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# BlackFlash

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## Nature in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

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**"natural Forms" curated by John G. Hampton, and featuring work by: Jeremy Drummond, Jocelyn Philibert, Barbara Meneley, Crystal Mowry and Robert Hengeveld,**

**at Neutral Ground Artist-run centre this September 10<sup>th</sup> - October 30, 2010.**

**By Margaret Bessai**

*We cannot remember too often that when we observe nature, and especially the ordering of nature, it is always ourselves alone we are observing.*

— Georg Christoph Lichtenberg[1]

I pondered my own yard, while mesmerized by Robert Hengeveld's sculpture, *Kentucky Perfect*. Hengeveld's robotic lawn cares for a strip of grass by providing artificial light, periodic watering, and meticulous trimming as efficiently as a photocopier processes a 250 page document. My lawn also needs watering, weeding, and mowing to maintain a lush growth. It too bears no resemblance to the prairie grasses that once flourished in this region. Both lawns are emblematic of our Canadian relationship with the land and nature. But while they are both organic, are they natural?

The robot lawn was part of the exhibition "natural Forms" curated by John G. Hampton this fall for Neutral Ground Artist-run Centre in Regina. The exhibition featured work by five contemporary Canadian artists: Jeremy Drummond, Jocelyn Philibert, Barbara Meneley, Crystal Mowry, and Robert Hengeveld. I found Hampton's choice of photographs, kinetic sculpture, robotic assemblage, miniature installation, and video embodied the technologically mediated relationship our culture has with the natural world.



natural Forms installation view. *Kentucky Perfect* by Robert Hengeveld in foreground

The subject of landscape has been linked with representations of Canada since the very formation of our country. Early government and businesses used posters of undeveloped lands as a tactic to encourage immigration. Artists such as the Group of Seven sought to assert a Canadian cultural identity against a euro-centric art history. They created landscapes of trees, rocks, and water to stand as Canadian. In subsequent years, this romantic view of Canada has been propagated through popular media, postcards, and coffee table books. The vast and empty wilderness has become a persistent cultural identity. In addition, North American culture has accelerated technological development in the last 100 years, awarding a large percentage of our population with a lifestyle that is physically more advanced than our general philosophical and moral comprehension. It is the everyday relationship with the natural, not the Romantic wilderness, that Hampton seeks to explore in “natural Forms.”

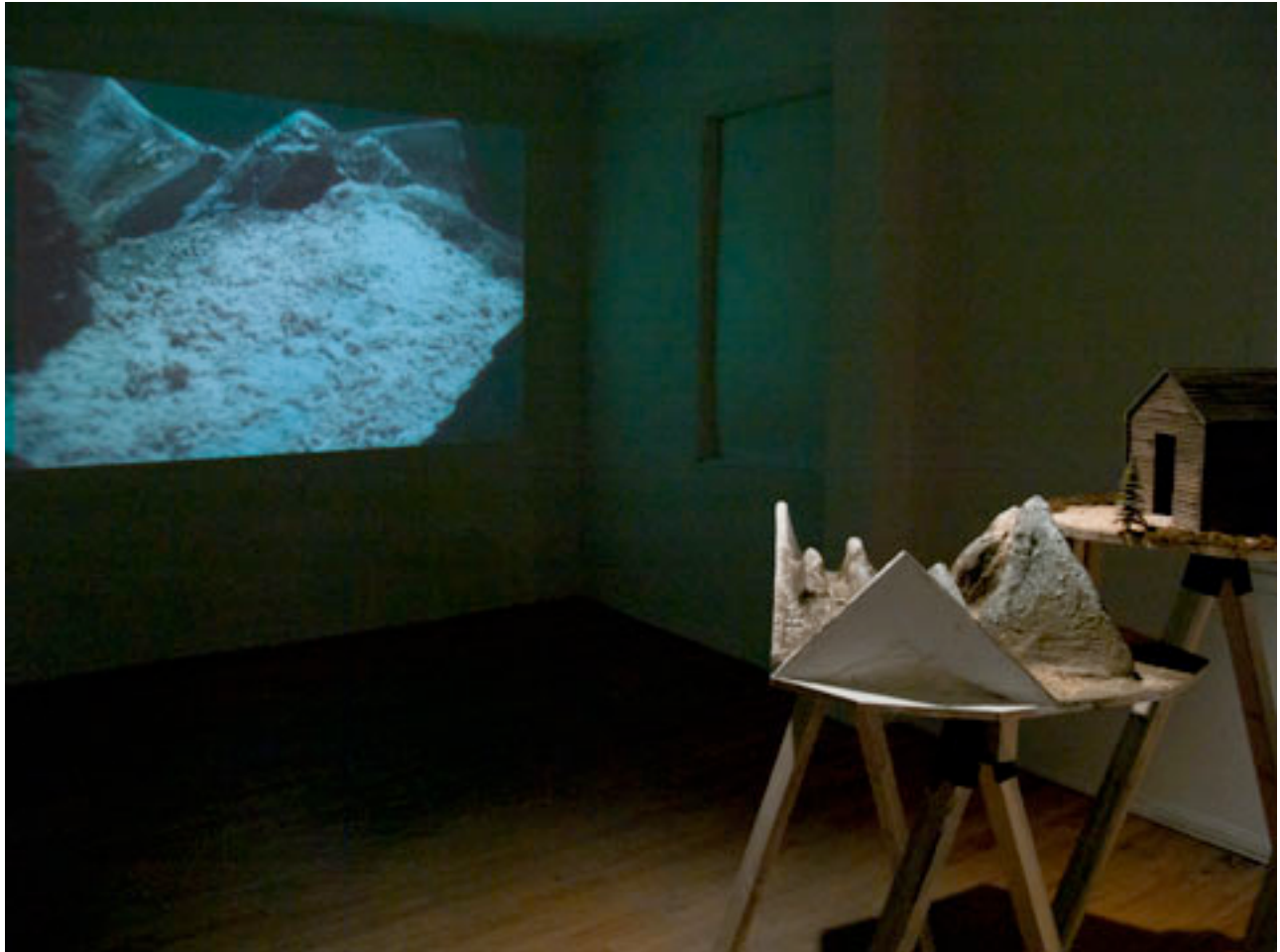
Indoors, Hengeveld’s *Kentucky Perfect* grass is seductive, conjuring the smell of gardens and soft places for bare feet to walk. It sends a contradictory message, as the strict nature of the care that sustains this lawn makes it impossible to walk on. The sculpture is fragile, suspended on sawhorses. The robotic watering arm and the vigilant mower-blade would cut anything in their path. Hengeveld discussed this contradiction during the opening panel discussion with Meneley, Mowry, and Hampton. After moving his young family he observed the ritual lawn-care routines of his neighbours, the peer pressure to maintain a “perfect” lawn, and

the many un-used front yards. When so much work is put into a cultivation that returns no obvious material gain, one must wonder, why?

Today's front lawn is an echo from the Baroque age, when the art of gardening expressed a philosophical subtext. Obvious human control of the environment was the natural hierarchy of the world in western culture, as articulated by the Great Chain of Being and the Divine Right of Kings: God over King, King over Man, Man over Nature.[2] It also functioned as a display of wealth. Christopher Thacker's *History of Gardens*, notes that such "conspicuous use of land to adorn one's residence, without any return of crops or fattening of cattle was a sign of power, and a proof of wealth—English landlords, and even the English monarch, could not afford this ostentation." [3] The Sun King, Louis the XIV<sup>th</sup> of France first established political power through conspicuous garden display, notably at the estate Versailles. Created out of swampland by the landscape architect and gardener André Le Notre, Versailles has geometric hedges, intricate fountains, and vistas of lawn and tree plantings carefully planned to give the illusion that the King's power over the land (and people) stretches as far as the eye can see. The 21<sup>st</sup> century suburbanite maintaining a private home and garden is flaunting kingly wealth.

What began as private wealth, the urban park, has become public policy. Today planners recognize that without access to fresh air, sunlight, and green spaces, city populations live miserably. Studies have even shown that patients in hospitals with a view of trees recover more quickly than those facing a brick wall.[4] We need the natural, without it we fail to thrive.

Thriving on exposure to the natural does not mean dying of exposure.[5] Our ability to adapt with manufactured tools and cultural organization facilitates our survival in a competitive environment. Though this sophistication makes it difficult to see ourselves as part of the natural world, we can observe several other species to find that devising tools, sharing knowledge, and trading resources is a natural part of how animals adapt. Yet, as our adaptations are pushing our population numbers beyond the sustainable use of natural resources, we must ask, is it our right to do something just because we are able to carry it out? Eat every fish? Dump garbage in every ocean? Species that expand unchecked eventually collapse. We have self-awareness, and can govern our behavior. While we debate the right way to live, many individuals long for a simpler life.



Crystal Mowry, *Precipice*

*Precipice*, Crystal Mowry's installation, invites us to consider the meme of returning to the simpler life through the historical figure of Henry David Thoreau, author of *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*. Thoreau is a writer known more through mythic reputation than he is actually read.<sup>[6]</sup> *Walden*, written in 1854, documents Thoreau's experiment in solitude: Two years, two weeks, and two days in a "tightly shingled and plastered house" of his own construction, built in the New England forest.<sup>[7]</sup> Mowry's miniature reproduction of Thoreau's cabin is built to scale from his literary description of the English-style ten foot by fifteen-foot cottage. The model house stands on a tiny hillside, overlooking a valley pond in winter. A camera placed inside the model records the view of the replica valley from the front door. A live video-feed projects this grainy black and white image onto the wall behind the sculpture. It is more evocative and romantic than looking at the actual model, much as viewing the natural world from a distance is more romantic than dealing with the reality of hardships in nature.



Crystal Mowry, Precipice (detail)

In his curatorial statement, Hampton links Mowry's sculpture, and the popular understanding that Thoreau was a self-sufficient hermit,<sup>[8]</sup> with a one-room cabin near Lincoln, Montana, home to the Unabomber. Harvard-educated mathematician turned recluse Ted Kaczynski lived there in self-imposed exile for more than 25 years, before his arrest and conviction for 17 years of domestic terrorist activity. The Unabomber is also the infamous author of a 35,000-word manifesto, *Industrial Society and Its Future*. Railing against technology, consumerism, advertising, "oversocialization," the government, and corporations—all in relation to the individual's loss of freedom—he wrote, "Industrial-technological society cannot be reformed in such a way as to prevent it from progressively narrowing the sphere of human freedom."<sup>[9]</sup>

Though diagnosed a paranoid schizophrenic and convicted of murder, Kaczynski is still championed by those who believe in the myth of frontier style self-sufficiency, a more natural life better without taxes and government—away from too much civilization.

The word “civilization” connotes the negative, violent history of colonialism. Rooted in European empire-building, permeating the world with cookie-cutter efficiency, and transplanting the trappings of urban North American lifestyles, flush toilets, air travel, and ice cubes floating in cocktails without consideration for local environments. Interestingly, the word *civilization* simply refers to life in an organized community, such as a city, or as a part of a body politic. It is derived from the Latin adjective *civilis*, the councils and assemblages of men associating together on principles of law.[10]



Barbara Meneley, The Whispering City

During the panel discussion, Barbara Meneley discussed her research into the history of civic planning, as evident in the communities in Western Canada, and the pros and cons of the City Beautiful Movement.<sup>[11]</sup> She questioned the value of architecture transplanted without regard for local environments, but appreciated civic participation. In recent years, Meneley's sculptural installations have addressed the role of the citizen in civic planning. Her newest installation, *The Whispering City* is a set of mobiles. Four hand-cut paper skyscrapers, delicate white shells reminiscent of beaux-arts buildings, turn in response to any breeze created by the movement of people in the gallery. Suspended within each floating building is a long ticker tape, a spinal column decorated with drawings of blueprints, the concentric circles of city suburbs. These papers trail down onto the floor, insubstantial anchors. The interactive nature of Meneley's work encourages the visitor to recognize their ability to change their environment and to act as citizen.

Jeremy Drummond's *65-Point Plan for Sustainable Living* was inspired by a road trip through North America and the depressing sameness of newly constructed communities. Using satellite photos of suburbs, Drummond removed the roads connecting each cluster of buildings to their larger urban setting and rendering each subdivision an island in the landscape. The sixty-five ten by seven inch photos represent each of the states and provinces. Mounted in a loose geographic correspondence they create a grid-like map of the United States and Canada. Each photo contains a different coral-like pattern. From a distance, they could be ritual earthworks, or abandoned fortifications. Closer examination reveals the details of trees, buildings, and waterways: clues that these are aerial photos. Cut off from their urban context, these clusters of houses recall the mid-twentieth century suburbia created by William Levitt, and utopian promises of a home for every family away from the evils of the city. The reality was isolation, alienation: dystopia.<sup>[12]</sup>



Satellite imagery is only one lens through which our contemporary urban society experiences nature. Photography brings us a library of images from the past and from places we have not been. Microscopes enlarge the non-visible, bringing tiny structures to our view. Telescopes show us the space beyond our sky. X-ray cameras see through flesh. Infra-red can show us how other species perceive the world. Proust begins the discussion on photography's way of changing how we "see" in his *Remembrance of Things Past Vol. 2, Within a Budding Grove*, "a photograph acquires something of the dignity which it ordinarily lacks when it ceases to be a reproduction of reality and shews us things that no longer exist." Sontag continued this discourse in her seminal work, *On Photography*, "To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt." And "Photographs are perhaps the most mysterious of all the objects that make up, and thicken, the environment we recognize as modern. Photographs really are experience captured, and the camera is the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood."

The digital camera can further stretch visual information through computer processing. Jocelyn Philibert makes this clear in his photos *Untitled Apricot Tree (north Side) of Siberia* and *Untitled Pear Tree of Mandchouria*. Each image was composited from four months of photographic documentation, and presents an image that conveys the idea of the tree over time. The multiple superimpositions create an image humming with insubstantial details and imply a quantum nature to life: tiny particles zooming around, being, not being.



Jocelyn Philibert, Untitled Apricot Tree (north Side) of Siberia

On his website, Philibert writes of being inspired by Hindu philosophy:

The Hindu concept of matter as nothing more than an endless series of waves has always intrigued me. The digital is, above all, a plunge into matter: millions and millions of potentially moving and changing particles which, through a process of cutting and pasting, make possible every manipulation and variation desired, superimposing multiple surfaces. Vibrations and shudderings: the real becomes malleable. It's like working with an image-making machine with an almost metaphysical volatility. [\[13\]](#)

Philibert's entrancing ghost-like images were captured at night with flash photography, a technique reminiscent of Brenda Pelkey's work in *Haunts*.<sup>[14]</sup> They shimmer and dance with the tree's experience of the seasons, over time. The settings are solid, urban places. The trees are insubstantial. Are these images the memory of a tree?

Though our use of technology has the capacity to alienate us from nature, it is also a tool that empowers our thinking, and our sense of wonder. Each of the works in "natural Forms" is as unpopulated as the Canadian landscapes by the Group of Seven. However, these works were not created to function as a window onto nature, nor create awe, nor assert landscape as national identity. Instead, these five artists create work that documents our new relationship with nature, mediated through the technology of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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[1] [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Georg\\_Christoph\\_Lichtenberg](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Georg_Christoph_Lichtenberg). Wikiquotes lists Lichtenberg as a German scientist, satirist and philosopher. This quote comes from Notebook J written in 1789-1793. It is currently available as part of:

The Waste Books, Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, translated and with an introduction by R.J. Hollingdale, NYRB Classics, 2000. pages: 127-182.

ISBN-10: 0940322501

[2] The "Great Chain of Being" is a philosophy about the structure of the universe that has had a pervasive influence on Western thought. It is the idea that all species may be placed in an order, from the "lowest" to the "highest," with the least evolved at the bottom and God on the top. It is thought to have originated with Aristotle, and is also known as the Scala Natura. THE definitive book is by Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*. (See Page 59 for Aristotle.) This book is still available, and was originally published in 1936 by Harvard University Press. By the time of medieval Christian society, this hierarchy of all things was quite detailed. See for example the charts by St. Thomas Aquinas 1225-1274. God is at the top of the spiritual realm presiding over levels of angels who are above humans. We straddle the spiritual and the physical; Our souls place us above animals. This hierarchy was also part of feudalism in such ideas as the doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings, where the king's position at the top of humanity's social order was legitimized by God. The Great Chain of Being idea was taken up and elaborated on many times in post-renaissance times by such philosophers and scientists as Sir Thomas Browne (1605 – 1682), Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) , Alexander Pope (1688-1744), Georges Leclerc (1720-1788) , Charles Bonnet (1720-1793. In *The Flamingos Smile*, Stephen Jay Gould discusses the "Chain of Being"and how Dr. Charles White (1728-1813) used it to defend the social hierarchy of slavery. Although less popular after the 18<sup>th</sup> century, one can see how these ideas of hierarchy still inform our current ideas of humanities right to assert itself over nature—through farming, scientific experimentation etc. In 1975 Richard Ryder discusses this as "speciesism" in his work, *Victims of Science: The Use of Animals in Research*.

[3] Christopher Thacker, *History of Gardens*, (Los Angeles: University of California, 1985), p152. 2. Thacker is quoted by Stephanie Ross, in *What Gardens Mean* (p. 34). Interestingly, Ross also notes that the green

spaces in London, Hyde Park etc., began as hunting preserves for the royalty, wild meat supermarkets rather than aesthetic space.

[4] Roger S. Ulrich, 'View through a window may influence recovery from surgery,' in *Science* (27, April 1984): Vol. 224 no. 4647 pp. 420-421.

[5] Kurt Vonnegut reminds us, It [nature] has not only exterminated exquisitely evolved species in a twinkling, but drained oceans and drowned continents as well. If people think nature is their friend, then they sure don't need an enemy.

Kurt Vonnegut, *Fates Worse Than Death: An Autobiographical Collage* (1991) printed originally as "Letter to Earthlings a century from now" (*Time*, 1988)

[6] In 2004, John Updike of the Guardian wrote, "A century and a half after its publication, *Walden* has become such a totem of the back-to-nature, preservationist, anti-business, civil-disobedience mindset, and Thoreau so vivid a protester, so perfect a crank and hermit saint, that the book risks being as revered and unread as the Bible." <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/jun/26/classics> John Updike on Henry Thoreau's classic *Walden*: This article appeared on p4 of the *Guardian review* section of *the Guardian* on Saturday 26 June 2004. It was published on [guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk) at 00.56 BST on Saturday 26 June 2004. It was last modified at 00.56 BST on Saturday 26 June 2004.]

[7] Robert Smith, "Thoreau's First Year at Walden in Fact and Fiction," Thoreau Society Annual Gathering (Concord, MA), July 14, 2007

[8] Smith, "Thoreau's First Year at Walden in Fact and Fiction." Richard Smith in discussion of *Walden*, identifies and refutes two persistent myths around Thoreau. The first myth is that Thoreau "was a hermit". Smith describes Thoreau's time in the woods [comment: I deleted the text that was repeated from the text above.] as an experiment in solitude, time taken to read classical literature and to write. *Solitude*, Smith asserts, does not mean *hermit*. The second, contradictory myth, is that if he meant to be a hermit, he "was a hypocrite ... he came home every day to get his laundry done!" Smith points out the chapter in *Walden* entitled "*Visitors*" details both Thoreau's proximity to the town of Concord, Massachusetts and the social contacts he welcomed. In Smith's estimation, *Walden* is Thoreau's attempt to engage creatively with the better aspects of his culture, not say "no" to civilization, but the myth of self-sufficiency persists.

[9] Harvey W Kushner, 'Unabomber' in *Encyclopedia of Terrorism*. (London: Sage Publications, Inc. 2003)

[10] Source: from A copious and critical English-Latin dictionary by Sir William Smith, Theophilus Dwight Hall, published by the American Book Company in 1870, scanned on-line at:  
[http://books.google.ca/books?id=jeQIAQAAIAAJ&pg=PA794&lpg=PA794&dq=latin+dictionary+civilis&source=bl&ots=RS1dqQjXiM&sig=khI5v9OlyLJOb6NLqBZTIQnsXp8&hl=en&ei=GJRATeP-BYGGlAfol5mhAw&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=5&ved=0CDsQ6AEwBA#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.ca/books?id=jeQIAQAAIAAJ&pg=PA794&lpg=PA794&dq=latin+dictionary+civilis&source=bl&ots=RS1dqQjXiM&sig=khI5v9OlyLJOb6NLqBZTIQnsXp8&hl=en&ei=GJRATeP-BYGGlAfol5mhAw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=5&ved=0CDsQ6AEwBA#v=onepage&q&f=false)

[11] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/City\\_Beautiful\\_movement](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/City_Beautiful_movement)

[12] Cabinet Magazine Summer 2010, issue 38, pp. 98-101

[13] <http://jocelynphilibert.com/> **2006 trees in the Night. Excerpt of original French text:**

Le numérique est d'abord une plongée dans la matière : millions de millions de particules potentiellement mouvantes et changeantes avec un copié collé permettant toutes les manipulations et variantes désirées, superpositions de multiples surfaces... Vibrations, frémissements : le réel devient malléable.

Also great articles:

1. On process: Trees at night by Nathalie Côté for Le Journal de Saint-Bruno – 13 novembre 2009 link: [http://monteregieweb.com/main+fr+01\\_300+Arbres\\_de\\_nuit.html?ArticleID=612876&JournalID=8](http://monteregieweb.com/main+fr+01_300+Arbres_de_nuit.html?ArticleID=612876&JournalID=8)

2. Quick Bio, Galerie SAS, The nocturne atmosphere, the effects of perspective and depth and the raw light of the flash contribute to create a mysterious and strange mood. Everything seems both real and unreal, natural and artificial. <http://www.galeriasas.com/spip.php?article1033>

3. More Images at:

<http://www.cielvariable.ca/archives/fr/chroniques-de-lactualite-cv78/jocelyn-philibert-surreel-par-jean-pierre-vidal.html>]

[14] Brenda Pelkey: Haunts; essay by Ingrid Jenkner. Imprint Halifax: Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, c2001.)