

The transformation of landscape in Canada: The Inside & Outside of Being

For an outsider coming to Canada, everything one encounters is curious and new. My first impression and discovery of Canada was the Canadian fixation with landscape, an emotional and mental fixation, full of conflict, yet persistent. What I have perceived of the fixation is also what Chinese have imagined about Canadian art.

In 1975, the National Gallery of China held an exhibition of The Group of Seven. During the Cultural Revolution, art like the Group of Seven was the only acceptable non-socialist, realistic art to be introduced to the Chinese. The embodiment of patriotism in landscape that was endorsed in the paintings of the Group of Seven is what Chinese landscape art was permitted to emulate at the time. However, the exhibition created an intimacy that went beyond the assumed political connections and opened an imaginative space of scenes of a land whereon and whereby people live; whether these visions are realistic or imaginative, they are not propaganda.

Art communication between China and Canada has continued for decades, though we still can not say that Canadian art is significant to the glamorous art world of China. There have been a few Canadian exhibitions presented in China since the 1980s, including two Edward Burtynsky exhibitions, and The Group of Seven's *The Land of Wilderness: Canadian Landscape Painting* in 2001. Interest in Burtynsky's works in China lies more in his subject matter, industrialized China, than in his concern for the environment and an eco-world, and his concept of the manufactured landscape. However, some artists and art professionals have paid attention to his art language: the painterly and epic photographs of his manufactured landscapes. In Canadian art circles, since the 1940s, The Group of Seven has become passé, and showing their works as representative of Canadian art would be like exhibiting the 1950s-1960s Chinese socialism art as representative of Chinese art; it is not contemporary at all.

Because there has not been sufficient exposure to Canadian art, including landscape art in China, and academic communication on this field is also not adequate, it is evident that what Canadian artists have been doing with landscape in more than past six decades is mostly

unfamiliar to and unrecognized by the Chinese art world and Chinese audience. The lack of Chinese recognition for these new interpretations of landscape may, in part, be due to the comparative decline of both classical Chinese Mountains and Water painting, and Chinese modern landscape art influenced by western classical and modern landscape art. There is a vacant space waiting for the transformation and renewal of conceptions and practices of landscape related art in China. In this sense, contemporary Canadian landscape art will be a rich and inspiring reference for the Chinese art world. But on the other hand, even in contemporary Canadian art, only a small portion of it is about landscape; and most contemporary artists are reluctant to be associated with older modes of landscape art, or with how a work will tell a sense of the nation.

Landscape art in Canada has been in constant flux and is diverse in output; contrary to the dominant narrative, it has never been just by the Group of Seven or about the Great North in Canada. There is landscape art from other Canadian regions and non-English speaking areas. There is landscape-related art pre-dating the Group of Seven, such as colonial landscape art and aboriginal art. There is also hybrid landscape-related art by immigrants. On the other hand, the emphasis on landscape art has complicated historical backgrounds. It involves intentional neglect and erasure of diverse human lives and experiences, in addition to stunting a more diversified art imagination and practice. What is problematic with this dominant narrative is that it takes landscape as a unity of identity, a symbol for national spirit as presented through wilderness, which Professor Northrop Frye famously mocked as the *garrison mentality* (Frye 109). Decades ago, he fiercely criticized that this landscape narrative as a false premise, because “identity is local” and “unity is national” (109). Therefore he said that the question of Canadian identity that affects the creative imagination is not a “Canadian” question at all, but a regional question. (109)” Contemporary artist Ken Lum gives a new spin on Frye’s thesis. He thinks that the universalized landscape narrative evens out difference and is exclusionary, akin to Canada’s official policy of multiculturalism, which recycles “the identity-as-landscape narrative with all of its binaries”, and this narrative in fact neglects the diversity of human identities (Lum 2013).

In order to discuss Canadian landscape art, the transformation of the concept of landscape art by contemporary Canadian artists must be articulated. For example, Burtynsky conceived a new landscape art that demonstrates the largest expression of the incursion of the industry on

the land, which he named as the manufactured landscape (Burtynsky 2003); and Iain Baxter& thought that there is a natural landscape and a landscape of information, and that we dwell in both. We must open to differences and changes of landscape that are outside of us, to diversity of people and their experiences that are inside of us, and to possibilities of creative imagination and art expressions that come from and go out of us. This is what the exhibition will look at: transformation of Canadian landscape art: the inside and outside of being. We are going to look at what Canadian artists have done in the past five decades in the landscape genre, what they have perceived, deconstructed, imagined and created. We are going to look at how landscape relates to humanity, and evades human dwelling and imagination in places and in time. We will look at artists who continue to dialogue with the legacy of the “representative” Canadian landscape art through re-interpretation of, confrontation with, destruction and re-construction of the past, such as Michael Snow, and Robert Youds. We will also look at other artists who create new perspectives on landscape avoiding the dominant narrative, such as Iain Baxter&, Andy Patton, Wanda Koop and Jean-François Côté. Identity problems related to landscape still exist, but we can perceive it from a new lens, from perceptions of artists such as Jamelie Hassan. There are also other issues equally urgent, such as environmental issues and expansion of urban life and disappearance of rural life explored by artists such as Burtynsky and Isabelle Hayeur.

The exhibition will have four parts:

1: Deconstructing landscape traditions

Michael Snow; Andrew Wright; Robert Youds

2: Landscape as always becoming

Iain BAXTER&; Wanda Koop; Jean-François Côté; Ed Pien

3: Thinking beyond landscape

Rebecca Belmore; Edward Burtynsky; Isabelle Hayeur; Ron Benner; Bonnie Devine

4: Landscape as an imagined journey

Andy Patton; Jamelie Hassan; Gu Xiong

We are going to bring the exhibition to Xi'an, China. Xi'an is the Rome of the East. In its 6,000 year history, it has been the capital of thirteen dynasties. It is one of the few places where tradition is still alive in cultural and daily life going beyond the numerous relics, temples and museums. Traditional art is very strong in Xi'an. Since the 1980s, contemporary art has also occupied an important role on the local cultural map. Xi'an is also a city where different ethnic groups have lived together peacefully for hundreds of years, with a large Muslim population and many foreigners. There is a capacity to generate a dynamic cultural dialogue between the local community and Canadian landscape artists.

The exhibition will be launched in Xi'an Art Museum. The Museum was opened in September 2009. Covering 17,000 square meters, it is one of the largest art museums recently built in China. Since its opening, the museum has hosted more than one hundred exhibitions, including *Graphic Design Biennale China Germany* (2009), solo exhibition of Käthe Kollwitz (2010), *Marc Riboud Retrospective* (2010), *Germany Contemporary Art Exhibition* (2010), *Contemporary Art from The British Council Collection 1980-2010* (2011), solo exhibition of Fang Lijun, *20 years Retrospective Exhibition of 1991 San Diego Chinese Artistic Creation Seminar* (2011), *Masterpieces from The Warburton Indigenous Art Collection Australia* (2011), and solo exhibition of Jannis Kounellis (2012).

For people in Xi'an and in Canada, landscape has an in-borne existence. In Xi'an, the view of Zhongnan Mountains will come to one's mind and eyes with associations of poetry, painting and philosophy. In Canada, the vastness and diversity of landscape has always urged artists to seek new challenges, new departures and new divergences in art. "What is your urgent command, if not transformation? (Duino Elegies V)" Rilke's inquiry to the Earth is also the cry for the transformation of Canadian landscape art that will be presented in this exhibition.

The Chinese diaspora in Canada is expanding, and Canadian interest with contemporary China continues to grow. As members of the Asia-Pacific region, increasing cultural exchange and dialogue will enhance relations between China and Canada by providing opportunities for deeper understanding and cooperation. Recently, a plenitude of Chinese contemporary art exhibitions have been brought to Canada, including Da Bao group show at the Varley Art Gallery, Zhang Huan's solo show and the stunning Ai Weiwei exhibit at the AGO, a large contemporary Chinese Female Artists exhibition will also be presented at the next year's

Contact Photography Festival in Toronto, the largest annual photography exhibit in the world. We believe that this contemporary Canadian landscape art exhibit in Xi'an will make a remarkable difference in both China and Canada.

Exhibition date: August 10 to September 21, 2014.

The exhibit is planned to tour to three to four other venues in China after the opening show in Xi'an.

Exhibition Advisor: Dr. Mark A. Cheetham

Curator: Yan Zhou, Yang Chao

Assistant Curator: Christine Platt

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