LAND MINE:
Culling the Contemporary Landscape

Sarah Munro

In the thick of the forest, in the still of the night, there is something unnatural afoot. Some strange presence, at once melancholy and mischievous, understated and ostentatious, encroaches on the environment. It is as harmonious as it is discordant. It adds to the landscape as much as it succeeds in stripping away. Appearing inexplicably at odds with the natural world, it reveals itself through this confluence of contradictions to be both ally and adversary to the unparalleled beauty of its surroundings. indeed, it reveals itself to be human.

Human/Nature is an exhibition comprised of two emerging artists' nocturnal explorations of sylvan spaces. Mark Kasumovic's series, *Ideal Landscapes*, offers a critique of traditional landscape photography's overt aestheticization of the natural world. Embracing mankind's impulse to improve upon the inherent beauty of nature, Kasumovic's work suggests another strategy for refinement. It is through the electronic lighting of each landscape that Kasumovic repositions nature as a perfectly realized product ripe for human consumption. Amanda Arcuri's work, *Present in Absence*, also aims to embellish the landscape. Her time-elapsed invasions of public parks highlight humanized elements of nature via streaks of fire and strategically laid lights. However, in the speed of her performance, Arcuri's photographs all but eliminate the hand of the human who created them. Independently, these two artists illustrate alternate

strategies for picturing landscape at a crossroads; in the wake of a perilously industrialized era where man and nature invariably meet. In tandem they address contemporary environmental concerns by alluding to the future of landscape photography: a united front founded upon the acute awareness yet unwavering optimism of an entirely new generation of image-makers.

Just as we have mined the earth for its natural resources – for diamonds, coal, oil and ore – so have we mined it for aesthetics. Born out of a longstanding tradition in other artistic media of exalting the earth, and of positioning the pastoral as the standard by which all other beauty is measured, early fine art photographers fixated on the unmatched ability of the natural world to inspire artistic creativity, even within an allegedly mechanized medium. Among photography's many roles, some still in the process of being realized, was its simultaneous status as both a burgeoning art form and as a means of recording reality. That photography aligned itself with the landscape tradition which figured so prominently in painting was wise, as this ultimately served to legitimize a medium so far seen as inferior. That it rendered these landscapes with such fidelity, however, became photography's true selling-feature. As the medium was being discovered, so still were many regions of the world. Employed as a means of documenting these discoveries, photography was privileged as the first and most faithful means of representing man's triumph over uncharted wilderness.

Timothy O'Sullivan's images of the American West, Reverend Harold Dauncey's pictures of Papua New Guinea, or any number of uncredited images illuminating Arctic expeditions, all provided proof of nature's splendour, so far largely unaltered by man.

As the mandates of many artistic institutions came to include photography, they subsequently allowed for the absorption of these intended documents into the realm of high art, thus increasing their value both fiscally and as perceived by the public. The popularity and – perhaps more pressing – saleability of such subsequent prolific landscape photographers as Ansel Adams, whose 1948 print of the earlier image *Moonrise, Hernandez* recently fetched a staggering $360,000 USD at auction, is proof positive of traditional landscape photography's significance to both the medium's maturation and its present state. With an established interest in landscape imagery and seemingly endless environments to mine, 20th-century photography charted a course parallel to that of industry: identifying, exploiting, and arguably exhausting their aesthetic resources. Just as the aforementioned reserves of oil and ore have revealed themselves to be finite – with many in immediate danger of depletion – so has the inherent aesthetic value of the virgin landscape. It is debatable whether contemporary image-makers are no longer content to depict the picturesque and pastoral, or whether an untouched environment no longer exists for them to illustrate. Regardless of the impetus, it

appears evident that as the status of the natural world has shifted, so have our strategies for representing it.

One such strategy is to embrace the reality of contemporary landscape photography by addressing either implicitly or explicitly man's current environmental concerns, and by subsequently seeking a new standard of beauty within the presumed absence thereof. It is a strategy employed by Toronto-based photographer Edward Burtynsky, whose large-format images depict industry's systematic degradation of the environment as well as the unconventionally aesthetic artifacts thereof. Burtynsky positions himself high above the scene to focus on the textures, tones and patterns that emerge organically from the vastness of his subjects. In a sea of assembly-line workers, in endless mounds of industrial debris, in the geometric wasteland of emptied quarries, Burtynsky finds beauty and order. Paradoxically, his aestheticization of the abhorrent eschews the aesthetic model of traditional landscape photography yet reignites our interest therein. The world is a very different place now.

An alternate strategy, as employed by two contemporaneous Canadian artists, Isabelle Hayeur and Scott McFarland, is the digital construction of otherwise impossible landscapes. While still seemingly banal in their ultimate execution, these images are to some extent representations of the artists' ideal environments; amalgams of elements extracted from various locations, during

different seasons, and at disparate times of day. Digitally recombined into seamless vistas, they are images evocative of actual landscapes that did not – could not – ever exist. They are executed with a subtlety seldom seen in digital imagery; unassuming in their averageness yet suggestive of something more. They speak silently to the notion that nature can indeed be bent to our will, but unlike Burtynsky's work, these images do not necessarily present that concept as cause for alarm, rather as a reciprocal relationship. Where once man made art in the image of nature, now man makes nature in the image of art.

A third strategy, specifically engaged by the two emerging artists in this exhibition, is to tailor the traditional landscape model in accordance with both of these approaches; to simultaneously embrace and eschew the notion that nature, and thus the artistic landscape, has been irrevocably altered by man. Indeed, the images are an exercise in binary concepts: a simultaneous convergence of conspicuousness and subtlety, of the natural and the unnatural, of the real and the ideal. From a generation fully cognizant of contemporary environmental concerns, Amanda Arcuri and Mark Kasumovic arguably aim to offset the oppressiveness of their reality through a shared theatricality. It is an end result arrived at in very different ways. Where Kasumovic's photographs act as an unassuming backdrop – each one resembling a strategically lit stage – Arcuri's images embody the performance that plays out upon it. From Kasumovic's still and silent clearings to

Arcuri's, alive with implied motion, the duo's images represent a direct interplay of the aforementioned strategies, and a subsequently novel approach towards representing the natural world.

Like Burtynsky, Kasumovic's images can be seen as a cautionary tale. They are in part inspired by Susan Sontag's belief that, "so successful has been the camera's role in beautifying the world that photographs, rather than the world, have become the standard of the beautiful"[1]. Via the understated introduction of artificial lighting into his environments, Kasumovic alludes to an inherent human desire: to fix that which is not necessarily broken, in effect beautifying the beautiful. He likens the natural landscape to a product conceived of, created, and marketed by man. As in an advertisement, the photographer carefully constructs a lighting scheme in order to emphasize specific elements – selling features – of the shot. It is the object itself, only better. As an advertisement might tout, it is "Nature: New and Improved". Implicit in this is the notion that man cannot be content with natural beauty; that he must intervene and, in doing so, change the way we see. However, while revealing how the hand of man has forever altered the way in which we view the world, Kasumovic's strength is that he does so with the subtlety of McFarland and Hayeur. So largely imperceptible is his influence over the scenes that, in specific images, we can hardly pinpoint the photographer's

[1] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 2001), 85.

interference at all. It is only when Kasumovic intentionally increases that artifice through over-lighting and obvious staging, for example, that he succeeds in upsetting the carefully established equilibrium of presence over absence. Kasumovic's images are also indicative of a narrative, the creation of which is an inarguably human pursuit. The inclusion of manmade artifacts – a tree stump, a boardwalk, a beaten path – suggests some underlying purpose for this walk through the wilderness, and it is our resultant rationalization of the journey that further underscores mankind's compulsion to tame the untamable. That Kasumovic's images were captured at dusk only adds to the ominousness of their message: as daylight is all but exhausted, so is the hope of an existence unaltered by man.

As with *Ideal Landscapes*, Amanda Arcuri's images oscillate between presence and absence, albeit taking a far less fatalistic approach. So too, her images are captured at night, however the strong sense of foreboding felt in Kasumovic's photographs translates into sheer wonder within the context of Arcuri's *Present in Absence*. In abandoned parks and amidst their sleeping pines, flashes of fire and light are ignited by an unseen hand. Existing as evidence of some lighthearted, almost impish, incursion into so-called natural spaces, they encircle trees, illuminate benches, and engulf picnic tables. That they enlighten environments already tamed by man is telling. Indeed, their paths of light point

like neon signs to those tangible artifacts of human interference: to fire hydrants, to foot paths, and to trees all too perfectly aligned. However, it is a light far too fleeting to ever appear accusatory. It merely means to juxtapose the permanent ways in which man has impacted his environment with Arcuri's own ephemeral approach. In an age where man must consider his carbon footprint, this artist actively seeks to tread a little lighter. It is this hands-off approach that best aligns Arcuri's work with that of Scott McFarland and Isabelle Hayeur. As with their respective constructions of a computer generated Utopia, Arcuri's more performative incursions are impermanent: realized in photographs rather than the real world. Inherent in them, however, is a danger inconsequential to the digital realm. Unlike a computer, the tools with which Arcuri works have real world repercussions. Through their insurgent introduction of fire into forest, Arcuri's images betray a delicate balance. Fire, like he who wields it, has the ability to indiscriminately destroy. It is only in the presence of personal restraint, in Arcuri's sensitivity to her surroundings, that nature and its adversaries can come to coexist. Through Arcuri they are made aesthetic allies. In relation to fellow photographer-cum-environmentalist Edward Burtynsky, Arcuri is equally interested in the atypically aesthetic by-products of human activity. Like Burtynsky, she focuses on the formation of patterns and shapes that inherently emerge from man's systematic interruption of a natural setting. As the inevitably Cubist

structure of a rock quarry reveals itself only over time, so do Arcuri's images: each one being a time-elapsed accumulation of human interferences.

The work of Mark Kasumovic and Amanda Arcuri allows us to consider the notion of human intervention from both a positive and negative perspective. Arcuri's images suggest that mankind's impingement upon the environment can be fleeting, harmless, and even beautiful. Within her work, the evidence of human intervention is at once present and absent, and it is this ephemerality that affords us an unlikely optimism for the future of our world. Not all damage is inherently irreversible. By comparison, Kasumovic's work can be seen as a critique of mankind's mediation of the natural world; most perceptibly on the photographs thereof. Through the photographic improvement of landscape, his works seem to say, man has set an entirely new standard for beauty. In fact, mankind's manipulation of the world around him has happened slowly and subtly enough that in images it is often impossible to differentiate between the real and the ideal. This is perhaps most damning of all, as in the absence of an acknowledged problem there will likely be no search for a solution. While affording the interpretation of a "real world" agenda, both artists avoid heavy-handedness through theatrical touches to their imagery. Their use of both artificial lighting and an elemental diversion like fire suggests a certain playfulness: in this age of hybridity perhaps the natural and the unnatural can indeed coexist. In turn, this imbues their images

with both an ominousness and optimism, the conflation of which may just come to characterize a whole new generation of landscape photography.

Sarah Munro is a Toronto-based writer and photographer. She holds a BFA in photography from Ryerson University and is currently pursuing her MA in Photographic Preservation and Collections Management. As the facility's former Exhibition Coordinator, she now serves on the advisory board for the Ryerson Gallery. Sarah also acts as Publications Assistant for the Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art and operates as Book Reviews Editor for their publication, Prefix Photo magazine.