

# *Cul-de-sac Island*

An Exhibition of Digital Video

By

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## Authors Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## Abstract

*Cul-de-sac Island* is a multimedia installation that combines personal research, lens-based strategies and performative re-enactments to camera that engage in a self-reflective investigation of identity, place and territory. Juxtaposing elements of the natural and the unnatural, my work questions personal and collective assumptions about the landscape, while exploring the correlation between nature and nationhood. By re-positioning myself within familiar sites from my childhood, my work interrogates the suburban spaces that have influenced my understanding of nature and the ways in which these constructed environments instill a human privilege over the landscape.

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## Land Acknowledgement

As a woman of settler descent I am grateful for the privilege to conduct research and cultural work, which engages with Kitchener-Waterloo and the surrounding region. I wish to acknowledge the land on which the University of Waterloo operates, as the institution where I currently study. For thousands of years, it has been the traditional territory of the Attawandaron (Neutral), Anishinaabeg and Haudenosaunee peoples. The University of Waterloo is situated on the Haldimand Tract, the land promised to the Six Nations that includes ten kilometres on each side of the Grand River.

Today as I continue to develop work that engages with the land on which I reside, through my family's trajectory, I remain conscious of my place as a settler. As I continue my education toward Indigenous allyship, I will speak, learn, and act in solidarity with the Indigenous peoples in Canada.



## **Aunt Judi**

For instilling strength and an affection for plants in me  
October 24 1959 – April 13 2019

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## The Lake and a Collection of Specimens

I grew up in a small town in the Niagara Region, in Lincoln Ontario. It's populated with 23,000 people and situated in the heart of the greenbelt on the foot of the Niagara Escarpment. For me, the Southern shoreline of Lake Ontario has always been a place of fascination. As a child I spent a lot of time with my grandmother, Granny. Granny lives for outdoor recreation; the excitement of play and discovery outside is the reason for her youthful spark.

Together Granny and I spent countless days skipping rocks across Lake Ontario's surface, just as she did with my mother when she was young. As we looked out across the water we took in the Toronto skyline, a miniature, picturesque city on the horizon, like something straight off of a postcard. Throughout my childhood my family hiked The Bruce Trail and camped within Ontario's Provincial Parks. We attended nature tours hosted by park naturalists, and collected rocks that my brother and I insisted we bring home as part pet rocks, part souvenirs.



1. Documentation of Dave Stewart's Natural Science Specimens, 1994–ongoing.

For me, these pet rock souvenirs represent our memory—linked to the time and space that my brother and I claimed the objects in the first place. My father has a similar collection, an ongoing assemblage of backyard nature discoveries, all contained in what he calls his “Natural Science Box.” His discoveries consist of found specimens like insects, flora, snakeskins of various sizes, a squirrel jaw, shells, and birds’ nests. His collection is organized by housing each specimen in a clear Ziploc bag with its identification and the year it was found written in black magic marker. For me, his collection is symbolic of my family’s interest in interacting with the natural world, however, within a suburban context, as all of his specimens were collected where rural and urban meet. His collection highlights the type of nature that can live closely to civilization; insects, rodents, snakes etc., functioning collectively as a compendium of place.

My father’s fascination with citizen-science and a love for the outdoors is an interest that has been passed down to me. Being exposed to experiences like stoking campfires, navigating trails, and wildlife identification, has shaped my understanding of nature. This early introduction to the landscape, through habitual family outings and citizen science, instilled a stewardship (wonder, respect and care) for the land, and also informed my identity as someone who visually, mentally, and physically consumes nature through recreation, leisure and play.

## The Cul-de-sac I know is a Bulbous Dead-end

Growing up in a small town within Ontario's *Golden Horseshoe* has afforded many childhood memories, like the ones highlighted with my Granny and Father, that have profoundly influenced my perception of the landscape. Beamsville—located in the Town of Lincoln—is a township that I consider both urban and rural. I had the privilege of growing up with access to recreational outdoor spaces that I 'considered' natural, like the lawn in our family's backyard or the neighbourhood park. As an adult, I now wrestle with the hard truths of my understanding of nature and the relationship that I—and a vast majority of western society—have adopted, even subconsciously, a position that understands nature/landscape as object (something to be possessed), which inherently implies human superiority.

Part homage, part critical inquiry, *Cul-de-sac Island* is a multimedia installation that combines personal research, lens-based strategies and performance-as-re-enactment in an exploration of nature, nationhood, and personal identity. Through the juxtaposition of the artificial and the real, my work interrogates the suburban sites from my upbringing that have influenced my understanding of nature. It speaks to the human need to 'edit' nature, as a privileged act that acknowledges nature as an object that can be pruned, commodified, and consumed. This need to edit and portray the landscape in a particular way goes hand in hand with national identity. Canada, for example, prides itself on the nature it has co-opted as a symbolic representation of place. Merging elements of performative action, play, amateur ethnography, humour and futility, my work serves as a self-reflective

investigation unpacking my personal and collective assumptions about landscape, territory and national identity.



2. Village Park Drive, North Cul-de-sac, Beamsville, Ontario. 2019.

The exhibition *Cul-de-sac Island* came about through my personal research into the spaces and places of my childhood. All video footage was shot in familiar outdoor sights; spaces that were home to imagination and discovery. Using conversations with my parents, looking through my father's collections, and revisiting familiar childhood outdoor sites as impetus, my work investigates my personal understanding of the Canadian landscape.

For me, it began with the suburban neighbourhood where I grew up: This neighbourhood was fraught with *natural* spaces; a backyard, a ravine, a park space, and a cul-de-sac. A cul-de-sac is a dead-end street surrounded by houses in a semi-circle and my street's infrastructure was designed with one at each end. Designed to assist with manoeuvring a dead-end when in a vehicle, the cul-de-sac has become a ubiquitous indicator of North American urban/sub-urban sprawl. Sometimes a cul-de-sac will be designed with a landscape island in the middle. Confined within a curb, this island is routinely manicured by the municipality and left with little indication of its use to the public. Although the island may be seen as an underutilized space, when activated by a child's imagination it has the potential to become much more,

even a paradise. For my childhood friends and I, it was a meeting place and a place of play. It was a site that brought together a neighbourhood community, acting similarly to a park space. Sociologist, Thomas Hochschild, researches the use of cul-de-sacs within North America as site that influences social cohesion. He specifically analyses the 'bulb' cul-de-sac as urban topography that contributes positively to neighbourliness (1).

A cul-de-sac functions similar to a park as they create a space for community, but unlike a park, a cul-de-sac is not activated by traditional greenspace infrastructure: benches, lampposts, paths or landscaping. Most often these suburban islands are a desolate patch of crisp grass and are rarely activated by non-human elements. The cul-de-sac island can be seen as a space that could be considered a place and a non-place. Marc Augé in *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, identifies a "non-place" as a space that can not be defined as relational, historical, or concerned with identity (77), leaving it with loads of potential.



## *Parks as Re-creation*

Like the cul-de-sac island, municipal parks also played a part in my introduction to nature. I am intrigued by the natural elements that exist in the cityscape as a way to bring nature into the urban environment. Specifically human-made “nature”—parks, pools, ice rinks—spaces and locations that are constructed, idealized versions of their natural counterpart: forests and lakes both frozen and non. Lakes have become pools, ice rinks have moved indoors, a plot of land with a few trees becomes a park, and everything is maintained weekly. These constructed natural counterparts are both controlled and commodified landscape attractions. At times, they require visitors to pay a fee in order to view or engage with the site. As urban dwellers, we have manicured these spaces for recreational use, and through this conditioning it has shaped our understanding of nature.

Before parks were open to the public they were historically only available to upper class citizens. Today parks are a familiar site for leisure and play, providing citizens with a break from urbanization and an introduction to the outdoors, existing as the “lungs of the city” they aid in open-air relaxation (Kearns 167). Often park spaces within the urban landscape become highly trafficked on weekends as a break from the pace of city life, a popular space for outdoor leisure and recreation. Writer, Lucy Lippard, identifies the corporate devastation of nature, and the cultural production of nature as an experience that should not be defined as recreation but as “re-creation” (141).

Beginning as a swatch of nature within the grid of the city, the design of a park takes its reference from the wilderness that exists beyond the cityscape, and “claims

to imitate the environments they replace” (Lippard 139). For example, New York City’s Central Park was designed by landscape architects Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux. During a tour of the parks arboretum, I learned that the two designed the North Woods to resemble and reflect the landscapes of the Adirondack Mountains. Constructed as a way to provide a secluded forest to park goers, while connecting them to nature that exists naturally outside of the city. This resemblance of nature used in landscape architecture are design elements that reference the outdoors symbolically. All parks contain similar elements throughout western society: grass, trees, a bench, bushes, a path and a lamppost. Looking back into the history of park landscaping, this aesthetic is not coincidental, parks were designed in such a way to carefully regulate visitor’s behaviours, through the creation of paths, terraces and steps, the public’s navigation of a park is controlled (Brück 202). These objects also exist as a framework for experiencing space, park benches and lampposts are placed strategically creating an almost theatrical setting where sociability could be enacted (Brück 197). Enabling the role of parks and their characteristics to reflect and underpin a specific set of social and cultural values and to create a landscape that gave material form to identity, class, and nationhood (Brück 198).

In *Urban Public Parks: 1840–1900: Design and Meaning*, Hilary Taylor discusses the history of parks from an early Victorian standpoint, highlighting the strategies of their design and impact on society. Taylor writes that the “designed landscape is essentially a manifestation of personal and historical ideology” (201). Creating a romanticized landscape, her research brings attention to the motives of park design, which included civic pride, personal gain, and political responsibility (202). Beginning in the Victorian age up to present day, parks have ulterior motives

beyond recreation; these swatches of nature were and are still used to embody national identity.

A park is a collection of cultivation elements that can be arranged, rearranged, and replaced, this treatment of nature as objects embodies society's authority over nature. Approaching the landscape as though we have the ability to replicate it, we present nature through a picturesque façade. This authority is harnessed through the treatment of nature as a device, an object that we are able to control and commodify for our own benefit and national reputation.

- ★★★★★ Amazing location. Highly creative and visually stimulating! Come here and sit for a while under the summer shade and enjoy the great atmosphere with a loved one!
- ★★★★★ The inner areas are nice, but the marina makes the place stink.
- ★★★★★ This is a fantastic hideaway place from the busy core. I used to work nearby, and it would be a great escape during lunch, the breeze off of Lake Ontario is refreshing
- ★★★★★ It is a beautiful place
- ★★★★★ It's aight
- ★★★★★ Great place to spend a summer evening. Huge field, it's sheltered somewhat by the hill. Wonderful in summer and winter. I've heard some people say that it can be a bit sketchy at night, but that hasn't been my experience at all.
- ★☆☆☆☆ It sucks a lot, terrible park

3. *Park Reviews*, 2015-ongoing.

My fascination with parks began in 2015 when I started collecting tourist ratings and reviews of regional parks from Google Maps. The work is a digital compendium of public experiences within park spaces throughout the *Golden Horseshoe*. I am intrigued by the need for individuals to express their positive and negative encounters within elements of nature, as well as the absurdity of the action to assign a park with a rating between 1-5 stars. Speaking from my own experience, my engagement with nature has been around 4 to 5 stars, I was privileged to have

access to spaces that I understood as nature within a block of my childhood home. However, it wasn't until adulthood that I realised that the landscapes I viewed as natural were all human-made.



4. *Landscape Technician*, 2019, Video Still, 00:04:44.

*Landscape Technician* is a thirty-minute performance for video that considers western society's portrayal of nature within the suburban landscape as an assembled environment. Through the revisitation of the familiar ravine waterfall, the work takes a self-reflective approach as I reconsider the landscape idylls from my childhood and their influence on my understanding of the natural landscape. The performance is set in a studio space with a large white wall, revealing unfinished drywall on either side. The space is in flux, it's a space for contemplation, reconsideration and re-evaluation.

The video begins with a pile of fabric transported into the studio space on a dolly, which has been chroma keyed to reveal video footage of the ravine waterfall. The footage documents the waterfall edged by large escarpment-esque boulders as it

glistens beneath the sunshine, a picturesque site. However, upon further investigation, the waterfall is flowing through a culvert running under the road and fed by a flood basin in the neighbouring subdivision. Dressed in everyday studio attire, with a tool belt, hammer, nails, level, stepladder, extension cord and steamer, I install three panels of fabric similar to a photography or film studio backdrop in front of the camera. Using banal humour, the work engages in dialogues around the objectification, commodification and control of the landscape, through the hanging, steaming of the fabric, and my attempt to literally level the horizon line.



5. *Landscape Technician*, 2019, Video Still, 00:19:32.

What begins as a skewed landscape on a dolly, slowly becomes a composed picturesque landscape as it is hung, arranged, and pulled taught. As the image is unveiled, I become situated within the virtual landscape. As I move on and off of the fabric it causes the viewer to question what elements within the frame are artificial or real, creating an illusion of place. The use of artifice is commonly employed within my

practice, which is often used to enhance the autofictionally-based narratives within my work. The illusion of the landscape questions the real by way of the artificial, heightening the presence of the falseness within the suburban landscape through the act of physically bringing the landscape indoors and assembling it. *Landscape Technician* is the central work in *Cul-de-sac Island*, it is shown as a large-scale projection, with a soundscape that fuses a running waterfall with sporadic hammering throughout the gallery space.



6. Joan Jonas, *Volcano Saga* 1985-89. Video Still.

*Landscape Technician* harnesses the use of chroma keying as a way to show the physicality and manipulation of the landscape. Chroma keying is a green screen technique commonly used within the film industry to superimpose alternative

backdrops behind subject matter, creating an illusion that the documented subject is in an alternate space. Joan Jonas, a pioneer in video and performance art, similarly uses the use of chroma keying within her work, which is often used as a method to manipulate the sites around her subjects. Described in the catalogue for her anthological exhibition, *Light Time Tales* at Pirelli HangarBicocca in Italy, her work investigates the possibilities connected with the illusory, repetitive and manipulative capacities of video through the superimposition of more than one time within a single event (8). Her video piece *Volcano Saga* utilizes chroma keying as a form of fragmentation, using it in contrast to its traditionally seamless application within film, but as an “illusory mechanism to build the scene, opening the work up to an interplay of continuous cross references between fiction and reality” (Aspesi and Fiammetta 27). Like Jonas, this fusion of both fiction and reality is an important element within my work. I use this methodology of illusion to question our relationship to the everyday, as a way to reframe truth alongside falsehood. *Landscape Technician* intersects fiction and reality as a device to address the false portrayal of non-human through the reality of human intervention.



## Superficial Scenes

Throughout my research the dichotomy between human and non-human has been continuously brought to the surface. Park spaces are used to integrate nature within the city but physically delineate nature in the urban grid, bound by fences, sidewalks or curbs. In *Posthumanist Performativity*, Karen Barad posits the entanglement of the human and non-human as a posthumanist notion, a notion that challenges the delineation of this anthropocentric dichotomy (Barad 808). My work draws attention to society's tendency to create a divide between humans and nature, highlighting the dichotomy as a privilege over nature that exists within recreational activities associated with the outdoors.

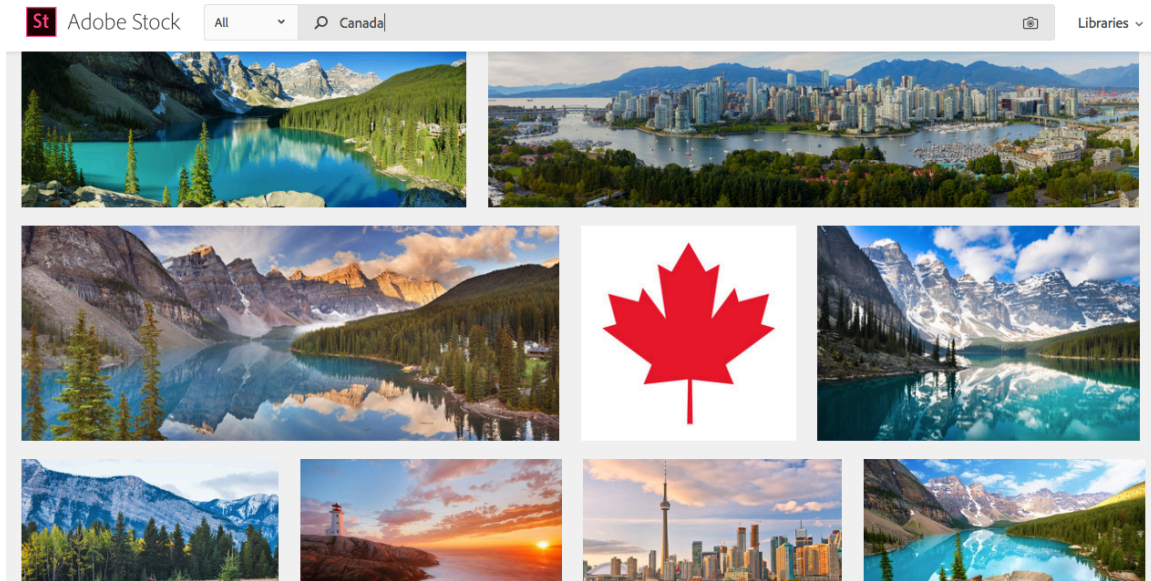
Like nature within the city centre, scenic tourism creates a similar division situating humans in a particular perspective over the landscape. My hometown is the quintessential example of a place for scenic 'rural tourism'. Situated within the Greenbelt and on the escarpment, many sites from my hometown are actively marketed in order to draw tourists, eager for an opportunity to "experience a rejuvenating connection to the natural world" ([greenbelt.ca](http://greenbelt.ca)). This marketing of the landscape through rural tourism influences our understanding of place. Rural geographer, Michael Woods defines "Rural Tourism" as "touristic activities focused on the consumption of rural landscapes, artifacts, cultures and experiences, involving different degrees of engagement and performance" (94).

The visual consumption of the landscape through scenic tourism situates nature as an exhibit. These scenic tourist sites are often built with a platform, barrier, and accompanying didactic panel for individuals to stand and absorb its beautiful



view (or take selfies). The lookout point functions as a device that controls our observation of the landscape, creating a space that physically places humans above nature, steering our perspective. Through the act of looking we are engaging with the landscape at a distance, as though we are on the outside, that we are separate, or superior to it. It is that separation and delineation of nature that blurs our understanding of it—defining it as a spectacle—and creates a human, non-human dichotomy and removes the body outside of nature, instead of a part of it.

Lippard describes the scenic overlook as a “ready-made photograph waiting to be snapped, it is removed from an actual experience, even as it may move us deeply for a moment [...] just as a postcard is a substitute for first-hand photography, the scenic overlook is a substitute for exertion” (139). This constructed perspective and physical elevation through the lookout point creates a very specific site for tourists to photograph nature. Because of this, when you Google a tourist site, the documentation is all relatively the same. Stock photography is an example of this. Stock imagery is generic, licensed and royalty-free visual content that can be purchased and used by anyone. Across stock image databases, from Getty Images, Shutterstock, iStock Photo, to Adobe Stock, the Canadian landscape is consistently represented through picturesque imagery.



7. Adobe Stock "Canada", screen capture. 2019.

From the Toronto skyline to Rocky Mountains, the photographs are similarly edited with high contrast, HDR, and highly saturated colours. A blue sky with clouds and reflective surfaces are a recurring characteristic throughout the imagery. While the images are beautiful they reveal little to no information around the history of place but rather, romanticize the landscape. This portrayal of the landscape is a structured aesthetic that contributes to our understanding and interpretation of place.



8. Isabell Spenger, *Two Days at the Falls*, 2 channel video installation, 4K, 22 min. loop, 2015

Artworks such as Isabell Spenger's *Two Days at the Falls*, directly refers to the depiction of place through digital media, like stock imagery. *Two Days at the Falls* is a two-channel installation that comments on the romanticization of place through the dissemination of imagery. The work is shown as two panoramic video depictions of Niagara Falls. The left channel is a three-dimensional model of the site, having never visited Niagara Falls, the model is a translation of the artist's preconceived notions of place—a notion that she based on a multitude of images, films, texts and digital replicas depicting the famous site. Using these references, Spenger reinterprets the landscape through objects, textures, and foleys (Spenger). The second channel is footage captured by the artist when she physically visited the site. Placed side by side Spenger identifies the portrayal of place in contrast with the physical site, highlighting how our perceptions are blurred by these representations. *Two Days at the Falls* explores the “intersection between the real and the imagined, the influence of popular culture and private perception, the monumental and the ordinary against the backdrop of contemporary, "immersive media technologies” (Spenger).

Hyper-idealized images of nature are not unique to Canada, but rather are found worldwide. It is especially prevalent now due to the proliferation of stock imagery through the Internet, to the extent that it is becoming a dominant way of experiencing landscape. Stock photos are replacing postcards in many ways, they differ in that they are not connected to memory, but still represent an idealized version of nature. I see similarities between the constructed, edited, and romanticized landscapes within digital photography, to the physical manicuring of the landscape within parks, this beautiful portrayal leads its way to notions of the picturesque. As Susan Stewart points out in *On Longing*:

The description of beautiful appears historically on the interface between the sublime and the picturesque. The terrifying and gigantasized nature of the sublime is domesticated into the orderly and cultivated nature of the picturesque. While the sublime is marked by a potential recklessness, a dangerous surrender to disorder in nature, the picturesque is marked by the harmony of form, colour, light, of modulation approached by a distanced viewer (75).

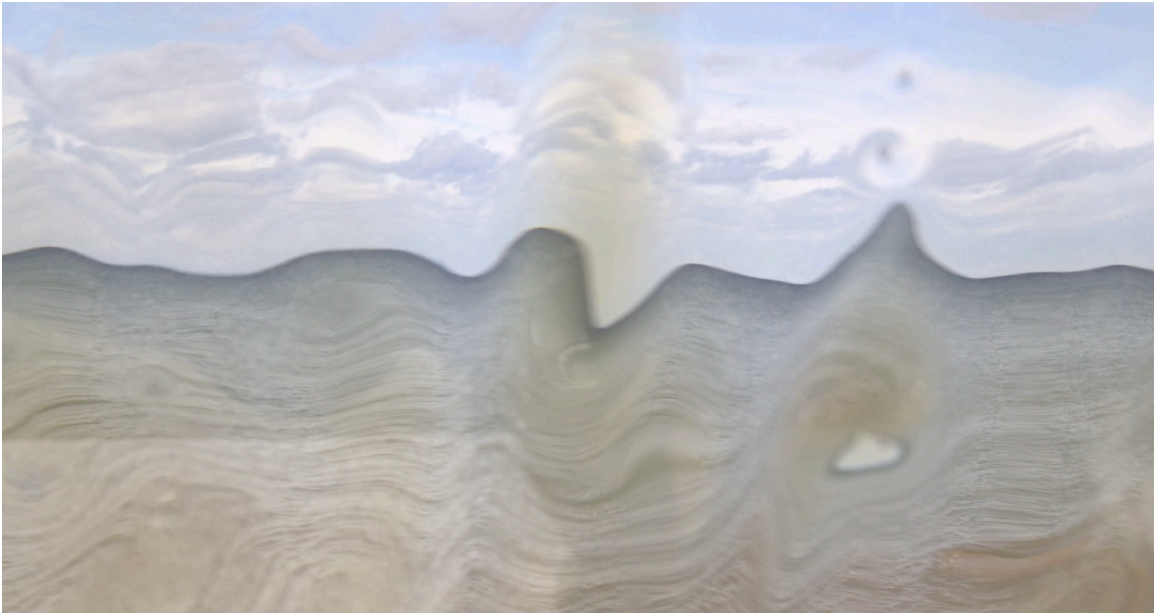
Scenic tourism is the embodiment of the picturesque, and presents a privileged notion of space and place. When viewing a place through photography, it is important to consider how scenic photographs operate, they operate as “complex discursive objects of colonial power and culture” (Sampson and Height 16). As devices that present the landscape in the way that the nation would like to be perceived. Lippard references postcards of landscapes as “instruments that focus on oversimplification, insidious misrepresentation, and as fertilizer of the colonial vision” (137).



9. Michael Snow, *Wavelength*, 1966, 45 minutes. (film stills from left to right 00:21:10, 00:37:55, 00:40:02)

Like the constructed and edited perspective of the landscape created through recreation, scenic tourism, and souvenir postcards, I use video in my work to intentionally frame the landscape for the viewer. My ongoing series *Landscape Studies* investigates contemporary notions of the landscape through video by departing from traditional forms of landscape drawing or ‘plein-air’ painting.

Canadian artist Michael Snow created a ground-breaking film *Wavelength*, in 1966 that catapulted him from the painting studio and into the realm of experimental film (Langford 15). My piece *Landscape Study IV* is a fixed camera position, which adopts a similar structuralist film technique like his work. Snow uses the bound visual frame in video as a cinematic technique to challenge films association with narrative. *Wavelength* is said to be a landmark in avant-garde cinema, creating a rupture of traditional cinematic language, Snow embraced fundamental strangeness and aesthetic radicality (Sicinski 61).



10. *Landscape Study IV*, 2019, Video Still, 00:04:21.

*Landscape Study IV* is a seven minute video work displayed on a large LED monitor. The work uses the physical intervention of the image to explore the artificiality of scenic tourism's depiction of the Canadian landscape. The piece is set on the Lake Ontario shoreline in Grimsby, a site where I would spend countless afternoons skipping rocks with Granny. The site is also a scenic spot that motorists

can experience on their way to Niagara Falls. The video documents the lake's horizon, on the left there is a distant Toronto skyline and on the right a small pier covered by the turning waves. Over the duration of the video the picturesque skyline becomes obscured as globs of viscous liquid interfere with the view. The seemingly symmetrical drips roll down the image, as the video continues, the transparent amber liquid completely engulfs the picture plane, causing the lake, sky and cumulus clouds to meld into mountain-like forms. As the ambiguous drips pick up speed, the liquid becomes reminiscent of maple syrup on pancakes, a common household ingredient that is commodified both inside and outside Canada as a distinctly Canadian condiment.



## Enthusiasm is an Illusion

Maple syrup as a quintessential Canadian condiment is a stereotypical notion that derives from the Canada settler colony and their co-opt of nature—specifically the maple leaf—as a symbol used to represent place and Canadian identity. A symbol that upholds a national mythology which depicts Canada as an untamed wilderness. Geneviève Richard in *Nature and National Identity* discusses the equation between nature and identity that has been further reinforced by the establishment of a national currency through their use of images of the natural world (7). Richard writes:

The Canadian Mint played an important role in constructing national myths and in enforcing Canadian identity. Canadian currency is one of the most useful tools in equating Canadian identity with nature, since the permanent collection includes images of the beaver, the maple leaf, the polar bear, the caribou and the loon (8).



11. *Landscape Study III [pocket change]*. 2019, Video Still. 00:06:55.

*Landscape Study III [pocket change]* is a five minute video shown on an LCD monitor face up on the floor. In the video I continuously toss my father's collection of 600 pennies into a virtual stream. Relating to both the mythological act of tossing coins into water as a mode of wish making and the actions futility. The stream has been superimposed onto chroma keyed fabric on the ground and as the coins are tossed, instead of submerging, the pennies bounce and deflect off the ground's surface. Although the penny was removed from circulation in 2015, for many, the penny has an embedded sense of mythological luck, which is influenced by the familiar saying: "Find a penny, pick it up, then all day you'll have good luck." The mass-produced penny makes its way into the intimacy of peoples hands, pockets, and box of souvenirs.

Through the performative action evoking futility and failure, the piece comments on the artificiality of our understanding of place while functioning as a personal reflection, combining myth, and ritual. Anthropologist Peter Wogan researches human's inclination to toss coins into water. He states that the action is known to spark effervescent, uncanny sensations driven by the principle anthropologists call, "contagious magic" in combination with the force of "awe", contagious magic is the "bond between a person and their direct contact with an object". The marvelling essence of awe becomes present "through the sudden miniaturization of the coin thrown in the fountain, we experience a hint of awe at the vastness of nature (water)." Beginning as an individual act of private wishes transitions into the celebration of nature and communal belonging (Wogan). The video work is void from this marvelling essence that comes with the action of tossing a coin into water, the removal of this desire speaks to the artificiality of nostalgia that



is embedded in the penny. The leaf functions symbolically as a depiction of Canada, while evoking a false sense of longing, a nostalgic, political ploy.

My memories of the landscape are a mix of truth and falsehood that serves as a framework for my research. Nostalgia often saturates the memories I aim to revisit in my work. Nostalgia is “a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams” (Boym 24). Which idealizes my childhood, creating a barrier that filters my investigation of the elements I’m attempting to interrogate.

Stewart expands on nostalgia’s ideological nature when she writes:

Nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, the past continually threatens to produce itself as a felt lack. Hostile to history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin, [...] nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past, a past which has only ideological reality[...]nostalgia is the desire for desire (23).

Stewart’s notion of nostalgia as an ideological reality goes hand in hand with my desire to return to an ideological past of childhood idylls. Childhood activities around nature are about exploration and play and a time of innocence. The penny was instilled in my childhood as representative of Canada, of place, which in turn is embedded by colonial notions of understanding. However, this authority over nature and place was something that as a child, I was naive to. Every morning throughout elementary and secondary school we stood facing the flag while the Canadian anthem rang through the halls. Through the investigation of everyday rituals my work re-engages in personal mythologies to investigate a larger dialogue with our national mythology. Now considering those moments of ritualized nationalism as an adult I question and interrogate these experiences through my work. The Canada flag holds

a nostalgia that myself, and many other Canadians have become accustomed to. Creating a complicated relationship, an illusion impeding on my understanding of nature, place and personal identity.



12. *Landscape Study V [cheering for what?]*, 2019, Video Stills, Clockwise: 00:03:30, 00:02:23, 00:06:12.

In the same way that our notions of landscape and nationhood serve as constructions, my sense of personal identity relies on and yet is complicated by those constructions. In *Collective Memory and Cultural Identity*, Jan Assman identifies collective memory as knowledge that has been repeatedly passed down through the generations, a knowledge that “directs behaviour and experience in the interactive framework of a society” (126). This collective memory then informs cultural memory, a theory where cultural knowledge is preserved and forms a societies self-image (132).

*Landscape Study V [cheering for what?]* is a sequence of three performances for video inspired by collective memory and cultural knowledge. Through futility and humour the work questions the self-image that society has instilled in my childhood, informing my Canadian identity. In the piece, I'm dressed in red shorts, a tank top, high socks, white shoes, wearing red nail polish with pom poms in hand, a costume that merges both cheerleading and athleticism. The videos document a choreographed routine on the lawn in my parent's backyard, a familiar place for rehearsal of both dance and sport. Drawing from the visual language of drill teams and cheerleading, the choreography speaks to the ritualization of patriotism and nationalism embedded in my upbringing.

Although the Canadian Flag is not visually present in the video, elements hinting at Canadiana are brought in through colour, action and props. The repetitive choreographed action is a series of semaphores (flag sign language) that signal the letters S, O, R, R, and Y. This language is not necessary for the viewer to understand but was a way to integrate the word 'sorry' as a stereotypical notion of Canada's politeness. In contrast to the politeness SORRY symbolizes, the repeatedly recited signal also evokes an eerie discomfort. The act of licking a maple syrup sucker in the shape of a maple leaf relates to childhood action, innocence and naivety, while also addressing the commodification of nature and its consumption. Caught in a contemplative perpetual loop the work questions modes of devotion, dedication, obligation and commitment.

Out of all of the works displayed within *Cul-de-sac Island*, *Landscape Study V [cheering for what?]* highlights my personal position as a white, middle-class, female, Canadian. It acknowledges my privilege and my implicit role in the

oppression of Turtle Island—Indigenous peoples, land, language and knowledge. I see the actions within the work, as well as the making of the work as a personal starting place with the intention of becoming an indigenous ally.

These three videos are shown in the gallery space existing as a montage, the central image is projected while the two others sit on its periphery housed on LED monitors. Using performance for video in a similar way to *Landscape Technician*, I place myself as the subject matter within my work in order to engage in a self-reflective dialogue. Performance to video, in contrast to live performance is used as part of my methodology to frame and compose the scene to the viewer, constructing their view, to allow the frame to function similar to a scenic lookout point. This construction often combines elements of the artificial and the real, aiding in the development of an autofictitious narrative.



13. Lisa Birke, *Fragonard's swing; Miss La La; hung out to dry*, 2013-14, Video Still, 00:01:58.

*Landscape Study V [cheering for what?]* is filmed from a room looking down into the backyard, as I repetitively execute my routine. The piece takes on both a humorous and bizarre tone through the futility of the action as well as the voyeuristic view of the camera. Canadian performance-for-video artist Lisa Birke utilizes the same unnerving spectacle through theatrical voyeurism, which is an inherent quality of cinema. Engaging in similar strategies, Birke uses the performing body as both subject and object, through the documentation of the self, she merges repetitive, durational, futile gestures while in the natural landscape. In her work *Fragonard's swing; Miss La La; hung out to dry*, Birke is shown hanging upside-down off a trapeze from the nooks of her knees in a forest, throughout the video the figure on the trapeze does a series of slow rotations, back and forth. A banal action that engages in both humour and absurdity, she doesn't see us, but we can see her ([lisabirke.ca](http://lisabirke.ca)). Like Birke, I positioning myself under the eye of surveillance, reflecting not only an internalised form of self-discipline, but also a self-consciousness. This panoptic nature within the work can connect to the panopticism implied by neighbourhood cul-de-sacs (Hoschild). A site that places any individual situated on the cul-de-sac island directly in the neighbours view, like a stage.



## Cul-de-sac Island



14. *Claiming Cul-de-sac Island*, digital matte print, 44 in by 22.5 in, 2019.

Throughout the development of this body of work I have become fascinated with the cul-de-sac as place. Intersecting playful proposition and colonial critique, the final piece in the exhibition, *Claiming Cul-de-sac Island* is a still from a performance for video in which I declare the cul-de-sac where I grew up, a sovereign nation. Using the Canadian flag as a cultural trope, the piece highlights the absurdity of authority over the landscape through the function of the flag as a marker of territory and ownership. The flag is designed with a cul-de-sac in bright 'green screen' green, the same green used to harness the illusion of place in the video work throughout the exhibition. Dressed in the same costume as *Landscape Study V [cheering for what?]* though in green, I embody a patriotic role as I claim the landscape as object. Alongside the framed video still is a physical *Cul-de-sac Island* flag mounted on the

wall as though it would be hanging off a residential house or in a gymnasium. Questioning embedded colonial dialogues, ritualistic patriarchies and the representation of place, the work considers the treatment and exploitation of the landscape as an action that has been passed down by my settler ancestors, an action that has been instilled within my identity.

While this piece, along with the other works that make up my thesis exhibition are not intended to come to a formal conclusion, *Cul-de-sac Island* functions as a contemplative conversation through both authentic and parodic visualisations. Through the recollection of memories and the re-visitation of familiar *natural* sites that have informed my introduction to the outdoors, my thesis exhibition interrogates the delineation between human and nature that has been instilled in my upbringing. Juxtaposing elements of the artificial and the real, my work investigates elements of embedded colonialist notions of authority over the landscape. Part homage, part critical inquiry *Cul-de-sac Island* is a self-reflective exploration of nature, place and personal identity.

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