

Dikeakos, Christos. Interview. By Gary Pearson. *Lake Journal of Arts and Environment* 2 (2008): 40.

# Location and Actuality



**Foreground Study, Cucumber Greenhouse, 2000**  
Colour photograph, 61 cm X 111.7cm, Christos Dikeakos



**I**n the following interviews, artists Christos Dikeakos, Jeff Wall, and Ian Wallace speak about the importance of location to the production and meaning of their photographic work. While each of these artists has produced and exhibited artwork in far corners of the world, the focus of the *Lake* interviews is on work they have done in the South Okanagan region of British Columbia.

christos dikeakos



**Cardboard Boxes, 2000**

Colour photograph, 53.3cm x 61cm,  
Christos Dikeakos

**gary pearson**

Your primary residence is in Vancouver, and most of your work has been sited in and around that city; however, you do have another home in Naramata in the south Okanagan, where you spend a certain amount of time each year. This interview feature contains reproductions of some of your work produced in this area. Would you describe in general terms how these works make reference to the South Okanagan? The assumption is that the environment of this region has some unique characteristics that are relevant to your work. Would you also tie your response to the particular circumstances of the production and meaning of *Cardboard Boxes*, for example?

**christos dikeakos:**

The picture *Cardboard Boxes* is from 2000. It was taken at harvest time in a well-run, well-managed, and versatile farm that grew everything from hot to mild peppers, eggplant, heirloom tomatoes, melons, and all kinds of orchard fruits. The kind of farm that is probably now on the decline in a region that is fast becoming identified by a kind of industrial row farming of thousands of acres of planted vineyards. The location is in the southern Okanagan between Oliver and Osoyoos.

The shot was produced on a panoramic camera, a Noblex medium format. The style accentuates a foreground and background division of visual relationships, a dichotomy, perhaps a contradiction between messy, untidy, provisional foregrounds and stable landscape backgrounds. I used this technique throughout this period and also shot a number of pictures in various urban locations in Vancouver and around Europe. In this case the messy is what borders the property boundaries or the unfarmed part of the farm where the detritus is tossed out, wood piled up, where things and implements are abandoned and forgotten. The cardboard boxes folded, piled and curved is a fake natural topographical landscape—a sham.

The messy and untidy iconography is the subaltern of a photo obsession for many generations of Vancouver photographers starting with Fred Herzog in the 60's. It may

denote shifting power relations as evidenced by the subject matter in the picture. Here the old weathered cardboard box pile splits the picture frame as oppositional to the near and background distance of the picture, in which a young and ordered orchard seems to flourish. Farther in the background are the Ice Age-carved, low rolling mountains, with the sage and pine trees of the south Okanagan region.

The focus is on natural landscape with the emphasis on the human-occupied landscape. The natural wilderness is distanced. It's still a lyrical and beautiful subject but my focus in this picture at the time was to produce a number of perspectives on how people still live off the land, and the agro-economic changes that were occurring then, and are still occurring.

In an unconscious way, I chose this picture from many other pictures of this amazingly well-run 20-acre farm. The farmer grew exceptional produce only to see half of it re-ploughed at the end of the harvest season. The iconography suggests that small-lot farming does not pay. That it's a business in decline. My question was: How can one make a living off the land? Now that the vineyard gold rush and wine and agro-tourism have set in, perhaps that same farmer may turn into a vintner and find a new way to make a living.

As you can see, the picture is driven by subject matter and the detailing and localizing of a place. What should be noticed and needs to be articulated in this case are the edge and boundary areas. Many pictures like this seem to go off assignment, especially in such a dramatic and unique place like the southern Okanagan. The boxes are a weathered pile of lifeless brown containers with local origins like BC Fruit to the big industrial cartels like the United Fruit Company which almost owned pre-Castro Cuba.

**gp** In reference to *Cardboard Boxes*, you said that what should be noticed and needs to be articulated are the edge and boundary areas. As I understand it, you're referring to the perimeter of the farm where the cardboard boxes were disposed of, and the background, the other edge, the "natural wilderness." If the wilderness and the waste and the small market farmer are being pushed to the edge in the South Okanagan, what does that say about what's central to us? Maybe what you're asking us to think about in relation to our geographical, social, and economic realities is the relevance of such concepts such as near and far, centre and periphery.

**cd** My response is my approach to picture-making, whether it be the edge of the farm, or a series that I took in Athens at the edge of the sanctuary of Plato's academy.

In the Okanagan, I did a lot of location scouting, driving and walking, and musing on the concept of making a living by farming. I used a conceptual framework to include documentary objective approaches. I reference a historical pictorial style of picture-making with the grand views of nature, tied in with the social landscape of the farm. Ultimately, it's the reality of everyday settings underlining the solidity of what we see.

This method has both an aesthetic and a contemplative interest. I've taken a lot of pictures which appear as a threshold, or at the edge of a boundary. The other method is to introduce opposing and contradictory picture planes of subject matter. It's an interrogative approach to looking at landscape.

**gp** The threshold as you describe it could also be applied to the narrative juncture of aesthetic and contemplative interests/content in your photograph called *Dumped Aurora Red Apples*, a work which, if not for the jarring image of the upended apple bin in the foreground, could easily qualify as a picture postcard view of the south Okanagan. There's more to it than that, of course, including the compositional relationship between the apple box and the house to the upper right corner, and how this correspondence might implicate this house in the "crime" of the dumped apples. In another conversation you referred to this picture as "a reverse image of the bountiful cornucopia."

The cornucopia signifies an abundance of "good things," and while on the surface your image might be said to do the same, it doesn't translate with the same reassurance and idealism offered by the conventional symbol of plenty. There's an unsettling quality to this artwork which in varying degrees I've experienced from other work you've done, an experience that I would argue attenuates, or certainly complicates, the aesthetic attraction of the scene. Another example would be your photograph *Foreground Study, Cucumber Greenhouse*, which is the picture of the young woman in the greenhouse walking amongst the cucumber plants.

A picturesque orchard with a dumped, perfectly good-looking crop creates alarm about how this country produces its wealth.

**cd** There are parallel interests that exist in both these pictures. One is the idea of a picture postcard of the Okanagan orchards, and the full wooden bins of red juicy apples headed for the co-op in September. That picture postcard view was available four weeks later, after *Dumped Apples*, but I decided not to take it. The dumped apple bin is actually a worthless, bountiful crop—an apple that was deemed to have no value. The second picture, *Foreground Study*,

a panorama, is of a temporary greenhouse which by now is in tatters with barely a saleable cucumber left in it. The steamy, overgrown condition of this place speaks of a transient passage of plants which are grown as food crops. They appeared like conscious acts of wasteful dereliction. At the time, I considered these pictures as visual allures. Furthermore, both of these pictures are about the vernacular image and the idiosyncrasies of a rural Okanagan. *Dumped Aurora Red Apples* also illustrates how little Canadians value our natural and agricultural resources. The photo of a picturesque orchard with a dumped, perfectly good-looking crop creates alarm about how this country produces its wealth. In fact, Canada is looking more like a less-developed nation unable to consume what it produces.

There is also an interest in showing marginal places which have vernacular qualities in local architecture and rural scenes. These are sometimes non-conforming, unique and colloquial, as, for example, in *Doublewide Trailer with Lake View, Naramata*. This interest in the vernacular requires location-scouting away from the malls and the urbanization of the present capital of the Okanagan, Kelowna. The small pockets and holdouts of the vernacular remind me of the importance that the American poet Charles Olson placed on small communities, which he referred to as *polis* (the small Greek city of intimate inhabitants). His interest was in a *polis* as a communicated place of keen observation and language: "Polis is eyes."

**gp** Urbanization and suburbanization have certainly transformed the vernacular of local architecture and rural scenes in the Okanagan. Maybe someday the doublewide trailer will re-emerge as a neo-vernacular housing style? The photographs you've been describing, and others in this broader series, are marked by their narrative of temporality. They are about the passage of time communicated through the changes of marginal and seemingly mundane places and things, views of the world that often go unnoticed or are taken for granted. Your picture-making has, as you've said, both aesthetic and contemplative interest. I really admire how these two qualities are manifested in your work, as your photographs are at odds with most of the images we're bombarded with by mass media and the entertainment industries. In this series you seem to have embraced the anti-spectacle as a visual trope for "picturing the world".

**cd** The promotional picturing of the Okanagan which was established in the late 50's by the provincial tourist ministry was based on the recreational and lush landscapes of happy fruit pickers in bountiful orchards. My pictures show some of the changes in the food-growing culture, revealing changes in the "natural" farm landscape. Demographics in the Okanagan are changing



**Dumped Aurora Red Apples, 2007**  
Colour photograph, 53.3cm x 61cm, Christos Dikeakos



**Dumped Aurora Red Apples, 2007**  
Colour photograph, 53.3cm x 61cm, Christos Dikeakos



**Doublewide Trailer with  
Lake View, Naramata, 1999**  
Colour photograph, 53.3cm x 53.3cm,  
Christos Dikeakos



**Jeff Wall setting up camera to shoot *Rock Surface 2*, 2007**  
 Colour photograph, Christos Dikeakos

and with that, an end to traditional orchard farming. This is part of the anti-spectacle and is paying attention to the ordinary without sentimentalizing the subject matter, a balance to the new Okanagan getaway and retirement/recreational lifestyle—the idealized and constructed landscape of privilege and the good life.

I also want to mention that I participate in the Canadian preoccupation with landscape art. But it is impossible or irrelevant to think that landscape art holds coherent criteria for picturing a place like the Okanagan. Throughout the year I drive from Vancouver and stay in a rural orchard outside Penticton. I notice the subtle seasonal changes of the natural topography and the social and economic transformations of place. ∞