

The Third Landscape

Calgary's Ralph Klein Park is a manufactured wetland, which would appear to be a contradiction in terms. How do humans artificially create what it takes an ecosystem a lifetime to build? However, unlike the ruined bog lands in Northern Alberta, carved out of the ground in the pursuit of bitumen, the Ralph Klein Park's wetland "gives back" to the public by treating storm water with its vegetation.

Between this wetland and the city, between the ponds teeming with tiny creatures and the highway exists a borderland. An interstitial space where grass grows between the trestles of a silent railroad track and rainwater pools in roadside ditches.

French gardener and botanist Gilles Clement dubbed this interim space The Third Landscape, "the sum of the space left over by man to landscape evolution - to nature alone" (2003, para.1). These spaces include not only wetlands and shorelines but areas designed and created as reserves, places meant to be cultivated as nature, not humans, see fit.

Jay Mosher and Rory Middleton have found this space in the borderlands of Ralph Klein Park. This is where the onscreen Wild West exists. Their exhibition's accompanying video work reaches wide, opening into a panoramic Western narrative with big, bright letters inviting viewers into The Third Landscape.

Accompanying the video work is a sound composition by Douglas Bevans, a deep plunking guitar conjuring images of a post-apocalyptic Spaghetti Western. The Spaghetti West is desolate, empty and hard

like the surface of the Moon. Sergio Leone's iconic works (*The Man With No Name* trilogy, *Once Upon a Time in the West*) are world-expanding yarns, merciless in their characterization of a landscape hostile to human presence. Like their American counterparts, from John Ford's prototypical *Stagecoach* to Kelly Reichardt's haunting *Meek's Cutoff*, Spaghetti Westerns are preoccupied with space, scrabbling to raise structures that ward off being absorbed into the endless earth. The humans often lose, of course; nature has much, much more patience.

Westerns are still made, but they increasingly haunt celluloid rather than inhabit them. Films like Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*, which was seen by many as revitalizing the genre, now appear, as all Westerns do, part of its cannon. The genre has long been film's Third Landscape.

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Though scientists largely dismiss James Lovelock's Gaia Hypothesis - that the earth is a self-regulating system - what they choose to ignore is humanity's delusion in claiming the earth as its subservient, cooperating tool. We only need look to The Third Landscape to correct ourselves. Charles Darwin delighted in nature's unsanctioned processes. Books like Alan Weisman's *The World Without Us* detail our fascination with oblivion, how quickly what we've created will crumble and turn to dust. Domestic animals die quickly, those adapted to an early Pangaea thriving in the trees and hollowed out buildings. Vines creep up the sides of apartment blocks, slowly crushing them; Amazonian trees burst

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through once-busy streets. The earth would forget us quickly, our creations – homes, industry – lasting only a little longer.

The echoes of our presence define the Third Landscape. One of the 20th century's greatest chroniclers of this space, J.G. Ballard (*The Drowned World; The Terminal Beach*), often saw something more humid and erotic in the borderland, deliriously alive, though no less haunted and inescapable. In *Hello America* (1988), he imagines a future where we must learn to inhabit The Third Landscape, an overgrown Spaghetti Western of our own creation, and the only space left open for us. Perhaps, one day, The Third Landscape of Ralph Klein Park:

"...I could see the upper floors of the taller office blocks and apartment houses rising above the foliage. Now and then, below the canopy, I caught a glimpse of the dawn world of the forest floor, a shadowy realm of suburban stores and houses split apart by the huge palms and oaks. Everywhere fast jungle rivers carved their way towards the sea, cutting deep ravines through the old shopping malls and private estates..." (p.138).

We forget that The Third Landscape is all around us: abandoned Olympic stadiums, conservation reserves, forgotten roads, and the border of Ralph Klein Park. Mosher and Middleton not only reveal the wetland as inhabiting this interstitial space, drawing on Western narratives of engulfing space and human cultivation, but a place where nature is emancipated from human process, left to its own hidden needs and desires.

Works Cited

Ballard, J.G. (1988). *Hello America*. New York, NY: Carroll and Graf Publishers, Inc.

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This text was produced to accompany *The Third Landscape* (2014), a work by artists Jay Mosher and Rory Middleton encompassing installation, video, sound and text.

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