Landscape has the potential to shape consciousness. How we picture the world and imagine ourselves within it powerfully impacts our identity.

One of my earliest encounters with landscape art took place at the McMichael Art Gallery in Kleinberg, Ontario. It was there that I first saw Tom Thomson’s cabin and the paintings of the Group of Seven. I was very impressed by the paintings and by the stories of their making: the members of the Group who bucked the traditions of landscape art of the day and boldly painted Canada from a Canadian perspective. Their work presented Canada as a raw and vital place that was far removed from the tamed and pastoral landscapes of England and the Continent. As a first generation Canadian, the difference between how these two worlds were portrayed played an important early role in my process of self-definition.

As objects of nostalgia, the landscape paintings of Tom Thomson, the Group of Seven, and Emily Carr (not an official member of the Group but an integral contemporary from the West) continue to play a lingering but less powerful role in my sense of what it means to be “Canadian” because what I cling to as an idea of a place is rapidly diminishing (if not completely) imaginary.

It could be argued that the work of the Group played an important role in the construction of a national self-definition. In contrast, the works of Thomas Kneubühler and Bertrand R. Pitt portray landscapes that implicate us in their conditions. In other words, through Kneubühler’s and Pitt’s works, it becomes clear that landscape doesn’t shape us—we shape the landscape.
images. Either mode of viewing invites quiet contemplation. The solitary act of looking at and engaging with the work produces a synchronic and utterly subjective relationship with the projected landscapes. Viewed in isolation, the pulsing images and presence of the viewer. However, this sense of solitary coexistence is disrupted by the presence of additional viewer-participants. Pitt’s interactive interface is designed for multiple viewers; it is no accident that there are numerous sensor plates placed throughout the installation space. Whereas landscape has traditionally been portrayed as transcending human interference, the transformed landscapes in Uncertain Horizons arise as a result of human involvement. As such, Uncertain Horizons implicates viewers in the distortion of its images. Any cohesion that could have formed within a group of viewers and the projected landscapes paradoxically leads to a breakdown of the images themselves. Pitt’s interactive installation articulates our contemporary understanding of the hazard-laden relationship that can occur between humans and the environment, and the disintegration of Pitt’s images becomes a shared responsibility.

It is noteworthy that Pitt’s projected images are composed of both urban and natural landscapes. This saves Uncertain Horizons from being characterized as having a mere “tree-hugging” agenda. On the contrary, the interactive element in Pitt’s work subtly shifts our relationship to landscape via a cumulative effect. We, as viewers, are keenly aware that the degree of distortion in the images is contingent upon the number of people interacting with the work at any one time. In this case, density is presented as a condition that threatens urban and natural spaces alike.

As a multi-user installation, Uncertain Horizons becomes a staging ground for experiments with group behaviour. Viewers become participants who interact with one another in the construction or destruction of the work. Thus, authorship shifts from a solitary to a group experience. What effect, if any, does this shift have on the construction of our own identity? Our relationship to the projected landscapes, after all, is bound to the actions of the group, and agency is borne from an awareness of the collective rather than from a purely individual response to the work. Multi-user interactive experiences are commonly found in computer gaming. Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) were first introduced into computer gaming culture in the late 1980s. MUDs allow multiple players to interact with one another in virtual computing space. This form of multi-user interactivity encourages elaborate role-playing as it is predicated on the promise of user anonymity. This context is radically different from that of the group experience created in the interactive interface of Uncertain Horizons. Pitt’s installation invites a very public form of group activity, and viewer-participants are fully aware of each other’s presence and its effect on the display of the work. Because of this, viewers are faced with the need to make a decision on how to modify their behaviour in relation to the actions of the group, and agency is borne from an awareness of the collective rather than from a purely individual response to the work.

Night Lights: The Work of Thomas Kneubühler

Viewing a cityscape from an airplane at night prompts feelings of awe and voyeurism. I am fascinated with and dazzled by the look of a city when it is lit up at night and this feeling is magnified when the city is viewed from above. Staring down at a cityscape from the insulated chamber of an aircraft makes me feel that I am viewing the activities of an unfamiliar planet. As I hover above the cityscape, my birds-eye view allows me to silently observe the goings-on below with a cool and yet spellbound detachment. The turning on of lights signifies that a space is occupied. This is especially true of lights that are situated in non-urban environments. Lights placed in a landscape signify control over that space. In other words, outdoor lighting creates landscapes that are tamed rather than wild. The images in Thomas Kneubühler’s series Electric Mountains depict mountain ranges that have been artificially lit to permit night skiing. The artificial light subdues the
Thomas Kneubühler in collaboration with Geoffrey Jones (LED lights), Brise Soleil Meets Mt. Hortons, installation view at ProjexMtl Galerie, site specific installation, dimensions variable, 2009

The daunting landscape of the mountains and imbues it with a sense of spectacle that arises from human domination. Photographed from a distance, Kneubühler’s mountain ranges seem unreachable, if not entirely unreal. The powerful lights used to illuminate the slopes transform the landscapes into elaborate sets. In truth, the wattage needed to power these types of lights is closely related to the power used to illuminate outdoor film sets. In this context, night skiing approaches the realm of fantasy precisely because it can only exist within a hyper-mediated experience.

What do we feel when we are confronted with these images? Kneubühler’s decision to frame the mountains at a distance eliminates any identification with individual skiers. (In fact, the ski hills seem unoccupied). Looking at Kneubühler’s images evoke feelings of the sublime; if this had been his aim, his choice of a mountain range as subject matter, is highly appropriate. However, sensations of awe and speechlessness emerge from our understanding that the mountain landscapes have been tamed, rather than from any sense of nature’s power over us.

It is not uncommon to feel awe in the face of human domination over nature. Engineering wonders such as the Golden Gate Bridge, the Great Wall of China, and the Hoover Dam inspire feelings of wonderment and admiration. However, that a ski hill was kept open for business at night prompts feelings relating to decadence and even hubris rather than reverence. Nonetheless, Kneubühler’s photographs retain a seductiveness that holds our attention, even while their point-of-view keeps us at a distance. Kneubühler’s colour photographs, Electric #3, Electric #6, and Electric #9 are printed on transparencies, mounted in light boxes lit from behind. This gives them a compellingly eerie glow not unlike the luminance emanating from the artificially lit ski hills themselves.

The installation Brise Soleil Meets Mt. Hortons is a collaborative piece that pairs Kneubühler’s photograph Mt.Hortons with Geoffrey Jones’s LED light panels Brise Soleil. This work consists of a 3 metre x 3.6 metre
The invention of artificial light triggered humankind’s mastery over the natural world by giving us power over darkness. This advent radically altered our relationship to nature and put us out of sync with the environment. The slowly pulsing LED lights in Kneubühler’s installation pull us into a temporal relationship with the photograph that produces a sensation akin to watching snow (a.k.a. noise) on a television screen. In this case, time becomes an important component of our perception of an image that is paradoxically trapped in a condition of stasis.

In Kneubühler’s installation, the LED panels throw light directly onto the surface of the actual photograph, which creates a doubling effect between the light evident within the photograph and the lights that illuminate the photograph’s space in the gallery. Would the LED lights melt the snow pictured in the photograph? This is a naïve and somewhat rhetorical question, but it points to the tension that Kneubühler creates with his “night shot” could not have been made without artificial lighting.

Kneubühler presents us with an image of a landscape that has been artificially constructed. Yet because this landscape has been photographed, we receive it as something that occurs naturally. Kneubühler’s photographic landscape is derived from our involvement with them and as such, the act of observing Pitt’s and Kneubühler’s works becomes an encounter with ourselves.
Thomas Kneubühler was born in Solothurn, Switzerland, and has been living in Canada since 2000. In 2003 he completed a Master’s Degree in Studio Arts at Concordia University, Montreal. His work often deals with social issues and the affect of technology on people’s lives. Recent exhibitions include Real Estate at the Kunstmuseum Solothurn (2008), Trespass: A0 at Latitude 53 in Edmonton (2009), and Jet Montreal Contemporary at the Times Square in Shanghai (2010). He currently lives in Montreal, where he works at the Huguenin Institute for Research/Creation in Media Arts and Technologies at Concordia University.

Thomas Kneubühler, Electric #6
from the series Electric Mountains, 100 x 127 cm
c-print, 2009

Thomas Kneubühler, Electric #9
from the series Electric Mountains, 100 x 127 cm
c-print, 2009

Bertrand R. Pitt lives and works in Montreal. His videos and installations have been shown in more than fifteen solo exhibitions and a variety of group exhibitions in Quebec and Canada, as well as in France and Switzerland. His work has received support on numerous occasions from The Canada Council for the Arts and the Conseil des arts et deslettres du Québec, and is part of the collection of the Musée National des Beaux-Arts du Québec. He currently teaches in the visual arts department of Collège Lionel-Groulx, Quebec.

Bertrand R. Pitt: Nôve
from the series Nôve, 1:4:5
digital video, 2009

Simone Jones is an artist and educator based in Toronto. Jones is currently an Associate Professor of Art at the Ontario College of Art & Design University (OCADU) where she teaches in the Integrated Media Program. Jones is represented by Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in New York.

Simone Jones, Exclusion, 2008
metal, embroidery, 137 x 305 cm

following page:

Simone Jones, FMD18
from the series FMD18: Contemporary Art in Canada, 150 x 150 cm
c-print, 2009