Espace Sculpture

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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 exciting and precise recreations of nature structures, Paine engages in what resembles a kind of manufactured bio-mimicry. Earlier in his career, Paine made some very exciting and precise recreations of nature structures that existed as the core of 19th century Romanticism. Our cultural worldview, Paine seems to suggest, is influenced 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 met with mountain landscapes, and inflatable Jules Verne-like science-fiction dirigible constructions delighted gallery-goers. In the dead centre of Daniel Corbeil’s floor installation, Comptes industriels, we see a tiny heroic statue of a man. This generic statue stands amid a chaotic scene of nuclear silos, industrial buildings, spherical struc-
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 complement 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 laisser-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 (particularly 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 Verschueren Outdoor Installations, Editions Mardaga, Brussels, (2010).