

Late Stage Nature

Jan Allen

Finally we just filled it with our will, so that the land came to look tired in its heart: almost empty but crammed with human intention, sick with a sameness that came from us.

Tim Lilburn, *Going Home: Essays* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2008)

In Don Maynard's multi-media *Franken Forest*, a grove of fabricated trees and a skittering stop-action video projection of forest canopy conjure up a future in which fanciful simulacra displace the natural world. The work offers a darkly comic reflection on current conditions by extrapolating the technological penetration of natural systems and life forms. The three thematically related works that together constitute the exhibition *Don Maynard: Franken Forest* are a culmination of the artist's long investigation of a spectrum of issues and approaches to art making. Taking the essential theatricality of Maynard's recent work, noted by Gil McElroy [cite source], as a starting point, I walk through the components of this exhibition, and probe behind the scenes to trace precedents in Maynard's art.

Inspired by the skeletal stand of trees remaining after a brush fire during his 2007 residency at the Banff Centre, Don Maynard created a faux copse of seven trees. Each is a unitary vertical gesture, without branches or leaves. Some are spiky, encrusted

with drywall screws, while others are sliced and roughly reassembled with steel plates or wooden collars. Thick, limb-like trees contrast with the improbably slender rise of the birch. Each specimen captures light in its own way: from dark stained wood to luminous tubes of cast glass.¹

Like Frankenstein, Mary Shelley's fictional character invoked in the project title, the rendering of the forest is imperfect, following an affecting logic of crude assembly. One tree is a bent stub, like the severed arm of a giant, slashed with wound-like slices, the entire surface sheathed in plastic bandages. Another strangely figural tree is wrapped tight in strings of Christmas lights, the festive illumination made ominous by over use. A parody of the seasonal tree, Maynard's version is reduced and self-involved, its overwrapped dead lights signal the choking accrual of consumption, and the (too familiar) failure of maintenance regimes in favour of accumulation.

On a wonky off-oval screen suspended above the forest, a video projection supplies foliage. The image is a rough-edged fragment emphasizing the fabricated and unstable character of the environment, improvised and insufficient. The video, a composite of thousands of still photographs, offers an aggressive jolting dance through the seasons as they might be observed through a canopy of trees. Ascending trunks and the feathery upper reaches of the tree tops spin or quiver to the horizontal flicker of leaves torn from branches. As the video loop moves from gently swaying or wind whipped foliage,

¹ These components were cast at Kingston Glass Studios.

through stark black branches, blue sky and scudding clouds, the pace is frenetic, catapulting the viewer through the round of cyclical time. This sense of urgency is comic given the stasis of the *Franken Forest*'s sculptural components, suggesting a forced animation. Maynard has drawn on images from far flung locations, but many of the images in the video were taken near his home in the urban forest of Kingston's McBurney Park and at the Greater Cataraqui Creek Conservation Area.² The resonant sound track is a composite of hollow rushing wind and the distorted calls of a mourning dove, (I am not certain if one of these birds is a mourning dove but these are "early morning" bird calls captured by the river at 5:30 am and then sped up 8 times faster) oddly surging like heavy traffic.

Like a real forest, the *Franken Forest* has denizens: within an improvised nest tucked into a tree stump, a small video screen presents an accelerated recording of an actual bird nest. The flickering image is punctuated by the insistent gothic screeching of baby starlings. Although at low volume, the needle-like pitch of the bird cries sends a thread of anxiety through the installation. In one startling scene, a phalanx of the nestling's sharp, yellow-lined beaks opens wide to greet their mother. The agitated movements of the birds are exaggerated by the coarse motion-triggered recording; the flicker of the camera's red light amplifies the sense of intrusion and artifice.

² McBurney Park is known as Skeleton Park, a persistent moniker inspired by the site's history as a burial ground.

The gallery space becomes the forest; its stark disconsolate mood is bound by flashes of humour and hyperbole. The effect is one of an orchestrated but failed grandeur. It reads as a fairy tale-like sketch of elements, a setting for a cautionary tale in which we are the actors. In fact, *Franken Forest* is best seen with a group: the absurdity of the setting and the ways in which the tree forms are themselves suggestive of figures are emphasised by the presence of other witnesses. Within the grove—and it is important to enter it, to wander among the trees – it is experienced as a full-scale museum diorama, wherein the approach to simulation highlights its lack, that is, the extent to which it is “sick with a sameness” of fabrication. *Franken Forest* is a hollow performance of life systems, a portent of depleted nature.

Two companion works expand on the theme of the *Franken Forest*, and similarly draw on bird motifs as harbingers. In this, Maynard participates in a long history of birds’ use as first indicators of danger, ranging from approaching predators to choking gases in mines or insidious toxins in lakes.

Drawing on the title of Margaret Laurence’s 1970 short story cycle, *Bird in the House* uses a schematic house form recurrent in Maynard’s work.³ In this piece, a fabric-swathed house frame,

³ Maynard used house forms in his encaustic paintings of the 1990s. He discussed his use of this schema in a 1997 artist’s statement: “In this way, one house comes to stand for all houses. The image of a house is charged with all the emotional, intellectual and psychological associations that the idea of a house evokes: the house as an image of self, the house as haven, a domain of safety, the protective qualities of a house and, at the same time, the excluding aspect of the house—walls that keep strangers, scrutiny, the world at a distance.” A recent sculptural iteration is the levitating house of *Maintaining Gravity* (2008).

illuminated from within, is slightly tipped and elevated so it appears to rise from the floor. Standing for shelter, the essential structure of culture as a safe haven and private zone of the nuclear family, this house is occupied by the shadow of a bird describing a loopy ellipse on its translucent walls. Moving in a steady, balletic swoop, the soft-edged form slides in and out of focus. Maynard adds a low-level sound track of a recurrent muffled battering of wings, inflected with an oddly grating mechanical overtone.

In its soft performance, *Bird in the House* calls to the viewer's experience, provoking the frisson of urgency associated with such intrusions. Like *Franken Forest*, it is a seductive enactment of things gone wrong, of the natural order disrupted. In part, it is a matter of scale: this is a monster bird relative to the house. The floating stance of the house lends the piece the magic-infested precariousness of a fairy tale. It's a fitting allusion since the piece enacts a folk superstition: a bird in the house is a harbinger of death.

The third component of this exhibition, *Flock* is a sculptural tableaux that mimics the heave of a flock of birds mid-flight: picture the thick upward rush of starlings over a field of ripening corn. Rehearsing for migration, they rise, thrust and dive as one entity, instinct-driven. The implied movement of *Flock* arises from the arrangement of its parts, static, on the wall. As with *Bird in the House*, the wall serves as both restrictive barrier and screen. The illusion of motion is amplified by a spray of light from multiple sources, which shoots shadows and reflections

across the wall. This striking display holds a further surprise: as you move closer, it becomes evident that the bird-like forms are folded-foil planes -- each sleek like a fighter jet, or a child's notion of a fighter jet -- with their noses buried in the wall. Maynard achieves a tight, savvy synthesis in *Flock*, twining nature, play and military technologies. The autumnal flock becomes a swarm of unmanned drones (spy planes or bombers) enacting the instincts of human aggression and will.

The works in this exhibition have grown out of the artist's sustained exploration of suggestive hybridity and synthesis, first through painting and, more recently, through experimentation with the sculptural capacity of industrial materials. In his narrative encaustic painting of the 1990s -- dreamlike figural scenarios animated by richly textured surfaces -- Maynard conjured elemental themes of transformation.⁴ By the 2002 *Terra Firma* series, he had begun to use encaustic on curved plywood forms works incorporating such materials as copper, aluminum, and old national geographic maps. Maynard wrote about these works: "... the forms suggest that these are segments of the planet reconfigured and reassembled to reflect the inner workings of the world."⁵ Allusion to global systems emerged.

⁴ The Agnes Etherington Art Centre presented a small exhibition of these works under the title *Dreams and Symbols of Transformation* in 1993. This phase of Maynard's work received important recognition when it was documented and discussed on CBC television's arts showcase "Adrienne Clarkson Presents" in 1998.

⁵ Correspondence with the author, 22 July 2002

With increasingly confident use of reductive and synthetic form in his work, Maynard developed block-like abstract encaustic paintings, in which he began to explore new materials. Of the series of curved painting on metal works like *Curved Markings* (2002) or *Rigid Wave* (2003) he said, “I am interested in how light plays on form, how shapes are altered by the reflective qualities of the surface, and how subtle nuances of surface, texture and shadow create meaning.”⁶ Through this transitional period in the early years of the present decade, Maynard used industrial materials, especially the fine gill-like aluminum of radiator cores, primarily for their formal qualities.

Such materials and their explicit association with the wider “meaning” valence of environmental concerns came to life in *Smoke Signal #1* (2004) and associated works. The *Smoke Signal* series of wall-mounted sculpture were fabricated from the components of HVAC air conditioning units. These large blocks were dismantled to expose their inner workings of half inch copper tubing running through aluminum fins. Slicing the metal diagonally, on the bias, Maynard fashioned the resulting strips into writhing forms pierced by tubing reminiscent of the tunnels of burrowing insects or blood vessels. As the series title suggests, their decorative animation conveys a dark warning: they are intended as grimly encoded messages of environmental degradation.

⁶ Artist’s statement, 2004, in Julie Sasse, *Paint on Metal: Modern and Contemporary Explorations and Discoveries* (Tuscon, AZ: Tuscon Museum of Art, 2005) 90

Ongoing investigation of the capacity of industrial materials to suggest organic systems has driven much of Maynard's recent work. The environmental implications embedded in his choice of materials and the increasing scale of Maynard's projects gathered momentum. At the same time his interest in light, always present, became a preoccupation. Collaboration with other artists, such as filmmaker Lenny Epstein, opened up the possibilities of video, and projected and reflected light became increasingly important in shaping the meaning and experience of his work. *Looks Like Rain* (2007), an installation of shimmering Plexiglas (Pyrex) rods, is one of a number of works in this period addressing light and illusion.

Maynard's incorporation of political undercurrents in his work became more consistent, although these references have remained subsumed in aesthetic effect. For instance the dark enclosed form of *Absence of Light* (2006) exhibited at Kingston's Verb Gallery was accompanied by an artist's statement identifying the work as a response to the 2002 imprisonment and torture of Canadian citizen Mayer Arar. Weather systems became a predominant theme when Maynard read Australian environmentalist Tim Flannery's *The Weather Makers: The History and Future Impact of Climate Change* (2005), a collection of essays on the implications of global warming, including mass extinctions of species.⁷

⁷ Flannery, (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2005), cited in artist's statement, "Eyes on the Water," e-mail correspondence with the author, 21 November 2007

When Maynard gained access to a supply of surplus 8-foot long fluorescent tubes, he began to assemble them into backlit wall-mounted forms. With the support of a project grant, he was able to explore this effect on a much larger scale. The resulting 2007 sculpture/event *Tidal Mass* featured more than 2000 discarded fluorescent tubes mounted across open armature platforms in wave-like ranks, softly illuminated from below. This gorgeous installation, occupying some 2000 square feet, offered the emotional wallop of what Maynard described as an “illuminated ocean.”⁸ Occupying the third floor of the abandoned National Grocer’s warehouse, light from the windows washed across the surface of *Tidal Mass* steadily shifting its character through the day. The resonance of the staging of waste materials in a location made surplus by the vertical integration of food distribution was haunting and powerful. The material points to the calculated generation of waste – the practice of discarding still functioning lights – in the efficiency-driven mass turnover of lighting in retail and factory settings.⁹ With a subtle humour, *Tidal Mass* makes the case that such irrational “rational” business practices are difficult to change: a whole ocean of momentum sustains them.

The public presentation of *Tidal Mass* was integrated into a twenty-four hour event incorporating the work of other artists, film screenings and music performance.¹⁰ *Tidal Mass* marked an

⁸ The artist, e-mail correspondence with the author, 21 November 2007

⁹ Lighting tubes are replaced on a schedule, and those removed, including working tubes, are discarded *en masse*.

¹⁰ *Tidal Mass* ran for 24 hours from 8pm on Saturday 15 September, at the NGB Studio Building, 12 Catarauqui St, Kingston. Artists Colm McCool and Maggie Hogan presented new sculptural installations, and Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre screened films. Participating musicians (whose inclusion was

important departure in Don Maynard's work on several levels: in terms of scale, in terms of the organization and collaboration required to realize the project, and, not least, its social dimension.

Deploying everyday materials such as glass, nails, laminate flooring and Christmas lights, *Don Maynard: Franken Forest* plumbs our uneasiness with the irreversible drift of species loss and the insufficient theatre of their replacement. Maynard makes canny use of light and perceptual ambiguity to stoke the emotional force and conceptual immanence of his art, and draws on a range of references to games, folklore and gothic fiction. *Franken Forest* conjures the fright of the mingling of the real and artificial. This notion of illusion is key: "My work always relates to my sense that there are levels of reality, realities that lie beneath the surface of things, or behind our experiences."¹¹ Beneath the thin simulations of *Franken Forest* lies Maynard's cautionary tale of nature's depletion in a world "crammed with human intention."

facilitated through Greg Tilson) included members of Kingston bands Magic Jordan and The Dirty Colours, Jeff Barbeau, Annie Clifford, Daniel Darch, Andy Love, Derek Morton, Benjamin Nelson, Jenny O'Neil, Paul Saulnier, Chris Trimmer, and Nick Worby.

¹¹ In Melanie Dugan, "Artspace: Maynard reveals his emotions through his art," *The Kingston Whig-Standard* (20 January 2001), *Companion* section, 4

Artist Biographical Note

Born in Toronto in 1955, Don Maynard is a Kingston-based artist whose work has garnered wide critical affirmation. He has exhibited painting and sculpture across Canada and the United States since 1990. Recent solo exhibitions include *Looks Like Rain*, MacLaren Art Centre, Barrie, ON, (2008), and *Fractured Reflections*, McIntosh Gallery, London, ON, (2008). Group exhibitions include *Housing: A Right*, The Power Plant, Toronto (1990); *Connected: Contemporary Art in Kingston*, Kingston, ON (2003) and *Paint on Metal*, at the Tucson Museum of Art, Tucson, AZ (2005). A major installation was featured in the CAFKA 2009 Biennale, *Veracity*, in Kitchener-Waterloo, ON (2009).

Maynard recently won a public art competition commission for the Central Archives and Public Library Materials Centre in Ottawa (2009). He is the recipient of a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant (2009), as well as numerous grants from the Canada Council for the Arts, and the Ontario Arts Council. Maynard's work was the subject of a half-hour segment of "Adrienne Clarkson Presents," produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in 1998.

He is represented by Newzones Gallery of Contemporary Art, Calgary, ON; Walker Contemporary, Boston MA and Sears-Peyton Gallery, New York, NY. His work is held in the collections of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Canada; the Canada Council Art Bank; General Electric and the University of Toronto.