

Anne O'Callaghan *Scenic View*

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O'CALLAGHAN: *Scenic View*

Soper Creek lazily winds its way through Bowmanville, a town about an hour's drive east of Toronto along Highway 401. Salmon hang out in a shady bend of the waterway behind what was once a barley mill on the south side of town, their tail fins cutting through the placid surface. Deer come to graze nearby. It's all quite bucolic here, if you ignore the sprawling new subdivisions nearby, or the distant sound of highway traffic. And if you look in the right direction, it's even somewhat scenic.

The former barley mill now houses artists' studios, with the Mill Gallery of the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington (VAC). The green space behind it — an oval expanse of lawn bordered by trees and Soper Creek on one side and a road on the other — is used for the VAC's "Art on Public Lands Project," a series of year-

long *in situ* installations by select artists. For 2001/2002, the work shown is *Scenic View*, by Toronto-based artist Anne O'Callaghan.

At the edge of the VAC's lawn, squeezed in the space between a row of maple trees and the creek, O'Callaghan has installed a line of four vitrines, small steel boxes set atop a framework of spindly metre-high rusted metal legs. Etched into the narrow steel sides of the framework are the names of species of trees in both English ("Hazel Alder") and Latin ("Alnus Serrulata"). A separate line of text runs along one side of each box, poetic fragments that, linked together, collectively read "The road of the / Past and Future / Points. Places in / The Imagination." The steel tops of the vitrines have photographic transfers upon them. They are circular images, two of which resemble the dials of old rotary telephones; all are close-up photographs of architectural details carved on a stone building. In the centre of each, only partially discernible amid the rust, O'Callaghan has inset a scenic view: a photograph of forest along the edge of some unknown lake.

The vitrines talk. An unseen timing system separately triggers speakers hidden in the boxes. From each emanates the same short audio track, a poem by Victor Coleman (read by the poet himself), that is first heralded and then accompanied by the sound of running water. Coleman's poem (difficult to hear at times over the background ambient sounds of both the recording and the installation site) speaks of the sun as "the continuation of a line ... stretching out to the perceived horizon to mark the integrity that lies on both sides of the river."

Set here at the edge of encroaching suburbia on a site that is only marginally natural (the line of trees next to the vitrines is obviously the consequence of a planting, and the green space — the lawn —

encompassing O'Callaghan's work is itself a sign of nature held at bay), *Scenic View* confronts our relationship with the natural world head-on. For starters, the vitrines don't "fit" within our preconceived expectations of this park-like setting. Their rusted steel is jarring, even unpleasant, reminiscent, perhaps, of long-discarded objects uncaringly dumped here and never cleared away. And their hard-edged shapes are entirely out of sync with the natural forms of their environment. They stick out. They don't belong.

Yet they are in keeping with our synthetic, cartoonish perception of nature, a perception that has much to do with the influence of the institution that is the museum. O'Callaghan's vitrines overtly critique the museum and the museological imperative of classification and preservation. Their aim is set squarely on the curatorial systems implemented in the controlled, artificial environment of the museum, on presentation modes (the logic of display cabinets, dioramas, etc.), and on *in situ* museological practices like the imposition of didactic labels and signage at sites both historic and otherwise — the kind that might be found at, well, virtually any "scenic view."

The inscription of the names of tree species on O'Callaghan's steel stands points to our need to taxonomize, to classify — to subordinate — nature. The imperative behind it all, one might argue, could be that of consumerism. Our experience of nature is, after all, that of consumption; camping in federal or provincial parks, for instance, is typically little more than moteling in tents, campers, or trailers (right down to the need for reservations), and we prefer our adventures in the great outdoors to be sanitized (not to mention sanitary) and devoid of encounters with the less pleasant side of nature, red in tooth and claw. It's



not that big a leap from the shopping mall to the scenic view.

Scenic View, then, is a nuanced critique of that after which it is named. In foregrounding our consumeristic apprehension of the natural world, it takes on the critical role of the object of our affection. Rather than meditating or reflecting on the fragments of nature to be found on this site adjacent to suburban Bowmanville (and though they are few, they are indeed here), we find ourselves inexorably pulled toward a mediating agent — O'Callaghan's four talking steel boxes on rusty legs — that offers up sound, text, and images: all that we need to flesh out our perfunctory brush with the bush and allow us to depart, sated.

In the end, however, O'Callaghan pulls a fast one on us. In place of the easily didactic, she proffers the rigorous enigma of poetry and images. While redevelopment may push its way along the far side of Soper Creek, *Scenic View* marks the integrity that lies, for the time being at least, on this side of the river. ←

Anne O'Callaghan: *Scenic View*
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Anne O'Callaghan:
Scenic View, 2001.
Photo: courtesy of
the Visual Arts Centre
of Clarington.

