Hammertown

Geoffrey Farmer , Brian Jungen, Myfanwy MacLeod, Euan Macdonald, Luanne Martineau, Damian Moppett, Shannon Oksanen, Kevin Schmidt

Hammertown showcases an emerging generation of West Coast based Canadian artists, and is the first comprehensive and thematically related exhibition of these artists' work to be realised outside Canada. Each of the artists has been commissioned by The Fruitmarket Gallery to make new work for the exhibition. In their working practice, the artists share a mutual interest in the use of commodities, popular media and everyday imagery. They employ techniques of transformation, and rework materials, media and products into objects of personal and political significance. Their work reflects a strong material and filmic sensitivity, but it is their complex, diverse response to the legacies of conceptualism and the critical avant-garde on the West Coast that is the central tenet of the exhibition.

The title Hammertown is taken from the novel Life, A User's Manual (1974), by French author Georges Perec. In one passage Perec describes a painter whose life project is creating and assembling puzzles from paintings he's done on his travels: "Once - and this is something he had never done for anyone and would never do again - he showed her the puzzle he was reassembling that fortnight: it was a fishing port on Vancouver Island, a place called Hammertown, all white with snow, with a few low houses and some fishermen in fur-lined jackets hauling a long, pale hull along the shore." For anyone familiar with Canada, and particularly its west coast, where it rarely snows, this scene is a comic amalgamation of stereotypes assembled from a host of received ideas. Hammertown is used to title this exhibition as a way of alluding to the sense of alienation that those who reside on the west coast can feel about their own landscape. Unlike other cities in North America, Vancouver is exceptionally young, and its geography still bears historically fresh marks from the rapacious projects of its European colonizers. This legacy is in the habit of refreshing and reiterating itself through cyclical processes of destruction and reinvention. On the West Coast, there is sometimes an urgent, guilty compulsion to beat back history by destroying that which is old, and as a consequence, the landscape sports a surreal mix of legacies. The works in this exhibition have been assembled in partial reflection of this psycho-geography.

The artists in Hammertown utilise pedestrian, idiosyncratic and quotidian materials and working methods in combination with everyday subjects to explore and further themes of conjunction. Each makes works that can harbour a sense of the uncanny, and often two disparate themes, objects, and/or subjects are brought together to form a startling new relationship. It is a surrealist bent that has been described by Vancouver Island critic Peter Culley as "politically motivated". Writing of a previous work by Brian Jungen titled Shapeshifter, he states: "…its active and direct incursion into the material substance of consumerism…the simplicity of its conception and execution, its blunt seizure of

transcendence from the most crushingly banal of circumstances and materials, were so unexpected on my first viewing of the work as to seem almost alien, shocking."

LOWER GALLERY

Immediately on the left is Kevin Schmidt's video projection, Long Beach Led Zep. Kevin Schmidt (born 1970) takes a particular interest in combining aspects of the sublime with the prosaic. He has an interest in surf culture, and recently produced a series of surfboards laminated with watercolour paintings of surfers engaged in mundane activities such as changing their clothes in beach parking lots. Long Beach Led Zep (2002), is a self portrait in video of the artist playing Led Zeppelin's Stairway to Heaven on a guitar while standing on a beach on the west coast of Vancouver Island. Schmidt contrasts the splendour of the outdoor location with his rudimentary guitar ability, evoking a world of overwrought juvenile sentiment and fatalistic bombast. In its naturalism, however, Schmidt's video imparts the heroic idealism of youth in counterpart to an encounter with the sublime.

In the middle of the lower gallery is Myfanwy MacLeod's sculpure Our Mutual Friend. Myfanwy MacLeod (born 1961, London, Canada) mixes popular references to produce large sculptural works and installations. In The Mascot (1996-99) she manufactured a cartoon-like self-portrait mascot costume which she wore to the opening of an exhibition. The Tiny Kingdom (2001) was an oversize, fully realized outhouse based on an amalgam of Hollywood film and historical sources. Based on an image extracted from the film Chitty Chitty Bang Bang, the work was grounded in the tradition of old-world rustic hermitage as a sanctified recluse for the artist, set within the architecture of the North American backwoods toilet. Our Mutual Friend is a sculpture of man's leg, foot and arm carved from a block of wood. Referencing the traditions of folk artists and rural handicrafts, the carving concentrates on a big toe of the foot poking through a hole in the boot. This iconic hillbilly image is a common cliché of North American rustic simplicity, and continues MacLeod's use of stereotypes to comment on the self-referencing characteristics of small communities, be they rural or urban.

Along the back and end wall of the lower gallery is Damian Moppett's photographic series Untitled (Heroic Tertiary). Damian Moppett (born 1969, Calgary) has worked in a variety of media, including painting, photography and sculpture. Amongst his recent works are a series of large photographs that glorify crudely manufactured miniature worlds made from tabletop detritus, and an intricately detailed architectural model of a fantastical, utopian skateboard park. In another new work, building on the idea of the tree fort, he manufactured crude dwellings out of cheap cardboard that are patterned on signature high modernist architecture. These paper sculptures were placed within the branches of tree limbs and twigs, creating a disjunctive play between modernist buildings and their child-like reinterpretation and reconfiguration as model play houses. Untitled (Heroic Tertiary) is a series of photographs of angora goats. Habitants of a semi-rural farm on the outskirts of Vancouver, the goats are depicted in a straightforward documentary style. The images evoke a common art historical subject within pastoral and rural genres, whilst alluding to a tradition of Vancouver based landscape photography. Neither landscape nor portraiture, Moppett's photographs hover at an intersection of unpresupposing subject and historical association.

In the room at the end of lower gallery is the first of Euan Macdonald's video works, The Shadows Path. Euan Macdonald (born 1965, Edinburgh) creates subtle video works which gently skew optical readings of everyday things and occurrences. Two Planes (1998) pictured a pair of airborne passenger jets one atop another as if in a romantic embrace. Ball (1996), digitally manipulated an image of a ball so that it bounced endlessly on a floor. His videos draw our attention to the trivial occurrences of everyday life, and through simple editing techniques often repeat finite, fleeting incidents, gently orchestrating events so they appear to be endless. In Brakestand (2000), a car is shown in profile spinning its rear wheels. The viewer expects the car to lurch forward or the spinning wheels to cease, and that the brakestand – and the video – will 'complete' itself. Instead Macdonald diverts this anticipation by looping the shot and playing it over and over, frustrating our need for conclusion and resolution.
In the works created for Hammertown, Macdonald is again pursuing the unconsidered and unexpected event, and his video works construct short looping narratives out of everyday occurrences. In The Shadow's Path (2002), Macdonald hired a helicopter to shoot a video image that follows the path of eclipse as the sun falls behind the earth. The New Zealand farmyards pictured in the work are seen just at the point of nightfall, and Macdonald slows the video playback to allow a durational depiction of the 'gloaming' of this countryside.

UPPER GALLERY
In the small room at the top of the stairs is Shannon Oksanen's 16mm film projection Spins. Shannon Oksanen (born 1967, Vancouver) draws on themes whose elements of present and past are at a moment of fleeting conjuncture. Two recent works have concentrated on video and film representations of figure skaters. In Compulsory Figures (1999) a skater is engaged in 'compulsories', exercises that have been recently removed from competitive practice as they were deemed too uneventful and mundane for television audiences. Spins, is a looped, 4 minute, 16 mm film projection. The subject is a figure skater practicing 'spins', rhythmic and formalist skating exercises which are the backbone of competitive practice, but which in this film are pictured in an unspectacular, static, black and white style. Oksanen filmed her skater against a backdrop of twinkling stars reminiscent of a theatrical stage, which refers specifically to the filmic backdrops and camera technique employed by silent film pioneer Georges Méliès. In A trip to the Moon (1902), amongst other turn of the century film works, Méliès pioneered the use of theatrical stage and stage magic techniques as tools for an early cinematic language. Oksanen quotes this passage between mediums, and utilises the drift from theatre to cinema as a method of picturing a subject in a moment of disappearance and reemergence into something new.

Moving round the upper gallery in a clockwise direction, on the right is a fabric sculpture titled The German General by Luanne Martineau. Luanne Martineau's (born 1970, Saskatoon, Canada) compulsive and laboriously produced sculptures and drawings combine an interest in early twentieth century cartoons, and their stark portrayals of race and class, with suggestively biomorphic, modernist forms. The German General, is a large, amorphous, and collapsible sculptural 'pillow' manufactured from felt and stuffed with

styro beads. Outcroppings of cartoon-like tenement buildings sprout from the top. The style is extracted from the iconology of the 1910 comic book The Yellow Kid by R.F. Oucault. His mildly racist depictions of the immigrant polyglot of North America has become a rich source for Martineau's investigation into the selectivity of Western attitudes toward ethnicity and race, and her abiding interest in repressed undercurrents of modernism.

On the wall behind Luanne Martineau's work is a drawing by Euan Macdonald. Further round is his second video work, Two Lions. Like The Shadows Path downstairs, this is played in slow motion, and depicts a male and female lion in a California zoo. Their uninterested expressions are occasionally punctuated with fleeting glances into the camera lens, and a sudden, disjunctive engagement with the viewer.

At the far end of the upper gallery is the full size prop trailer titled Box with the Sound of its Own Making, part of a work by Geoffrey Farmer. Amongst his previous work, Geoffrey Farmer (born 1970) has created elaborate archives out of ephemera associated with cinema and popular culture, and more recently, Victor Hugo's The Hunchback of Notre Dame. Box with the Sound of its Own Making (2002), is named after Robert Morris' instrumental sculpture of a box inside of which sounds associated with the box's construction can be heard, and is part of a cycle of works by Farmer forming an ongoing project under the title The Blacking Factory. Box with the Sound of its Own Making is a large semi-truck trailer built in mimicry of a production vehicle for a film shoot (one that might be used to house various props, equipment and costumes), but which is itself a fabrication. Behind the truck a video monitor screens November 19, 2001, Vancouver, Canada, depicting a set location in downtown Vancouver that appears to be the sight of a battle. Farmer snuck into a film set to produce the footage, and the video, coupled with the trailer, reference the ongoing use of Vancouver as a set for the production for a variety of Hollywood films. This aspect of the 'stand-in' also draws viewers into the double entendres and slippages common throughout Farmer's practice. Box with the Sound of its Own Making is, among many things, a white cube which resides within the architecture of an art gallery, and a sculpture of a container for props that is itself a prop.

Finally, on the floor in front of the lift, is Brian Jungen's Beer Cooler. Brian Jungen (born 1970, Fort St. John, British Columbia) formed his reputation with the production of Prototype for a New Understanding (1999), a series of masks reminiscent of North West Coast native designs that he constructed from Nike running shoes. In the recent exhibition, Museopathy, he was asked to produce a work to be sited in the Correctional Service of Canada Museum, an institution devoted to the objects, tools and weapons created by Canadian penitentiary inmates while incarcerated. One prisoner had laboriously assembled a stack of plastic cafeteria trays over the course of a year in order to create a hiding place for an escape attempt. Jungen 'recreated' this stack with newly purchased trays, assembling them on top of a wooden shipping palette that he had made from Western Red Cedar, a traditional building material of West Coast Indians. The result, Isolated Depictions of the Passage of Time (2001), was colour coded according to the astronomical numbers of Native inmates currently incarcerated in Canadian prisons, resulting in a dramatically beautiful, bitingly political artwork.

For Hammertown, Jungen is turning away from Native iconology toward a colonial model, and manufacturing a work from a Coleman cooler. In much of his work, Jungen has refocused an anthropological lens back upon cultures for which cultural exploration is a one-way street. European and North American societies are used to looking, not being looked upon. In Beer Cooler, Jungen co-ops motifs of tattoo art, biker gangs, and white trash culture to emblazon an object of middle-class wilderness retreat. It is stocked, with beer, much as it might be on a typical camping trip. The cooler, in this guise, harkens back to an object of West Coast Native art: cedar plank chests that were meticulously fashioned and elaborately painted with emblematic symbology. At the same time, the chest offers back, as a gift, one of the most devastating of European imports to North America.

More detail about the artists' work in the exhibition can be found in the accompanying catalogue, on sale in the gallery bookshop.

A children's quiz is also available, intended to help young visitors (aged approx. 7 to 14) engage with the works in the exhibition. Please ask at the gallery bookshop.

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