

# ART NORTH

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## THE SUBLIME IS STILL NOW! REASSESSING THE NORTHERN ROMANTIC TRADITION

### ENVIRONMENT SPECIAL WE REALLY NEED TO TALK ABOUT TREES

Stoop Labour on Cougar Mountain  
Place Awareness in Cairngorms  
Seeing Red in Almería  
Eco-Crime in Serbia

Jonathan Dickson's  
Arborealism

### PHILIP BRAHAM'S ELEGANT SILENCES

### ALEC FINLAY PINES & PEARLS

### PETER HILL'S FIELD NOTES FROM CAITHNESS

### RANVA KUNOY GOES AFTER HISTORY

### JULIE BURCHILL ON CLASS & FINDING CHRISTINE KEELER IN ART

### ART NORTH PHOTO COMPETITION 2019

+ Mark Lomax talks to Lar MacGregor about hardcore quilting, Danish critic Bo Gorzelak Pedersen reveals the connections between a cheap knock-off of Arne Jacobsen's iconic Sýveren chair, Situationist bad boy, J. V. Martin, photographer Lewis Morley, and shaving the Mona Lisa, & International Reports from: Yukon, Northern Sweden, Newfoundland, & The Faroes

### SAM AINSLEY

*Still Choosing Red? Clare Henry celebrates the many achievements of 'Scottish Art's finest advocate'!*

### ART, LANDSCAPE & ARCHAEOLOGY

*Antonia Thomas Reports From Orkney*





# To Live and Work as One Sees

Risa Horowitz navigates the sense of autonomy that artists yearn for against the foreground of First Nations' struggles for self-determination in Canada

## YUKON

Gaining a better understanding of a place can be a sobering experience. This summer, I spent time researching the history of the Yukon and the Gold Rush, preparing for my attending the Klondike Institute of Contemporary Art ([www.kiac.ca](http://www.kiac.ca)) artist residency in June 2019. I covered a lot of (research) ground, from Franklin seeking the Northwest Passage in 1825 to the Tlingit running out the Hudson's Bay Company at Selkirk in 1848; from 1882, when the first gold prospectors crossed the Chilkoot Pass, to 1898 and the complete transformation of Dawson City, migratory home to the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in people, which went from being moose pasture and fishing grounds to an earth-digging, raucous, muddy, scurried, drunken, gambling sort of place. It was a whole lot of heartache for many, leading to personal ruin and some select enrichment (for example, the mining wealth of the Guggenheims). I learnt about the handing over of Federal power to the Territories through the Government of Canada's legislative Devolution Protocol Accord (1998), coincident with the year that the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Final Agreement (a modern Treaty) of self-government and land-settlement took effect.

During my prior residencies on Svalbard, where no Indigenous peoples ever lived, I felt liberated from the obligations of a Eurasian-descended settler. This time, my first visit to the Canadian North, I was aware of participating anew in Canada's settlement. This all to hold present an awareness of the problematic history of exploitation in Canada, while I mull about romantic ideals of the North and the particular ideologies of untouched hinterland that have been so effectively mythologised in the country by national identity campaigns and the endlessly sublime paintings of the Group of Seven (i.e. Canadian landscape painters Franklin Carmichael, Lawren Harris, A. Y. Jackson, Frank Johnston, Arthur Lismer, J. E. H. MacDonald, and Frederick Varley, all of whom believed a distinct Canadian art could be developed via a direct contact with nature).

The phrase *not in my backyard* sticks. The area of the Yukon has, for millennia, been the traditional homelands of Tlingit, Kaska, Tagish, Tutchone, Gwich'in, and Inuvialuit peoples, who crossed the Bering Land Bridge. Bracketing this sticky phrase is the story of Chief Isaac, leader of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in people through the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and an artwork by Whitehorse artist Ken Anderson (Tlingit/Scandinavian): *I wouldn't want one through mine* (2018).

With the influx of gold prospectors to Dawson City in the late nineteenth century, Chief Isaac led his community from the mouth of the Tr'ondëk (Klondike) River, downstream five kilometres to develop the Moosehide settlement. He was concerned for the welfare of Tr'ondëk people's culture and heritage, and knew there was no stopping that rush of white people from down south in their quest.

*I wouldn't want one through mine* is one of several works in an important exhibition touring the Yukon this year, starting at the Yukon Art Centre, Whitehorse, before moving on to Dawson City. *There, To Talk With Others* presents works by mostly contemporary Yukon First Nations artists at ODD Gallery, managed by KICAC, the gallery of the Yukon School of Visual Art (SOVA), and the Dänojà Zho Cultural Centre, devoted to sharing the culture and heritage of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation.

*To Talk With Others* takes as its premise the minutes of a 1977 meeting between Yukon First Nations Leaders and then Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. Initiated to discuss the Mackenzie Pipeline project (which was recently canned because it was not profitable enough), the conversation, as described in the exhibition text, became one "about First Nations way of life and a declaration for autonomous self-determination." In those minutes, Trudeau's finely honed rhetoric is scandalizing, full of condescending twists and double-talk. All the Leaders wanted was to delay pipeline decisions until their Final Agreements were ratified: to be empowered to negotiate on their lands for the benefit of their peoples. Trudeau ruthlessly accuses

them of refusing and, ultimately, "We I wouldn't want one through mine" pipelines and a white print emerges and footprint. Some of middle-class the tiny scar Nations by ments. The and the co to the poli land rights Anderson's ing remark vate corpor use, resour capital over As a resid attracted to those ideat weeks I too transit – the Yukon River World High day for tho tion of mov Miles of p approach Creeks, the been turne commonpl left *in-situ*, atop them with some Among s fires is the



# Work as One Sees Fit

Autonomy  
bound

"Dawson (population around 1500 or more, depending on who refuses to be counted), has a large amount of cultural activity for such a small town. During June KIAC programs ran almost daily. In addition to the ODD Gallery, an artist-run centre devoted to contemporary art, KIAC runs Print & Publishing and Film Festivals, and the Artist Residency, which runs year-long."

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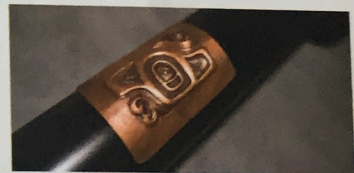
them of refusing to enter the twentieth century (that old bait, yes), and, ultimately, threatens them with delaying land claims settlements ("We will take our time") as if in a game of cat and mouse.

*I wouldn't want one through mine* – quoting Trudeau himself on pipelines and backyards – is a wood, steel, and copper installation of a white picket fence enclosing a pipe that emerges and submerges within its modest footprint. Symbolic of aspirational visions of middle-class comfort, *this fence* refers to the tiny scale of lands 'given back' to First Nations by the Queen in the Final Agreements. The fence encloses only the pipe and the copper plate adorning it, a nod to the politics of surface and sub-surface land rights outlined in the Agreements. Anderson's work is an evocative and scathing remark upon the set of values that motivate corporate and national priorities in land use, resource development, and, at its core, capital over people and environment.

As a resident artist I grappled with being attracted to the history of gold mining and those ideas of the North. Each day for two weeks I took joyrides on Dawson City public transit – the free ferry that runs across the Yukon River connecting with the Top of the World Highway that leads to Alaska. Each day for those first two weeks I participated in the devastating tradition of moving earth on our planet.

Miles of placer mine tailings extend along the Klondike River as it approaches the Yukon River, as well as along Bonanza and Eldorado Creeks, the tributaries famous for their gold. The river has, literally, been turned upside down. This amount of terraforming is, of course, commonplace, it's just that in Dawson the upturned earth has been left *in-situ*, visible from satellite images, some with subdivisions built atop them, others being re-dredged with newer technology, and with some mixed desire to achieve UNESCO heritage designation.

Among scent-memories that include wet poplars and forest fires is the smell of Stan McNevin's very old ball cap. Stan is the



Ken Anderson, *I wouldn't want one through mine*, 2019. ODD Gallery. Photo: Risa Horowitz. Detail (top) photo by Devon Lindsay, (courtesy Yukon Art Centre). [www.kiac.ca/odd-gallery/](http://www.kiac.ca/odd-gallery/)

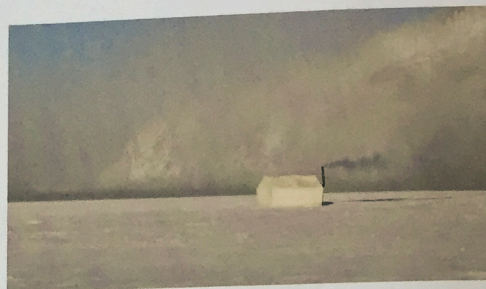




Risa Horowitz, *Moving Earth 11*, Super-8 stills. 2019 (courtesy the author).



Veronica Verkley, *Second Nature: FERAL*, 2017, stills from nine-minute video. [www.veronicaverkley.com](http://www.veronicaverkley.com).



Jeffrey Langille, video still from *elegy*, 2018, HD video, 16mm and Super 8 film transferred to video, sound, 22:23 min. [jeffreylangille.com](http://jeffreylangille.com).

long-time owner of the Eagle Plains Hotel, 35km from the Arctic Circle along the Dempster Highway. Following an old dog-sled route, highway construction began in the 1960s to facilitate oil and gas exploration that eventually fizzled. I spent two nights at Eagle Plains with more than a dozen colleagues.

Up there, we tumbled through tussocks and gaped at Arctic Cotton Grass covering the tundra. Among us, a generation of folks vitally responsible for the development of contemporary art programming, practices, and education in Dawson City: recently retired Director of KIAC, Karen DuBois, a fourth-generation Dawsonite; Eldo Enns, the go-to Interim Director of SOVA; John Steins, a printmaker and former Studio Technician with SOVA who hopped in a van and ended up settling in Dawson more than forty years ago; and Dan Sokolowski, a film maker from Ontario who runs the Film Festival and Artist Residency programs with KIAC.

Established in 2007, SOVA offers a one-year foundation program in visual arts to a small cohort of mostly regional students. Many finish their studies at one of Canada's major art schools, and often return to Dawson as artists and/or administrators (like Aubyn O'Grady, SOVA's current Director). Dawson also lures countless artists from 'the outside', many who attended the KIAC residency and returned, or who made their way by connections with SOVA.

Veronica Verkley – who, when we stopped the van on the Dempster walked out on to the tundra and lay herself down as if to float – is a media artist and sculptor from Ontario who, by many chances, became founding faculty with SOVA. She lives and makes art in her off-grid cabin near Bonanza Creek, sourcing

most of her materials from the environment, which also includes Dawson City's Landfill site. Verkley creates delightful animatronic animals, installations and video works, such

as the wistful stop-motion animation titled *Second Nature: FERAL*, which took one year, all told, to produce by hand.

In conversation, she dismisses the ease with which her practice could be romanticised in relation to the North. Her focus on animals and nature pre-dates her living in the bush: the resilience and struggles in the forested valleys of an urban centre like Toronto just as easily enabled her practices before relocation. We spoke of the predisposition towards problem-solving and troubleshooting that connects her practice and her living; that is, in the way she figures out how to get the snowmobile running at -40°C, fix a broken axe handle, or "build an art thing." I am compelled by Verkley's story about her first trip up the Dempster, where out on the tundra she relished the feeling of being a long way from other humans.

This vital silence and solitude is, likewise, expressed by artist Jeffrey Langille, also a SOVA teacher, who mainly works in lens-based practices. Langille's ethereal film and video works combine 16mm and Super 8 film with digital video, allowing him to contemplate and represent the slow, atmospheric unfolding of time while maintaining – and engaging in the viewer – a constant awareness of the mediation of the mechanisms of cameras and lenses. As a child Langille lived in Inuvik. Returning to the Yukon four years ago seems to have had a transformational impact on his work. For him, stepping out of a certain art-world rat race, and into an environment devoid of advertising, felt like "someone had turned down the volume." Langille views Dawson as a place that allows working as one sees fit – and who doesn't want this level of self-determination?

Aubyn O'Grady, meanwhile, bemoaned the predictability of art that assumes the romantic ideals of the sublime northern hinterland when we spoke about how many visiting artists (we who parachute in, so to speak), latch on to predictable themes/approaches (gold, or putting themselves in to the landscape) before, possibly, getting to a deeper practice that may indeed be about place but that does not rely on the old stereotypes. O'Grady describes many regional Indigenous and Settler artists who make weird and conceptual art (she herself conceived of the *League of Lady Wrestlers*, "a performance art collective that uses the spectacle of professional wrestling to engage her audience in feminist theory and subversive performance"), and the ways that SOVA, KIAC, and the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Heritage Department are, uniquely, finding ways to talk about and describe less conventional practices, or First Nations practices that have been mostly oral, or practices that use traditional materials unconventionally.

Lulu Keating, a filmmaker who relocated from Eastern Canada to Dawson in the early 2000s, runs the Arctic Circle Retreat residency during off-season at the Eagle Plains Hotel. Keating, who quips that she never thought she would perform as a lady wrestler (props included a walking aid and a urine bag) holds this important point present: "there is a false assumption that everyone in the North is new here... [negating] the homeland of the various First Nations who have been in the Yukon for millennia." This is a worthy reminder that white, Western, Settler institutional frameworks for art need not be assumed to be central, and the shameful necessity in our post-colonial world for some people, in some places, to have to fight to live as one sees fit. ■

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