

Kevin Lockau Geographic Realities

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Kevin Lockau

Geographic Realities

Neo Faber Gallery, Toronto, March 2-23, 1989

"While you were looking the other way the poet left on a fishing trip. His wicker fishing basket is full of invisible fish that remain magically incorrupt. A freak planetary windstorm dumped them in his lap with an electronic thump. He is lost in the woods on his way to a lake whose name he doesn't know. The surveyors missed it in their elaborate and fruitless maps. Extraterrestrial insects buzz menacingly around his elliptical head. Worms wriggle breathless in the rusty tobacco can that reads 'when a feller needs a friend'. He trips on a fallen mossy log and the poetry of his elliptical fall is complete and inescapable."¹
 "Reality: something that is neither derivative nor dependent, but exists necessarily"²

There is a crisis in the world today – a silent war being waged between the planet as it existed before the arrival of human beings and that reality which humans are trying to impose. The symptoms of this crisis are manifest in alternately successful and disastrous attempts on the part of humankind to achieve a balance, to assert a solid position, while attempting to allow for the continued existence of the natural world. This natural world, s/he knows, is not only desired, but necessary to the survival of the species.

Kevin Lockau, like the poet Whiteman, captures and identifies that absurd, tragic, yet inevitable moment at which the two energies collide. In the work of each artist, dialectic forces reside: man/technology; future/past; poet/society; weakness of man/throbbing strength of nature. Currently, the theme of the environment is undeniably in vogue. In *Geographic Realities*, Lockau captures in raw material, natural and man-made, that which Whiteman seizes in words.

Like other artists in post-war years, Kevin Lockau aims at narrowing the gap between art and life. In *Geographic Realities*, the land art

process, characterized by the work of artists such as Robert Smithson, is often reversed by Lockau. In some of his works, rather than taking art outside the gallery and imposing it on nature, he isolates that which takes place in nature **outside** the gallery and brings it inside, thus drawing the viewer's attention to relationships which s/he would otherwise have overlooked. Lockau maintains that "people in the city don't have an idea of life and death". His work is an attempt to show "how we are a part of nature, even though we're in the city".

In the dimly-lit environment created in this Toronto gallery, a smell of tar and wood prevails, producing a somewhat cave-like, mystical feeling. Lockau uses natural materials, combined with man-made. Wood, granite, branches, water and flames merge with polished glass, metal cables, and electric wires, to produce a total of seventeen works; wall sculpture, free-standing table-like pieces, suspended works, several small shelf-size sculptures and a major floor installation.

Finding a Balance, the most important work and the most imposing, consists of two large wooden dug-out canoe-like structures placed directly in the centre of the gallery. Lined with tar, the structures are adorned with scraps of beaver fur stapled to the wood, as if the structures had just smashed into an animal. Both contain several inches of stagnant water in which abandoned objects lie. In the one to the right, bits of nature decay; stumps, branches, wooden waste. The water is murky. In the one on the left, scraps of discarded metal slowly rust, tainting the water a pathetic yet threatening amber. From each basin projects a large, seemingly lifeless tree.

In this work, however, there is more than a warning: the branches are budding. From the pungent, slimy water and tar, tender green life pushes outward.

Visiting the exhibition, the writer astutely noted that the water surrounding the **metal** objects in the canoe to the left appeared significantly more polluted than that in the vessel to the right, which contained only wood and plant material. Discussion with the artist, revealed that far more budding was evident on the metal-filled side than on the organic. The artist asserts in this exhibition that yes, we must be conscious of our environment, of what is happening and of the subtle balance, yet he assures too that nature's ability to self-repair, to overpower man-imposed destruction, is more puissant, perhaps, than we understand.

Born in 1956, Kevin Lockau grew up in the Maritimes, moving to Kitchener, Ontario when he was fifteen. He moved in 1982 to Toronto

Kevin Lockau, *Moving in Shadows Barefoot on Rock*, 1989. Granite, glass, wire, B.C. wood. 18"x90"x10". Photo: Gil Alkin



where, at the age of twenty-five, he enrolled at Ontario College of Art (OCA). His goal was to become an illustrator. By the second year, Lockau found that he preferred the physical experience of working with glass. Sand casting glass "got my hands dirty". Lockau recalls his own teachers counseling him to "make your art your own", advice which he passes on to his first-year students in glass techniques at Toronto's Sheridan College.

A series of totems, which were shown in 1988 at Galerie Elena Lee Verre d'Art in Montreal, stemmed from work initiated at O.C.A. "Dangerous Art", exhibition by Lockau and six other Toronto artists in 1986, represented the culmination of four years of exploration into the possibilities of glass. Lockau's installation incorporated glass-moulded, life-size tracks by tractor tires.

Today, Lockau strives for a quiet exchange, which calls for a quieter use of glass, a quieter use of materials. Through his works, he hopes to elicit first a spontaneous sensory response, which is only then followed by a quiet and conscious meditation. Lockau believes that "if people would sense something different when they see my work, then I was successful". He believes that art should be accessible, both to connoisseurs as well as to non-art people, those less familiar with the sophisticated, contemporary art milieu. He hopes that it will speak to "people who have been camping and say, hey, I know what you're talking about!"

The title of this exhibition, *Geographic Realities*, is at once alarmingly serious and slightly tongue-in-cheek. Whose Reality? In effect, Lockau wishes, through his work, to draw attention to place, to the geography of our surroundings. To this end, executed directly on the wall, above eye-level and covering one entire corner of the space, are hand-drawn maps which mildly resemble the map of Canada. Done in coloured wax crayon, the huge drawings identically reproduce Lockau's students' notions of this country, which is definitely lacking in accuracy. Mysterious names such as "P.E. town" are attached to a Manhattan-shaped island off the coast of a squared-off Eastern Canada. An island called "Challet town" is situated above another island on which are closely grouped "N.S., Moncton, and St. John", the whole thing floating somewhere off the coast of New Brunswick! According to the results of these sketches (directly reproduced on the wall from the responses to a quiz which he routinely issues to his classes), Lockau's need to sensitize Canadians to their environment is proven well-founded.

Some of the works in this exhibition would seem to portray a conflict, a grappling of the forces of nature and man, wherein one inevitably succumbs to the other. In works such as *Moving in Shadows Barefoot on Rock*, a granite mass fixed to the wall is held by a taut metal cable which stretches horizontally across the piece to encompass two wooden stick-like objects, several feet to the right, also on the wall. The man-made metal presses mercilessly into the rock, creating a groove, as if it were pressing into and injuring a living surface. The rock itself, impervious to the pressure, resists. When questioned about this seeming conflict, Lockau assures that

"I have no romantic view of nature... it has great rebound capacity. Our technology is merged with nature, is not necessarily in conflict with it. I think we have to take away from this view of nature that is pristine. There does exist a tension between the two, with all the communications that we send out zapping each other. What I hope to arouse is an appreciation, an awareness about the environment. And it is not good environment versus ugly environment; there is a grey area. That's where we are. Both at the same time."

The need to make sense of one's environment is not new to the artist, who pursues important questions to the end.

"Leave him alone for a moment or two, and you'll see him with his head bent down, brooding, brooding, eyes fixed on some chip, some stone, some common plant, the commonest thing, as if it were the clue. The disturbed eyes rise, furtive, foiled, dissatisfied from meditation on the true and insignificant."³



Kevin Lockau, *Finding a Balance* (detail), 1989. Plywood, tar, water, metal, B.C. wood, beaver fur, live branches. 66" x 166" x 103". Photo: Gil Alkin.

Yet despite a sense of caution and subtle warning, Lockau's discourse is one of optimism. Rather than instilling alarm in his viewers, this artist affirms the self-rehabilitative capacity of nature. Lockau explains that the installation piece *Finding a Balance* takes its source from an actual experience. A land-fill site at the foot of Leslie Street was, twenty years ago, a gaping hole on the shore of Lake Ontario. Today it is referred to as (Tom) Thompson Park. Despite the negligent ravages of man, the earth has cleansed itself. Left unattended, the water-line rose and subsequent green life has re-created a beautiful environment. In *Finding a Balance*, Lockau has, in a smaller way, duplicated this process. A leafless and seemingly lifeless tree was left indoors unattended, in a man-made pool of stagnant water. The branch with the most evident greenery stemmed, awesomely, from the rawest source. Within three days, the regenerative process—the same process that Lockau affirms we are witness to and a part of daily — was initiated. Although Nietzsche avowed that "we have art in order not to perish from the truth", Lockau is more optimistic. Referring to nature, he affirms through his art that "In spite of us, it can come back".⁴

1. Whiteman, Bruce. *The invisible World is in Decline*. Copyright Bruce Whiteman, 1984. Printed by Coach House Press, Toronto. p. 3
2. *Websters New Collegiate Dictionary*. Copyright 1979 G. & C. Merriam Co. Printed Thomas Allen & Son Limited, Toronto, Ontario. p. 954.
3. Cited in Clifford Beerts, *The interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books Inc., New York, 1973. p. 54. Reprinted with permission of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc., and Faber & Faber, Ltd., from "Hawthorne", in *For the Union Dead*, p. 39. Copyright 1964 by Robert Lowell.
4. Kevin Lockau lives and works in Toronto, Ontario. He has been the recipient of many awards, including, among others, numerous Pilchuk full scholarships (1987, 1986, 1985), Resident Harbourfront Glass Studio (1986), Canadian Glass Conference, Calgary (1985), Professional Glass Artist's Award (OCA, 1986), 1985, 1984). He has participated in over twenty exhibitions, both national and international, since 1983. Since 1987, Lockau has presented three solo exhibitions, in Toronto and Montreal. Kevin Lockau is represented in Montreal by Galerie Elena Lee Verre d'Art.