
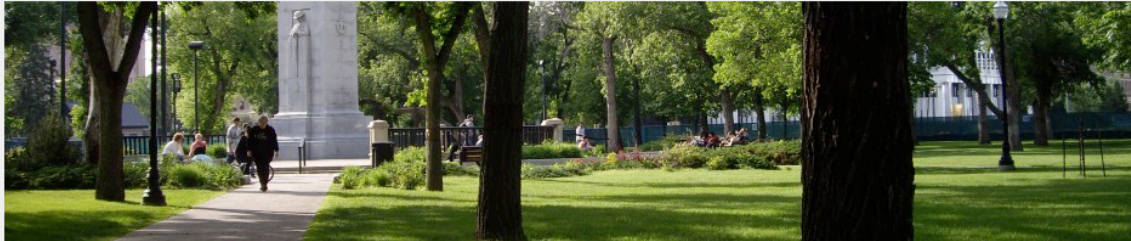


REGINA URBAN ECOLOGY

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Barbara Meneley
Crystal Mowry
Jeremy Drummond
Jocelyn Philibert
Robert Hengeveld
Curated by JG Hampton

On September 10th I attended the opening of 'natural Forms: idyllic landscape and social forms in contemporary practices' at the Neutral Ground Gallery (click on the banner above for the website). To accompany the art unveiling was a panel discussion with curator JG Hampton and three of the five artists; Robert Hengeveld, Barbara Meneley and Crystal Mowry.

The artist's intention, according to the show's hand-out, is not to:

merely imitate nature, nor do they attempt solely to influence how we reconstruct nature through their representations; instead they critically investigate how our ever-changing societal ideals alter nature and our relationship with the 'natural world.

Below I will discuss some of the themes coming out of the panel discussion and my impressions of the show.

Below is a quick description of the pieces produced by the three artists who spoke on the panel.

Robert Hengeveld's "Kentucky Perfect" is a bed of grass fitted into a metal apparatus which automatically provides water, light and then periodically cut to insure regular height.

Barbara Meneley's "The Whispering City" brought together plans and maps of the City Beautiful movement, cut into long strips suspended in a mobile of buildings made of light paper, so the whole contraption would spin and move with the slightest air movement.

Crystal Mowry's "Precipice" recreated Henry David Thoreau's cabin described in *Walden*. By placing a camera inside the cabin, with the live image fed to a projector and beamed onto the wall, Mowry creates the vantage point of an occupant.

Starting with the panel discussion, Crystal Mowry made many interesting points regarding the role of nature and how Thoreau's solitary ideals are reflected today. She spoke of her own home, where "basic ingredients" like rivers or tree cover "lull," as she put it, populations into believing their situation more pastoral than it really is. Through the recreation of Walden's cabin, Mowry contrasts the rugged individualism with the reality that most people live in very controlled places, managed natural areas with manicured foliage. In fact, Mowry notes, Thoreau is not self-sufficient, he lacks expertise in important areas like the over design of his cabin and not being a carpenter. The ultimate end is his idealized lifestyle is a dream, in reality he's unable to live a life of self-sufficient solitude.

romanticized landscapes continued to be a theme in the discussion of Barbara Meneley's floating, twirling mobiles. In her case, the ideal she investigates is the city beautiful movement of the early 20th century. Regina's Mawson plan, available for viewing at the [Regina Plains Museum](#), is one such example of this planning movement. Meneley makes the point that in many ways the City Beautiful movement was a travelling show pony, a plan for "cities without cities." It's grand malls, monumental architecture abutting grand avenues and ordered layout looked heaven-sent to new places digging themselves preliminary paved roads. Like the solitude of Thoreau's cabin, the dream that ordered streets would make an ordered populace was not born in practice.

Meneley's mobiles, in her words, give agency to viewers by being able to move the piece with the movement of air or even just stepping into the room. This agency is meant to extend in the viewers mind to that every citizen has existing within the city. Everyone makes a mark on their city, each person can change the city fabric. The top down, selling of the City Beautiful city, is an imposition of a social and spatial order. The mobiles themselves feature long strips of maps which make the spine or core of the built frames, like office towers, that surround them. In this way the both the physical core of an office building and the intellectual principles or esthetics that define the core beliefs in a city are displayed in the same fanciful towers. Another aspect of the mobiles is the lightweight materials which have a dual ability to allow the movement of the mobiles but also, for me, give a sense of impermanence.

Robert Hengeveld's presentation of mechanical lawn care is effective in raising questions on lawns, their function, and role in our neighbourhoods. The artist himself grappled with the lawn as a place he and his family have a use for, while understanding many of the contradictions of maintaining this land use. The perfect lawn is a common ideal of many communities. Hengeveld mentioned how pressure and competition in his own community: in his experience as a new home owner, Hengeveld has to make a decision if he's to enter into comparative lawn competition on his block. The decision to, 'keep up with the Jones' is a way to buy into the community and the lifeways of the people who live around him.

Two artists were displaying work in the gallery but were not among the panelists. Jeremy Drummond provided "65-Point plan for sustainability" a set of individual satellite images, all the same size, of small planned communities, mostly residential, displayed along a wall in a similar pattern to many of the curvilinear images. And Jocelyn Philibert's two large pictures "Untitled Apricot Tree (North Side) of Siberia" and "Untitled Pear Tree of Manchouria." From the handout, Philibert's process was to take composites of nearly 100 night-time photos of a tree, digitally reconstruct the fragments in order to get a full image close to that of the entire tree.

Neither artists' works were discussed by the panel, so I guess I'll jump in and give you my two cents.

The process and subject matter of Philibert's "Pear Tree" especially made me think of a city as being a collection of parts (infrastructure-neighbourhoods), of individuals and ideas (imagery-iconography) that get pieced together into a broader identity (City-"The Big Apple" "Infinite Horizons"). I think the tree is an effective substitute for the city because of its roles as habitat, energy source, food supply, connector and protector. The images themselves were really striking, the upper canopy brightly shines, in what is a subtly unnatural light. There is a loneliness and foreboding to the tree. It really spoke to me about the balance of a city as the place of recombining the atoms of ideas, individuals and spaces (like the image fragments) into a cogent story or picture while providing a visual feeling of mystery, uncertainty and unnatural arrangements.

The piece I had the most trouble with was Drummond's. Certainly there is enough visual interest in the satellite images on their own - the curving, spiralling patterns of concrete and grey shingled roofs contrast to the earthy greens, browns and reds of both natural and human land uses. Collected, I could only look at the images as a review of the many forms humans create, restricted in some places by slope, liberated in others to swirl and stretch as they please. One way that Drummond's piece matches the other four is in a sense of impermanence. I don't see these suburban formations lasting forever, just as City Beautiful conceptions went out of vogue, the illusionary control of mowing and the ultimate dereliction of Thoreau's cabin. With Drummond's work, I got the impression of old family pictures, with the urban formations substitutes for the now funny and embarrassing clothing styles.

The main theme that I took out of the art and discussion was exploring the control of nature to create secure yet romanticized or dreamed lifestyles and places. Culture and mores coming together, installing order on the world with philosophies and esthetic principles. The resulting built forms are ephemeral with modern order destined to be broken down and rebuilt to meet new ideals. In most of our built communities, nature comes out of our ordered requirements to produce beauty. We know from past civilizations that trees may one day shoot through our streets and grasses will dominate the cobbled hills of building rubble. By controlling the grasses, planting the trees and placing our subdivisions in precariously lovely valley slopes and flood plains we fool ourselves as masters of nature.