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the beat

Arts in London

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Too Much Unsaid

Land ho: Sighting Land at Museum London

By Beth Stewart

Museum London's *Sighting Land* brings together diverse interpretations of the Canadian landscape. It mixes several "isms" – post-impressionism, expressionism and realism – with a dash of pop.

Cassandra Getty, the museum's curator of art, pulled together work from the vault to present this snapshot of landscape painting in Canada. The result brilliantly blends together the work of traditional and contemporary artists.

"The threads that the Group of Seven were trying to communicate can still be seen today," says Getty.

The exhibition also addresses the museum's desire to show off its collection, which now numbers over 5,000 pieces. "One of the things we do," Getty explains, "is work thematically in terms of quarters."

"It allows the museum to remain current with what's happening on a larger scale, what's happening in the province," Getty adds.

The exhibition is hung in the Forum Gallery which affords visitors the opportunity to view it from above, through the windows of the Centre Gallery, as well as in situ.

John Hartman holds center stage with three large 1997 oil-on-linen paintings. "Argentia" and "Twillingate" depict Newfoundland; "Fox Harbour" depicts Nova Scotia.

Hartman's bold application of paint and colour invites inspection. Close examination rewards the viewer with a variety of ghostly figures and symbols that connect a human history with that of the land.



Bernice Vincent, "Passing through the Landscape," acrylic on wooden cigar box top with pedestal, 1991.

Getty describes Hartman's landscapes as surreal and fantastical, saying they reflect not only the land, but also stories of its settlers, stories Hartman heard growing up or has gathered since. Interpretation of Hartman's narratives is left largely up to the viewer, which may contribute to their appeal.

"Fox Harbour," for example, reveals the figure of a dog or fox following a hunter, who is, in turn, following two geese. Also present are a Madonna-like figure, a sign post, and an artist's easel. Speculation abounds.

Hartman's work forms a theoretical bridge between the landscape of the Group of Seven and the celestial painting of the group's contemporary David Milne.

Milne's "Ascension No. 10, Uxbridge," a 1945 watercolour painting that is also part of the exhibition, features narrative figures, including a Madonna that eerily echoes Hartman's.

In addition, *Sighting Land* presents Museum London with the opportunity to celebrate

new acquisitions such as Claude Breeze's "The Kiss," a 1966 acrylic on canvas painting gifted to the gallery in 2010.

Close up, "The Kiss" appears to be of a green and yellow field topped by a deep blue sky. From a distance it cleverly morphs into two faces seen in profile: the tree tops become eyes, the clouds, eyebrows, and the title becomes clear.

Regional painters taking part in *Sighting Land* include Roly Fenwick, Clark MacDougall and Bernice Vincent.

Fenwick's 1990 large oil on canvas "Regenerating Trees" presents a lush and powerful stand of trees undercut with a sense of foreboding. It straddles motion and stillness in a way that suggests a storm has just passed or is coming.

Bernice Vincent's 1991 mixed media piece "Passing through the Landscape" introduces humour into *Sighting Land* with its melamine road literally passing through a small landscape painting.

It is interesting to note that the support for the painting is the lid of an old wooden cigar box and a peek behind it reveals the inscription "Marguerite a fine cigar." Canadian made, Marguerite cigars were first introduced in 1891.



David Milne, "Ascension No. 10, Uxbridge," watercolour on paper, c. 1945. Collection of Museum London.

Complementing *Sighting Land* are two sister exhibitions *Pastorale* and *Garden Variety* both of which run to October 9. They too juxtapose older and newer works with similar themes and motives: the land, survival, rural life, and the human desire to cultivate.

The trio of exhibitions, Getty points out, all beg the question: "Is nature a celebration which one coexists with or a place of human intervention and control?"

Beth Stewart is a secondary school teacher, visual artist and writer.

What: *Sighting Land*

Where: Museum London (421 Ridout Street N)

When: July 2 - September 18

Contact: www.museumlondon.ca

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