

I will pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and untold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation.

...but I can make you so wretched that the light of day will be hateful to you. You are my creator, but I am your master...

Frankenstein<sup>1</sup>

In the past number of years, we have been regularly reminded that nature has infinite resources for killing us: tsunamis, earthquakes, and hurricanes alienate us from Nature and have established an unstable relationship between us. Much of this alienation is, of course, human-made: Dr. Frankenstein run amok with his need to understand “the deepest mysteries of creation.” Don Maynard’s *Franken Forest* delves into the concept of nature as an invention, a cultural construct whose reconstituted trees takes the viewer a step beyond environment. Our edenic notions of nature and our cosy relationship with it have been thwarted and we are faced with nature as foe. Maynard states that his work addresses “political and environmental concerns, such as environmental degradation and its political ramifications, and human rights issues.”<sup>2</sup> He does this by showing us the monster we have created and, as we traverse his installation, increasing our sense of anxiety in its presence.

Historically, Canadians have created their national distinctiveness through identifying with the landscape, whether Algonquin Park, Algoma, the Rocky Mountains, or the hills surrounding Quebec’s urban centres. But Maynard has no interest in identifying his location, indeed, his can be likened to Michel Foucault’s concept of Utopia:

Utopias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. 1973), 41, 142.

<sup>2</sup> Don Maynard, Artist Statement, January, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diatrics*, (vol. 16, no. 1, spring, 1986), 265.

In this installation, this unreal space, the viewer is presented with an unlikely group of trees, a flock of birds mid flight and another bird, trapped within the confines of a house.

The focal point of the exhibition is the forest itself. It is installed as an island within the space: an isolated space, a museum display of a lost world. The installation consists of eight trees, six, in some form, originating from actual cedar trees that have been manipulated, cut apart and reconstructed (while Dr. Frankenstein's monster was constructed with materials found in the dissecting room and slaughterhouse, Maynard uses society's detritus in the formation of his work). These trees are about the fake as imagined, true nature obscured; this built environment insists that we notice its artifice and by doing so, question the motives of its maker. One tree is "armoured" in dry-wall screws, another with nails. The tall (floor to ceiling), thin birch tree, upon closer inspection, is a replica constructed of paper and wax. The glass and wood tree has been reconstructed from an original tree that has been cut into junks, some of which have then been cast in glass, and then reconstituted as an unlikely hybrid. Another is simply a memory of a tree, being constructed completely of glass. It tapers from an eight-inch diameter at its base to three inches at its uppermost reach some seven feet from the "ground." The individual glass rings that makes up the whole, are symbolic of, not only the separate rings of a tree that speak to its longevity, but the vertebrae of the human spinal column, tapping into our personal physiological memory as well. The bandaged tree, not much more than a stump, is reminiscent of a prop in a B movie: mean in execution and decidedly one from which to avert your eyes. The tree that has been drilled with one inch holes is precariously balanced – the deep black holes (a Palliated wood pecker gone mad?) that covers its surface adding to its unsteady nature. From a distance, the tree that is covered in Christmas lights is something of a respite: a warm glow emanates from the small, coloured bulbs, a cheery reprieve from this unnatural Nature. But, on closer inspection, the tree has virtually been strangled by string upon strings of lights, sinister in its jovial presentation of false warmth.

What forest would be complete without the sounds of birds reverberating through its trees? Upon approaching the faux trees, the sound of real birds can be heard. The sound

emanates from the interior of a large stump (freed from a municipal stump graveyard — how appropriate!). The stump is filled with nesting material and underneath it is a small screen with a video of at least four starling fledglings. The 38 second looped soundtrack of peeping birds suddenly becomes more violent as the four yellow-rimmed beaks rising from a clump of grey downy feathers, starts to screech as their mother comes into view. Think Hitchcock: these virtual (read fake) birds are not friendly...

Suspended over the entire installation is an oval screen some six feet in diameter on which are projected sky and trees as seen from the forest floor, a portal extending the imagined space. As Maynard notes, the video is meant to bring a dream-like quality over the trees — an evocation of past real or imagined walks.<sup>4</sup> The video is an assemblage of thousands of photographs rather than video; this gives a jerky quality to the passing trees and clouds that has the viewer once again, questioning what is real. The sound component is that of a mourning dove, A MORNING DOVE MAY HAVE BEEN PRESENT BUT IT WAS THE GENERIC EARLY MORNING BIRDS SONGS, 6 AM ON THE RIVER speeded up eight times with sounds of wind present when the trees on the screen appear to blow. The video compilation is from photographs of, among others, forests in New York, Algonquin Park, Newfoundland and Prince Edward County. MOSTLY KINGSTON, SKELETON PARK, WHICH IS OUT MY FRONT DOOR The four seasons slide by: coniferous and deciduous forests that reveal varying amounts of sky depending on the time of year. There is a dizzying array of images and sound that adds a feeling of anxiety in the face of nature. Dr. Frankenstein describes his growing dread as his monster continues to roam :

I cannot describe to you how the eternal twinkling of the stars weighted upon me and how I listened to every blast of wind as if it were a dull ugly siroc on its way to consume me.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Don Maynard, Artist Statement, January, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Shelley, 126.

Some two hundred CLOSER TO 100 AT THE AGNES birds swoop towards arrested flight on one of the gallery walls in the work *Flock*. Light and shadow play on both bird and wall, witness to the speed and accuracy of hundreds of wings in unison, a silent chorus of movement. Upon closer inspection, the “birds” are made of folded aluminium in the shape of paper airplanes, their beaks embedded into the wall. This static moment within imagined flight is yet another of Maynard’s built environments that insists that we notice the artifice of the whole. His are not gestures of a majestic landscape, but vignettes that serve to hold our attention and point to our less than grand, indeed false, relationship with nature due, in no small part, to our exploitations of its resources, the break neck speed with which we raze the land. Maynard’s decontextualization of imagery that dances on the edge of our memory creates an unease — we recall making and throwing paper airplanes, but these planes, these “birds,” cannot fly and leave the viewer with a feeling of unease as we contemplate our place in nature. There is an aesthetic appreciation for the forms that Maynard creates: the wall installation is like a free-form drawing, the shapes capturing and reflecting light, creating an harmonic movement. But our fixation on the beauty of nature is forestalled by the rupture that is our need to control it. As Kate Soper explains:

Untamed nature begins to figure as a positive and redemptive power only at the point where human mastery over its forces is extensive enough to be experienced as itself a source of danger and alienation.<sup>6</sup>

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I recall going into my infant son’s bedroom one evening and being faced with the flapping wings of a bat desperately trying to exit the room. My immediate concern was for my son, who slept, oblivious to my frantic need to do what? protect him from this creature weighing less than half an ounce? Once we had safely extricated the bat from the room and released it, I tried to imagine what *it* must have been thinking as the blanket fell.

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<sup>6</sup> Kate Soper, “Nature/’ nature,” *Future Natural: Nature, Science, Culture*, ed. George Robertson, Melinda Mash, Lisa Tickner, Jon Bird, Barry Curtis and Tim Putnam (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 25.

*A Bird in the House*, the final piece in Maynard's installation, shows, in the most palpable way, our fractured relationship with nature. A house, constructed of fabric over a wood frame, is suspended from the floor, floating at a slight angle. Inside is the shadow of a bird in flight; the flight is irregular, panicked. As we move toward the structure, we come to the sound, some real some false, of a bird, struggling, flapping to exit. The house is relatively small (three feet in height) with the bird attached to a child's record player, allowing for the irregular speed of its flight. Yet, despite the innocuous components, the work has a violent sensibility, compelling us to come toward the building and reach for the sound and understand the terror of its single occupant. The issue becomes, are we more threatened by, or threatening to nature? Do we, as Dr. Frankenstein did, abandon the monster, or open the door?

Cole Harris, in his essay "The Myth of the Land in Canadian Nationalism" states "Canadians tend to explain themselves in terms of land and location."<sup>7</sup> Maynard's intent is to remove that myth, to force us to face the artifice of human-made nature and ask the question: "what is 'natural' about nature?" *Franken Forest* is not a place of calm retreat to contemplate nature's majesty, but rather, a motley forest of trees – bandaged and misshapen, beautiful yet repellent. Like Frankenstein's misunderstood monster, our intervention and re-creation of nature begins to threaten us, our cleverness in reshaping the world our ultimate downfall. Our assumption that nature is to provide us with shade, protection and sustenance is foiled by our incessant need to intervene, rebuild, redefine. Ultimately, Utopia is an unreal place; perhaps what Don Maynard is doing is simply asking us to face reality.

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<sup>7</sup> Cole Harris, "The Myth of the Land in Canadian Nationalism," *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, ed. John O'Brian and Peter White (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 239.