

TORONTO SCULPTURE GARDEN

JAMES CARL

MAY 14 – SEPTEMBER 30, 1997



f o u n t a i n

A CITY OF TORONTO PARK ■ 115 KING STREET EAST

fountain

Before visiting Niagara Falls, the first year after emigrating from the hyper-industrialized Ruhr valley in Germany, I imagined them in the wilderness. I imagined that one would leave one's car on a parking lot somewhere, surrounded by large old pines, take up one's rucksack and hiking boots, climb way up through the broken light of a fragrant forest along a well-maintained hiking path, and get to the top where – like Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Mists* – one would be shattered by the awesome, primordial Jurassic phenomenon of one of the largest waterfalls on earth – the encounter with a sense of milleniums of untouched North American nature.

Falls could be (and were at some point) turned off altogether, as with a tap, and all that vast leaden mass of dark grey-green water diverted – by the weir that crosses the entire river—into the turbines along its sides for the purpose of generating electric power. The Falls, in other words, are carefully maintained as a recreation, a nearly Disney-like replication of a landscape, a visual spectacle for the purpose of tourism only, as the agglutination of road-side attractions like slot-machines, cheesy motels, Burger Kings, and the wax museum all readily show. In fact, the Falls are operated around the clock, as the treaty between Canada and the U.S. of 1950 puts it so well: "during the daylight hours of the tourist season (from 0800 to 2200 hours local time 1 April to 15 September), the flow over Niagara Falls [can not be] less than 100,000 cubic feet per second." (In the winter and off-tourist season, the flow is allowed to go as low as 50,000 cfs.)² The Niagara Falls are more than a managed spectacle; they are exemplary of modern technology, not just as one of its gadgets or apparati but,



Dimensions: 72" H x 33" D x 30" L

The experience of the Falls is very different, of course. One can drive right up to the asphalt edge along the Falls; park the car next to the postcard stand, the sightseeing bus, the newspaper box; peek over the edge of a concrete wall where the river, thus hemmed in, rushes by at the height of one's ankles; then, for a dollar, get a plastic raincoat in order to be able to walk down into a maze of wet tunnels.¹ There, as if against the shock of previous disappointment, one encounters the Sublime – in its modern, industrial form. Standing under the Falls inside a wet, concrete bunker, leaning over an iron rail, one can almost touch the spectacularly blinding, relentlessly roaring, falling water – pressing down as it rushes by.

Of course, as is generally known, even this display of power is not what it appears to be. If it was not for the tourist industry, the

as the German philosopher Martin Heidegger would have put it, exemplary of the principle of "putting to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be extracted and stored as such."³ The river's energy is challenged forth into a 'standing-reserve': not only of stock-piled electricity, but also of the very spectacle of 'nature' – to flow on demand. It is, indeed, no longer the river that stands "over against us as object."⁴ Now it is the technological mastery of nature that partakes of the sublime.

James Carl's work for the Toronto Sculpture Garden is intertwined with the logic that permeates the Falls in more ways than one. Implicating its setting, the work unravels our alienation from nature – its return, on demand, in packaged form, quite literally, as a standing-reserve. At first, the work is simply impressive in its formal elegance – the linear and serial arrangement of

nine identical vending machines has the silently imposing, cool presence reminiscent of a Bertrand Lavier or Robin Collyer sculpture. It signals its site-specificity through the semi-circular configuration of the machines, which echoes both the small, decorative brick wall which acts as a retaining bed for a background of shrubs and trees, and the curvature of the Canadian section of the Falls as seen in the giant back-lit transparency cut into nine sections and reading as one whole view across the machines. Actually, not quite; the view is interrupted at regular intervals by the column of buttons and dollar slots where one can exchange one's money for a bottle of 'natural' water.

However, the elegant arrangement underlines a number of ironic, if not sardonic, interrelationships. The vending machines project the dim glow of a tourist destination into this urban garden, this recreational enclave for the tired urbanite in

bottled, spring water'. Like giant slot machines, each approximately the size of the great white Suburban Family Fridge, the vending machines function as an outdoor supermarket, offering the convenience – for the price of \$1.00 – of ready-at-hand, natural water, including James Carl's own brand. This water is, of course, neither drawn from the Sculpture Garden's water fountain which always seems to smell of bleach; nor from Niagara Falls or the dirty Niagara River; but imported from – what irony – the pure springs of the French Alps or other European mountains. This is like sitting in a bar, smoking, while looking at a Marlborough ad – although with perhaps a more complicated system of forward and backward projections as well as inverted exoticisms to accompany one's blues.

The harnessed nature of the Sculpture Garden, itself an outdoor museum, a 'collection' of nature pleasantly presented, echoes the transformation of Niagara Falls – its existence in the stock of

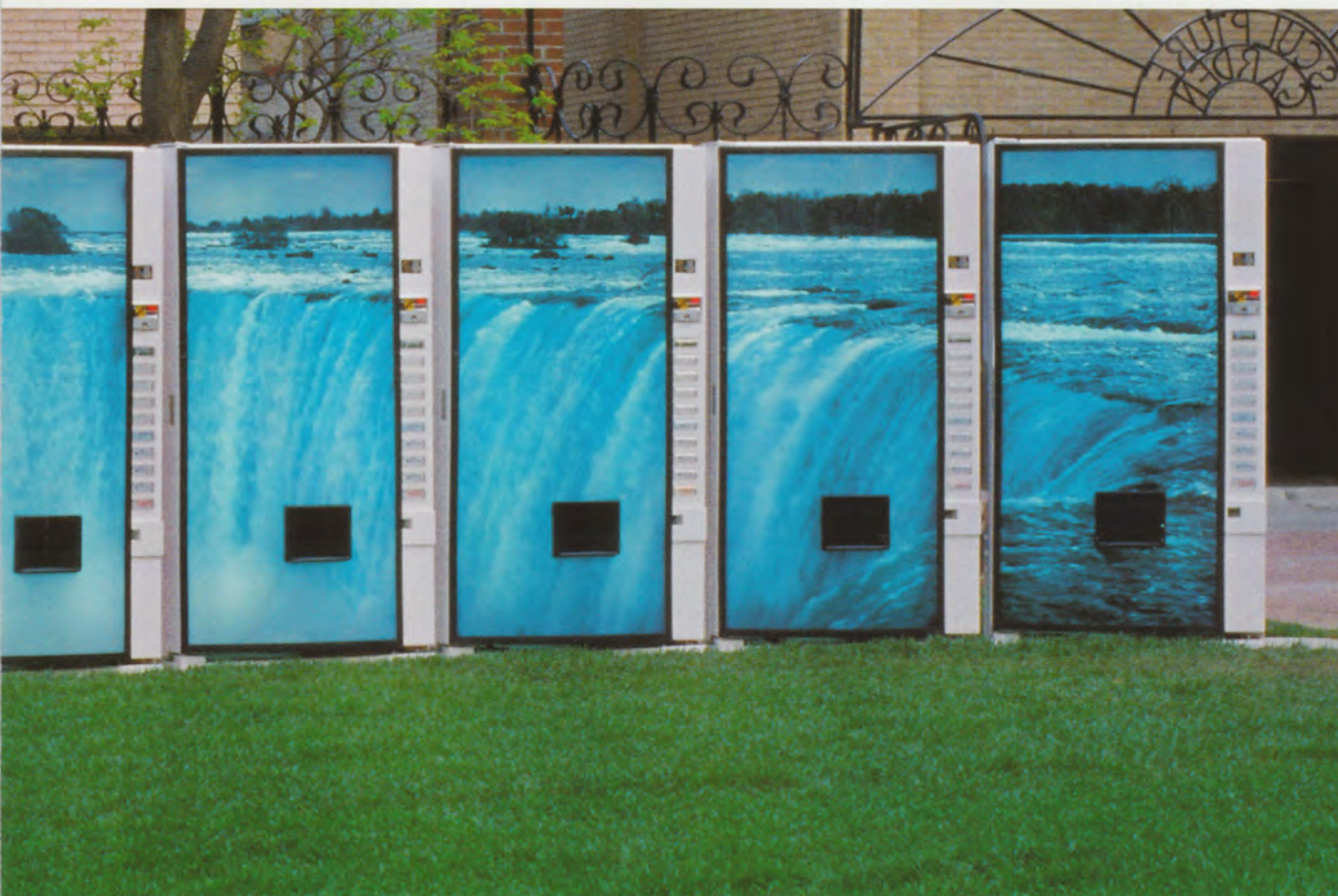


Photo: James Carl

search for a place to get away from it all. The image provides a cinematic experience that somehow pitches the 'nature' of the setting by exaggerating it. Just as the image of Niagara Falls supplies the artificial, small urban garden with a grander, more fantastic nature, the Toronto Sculpture Garden's own waterfall now works as the stereophonic sound-track for that very same, silent image. Carl's scenario is the low-tech, commercial, re-staged contemporary version of an Albert Bierstadt or Lucius O'Brien, whose North American landscapes mix the sublime with the pastoral, 'civil', European garden.

Where we are given a cinematic, stereophonic re-creation of nature – the little garden drawn out as a dioramic, museum-like simulacrum complete with birds, trees and nature sounds – the vending machines complete the experience by offering 'pure,

images; their function as controlled spectacle; and their use for the extraction of hydro-electric power. Electricity, in turn, maintains this little Disneyland and outdoor supermarket: the pump that runs the waterfall, the light that makes the Niagara Falls image glow, and the refrigeration unit that keeps the 'standing-reserve' of bottled water cool. This apparatus offers the tonic of nature, not simply for our convenience, but – as much more intensely at Niagara Falls, of course – to extricate surplus value, like energy, from the roaring mass of consumers and thereby, as well, provide artists with the ability to make a living.⁵ □

Barbara Fischer, independent writer and curator, also teaches in the areas of contemporary art.

ENDNOTES



Photo: Ryan Drew Mellon

- 1 Alex Wilson points out that all of the workings of Disney World are hidden from the spectator. Miles of underground corridors – “utilidors” – allow workers, supplies, utilities and telecommunications to move out to the various parts of the “total Vacation Kingdom”. Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to Exxon Valdez* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1991), p. 176.
- 2 Niagara Falls, Canada, Visitor and Convention Bureau brochure.
- 3 See Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *Basic Writings*, ed. By David F. Krell (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), p. 320. The possible application of Heidegger’s essay to the workings of Niagara Falls was explored by Carol Bigwood, Professor of Contemporary Continental Philosophy, University of Toronto, 1992.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 322.
- 5 Is it mere co-incidence that Niagara Falls, as its tourist brochures advertise, can boast a succession of firsts: the first hydro-electric power development in history; the first railway suspension bridge in the world; the first use of public money to expropriate land for public parks; the first museum in North America?

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JAMES CARL

1960 born Montreal, Canada

Education

- 1996 MFA, Rutgers, State University of New Jersey
- 1990, '95 Diplomas, Central Academy of Fine Art, Beijing
- 1992 BA, McGill University, Montreal
- 1983 BFA, University of Victoria, British Columbia

Solo Exhibitions

- 1996 *Still Life*, Paul Petro @ 100 Yonge, Toronto
- 1996 *Out of Service*, Civic Square Building, New Brunswick, NJ
- 1994 *Unentitled*, YYZ, Toronto
- 1993 *public works*, Grunt Gallery, Vancouver
- 1992 *re-possession*, Galerie Clark, Montreal
- 1991 *Spring Collection*, a public sculpture, Montreal
- 1990 *Border Patterns*, Central Academy of Fine Art, Beijing

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1997 *Vague Pop Part One*, View Room, New York
- 1996 *Limousine*, Free Parking, Toronto
- 1996 *MGSA Group Show*, 420 West Broadway, New York

- 1996 *Sac de Hockey*, Paul Petro @ 100 Yonge, Toronto
- 1995 *HOA*, Library of Art History, Rutgers University
- 1995 *Weihai Public Sculpture Symposium*, Shandong, China
- 1995 Central Academy of Fine Art, Beijing
- 1995 DeLeon White Gallery, Toronto
- 1993 *Artropolis*, Vancouver
- 1993 *Word Power*, Foto Based Gallery, Vancouver
- 1993 *Art and Environment*, Gotlieb Gallery, Toronto
- 1991 *Les Jardins Imprevus*, Montreal

Selected Awards

- 1997 Canada Council “B” Grant
- 1997 Toronto Arts Awards, Protégé Award
- 1995 Canada Council “B” Grant
- 1994-95 Chinese- Canadian Graduate Scholar Award
- 1994 Canada Council “B” Grant
- 1993 Conseils des Arts du Québec Project Grant
- 1993 Canada Council Short Term Grant
- 1992 Japanese-Canadian Culture Centre Award
- 1992 Canada Council Travel Grant
- 1989-90 Chinese-Canadian Undergraduate Scholar Award

The **Toronto Sculpture Garden** is operated by the City of Toronto Department of Parks and Recreation. The Garden was developed through the sponsorship of the Louis L. Odette Family, the City of Toronto and the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Culture. The site was designed by the Architecture and Urban Design Division of the City’s Planning and Development Department, in association with the Department of Parks and Recreation.

Exhibitions are funded and administered by the non-profit L.L.O. Sculpture Garden Foundation. and are coordinated by the Garden’s director, Rina Greer.

A volunteer Art Advisory Board, appointed by the Foundation, selects work for exhibition. Its current members are Don Bennett, Shirley Blumberg, Nancy Campbell, Carlo Cesta, Stephen Cruise, Mark Gomes, Kim Kozzi, Bernie Miller, Louis Odette, Malcolm Ruby and Loretta Yarlow.

The work in this exhibition may be purchased directly from the artist or through the Garden.

Open daily, free of charge, from dawn to dusk.