

Joan Scaglione: *Ribs of Sky, Ribs of Stone*

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Joan SCAGLIONE: *Ribs of Sky, Ribs of Stone*

Greg BEATTY

On January 7, the day that Regina sculptor Joan Scaglione began installing *Ribs of Sky, Ribs of Stone* at the MacKenzie Gallery, the mercury plunged to minus 37.5°C and there was a wind chill in the minus 50°C range. As described by Head Curator Timothy Long in a short promotional essay, the exhibition consisted of a “small fleet” of cedar-beamed canoes, ranging in length from eight to 24-feet that Scaglione planned to place on the floor and hang from the ceiling of the MacKenzie’s most expansive gallery. Just imagine delivering a bulky cargo like that from your studio to the gallery in minus 50°C weather.

Now imagine doing it the old-fashioned way. And by old-fashioned I mean the way canoes used to be transported overland in Canada by the First Nations, Metis and early European explorers and fur-traders. When they reached a dead-end waterway, or needed to detour around a waterfall or impassable section of rapids, they’d pull into shore, unload their canoes and carry them and their supplies miles over often-rugged terrain to reach a connecting waterway. Even in summer, with swarms of ravenous mosquitoes and black flies to contend with, portaging was a pretty brutal exercise. In winter, it would have been indescribably worse. Of course, outside of possibly getting caught in an early season freeze-up on a northern lake or river and having to portage to open water,

people who traditionally used canoes for transportation back then used other means to get around in the winter.

Five of Scaglione’s canoes were simple ribbed structures without hulls. The other 13 had hulls, and were built competently enough that, from a distance, it seemed possible they might be functional. It would have taken a lot of time, effort and skill on Scaglione’s part to craft them, admittedly. But as anyone familiar with her work knows, she’s not averse to tackling a big project. Imbued, wrote Long in his essay, with a desire to “re-mythologize humanity’s broken relationship to the earth through images of healing and regeneration,” Scaglione did a recent residency in Dawson City in the Yukon where she created the outdoor installation *Earth Bed Tells*

—using tailings from a nearby strip mine and garbage from the city dump to construct a series of life-size beds. Anyone who can pull that off can surely make a few watertight canoes. Well, maybe. But when you take a closer look at Scaglione’s canoes, it instantly becomes apparent from the light that shines through tiny cracks that they are not functional.

For those who don’t know Regina, the MacKenzie Gallery is located in Wascana Centre. A key feature of the 930-hectare park, which is consistently rated by Reginans as one of the city’s top amenities, is Wascana “Lake.” Those aren’t sneer quotes, by the way, just an admission that as far as large bodies of fresh water go, Wascana isn’t exactly “Great.” It’s more of a slough really. Most of it was hand-dug as a



Joan SCAGLIONE,
*Ribs of Sky, Ribs of
Stone*, 2010. Detail.
Mackenzie Art Gallery.
Photo: courtesy of the
artist.



Joan SCAGLIONE,
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Mackenzie Art Gallery.
Photo: courtesy of the
artist.

make-work project during the depths of the Depression. Then in 2004, it had to be dug out again to remove all the silt and deepen it for the 2005 Jeux du Canada Games. The yachting events weren't held there, but canoeing, kayaking and rowing were. So it is navigable by small watercraft.

After *Ribs of Sky, Ribs of Stone* closes on April 11, I should mention, Scaglione plans to transport the boats from the gallery to a farm outside Regina and burn them. Probably not the most environmentally friendly thing to do, granted, but it does serve as a fitting end to a transformative cycle where the boats will move from water to sky to earth to flame. Had Scaglione made her canoes waterproof, and had her show been held in summer instead of winter, she could have enlisted the help of some canoeists and delivered them to the gallery by paddling them across the lake. Instead, she elected to portage

them in. To alert local media, the MacKenzie issued a press release. It was bitterly cold that day, as I noted, so I didn't make it out to watch the procession. But there is video documentation in the show. With minus 50°C wind chill, exposed skin freezes almost instantly. And here were these poor souls, grimly trudging through the park with canoes held aloft like they were extras in a no-budget remake of *Nanook of the North*.

A week or so later, we had a nice stretch of sunny and mild weather. Had the portage taken place then, it would have qualified as a pleasant winter outing for Scaglione and her crew. Granted, they still would've been engaged in a pretty incongruous activity. With a large hill also situated in Wascana Park, it's not uncommon to see families and children walking with toboggans in winter. But canoes? Throw in the minus 50°C wind chill, and Scaglione's surreal procession tran-

sceded the quixotic and entered the realm of the deliciously sublime. And it did introduce an intriguing interpretative wrinkle into the show.

If, as Long suggests, Scaglione is interested in "re-mythologizing" our broken relationship to the earth, her installation implicitly critiques the drive we have in the West to tame or master nature through the relentless development and application of technology. When European explorers and settlers first arrived in the New World, the wisest among them probably observed the indigenous inhabitants pretty closely and did as they did in order to survive. Filled with Euro-centric hubris and Christian chauvinism, however, others mindlessly sought to transplant their genteel Old World lifestyle to the decidedly less domesticated New World. Innumerable times, surely, this led to scenes no less absurd (and ultimately even

fatal) than the portage here.

The effort, I'm pleased to report, was worth it. Installed in a gallery with a gorgeous hardwood floor, and with the addition of half a ton of rough-hewn black slate that is hung on one wall as a powerful evocation of the hard and unforgiving land, *Ribs of Sky, Ribs of Stone* is visually stunning. Through judicious lighting, Scaglione's even managed to create some haunting shadows that foretell the conflagration that will ultimately consume the canoes in April and transform them from solid wood into light, heat and smoke.

Good show. ←

Joan Scaglione:
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