

## Scott McFarland, *A Cultivated View*, Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa April 11 to September 13, 2009

John K. Grande

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Scott McFarland, *Orchard View, Late Spring: Vitis vinifera, Wisteria*, 2004, from the series *Gardens*, chromogenic print, Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa.

## Scott McFarland

**A Cultivated View**  
Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa  
April 11 to September 13, 2009

Given his avid interest in gardening, west coast photographer Scott McFarland addresses the landscape with his photographs. Is he acutely aware of the history of landscape in art? The thirty-six works on view in this exhibition curated by Andrea Kunard reveal McFarland to be a very aesthetic, informed photographer. His photos address their subjects as a painter might have in the nineteenth century. The people are of our time, but the scenes might have been painted by Thomas Gainsborough or Joshua Reynolds had they lived in the twenty-first century. McFarland's lens exploits the landscape, even characterizes it as an archetype. In doing this, he makes a point, for landscape and ideas of nature are as categorical and idealized as they ever were ... A car commercial on TV can tell you as much!

McFarland presents human players gardening, relaxing, riding horses, or visiting a zoo in landscapes as ambiguous and artificial as they look natural. A subtle subtext to his *A Cultivated View* exhibition is our capacity to dominate, modify, play with, or orchestrate nature, even when we do not know that we are doing it. The message about control of nature, though modest, surfaces in *Spraying, Norman Whalley Applying Aphid Solution* (2004), an image of a gardener quietly going about his work.

Powerful for its simplicity, *Gorse and Sky* (2008) shows a spray of gorse bush on a hillside. One cloud hovers above. In the distance, a tiny cluster of Moslems are turned to Mecca praying, a clue to this work's contemporary context. *Fallen Oak Tree* (2008) also has a simple beauty worthy of the American painter Thomas Vicat Cole or another Hudson River School artist. Garden scenes such as *Hill Garden Pergola at Inverforth House* (2007) show cultivated species with a "natural" complexity. They have been arranged into areas, with walls separating them. Spread out, this garden is a transitional one, dominance of nature has made way for a *laissez faire* approach to cultivation. Still other photos are reminis-

cent of Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*. Scale and distance – from the people to the dogs, to various other people sitting, kneeling, or lying down on the grass – give *View of the Vale of Heath, Looking Towards Hampstead* (2007) a "naturalism" that is as romantic and contrived as were John Constable's nineteenth-century views of Hampstead. McFarland's landscapes play on the way we read visuals today, and this makes them distinctly – ingeniously – of our times. The visual elements in a photograph are not segregated or objectified, but part of an overall flow – the image as part of a screen, let's say – but a very novel, static, and digitally enhanced viewfinder if there ever was one. Classic and contemporary come together in *Dipping, Conrad Arida with Mother and Child Wading in the Water* (2004). A mother dips her child in the fountain; a pair of pink flip-flops and a towel are strewn nearby. The man in the scene dips his foot in the water hesitantly. The scene is near-biblical. Another photo, *Discussing, Michael O'Brian with Artist and Model on his Property* (2005), has a similar close-up depth, and we see the human, the body, all the activity in a contemporary context, less framed by the frame. The implication is

that space continues beyond the frame or borders, making this a virtual still life.

*Pouring, Ben Kubomiwa Treating Fountain with Potassium Permanganate* (2007), with its vivid dye dissolving in front of an orchestrated waterfall scene, and *Trapping, Ernesto Gacutan Positions Against Fauna* (2003), with a scene of a man setting a cage trap in a garden, again subtly look at what we do to nature, and not all of it is good. If ever there was a photographer who emblemized the contemporary language of the landscape it is McFarland, not just for his content – people, plants, trees, landscapes – but also for the way he unframes the scenes that he captures, as if he were entering captions in a photo book on contemporary myth. As an artist he understands how we have placed ourselves, and our civilization, vis-à-vis nature as we cultivate, consecrate, orchestrate, and bulldoze, eternally changing and reconfiguring the landscape. And so his photographs are as much about what has eternally driven us as humans as it is about the landscape or nature. It's a cultivated view of our primordial drives, all very scenic, with vistas, planar visions, and people moving in and through photographic scenarios as if it were all a stage and the people in it merely players.

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**John Grande's** *Dialogues in Diversity: Art from Marginal to Mainstream* was published by *Pari Publishing (Italy)* in 2007 ([www.paripublishing.com](http://www.paripublishing.com)). *Art Allsorts: Writings on Art & Artists*, vols. 1 and 2 (2008/2009) are available at . *John Grande is curator of Earth Art 2009 at the Royal Botanical Gardens, Hamilton* ([www.rbg.ca](http://www.rbg.ca)). [www.grandescritique.com](http://www.grandescritique.com)  
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## Road Runners

VOX, centre de l'image contemporaine, Cinémathèque québécoise, Montréal  
Du 6 mars au 30 mai 2009<sup>1</sup>

Dans *les Fraises sauvages* de Bergman, la route à coups de *flash-back* fait remonter le fil du temps et permet de revenir à la source, vers l'enfance. *Il Viaggio in Italia* de Rossellini oblige les protagonistes à éprouver la pérennité des choses. C'est à Pompéi devant les amants enlacés et saisis par la lave que le couple en crise se redécouvre.

Partir à zéro, c'est en même temps transformer, éclairer ou racheter tout ce qui peut rendre la vie difficile à supporter. Le voyage atteint son moment de vérité en transcendant le quotidien. *Easy Rider* (1969) se fait l'emblème d'une nouvelle cinématographie. Projetant les utopies et les cauchemars de l'époque, la moto de Dennis Hopper et de Peter Fonda nous emmène jusqu'au délire psychédélique. À l'heure du déplacement des personnes

et de la déterritorialisation, les road movies de Wim Wenders conduisent au désert où toute distinction est aplatée. Refuge, souvenir, non-lieu, utopie... aujourd'hui dans le road movie l'origine elle-même est devenue hybride. Au-delà d'un lieu originel et non contaminé, c'est une nouvelle mixité, le mélange, et toujours le conflit et le dialogue des codes, qui font sortir les protagonistes d'eux-mêmes. Au cinéma et en littérature, le road movie permet de fixer et de confronter l'identification tant personnelle que collective à une histoire à jamais inachevée de perte et de rédemption. Si le road movie donne forme au passé qui a posé ces acteurs ici et maintenant, il le rachète du même coup face à un avenir en forme d'espace virtuel, vide et prégnant où tout est à gagner, où tout est à faire.

Initiée avec le western, la métaphore du voyage, celle du chemin chaotique, a beau être usée à la trame, le rêve pourtant subsiste. Au-delà de tout galvaudage, en s'attachant au thème du road movie, à la Cinémathèque et à VOX l'exposition *Road Runners* nous rappelait la puissance de cette métaphore. En parallèle avec des projections de films et à l'aide de ces topos



John Massey, *This Land (The Photographs)*, 2008, épreuves numériques à développement chromogène, 69,8 x 190,5 cm chacune, photo: Michel Brunelle.

cinématographiques, Marie-Josée Jean, commissaire de l'exposition, a centré cette thématique sans cesse à réinterpréter sur l'analyse des singularités que connaît le road movie en se transposant et se réactivant en différents formats : vidéo; cinéma et livres d'artistes; photographies; installation. La « mise en scène » transversale qu'est cette exposition se pose en exemple.

Bib! Bib! Faisant office de générique, le cartoon créé en 1949 par Chuck Jones renforce à l'entrée de l'expo à VOX les liens avec la « séance » cinématographique. D'emblée, les accélérations caricaturales du personnage pourchassé par Coyote et les expédients dont use ce dernier nous ramènent aux images modernistes du déterminisme de la machine sur fond de fonc-