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J. J. LIGHTMAN

ENNEANNE O'CALLAGHAN

EMERGING GROUND



Clarington
Leading the Way



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EMERGING GROUND

“For nature is that which we usually conceive of as existing independently from us, whereas it is our (real and imaginary) interaction with nature and the environment that produces the landscape.”¹

To contemplate our place within nature there is a threshold to be crossed. Silently, underlying fragments shape a landscape, a formative mythology. It is here that artists E.J. Lightman and Anne O’Callaghan have entered into a transformative relationship between the wilderness and culture. Their unique use of raw materials, found specimens and cast forms create installations that harbour both political and spiritual gleanings.

Before I enter the studios of E.J. Lightman and Anne O’Callaghan there is a need to think about being in or with nature. Musings about travel, reading maps and wandering on foot become sustainable rhythms that alter my initial receptivity to each of their works. Ecological and philosophical questions are as much a consideration as is a methodical walk through the wilderness. In these two artists, one encounters a borderland, a site between states of mind and the physicality of natural elements. At each studio, the table becomes an important viewing device where individual works are shown in relationship to one another. There is a sense of sanctuary as specimens, found at a given site, become signs in negotiation with cultural artefacts or salvaged remnants.

For E.J. Lightman, a votive-like, regenerative construction of new objects is in the making as coral, wax, roots, shells and seeds encase or are encased by bell jars, small box assemblages or covered in gold. Anne O'Callaghan favours the multiple displays of natural forms. Arrays of thorns, sea urchins and bones draw attention to a kind of memento mori – a palaeontology of earth signs distilling acts of redemption in the gathering.

Emerging Grounds, as a curatorial, becomes its own site, a narrative of exploration. The levitating of ground (earth, soil, skin of earth, detritus) above itself becomes a self-reflective process revealing the very nature of our act of discovery within a wilderness. Casting becomes part of this raising process, allowing for the repetition and transformative distillation of raw material. It is here that a reflective way of mind grapples with unknown territories and begins a quiet narrative.

“But this assertion of human presence anticipates a threshold still to be crossed from wilderness as witnessed to wilderness as unwitnessed landscape art. The crossing of the threshold from witnessed to unwitnessed is marked by the erasure of the figural traces of human presence from the contents of the representation and the substitution of that witness figure, for example, by the nonhuman figure of a solitary tree.”²

Lightman and O'Callaghan are willing to grapple with their roll as **witnesses** in an ever more complex set of relationships to landscape. The performative nature of each installation constructs a series of memorable acts reminiscent of spiritual, mythical and ceremonial rites of passage. There is the recognition of an initial 'wound' as each sets about their own reparative constructions. To create an object that manages to 'stand-in' for ones own being in the landscape requires a technical and intuitive response to forms and events in association with the history of making artefacts. As each artist travels from urban to rural to wilderness sites, geographic transitions trace an invisible cartography. It is here that a **poetics of space**³ is internalized. Interior and exterior boundaries are broken down by intersecting zones of lived experience. There is no longer a completely isolated experience of wilderness without its solitude being modified by the architecture of cities. The fusing of wild and cultivated experiences becomes an inherent part of the work.

Lightman's votive-like forms combine fragments of man made materials such as barbed wire, glass, a saw, and roots with coral, shells, teeth and bone. They gather meaning as auras of intention: longing to remember, holding onto what could so easily slip from us. Gold-covered roots, once pot bound, are freed to delineate the air that surrounds them. These roots originally took their shape from the space within the pot. Their removal reveals the origins of their constructed nature, reminding us that the power of growing things can be domesticated (controlled) or wild. Wax and bronze casts reprint a living morphology with the spell of Mnemosyne (Goddess of Memory). Images of a cascading waterfall are caught within a rectangular piece of floor. Water spins toward taps as a never-ending cycle of use, forgetting the freedom of natural elements. Illumination is an underlying metaphor that touches each of Lightman's constructions. Even her menacing pieces, *Handsaw* and *Wound* shed light on a psychic condition. These concise poetic forms have a relationship to early pictographic language constructs. Each carefully chosen object is modified by its collective form. There is the internal presence of a story unfolding as the meeting of gathered detritus emerges into a different form of speaking.

Shrines found on a journey to Thailand had a strong effect on Lightman's early work. Here, the distillation of a pilgrimage site takes on meaning alongside one's presence in the wilderness. Through her juxtaposition of specimens and discarded objects, one senses the essence of boundaries between the cultivated form and natural form. It is at this very boundary that the act of memory comes into play. In the piece *Framed Plant*, a constructed way of viewing transforms the normal scientific isolation of a specimen. Lightman coats a wooden box with brown wax. Each small rectangular opening shapes an interior space of receptivity. Found flowers are not to be named and placed within a taxonomy of ordered referencing, rather they are painted gold, touched by a poetic transformation. Wax, a pliable and fragile substance, covers the wooden frame mirroring a thoughtful process that takes us through and beyond the naming of things. There is a grammar in this work, creating a bridge between states of being, as Bringhurst reminds us, "The world is the dictionary; the ecosystem – that thin but intricate, rumpled slab of organic memory – is the grammar."⁴ Lightman's newest piece in the exhibition is *Water Lilies* a DVD projection. A darkened room becomes a memory site as the sound of the artist's paddle moves through lily pads. Our focus is held in suspension as the projected image appears on a white cloth floating above the floor. There is stillness within the space as an almost surreal dream or vision takes hold of one's sense of sight. As the camera moves and zooms over the surface of water, each area of viewing breaks up into smaller circular discs. While the votive-like constructions act like miniature **theatres of memory** (Frances Yates) this darkened room encompasses one inside a virtual memory.



E.J. Lightman, *Handsaw*, 2002, bronze and
found saw, 18 x 5 x 1 inches



E.J. Lightman, *Framed Plant*, 2002, brown wax on wood, gold paint, found flowers, 15 x 6 x 2 inches



E.J. Lightman, *Wound*, 2007, root with inlaid barbed wire,
36 x 24 x 6 inches



E.J. Lightman, *Weed Relic*, 2007, mixed media, coral,
10 x 4 inches diameter



E.J. Lightman, *Root and Coral*, 2003, root from potted plant, coral,
brown wax, 12 x 5 x 5 inches



Anne O'Callaghan, Installation Shot



Anne O'Callaghan, *Vestment 2*, 2006, latex, real hawthorns, cast thorns,
10 feet wide, height variable

Anne O'Callaghan, *Waiting*, 2007, latex, bronze thorns,
12 feet long, height variable





Anne O'Callaghan, *Skin 2*, 2004, cast latex, stainless steel box. Steel box 8 feet long x 6 inches deep x 4 inches high. Latex 884 inches long x 6 inches deep x 2 inches high.

Anne O'Callaghan brings the wisdom of a bare spirit and the terror of the grand inquisitor into her finely honed installation. One thinks of the poet Octavio Paz transforming the words of Robert Motherwell, "The skin of the world, the sound of the world" into:

"Lines,
vehemence and geometry,
high-tension wires:
the scalpel line
that divides the world like a loaf of bread,"⁵

As she lifts back cast skins of rock and invisible vestments from a latex-painted wall, such gestures reveal a rift or tragic liminal space. Fragility and reparation are attended to as O'Callaghan sets about mending a deeply cast memory hidden in the earth. For all human actions within nature, bear the weight of a politics of contact. Bronze casts of specimens and her vast array of thorns become either lethal piercing objects or potential needles that set about mending the origins of a scar or wound. The Vestment series narrates both, the phantom visitation of the Grand Inquisitor who condemned innocent souls, or a surgeons delicate stitching of a necessary surgery. An ecology of conscience shapes a vital drama between nature and culture.

O'Callaghan's installation on the third floor loft of the Mill occupies the space as though each latex hanging were awaiting a performance. These textile like skins engulf the viewer within the work as a whole. Even the ambient light of the windows play into the dramatic aura. The monumental veiling of *Vestment #1* falls from the rafters like a curtain encrusted with lichen, negative rock formations and a single embedded leaf. Towards the back beams hangs *Vestment #2*, as a half moon pattern, an outstretched garment. A lone branch is cast and contained within the latex. Thorns stitch together

a rent in an otherwise smooth latex fabric. A narrative unfolds for the body, in the act of remembering, as each visceral memory is linked to a process of becoming. A third, folded vestment, *Waiting*, lies across a small table stitched with hawthorns. This draped material spreads out onto the floor anticipating its next unveiling. Imaginary movements and thoughts fill the space with invisible memories – re-scripted into the body of each viewer. No matter how stark or wild a landscape becomes, the moment of our human entry marks a meeting point, a cultural act of remembering. “To see the ghostly outline of an old landscape beneath the superficial covering of the contemporary is to be made aware of the endurance of core myths.”⁶ As Simon Schama reminds us, there is no entry into the wilderness/landscape paradigm without acknowledging the cultural layers of history scripted beneath any given site. O’Callaghan balances her relationship to the visceral memories of natural places with a social memory that maps out territorial boundaries. In *Skin 2*, latex is cast in a stainless steel box, removed and delicately balanced on the underside of the same box. This thick epidermal layer becomes a memory trace of its very genesis. The boundary of the box and the skin of tree bark is the measure of this skin’s marks or scars.

Emerging Grounds as an action excavates and lays bare a process of engagement with a landscape ever more complex and vulnerable. A politics of guardianship is distilled as both O’Callaghan and Lightman continue to unravel the infinite mystery of our participation in nature. The stratas of meaning actively shape a script we are all involved in and cannot be apart from.

ESSAY BY MARALYNN CHERRY, CURATOR

As a final appendix to this exhibition, it is important to focus on E.J. Lightman and Anne O’Callaghan as founders and co-curators of the Tree Museum. Their history of active engagement in such a project is a testament to an ongoing commitment of forging and deepening our communal dialogue with landscape.

Endnotes

- 1 Martin Lefebvre, *Landscape and Film*, edited with introduction by Lefebvre (Routledge, 2006) xiii.
- 2 Jonathan Bordo, *Picture and Witness at the Site of the Wilderness*, Critical Enquiry Winter, 2000, v.26 no.2 (The University of Chicago, "The solitary tree is a stand-in for the specular witness") 231–232.
- 3 Gaston Bachalard, *The Poetics of Space* (Beacon Press, 1969).
- 4 Robert Bringhurst, *The Tree of Meaning, Thirteen Talks, in Wild Language* (Gaspereau Press M.M.V.I.) 272.
- 5 Octavio Paz, *A Draft of Shadows*, "The skin of the world, the sound of the world" (New Directions, 1969) 69.
- 6 Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (Random House of Canada, 1995) 16.

Since the 1960's, **Collaborations** or **Joint Productions**, by two or more artists, musicians or performance artists became quite common. Gilbert and George, Bernd and Hilla Becher and Fastwurms are a few examples of such widely known collaborative groups to emerge. Less common are curatorial and administrative collaborations reflected in the shared vision between E.J. Lightman and myself, Anne O'Callaghan. *The Tree Museum* created such an ongoing partnership. It is a place, a thing and a concept, which could not be produced alone. Looking back over the past ten years, we are often amazed by the results of this collaborative process. Through our initiative, *The Tree Museum* attracts artists of varying genres, creating site works in a wide variety of forms. Projects involve local, national and international artists.

Site: 400 hundred acres

Loons, deer, fox, wolves, bear, dogwood, raccoon, trout lily, trillium, flying squirrel, chipmunk, beaver, heron, milkweed

It is a quiet place dominated by the Precambrian Shield, a place of many surprises. What holds my attention year after year is the reminder of an unseen community (not human). Circumnavigating the land one glimpses the bear, the deer, the magnificent moose; the movement of insects and the beauty of lichen; the discovery of a new body of water and yet another wild flower. I often think as I paddle the lake or walk through the woods that we have not traveled far from Thoreau's notion that "in wilderness was the preservation of the world". Then as now, wilderness (land-scape) is still a part of some mythic longing for escape or cultural desire for taming.

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