

CURATORIAL STATEMENT

Extracting Memory from the Landscape Through Embodied Process and Drone Technology

Harrop-Procter, an area of 650-1150 residents depending on the season, sits at the mouth of the west arm of Kootenay Lake in south eastern British Columbia. It is remote. Accessed by ferry only, it is a place of long winters, deep lakes and high mountains. Before a series of hydro-electric dams were built downstream, Harrop-Procter would flood to high levels each spring establishing seasonal gathering rounds for Sinixt communities, who would have accessed it from their year-round villages close by (Pearkes). While the Sinixt have experienced systematic cultural genocide and expropriation, they maintain a relationship to the area that is over 10,000 years long.

The colonial townsite history of Harrop-Procter is one of settlement in the late nineteenth century for mining and logging, followed by the construction of a Canadian Pacific Railway spur in 1900. The area was then serviced by sternwheelers, which brought supplies in and took harvested resources out. Although no longer agriculturally productive, the region is studded with rambling orchards; gnarled apple trees stand sometimes still heavy with fruit. For over 20 years, artist prOphecy sun's family have been renting a property on an aging orchard in Sunshine Bay, a hamlet between Harrop and Procter.

In their exhibition, *Nostalgic Geography: Mama and Papa Have Trains, Orchards and Mountains in Their Backyard* prOphecy sun and Darren Fleet collaboratively negotiate the terrain of this place, and both the personal and political narratives it holds.

One walks into the naturally lit space to find railway beams placed strategically at the entrance-way to the gallery, requiring the viewer to walk between or around them. At the end of the row of beams is a vignette of prOphecy walking away from the viewer along a railroad line, shot with a drone. Projected throughout the space at an intimate scale and low to the ground, the viewer absorbs multiple vignettes simultaneously. The videos picture prOphecy's figure captured from far above as she winds her way through the visually rhythmic orchards and moves steadily along worn paths that are made tidy from such a lofty height. Found remnants of agriculture and rail transport collected on prOphecy's family land are installed throughout the exhibition at ground level. In the centre of the gallery, five fruit trees are suspended like specters of a different place and time. They transform from vibrant to wilted throughout the exhibition's duration, producing a subtle smell of decaying apples.

Layered, ambient sound creates an eerie quality evocative of squealing metal under hot railroad tracks, produced with minor-key vocalizations and the lonely field recordings of birds, wind and weather. A discreet sound piece experienced through headphones includes archival footage of prOphecy's father, brother and daughter. The effect of the audio-visual works is haunting and meditative, evoking absence through tone while never explicitly naming familial loss.

Responding to prOphecy's father's sudden passing two and a half years ago, the exhibition is in part an elegiac effort to interact with the site that carries his memories (sun). Through embodied process prOphecy honours his passing by tracing his daily steps through the land. One noticeably different vignette pictures sun purposefully dragging large driftwood pieces to the edge of the lake. Over the course of her repetitive gestures she is building a Sisyphian raft, a structure that will

never keep water out, or her body in. A sense of loss is replaced by frustration as she struggles to navigate her father's absence and to deal with the fragmentary nature of her memories. By recreating place-based memory using multiple projections, embodied process, and layered sound the artists question its inherent completeness and assert its mutability.

Familial nostalgia is embedded in the land itself for the artists. Yet ideas of *nostalgia* — particularly in the context of landscape representation — risk romanticizing pre-industrialized and settler-pioneered places. Further, the discipline of *geography* is deeply implicated in histories of cartographic representation that have opened up land to imperial occupation and resource extraction. How might settler artists contend with telling a personal story that is deeply imbedded in the west Kootenay landscape, without reproducing colonial nostalgia towards place, agriculture and nature? sun and Fleet respond to this question through their use of text and drone technology.

The exhibition forefronts the terms *nostalgic* and *geography* while staying in dialogue with their implicit tensions. Two didactic wall texts activate this dialogue. One is narrative, combining ten years of family stories into a text about harvesting potatoes. Beside it sits a long list of 43 possible adjectives to describe geography, from *nostalgic* to *petrol*, to *colonial* to *incomplete*. While the narrative text is nostalgic, the list self-reflexively acknowledges geography as a loaded term. The polarity in tone between the two texts makes explicit the tension between personal and political that exists in the exhibition's content and title.

Through their use of drone technology, sun and Fleet experiment with ideas of *extracting* memory, while appropriating its military and industrial uses. Drone photography is a surveillance technology used in weaponry and resource sectors for violent ends. The uneasiness of surveillance footage is

heavily referenced through the use of the god's eye perspective that tracks prOphecy's movement through the landscape. While personal stories are extracted rather than natural resources, the artists question their own nostalgia through the active reconstruction of memory from this 'objective' yet dreamlike vantage point.

For the artists, this project has been a negotiation between conflicting responsibilities. While required to 'deliver' an exhibition, their more urgent responsibility was to the sun family. Telling a personal narrative while not exposing a family's privacy became a delicate balance where issues of authorship, precarity and power through cultural mobility were entangled in relational networks.

Nostalgic Geography: Mama and Papa Have Trains, Orchards and Mountains in Their Backyard is deftly multivalent. While remaining in dialogue with its own tensions and negotiations, it also records an embodied grieving process that looks to the land and its living and non-living materials for direction. It is a meditation on both presence and absence of memory imbedded in landscape, and retrieved through the invocation of sound, text, material and moving image. **"The sound of the night train marks our time together that is suddenly here and suddenly gone"** *Darren Fleet, Exhibition Wall Text, Nostalgic Geography, 2019*

WORKS CITED

Pearkes, Eileen Delehanty. "Re: Sinixt Name or Names for Harrop Procter Area". Message to Genevieve Robertson. 9 October 2019. Email.

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