

REFLECTIONS ON "OASIS": REPRESENTING KELOWNA, 1905-2005

A Review Essay

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SUMMERS IN THE Okanagan are usually hot, dry, and busy, and the summer of 2005 was no exception. However, this year Kelowna seemed even busier than usual: there were more tourists, more road-building projects with annoying traffic disruptions, more single-family houses climbing up hillsides, and, in the downtown core, more proposed construction for both the former CNR lands in the north end of town and the city park at the foot of Bernard Avenue, one of the city's oldest streets. Some welcome respite from all this was offered by the cool and calm spaces of the Kelowna Art Gallery, where for nearly four and a half months from the end of April until mid-September the gallery had hosted "Oasis," an exhibition in honour of the city's centennial. With few exceptions the Okanagan landscape was the star of the show: there were orchards, vineyards, mountains, pristine hillsides, and sweeping panoramic views along Lake Okanagan. The contrast with the world outside the gallery was jarring: there were no views of the Okanagan Connector, the highway that slashed its way through the hills above Peachland in 1987 to provide a quick link between the Interior and the Lower Mainland; or of high-rise towers that blocked views

of the lake; or of hillsides carved up for development. In fact, there were almost no people to be found in the works comprising the exhibition, despite the fact that the population of Kelowna has grown from 600 people in 1905 to over 107,000 in 2005. My initial impression was that the Kelowna contained within the pristine white cube of the Kelowna Art Gallery last summer seemed so idyllic that the exhibition might as easily have been called "Paradise" or "Eden" or "Shangri-La."

The intention of "Oasis," curator Linda Sawchyn explains on the wall panel introducing the exhibition, is to "explore Kelowna, a burgeoning city in a semi-desert landscape that encompasses a very large lake, as an oasis or place of refuge and retreat for those who live and visit here." However, "even an oasis can have a dark side," she cautions, and so she included works by artists "who turn a more critical eye to Kelowna's growing urban presence, to the pressures growth and development impose on the landscape, and to the very idea of 'oasis.'" By eschewing a "best of each year or decade" survey and opting instead for a thematic approach, Sawchyn mounted an exhibition that is necessarily selective and exclusive (and exclusionary) but that offers an overview

of some of the art that has come out of Kelowna over the last 100 years.

“Oasis” is installed in the main gallery, a large rectangular space that shows to advantage the many photographs, prints, early survey maps, paintings and drawings as well as a few three-dimensional works. The gallery’s exterior sculpture court, approached from the central axis leading to the main gallery, houses Byron Johnston’s *Oasis Part-Too*, a site-specific work created for the exhibition. Unfortunately, there are no explanatory wall panels other than the one at the entrance, and the exhibition catalogue, which might have offered a more detailed discussion of the premise of the show has, as of December 2005, yet to appear. Consequently, it is up to the viewer (including this reviewer) to establish links between the works and to relate them to the theme of the exhibition.

“Oasis” opens with three works placed directly opposite the entrance to the main gallery. Read in relation to each other, and not as individual pieces, I found that they offer an important conceptual and interpretive framework for viewing the exhibition. In the centre is a large pinky-red neon sign that reads OASIS; it is the type of sign, heavy with suggestive hints of the tacky and the exotic, that used to advertise motels and lounges. Hanging to its left is Mary Bull’s *Freedom Camel* (1991), a brightly painted dromedary carrying a bottle of Perrier-Jouët champagne from Epernay on its hump. The painting is positioned in such a way that the camel appears to be gazing quizzically up at the sign (see Figure 1). It is a provocative image: on its own, the camel, with its goofy expression, is deliciously whimsical, but within this context it recalls one of the sorrier episodes associated with the opening up of British Columbia’s interior. During the early 1860s camels

were brought in as pack animals; however, their feet were too soft for the rocky terrain, and so they were released to graze on the open range land – to find their own oases, as it were. The last descendant of these camels is said to have died sometime around 1905, the year that provides the chronological opener for this centennial exhibition.¹ To me the image reads as a warning about the possibility that an oasis might be nothing more than a mirage, part of the “dark side” that Sawchyn mentions in her introductory panel. However, this reading is balanced by Richard Prince’s viewer-activated sculpture entitled *A Breeze on the Southern Isle*, positioned to the right and in front of the OASIS sign. In a statement accompanying this 1976 work, Prince speaks of Kelowna and the Okanagan “as a sort of mythical summer vacation land,” and he links it to an “imaginary paradise of tropical islands.” This grouping thus alerts the viewer (who may or may not have read the wall panel on her/his way in) that an oasis can be both a utopia and a dystopia and that sometimes they coexist. The question in my mind was how the implications raised by this strong opening salvo would be supported by the rest of the exhibition.

To the left of the entrance is a group of works, many small in scale and done in watercolour, from the late nineteenth century through to the mid-twentieth century. This section of the exhibition is arguably the most important: it lays the foundation for what follows, and it is here that the exhibition’s premise has to take hold. It does. These paintings are like a visual chorus praising Kelowna and the Okanagan Valley as a lush and plentiful Eden where all is possible. A

¹ Daniel Francis, ed. *Encyclopedia of British Columbia* (Madeira Park: Harbour Publishing Ltd., 2000), 105.

few examples will suffice. The stage is set with an excerpt from Bliss Carman's poem "In the Okanagan" copied by Ellen Vaughn Grayson on the back of one of her paintings. Although it is just one verse and the poem is not explicitly about Kelowna (it is speaking of the area south of Penticton), the sentiments it professes are undoubtedly widely felt: it speaks of "the glow of sunset," and claims that "Here time takes on new leisure / And life attains new worth." The last two lines read: "And wise are they who treasure / This Eden of the North." Eden is present in the three works by English-born C.J. Collings, who left London in 1910 for the clear skies of the Shuswap and was undoubtedly one of the best watercolourists who ever worked here: his soft-focus, gentle paintings float serenely on the gallery walls. Close by are watercolours by Ishbel, Lady Aberdeen, that would have been at home in pre-Industrial Revolution England: on her few visits here in the mid-1890s, she painted the area as a picturesque, untouched Arcadia.

Many of the artists in this section of the exhibition are, like Collings and Lady Aberdeen, British, and this is reflected in the cultural and aesthetic assumptions that they bring with them to the Okanagan. So many of them "didn't know what the hell they were coming out to in the first place," and, as Paddy Acland has noted, "they just imagined a sort of beautiful halo around everything."² What they found when they arrived, as the exhibition underlines, was a landscape that easily leant itself to the conventions of the picturesque. However, mixed in with

the British painters in "Oasis" are Canadian-born artists like Gwen Lamont and Ellen Vaughn Grayson, who arrived in the Okanagan after the First World War and who had had formal art training in Canada. Vaughn Grayson, for example, filters her vision of the Okanagan through Bliss Carman and the Confederation Poets as well as through the Canadian Shield, using motifs such as the lone pine made famous elsewhere in Canada by Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven, and fitting them snugly into the conventions of the picturesque (see Figure 2). Although such works maintain the Okanagan-as-Eden sensibility of the earlier works with which they are grouped, there is an important shift that might have been emphasized in the hanging of this section: after 1918 the oasis becomes less tied to the sensibilities of diasporic British immigrants and, with the arrival of artists such as Vaughn Grayson and Gwen Lamont, more tied to the 1920s- and-beyond nationalism of the Group of Seven.

Sawchyn's curatorial statement speaks of a dark side to the oasis, however, and I wondered how early it would appear in the exhibition. The Floating Bridge, which was built in 1958, effected a major transformation in the land and, one might assume, a challenge to the picturesque; however, in the several works that include the new bridge, the painters just expand the picturesque to include and naturalize it – paradise is elastic, they imply (see Figure 3). I found an early look at the dark side of the oasis in the two undated survey maps proposing how the townsite of Kelowna would be divided up for agricultural and residential development as well as in the 1924 plan showing the right of way for a proposed tramway along the lake. Although these three documents initially seem

² Paddy Acland, quoted in David Mitchell and Dennis Duffy, eds., *Bright Sunshine and a Brand New Country: Recollections of the Okanagan Valley, 1890-1914* (Victoria: Provincial Archives, 1979), 32.

to be out of place amidst the soft blues and greens of the watercolours, injecting an engineer's geometric precision into the picturesque, they make the important point that, right from the start of white settlement in the Okanagan Valley, everybody, not just the artists, was looking at the land: and that Kelowna has always been up for grabs. Grace Willis's pastoral views of the Okanagan, hanging a few metres away from plans to transform it, speak volumes about the instability of the concept of oasis, even for those who seek to escape the industrial world and to find refuge in the Okanagan. As many of the works in this part of the show reveal, Kelowna's natural wealth and beauty are exploited not only by artists seeking to preserve a corner of Eden through their art but also by those who have business interests and want to transform paradise into productive farmland. At least once, artist and developer were the same person: Lady Aberdeen painted Arcadia while she and her husband were energetically redeveloping and modernizing a farm in Kelowna and the Coldstream Ranch in Vernon. Indeed, in her book *Through Canada with a Kodak*, which was on display in a vitrine in the exhibition, Lady Aberdeen writes enthusiastically that, "up to now but little attention has been devoted to fruit-growing, as this has been principally a stock-raising country, but the possibilities shown by the few orchards already planted point to its being found to possess exceptional advantages for the pursuit of this industry."³

³ Although the exhibition included an early edition of the book, my quote is taken from a later edition. Lady Aberdeen, Ishbel Maria Gordon, marchioness of Aberdeen and Temair, *Through Canada with a Kodak* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 159-60.

Upon leaving this introductory area of the exhibition, the viewer is presented with three related sections, each of which is specifically about one aspect of the topography of this oasis and which adheres to no particular chronology. On the north wall are works about the hills that surround Kelowna; on the east wall are works featuring Lake Okanagan; and on the south and remaining portion of the west wall to the right of the entrance are views of the bench lands with their orchards and vineyards. These works are more recent (the OASIS sign, Mary Bull's painting, and Richard Prince's sculpture are part of this section) and offer more contemporary "takes" on Kelowna and the Okanagan Valley. By the 1950s Kelowna was far from enjoying the cocoon-like isolation that informed so many of the earlier works; significant interventions, not all of them benign, had altered the land itself and had therefore irrevocably altered how Kelowna's landscape was viewed. New highways, frequent and regular air service, urbanization and commercial development, while not necessarily tied to the dark side of the oasis, were among the visible changes. Less visible but equally important was the opening of the Fine Arts Department of Okanagan College in 1971, which has, since 1 July 2005, become the Creative Studies Department of UBC Okanagan. This resulted in a core of professional artists who live and teach here (interestingly, five of the artists in "Oasis" either are, or have been, associated with this department during its various stages). And the Kelowna Art Gallery, in the space of less than thirty years, has become a nationally recognized public art gallery.

What, then, do these more recent works have to say about the show's premise? There are, of course, orchards,



Figure 1: Mary Bull, *Freedom Camel*, 1991. Acrylic on canvas. Collection of Carol Taylor. OASIS sign. Collection of Kelowna Art Gallery. Photo Credit: Colin Jewall.



Figure 2: Ellen Vaughn Grayson, *Lone Pine, Okanagan Lake*, n.d. Watercolour on paper. Collection of the Kelowna Art Gallery, gift of David and Carolyn Grayson 1999. Photo credit: Kyle L. Poirier.



Figure 3: Alice Eleanor Anderson, *Kelowna from Casa Loma*, 1960. Oil on canvas board. Collection of the artist. Photo credit: Kyle L. Poirier.



Figure 4: Mary Smith McCulloch, *Glenmore Orchard III*, 1987. Etching on paper. Collection of the artist. Photo credit: Colin Jewall.

orchards, and more orchards splashed on the gallery walls as well as views of vineyards, golf courses, and the Simpson mill (now Tolko Industries). However, in this section it is easier to follow Sawchyn's suggestion that the oasis has both a light and a dark side, possibly because many of the works are large and, therefore, can form dialogues across greater distances. For example, a large photograph entitled *Floating Log Bundles* by Fern Helfand hangs opposite the gallery from delicate, early twentieth-century watercolour paintings of trees; and Mary Smith McCulloch's premonitory 2003 *Molten Vineyard* is set across the long axis of the gallery from Helfand's mordant comment on the Okanagan Fire of 2003 in *Disaster as Spectacle #1 and #2*. The dark side of the oasis is apparent in McCulloch's quiet etching, entitled *Glenmore Orchard III* (see Figure 4), which is placed amidst a number of exuberant paintings and prints of orchards. In the statement accompanying this work McCulloch points out that orchards (which themselves are relatively recent alterations to the landscape of the oasis) are being torn down throughout the Okanagan to make way for even newer alterations to the land: among the first to go were the Glenmore Valley pear orchards, which have been replaced by subdivisions. However, in its emphasis on the grid, this work also points out that, whatever our romantic attachments to them might be, orchards are examples of industrialized farming, exactly the type of thing Lady Aberdeen was promoting at the end of the nineteenth century.

There are other works in the exhibition that comment on the dark side of the oasis. Andrew Hunter's two digital photos from his 2004 *Hanksville: Kelowna, Golf Course/Orchard* series are filled with irony. Like the orchards,

golf courses are seductively beautiful, but they, too, have wrought enormous changes on the landscape of the oasis: both incursions replace dry natural habitats and depend on the transfer of water from the higher plateaus to the semi-arid agricultural zones in the bottom of the valley.

By this point in the exhibition, any notions I had that the light side of the oasis outweighed the dark side at the beginning of the twenty-first century had become very wobbly, and they were further undermined by Byron Johnston's courtyard sculpture entitled *Oasis Part-Too* (see Figure 5). Here Johnston lays out a psychedelically green golf course covered with red toy Mercedes trapped in plastic bubbles; in the centre is a tall orchard ladder with broken rungs leading to an official-looking, chair at the top. It is the type of chair in which a civic leader might choose to sit, providing s/he could climb this unstable ladder: from this chair it is easy to take an optimistic, long-range view, both literally and figuratively, and to speak of concerns about development, sustainability, and land use. However, a look straight down to what is happening on the ground suggests that optimism is no more than empty rhetoric.

"Oasis" appears at a time of enormous change in the Okanagan and, as the first major survey of the art of this region, demonstrates the need for ongoing critical discussion about the relationship between art, artists, and society in the Okanagan. The idea of the oasis (or Eden) is a construct, a convenient lens through which immigrants to the Okanagan could frame and then develop a sense of place and belonging. Sawchyn is careful to avoid any suggestion that the Okanagan was seen as an oasis by First Nations peoples or by any of the other minorities who have lived here: apart from two works



Figure 5: Byron Johnston, *Oasis Part-Too*, 2005. Mixed media installation. Collection of the artist. Photo credit: Colin Jewell.

by Lee Claremont, First Nations artists are not represented in “Oasis.” There is, however, an important exhibition entitled “In the Spirit of N’ha-a-itk,” which was located in the foyer of the Kelowna Art Gallery and that ran until 14 August, thus overlapping with “Oasis.” While the mandate of the former exhibition is quite different from that of the latter and is beyond the scope of this review, I was sorry that the gallery didn’t link the two exhibitions since they point to two completely different discourses that inform the art history of this region. N’ha-a-itk

is the lake serpent (anglicized as Ogopogo) who animates the depths of Lake Okanagan, and I thought that Roxanne Lindley’s serpent, a scathing critique of environmental negligence, suspended from the ceiling of the main gallery rather than in the foyer, would have rattled the placid painted waters of Lake Okanagan, injecting a much-needed critique of the cultural myopia of some of the art in “Oasis.”

“Oasis” is an important, thought-provoking exhibition. Clearly the art done in the Okanagan over the past hundred years belongs with and is informed by the wider discourses surrounding artistic practice in Canada and elsewhere. The issue of colonial versus postcolonial points of view, for example, simmers throughout “Oasis,” accompanied by nagging questions about presenting art history only through the eyes of the dominant culture. And I wondered about the usefulness of the conventions of landscape art with regard to addressing

the enormous changes that have taken place in this region over the last century. It was easy to imagine that some of the artists represented in the earlier part of the show had tucked William Gilpin’s essay on the picturesque into their luggage along with paints and brushes: in their works, foreground, middle ground, and background unfold as Gilpin thought they should. However, a visit in 2006 to the sites of some of these earlier paintings would almost certainly lead one to the conclusion that the picturesque is dead and that other, more critical approaches are needed

to address the shifts that have taken place in this oasis. The middle and backgrounds are still there, although barely; but in so many instances the foreground has been irrevocably altered by urban sprawl in its many forms.

I considered these questions as I contemplated Vancouver photographer Christos Dikeakos's *Kelowna, B.C.*, which is hung at right angles to H.G. Glyde's *Okanagan Lake*, which was painted fifty years earlier. It is a telling juxtaposition of then and now: the gentle Glyde, firmly within the conventions of the picturesque, versus the brash and critical Dikeakos. In Dikeakos's work – one of the few pieces in the show with an urban theme – a GMC truck with Washington plates sits in front of the kitsch Ogoogo WELCOME sign, written in five languages, which greets visitors

arriving in Kelowna. Kelowna has lost any sense of identity, it implies, in its rush to welcome consumerism, tourism, and the inauthentic.

There is both a light and a dark side to the oasis, I decided, but the oasis has been so altered since Bliss Carman described the Okanagan as "this Eden of the North" that it might be more appropriate to talk about two distinct oases: the first is the one that drew the early settlers and visitors and that lent itself endlessly to the picturesque; the second, and the one now in place, is a simulacrum. It is a marketing concept developed by chambers of commerce and visitor information centres to encourage year-round tourism and continuous development. The shift occurred when *Lost Horizons* met *My American Cousin*.



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