

# An Olympic moment

BY SARAH MILROY FEBRUARY 5, 2010 (UPDATED APRIL 28, 2018)

British Columbia is like the rest of the world, only more so.

Nature is beautiful everywhere, but this mist-wreathed Nirvana of dripping cedars and sparkling fjords is ridiculously, rapturously so. Here, the universal contest of man versus nature takes on a certain steroid-enhanced quality: It's not unheard of to find an avalanche settled at your back door, or a black bear in your garbage. Human migration is creating change the world over, but in B.C. the disjunctures are extreme and dramatic. Where Chinese labourers once built the railways, Hong Kong billionaires now call the shots in their towers of glass and steel.

Aboriginal cultures exist around the world, but in B.C. they take centre stage — fighting and surviving in a way that inspires indigenous people everywhere. The green movement has always been the mainstream here — it's hippie heaven — while resource extraction manifests itself in fearsome ways: in the logging trucks that barrel past on the highway, in the clear cuts, in the armada of freighters destined for the shipping lanes of international capitalism.

Read the landscape of B.C., in other words, and you read where we're at globally and how we got here. But in B.C., where the world will converge next weekend to celebrate the Olympic and Paralympic Games, it's the high-def version. *Visions of British Columbia: A Landscape Manual*, the Vancouver Art Gallery's insightful and authoritative show on view through the Olympics and beyond, attempts to describe how B.C. artists — 37 of the best of them — have responded to this richness.

Starting with archival photography and early film footage of the coast, as well as some historic Northwest Coast aboriginal carvings, the show also includes the works of those contemporary artists who have put Vancouver on the international art map: Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham, Ken Lum, Ian Wallace, Stan Douglas. Organized by VAG senior curator Bruce Grenville, the show drives at the essence of British Columbia, and it gets in deep.

Rather than being a chronological survey, the show is built up of relationships. In one characteristic juxtaposition, Haida carver Bill Reid's bronze *Killer Whale* (1984), a quintessential exemplar of Northwest Coast design infused by the traditions of modernist sculpture, is sited next to Brian Jungen's *Cetology* (2002), a 12-metre-long replica of a bowhead whale skeleton fashioned from cut-up plastic lawn furniture.

## Who speaks for B.C.?

At several points, Grenville engineers visual ensembles, with three or more artists creating a chorus of contesting viewpoints. The contemporary Coast Salish artist Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, who brings Northwest Coast iconography into his pop- and surrealist-influenced paintings, is presented in the same gallery as Emily Carr, a white woman from a genteel Victoria family who received her artistic training abroad and then came home to seek truth in the forests of B.C. and their indigenous inhabitants. Installed alongside Carr and Yuxweluptun is the work of contemporary Korean-born artist Jin-me Yoon, whose composite photographic work, *Group of Sixty-Seven* (1996), portrays 67 members of her Korean-Canadian community pictured in front of canonical landscape paintings by Lawren Harris and Carr.

Taken as a whole, this arrangement offers a cultural kaleidoscope. There are those who were here first, there are those who came next, and then there are the most recent arrivals, also seeking a way to belong to this land and its cultural traditions. The curator seems to ask: Who is entitled to speak for this place?

Grenville also brings Roy Arden's photos of contemporary urban development and lumber production together with Tim Gardner's watercolours of his friends atop ski hills or pausing during a day hike. Here in the gallery, as in the province at large, the resource and the tourist economies are held in a delicate balance.

Elsewhere, Grenville isolates individual landmark artists, such as the sculptor and photographer Liz Magor. Her *Deep Woods Portfolio* (1999) is a suite of black-and-white photographs of animal burrows, collapsed indigent shacks in the forest, and abandoned cabins she has discovered up the coast. These mournful, haunting images reveal B.C. as the natural habitat of drifters, dreamers and runaways, a place so mild and wet that one can feasibly live outdoors, even in the winter. The West is our lunatic fringe.

## Mystical thresholds

The experience of the frontier is never far away, articulated here in John Vanderpant's 1926 photograph of a hillside deforested by wildfire; in Frederick Varley's historic evocations of the coastal mountains as mystical thresholds to the infinite; and in Jeff Wall's illuminated light-box titled *The Pine on the Corner* (1990), in which an intersection in East Vancouver is presided over by a great shaggy evergreen, an eruption of the primordial into an ordered urban grid of modernist houses and telephone wires.

It is Rodney Graham's mammoth multimedia work *Edge of a Wood* (1999), though, that is arguably this exhibition's most powerful evocation of frontier — a sweeping two-screen projection of a forest at night, its trees and dense undergrowth swept intermittently by the blazing searchlights of a helicopter. Overhead, we hear the rotors beating, deafening and intimidating, and sitting in the darkness, we cannot help but think how times have changed.

For European explorers, the edge of the forest was a kind of boundary line, concealing unknown terrors. Now, the forests are commodity. The presence of a helicopter with searchlights suggests search-and-rescue efforts, or perhaps a police investigation (another maniac on the loose), but it also suggests the heavy machinery of the logging industry, and the multibillion-dollar corporations that patrol their resources up and down the coast. When the Europeans arrived, it was the woods that were scary. Today, capitalism is the monster to be feared.

"We are a rain-forest people, native or naturalized, by birth or by choice," wrote naturalist David Pitt-Brooke in *Chasing Clayoquot: A Wilderness Almanac*. (The passage is excerpted in the brilliant book that accompanies this show.) "These forests shape our sense of identity, of our place in the world. What will become of us when they are gone?" he laments. "We will become a people of strip malls, I suppose, and big-box retail outlets and multilane highways to nowhere worth going."

Or maybe not. By creating an exhibition for the Olympic moment that so urgently declares a sense of place, the VAG makes itself part of the solution, providing powerful cultural ammo for the fight against all that is banal and generic in this unique, lovely and complicated place. This is the kind of thing museums do best. Only more so.