILY CARR EN TANT QUE PUR MOUVEMENT, « LES ONDULATIONS, LES GICLÉES ET LES CASCADES DE LA CROISSANCE ».

PHOTOS 1,2,3,4 PHILLIPS FAREVAAG SMALLENBERG **5+7** SITE PHOTOGRAPHY SCOTT MASSEY
6 VANCOUVER ART GALLERY, EMILY CARR TRUST

SITE PHOTOGRAPHY, SCOTT MASSEY

paintings depict ocean, beach, forest, sky and ground as a "living arena of processes and exchanges over time,"[13] and are pulled together into a portrayal of dynamic flux. In such an environment, "form is provisional and temporary, constantly on its way to becoming something else,"[14] impossible to pin down. In discussing contemporary landscape architecture, James Corner writes, "the discipline of ecology suggests that individual agents acting across a broad field of operation produce incremental and cumulative effects that continually evolve the shape of an environment over time."[15] Carr understood this notion of ecology at a time when nature was seen as constant and immutable. Beyond surficial effects, she attempted to communicate nonlinear processes and flows, the emergent forces of nature. Carr describes the "unquenchable vitality of trees": "There is nothing so strong as growing. Nothing can drown that force that splits rocks and pavements and spreads over the fields. To meet and check it one must fight and sweat, but it is never conquered. Man may pattern it and change its variety and shape, but leave it for even a short time and off it goes back to its own, swamping and swallowing man's puny intentions. No killing nor stamping down can destroy it. Life is in the soil."[16]

Subjectivity shifts from a removed, external, sole author to a relational field of interacting subjects that is the landscape itself. Carr's paintings depict landscape as emerging from this "vibrating, coiling, cascading" movement.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] Northrop Frye, The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1971): 164.

[2] Carl Berger. "The True North Strong and Free" in Canadian Culture: An Introductory Reader, Elspeth Cameron (ed.) (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 1997): 96.

[3] While Emily Carr has been criticized for continuing a colonialist tradition of cultural appropriation and the and Aboriginality in the Paintings of Emily Carr" (Journal of Canadian Studies, Summer 1998), have countered these arguments, "Given her persistent acknowledgement of the continuing Native presence and her prediction that the moral force of aboriginal traditions would be revalued, it is my argument that Carr's late paintings with Native motifs can be seen as an extension of her earlier modernist vision of mutual respect and communication".

[4] See Carr's paintings Stumps and Sky (1934), Forest Clearing (1939) and Trees in the Sky (1939).

[5] Tippett, Maria. Emily Carr: A Biography (Toronto: Stoddart, 1994), p. 167

[6] James Corner, ed. Recovering Landscape: Essays in Contemporary Landscape Architecture, (Sparks, NV: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999): 153.

[7] Doris Shadbolt . Emily Carr (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990): 211.

[8] Carr to Eric Brown, 4 March 1937, National Gallery.

[9] Emily Carr. Hundreds and Thousands: The Journals of Emily Carr (Toronto: Clarke and Irwin, 1966): 136.

[10] Ibid. 13, p. 293.

[11] Shadbolt, Op. Cit. p. 185.

[12] Carr, Op. Cit. p. 13.

[13] James Corner. "Terra Fluxus" in The Landscape Urbanism Reader Charles Waldheim, ed. (NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006): 30.

[14] Shadbolt, Op. Cit. p. 30.

[15] Corner, Op.Cit. p.29.

[16] Carr, Op. Cit. p. 301.