

Sympathetic Magic

Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon

June 27 – September 14, 2014
by Tarin Hughes

Taken from James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study of Magic and Religion*, first published in 1890, "Sympathetic Magic" was Frazer's heading for two branches of magic – homoeopathic/imitative magic and contagious magic – which serve as a jumping-off point for the exhibition. Curator Troy Gronsdahl employs the principles behind Frazer's definitions, quoting the Law of Similarity, where "like produces like" and the Law of Contagion, where "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."¹ This distance or space is applied to Gronsdahl's consideration of mediated, sometimes invisible, spaces affecting our cultural, political and social identities. He notes that the trope of the Canadian rugged landscape is a pervasive ideal affecting the consciousness of our geographical space and our national identity. According to Gronsdahl, traditional visual representations of the land and the concept of the wild North are of particular significance because these signifiers "continue to act" on our idea of Canadianness, and thus are difficult to reframe and disrupt.

Gronsdahl's curatorial thesis is pursued through the work of four contemporary Canadian artists: Raymond Boisjoly, Adad Hannah, Ken Lum and Kevin Schmidt. The presentation of their work together highlights documentation, language and the invisibility of the artist/maker. Through a collection of photography, text and video, an overt subversion of the Canadian landscape traditions of medium and subject matter is cleverly juxtaposed against the representational paintings of *A Vital Force: The Canadian Group of Painters* also on view at the Mendel.

landscape. Installed by the artist, the billboard references commercial signage while the labourious hand-carved text taken from the book of Revelations is reminiscent of roadside religious extremist signage complete with an apocalyptic message. *A Sign* rotates between performance and document, leaving us with the possibility that the billboard may still be afloat and that the doomsday text continues in relevance, depending on your worldview. The choreographed arctic concert *Wild Signals*, showcased in its own darkened space as a large-scale projection, was inspired by the soundtrack for *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977). The video depicts concert lights, fog machines and speakers set within an expansive snowfield, bolstering the theme of the mechanical versus the natural and undermining the notion of the wild northern landscape. A subtle but successful relationship is drawn between *Wild Signals* and *The Russians*. Standing in view of each work, viewers can pair both the solitude and chaos found within the staged settings and perhaps find beauty in the duality between the ephemeral performance and documented permanence.

Adding to the tension between staged and candid, Ken Lum's *Cheeseburger* (2011) supports the notion of unseen spaces continuing to act on each other.² *Cheeseburger* is one of Lum's portrait/text works, this one depicting a male restaurant worker smoking in a cluttered commercial kitchen. The adjoining text reads like a menu from a Chinese-Canadian restaurant, "Cheeseburger. Chicken chow mein." The work vacillates between Hannah's video portraits, Boisjoly's graphic text and Schmidt's advertorial/hand-made billboard, at once referencing labour, cultural identity, portraiture, documentation and commercialism.

Brought under the umbrella of Canadian identity, landscape and the North, the works of the four artists presented are successfully paired, but at times it is challenging to connect them all at once. However, as he writes in his curatorial statement, Gronsdahl seeks to work within invisible space and ambiguity, branching off into varied but interconnected threads. These four artists also share distinct commonalities: all are tied to Vancouver and all of them are male. The lack of a female presence is especially glaring with the exhibition space leading into *Convolved Beauty: In the Company of Emily Carr*, which explores Carr's time in the UK and the development of her Canadian and artistic voice. Furthermore, there exists a potential for inclusion of an artist based in the North.

Aside from those critiques, *Sympathetic Magic* facilitates a physical space for negotiation and contemplation of Gronsdahl's proposal. The tension between purpose and uncertainty is clearly felt through performance, text and wild-yet-staged landscape scenes. There is also a subtle tension between fragility and power found within the contemplation of each work, the clarity of which is summed up through Frazer's writing, which assumes "that things act on each other at a distance through a secret sympathy."³

Sympathetic Magic is anchored by Boisjoly's *a relative position and direction* (2014). The large-scale text is distorted, seemingly changing in perspective and receding into the wall from various vantage points. *a relative position and direction* also acts as a kind of vista, proposing a landscape within the gallery both through its physical installation and reference to place. Boisjoly's text ambiguously reads, "Where we were is no longer where we are, and where we will be is not yet." This speculative statement is at once simplistic and sophisticated – accessible from multiple perspectives. The installation underscores Boisjoly's interest in identity, specifically representations of Aboriginality and the conditional nature of knowledge.

Echoing Boisjoly's consideration of identity and existence, while also connecting to depictions of physical place and invisible cultural space, a collection of Adad Hannah's video portraits from the series *The Russians* (2011) is looped on two monitors. Hannah's study of contemporary Russian life through a diverse selection of individuals and scenery operates between staged performance, formal portraiture, documentary and candid photography. The occasional piercing gaze of the subject – for example, in *Six Russians Eating Ice Cream* – facilitates an interaction with the viewer, combined with that of the artist. This multilayered relationship reinforces an ongoing thread of ambiguous spaces and interactions within *Sympathetic Magic* enabling viewers to position themselves, and potentially their place within the world, by way of the works in the exhibition.

Flanking *The Russians*, Schmidt's works *A Sign in the Northwest Passage* (2010) and *Wild Signals* (2007) are an obvious connection to the North. While the works continue to evoke powerful imagery, their selection could be seen as redundant after Schmidt's inclusion in *Untrue North* (2012) at the Yukon Arts Centre and *Up North* (2011–2012) at the Art Gallery of Alberta. The subject of the North has been a trend within group exhibitions in recent years and continues to hold topical significance as political tensions, resource development and romantic notions of the untamed endure. The photograph *A Sign* depicts a large wooden billboard standing in a barren arctic

1 Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: a Study of Magic and Religion*, Project Gutenberg, <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext03/bough11.htm> (accessed August 30, 2014).

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.