

Roxy Paine, Daniel Corbeil. A Tree with No Leaves and a Landscape with Silos

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Roxy PAINE, Daniel CORBEIL

A Tree with No Leaves and a Landscape with Silos

John K. GRANDE

On a sunny day, Roxy Paine's *One Hundred Foot Line* stainless steel tree stretches skywards. This sculpture's crisp undulation is a sublime beatific statement. The scale is to nature. Seen in reverse, *One Hundred Foot Line* could represent a stroke of lightning striking the ground. The Ottawa piece is the largest of the tree structures Roxy Paine calls *Dendroids*. For the Whitney Biennial a fifty-foot tree stood in New York's Central Park, while another stood in Madison Square Park (2008). With some of the nature structures, Paine engages in what resembles a kind of manufactured bio-mimicry. Earlier in his career, Paine made some very exacting and precise recreations of the surface of the land and of "chunks of nature;" a lawn with a weeder, a field with mushrooms, even psychotropic plants like poison ivy.

Re-casting nature and copying or reifying nature's forms, Paine's sculptural process involves a series of transitions. He adapts the man-made stainless steel whose origins are in nature. He then adjusts the steel into recreations of tree forms. (Paine has even made mutant trees, trees that move, and a broken tree that looks like it was struck down by a natural disaster.) Nature parallels the art and the art parallels nature. There is no fusion of the two, nor any decisive integration. This is the key to Roxy Paine's paradoxical realist sculpture. What is nature? Ultimately Paine encourages us to question the linear way we historically have prescribed the nature culture dilemma. (Our construct of nature is largely fabricated, and designed by our worldviews, our inherited theological attitudes.) Whether conscious or unconscious, recognized or not, the biases as to what nature is or could be are there.

We objectify nature. Roxy Paine's

sculptural practice suggests that our art is also part of a complex interweave, where culture and nature cross-over in a series of stages and that this endlessly keeps happening. Less well known is that earlier on in his career, Paine made artmaking machines that robotically produced art according to the artist's programmed commands. The choice was painting, sculpture or ink drawing according to the program. On an overcast wintry day, *One Hundred Foot Line* looks like a giant crack in the sky. Whether with his "chunks of nature" or his art making machines, Paine inadvertently questions the hierarchy that we humans maintain over nature. While it reproduces aspects of nature, Paine's art likewise maintains a great distance from nature itself. These structures are wholly synthetic, and not at all organic. And yet the materials all derive ultimately from nature even as they are radically transformed into stainless steel or other elements. The materials' origins are in the ecosystem we are a part of.

The National Gallery of Canada's *One Hundred Foot Line* is the largest sculpture Roxy Paine has made to date. Like a tree with no leaves or branches, or as a material manifestation of a lightning stroke, the Ottawa piece reproduces something that looks natural in the form of a product (stainless steel). The artist assumes the role of interpreter of God's creations just as America's 19th century Hudson River School of landscape painters, or Fitz Hugh Lane and the Luminists once did. America's artists envisioned the landscape to be an extension of God's Dominion and the artist painter was a preacher of sorts, painting out his landscape parable on the power of God's universe. The difference is that this sculpture exists in nature as a physical presence. On a sunny day, the welded stainless steel cylinders shine with a brilliant resonance that is as beatific as those old landscape paintings—a sublime creation.

The siting of Paine's light sensitive sculpture on Nepean Point close to a classic bronze monument of

Champlain with his astrolabe is spectacular. You can see *One Hundred Foot Line* when crossing the old Victoria Bridge from Gatineau to Ottawa where the log booms once floated down the river, and the old E.B. Eddy match factory once thrived.

Made of industrial materials, *One Hundred Foot Line* refers to nature, copies nature forms through manufacture just as nature procreates its designs. Roxy Paine touches on notions of the sublime and the beautiful that existed as the core of 19th century Romanticism. Our cultural worldview, Paine seems to suggest, is influence by the way human civilization has become estranged from nature. The very natural look of Paine's sculptures renders their unnatural and artificial creation all the more unusual. Estranged from nature we exploit her resources. This duality is at the crux of our present day problems with sustainability, for estrangement makes it easier to exploit whatever the material, or subject may be. The same duality existed in the Romantic era when Turner and Constable painted their landscapes. It persists into the 21st century. Nature procreates, humans design....

Daniel Corbeil's simulated landscapes at Galerie 101 on Bank St. could allude to global warming and some of those sustainability problems that arrived with industrialism and still persist. *Constructed Landscape #8*, a two-dimensional, laser-print on polypropylene "document" presents a potential parable on global warming. This modular landscape has bits of hypothetical melting ice. The fictional character of the photo map is like earlier Corbeil works where mock-science laboratory containers had melting mountain landscapes, and inflatable Jules Verne-like science-fiction dirigible constructions delighted gallery-goers.

In the dead centre of Daniel Corbeil's floor installation, *Complexe industriel*, we see a tiny heroic statue of a man. This generic statue stands amid a chaotic scene of nuclear silos, industrial buildings, spherical struc-



Roxy PAINE, *One Hundred Foot Line*, 2010. Stainless steel, concrete. 30,48 x 1,3 m (approx.). Collection National Gallery of Canada. Photo : courtesy National Gallery of Canada.



Daniel CORBEIL,
Complexe industriel,
2010. Detail. Photo:
Courtesy the artist.

tures (made of recycled bulbs), grid pieces and assorted industrial paraphernalia. This no-man's land of cracked and rusted decaying industry and buildings is playful and ironic. Daniel Corbeil is originally from Abitibi-Témiscamingue, a town where nature existed, like the forest of miniature trees at the margins of this maquette, right next to the raw resource industries of mining and forestry. Corbeil's inquiry is into the ethics of resource exploitation, the foibles of humanity's progress and the way it seems to be in dialectical opposition to nature. These object/

artifacts and two dimensional photo documents of reconstructed map-like topographies describe the human soul's progress in the primary industries of the bush country of Quebec. The *Fragmented Landscapes* piece together what look like fragments of Google Earth maps. The scale model landscapes and scenarios Daniel Corbeil has painstakingly constructed capture what looks like real life aerial maps. Tiny bits of blue archival tape cover the surfaces of these landscape maps, rendering them somewhat abstract in appearance. The blue patch marks of tape and the invented

landscape features collide, merge and compliment each other. Shadows of hypothetical airplanes, of quasi-industrial and natural elements recur throughout on these "photo maps," outlining the duality of human intervention and nature that exists in much of the Quebec and Canadian landscape.

Daniel Corbeil builds his sets with a style that encourages interpretation. This *laissez-faire* re-fabrication and re-production is so thinly disguised that it could be laughable if the truth behind nuclear industrial narrative were not so serious (partic-

ularly since Japan's recent Fukushima disaster). Homespun, makeshift, these are the words that describe the narratives Daniel Corbeil realizes. Corbeil's is an engaging play of identity and memory. The plastic sheeting and corrugated cardboard show through from beneath the installation with a beautiful transparency as if to remind us how thinly disguised tragedy is and can be despite the appearance of things. Environmental concerns surface through neglect, just as the sense of abandon projected in the installation speaks of the fragility of our inherited worldviews that promote neglect of, exploitation of, nature. Corbeil's maps and installations capture an ideotype. And with a sublime sense, not so distant from that of the 19th century Romantic whose sublime and beatific landscapes delight us to this day, Corbeil suggests that in the ways we conceive of nature there is a potential irony and in that irony some trace of the sublime. ←

John K. GRANDE's *Dialogues in Diversity; Art from Marginal to Mainstream*, was published by Pari Publishing in Italy, (2007). His most recent books are *The Landscape Changes*, Prospect/Gaspereau Press, (2009) and *Natura Humana; Bob Verschuere Outdoor Installations*, Editions Mardaga, Brussels, (2010).

Daniel CORBEIL,
Complexe industriel,
2010. Metal, cement,
recycled objects, card-
board, clay. 60 x 400 x
400 cm (variable
dimensions). Photo:
Courtesy the artist.

