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GARY SIMMONS
HELGA GROVES
JIM ISERMANN
ROY VILLEVOYE
JENNIFER BORNSTEIN

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"Topographies"

Vancouver Art Gallery

September 29, 1996 - January 5, 1997

"Topographies" is one of the largest surveys to date of recent art from British Columbia. Given shifts in demography and the region's changing political and cultural scene, it may well be the last to attempt to address the notion of a "B.C. art." As the Coast is increasingly uncoupled from the rest of Canada and integrated into Asia-Pacific, with large portions of the province eventually to be declared territories of numerous First Nations, this exhibition signals the end of the "two solitudes" (French and English) model that has dominated the art of Pacific Canada for over a century and a half. Instead, curators Grant Arnold, Monika Kin Gagnon and Doreen Jensen address collective, multiple experiences, as well as growing contentions about ethnic and linguistic "fusion."

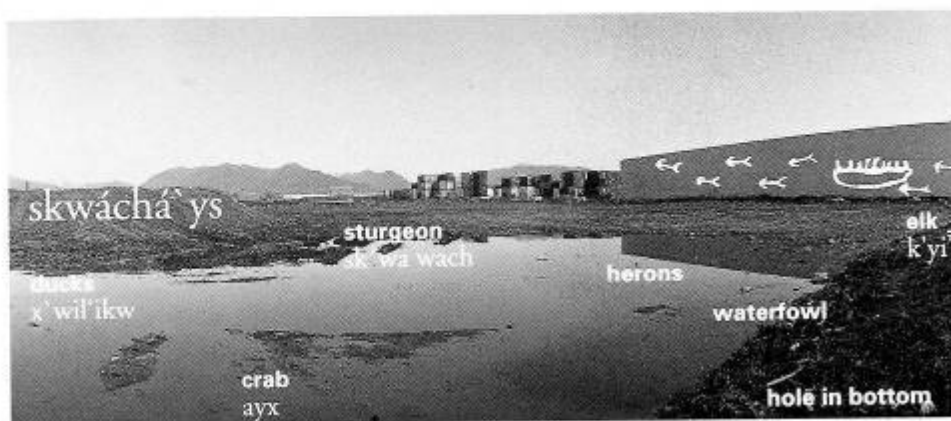
Featuring 41 artists and 90 works, the show was organized around shifting modes and scales of production. In a time of increasingly crowded Indian Reserves, alienated urban enclaves, and the prospect of slow progress in land claim negotiations, many Native artists have had to augment or miniaturize their work as a way of responding to the erosion of community life. The alder masks of Taltan artist Dempsey Bob, larger than those typically worn for dancing, provide a good example: clearly recuperative, they attempt to come to terms with the artist's experiences in a residential school where he was prohibited from speaking his own language and making "Indian" art. Haida artist

Isabel Rorick's miniature berry basket also reflects the contradictions and limitations of emerging First Nations, where availability of traditional food resources is rapidly declining.

The exhibition grouped artists in provocative arrangements intended to heighten the extreme problems facing cultural exchange in Pacific Canada today. One of these groupings brought together, among others, Greece-born Christos Dikeakos and Wendy Oberlander, the daughter of a Jewish refugee. Dikeakos's photomontage series, *Hole in Bottom*, concerns a contentious development site in central Vancouver, involving local government corruption and Hong Kong capital investment that has overturned years of careful negotiation by the Native title owners. Dikeakos's use of overlaid, fragmentary imagery would seem to represent a shift away from the realist photography of the likes of Jeff Wall and Roy Arden, whose subject positions are hardly ever explored. On the other hand, his use of pure text and "primitive" drawings on etched glass, which are placed over his photographs, evoke Eurocentric techniques more so than they do the local Native landscape traditions.

Wendy Oberlander's *Nothing To Be Written Here* is similarly overdetermined. On escaping Vienna, her father was declared a "dangerous enemy alien" in Britain and transported to a camp in Canada, which contained a bizarre mix of German prisoners of war and Jews who had fled to Canada to escape the Nazis. Recounting her father's internment, his eventual settlement in Canada, and how he could not bring himself to talk about these experiences, Oberlander spins a haunting dialogue

CHRISTOS DIKEAKOS, *HOLE IN BOTTOM*, C-PRINT AND SAND-BLASTED GLASS, 54 x 105 CMs.



that says far more about routes than destinations, linking together Yiddish parables, the Canadian landscape, and cultural memory.

"Topographies" barely begins to map out the complex, interlocking locations and subject positions of this vast province once referred to as British Columbia. Doreen Jensen, borrowing a word from the Nuuchaanulth language, has suggested *Nisnat* as a name for the region. No doubt other names and cultural boundaries will be proposed—but they will all have to prove their worth in a world where traditional rights and a sense of place are increasingly devalued.

Gordon Brent Ingram

Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller

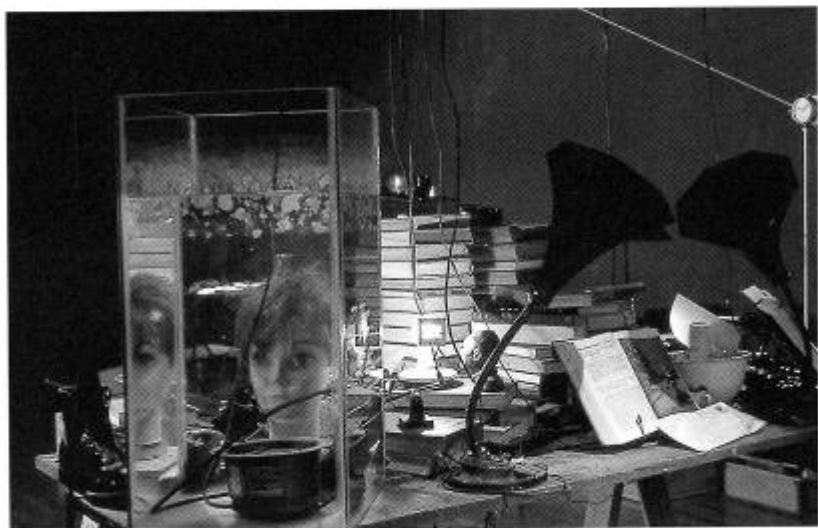
Glenbow Museum, Calgary
November 2, 1995 - March 2, 1997

The conceit of Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's installation, *The Dark Pool*, is that a certain couple have been working for years to understand a legendary phenomenon—a sort of terrestrial black hole. The paranormal investigations have so consumed them that their residence—which is revealed to be the installation itself—has become a cross-disciplinary, monkish laboratory. Their lives are now literally overwhelmed by stacks of old books and electronic hardware half-formed into pseudo-scientific devices.

A narrow cot—indicating that the pair take turns sleeping—poignantly underlines the urgency of their project. Their unexplained absence invites speculation as to its success or failure: Have they discovered the pool's secret and passed into it, or been taken away by the authorities? The mystery invites us to become forensic experts.

Dipping into *The Dark Pool* is like trespassing into a private space. But like most fictional spaces, it is designed by its authors to be seen by a sympathetic viewer—an ideal participant who risks privacy to become complicit in another's narrative. A living novel or penetrable film, *The Dark Pool* may have been surrendered by its authors to an audience in the hopes that the audience would continue the project.

Once inside, your movements trigger over two dozen devices and tape loops: a radio plays *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*, a severed bird's wing



JANET CARDIFF & GEORGE
BURES MILLER, *THE DARK
POOL*, INSTALLATION
DETAIL.

flaps as you approach a wishing machine; the interior of a suitcase lights up to reveal an exquisite scale model of the pool; footsteps and a piano sound off; numerous speakers give fragmentary accounts of the dark pool and other uncanny events; and one can eavesdrop on a conversation about dancing shadows, a domestic argument, or stories that might, or might not, refer to the couple themselves.

If you move, the story stops and continues only upon your return. Static artifacts—wax heads, a lie detector on a mannequin's hand, a collection of tea cups with ancient stains and directions for reading tea leaves, an incomplete text left in a typewriter, notes jotted in the margins of open books—are also tantalizing clues, transforming us from viewer to participant in this (meta)fiction.

In what appear to be stacks of unrelated junk we soon find compelling patterns: Is this an allegory of art making? The absence that bespeaks desire? Does the phenomenon refer to the impossibility of a shared metaphysical vision? Is philosophy literature? Science partial? Pulp fiction sociology? Art alchemy?

While there is subtle humor here, *The Dark Pool* is not played for laughs. It is a parable for the coming post-ironic age—articulating a desire for mystery in a materialist, overdetermined and self-conscious historical moment. The controlling theme of this moment is loss: the fear and dream of disappearing without a trace—of