

Turf & Twig  
An Exhibition of Paintings

by

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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

In *Turf & Twig* solitary figures are depicted at the boundaries of salable land, performing surreal and fruitless tasks. The objects they interact with recall a manufactured domesticity that seems displaced and almost obsolete set within the outdoors. The inadequacy of these interactions is emphasized by the immensity of the wilderness behind them. Inspired by the historic “Turf and Twig ceremony”, which has its roots in the colonial, English expansion into North America, the symbolic actions depicted in these large-scale oil paintings suggest failed versions of settlement. Source images for the landscapes are retrieved from Canadian real estate websites, which advertise ‘empty lots for sale’. These open-ended narratives act as imagined histories on lots of land charged with unresolved colonial links to the past.

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Lastly, to my partner Brian – I couldn't have done this without your support. For everything you've helped me with these past two years, your patience and understanding, and your big picture perspective – thank you.

## Dedication

*Turf & Twig* is dedicated to my family and to my partner Brian.

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## Introduction

In the silence of the forest certain events are unaccommodated and cannot be placed in time. Being like this they both disconcert and entice the observer's imagination: for they are like another creature's experience of duration. (Berger 126)

*Turf & Twig* is an exhibition of large landscape-with-figure oil paintings. Based on images from current real estate listings in Canada these works depict imagined interactions between the European settler (aka the colonizer) and the land – the property lines and boundaries of suburbia versus the immensity of the Canadian forest. The awkward scenes that occur in these paintings are staged interpretations of activities I imagine settlers engaging in on these lots of land, decades and centuries before. They render the invisible (and constructed) past visible, presenting it as visual riddles. I have pointed toward one such activity by name – the Turf and Twig ceremony, which is an historic ceremony also known as 'Livery of Seizin' that has roots in English colonialism. In one account,

The lucky new Commoner goes to his "given" acre and cuts a turf from the selected site and drops two shillings in the hole made. The Clerk to the Common then twitches him with a twig and sticks the twig in the turf, then hands it to him saying, "This turf and twig I give to thee, as free as Athelstan gave to me, and I hope a loving brother thou wilt be." The Clerk then takes the money out of the hole and the new landowner replaces the turf. (Hodge 22)

The colonial implication of this bizarre ritual is that the "new Commoner" now owns this patch of turf.

The paintings in *Turf & Twig* depict figures alone at the edge of salable land boundaries, as they perform surreal, unnamed, fruitless tasks. The insufficient and absurd nature of their actions is emphasized by the immensity of the wildernesses behind them. The objects that the figures interact with recall a manufactured domesticity. Displaced in the outdoors and almost obsolete, the relevancy of these objects is unclear as they are stripped of both functional and cultural indicators. The characters' relationships with the objects, in addition to their placement

within the frames, suggest visual hierarchies. They also play an important narrative role in helping to signify moments of marking or seizing the land by way of symbolic gestures, as well as through the intervention of synthetic materials.

Visual clues such as chair design or hairstyle place these scenes in a vaguely post-industrial age, however the obscured horizons and close cropping prevent the viewer from concrete geographical placement. In this way, these landscapes function in the tradition of the early British depictions of Canadian landscapes as ‘sublime’, which McKay defines as “...made up of sites that were vast, awesome, obscure, dark, gloomy, and solid such as mountains, wilderness forests, volcanoes, raging waters, and stormy skies, all of which from a distance induced an enjoyable or delightful fear in the viewer.” (McKay 48).



**Figure 1. James Pattison Cockburn, *The Road Between Kingston and York, Upper Canada*, circa 1830<sup>1</sup>.**

Conceptually it was necessary to link these paintings to the tradition of colonial landscape paintings in Canada, which I attempted to do through suggestions of the sublime. The images

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<sup>1</sup> [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d5/Road\\_Between\\_Kingston\\_and\\_York,\\_Upper\\_Canada.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d5/Road_Between_Kingston_and_York,_Upper_Canada.jpg)

avoid a ‘picturesque’ composition by directing the viewer’s gaze onto the land for sale as if they are standing directly in front of it and unable to take all of it in, rather than viewing the scene from a remote location (McKay 72), which implies a certain degree of voyeurism. In his article “The Contemporary Sublime”, Simon Morley includes a brief introduction to the history of the sublime. Specifically of interest is his reading of Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* (1790), writing: “Thus because the sublime addresses what cannot be commanded or controlled, it is grounded in an awareness of lack. And as a consequence of this awareness of an inaccessible form of excess, argued Kant, we come to a recognition of our limitations...” (Morley 16). Therefore the combination of an incomprehensibly vast wilderness situated behind fictional, unresolved tasks establishes both an impending sense of ‘delightful fear’ in the viewer as well as an awareness of one’s own limitations.

The settings in *Turf & Twig* are not centred around notable landmarks or particularly scenic areas, but rather on so-called ‘empty’ lots of land for sale. The significance of painting ‘empty’ lots of land points to the problematic notions of land ownership carried over from the colonial paradigm that was used to entice and promote immigration. Representations of Canadian land as ‘empty’ were political in their omission of any Native presence (McKay 16). In his book *Representing Place: Landscape Painting & Maps*, Edward S. Casey asserts that the representation of place also entails specific time periods and that past histories are always inseparable from where they took place (Casey 265). Similar to Berger’s quote this exhibition investigates the limits between ourselves and our perception of limitlessness, a recognizable strangeness between the visible present and the invisible past.

In addition to my research, I also draw upon my family’s history, as it remains a very relevant part of the time we spend together. The ancestors of my parents were early settlers to

Nova Scotia. They were regarded as ‘Foreign Protestants’ by the British and were offered free land and rations in exchange for loyalty to the crown (Bassler 11-35). The Rodenhauser family arrived in Halifax in 1751 after having sailed from the Netherlands aboard the *Murdoch* ship. In addition to my relatives who actively maintain our family tree, information from these first voyages remains in online databases, making this part of my heritage very accessible<sup>2</sup>. Daytrips around Lunenburg County often uncover more pieces of the puzzle (for instance, this past summer my aunts informed us that the first lot of land given to the Rodenhausers is where the Lunenburg Art Gallery is now located). A lifetime steeped in this kind of lived history has informed my desire to create paintings, which help in the investigation of my colonial roots.

### **A Country of the Bush**

...The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism and constitutes one of the main connections between them. (Said 1993, xiii)

In his book *Culture and Imperialism* Edward Said defines imperialism on a basic level as “...thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others” (Said 1993, 7). Many of the earliest representations of the Canadian landscape may be read in relation to this. In her book *Picturing the Land: Narrating Territories in Canadian Landscape Art, 1500-1950*, Marilyn McKay examines maps made during the first excursions to North America, many of these depicted “terra nullius (‘land belonging to no one’)” (McKay 16). She points out that while many of these maps were understood to be scientifically true at the time, they were actually narratives: “As such they were spaces for representation as much as they were representations of space.” (McKay 17). For

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<sup>2</sup> Passenger Lists for Ships Carrying the “Foreign Protestants” to Nova Scotia:  
<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~canns/lunenburg/shiplist1.html>

example, Samuel de Champlain’s “Map of Eastern Canada” from 1612 celebrates a colonial narrative by using explorer-based symbolism and includes the representations of four Native people in the style of Greco-Roman statuary which, to McKay, equates them with philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s view of the ‘noble savage’ (McKay 23).



Figure 2. Samuel de Champlain, *Map of Eastern Canada*, 1612<sup>3</sup>.

In Peter Kulchyski’s 1996 article, *Bush Culture for a Bush Country: An Unfinished Manifesto*, he defines the ‘bush’ as being distinct from the ‘wilderness’. Historically, Canada has been portrayed by imperialists as a country of vast wilderness, however Kulchyski states that conceiving of Canada as a ‘country of the bush’ “...allows us to think of a lived relation to and in this landscape” (Kulchyski 192). In this way, it is possible to regard the country of Canada as a place of lived history. Kulchyski elaborates

all the ghosts in this country are in the bush, where the killing took place. The spirits of the country are in the bush, roaming restlessly through the dreams of those whose bodies are marked with the traces of history forced on them, the history that hurts, the history

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[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c3/Samuel\\_de\\_Champlain\\_Carte\\_geographique\\_de\\_la\\_Nouvelle\\_France.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c3/Samuel_de_Champlain_Carte_geographique_de_la_Nouvelle_France.jpg)

that is not a story of how every day in every way things got better and better. (Kulchyski 195)

Kulchyski's theory of the 'bush' as a place of lived history corresponds with Edward Said's idea of the past and present informing, implying, and coexisting with the other (Said 4). The form of coexistence that Kulchyski and Said speak of provides an opportunity for overlooked information from the past, and newfound knowledge of the present to generate fresh perspectives on historical records. These alternative and re-imagined narratives are a form of intervention; they disrupt the rigid and linear history imparted to us from the past. The peculiar objects within my work are positioned against the traditional backdrop of the 'bush' producing a hybrid position of present and past within the same space, which serves as a form of playful intervention. For this reason I identify with Kulchyski's theory of the 'bush' as a place of lived history since it represents "a great site for play and for possibility; for repetition and for difference." (Kulchyski 1996).

This group of paintings was constructed within the history of Canadian landscape paintings: how these early painted representations make obvious our colonial relationship to the land. It is a constructed, failed version of settlement that navigates around recognizable landmarks or region-specific elements. It 'makes strange' the existing relationship that we have with our country's history of land seizure by decontextualizing the source images of land that are for sale today. My reference point of real estate photography alludes to the problematic nature of representing the land due to the impossibility of 'containment'. According to Edward S. Casey: "...the issue is how something that, by its very nature, overflows ordinary perception can be represented by something else that, by *its* very nature, can only present itself to the viewer as a discrete object with definite dimensions and often within a delimited frame." (Casey 7). Few images of "empty lots for sale" feature distinct property lines or signifiers as they are often

overgrown with weeds or butt up against the ‘wilderness’. However, the in-camera cropping attempts to ‘contain’ the land and otherwise direct the viewer/potential buyer’s gaze.

The landscapes depicted in *Turf & Twig* include both cleared areas as well as dense ‘backdrops’ of forest which, due to the nature of the source material (i.e. Canadian Realty websites), illustrate the possibility of clearing and occupying land – making it one’s territory. According to McKay, this is typical of early English depictions of Canadian landscapes as well: “...in images of the exploration of the wilderness and of its transformation into agricultural land – sometimes within the same frame, so that they could emphasize process.” (McKay 274).



Figure 3. S. Russell after William Kay for Day and Haghe Lithographers, *Process of Clearing the Town Plot of Stanley*, 1836<sup>4</sup>.

An example of this can be found in a poster designed for the New Brunswick and Nova Scotia Land Company that aimed to attract settlers to the area (McKay 78). Entitled “Process of Clearing the Town Plot of Stanley”, this lithograph was designed by S. Russell from a drawing by W.P. Kay. The poster depicts the process of clearing the land: workers clear-cut an area in the foreground; in the middle ground we can see that recent structures have been erected; and

<sup>4</sup> <http://data2.archives.ca/ap/c/c000017k.jpg;pv5cebee192b71cf1e>

beyond that an untouched, sublime landscape awaits transformation. Intrigued by the possibility of indicating the passage of time through representational space, I have chosen images of lots for sale in front of unspoiled forests in reference to these early transformative depictions of the Canadian landscape.

### **Between the Crown and the Ground**

‘What is painting?’, Lyotard asks of avant-garde painters since the advent of photography. His answer: ‘Essentially what is at stake in the work is the demonstration of the existence of the invisible in the visual.’ (Lyotard 134)

I have taken cues from my reading of the traditional Turf and Twig ceremony in the construction of open-ended, vaguely ceremonial interactions with (or in relation to) land charged with unresolved links to the past. In his book *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, Gilles Deleuze points to Bacon’s desire to “paint the scream more than the horror”. According to him, Bacon achieves this through establishing “a relationship between the visibility of the scream (the open mouth as a shadowy abyss) and invisible forces, which are nothing other than the forces of the future.” (Deleuze 51) In *Turf & Twig*, I imagine the establishing of settlements to have been carried out on behalf of ‘invisible forces’ such as the imperial crown, God, or other prevailing forces and that their invisibility may have assisted in greatly disfiguring or otherwise altering the land. The individual supposedly free from accountability was therefore able to carry out tasks in the name of these forces. What captivated my imagination about the Turf and Twig ceremony was the formality of it – a frighteningly symbolic gesture that underscores the more widespread and forceful process of colonization. By distilling the essence of land seizure down to the objects



of a small twig and a few shillings, those performing the task remained distanced from the larger impact of the situation, a distance that is further extended through legal and symbolic jargon.

Likewise, the paintings in *Turf & Twig* do not outwardly depict acts of aggression or violence. The figures within them appear despondent, apathetic, and busy. These attributes represent both the contemporary consumer and the historic settler, where the self-involvement of the figures may suggest a lack of concern for the invasive nature of their settlement. Rather than painting the horror implicit in European expansion into Canada, I am more interested in alluding to feelings of emptiness or insufficiency, feelings that I believe are part of our nation's history.

In his curatorial essay entitled, *The Power of the Untimely – Neo Rauch: Painter of the Present*, Bernhart Schwenk examines Rauch's work in relation to our over-consumption of images. He points to the intermingling of historical and contemporary images in Rauch's work, an intermingling that allows for alternate readings of historic events in the collective consciousness. "Consciously untimely, they work with a historicity that reveals the historical not as an unquestioned fact, but remains semantically open in a timeless form of retelling. They make various (re)interpretations possible." (Schwenk 11) In this way Rauch's work plays with combining the invisible with the visible, a strategy that Schwenk argues ultimately leads the viewer away from having a finite understanding of his work.



Figure 4. Neo Rauch, *Schilf*, 2009<sup>5</sup>.

According to Alison M. Gingeras, the instances of anachronism that Rauch regularly employs in his work should be understood as symptomatic of contemporary issues in painting rather than an overly simplified form of nostalgia (Gingeras 274). By incorporating familiar references and ‘retro’ motifs Rauch successfully communicates complex present-day concerns as unavoidable consequences to collective memories of the past. While I may employ similar techniques as Rauch in working with a collage-based process to conjure past eras, the elements in his paintings seem to retain more of their separateness, resulting in an overall ‘cornucopia’ effect. The dramatic variations in scale, perspective, and lighting found in Rauch’s work prevent the emphasis from being on one singular event, as is the case in the paintings from *Turf & Twig*.

## Ordering Systems

What does it mean to consume a painted image? What does ‘landscape’ represent in this context? A rarified, privileged experience, confined to a cultural elite? If so, what has happened to the sense that the natural world is free and open to us all? (Andrews 2)

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.zacheta.art.pl/gfx/db\\_pictures/huge/000770.jpg](http://www.zacheta.art.pl/gfx/db_pictures/huge/000770.jpg)

Leslie Dawn outlines how the British tradition of landscape painting has influenced Canadian landscape paintings in her article “The Britishness of Canadian Art”, arguing that the “...connections between possession and representation...” were originally British ways of staking claim to a new land (Dawn 196). She also asserts that British depictions of Canadian land can be viewed as representations of imperial interests, stating that a number of these works function as perfect devices for generating ‘historical narratives’ that promote a gradual ‘expansion’ (Dawn 197). This may be understood as an example of what Malcolm Andrews refers to as ‘pictorial colonization’ (162) – essentially the “...old world ordering systems of the new world...” (162).

It wasn’t until the early twentieth century that Canada began to assert itself against its European roots and define itself as an independent culture. In her article “Nature and National Identity: Contradictions in a Canadian Myth”, Geneviève Richard points to Paul Hjartarson who states that, “Canada as a settler colony, is not able to construct a simple concept of the nation such as those based on a linguistic community or racial or religious homogeneity because it is faced with a plurality of cultures and identities” (Richard 6). Due to the problematic history of how colonizers came to occupy the land in Canada, Hjartarson argues that “...creating an identity surrounding the natural world became simpler as it did not need to address the issues of colonization and plurality...” (Richard 6). A shift in the representation of the vast landscape of Canada became a way to forge a new national identity separate from Europe and the United States.

The Group of Seven began to promote the idea of the untamed wilderness in contrast to the manicured landscapes and pastoral scenes associated with colonial powers. Marilyn McKay quotes early reviews of work by English Canadian landscape artists (including those who went on to form the Group of Seven) which celebrated the expressive brushwork that depicted scenes

of wilderness as representative of decidedly Canadian scenes, supposedly ‘without European influence’ – a claim that has been disputed since then. (McKay 172-173) The Group “...were adherents to the view that the uniqueness of the Canadian wilderness made it more likely than settled landscapes to inspire pride and, moreover, that such pride would lead the nation to greatness.” (McKay 185). The Group of Seven represented the wild, untamed, unwelcoming Canadian landscape, which has come to be understood as characteristic of Canada’s wilderness, as demonstrated in A.Y. Jackson’s *Terre Sauvage*, 1913.



Figure 5. A.Y. Jackson, *Terre Sauvage*, 1913<sup>6</sup>.

The work of the Group of Seven was widely embraced as being distinctly Canadian as a result of the political climate of the time. Richard states that “...while Canada slowly started establishing itself in the nineteenth century, Europe was experiencing a growth of nationalism...” (Richard 6). There emerged a strong desire to set Canada apart from its European roots and American counterparts. Richard identifies that the paintings of the wilderness by the Group of Seven had “...characterized the country as a virile nation; as being stronger than its American

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<sup>6</sup> <http://uploads0.wikipaintings.org/images/a-y-jackson/terre-sauvage-1913.jpg>

neighbours to the south due to the harsh winters and as impenetrable due its dangerous and rugged terrain...” (Richard 6). By depicting these wild scenes the Group of Seven forged a distinctly Canadian identity as a nation of strength and perseverance. The vast nature that Canada offers remains an important aspect of Canadian identity. Geneviève Richard outlines the importance of art in creating a national identity, and that this work is “...often displayed in national museums, meant to embody the country’s history and culture...” (Richard 7).

While the work of the Group of Seven has been celebrated for decades, it is important to also acknowledge that their landscapes are problematic in their representation of such a small part of Canada’s geography and in their failure to include any kind of aboriginal presence. Although this style of painting set Canadian art apart from the highly manicured and tamed English Canadian landscape paintings that preceded, it must be identified that

By painting Canadian nature as wild, dangerous, and untouched, the Group of Seven effectively erased the aboriginal people who populate the entire country. While the Group thought they were distancing themselves from the colonial nature of Europe and of European landscape painting, they deepened the colonial process by failing to recognize the indigenous peoples in Canada. (Richard 12)

Most of the members of the Group of Seven were from Ontario and as a result most of their images depict scenes located in Northern Ontario, and not Canada in its entirety. This overlooks many of the peoples and much of the landscape this vast country has to offer.

In contrast to the early colonial depictions of Canada by European painters and the nationalist sentiments of the Group of Seven, the work of Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun creates what he refers to as a ‘neo-Native gaze’ (Ritchie 124). In art historian Christina Ritchie’s article, she proposes that Yuxweluptun’s combination of traditional aboriginal design elements with surreal Dali-esque clear-cut wastelands situates his work as a ‘counter-narrative’ to Canada’s history of landscape painting, offering a critique of contemporary environmental issues (Ritchie 120). Yuxweluptun’s intervention with the Canadian canon of landscape painting includes a

highly stylized treatment of the land, which provides the space for his narratives to assert their criticality. I find this inserting of new narratives into the Canadian landscape is an important method in understanding our Canada's colonial history.



Figure 6. Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *Burying Another Face of Racism on First Nations Soil*, 1997<sup>7</sup>.

### Projecting Narratives

Source images of landscapes are retrieved from Canadian real estate websites, advertising ‘empty lots for sale’. The commissioned realtors usually decide the framing of these images. As a result they tend to lack obvious focal points or landmarks traditionally found in landscape images – instead, the limits of the land for sale become part of the colonial narrative (i.e.

<sup>7</sup> [http://coastalartbeat.ca/newsletters/The\\_Beat\\_May\\_2012\\_html\\_m69eeb9b2.png](http://coastalartbeat.ca/newsletters/The_Beat_May_2012_html_m69eeb9b2.png)

McKay's 'terra nullius', land that belongs to no one). This lack of focal point allows for the viewer (and potential buyer) to clearly imagine or impose their vision onto the vacant lot. Trees and obstructions are obstacles that require more work on the owner's behalf, while a cleared lot suggests that it is 'prime for the taking'. The buyer can quickly occupy the land and begin a new venture there. The ads are essentially selling the idea of a 'blank slate': a shallow, vacant lot that has very little history.

With *Turf & Twig*, I purposefully selected images that depict shallow spaces, as I want them to function as 'backdrops' for the narratives. This also parallels how settlers may have understood the land – as a backdrop on which their actions had little to no consequences, a backdrop which was not impacted by the prescribed tasks of extracting resources, disseminating religion, and imposing treaties. In this way, my response to the vacant lots and the realtor's framing of the land is similar to that of a buyer. However, instead of envisioning my future life on these specific lots, I construct historical narratives of imagined events and people. Source imagery of figures and objects are accessed through online archives, then brought together and manipulated in Photoshop. Having worked as a freelance retoucher for a number of years, these skills have become an important part of my painting process. They allow me to try out multiple compositions, pairing different figures with different objects, until I find something that alludes to more than just the sum of its parts. Using a digital projector, I then literally project these Photoshopped narratives onto the canvas and onto the real estate images of Canadian land.

Human intervention, sale, and ownership of land are integral parts of Canada's history from the time of the earliest colonizers. In 1844 Upper Canadian political reformer Dr. Thomas Rolph stated that "...human industry works its greatest miracles only when the skill and capital of an improved society are brought to bear upon the superior lands of a new country" (Weaver 3).

By this, Rolph observed the widely accepted belief that the colonizers could only improve upon the land found in Canada by taking ownership and implementing their own methods and strategies for development. By various means the land was claimed, and clear-cut to make room for civilization and capitalism. John C. Weaver further discusses the vast consumption and ownership taken over the 'unclaimed' land in Canada, stating: "...any account of the great land rush must consider how Neo-Europeans acquired as well as distributed land. From the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, when colonizing Europeans encountered other civilizations, they invariably measured them by European religion, laws, science, technology, political organization, knack for warfare, and use of land" (Weaver 3). These appraisals were used to claim ownership of land, occupied or not, especially when there was potential for economic gain (Weaver 3). This land was cultivated and its resources provided profit and progress.

With the Industrial Revolution land became occupied in a number of new ways and there soon emerged a desire to create an entirely new space that existed somewhere between the urban and rural regions. This space began to develop on the outskirts of urban centres which was "...at once rural and urban, a space that was prototypically suburban..." (Spigel 12). By the 1830s this concept was wide-spread as "...in a world of industrial urbanization the middle class man could uphold the republic's agrarian values through owning a private home outside the city..." (Spigel 12).

As a result of modernism, ownership of land and suburban centres began to dominate the North American landscape. Following World War II, the economic stability of Canada and the United States in comparison to the many devastated European countries led to a new wave of immigration to North America. This in turn led to an influx of affordable housing and widespread development of the suburbs. This suburban sprawl claimed ownership of vast areas



of land, and mass-produced, prefabricated housing was developed as a way to meet the high demands. For example, in 1949 in a potato field in Hempstead, Long Island “...more than 1,400 people lined up [...] to purchase their first home, a prefabricated Cape Cod/Ranch style cottage filled with modern labor-saving appliances and located in the most famous mass-produced suburbs, Levittown...” (Spigel 1). This suburban sprawl, and desire to own a piece of the land is still predominant today, as is demonstrated by the many active advertisements of ‘land for sale’ on Canadian real estate websites (the ones that serve as source images for my work).

My understanding of the relationship between colonial settlement and the eventual suburban sprawl into the Canadian landscape informs my compositional choices. Real estate images are selected based on their depictions of cleared areas in front of thick forests. According to Malcolm Andrews, the word ‘landscape’ has German origins and is based on the word ‘landschaft’ which means “...the land immediately adjacent to a town and understood as belonging to that town...” (Andrews 156). To me this type of image suggests *liminality*, in that while it is for sale, its future use is unknown, (as is the future of the forest behind the clearing). By combining these current images of land with projected narratives, this series not only recollects historic colonial events, but also suggests concern for our future treatment of the land.

### **New Commoners**

Although the individual paintings in *Turf & Twig* depict unique figures, objects, and narratives, there are several visual strategies I use throughout the series in order to augment feelings of strangeness. For example, light consistently and subtly appears to emanate from several sources. Upon close inspection of shadow and highlight, it becomes evident that each element has its own light source. These visual cues indicate that the figures, objects, and backgrounds come from separate sources. Although the disparate lighting of these found images

are to some degree neutralized and unified during the painting process, the overall effect remains disquieting in its subtle deficiencies. The overall paint application is neither textural nor overly thick, although brushstrokes are visible throughout the work. This consistency in application also helps to unify the paintings.

The tasks depicted in *Turf & Twig* are fictionalized variations of what I imagined to be early settlers' primary concerns (familiarizing surroundings, mediating experiences with the environment, creating spaces for religious rituals, etc...). I have taken these vague notions and equipped the figures with ineffective domestic, industrial, and otherwise unexplained items to contextualize their tasks. In this way I mirror what I perceive to be the insufficient, symbolic nature of the Turf and Twig ceremony.

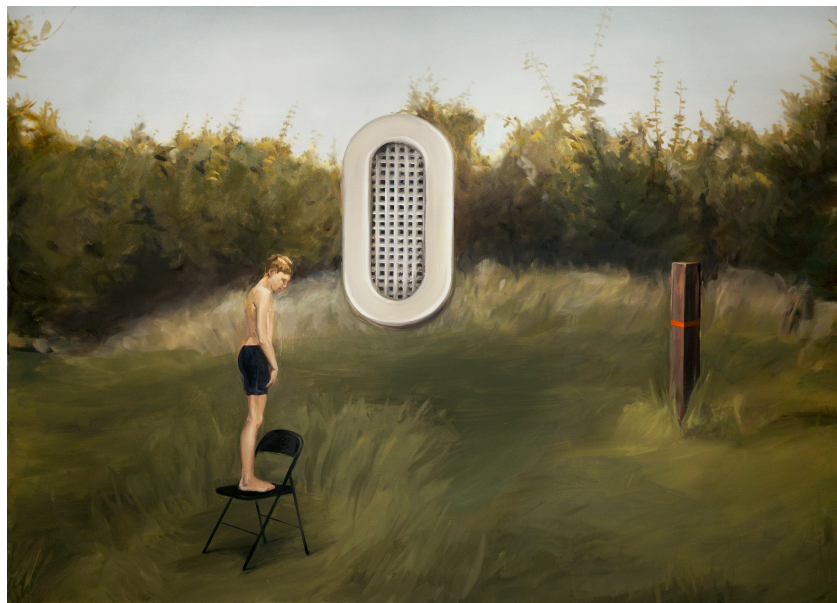


Figure 7. *Signalman*, 2013.

In “Signalman” a white adolescent boy stands frozen on top of a black metal folding chair. Both the boy and the chair are positioned on a flattened area of tall grass, suggesting that he stands there often. Hovering like an apparition in the centre of the image is an oversized oval that appears to be made of an industrial strength material. Its middle contains a weathered vent.

This object may be understood in relation to the boy's narrative, but it also interrupts the illusion of a landscape in perspective. It calls attention to the collage technique used in the creation of this piece. On the right side of the painting, a wooden post marked with fluorescent orange flagging tape emerges from the soft grass. Beyond this post we see nothing but trees – bending softly, their uppermost branches flecked with golden sunlight. The initial impression is serene, however the impenetrability and wildness of the forest soon stifles this. As the directional movement of the grass begins to hint at a breeze, the centrally positioned vent reasserts its ominous presence above the land and the preoccupation of the boy becomes more vulnerable and tense.



**Figure 8.** *Turf & Twig*, 2013.

In the painting “Turf & Twig” a young white girl in plain undergarments stands in a cleared area before a dense wall of trees. To her left sits a tropical potted plant. The species known as the *Monstera Deliciosa* is native to southern Mexico, and references the colonial desires to collect, contain and display the exotic. On her immediate right is a figure obscured by a thick stroke of paint, the colours of which echo the young girl's own pale complexion. The girl's body language is closed; she hugs her waist and bites her fingernails as she scrutinizes the

figure beside her. The shadowy expanse of balsam fir trees in the background emphasizes the unexpected presence of the tropical plant, while simultaneously isolating and foregrounding the narrative.

The construction of images in *Turf & Twig* may also be understood in relation to the tradition of the ‘tableau vivant’, where models maintain their poses under theatrical lighting for a set duration<sup>8</sup>. The *stagedness* of this approach has long been referenced in image making, with contemporary artists such as Jeff Wall incorporating aspects of it through photographic representation. Wall has assigned his own term, the ‘cinematographic’, to the type of rigorous staging that occurs in his photos, which allows for “...the illusion that the picture is complete in itself, a symbolic microcosm which does not depict the world in the photographic way, but more in the way of symbolic images, or allegories.” (Wall 9).



Figure 9. Jeff Wall, *A ventriloquist at a birthday party in October 1947, 1990*.

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<sup>8</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tableau\\_vivant](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tableau_vivant)

The paintings in *Turf & Twig* also reference this tradition in their *stagedness* – and similar to Wall’s photographs, these paintings present the illusion that they are complete and that the viewer is not missing any action outside of the frame.



**Figure 10.** “Turf & Twig” installation shot, University of Waterloo Art Gallery, 2014.

Of the seven paintings in *Turf & Twig*, six of them include a figure: four female and two male. While these figures span from early adolescence to old age, they exist in a kind of perpetual summer, with the foliage depicted at the height of its fullness and vibrancy. Each figure defines their relationship to the other elements within the painting, as well as to the viewer, by way of their gaze. Some focus on the task at hand while others scrutinize their surroundings, and in one instance a figure actually looks up and away from their immediate situation and out towards the viewer (e.g. in the painting “Sharpen the Trunk and Drive it into the Ground”).



**Figure 11. “Sharpen the Trunk and Drive it into the Ground”, 2014.**



**Figure 12. “Dry Enough to Burn”, 2014.**

While these paintings do not require a specific sequence to be read, the installation pivots around the painting “Dry Enough to Burn”. Due to its lack of figures this piece is a sort of bookend to the entire group of paintings, however my intention was to suggest a pause within the

cyclical narrative of generations altering the land. In the foreground a metal bedframe supports a pile of freshly cut firewood, which tumbles down the front of the picture plane. Behind this pile is the familiar wall of forest shared by the other paintings in the exhibition, except in this painting there is a break in the trees hinted at in the right-hand corner. Through this gap a field in the distance becomes visible. Pinkish foliage lines the area immediately in front of the forest, but this too contains a trampled-down gap. On the left-hand side of the canvas is a painted post-it note – neon orange, but slightly faded. The shadow of the post-it appears to be cast on the surface of the painting, which breaks with the illusion established by the landscape, while simultaneously establishing its own illusion. While the post-it note is blank, the angle at which it appears to have been stuck on the canvas is reminiscent of leaving a quick note for someone, perhaps to indicate an intention to return.

## **Conclusion**

The creation of this body of work has come out of a desire to both understand my own relationship to Canadian landscape painting and my family's ties to Canada's colonial history. Uncovering some of the colonial traditions surrounding land ownership has allowed me to relate my own figurative representations to something historic, while simultaneously appropriating real estate imagery, and instilling both with metaphorical meaning. The staging of these scenes of unsuccessful settlement also reminds me of the many camping trips that I have taken over the years – itself an activity that is reminiscent of 'playing house' or 'setting up camp'. As I combined my imagined narratives with images of domestic life and densely forested lots I was surprised to find how easy it was to construct pictures that demonstrate uncomfortable relationships to the land, perhaps because our country has had several centuries of practice.

Through this research I have come to identify myself as the settler by imagining what my ancestors' concerns for the land were. In addition, I want to better understand my current relationship to the land via images (specifically, real estate images). As a young woman in a long-term relationship, browsing real estate websites for a future home is part of my reality. However, stumbling onto images of vacant land triggered ideas not related to my own future so much as my past. The experience of making this work has been personally symbolic. It has helped me to reconcile my nostalgia of growing up on the East coast surrounded by places specific to my family's history with the fact that I now understand these experiences to be part of a larger narrative of my ancestors' participation in Canada's history of settlement.



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