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VISUAL ART

Robert Hengeveld

by Dagmara Genda

interest in post-painterly abstraction, he also supported landscape painting. A notable result was celebrated Saskatchewan painter Dorothy Knowles, who attributes to Greenberg a boost in her career, his supportive voice acting as the impetus to her dropping her married name as a gesture of independence. It is important to argue using concrete examples rather than a generalized bias.

"Women tend to ask more questions than men, and tend to articulate as questions, what should be statement of fact," writes Dunlop Director/Curator Jennifer Matotek. While her curatorial approach may veer into the realm of agenda, "Who's Afraid of Purple, Orange and Green?" proves that the act of questioning is a necessary one. ■

"Who's Afraid of Purple, Orange and Green?" was exhibited at Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina, from April 25 to June 20, 2014.

Mireille Eagan is a curator based in St. John's, NL.

Robert Hengeveld's summer exhibition at the MacDonald Stewart Art Centre (MSAC) evokes connotations of untouched nature given to us by divine decree. The promised land is the fulfillment of a contract; it sets in tension what nature offers us and what we deem naturally ours. Using a familiar Northern Canadian landscape, Hengeveld charts a territory suffused with longing to present an environment moulded by our attempts to control and reflect ourselves within it. The installations evoke a suburban wilderness of perfect lawns, campsites and amusement parks. Frequent use of low-tech, cheap materials produced a 1990s basement rec-room aesthetic complete with record players, kitschy knickknacks and improvised forts. The analog appearance, however, belies the complex technological framework that anchors Hengeveld's work. The substratum of high-tech speaks to the ever more complicated ways we curate our environment. This form of curation also speaks to the act of exhibiting art, and the gallery as a site with its own promises.

Curated by the program's first artist-in-residence, Julie René de Cotret, the exhibition showcased work Hengeveld made while in residence at the University of Guelph School of Environmental Sciences. His time with the department allowed him to draw on available expertise to develop his interest in the use of so-called cutting-edge technology. Yet as so often happens with this sort of work, many of the pieces malfunctioned midway through the exhibition forcing the artist to perform regular maintenance checks. In the end the works were all fixed but during my time in Guelph only one piece functioned

VISUAL ART

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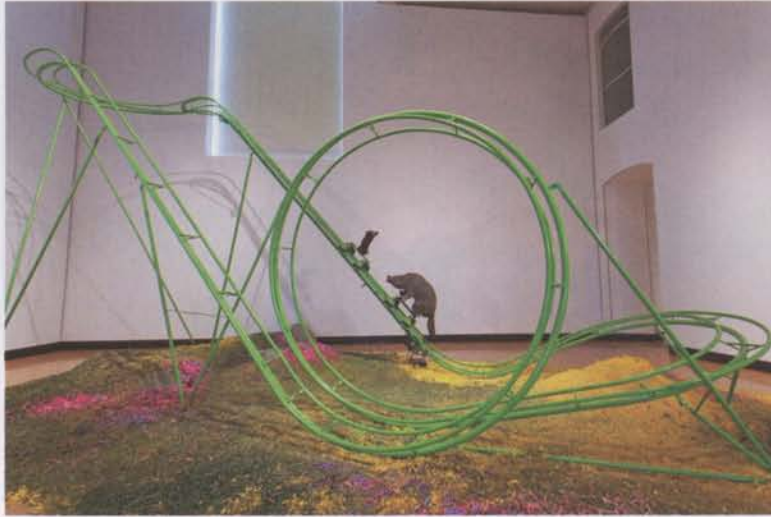


as intended. The gallery, nevertheless, remained open, thus allowing these contingencies to colour the interpretation of the show.

The failure to live up to its promise is a common problem with new technology, but in Hengeveld's case, the series of malfunctions had the charming effect of creating a meta-narrative about the idea of failure already implicit in the work. *In Pursuit of Paradise*, for example, is an immersive installation accessed through a kind of contemporary entrance to Narnia. But instead of walking through a wardrobe, the viewer passes through an elevator to find herself in a nocturnal campsite sparkling with LED lights. Birdsong is heard from a looped record player accompanied by the mechanical whir of a plastic owl's turning head. The grass is either Astro Turf or woolly, green carpet and there is a stagnant pond you can cross using a precarious wooden footpath. In my experience the failure of this utopia was underscored by a malfunctioning elevator entrance forcing me to enter paradise by the back door. This compromise brought the constructed environment closer to a suburban reality. In high school, we always filtered through a friend's back door to pile into a basement still awaiting renovation. These nostalgic spaces

1. Robert Hengeveld, *Unbridled Rein*, 2014, customized CNC machine, putting-green grass. All images courtesy Macdonald Stewart Art Centre, Guelph.

2. Robert Hengeveld, *Howl*, 2013, decoy bunny and coyote, steel, motor, electronics, paper, other.



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were characterized by old springy couches, wood veneer walls and oddly coloured thick carpets. In the dim light we would play records, make out and be momentarily free of parental supervision.

Suburban communities are often carefully landscaped sites where the nuclear family is meant to find its natural home. Amongst the many tropes of suburban life, one of the primary ones is the even, emerald green lawn. In a reworking of an older piece, *Kentucky Perfect*, Hengeveld wryly comments on this quest for perfection. *Kentucky Perfect* consisted of a strip of perfectly level grass that was lit, watered and cut daily by a CNC cutter. *unbridled rein*, however, has failure built into it. It is an uneven pile of grass mowed according to a digital map. As portions of the pile dry out and wither, the CNC cutter dutifully trims the ailing lawn. The cutter, however, did not work while I was there, allowing the green portions to grow higher than the rest.

Howl, the work first encountered upon entering the gallery, also bore its share of fruitful complications. The piece is an automated green roller coaster with two moving

carts, one shaped like a small stuffed rabbit and the other a large plastic coyote. The closed loop complicated the logic of the chase making it difficult to ascertain who was chasing whom. The technical difficulties, however, made the piece reminiscent of early Warner Bros. Road Runner cartoons. Wile E Coyote starts out chasing Road Runner but is in the end always outwitted, leaving Road Runner in the position of predator. Similarly, Hengeveld's coyote could not gain enough momentum on the drop and would fail to make its way around the upside-down loop. Instead, it would fall backwards in mid-loop, causing the rabbit to catch up.

The simplest of the pieces, *Synthetic Humph*, suffered no technical glitches. Shown alongside three oil paintings from MSAC's permanent collection, the more traditional set-up fulfilled the promise of the gallery. The tableau combined natural and man-made elements to create a campsite. A small vintage writing desk supported a diorama where a nylon butterfly affixed to a wire spun around a rock. Camouflage-patterned tarp was supported by

branches and an angled tree stump. The accompanying paintings of foxes and racoons would be equally at home in a suburban basement. Interestingly, the animals depicted were also ones that are as likely to be found in the city as in the country.

The contrast between the functioning and malfunctioning pieces ironically doubled Hengeveld's exploration of our attempts to control our environment. The malfunctions did not suggest the superiority of traditional mediums as much as the limits of the gallery, and art itself. As artistic production expands, not only through the use of technology but also through multi-disciplinarity, community concerns or as mode of knowledge production, among other things, we might begin to contemplate what new promises art is making to the viewer, and the public in general. How has the space in which art is exhibited changed, and in what ways might it enable or limit our interaction with it? I think all work that has an ambivalent relation to the gallery asks this question to some extent, but it seems especially poignant in Hengeveld's exploration of our failure to fully shape the land in our image. ■

"promised lands" was exhibited at the MacDonald Stewart Art Centre, Guelph, from May 3 to July 13, 2014.

Dagmara Genda is an artist and freelance writer living in Guelph.