Espace Sculpture

Kevin Kelly : We are Standing in Infinity

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"I was at a private view of the Diorama; it is in part a transparency; the spectator is in a dark chamber, and it is very pleasing, and has great illusion. It is without the pale of the art, because its object is deception. The art pleases by reminding, not deceiving", wrote John Constable on witnessing the first painted diorama by Louis Daguerre at Regent’s Park in London in 1823. The Romantic painters’ fascination with the diorama was entirely consequent with their vision of a natural world that was at once sublime and yet also an idealized simulation of reality. For them, the act of recreating nature was entirely caught up in a subjective vision, one that affirmed humanity’s spiritual title to her boundless reserves.

Today's art is moving increasingly towards images that are denaturized and decontextualized. Our sense of identity is now stigmatized by the ways in which communications technology projects, transmits and prints images. The West's Judeo-Christian traditions with their idealized notions of transcendence, on the one hand, and these effects of technology, on the other, channel our
responses and choices of imagery in art. The sublime ideals of
transcendence that once superseded nature have now been fused
with a technological bias that inadvertently decontextualizes nature.
Kevin Kelly has been involved in producing paintings and art instal-
lations that address these questions over the past six years directly or
indirectly through the forum of the diorama presentation. Con-
structed in a 180 degree, semi-circular fashion like the habitats one
might see in a Natural History Museum, the very format of Kevin
Kelly's first diorama presentations created the same effect without
idealizing, but instead by directly importing environmental sites
wholesale. They revealed the meanings we apply to nature to be
wholly inconsequent with what nature actually is. Reconstructed
Landscape #1 (1988-89), exhibited at the Surrey Art Gallery in
British Columbia, recreated the cavernous image of an open-pit
minesite near Black Lake, Quebec, eviscerated and denuded by
resource extraction. The half-ton of steel filings, actual resource ele-
ments imported wholesale and placed on the gallery floor in front of
the piece, aroused strong feelings of environmental dislocation. The
contrast between an idealized vision of nature and a constructed,
experiential one were as literal as they were explicit. By questioning
how our idea of nature causes us to conceive of nature in an objec-
tive, categorical way, while we presume our impressions to be
entirely subjective, Kelly's Reconstructed Landscape #1 elucidated
the Cartesian dilemma over subjective certainty and objective
knowledge in a way that was at once unequivocal and possible.

The following year Kevin Kelly portrayed the desecration of one
of the remotest regions in the world, Canada's far north, in Recon-
structed Landscape #4 (1990). The foreground was divided in its
centre by the dark line of a coal trench construction, painted with tar
along its sides. Piles of slate covered with lichen gave the real sensa-
tion of being in a northern arctic environment, as did the distant
horizon of Kelly's painted diorama backdrop. Reconstructed Land-
scape #4 made it clear that even in places farthest from civilization,
including Canada's arctic, the wilderness landscape is being mapped,
divided, rationalized for future exploitation. Descartes' presumption
that matter by and of itself could not possibly have any (conscious)
intention loomed large in this piece. Standing between the lines of
Kelly's infinite horizon line, within the trench that divided the piece
into two sections, it wasn't hard to read between the lines: our
resource planning strategies are guided by profit, pure and simple,
while considerations about resource management and nature conser-
vation are mere window dressing for the publicity departments of the
head offices of multinational corporations. Is it any surprise that in our
para-consumer guise, we are generally unable to decode the toys, instruments, clothes and even foodstuffs we consume in our daily reality? They all, after all, have their origins in the culture of nature. In The Ecology of Freedom, Murray Bookchin suggests it is social coding that guides
our reading of reality, and not vice versa... “the extraordinary, indeed
pathological, disjunction of nature from its manufactured results”
stems from “a largely mythic interpretation of technics... When
we say that a product, food, or even therapy is “natural”, we usually mean
that it is “pure” or “unadulterated”, not that it comes from nature.”

At this point a secondary issue began to arise out of Kelly's dio-
ramas. While the meaning of both art and culture are inimically tied
to the processes of nature, we still cannot exactly define what exactly
nature is. It can variously be a word, a subject, an objective general-
ization, an issue or a state of being. Reconstructed Landscape #5
(1987-91) exhibited at the Living Art Museum in Reykjavik, Iceland
approached this question passively. Kelly did not transform anything,
but instead let environmental reality speak for itself. A large scale ten
by twelve foot photo mural of a forest in Holland with a single spe-
cies of trees arranged in neat sequentially ordered rows was pre-
sented as a simple record of what looked like a “natural” environ-
ment entirely designed by man. It is a potent symbol of humanity's
urbane capacity to rationalize the external landscape for purposes of
maximal resource efficiency; the only real reference to a wilderness
scene in the installation was a stuffed red fox transfixxed in the fore-
ground, a trophy killed and prepared by taxidermists to present a
living image of nature. With Reconstructed Landscape #6 (1991)
Kelly incorporated a life-size plastic mold of a bear (the type used by
taxidermists) into the foreground of a diorama scene where waters
churned with an eerie, blood-red colour that felt like a cross between
Edvard Munch’s The Scream (1893) and Gericault’s The Raft of the
Medusa (1818-19), devoid of people and minus the raft.

Reconstructed Landscape #3 (1990) exhibited at La Chambre
Blanche in Quebec City did more than just reveal the dichotomy
between an objective and subjective view of nature (the ideal and the
reality). Here, the diorama no longer functioned like a kind of dead
theatre or lifeless simulator of natural environments. The viewer's per-
ceptual inner response became the issue amid a circle of video mon-
tors measuring four metres in diameter and buried amid ten cm of dirt
in a darkened room. While at first sight the projected images of flowing
water from the screens were perceived as beautiful and compelling,
their initial attraction soon gives way to the feeling that something was
fundamentally wrong with these images. The whirlpool effect of simu-
lated video images of water flowing at varied speeds in the same direc-
tion was both ethereal and unsettling, particularly when, for one brief
moment, the water turned blood red. The inherent connections
between an inner response and the external stimuli both re-
established and seemed strangely disconnected. While the environ-
mental cues simulated "real" experience using video technology, the
immediate, physical and sensory effect erased the borders between the
represented subject and our perceptual response to the piece.

Dioramas are as succinct a paraphrase for the way represented experience supersedes lived experience as one can get, particularly when its “object is deception”. They also epitomize an attitude to aesthetics that was firmly established in the 19th century, where artists actively believed in their spiritually transcendent (read
superior) relation to nature. The sublime or beatific landscape
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Kevin Kelly. We are
Standing in Infinity
Oil paint, wood &
paper.

In The Ecology of Freedom, Murray Bookchin suggests it is social coding that guides
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that anything unused was to be used if the very purpose of its existence was to be realized. Nothing in its natural state was acceptable.3 Kevin Kelly’s dioramas suggest that the Romantic painters’ vision of the landscape was, for its very idealism, no less a simulation, an escape from reality than the art of our era. The suggestion is that the act of representation now finds itself caught in a double bind, intricately linked to our civilization’s social, religious and historic biases while it also finds itself channelled into the narrow, so-called “innovative” yet de-contextualized language of the latest mass communications technology.

Kevin Kelly approached the issue of social and corporeal denaturalization by shifting his focus from a macro-cosmic scale to a micro-cosmic one in a series of five small-scale curved wall-piece dioramas, collectively titled Skin Disease Landscapes (1990–1991). The entire organism of the earth’s surface became a metaphor for the human body; its weathered skin, afflicted by unknown illnesses, passively awaiting its own destruction, armed only with life itself. The inherent fragility and lifeless appearance of these scarred, textural landscapes functions as a paradoxical emblem of an organism in a state of corporeal depletion. Its decay and transformation continues pathetically, regardless of whether the initial causes were natural or induced by human intervention.

In Dreaming with Open Eyes, Michael Tucker suggests that many of the problems we now face in the art of our times have to do with the language we use to describe our history and culture. He suggests we must strive to qualify the language we use so as to speak of what is other, that which Joseph Campbell says keeps us “transparent to the transcendent”. Tucker states that this “...does not imply any escapist refusal to face the world of social facts. On the contrary; it suggests the need to gain access to other energies, energies which may help us to turn the pain and confusion of so many of today’s ‘social facts’ into healing human potentiality.”4 We get something of this feeling from Kevin Kelly’s most recent installation titled We are Standing in Infinity (1992), exhibited at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery in Lethbridge this past year. Comprising two enclosures curved to 350 degrees that formed the shape of a figure eight, like an infinity symbol, it awakened feelings of mortality as much as of physical presence. The entrances to the two sections of the piece became narrow passages through which one could enter into each section. While the subject of the piece obviously had to do with Kelly’s treat-

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