

Folklore

AND OTHER PANICS

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The Rooms Corporation of Newfoundland and Labrador
9 Bonaventure Avenue
P.O. Box 1800
St. John's, NL A1C 5P9
www.therooms.ca

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IF A PANIC EXISTS

MIREILLE EAGAN, Curator

Folklore and Other Panics is a question in process. It collides what has often been named as opposite — contemporary art and the folkloric — and considers how they overlap. The exhibition provides a constellation of ideas, bringing together twelve artists that examine how our shifting stories define us. Rooted in Newfoundland and Labrador, local concerns reflect larger cultural narratives about changes in our communities, technologies, and our relationship with the natural world. For many artists, a return to “the folk” honours the informal and the everyday. It points to first-hand experience as a valuable form of resistance to the status quo. It reminds us of the importance of community life in a box store world, and celebrates what refuses to be commodified. It shows us that there is no need to panic — what might appear lost is often still present, continuing within a living, changing culture.

Newfoundland and Labrador is a province where folklore is in the furniture, carpets, and walls; folklore is a substantial part of the local culture and a significant field of study. My initial inquiry into how folklore might inform contemporary art discourse was launched while reading an intriguing statement by anthropologist John Comaroff: “Folklore, let me tell you, is one of the most dangerous words in the English language.” Comaroff disparaged certain branches of Folklore Studies that placed too much emphasis on scholarly approaches, thereby obscuring an “inherently resistant populace.”¹ He continued: “The point becomes not to study difference, but rather to de-center ourselves by asking what it is that contexts reveal of our taken-for-granted, our commonsensical axioms about the nature of our world.”²

Artists are undoubtedly a prime example of what Comaroff terms an “inherently resistant populace.” They often operate in deliberate refusal of the terminology that the academy or the bureaucracy prescribes, finding ways to undermine whatever norms may solidify. A complex environment and increasingly global culture has offered more materials to the palette, yet many artists are returning to “the folk,” connecting the local with different and sometimes challenging narratives. They show us that resistance doesn’t have to be overt; it can be embodied in areas such as the language we use and how we decorate our homes. Many artists in this exhibition work with the materials that are a tangible part of our everyday lives — gaining a unique potency when an artist reveals their value within the mundane. The pillars of the gallery space, for example, are covered with wallpaper designed by Kym Greeley and Erika Jane Stephens-Moore for the Fogo Island Inn. They become a part of the architecture of the gallery, but also represent the decoration of home as representative of identity. The imagery of the caribou as part of the wallpaper design speaks to a common animal in this province, and a significant symbol in the local psyche. It was the emblem of the Newfoundland Regiment, whose forces were almost decimated during the First World War. This event greatly affected those back home, altered the economic and cultural landscape for decades, and continues to resonate. Duane Linklater’s intervention in the Cape Spear page on Wikipedia subtly presents the fact that an online, open-source encyclopedia maintains an authoritative voice and regularly determines what sort of history is valid. His repeated insertion of the fact that he was present at Cape Spear to watch the sunrise becomes

representative of a larger omission of Aboriginal people from historical narrative. Like Linklater’s online entries, Mark Clintberg is interested in moments of intervention that are ambiguous, where something may or may not be “art.” He worked with members of the Winds and Waves Artisans’ Guild on Fogo Island to produce a series of quilts that are randomly placed throughout the Fogo Island Inn. The value, for him, existed in the process of collaboration within the Guild. For us, it becomes a reminder of the quilt as a site for local knowledge.

As communities deal with how to find a sense of identity within an increasingly global environment, economic and cultural transitions may bring “panics” of disintegration. The perceived loss of a coherent identity often compels narratives that may be nostalgic or protectionist in nature.³ In his writings on culture in Newfoundland and Labrador, folklorist Gerald Pocius describes a traditional society that is open to innovations and easily incorporates new methods into existing norms. This is despite what he describes as attempts to preserve so-called disappearing practices through “studies on the role of modern technology in indigenous cultures (that) often take an implicitly negative view of the impact of new things in existing ways.”⁴ He poses a valuable question: “Could the new object forms produced by dominant cultures have been adopted and altered by what have often been labelled peripheral groups without necessarily reflecting the profound cognitive rendering of the originating culture?”⁵ In other words, what might appear lost is still present as part of a living, changing culture. Regionalism, as a description of a place’s character, can arguably be marked by high-functioning adaptations.

Romanticism of place is explored in this exhibition through the presence of nature, in particular, landscape — in Duane Linklater’s film of Cape Spear, with Joshua Bonnetta’s dual-screen film of the sites of Guglielmo Marconi’s first transatlantic wireless transmission, and with a 40-foot wall drawing by Jerry Ropson. Ropson’s huge drawing speaks to a landscape in this province that is often close and overwhelming. His buildings are presented as absences, white spaces surrounded by lists of terms and experiences that Ropson has collected during gatherings with friends and family, and throughout the first week of the exhibition. Janice Wright Cheney’s “Coy Wolves” reflect on our perception of nature as something seductive yet threatening. Nearby, Flaherty’s ceramic antler-teapot provides documentation of changing ownership over a resettled community by humans, and then by caribou.

The exhibition balances artifacts with art that is in process. In the exhibition, a number of works provide sites of gathering which point to the informal processes where art develops — the casual discussions around tables or on couches outside the gallery space, as part of a community. Lee Henderson’s campfire setting is a site where visitors are forced to encounter each other, or sit in solitary contemplation. Steve Topping’s table is a fascinating and complicated example of art that is not art; it is made from modified fishing floats and a cheap door. It was built for The Stage, an old fishing building located in a neighbourhood in St. John’s where Topping would squat every summer. The building has seen considerable

change, losing its original function during the cod moratorium, and weathering many intense storms that destroyed buildings around it. Over the past decade or so, it has been a site for a new generation of artists to gather, representing an alternative history for the visual arts community that includes prominent international names and well-known local artists. The table is covered with their scribbles and marks, their portraits of each other. It is a form of artifact for this community of artists but, once it returns to The Stage, it will continue to be wiped down regularly, have beer spilled on it — it will be a table again. Throughout the exhibition, the table becomes a different site for gathering as the public are invited to use it. Card games will be held in the gallery with the artists who sat around the table originally, a game or two of Settlers of Catan led by Michael Flaherty, a few musical jam sessions led by Michael Waterman. These will be impromptu and unannounced, so that the visitor will happen upon the event unexpectedly.

Folklore teaches us that value is found in first-hand experience and resistance to commodification through repurposing what is available. Within the exhibition, a number of works overtly deal with resistance and questioning as a strategy. Kay Burns’ research as alter ego Iris Taylor seeks to logically disprove the notion that the world is round, rooting her discussion in “common sense.” Michael Waterman’s Pirate Radio station is an ongoing collage of sounds that range from historical recordings to live music provided by the artist. If visitors don’t like what’s being played, they can simply change it. The broadcast is

carried throughout the gallery with portable FM radios that create a moving sound sculpture, and also streams continuously online. In both cases, responsibility is given to the visitor to construct their worldview, while reminding them of the fundamental language that they use to do so.

The question is set in the gallery space, but continues with the viewer. This exhibition asks us to start from our own experiences, test what we hold to be true. The process is not simplistic — what is simple is the connection that exists in a sad ballad to soothe, a funny story to lighten a situation, and advice to guide a journey. At their bases, both folklore and art are what we tell ourselves, the tools we use to help us find affinity with whatever and whomever we find around us. If a “panic” exists, it is in a perception of insularity and provincialism rather than a celebration of a living, vernacular language. The only danger, the only cause for concern, is in becoming a romantic elegy for lost authenticity, rather than being in the presence of ordinary life as it is lived.

MIREILLE EAGAN
Curator of Contemporary Art
The Rooms

¹ Gray, Judith, and David Taylor. 1992. “Cite Unseen.” *American Folklore Newsletter* 21 (4): 2.

² Ibid.

³ Asa Briggs. “Culture” in *Folklore, Culture Performances, and Popular Entertainments: A Communications-Centered Handbook*. Richard Bauman, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) 6.

⁴ Gerald L. Pocius *A Place To Belong: Community, Order and Everyday Space in Calvert, Newfoundland* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991) 14.

⁵ Ibid, 11



LEE HENDERSON

The Known Effects of
Lightning on the Body,

2014

Video installation

LEE HENDERSON

How did this work
come to be?

I was burning matches and I noticed that they “bowed” as they burned. There’s already a tacit suggestion that the body of the match is somehow similar to our body, even in a very tenuous, subliminal way. We call the top of the match the “head,” for example. So I started to think about whether its bowing was a metaphor, in that the match has to exhaust itself before it submits, and also that it burns because of a chemical reaction in the head that translates itself to a physical reaction in the rest of the body. I started to think about how that’s like the idea of trauma, or some sort of psychological shift that plays itself out through the rest of the body, made visible in the change from chemical to physical.

I had initially imagined projecting the matches at the size of a human body, but was concerned the anthropomorphism would be too direct and obvious; the small projection invokes contemplation more readily. Projecting onto copper was just a fluke; one day in the studio I rotated the projector and it happened to pass by a nearby sheet of copper. It seemed like the light inhabited the copper in a kind of charged electrical state, so I began thinking about a signal happening somewhere, passing conductively through materials to have physical manifestation, an electrical impulse that takes shape.

The piece takes its title from a talk by Sarah Kember. In her lecture “The Virtual Life of Photography,” she talks about Roland Barthes’ idea that looking at a photo of his dead mother on some level re-kills his mother, because it’s the evidence of her having been there, and of no longer being here, and therefore embodies the evidence of her passing. Kember argues that, on the other hand, a photograph is a way that the dead can be given a “virtual life.” I’m ambivalent about those arguments, but the example that Kember uses is that of a person being struck by lightning while running on a beach, photographed by accident. She talks about the transformation that is wrought on the body when hit by lightning. The results are mostly non-fatal; what often happens is some level of brain damage and irreversible change to a person’s personality. There’s a complex explanation for that, but it makes sense on a visceral level. An electrochemical reaction has to have a price; that much electricity can’t pass through the body without leaving a trace. The copper reintroduces the idea of conductivity to the work, of translation and transmission.

Is the electric light intended as a godly presence, or some other kind of counterpoint to the matches?

The light bulb that hangs in the space is, in a way, a match inverted. It pulls our eye up and lets us have another pole between which to oscillate — watching this tiny figure burning itself out on the screen, and this electric presence spilling out into the rest of the space. I remember reading an article years ago that indicated that researchers in Japan had made recordings over the surface of the Earth and had established that the planet gives off a hum at a constant frequency and volume — something incredibly low, like 2 HZ — not something we can hear with our ears. I found that lovely to think about — this carrier wave for all other sounds that happen. If there’s a constant sort of baseline underneath all other experience, nothing is ever really nothing, and everything is never really everything. The light is a luminous counterpoint to these matches that fade and are replaced. There’s an irregular rhythm to their miniature traumas, contrary to the enveloping or cushioning of the constant source of light that is smoothing out those traumas experientially.

Your work evokes a
campfire setting,
particularly with the benches.
Can you speak to that?

The installation is a means by which we can have ritual or liminal spaces in secular contexts. The idea was to design a space that would let that kind of anthropomorphic shift take some form in the experience of the viewer. Low benches reconfigure your own body to take in the work — you, in other words, are encouraged to bend, too, to submit to gravity. It seems that in visual arts discourse we've been talking "the viewer" less and talking about "audiences" more. Rather than talking about a hypothetical individual, we describe a group of people all having the same experience. I don't think that's how it really goes. If you are alone, your experience is different than with a stranger; the stranger becomes part of the work, as you encounter someone who's already experiencing, already contemplating. There are multiple benches because I wanted that sort of shared, quiet, empty space to be a possibility. I don't think we're at all comfortable sharing silence. I suppose I'm exploiting that.

Would you say that your work
discusses themes of folklore?

In a direct sense, folklore is what I'm trying to suggest the light bulb is — folklore is doing socially what the light bulb does physically. It is passed from one body to another as a way of generating a continuum. The individuals that emerge and recede throughout that process are tiny; they are where pathos is generated. But folklore's possibility as a "panic" is deeply interesting to me, in that it's a reaction against brevity. Some years back, I was trying to think of a phrase to describe the concerns of my practice, and the closest I could get was that I'm interested in the persistence of collective histories and the brevity of individual lives. I feel like the collective histories are not made incidentally, but as a direct palliative for the individual by placing it within a larger continuum.

LEE HENDERSON is a
media-based artist from
Saskatchewan, currently
based in Toronto, ON.
Since completing his MFA
in 2005, he has been
furthering his time-based
and lens-based artistic
practice while teaching
intermedia, computer
science, photography and
contemporary media at the
post-secondary level.