

Hunting Nature, Chasing History *Sculpture Sackville 2008*

Tila Kellman

Number 87, Spring 2009

Transmission

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/9013ac>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Kellman, T. (2009). Review of [Hunting Nature, Chasing History: *Sculpture Sackville 2008*]. *Espace Sculpture*, (87), 43–44.

Hunting Nature, Chasing History: Sculpture Sackville 2008

Tila KELLMAN



Bob VERSCHUEREN,
Translations, 2008. Birch
saplings. Photo: courtesy
of Tila Kellman.

Sackville Wildfowl Park, in New Brunswick, is a renowned bird sanctuary at the head of the Bay of Fundy. It lies near an abandoned meander of the Tantramar River, formerly a busy port and ship-building centre. Today, while bordered by salt marshes, the refuge is an impounded fresh-water marsh crisscrossed by boardwalks. As a reconfiguration of nature, the Park is a fitting stage for the international exhibition of earth art curated by John K. Grande as part of Sackville's celebrations as a Cultural Capital of Canada for 2008. Grande argues that while, on a heroic scale, earlier "land art" reconfigured territory largely treated as empty, earth art is "a new genre... that is not only inspired by nature. It is part of nature."

As art is man-made, this proposes that contemporary earth art includes human activities and, thereby, history in the idea of nature, rather than nature being a *tabula rasa* or a term opposing

you or me as viewers. While each of us is an individual, in a discursive field your presence as a viewer, if not you specifically, is taken into account in works destined for my engagement, or yours. Now, the more powerful Sackville installations contain a critique addressed to each viewer in a reflexive form: how do I give my self to myself in the face of this questioning? As a result, the installations arguably have the potential to participate in the reconfiguration, or re-cognition, of what you or I claim as identity, how you and I recognize my self, or self-recognition.

Inspired by aboriginal skills at enticing prey, Yolanda Gutiérrez (Mexico) explored re-directing them towards conservation by floating small plywood nesting platforms supporting Constructivist-like "teepees" on the marsh pond: *The Hunter's Power*. They were adopted enthusiastically by the birds for resting. Although Gutiérrez admires aboriginal lore, her choice of a stereotypical aboriginal house-type for birdhouses is debatable. Nonetheless, their poetry can entice you or me closer into acknowledging

implication in domination and squandering resources. So, since the Park provides an abundant habitat, are the nesting platforms more for the birds or, wryly, to draw you and me into a reflection of collective beneficent stewardship?

Michael Flomen's (Canada) and Roy Staab's (USA) lyrical installations question how you or I understand life's voyage as a fundamental working of the environment. Evoking the aboriginal past, Flomen balanced a long sapling across bundled cattails. A small stone suggesting a chipped flint dangles near one end. At the other hangs a ragged vane of heavy paper bearing an exquisite photogram of the moon, inscribing its dynamics against the rocking water. This transitory weather vane, mourning the loss of aboriginal understanding of exchanges between cosmos and culture that underpin life, can uncomfortably insinuate itself into considering how each of us gives herself to herself through her mindfulness of aboriginal interests.

Staab's *Voyage*, a procession of the mere outlines of small boats suspended just above the water, emerges through the cattails. He



Roy STAAB, *Voyage*,
2008. Birch, maple
cherry, willow saplings.
Photo: courtesy of the
artist.

twined these "sketches" using saplings thinned from the marsh outflow. Their reflections draw you and me into imagining former lives along the vanished river, and the current voyages of people still dependent on small boats and fish weirs throughout the Maritimes. Flomen's and Staab's lyricism entices each of us into involving our sense of self-recognition with local history and the problem of environmental sustainability that is not only physical, but poetic.

With anti-Romantic skepticism, Jerilea Zempel (New York City) and Francesca Vivenza (Toronto) satirically questioned the interaction between consumerist desire and natural processes. Overlooking Swan Pond at Mount Allison University, Zempel parked *Homeland Security*, an SUV

On the marsh embankment, tented birches shelter a bench opposite a small landing perched over the water. Stakes sketching the ribs of a boat jut above the surface. Overhead, a line tugs a treetop towards the prow.

L'Embarcadère, construire un canot et abri dans l'attente de la marée, by Gilles Bruni (France), resembles an airy piece of rustic geometry set afloat. Bruni was fascinated by the vanished river meander, its industries and earlier aboriginal encampments. *L'Embarcadère* departs towards that disappearance, leading the imagination from actual into mythic history, from experience into desire. From the landing, in my imagination with you, I can only yearn to imagine the conflicts and alliances



covered with a white, ultra-fluffy, hand-crocheted "tea cozy" sporting large three-dimensional flowers, multiple woolly sheep tails and a toothy grin. Originally intending to enshroud the WWII scout car (with turret gun) at a town war memorial, Zempel substituted the SUV — the Maritimes' preferred defensive vehicle — when faced with local opposition.

A nearby oak grove sheltered bright-coloured spheres resting in shallow craters, possibly rejected from the celestial machinery; or are they toys? With polystyrene and latex paint, Vivenza's *On the Way to* pokes fun at romanticism whether found in landscape or earth art, or in mythicization of the moon and tides. Deflecting concern away from the dangers of climatic and cosmic accidents, *On the Way to* wickedly plays on contemporary willingness to hide in the joys of commodification. Just imagine, what colours could rejected moons be?

between man and nature, aboriginals and settlers, French and English that flowed across this region and shaped its future. As in J.-B. Watteau's *Embarkation for Cythera* (1717), *L'Embarcadère* beckons towards the unknown, freeing each of us to experience a pleasurable desire that rounds on the sense of self. However, *L'Embarcadère* interrupts romantic nostalgia enough to remind each of us that she awaits the day when the Fundy tides reclaim the Tantramar marshes.

Two installations arguably fail to explore place sufficiently and, in turn, only weakly engage self-recognition. Although Bob Verschueren's (Belgium) *Translations*, a pile of tightly stacked birch saplings, might entertain, the abstract basis of his practice ("organic into geometric") is reflected by indifference to locality. For *Gulliver*, Nils-Udo (Germany) heaped topsoil around

the trunks of some spruce and planted it with lush grass. While *Gulliver* creates a miniature world, it is not specific to this forest. Rather, both installations draw attention to their environmental cost. Their partial burial will eventually kill *Gulliver's* trees, while *Translations* required cutting an order of 600 hardwood saplings. They are a reminder that, in the Maritimes, thousands of hectares of re-sprouting hardwoods continue to be killed with herbicide to prepare land for industrially-preferred spruce, or are cleared for blueberries. How far should earth art mimic destructive environmental practices?

For this exhibition, earth art ranges from pointedly sociopolitical and contemporary practices to those focussed on history and use of local

materials. It is interesting that two female artists, Zempel and Vivenza, in a critique of romanticism, avoided local materials and thereby distanced history. Their installations initiate a challenging dialogue with the others, to the effect that I must re-imagine my self's implication with place; "a return to nature" includes not only fundamentally embracing a changing cosmos, but a return to history and an often rueful revision of my self-recognition. ←

Sculpture Sackville 2008

Sackville Wildfowl Park, New Brunswick
Summer 2008

Tila KELLMAN writes, curates and sometimes teaches in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. She is the author of *Figuring Redemption: Resighting My Self in the Art of Michael Snow*, and writes for *VANS Magazine*.

Yolanda GUTIÉRREZ, *The Hunter's Power*, 2008. Plywood, styrofoam, anchoring materials. Photo: courtesy Tila Kellman.

← Michael FLOMEN, *Untitled*, 2008. Photogram, hardwood saplings, stone, cat-tails. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

Gilles BRUNI, *L'Embarcadère, construire un canot et abri dans l'attente de la marée*, 2008. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

