

*Lawren Harris, *Untitled* (mountains near Jasper) is a key work in the Mendel Art Gallery permanent collection. Donated to the gallery in 1965 by the gallery's namesake, Fred Mendel, along with a dozen other paintings by the Group of Seven and their contemporaries, the gift formed the nucleus of the permanent collection. The paintings hung in this very exhibition space for more than 20 years.

The exhibition title is derived from a term used by anthropologist James George Frazer in his seminal treatise on magic and religion. First published in 1890, *The Golden Bough* had a profound influence on then-emerging fields of anthropology and sociology, and enduring influences on psychology and literature. Under the umbrella of *Sympathetic Magic*, Frazer identified two foundational principles: the Law of Similarity and the Law of Contact or Contagion. The latter stipulates: "Things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed." He makes another compelling statement: "Things can physically affect each other through a space which appears to be empty."

Sympathetic Magic is an exhibition about the Canadian landscape that does not strictly operate in the recognizable idioms of the genre. Visitors to the gallery will not see the familiar snow-capped peaks of Lawren Harris' iconic work*, but it is most certainly present. There are no pristine vistas painted *en plein air*, nor will anyone see a twisted pine, a rocky outcropping, or a lake. Yet they never seem far away. The exhibition seeks to maneuver through the complex terrain of "the north" through the work of four contemporary Canadian artists – Raymond Boisjoly, Adad Hannah, Ken Lum, and Kevin Schmidt – to expand on concepts of territory, nationhood, and identity.

In recent years, changes to Canadian domestic and foreign policy have reconfigured the political landscape. Aggressive resource development has radically altered the physical environment. Yet Canadian landscape tropes of northern wilderness are incredibly difficult to displace. Why is it so? Canada has cultivated and maintained a strong symbolic connection with the northern landscape. The production of the Group of Seven and their progeny has both defined artistic practice at home and Canada abroad. As art historian John O'Brian observes in *Wild Art History*, "The land and its representations are knotted together, not unlike two other words with an affinity to landscape in contemporary thought – nation and nationalism." The country as promoted by the authors of the Canadian landscape tradition is a pristine, untamed, and unpeopled place. Popular depictions of the landscape are telling: Canada is rich in natural beauty, abundant in resources, and ripe for development.

[Sympathetic Magic](#)
[June 27 to September 14, 2014](#)
[Reader's Notes by Troy Gronsdahl](#)

- Troy Gronsdahl

If this text has felt like a riddle at times, it is not without good reason. The didactic impulse that has informed the writing of exhibition texts has tended to support neat uninterrupted narratives. In the context of an exhibition, works of art generate and sustain a multitude of interpretations, perhaps even those that cannot be anticipated. By recognizing and working with ambiguity, *Sympathetic Magic* seeks to create a productive space for thinking through and around the works of four contemporary Canadian artists to refresh the discussion about landscape and Canadian identity.

The artists are creating work in a self-reflexive way. By engaging with the central concepts and assumptions embedded in photography and text, the artists point to the systems and structures that shape our spaces and subjectivity.

The artworks selected for the exhibition use photography and text. Both are registers of knowing that in some ways obscure the privileges of their making. Photography's mechanical representation of the physical world conceals the artist's role in composing a photograph. The camera makes the process of making almost invisible. Text and language operate in a similar way. When we use the words of our native tongues we hardly pause to think about grammar, syntax, or etymology. We often take it for granted until we stumble over a complex or awkward phrase. We encounter texts in public space, through advertising for example, yet seldom consider whose voice utters these words. The issue of language continues to be a national issue: whose language is official, and what might that mean for such a diverse society?

Space is a social product. The spaces in our homes, communities, and environments started out as a thought or idea and were realized through social activity. Spaces which appear natural are, in fact, highly mediated. Even spaces that appear to be invisible are not necessarily transparent. How do we see *through* an empty space?

Canada is a nation of wide open spaces and images of the land hold a particular allure in the public imagination. So much so, it is difficult to really see beyond the vista. Perhaps, in order to explore the relationships between landscape, nationhood, and identity it would be more productive to look around the landscape rather than directly at it. Visitors to the exhibition will see bits of greenery and winter scenes, but the show does not focus exclusively on depictions of the land. *Sympathetic Magic* also includes subjects who are framed by the spaces they inhabit and the traces left from encounters between people and their environments.

Raymond Boisjoly (born in Langley, British Columbia, 1981) is an artist of Haida and Québécois descent, living and working in Vancouver. Boisjoly's practice operates as active speculation; engaging issues of aboriginality, language as cultural practice, and the experiential aspects of materiality. Boisjoly has presented work in solo and group exhibitions at institutions including the Senter for Nordlige Folk, Manndalen; Simon Fraser University, Vancouver; Esker Foundation, Calgary; Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver; The Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver; The Power Plant, Toronto; and Western Bridge, Seattle. Boisjoly is participating in SITE Santa Fe, and La Biennale de Montréal. He is represented by Catriona Jeffries Gallery in Vancouver.

Adad Hannah (born in New York, USA, 1971) is well known for his cleverly staged videos that often revisit or re-enact artworks or historical photographs. Hannah has exhibited nationally and internationally, including at the Prague and Liverpool biennials. He has been long-listed for the Sobey Art Award three times, and his work is in many public and private collections including the National Gallery of Canada and the Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal. Hannah lives and works between Montreal and Vancouver and he is represented by Pierre-François Ouellette art contemporain, Montreal and Equinox Gallery, Vancouver.

Ken Lum (born in Vancouver, British Columbia, 1956) is a distinguished artist, writer, educator, and curator. Lum's teaching career includes an extended term at University of British Columbia, Vancouver, with additional teaching positions at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris, the Akademie der Bildenden Kunst, Munich, California College of the Arts, San Francisco, and the China Art Academy, Hangzhou. Lum is currently the director of the Undergraduate Fine Arts program at the University of Pennsylvania School of Design. He is co-founder and founding editor of Yishu Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art, and was co-curator of the 7th Sharjah Biennial (2005), and Shanghai Modern: 1919-1945 (2005). Lum has exhibited widely, including the São Paulo Biennial, the Shanghai Biennale, Documenta 11, the Istanbul Biennial, and the Gwangju Biennale. He is currently represented by Marc Jancou Gallery, New York; Galerie Nelson-Freeman, Paris; Galerie Christian Nagel, Berlin; Misa Shin Gallery, Tokyo; and L.A. Galerie, Frankfurt. Lum lives and works in Philadelphia.

Kevin Schmidt (born in Ottawa, Ontario, 1972) works primarily in photography and video. He has a strong interest in landscape, music, spectacle, and popular culture and has presented his work in solo and group exhibitions across Canada, the United States and Europe, including exhibitions at Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, Montréal; The Power Plant, Toronto; Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton; and the Vancouver Art Gallery. Schmidt is represented by Catriona Jeffries Gallery in Vancouver. He works between Vancouver and Berlin.

Raymond Boisjoly
a relative position and direction, 2014
Acrylic vinyl

*Where we were is no longer where we are
and where we will be is not yet.*

In his enigmatic text installations, Raymond Boisjoly uses ambiguity to open multiple readings. His work often meditates on notions of Aboriginality and tests the certainty of knowledge. For the exhibition, Boisjoly has applied the principle of perspective to a short text to create a work of complexity that belies its formal simplicity.

Boisjoly begins his statement by assigning the problem to a place: is he speaking of a physical territory or is he using the word in a figurative way? Could it be both? His second word further complicates the statement: is his use of “we,” the first person plural pronoun, an oblique reference to the first peoples of Canada? Is he referring to a discrete group of people or does the group include the viewer? Is it us and them? Is it something like the “royal we?” The interpretation of this little two-letter word changes the reading entirely.

The statement points to a tension between the anticipation of that which may yet be realized, with the realization that what we have known is no longer there. We find ourselves in the middle of a process with an uncertain resolution. How will this play out?

The text is distorted and its legibility changes in relation to the viewer’s physical position. The artist uses this skewed perspective as a formal device to introduce the concept of positionality, a term that describes how the landscape we inhabit informs the way we interpret and understand the world. As social and political contexts shift, our perspectives change as well. In this sense, we are always becoming.

Adad Hannah
The Russians, 2011
HD Video

Boy Sitting on a Tire, 4 min 17 s
Russian Woman at Home, 8 min 57 s
Cyclist Stopped on a Path, 5 min 09 s

Soldiers Resting, 5 min 41 s
Two Russian Couples, 5 min 57 s
Six Russians Eating Ice Cream, 4 min 27 s

Adad Hannah’s *The Russians* series was inspired by early 20th-century Russian photographer Sergei Prokudin-Gorskii, who documented Russian life, cultures and customs during a period of rapid modernization. In 2010, Hannah visited the Russian countryside near Saint Petersburg, engaging with local people to produce a large body of photographs and video portraits.

The artist enlisted a variety of individuals, recording them in domestic settings, at work, in moments of relaxation or recreation. The poses do not appear overly contrived, nor does the scene seem staged or dressed for the camera. The video portraits sit within a documentary tradition, recording details of Russian life with a veneer of objectivity. As the subjects attempt to hold their poses, however, subtle movements draw attention to the mutually performative acts of posing and taking a photograph. The physical movements of Hannah’s subjects are revealing – they shift uncomfortably, their eyes dart nervously. The encounter between photographer and subject is palpable, and creates tension in the work.

Hannah’s project rubs against the problems of representation in the documentary tradition by making evident the hierarchical power dynamic between the subject, the author, and the viewer. His beautifully composed photographic images pique the viewer’s curiosity in the other while revealing the subjectivity of the photographer.

Kevin Schmidt
A Sign in the Northwest Passage, 2010
LightJet print, cedar frame

Wild Signals, 2007
HD video, 9 min 42 s

Kevin Schmidt’s photograph, *A Sign in the Northwest Passage*, documents the artist’s project that took place near Tuktoyaktuk, Northwest Territories. Working with local guides and workers, Schmidt installed a large handmade sign displaying apocalyptic text from the Book of Revelations. The artist posted the warning on the Arctic ice of the Northwest Passage. In anticipation of the seasonal melt, the sign was designed to float away, broadcasting its apocalyptic message to unknown places.

The sign lists a variety of horrors that will mark the end of the world and has the visual treatment of a homespun doomsday proclamation – perhaps the kind scrawled on a signboard or the side of a van. Such prophecies usually recede into the noisy clutter of the urban environment and may be received with disinterest or derision. It is not apparent if anyone will encounter Schmidt’s ominous warning and there is something mildly absurd in this artistic proposition. There is humour in this work, but it is not flippant or frivolous. Situating the sign in the physical and political crux of the debate on Arctic development and climate change is a politically charged act.

In his video installation, *Wild Signals*, the artist stages a choreographed light show in a winter landscape. Against a backdrop of mountains and snow, a fog and light display accompanies a sparse five-note composition. The soundtrack was inspired by the Steven Spielberg film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* – scientists in the film use a variation of five tones to communicate with a visiting spaceship. Who is the artist reaching out to? The lights have an otherworldly visual effect, evoking sci-fi imagery or the striking natural phenomenon of the northern lights. It is also, most certainly, a rock show. The lighting rig and speakers are plunked in the centre of an otherwise perfect landscape composition, as if to compete with the aesthetic allure of a pristine winter scene. The wry spectacle of music, smoke and lights suggests how encounters with nature are highly mediated. How is one’s experience of a place shaped by representations of it?

Ken Lum
Cheeseburger, 2011
Chromogenic print on archival paper
Collection of the Mendel Art Gallery.
Purchased with the support of the Canada Council
for the Arts Acquisition Assistance program 2012.

Ken Lum’s experience as a Chinese Canadian living in East Vancouver has informed much of his art practice. In his signature works, the artist pairs portraits with text to explore issues of identity within the context of immigration and globalization.

Lum photographs his subjects within ordinary but staged situations and juxtaposes the image with text. In his 2011 work, *Cheeseburger*, Lum photographed a male subject in a commercial kitchen. This is a familiar scene: a worker pauses for a cigarette and a brief moment of rest from the demands of restaurant work. The photograph is juxtaposed with a list of menu items from a typical Chinese Canadian restaurant – the sort that has populated small towns in the province and in most urban centres across the country. The text might read like folksy shorthand for a kind of banal Canadian multicultural experience. This juxtaposition of text and photographic image situates issues of cultural identity, labour and class distinctions within a familiar context.

It is not apparent if the photograph is a candid portrait in the tradition of street photography or if it has been orchestrated for the camera. This ambiguity invites a moment of pause to consider the subject, and the idea of the subject. The term has many connotations: a subject is both a topic for discussion or art making but it also refers to an individual under the control of the state or crown. Canadians are subjected to laws that prohibit certain types of behavior, policies, institutions and spaces that promote others. How is our identity shaped by the social and political structures that frame our public selves?