

Our Better Natures: Alison Judd, Dylan Miner, and Terrance Houle in Dawson City

[“Our Better Natures: Alison Judd, Dylan Miner, and Terrance Houle in Dawson City.” The ODD Gallery/Klondike Institute of Art and Culture. Dawson City, Yukon, 2015. 12-19.]

The rounded mountains, west of Dawson City, Yukon, is one of the quietest natural places on the planet. Hunched in the light drizzle, pulling berries from low bushes on a smooth slope, I heard the static of rain rhyming with my tinnitus, the gentle rummage of fellow harvesters, and nothing else. Despite the lovely company, the distraction of my task, and the brevity of our visit, I was swept by euphoric calm oscillating with dread. I wanted equally to flee the saturated emptiness and to lose myself in its tranquil embrace. While most people say they want to die among family, there, at that moment, I felt my perfect conclusion to be a dissolve into that quiescence—but not just yet.

It is possible to resist the sublimity of that territory; but you would have to work at it: stay among the buildings and distract yourself with people. I went up last August to do just that—and there are plenty of fascinating buildings and people in Dawson. Tara Rudnickas and the Klondike Institute of Art & Culture invited me to talk about my *Roadkill* paintings as part of the series *The Natural & the Manufactured*. I was also there to enjoy the art and company of Terrance Houle and Dylan Miner. I did. But if local artist Bo Yeung hadn’t taken Dylan and me out berry picking, I would have missed the existential awe produced by that unique terrain beyond the town. I would have missed the North.

My visit was just a tongue tip taste of the place, and it got me wondering how it was possible for that summers’ artists in residence—Alison Judd, Dylan Miner, and Terrance Houle—who were there only a few weeks longer—to make aesthetic and relational sense of and with the site and those who live there. However, if a good way to know your territory is to show it to a stranger, a really unique way is to invite artists to reflect it back to you.

Dawson City has a population of just over 1,300. The number doubles during tourist season but never swells to the 40,000 who camped there during the gold rush (1896-9). The town is packed between the Yukon River and a hill marked by a gigantic rock slide that the traditional keepers of the territory, the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in, call “Eddhä dädhëcha” (“weathered moose hide hanging”). Though the avalanche occurred thousands of years ago, it looks recent, like it could continue its slide into the river, sweeping the town with it. The looming danger makes Dawson look both vulnerable and defiant.

This perilous backdrop attracted the interest of Guelph-based, Settler artist Alison Judd who made paper casts of some of its rocks and reproduced the slide in the art gallery. Hundreds of grey and white ‘rocks’, some the size of fists but most as big as heads or torsos, pour out from under a huge sheet of Japanese paper attached to the white wall and onto the grey floor. I was sorry to miss meeting Judd and see her work in person, but, from images of *Living with a Landslide* (July 3 – August 1), it is clear that she is negotiating a place between and among nature and culture.

Most European landscape art consists of miniature versions of the outdoors for the indoors. These paintings, photographs, and decorative arts remind us of what is on the other side of our walls, what we have pushed into the background during civilization. While some of these images are sublime, most are pastoral and inviting—reminders of what our homes and cities protect us from, but also what our human natures have lost and long for. *Living with a Landslide* seems both. It looks like a tiny glacier or a giant, Claes Oldenberg-esque, soft bag spilling chunks of white chocolate. If you are in a receptive mood, you may feel the power of the avalanche, but are more likely to wonder why the artist manufactured this pale and delicate copy of a monumental actual thing that exists just across town.

Living with a Landslide, like most landscape art, captures an aspect of nature, isolates it from the whole, and processes it through imagination and skill to produce something human. Such hand-made objects endeavour to make nature comprehensible through interpretation. Because the installation does not try to fool the eye into thinking it is rock, the work is less about representing an absent thing convincingly than it is about having us think about the artist's interpretive process. These wrinkled husks ask us not only to imagine their former contents, but also the wet hands that caressed these shapes into being. We imagine the artist's care and her numerous trips up and down the slope, her state of mind: "I need to think slowly and use repetition as a tool to understand change. It is the slow accretion of construction and insight that subsequent elements impose on me – not I on them." There is a certain conscious mindlessness to much art production. The mind in creation is not empty but features an attention that seems not to belong to its self, its own operations, but instead seems to share intentions with the thing being made. And often when artists echo nature, it feels as though the sight/site is communicating through you. This may be explained away as projection. Whatever it is, it feels as though one is beside oneself, or not one's self, alone.

Another way to consider Judd's ritualistic making is as haptic magical thinking. Ancient cave painters, religious artists, most artists, paint pictures and carve objects that safely evoke the things they want or fear. Art stills nature (and us) for contemplation. The avalanche looms over Dawson like a potential threat, not just a memory of one. *Living with a Landslide* both evokes this sleeping giant and (literally) makes light of it.

Dylan Miner's *Michif-Michin* (Aug. 14 – Sept. 19) is also a form of landscape art. While he, too, brings the outside in, in his installation and performance the lines between culture and nature, the real and copies, and art and life are unstable: medicine rather than magic. Miner converts the gallery into a dining room. The center piece is a big table covered with a blanket. On one wall are dried plants; on another, wooden shelves hold rows of glass and birch-bark containers for teas hand-picked by the artist. On other walls are framed woodcut prints of medicine plants: black currant, blueberry, cranberry, cloudberry, dandelion, fireweed, goldenrod, horsetail, juniper, Labrador tea, lamb's quarter, raspberry, rosehip, sage, Saskatoon, spruce, wild chamomile, wild onion, willow, and yarrow.

Miner (East Lansing, Michigan) descends from Métis who lived variously in the subarctic, boreal forests, Prairies, and Great Lakes. Much of his work concerns learning and transmitting Indigenous territory and knowledge, especially medicines. Just as Judd's landslide is a light but tangible echo of the real thing, so too Miner's prints are ghosts of what they represent. However,

there is a poignant vitality and a sense of sacrifice in knowing that the instead of ink the juice of one plant, blackberries, was used to generate the images of the others. Add to this the presence of the actual plants, and their consumption by visitors, and the division between representation and reality collapse.

Within and in addition to the installation, Dylan performed *The Elders Say We Don't Visit Anymore*, an opportunity for guests to join him for two hours of tea and conversation. The exchanges were engaging and robust. Everyone was eager to share their experiences, knowledge, and companionship. Art, especially contemporary Indigenous performance and relational art, often looks like traditional Indigenous life, compressed and revived. It can be a means to bring former or hidden lives and ways into the present and public. While there is something melancholic about the artificiality having to tart up visiting as art in order to get people involved, the work underlines a certain kind of alienation contemporary culture has constructed, especially between Indigenous and Settler peoples. It was beautiful to see folks equaled and in conversation about what they shared, the land. Stories make territory.

Terrance Houle's (Blood Tribe) *Friend or Foe #5* (July 12 – Aug. 18, 2014) consists of a series of signs scattered throughout Dawson City and a video projection screened at the artists' residence, Macaulay House. The signs show Native American sign language that explain aspects of the territory as told by locals to the artist. The video is a series of clips of local people using the sign language to tell visitors a little about their community; for example, "It is a good place to be in the case of a zombie apocalypse."

The work is the fifth iteration of an on-going series presented across the Americas where Terrance, in traditional regalia, introduces himself, his territory, and tells stories. Native American sign language was a universal trade and diplomatic language used through much of the west and center of Turtle Island. In fact, growing up in Blackfoot territory, in Southern Alberta, Terrance saw old folks still using it. Indigenous people past and present, especially on the Plains, are mobile. Territory does not only consist of static places but as spaces people traverse and make into territory by use and by story. By travelling to various places in the Americas, including Dawson, and communicating across cultures, and by having these different folks learn a little of this common language, Terrance temporarily expands his territory, makes himself at home, and others at home with him.

Plains sign language does not belong to one nation. It is a common language belonging to shared territories. Using it links bodies and minds in Indigenous, non-colonial space. Seeing both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people use Plains sign language rather than (colonial) English hints at what the future of conciliation might look like.

Reflecting on the experience of picking berries in the drizzle, and through the lens of these art works, I realize that while I am Indigenous, it is not a universal condition with the same meaning in and for all places. I am Métis, indigenous to the Plains, not this North. While participating in an Indigenous activity (a basic human one, really), and in Métis company, I had no stories to ground me to there or to the peoples of that territory. The feeling that overwhelmed me was a sense of meaninglessness, of being un-storied, of the sublime. I couldn't wait to get back into town and discourse. Art is part of that discourse. The works of Judd, Miner, and Houle are not

about nature as much as they are about us. These artists create hand-made objects and embodied experiences that link us to our human natures.

David Garneau