

Lee Henderson
"Meanwhile, somewhere in Canada..."

Essay by Dr. Anna F. Peppard



The only comic book in the library at my rural Ontario elementary school was a collection of the first volume of *Alpha Flight*, a Marvel series from the early 1980s starring a Canadian superhero team that includes a Sasquatch, a Sarcee Shaman, a shapeshifting Snowbird, and a little person named Puck, led by a guy shrink-wrapped into a maple leaf-emblazoned jumpsuit. In the first issue, they vanquish a villain called Tundra and flashback to fighting a Wendigo. As a kid, I was sure these comics were a ham-fisted psyop by the Canadian government trying to trick me into patriotism. Many years later, I'd learn that *Alpha Flight* comics were actually American and that the members of the title team were originally antagonists of the heroic X-Men.

My childhood confusion around these American-made, sometimes-villainous Canadian superheroes speaks to dynamics painted far more thoughtfully into Lee Henderson's work in this exhibition. *"Meanwhile, somewhere in Canada..."* re-represents Canadian landscapes that originally appeared as backgrounds in mainstream American comics, reimaging industrially printed pages as singular oil paintings. Painting titles are taken from descriptive captions in their sources, emphasizing the prescriptive weight of an American gaze that perpetually perceives Canada as a collection of barrenly beautiful vistas even as Henderson's re-representation of that gaze challenges and complicates it. Henderson further complicates prescriptive perspectives by isolating these American imaginings of Canada between and beyond impactfully voided panels formerly occupied by heroes and adventurers, and the thoughts and plots of both. Simultaneously signalling dramatic absence and deliberate presence, the black voids that subtract and substitute for these comics' American-made protagonists foreground the force of Henderson's reframing of the background as the foreground, changing Canada from a passively sublime setting into a self-reflexive subject.

Henderson's thematic reframing and painterly transformations underscore the neglected artistry of these bite-size backdrops and illuminate an interesting similarity between American perceptions of Canada appearing within a supposedly low cultural form (comics) and the appearance of Canada within one of our most celebrated homegrown art movements: the paintings of the Group of Seven.

The majestic landscapes the Group of Seven most memorably painted were an overt attempt to cultivate a national visual identity. And it worked. But when the American comic book landscapes Henderson isolates and embellishes evoke Group of Seven moods and milieus to repeatedly exoticize Canada, they compel consideration of what Canada's self-mythologizing hath wrought: the race to recognition that results in reductionism, our big dreams sold back to us in miniature. Alternatively, Henderson's paintings reflect one of the reasons my childhood self struggled to see the difference between Canadian and American imaginings of the place I was born: in both, Canada sometimes becomes whatever's convenient for selling settings for heroes, a series of tremendous terra nullius tableaux to be contemplated or conquered but not-quite convincingly lived in.