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GORDON LAURIN

Heather MacLeod: Exploring Landscape and Meaning

by Gordon Laurin

Over the past fifteen years Halifax-based photographer Heather MacLeod has created an engaging body of work that explores our relationship to nature by drawing from traditional landscape photography. She uses this format both as a stylistic model and as a strategy for posing interesting questions on our increasingly complex relationship to land. Of particular interest has been the way we develop an understanding of the natural world, and how photography has influenced how we think of the environment outside of urban space. She has worked primarily on thematically based series, sorting subjects in a standardized format, producing them in black and white and colour, using medium format film. The documentary series include, but are not limited to, lawn lighthouses of the East Coast, the archway in its many public forms across Canada, the vacationer's picnic table, themes of the frontier in the Canadian west, polluted rivers in Nova Scotia and a tree seed nursery used in reforestation.

Heather's interests in photography began in the 1970s when she bought her first camera, a Pentax. She needed to know how to use it, so she studied photography at both the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and York University. In the 1980s she began exhibiting her black and white photographs but for a period of time, switched from still photography to video and film production, before returning to her photographic roots again — this time working with a wide variety of medium format cameras, producing work in concept based series.

Taken collectively, the series discussed in this essay represent a catalogue of stored information, that while not an exhaustive study, still bring order by showing types and variations by multiple example. More importantly, unifying characteristics that otherwise might go unnoticed emerge when grouped together. In exploiting the ability of photography to sort and make comparisons possible, she draws out shared cultural values concerning land and how we use it. There is an interest in examining through the conventions of photography how land is transformed into a landscape. To this end, the series documents human interventions into the landscape and the manner in which land is marked or framed.

In order to facilitate this dialogue between marker and geography the photographs don't isolate objects through tight cropping but rather show their broader environment, helping to accentuate this exchange between the landscape and the artifact found within it.

Every region of Canada has particular forms of lawn ornamentation, those objects that are equal parts public sculpture, property marker and vernacular zeitgeist of cultural artifact. Any long road trip across Canada provides an opportunity to discover the latest form of home handcraft and residential pride found in these objects that are ironically an example of artistic effort at the same time they manifest sameness. On the East coast there are several variants that include the rustic, wooden lobster trap, large crazy shaped driftwood assemblages, the reversed truck tire planters and installations of colourfully painted buoys. The lawn lighthouse is part of this distinctive rural lawn ornamentation but unique it its complexity of construction and its practicality. Many have underground wiring that allow them to act as evening illumination at the end of driveways or around property entrances.

The *Lawn Lighthouse* series, comprised of thirty exuberant square format prints, was Heather's first photography to gain national attention in 1999. These works were the end result of Heather traveling the Maritimes, seeking out and documenting the many forms of lawn lighthouses found throughout the region. While one can immediately delight in their fanciful construction, I believe they

Second Peninsula, Nova Scotia
1999
chromogenic print
14" x 14"

collection of
Thunder Bay Casino

reflect a deeper sense of place than might at first be apparent. Although lawn lighthouses are increasing in numbers, actual lighthouses are diminishing as they are decommissioned from use. In this respect, the lawn lighthouse serves as a type of memorial to a disappearing structure operating on Atlantic shores. With the advent of global positioning systems, the lighthouse's navigational function has become obsolete, and the future of those still remaining is largely dependent on the efforts of communities dedicated to preserving them as a form of architectural heritage.

Hantsport, Nova Scotia
1999
chromogenic print
14" x 14"

collection of
Thunder Bay Casino

Having found a suitable working method for her photographic interests, Heather created a second even larger series, at roughly the same time as the *Lawn Lighthouses* body of work. This time traveling across Canada her focus was to document the many forms of freestanding archways found in city and rural landscapes. Again employing a square format and a front-on, symmetrical, documentation style, she photographed over fifty arches which she grouped into four categories — civic, commercial, religious and domestic. Common to all these arches is its role as a passageway that demarcates significance for a particular landscape or place. All arches serve physically and symbolically as a threshold to another space. In the series, we see the many ways that land is set-off and made unique through the use of the arch, and we become much more aware of the arch serving a deep, possibly unconscious need to impose specific meaning to particular locations.

Arches are by definition open, available and welcoming. In this series they vary from the whimsical, as is the case in many of the domestic arches, to the solemn as in the Westray Memorial arch created for twenty-six miners lost in the 1992 mining disaster in Westray, Nova Scotia.

It is important to make a distinction between the free-standing arch and the archway passage found as an architectural form in buildings. One may choose to pass through a free-standing arch; in a building you have no choice. As such you voluntarily 'enter through' the free-standing arch to a new space. The arch provides a sense of transformation, or ascendance to a unique realm psychologically. In its most utilitarian form it simply defines public from private

Cowbay, Nova Scotia

space. Granting entrance, the arch at the edge of a property welcomes while it defines ownership on an undifferentiated area of land. In other cases, the arch serves to signify a place of special significance that otherwise would be indistinguishable from its surroundings. In the arch series, Heather explores assumptions about land that are so central to western values we normally don't pay attention to them. The series documents a range of examples of arches as ritualistic land markers that reflect our deeper ideas of space.

The arch responds to our need to claim, define and make unique specific areas of land. They ascribe meaning to essentially neutral grounds. Past the arch, land is controlled, transformed into a safe haven.

Sharing many of the design strategies of the *Arch* series is *Beckoning Landscapes*. The common picnic table is photographed within its immediate surrounding, roadside stops and public spaces in Canada. As automotive travel became more common during the middle of the twentieth century there was an increasing need to provide rest stops for a population eager to discover the great outdoors. The car allowed people to go wherever they pleased and roadside stops became a necessity for these excursions. At each would be the picnic table, the openly available gathering point to rest, eat and enjoy the landscape. As a managed location for pulling off the road, the rest stop with its picnic tables would often be selected specifically to "showcase" the most picturesque of landscapes. They provided the exchange point between the traveler and the outdoors; the places where travelers encountered nature. As such the picnic tables became a stage of a sort that would highlight grand and pleasing landscape views. Heather became fascinated with the way the picnic table functioned to create mutually shared exchange points. The roadside picnic table becomes a signifier of the human need to take time out to 'be in nature', as opposed to merely viewing landscapes from the car window while driving by.

The compositions of the *Beckoning Landscape* series, crops the view of the scenery, in order to prefigure the picnic table. This formal decision creates an emphatic dialogue on our relationship to land and our orchestration of predetermined locations for use as inspirational view. Given how familiar the picnic

PAGE 70:
Westray Memorial
1999
Stellarton,
Nova Scotia
silver print
12" x 12"

PAGE 71:
Cowbay,
Nova Scotia
2000
silver print
12 " x 12"

AT RIGHT:
Annapolis Royal,
Nova Scotia
1998
silver print
11.5" x 11.5"

table experience would be to most people, the photographs have an oddly surreal feel to them. These very sites would have been photographed endlessly by travelers but by including the picnic table as central to each composition it gives the photographs a disconcerting feeling. The tables hold an oddly prominent position. Vacationers would have stood in front of the table ignoring it as a subject of photographic interest. By standing back and including the tables in the image, Heather highlights how these specifically chosen picnic sites serve to reinforce our notions of landscape aesthetics.

Banff, Alberta
1999
silver print
11.5" x 11.5"

Heather next produced the *Frontier* series in 1999 while on an artist residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts. These large scale black and white prints examine western icons in Alberta's landscape — cowboys and Indian sculptures, mission churches, ranch gates, cattle, teepees, log cabins and other artifacts. Here she considers specific mythologies of the Canadian west from its history as frontier country. In these grand images, there is a varying play between the human element and the surrounding landscape. Intentionally ambiguous, they direct the viewer to an awareness that these landscapes are both specific and unique places and at the same time, iconic vistas that exist as established visions of the western frontier.

The square format used in many of Heather's other series is here given up for a horizontal orientation to fully acknowledge the panoramic experience and the grand openness that defines much of the western landscape. In giving the horizon prevalence in the series, and by the presence of receding roads and fences, the images have a greater sense of depth than Heather's other works. The land is not claustrophobic and enclosed, but rather continues out into the distant reaches. The Frontier is pictured as geographically and symbolically still existing, a place wide open. Heather explores the romantic notions we hold for the western landscape as a metaphor to the continuing possibility of freedom and new beginnings. However, as much as each image offers this possibility, they also incorporate a telling element that exposes this vision as a construction that we maintain.

Heather's interest in environmental matters and work as an environmental studies lecturer emerges in her next two series of photographs.

ABOVE:

Stoney Indian Reservation, Alberta
1999
silver print
19.5" x 39"

collection of Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada

Superior Stock examines a tree seed nursery in Prince Edward Island. This is a place where the best genetic specimens of tree species are grown to produce seeds and seedlings for future forest regeneration on land that has been clearcut. In these colour photographs the orderly rows of trees are accompanied by identifying signs revealing the type of tree stands — Balsalm Fir, Red Pine, Red Spruce, Tamarack, etc. The photographs serve as a form of ecological literacy by labeling the individual species growing. While the nurseries ultimately serve a valuable role in reforesting logged terrain, Heather's strict formality in documenting them offers an unsettling vision of nature transformed into a factory, manicured and antiseptic in its grid line regularity. Rather than providing a neutral overview of reforestation practices, *Superior Stock* gives evidence of the evolving exchange between humans and the earth. Dominant though our place might seem, our lack of sensitivity can send delicate ecosystems careening out of control. The series poses a challenge. While we consider the orderly and controlled landscapes of the tree seed nursery, we carry the knowledge of devastated

ABOVE:

Cochrane, Alberta
1999
silver print
19.5" x 39"

collection of Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada

landscapes disrupted by clearcutting. The photographs can be seen as providing a façade of control and predictability in our use of the land, deceptively reassuring in its presentation of scientifically engineered, superior trees. But their peculiar stillness betrays an uneasiness we experience whenever something is too ordered. Rather than showing a torn up logging site, we're given the veneer of stability for a situation we know not to be such. As a point of interest, the tree seed nursery Heather photographed is located next to her ancestral home, where she spent her summers as a child visiting her grandparents.

Her most recent series entitled *Acid Rivers* documents fourteen of Nova Scotia's most acidic rivers, contaminated by the sulfur dioxide emissions carried downwind from the industrial plants in central North America. The photographs ironically don't betray the level of damage, but are rather oddly ordinary looking documents of rivers and waterways neither visibly ruined nor particularly picturesque. The photograph's ability to witness is incomplete here, revealing how the image can mislead when presenting images of scenic landscapes. The acid rivers


RED
PINE

Dover, Prince Edward Island
2005
chromogenic print
22" x 32"

don't generate a despair over what happened so much, as provide context for meditation on the harmful effects of our continuing industrial activities and the acid rain they create. Casual passerbys viewing these rivers would see them in the terms of picturesque scenes of undisturbed nature. However, with the knowledge that these rivers are incapable of supporting Atlantic salmon and other life forms, we are left to consider what has been lost without being prodded by a graphically charged presentation. Within this subtle, non-confrontational approach lies a central technique found in much of Heather's study of landscape. She seeks not to shock, badgering us into a state of agitated disgust as most photojournalistic approaches would pursue, but rather to involve us. In the case of this series, this less didactic engagement doesn't generate an oppositional exchange between the polluters and us; it invites us into a discussion generated by the openness of the images to varied interpretations. The problem these photographs present is invisible — acid rain is a player in the landscape but we are unaware of it. There is no lack of political and philosophical vision on her part, but a conscious decision to draw us in as participant in this deeply important subject, reminding us of the incongruity that many serious environmental problems escape our visual detection even though they are all around us. Presented as large scale panoramic colour prints, these vistas of river landscapes function as another expression of Heather's environmental photography.

As the looming global crisis of climate change gains ever greater presence in the media, and we begin to take account of the impact of our industrial culture on planet earth, there is a prosaic beauty that can be found in Heather MacLeod's fifteen-year investigation of human relationships to nature. I've been once again struck by her careful and committed artistic practice that has inventively explored ways that landscape photography can bring us new perspectives of the world and alert us to romanticized ideals we hold about our never-ending interventions on the land. Her work isn't a lecturing critique, but a subtle immersion in what is majestic and inspiring in nature, teased out by a respect for traditional landscape photography. Often beautiful in its formality and thought provoking in intention, her art incorporates an awareness of photography's power to both

Nine Mile River,
Nova Scotia
2006
chromogenic print
18" x 36"

reveal and hide nature. It explores what we delight in and what we avoid, ultimately leading us to new understandings of the impact we have on our environment.