Regional Dilemmas?

Summer Exhibitions
Thunder Bay Art Gallery
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By Greg Albo

The searing geographical differentiation of Canada has always made the regional aesthetic a necessary but deeply problematic conception. The tendency has been to search for a mediated landscape art – from the geographical terrain to the emotive to the canvas – in so many variations of the imagined national sensibility. Or to cast the lot of the regional with the nostalgic and romantic, in the way of the social interpretatives of a Kurelek or a Lemieux, capturing a resoundingly place-specific moment. In the process of representing the particular and the local, the regional art gallery also gains legitimacy from the local wheels of commerce, and a claim on arts resources from neoliberal central governments for what can't be represented in the big galleries of the metropoles.

But hasn't capitalism also unified the aesthetic experience in the rapture of commodity exchange as it has spread and unified markets and made common the violence of its labour processes? Shouldn't we insist that cultural workers have the freedom to explore all that underlies the social forms of the regional? And isn't it time that we accounted for the human need for the production of art beyond the major salons of Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal into every corner of Canada? This is to suggest, as much against prevailing sentiments in the fashionable art arcades, that the local is necessarily implicated in the universal, that the region and the centre are produced in the very same processes.

The summer exhibitions at the Thunder Bay Art Gallery illustrate all these dilemmas of regional art policy in Canada. The modest gallery is tucked into a corner of the Confederation College campus, literally bursting at the seams to accommodate its holdings and current shows. Its collections include numerous important works by Aboriginal artists such as Norval Morriseau, Jane Ash Poitras, Benjamin Chee Chee, and others, with only some of the many stunning and brash paintings of the Woodlands School of Northern Ontario able to be viewed. It is an astonishing statement on the backwardness of Canadian and Ontario arts policies that one of the greatest achievements of contemporary Canadian art is so inadequately housed. Nonetheless, the works drawn together in *Contemporary Aboriginal Art: Sacred Elements* from the permanent collection of the gallery illustrated well the burst of energy that has made contemporary Aboriginal art so vital. The juxtaposition of traditions of Northwest Coast masks with more contemporary works drawing striking continuities between time and place, while also, more often than not, pointing to what cannot be retrieved. Also exploring naturalist themes, Kathy Browning's *Spirit of the North* presented a number of stimulating digital prints, almost appearing layered by paint to get a depth of image, each exploring an abstract quality to the Superior landscape. And a third exhibition, *Reflections of Superior*, gathered some forty pieces of woodcuts, etchings, paintings, photo-based images, from artists around Lake Superior, based on images captured around a sail around the circumference of the lake. The exhibits all were worthwhile with more than a few accomplished pieces being presented, if with a decidedly localist cast and limited engagement. But then at the margins of the Gallery another modestly-presented piece on the geography of Lake Superior, bursting out of the particulars of the region to explore contemporary dilemmas. Josephine Mandamin's *Waterwalk* recalls through photographs and story-telling her 1300 mile walk around Lake Superior, with other Anisishinabe women, to raise awareness of ecological threats to water quality.

This, then, was exactly what was needed: something quite beyond the constraints of colour and form within the varied schools of Superior paintings and photographic imagery of nature as modernist abstraction; and something after endless postmodernist winks at cultural nostalgia and localized identities. A simple work saying so much from just confronting contemporary dilemmas rather than avoiding them. This is vital not just to the region and its particular aesthetic reflections, but Canadian culture as a whole. But why so little space given over to the breaking out of the bonds of the traditional?

At this point we need to take a step back and say something about the political economy of it all. The dilemma is not the exhibitions of regional geography or the mandates to develop and collect the regionally significant, and particularly the endlessly innovative work of contemporary Aboriginal art. Indeed, regional galleries do not have the space to adequately exhibit what should be shown in this vein. The problem lies in the shameful underfunding of arts as a whole, and the relative centralization of what is spent in a few centres. →

This really is, at the end of the day, the neglect of public gallery spaces for working class people and the general public (who will fill the galleries if the admission is free), as there is more than enough being spent by ruling elites on their own private collections to drive art market prices skyward. The pressures of neoliberal constraints on funding, moreover, compel the 'big' galleries to pursue 'blockbuster' shows, with endless exhibits of impressionism that never seem to lack for audiences, and the 'regional' galleries to appeal to the parochialism of local business elites. To undertake a radical departure into shows of the untried or difficult is to threaten the wobbly financial basis to the whole array of cultural institutions. The cultural practices supporting neoliberalism nestle everywhere and in unseen ways, and those that proffer a challenging brush stroke to the prevailing neoliberal order of capitalism are relegated to the margins. Isn't that also how the regional is always implicated in more universal processes and dilemmas? ■

Empire & the Media:

A Socialist Project Interview with Robert McChesney

On Wednesay August 4, 2004, Robert McChesney presented his argument in *The Problem of the US Media* to over 80 enthusiastic discussion participants at the Victory Café in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. The day after McChesney's discussion at the Victory Café, Greg Albo (G. A.), Sam Gindin (S. G.), and Tanner Mirrlees (T. M.) caught up with McChesney to talk in greater detail about the American empire and the global media. An excerpt from the interview follows.

On American Empire, the American state, and Global Media Corporations

T. M. –Given the size and global 'competitive advantage' of American communicational and media firms over those in developing countries, and the American state's brandishing of the 'free-flow of information' doctrine to pry open new markets for American-based media commodities, to what extent is the problem of the U.S. media *also* the core problem of the global media?

R. M. – It is in two different ways. First, American media, communication, advertising play an important role in consolidation of the American imperial project, and the corporate globalization project. They have for quite some time. The late Herbert Schiller documented the role that media and communication played in American dominance in the 1960s, and it is much greater today. Second, the American domination of the global news system results in journalist coverage that is often biased to American nationalism and foreign policy.

S. G. – Yet, CNN, a global news corporation, appeals to the audiences in other countries in localized ways.
R. M. – Yes, I just returned from Norway and there is a striking difference between the European CNN and the American CNN. Nevertheless, the global media is an important part of the American imperial project, but as I argue in *The Problem of the US Media*, we are at a time when not only 'national' policies are being made but global media policies as well: intellectual property rights, internet regulations and control. These policies rest on global or transnational decisions. We need to build global alliances to work on these issues, because the decisions that are made at 'the global level' will shape the domestic situations of every national-state and its population.

T. M. – But if the American commercial media model is being globalized, and is said to represent the interests, values, and aspirations of the planet, would it not be more useful to argue that media reform has to start within the imperial core of the global system, in the United States?

R. M. – I think you are right. In the early 1930s, when groups were trying to set up a non-commercial public broadcasting system in Canada, to justify this system, they referred to arguments made by Americans, which said: 'the commercial media system sucks, we
don't want it anymore, the last thing you want is commercial radio running Canada." Yes, we are Americans, we are at the heart of the global media problem, we can tell you how bad the commercial media system is. We have got to build up our part of the media reform movement within America, and connect with other like-minded movements around the world.

T. M. – Is there much research being done on the particular government institutions and communication apparatuses that currently represent, or function on behalf of, the foreign policy objectives of political blocs in positions of state power, like the Bush Administration?

R. M. - Well, there is always a subplot that is not openly discussed concerning the media and global trade. There is a movement in the WTO, for example, to make audio-visual media (film, television, and radio) subject to purely commercial prin-