

Kelly Richardson, *Terrene*

In Kelly Richardson's recent solo exhibition *Terrene*,¹ curated by Scott McGovern, her works are paired with Group of Seven and Tom Thomson paintings from the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre's (MSAC) permanent collection. Though stylistically different, the pairing is a highly effective match. Together, the works engage in a dialogue framed by issues of imperial conquest and the Romantic fascination with "the apocalyptic sublime."² Richardson's landscapes are always situated at some endpoint, whether it be the end of time, the abandonment of a site or the moment before death. The same might be said for Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven. As part of a concerted effort to construct a unified Canadian identity, they depict an uninhabited land available for exploitation and by doing so erase North American indigenous history. The landscapes are also a sort of eulogy for wilderness itself—recording wilderness has rendered it both property and cultural product. In this way, both series of works have a parallel sense of time and both act as witnesses to something lost.

In his essay "Imperial Landscape," W.J.T. Mitchell proposed that landscape is not a genre as much as a medium associated with imperial aggression. "Empires move outward in space as a way of moving forward in time; the 'prospect' that opens up is not just a spatial scene but a projected future of 'development' and exploitation."³ Many of Richardson's works use the Romantic trope of ruins to project to the very end of empire, while others substitute a projected future of destruction for development. In the case of *Mariner 9* (2012), originally a three channel HD video installation but shown as a panoramic photograph at MSAC, the future is envisioned in the form of an abandoned Martian space station. The actual landscape is built from data gathered by the real Mariner 9 space probe in 1971, though, as Richardson explains, it was difficult to maintain uncompromising fidelity to the data in the making of the work. Mapped out on a computer, the information yielded a jagged nondescript area that had to be painstakingly filled in with additional detail such as rocks, colour, dust, light and debris. The final panoramic view looks like an image by Caspar David Friedrich. A distant, hazy sun illuminates a vast sprawl of red earth, while what would be a cross in Friedrich's paintings look to be two non-functioning smokestacks. Outdoor lights continue their pulsating glow, presumably as a result of the indifferent automation that has outlasted the lives that designed it. The dusty Martian sand evokes another Romantic allusion, the boastful inscription turned ironic epitaph on the ruined statue of Ozymandias—"Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!"⁴

The Great Destroyer (2007-2012) is an eight monitor video installation that, rather than depicting wreckage, plays idyllic scenes from Algonquin Park, one of the Group's preferred painting spots and the site of Tom Thomson's death. The monitors, which are about the same size as the included paintings, function more like canvases than videos. There is no camera movement or editing; the only motion is the swaying of leaves and the flowing of water. One can easily imagine the painters in these exact locations attempting to produce uniquely Canadian pictures. Overtop the videos runs an audio track of an Australian lyrebird, a species that mimics the sounds around it. Between moments of birdsong, its tone convincingly descends into a chainsaw's growl or the humming of a passing car. While these sounds portend imminent destruction, they also speak to the hybrid nature of wilderness itself. Nature, and how we separate ourselves from it, is only ever a concept that serves someone's ends, whether it be imperial power, environmental activists, or industry. At the same time, we are encouraged to interpret the accompanying paintings within the framework of destruction. The wilderness, now well documented, is not quite wild anymore but lies in the service of culture and national mythology. While the destructive connotations of the chainsaw are apparent, there is also a destruction that occurs with any type of representation. Images of wilderness depend on witnessing that which derives its value from being untouched by human hands.

The largest work in the show is a dual channel video called *Orion Tide* (2013). The landscape is reminiscent of the Nevada desert nuclear test site, except here the explosives originate on the ground and blast up into the air like missiles or space shuttles. The impression is of the Earth attacking an unknown enemy rather than our world under siege—Orion, after all, is the great hunter of Greco-Roman antiquity. However, it is unclear who the enemy is. The so-called attack has a vaguely impersonal quality to it and, eventually, even a lulling effect. Could this be a test or an automated response that jumps into action after the civilization that built it is long gone?

The fashion for ruins was so prevalent in the 18th and 19th centuries that weathered Greek temples inscribed with moralistic, edifying verses were often constructed in the English countryside. These "ruins" had the effect of visually positioning England as the rightful inheritor and caretaker of civilization. In a reworking of Mitchell's quote above, we might think of empire extending into the past by occupying time itself. In Richardson's work, time is stunted. Since it is impossible for us to see our own end, it remains unclear who inherits the vestiges of the future empire.

More strikingly, it feels as if the eye that surveys our future wreckage is closer to machine than human. Even as they reference Romantic landscape painting, Richardson's images are mediated views that minimize the presence of human touch. They are modelled on data and composed using technological means. There are no moral verses, no narrative, no movement forward, only vast, moody expanses and automatic repetition.

The exhibition also showcases Richardson's early works, which include polaroids taken of wilderness scenes in horror movies, as well as an augmented video of her childhood neighbourhood in Guelph. These works function as precursors to her more ambitious digital constructions and show the evolution of her interest in the "apocalyptic sublime." Uncanny feelings of loss and a confrontation with the unknown permeate all the works, though they are brought to a much higher refinement in her installations. Together with the assorted Tom Thomson and Group of Seven paintings, the exhibition continues the Canadian tradition of thinking through landscape, though its implications are universal at a time when commercialized space travel and missions to Mars begin to sound like reality. The show also highlights a particularly secular sort of apocalyptic imagination based on environmental collapse and our likely failure to outrun our own destruction.

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1 *Terrene* by Kelly Richardson was presented at the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre, Guelph, from January 22 to March 27, 2015.

2 Coined by Morton D. Paley in his book of the same title (*The Apocalyptic Sublime*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986) and used by Kelly Richardson in reference to her work.

3 Mitchell, W.J.T. "Imperial Landscape." *Landscape and Power*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994. 17.

4 Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "Ozymandias." *The Literature Network*. http://www.online-literature.com/shelley_percy/672/ Web. 19 February 2015.