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Canada the Beautiful

Seven Contemporary Artists Reflect on Nature and Landscapes

by Anna Gawel



When you think of Canada, you can't help but conjure up images of its vast, untamed stretches of wilderness and pristine beauty. Nature is an intrinsic element not only to Canada's national identity, but to its artistic identity as well.

This heritage is best exemplified by the "Group of Seven," a collective of artists who gained recognition in the 1920s for creating a more "Canadian" aesthetic of the country's stunning landscapes. These artists—the group later encompassed more than the founding seven members—expanded on the romanticized ideal of their homeland with canvases that infused vivid colors with symbolic meaning.

Today, a handful of Canadian artists are adding their own contemporary perspective to this landscape tradition, reflecting on the Group of Seven's original work while also re-examining the influence that nature has had on the country's art scene. A small but thoughtful representation of their artwork can now be seen at the Canadian Embassy in "A Group of Seven: A Contemporary Look at the Canadian Landscape."

This new gang of seven—Lois Andison, Lucie Duval, Renée Duval, Sylvie Fraser, Katharine Harvey, Francis LeBouthillier and Monique Mo ngeau—give us a 21st-century reinterpretation of Canada's landscapes using a variety of media from photography and painting to sculpture and video, for the most part with successful, if not intriguing, results.

Visitors are greeted by a cacophony of odd chirping sounds that echo throughout the embassy art gallery, which sets the stage for the surreal nature-bonding experience that lies ahead. One of the first pieces you'll encounter is Lucie Duval's "Serie Mettre en Pot (Erabliere)," a collection of small glass jars filled with photographs depicting a dense, colorful forest. We see the autumn leaves as they blanket the ground along with a mysteriously empty cabin, or rather shack, nestled amid the foliage. The photography and scenery are compelling, although I couldn't help but think that the charming jars would make a perfect addition to a Pottery Barn catalogue.

Duval continues with her jar theme in "Serie Mettre en Pot (Manic V)," this time putting a twist on the technique by having the photos inside the jars create one large image that can only be discerned from afar, much like an impressionist painting. The result is a grid-like creation that acts as a visual centerpiece of the exhibit, with the photographic snippets of blue and white forming what looks like a highway bridge set against snow-covered mountains.

Similarly, Katharine Harvey's two contributions are some of the most visually striking in the display. Her two acrylic paintings take viewers just below the surface of the water, giving us a mesmerizing snapshot of tiny bubbles and rays of sunlight filtering through the liquid haze. The first piece, "Below I," casts this underwater environment in a serene bluish tint, while the second piece, "Underwater Galaxy," instead uses a reddish hue, creating a composition that indeed resembles an outer-space galaxy of sorts.

Although obviously different in subject matter and media, all of the works share a certain thread of emotion running through them. Like Duval and Harvey, the other five artists seem to portray a landscape that is at once beautiful and

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peaceful yet desolate and somber, with a pervasive sense of loneliness throughout—perhaps an inevitable consequence given the impersonal feel of landscape art.

Take for instance Lois Andison's "7 Hues," a series of photographs encased in Plexiglass and wood with fluorescent tubing running along the bottom. Although the tubes shine with bright colors and the corresponding images of gushing water, wheat fields and expansive skies are a majestic sight, there is still an air of isolation conveyed by the otherwise playful work.

Andison switches media in "Timelapse," a DVD video projected on a wall that shows a neighborhood as it morphs from night to day, summer to winter, etc. Although an urban landscape has been introduced here, the overall sentiment remains the same: deserted and somewhat depressing.

The second room of the gallery is as eclectic and unpredictable as the first. Monique Mongeau uses oil and wax on wild cherry wood panels to poetically illustrate the graceful, flowing lines of different flora and fauna. In a sharp contrast, Renée Duval presents us with two oil renderings of tree branches—the first a rather bland and standard landscape scene; the second a much darker, more dramatic and geometrically interesting painting that features an almost menacing foreground of tree trunks complemented by an equally brooding thicket of trees in the background.

What is sure to draw the most attention, however, is "Onion Skins" by Francis LeBouthiller, a strangely voyeuristic piece that literally lets us peek in on a cast of characters as they, well, peel onions while seemingly suspended against a backdrop of Canada's iconic natural wonders. The juxtaposition is an odd one to say the least, although there is something soothing about the methodical peeling and nonsensical quirkiness of it all. You'll also finally figure out where those ambient chirping sounds are coming from.

"A Group of Seven: A Contemporary Look at the Canadian Landscape" runs through Sept. 16 at the Canadian Embassy, 501 Pennsylvania Ave., NW. For more information, please call (202) 682-1740 or visit www.canadianembassy.org.

Anna Gawel is the managing editor of The Washington Diplomat.

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