

WHERE I LIVED, AND WHAT I LIVED FOR MYFANWY MACLEOD JANUARY 20–MARCH 19, 2006

New Icons of the Pastoral

Why situate yourself within the lineage of an antiquated genre, one that in the visual arts is often relegated to bourgeois fodder, typified by its idealistic representation of rural life, and conceived as a base reaction to the rapid encroachment of industrial and scientific development? “Shepherds, flutes, and flocks,” signifiers of a desire to return to a simpler life, are the icons of the pastoral ideal and paradoxically the harbingers of its end.²

Sparked by Henry David Thoreau’s autobiographical account of his two-year stay at Walden Pond, MacLeod builds on pastoral conventions. As if dutifully following Thoreau’s beseeching proclamation: “Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!,” MacLeod used her stay at the Glenfiddich Distillery in a remote region of northern Scotland to imagine the simplicity of rural life.² Exploring the countryside with camera in hand, MacLeod was romantically poised to experience and capture the evidence of this better life: robust farm animals, lush pastures, winding roadways, and long vistas. Her performance is almost perfect. It is clear that she is and can only be performing, that her position as an artist-in-residence instigates this role-play and offers her the landscape as a stage. — But it is not a farce or with lack of sincerity that MacLeod assumes this role. For her exhibition *Where I Lived, and What I Lived For*, a title she takes directly from a chapter heading in *Walden*, she presents work derived from her stay in Scotland with earnest intentions. She uses her unique situation, in a place that seems to hold evidence of its past so presently, as a means to pursue Thoreau’s method, and in her own words, to give homage to how he “used his own account of his experience in the woods to comment on human existence, society, government and other topics.”³ Yet the reasonableness of her pursuit is thinly veiled. The distance of time and the professional nature of MacLeod’s rural experience are the first signifiers of its implausibility. Her yearning for Thoreau’s deep conviction is not lost, but is met with a self-conscious injection of satire and self-mockery. This angst plays out in a series of photographs that draws on her anxieties of being isolated and alone. —

With two situating images, one of an iron gate opening onto a dirt road (cat. 1) and the other of an open field with a lone house in the distance (cat. 2), MacLeod builds two sequential narratives that centre on her images of two abandoned houses on the distillery’s property. Most of the photographs detail the effects of decay: growing mold, faded

wallpaper, an unused broom covered in years of dust, a splintered staircase, a stained tub and rusted faucets (cat. 3, 4, 7, 8 & 9). There is a romance in the silence of all of these images and a reflective beauty. There is also cliché. MacLeod uses the conventions of the pastoral, intentionally overplaying its conceits, amplifying a sense of loss and longing for a simpler time with her dramatic images of the deteriorating homes. She is hamming it up. Even the large scale of each photograph plays to this hand. But no sooner than MacLeod secures a typified reading of the pastoral she breaks it with a comical twist. Each sequence of photographs ends with an image that is more fitting for horror films than an idyllic pastoral landscape: one photograph is of a sheeted figure (cat. 5), another a pair of eyes peering through a mail slot (cat. 6). The draped figure is covered with a patterned sheet that has two hastily-cut holes unevenly fitted over its eyes. The mail slot is tightly framed, exaggerating the size and tenseness of the bulging and leering eyes. Both are almost cartoon-like in their simplicity and subject matter, humorous caricatures of the icons of fear. —

MacLeod builds this language through sculptural elements. Raised on a plinth is *Ghost* (cat. 24), a child-sized mannequin draped in the same patterned and cut sheet as the covered figure in the photograph. With this simple gesture, emblematic of child’s play or the lazy Halloween, MacLeod’s makeshift “ghost” captures a spirit. The elevated figure with its outreaching arms seems worthy of adoration. Like an altarpiece, the sculpture is positioned in the centre and at the end of the space. The even and low placement of the large photographs on the side walls of the gallery read like pews, setting a paced and marked path to the readily-made sculpture. —

MacLeod draws a faint and playful line between the secular and the sacred, conflating unknowns and sources of fear. With *Princess X* (cat. 26), MacLeod uses a circular, peach-tinted mirror to reflect our fears. She does this literally and spatially by positioning the mirror to capture a reflection of *Ghost*. The mirror’s dark shade obscures a clear perspective, drawing the viewer closer in an attempt to obtain a cleaner image; or in the vernacular of the otherworldly, the mirror is a portal that beseeches you into its vortex. The instability of time and space is implied in *Torso of a Young Girl* (cat. 25). A child-sized wig is loosely pinned into a corner. The wig is enough to imply a kneeling figure, reminiscent of the scariest and most unforgettable ending sequences of *The Blair Witch Project*. As one approaches the work,

the implied body seems to get sucked through the walls, forever stuck between two unstable dimensions. MacLeod even renders the middle of the room suspect with *Bound* (cat. 27), in which a pale-coloured carpet lies slightly off-centre. Vacuum lines clearly mark the deep pile of the carpet, leaving ghost-like traces. A ball of tangled hair in the upper left corner of the carpet suggests that something did happen there, something bad. *Bound* reads like fragments of a crime scene, evidence reminiscent of the props used in the slew of forensic crime shows currently filling primetime television. —————

In a series of thirteen drawings, MacLeod reproduces with orange pencil on vellum photographs from a website describing how to identify grow-op houses in Vancouver's neighbourhoods.⁴ The gentleness of the pencil and the texture of the paper give a soft-focus effect, similar to the filmic device used to indicate the past or a distant memory. This fluctuation of time is heightened by MacLeod's selection of images that focus on the deterioration caused by the hydroponics used to grow marijuana indoors. The often makeshift nature of these illegal operations quickly takes its toll on these homes, making the wear and tear seem out of sync with the age of the structure. The decay and erosion seems forced, almost prop-like, and with a double take, the more foliage-laden drawings are reminiscent of a picturesque garden with fake ruins and a temperate climate. The drawings bring us back to the pastoral landscape. The artifice of the harvest implies a longing for agricultural life, and with this particular illegal crop there is a humorous nod to the loss of an economy driven by farming. The nature of the crop also brings the pastoral home to beautiful British Columbia, infamous for its killer weed, while also metaphorically or euphorically pointing to a lifestyle of leisure. MacLeod humorously equates the chill and relaxed attitude of the laid back West Coast pot smoker as a contemporary signifier for pastoral life. —————

MacLeod's use of the comedic throughout the works in *Where I Lived, and What I Lived For*, plays within an historical trajectory of the pastoral in the visual arts. In an art history drawn by Jeremy Strick, "the realm of pastoral purity and perfection is transgressed by slapstick."⁵

Strick situates a diverse group of artists, such as Gustave Courbet, René Magritte, Yves Klein and Robert Rauschenberg, in relation to the pastoral, characterizing their works as using the ideal of the pastoral to inflect the real. For example, the images found in Rauschenberg's collages are frequently close to the traditions of the pastoral (images of nature and leisure), but they read as caricatures. In an early work entitled *Odalisque*, a stuffed rooster, strands of dead grass and torn images from magazines represent nature. According to Strick, "... Rauschenberg ironically signals his intent to fashion ...[the] pastoral from the detritus of contemporary life."⁶ In a like manner, MacLeod uses the visual tropes of the pastoral to draw a particular relationship with nature, and in colliding these tropes with iconic images from horror films, the language of television forensics, and drug culture she draws a contemporary picture that is predicated on fear, abandonment, paranoia, decay and self-mockery. A figure in a sheet, a door slightly ajar, a bodiless wig, a hair ball are caricatures of an uneasy, unstable and distant relationship to rural life, replacing "shepherds, flutes, and flocks," as icons of the pastoral ideal. For MacLeod humour is an effective means to laugh away the fear, but it is also integral in drawing this anxious narrative of loss and distance. —————

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- 1 Leo Marx, "Does Pastoral Have a Future," *The Pastoral Landscape* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1992), p. 209.
- 2 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston) 1966, p.56.
- 3 In her interview with Connie Butler.
- 4 www.collingwoodcpc.com
- 5 Jeremy Strick, "Notes on Some Instances of Irony in Modern Pastoral," *The Pastoral Landscape* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1992), p. 206.
- 6 Ibid.

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