

## I like your silence

*p-tul, p-tul, beep glub-glub-kee-he-heek kogubaleek* In Vid Ingelevics' vinyl lettered *Common Birds*, the transliterated text of songbird calls are installed in a frieze around the top of the gallery walls, on the door and in the street. They represent birds seen in the Toronto area in the month of June, from 1942 – '46 drawn from R. M. Saunders' 1947 book, *Flashing Wings*. Birds such as the Yellow Bellied Sapsucker, Killdeer and Common Grackle are included.

Such phonetic renderings are commonly used in birding books apparently to help spot/recognise a bird on location. Placed here in the gallery we are left with a series of comic like words wondering what they mean or represent. It would be impossible without already knowing the birdcalls to get to the original sound.

These 'words' both bring us nearer and distance us from the experience of birds. Normally their use is pragmatic. They are the sharing of an experience by those who carefully and meticulously study them. They're intended as an aid, should we want it, for observing bird life. But by being placed in the gallery, isolated from their usual context they change. Here, we encounter the birds' otherness, their un-knowability. 'Translated' into our language, as it were, we are given a way to come closer to their mystery, their *noumena*.

And yet, is this not also a part of our hubris and that which contributes to their demise? The birds whose transliterated calls are around the gallery were heard over sixty years ago. We tacitly assume that some species will no longer exist in this environment.

We don't embrace the otherness of the non-human. We shape, we name, we classify and categorize in an attempt to understand and manipulate our environment. We must shape it to our own. The transliterated calls spill out of the gallery into the street, into the realm of the birds, symbolic of our colonization, our acculturation of the non-human world.

There are now no wilderness places left in the world unchanged by human intervention. These denaturalised calls bring to mind our treatment of birds and so much of the rest of the non-human living world. The bird 'words' in the gallery won't hurt them, but *Common Birds* points mischievously to the fact that one of things that makes us human - our use of language - can.

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In Helen de Main's piece *Shelter* we observe two green polystyrene mounds. On top of one is a small elevated building with a doorway. It could be the type of structure normally found on top of mountains: a café or a pilgrim's refuge, a gift shop or an old smoke watchtower. There is no one inside, and no easy way for the imagined visitor to get in.

On top of the other mountain is a small copse of trees reminescent of many found in the countryside in Britain where de Main lives. We tacitly assume the mountains were once forested; the trees have been removed to make way for activity long since passed.

Separating, or possibly connecting the two is a railway track that runs between tunnels into each mountain. There is no train on the track. None passing between the mountains. Does one exist? Have we just missed it? Or are the tracks for something else? These mounds and tracks could be a set for a cartoon or animation. “*Thunderbirds are go!* “ They are on the cusp somewhere between Disney and metonym of ruined countryside.

In de Main’s second piece *Construct*, this time there is one mountain entirely encircled by scaffolding. Is it being repaired, or being built from the ground up? What exactly is being created? We can’t be sure as we try to get a glimpse of what is beneath the green gauze which shields the viewer from any activity. Like the mountains and the hut in *Shelter*, this mountain is inaccessible to us.

In the British countryside much more than in Canada, the land can be read as a history book of human habitation. Over millennia, layers of cultivation from different cultures have shaped what we see today. *Shelter* seems representative of our less conscious construction of the landscape, through agriculture, wars, urbanisation. Landscape as a word appeared in Europe only after much of the diversity and wilderness in the land was gone and there was a need to remember it, protect it, paint it, make it an object. In *Construct*, what is suggested by the scaffolding is that the end result will be a conscious creation. Perhaps another Big Rock Candy Mountain for a Disney theme park or something more reminiscent of Breughel’s *Tower of Babel* hewn from the mountain itself? “Capital creates and destroys its own landscape.” (T. Vanderbilt)

Parks originated as enclosures for royal hunting, as wild areas of pleasure for the king. Now across the world we are enclosing the land as shelters for flora and fauna instead. de Main’s work points to how what we experience as nature or landscape is modified, constructed and shaped to the cultural perceptions of what we think they should be. Our human impact and desire to control our environment is strong, something which can be both positive and negative.

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The term landscape was created to describe the Dutch landscape paintings in the Fifteenth Century. Curator Cheryl Sourkes has developed *Parks and Culture* as a contemporary addition to this canon. It draws our attention to the un-knowability of the non-human world; to the acculturation of our environment; to the consequences of our increasing re-construction of the world.

In Ingelevics' *Common Birds*, we need the presence of the birds to help us interpret the words. Aldo Leopold, American ecologist, argues that culture is predicated on our interaction with the non-human. The Enlightenment which created the mind body split and an objectively verifiable nature took us outside of our environment and, treating civilization as separate from nature, allowed for its systematic exploitation. In the Twenty-First Century more and more sophisticated technological development leads us further and further away from the concrete and into the virtual. As de Main's work shows us, nature becomes both a place of loss and a fantasyland, a comfort against this loss.

Seeing de Main's and Ingelevics' work together, we also experience their respective silences magnified. There is an absence of people but not of human presence. The mountains are inaccessible. We are left to imagine the birdsong from the quirky birds' words, the absence of their actual calls only amplifying the silence. All seems empty. Are we witnessing a frozen moment of time/space? Post apocalypse? The vision is dystopian in any case.

But the cartoon-like theme also adds a lightness to this exhibition. The scale of the mountains make them look like toys we might sit down and play adventure games in. The text on the wall reminds us of the sounds we read in comic books. Here is an alternative world where we might imagine another ending. In most cartoons and comic books, even though things seem grim at times, the hero(ine) mostly triumphs. And lives to see another day.

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