

Sentimental Journey

by Jenifer Papararo

Sentimental Journey is a group exhibition of local artists whose working methods capture sentiments of eighteenth and nineteenth century Romanticism.¹ Each of the exhibition's seven artists begins with a journey, evoking romantic notions of nature and the search for the self. The works in *Sentimental Journey* are both real and fictive representations of often-undetermined treks. All the artists use the journey as a starting point, approaching the expedition, or the landscape traversed, with a sincerity made evident by their fascination with documentation and the way documentation is presented. By fascination I mean their need to consider, from the outset, how the journey's process will be represented. Each artist approaches this differently; some start with an image in mind, while others generate the material and method of display only during their travels. Most of the works are imbued with an optimism that is tied to the landscape, the desire to be outdoors, and the character of the artist/wanderer. Ultimately, all of the artists bring forward the tight relation between process and presentation, embracing the romance of the journey while also recontextualizing and privileging the terms of display in order to question sentimentality in the experiences of their respective trips.

In "Landscape and I," Michael Turner talks about this wholly romantic impulse, using the recent films of Agnes Varda, and the filmmaker herself, as examples. In *The Gleaners & I* (2000) (figures 4 & 5), Varda begins her film with an image of *The Gleaners* by Jean-François Millet, whose painting developed in the context of the Romantic movement in France in the late seventeen hundreds. She

uses *The Gleaners* as an illustration of the act of gleaning, the subject of her film. But it is not only the painting's illustrative value that Varda draws on, it is also the romantic nature of the painter himself, and the character of Varda as an artist, that establish the film's sentimental tone. Millet was a founder of the Barbizon school, which was named after a small French village and came to signify a turn to nature, one that considered the landscape to be more than mere backdrop. The school emerged as artists moved out of their studios to paint the countryside *en plein air*. This shift was in large part a challenge to the academic hierarchy of genres, which traditionally placed history painting above all others, including portraiture, still life and—most relevant to the artists of Barbizon—landscape. They attempted to portray the simplicity of country life, not only as a worthy subject in its own right, but also as an act of resistance to the ordered rationalization of the natural world represented by the ideals of the Age of Enlightenment. To paint the landscape was a rebellion, and this is no more apparent than in the work of Millet, with its explicit embrace of nature, and in his approach to finding subject matter. Millet declared, "Every landscape, however small, should contain the possibility of being indefinitely extended on either side; every glimpse of the horizon should be felt to be a segment of the great circle that bounds our vision."²

Romanticism developed across Europe as a movement in visual art, literature and music; it was defined as a return to nature and a search for true understanding of the self. The French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who was identified as a pioneer of Romanticism, crossed the Alps alone on foot, expressing his experience in his autobiography *Confessions* published in 1782.³ The purpose of his long and isolated journeys, Rousseau states, was "to show to my fellow-men a portrait in every way true to nature, and this man I shall portray will be myself." This desire to find an authentic self is defined by the attempt to break with societal

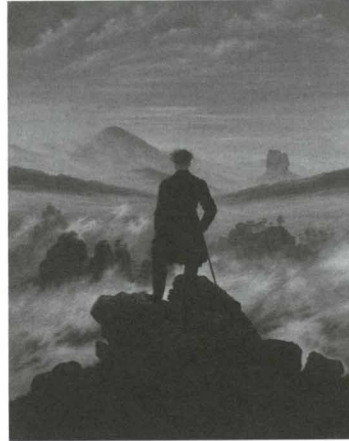


Figure 51: Caspar David Friedrich
Wanderer, Above the Sea of Fog, 1818
Oil on canvas
37 x 29 in.

constraints that limit choices and actions and, accordingly, limit the ability to understand and convey the experience of the true self.⁴ This notion of the Romantic thinker—focused on finding and defining the true inner self—reaches across place, time and disciplines.

We can easily point to this figure again and again in the visual arts. The romantic artist lingers and is now an archetype and at times a caricature of the artist in general. Common to much contemporary art discourse since the mid-twentieth century is a suspicion of this romantic figure and what it represents. Romanticism has always had its critics. Millet, for example, associated himself with Realism, an art movement that reproached the Barbizon school for its sentimentality, but still embodied many of its romantic ideals in rejecting the Enlightenment's reasoned conventions.⁵ Terms such as *sentimental*, *idealistic*, *spiritual*, *individualistic* and *emotional* have commonly been used to undermine the political gestures of Romanticism. Romance is a distraction, interfering with realism and its revolutionary intent. In relation to contemporary art the term is often used derogatorily, disassociated from the political and defined by self-interest; as a movement for the individual. This is characterized by Rousseau's statement, "Myself alone. I feel my heart and I know men. I am not

made like any that I have seen; I venture to believe that I was not made like any that exist.”⁶

The Wanderer (1818) (figure 51) by the German painter Casper David Friederich represents a paradigm of this physical and spiritual journey. A lone figure, his back to the picture plane, stands on a mountainous peak above the clouds, observing the vast valley below. Is this isolated figure in a landscape, shown within nature’s awesomeness, enough to convey the experience? Do Friederich’s intentions move beyond evoking the individualistic nature of these transcendental moments and our isolation as humans? Or does he simply intend the work to replicate the experience of awe for the viewer, hoping the representation itself elicits this feeling? A primary question for many artists in this exhibition may be, Is the pictorial portrayal of the journey enough to capture the interests of a viewer? This leads to other questions, such as: Should what is displayed replicate the journey? Does it even need to? Does it represent the experience, or is it a thing unto itself? Are process and presentation so intertwined that they become one, or do they function so differently that there will always be a huge gap between them?

Moraine Lake, Lake Louise (figure 17), a colour photograph by Mike McLean and Laura Trunkey, started with an image familiar to most Canadians. Their photograph is part of a larger body of work, *Range: Rocky Mountain National Park Photographs* (2008–2009) (figure 47), for which the duo embarked on backcountry treks through the wilderness preserves of Canada’s Mountain National Parks to take large-scale photographs of the scenes they encountered. In an artist statement, McLean references the numerous photographs that have represented these regions: “The common proclamation of all these photographers is one that the medium seems to underscore with such mechanical precision: *we were there.*” McLean and Trunkey began these treks to capture a loss and convey nostalgia for a recent time in Western Canadian history, using photography. Still fresh in the

memory of the west is a sense of discovery where explorers forged, mapping territories, and people hiked with a romantic sense of adventure, to places that had never been seen before. Now, mapping is done with helicopters instead of on foot or horseback, and treks into the mountains are most often limited to daily pursuits, instead of weeks-long hikes deep into the backwoods.

Many of the photographs in *Range* show scenes the artists have come across, but *Moraine Lake, Lake Louise* was selected before they began their journey into the mountains. The photograph, a diptych, shows Moraine Lake, which sits high in the Rocky Mountains. McLean and Trunkey have used the framing of the image of the lake that has been seen for over thirty years on the Canadian twenty-dollar bill—the most common bill in circulation. The artists' use of the "twenty dollar view," which they split in two, is more than mere documentation of their journey or an attempt to capture a sense of loss. Rather, it keenly conveys our current relationship to this landscape, which is now more commonplace than spectacle. This is not to say that the view isn't still spectacular, but the experience of it has shifted to something that is filtered through representation or measured by the day-to-day—as a short walk, rather than an extended romantic experience of isolation and discovery.

Within the ideals of historical Romanticism, the artwork, like nature, should be experiential. Thus in a true Romantic sense, the goal of a work of art is to elicit emotional response. More than any of the artists in *Sentimental Journey*, Kevin Schmidt keeps true to this tradition using the woods and wilderness as his primary source of inspiration, translating his experience materially, to create a new experience in its own right.

Symbolically, according to the Romantics, nature carries a charge that elicits a transcendental response. This response corresponds, fundamentally, to a sense of awe. I have no doubt that the natural world still carries the power to inspire awe, but it is also hard to

ignore how mediated our experiences are. As McLean and Trunkey show us, our visual fields are saturated with representations of landscapes, and the artist/explorer character is now relegated to the role of day tripper and seems more performative than earnest.

Schmidt's desire to represent the landscape is linked to an attempt to awaken, in himself and others, an interest in the power of nature and thus in its representation. Through his process and work, he attempts to bring us back to the spectacular in nature—intensifying its colour, amping the sound and creating new magic. In *Fog* (2004) (figure 48), Schmidt went into the BC rainforest with a generator, a fog machine, and stage lighting. Creating a thick layer of artificial fog that hugged the leafy forest floor, he documented the event at night on large format slides. Later he projected these to scale on two opposing freestanding walls in an otherwise pitch-black room. Entering the installation is disorienting, as the viewer has to negotiate the darkness, moving around one of the projection walls to encounter either of the luminous images. Schmidt doesn't conceal the artifice of the scene, instead he highlights it, creating an image that is somewhere between mystical and humorous, but is most definitely beautiful. *Fog* conjures the horror film, which heightens the forest's eeriness; but it is a very contemporary understanding of eerie—mediated more through images than experience, but no less felt.

With Schmidt there is always a play with popular culture. Pop references, from fantasy films to classic rock, are overlaid onto otherwise seemingly pristine natural scenes; yet his work is anything but ironic. In *Wild Signals* (2008) (figure 13), he set up an elaborate concert lighting system in the Yukon in the middle of winter with spectacular results. Nature and artifice each added to the other's effect. The snowy landscape was illuminated and the lighting was intensified by the crisp and clear surface. In *Epic Journey* (2009), he projected in chronological order, over three nights, each of the three parts of the *Ring Trilogy*. The movies were projected onto a fold-out

screen on a small metal motorboat while riding down the Fraser River, BC.⁷ For his work for *Sentimental Journey*, he is building on an earlier series of photographs (figure 49) where he painted landscapes *en plein air* onto lone standing trees in the woods. He added a small patch of plaster onto the bark of the single tree, painting the horizon line of the distant landscape onto the surface, and then photographed the scene for exhibition. At first glance, when viewing the final photograph, the paintings look like physical holes in each tree with the landscape revealed behind them, but the *trompe l'oeil* breaks down almost immediately as the viewer starts to compare the painting with the landscape. For this new piece, Schmidt uses video to document another painting, setting the otherwise still scene in motion. For the exhibition he will also install a canvas tent, which is the surface for a painting of the view where he will pitch his camp.

In these new works, Schmidt uses the traditional material of Romanticism, which in the visual arts has been historically limited to painting. As he did in the work before it, Schmidt attempts to elicit an emotional response tied to the landscape and to heighten natural spectacle by adding some pop culture, or by layering the representation—the filmed painting being one example. In all his work Schmidt manages to invoke the lone figure of the artist/wanderer, filtering this romantic character through his material work. For me, Gareth Moore, like Schmidt, also captures this artist/wanderer. But while Schmidt grounds this persona in the now, Moore creates a character that is slightly out of time. For example, in *The Road Through the Forest* by Lyman A. William (2008) (figures 44 & 45), Moore sets a scenario that takes him on a two-week journey. For the piece, first produced as part of the group exhibition *Wizard of Oz* for the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in San Francisco, Moore asked staff at the gallery to drive him blindfolded and drop him off at an unknown location. Moore's goal, with little more than the clothes he was wearing and 500 US dollars, was to find his way back to the gallery in two weeks. For the trip, the artist took on the

pseudonym Lyman A. William. He wore a fairly nondescript suit that was a combination of custom-made and store-bought, hand made his underwear, carried a wool blanket, and brought with him a box camera with 24 exposures of film. He carried no identification.

Ten days later, Moore arrived back at the CCA with forty dollars in his pocket and a collection of objects, both purchased and found. Many items he carried back with him were animal remains, like a raccoon-tail-turned-pencil-holder and a mid-size dog skull. Along the way, he built himself a companion out of cigarette butts he had smoked or found. He had taken all 24 exposures and was packing a variety of different objects—from feathers and paper cut-outs to a tree-branch-turned-walking-stick and some makeshift sunglasses. For the exhibition at Wattis, he placed all the objects, including his clothes, shoes and blanket in small stacks on the floor or leaning against the wall.

A patina of time seems to unify these objects. It is as if they were all collected, not by Moore himself, but by Lyman A. William, a character who seems to come from another time. It was William who walked in the heat, sometimes for over ten hours straight, until it felt like he was disappearing, not Moore. And it is precisely the fictitious character that spins into a circle the Romantic notion of the journey. As Lyman A. William, Moore undermines the Romantic impulse for embarking on the journey. The task of discovering the true individual self by using the journey is foiled by the character the artist portrays. If we remember Rousseau's words, "... this man I shall portray will be myself," we see that here, through the character and through these objects, Moore obscures himself, and thus shakes off the sentimental goal of finding one's true self through the isolated journey into nature. This figure has the potential to make friends, collect objects, and tell a story that is more about the journey than the self.

Fictionalization also plays out in Kara Uzelman's multi-faceted installation, *The Cavorist Project* (2009) (figures 1, 8, 41, 42 & 43).

Uzelman builds a long and complex narrative that starts with the figure of the discoverer as a scientist, searching for the truth of self through truth in nature. The story begins inside another story, H.G. Wells's *The First Men In the Moon* (1901), which centers around Dr. Cavor, who on October 14th, 1899 accidentally develops a new metal, Cavorite, that shields objects from the gravitational pull of the earth. Uzelman builds a story of "The Cavorists," followers of Dr. Cavor, writing about them from their beginning, collecting their ephemera, recreating their experiments through drawings, restaging conversations, documenting elements of their research and preserving their tools. She has created an archive of images that establishes their history and their directive, which is to recreate Dr. Cavor's accidental discovery. In their early days the group moves to Northern Canada to conduct research in isolation. The archive records a later splitting of the group into two sects; one wants to follow a spiritual path while the other remains dedicated to pure scientific research. This philosophic division, one that reflects the Romantics' rejection of the Age of Reason, ultimately leads to the groups' demise in the early 1990s.

The detail of Uzelman's fiction, which also reaches beyond the Cavorists proper to incorporate anti-gravity research done by other rogue outsiders, keeps the viewer guessing at what is real. Even though the work starts with a fictitious character and premise, the amount of research and material the artist has collected leaves the viewer wondering whether each item in the archive was made by her or found in actual research. *The Cavorist Project* is predicated on a suspension of reason and rejection of the belief that clarity leads to progress or that progress is desirable. Uzelman keeps us in the realm of fantasy. It is the dream of discovery that is captured here, and by drawing a rift between reason and the free expression of imagination, she leans, with sincerity, on the side of the romantics. She becomes the embodiment of the artist/explorer, drawing herself into the landscape to discover the impulse of this character. She went north to the Yukon to begin the Center for Observation, Research,

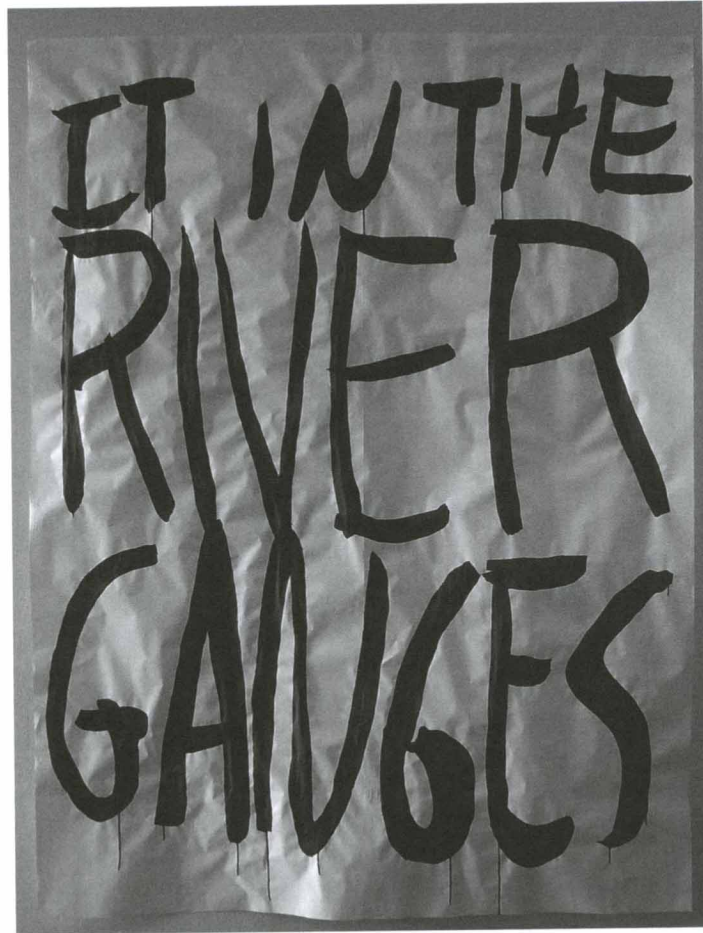


Figure 52: Michael Drebert
River Ganges Crash Crawly's, 2009
Ink on paper
72 x 91 in.

and Technology. This set her in motion through the landscape to construct, through photographs, drawing and *bricolage*, a scene that begins in the imagination and ends in a quasi-mystical, Romantic view of nature, searching and longing for discovery.

The embodiment of the Romantic traveler has a ring of even greater sincerity in *River Ganges Crash Crawly's* (2009) (figures 9, 48 & 52) by Michael Drebert, who set out on a two-month quest from Coquitlam, Canada to Varanasi, India. Drebert's travels began at Crash Crawly's, an indoor children's playground. He took a ball from the ball pit, wrapped it in a blanket and brought it on a journey to the Ganges River. Without much planning, Drebert devised a journey that would have him carry the ball from its origin, dip it in the Ganges River and then return it to the ball pit. Drebert recounts his journey in a simple text that outlines the basic elements of his journey, offering nothing of his actual experience. His description reads, "On November 14th, 2008, I borrowed a ball from the play ball pit at Crash Crawly's in Coquitlam, Canada. I travelled with this ball to Varanasi, India where I dipped it in the River Ganges. On February 21st 2009, I returned the ball to Crash Crawly's." For *Sentimental Journey*, he has rewritten this short description for the gallery's street front windows. He divided the message over eight windows, writing in large dripping black ink letters on separate pieces of white paper, which span the width and height of each vitrine (figure 52).

Uzelman manages to capture the magical side of historical Romanticism while Drebert draws out its more overtly spiritual aspect, yet both somehow ride a fine line bridging sincerity and criticality. Uzelman does this through a back-and-forth use of artifice. She begins with loose fictions that come together as an archive. This collection of materials is, over time, personalized through her travels, research and production. Drebert, however, balances earnestness and questioning on a ball. The Romantic notion of his journey is rendered a somewhat absurdist comedy by the banality of this

object (the ball). Why start at Crash Crawly's? Why choose a ball, let alone one of thousands of nondescript plastic balls? And why retell it without any description of the experience? Void of details, the ball becomes paramount. It is easy to see the poetry and romance in returning the ball to its origins, having it disappear back into its pit so that nothing materially remains of the trip but the artist's experience and the retelling of it. Yet the oddity of Crash Crawly's and the ball shakes the romance, underscoring the sincere emotional drive of the artist's quest by equating compulsion with whimsy.

In a recent body of work, *Mission* (2006) (figure 14), *Night* (2007) (figure 3), and *Joshua* (2009) (figure 15), Owen Kydd has represented three places: Mission, BC, Vancouver's Downtown East side at night and the Morongo Basin, California. Using a video camera, Kydd compiles vignettes of these places, documenting people, buildings, and landscapes. In capturing the residents of each place, he asks them to remain still while taking several seconds of video. The subjects are often fairly casually posed but become awkwardly stiff in their attempts to remain as still as possible over the duration of the shot. The people he captures are generally posed in typical snapshot stances, but some are seemingly caught engaged in fairly mundane activities—doing homework, sleeping. The landscape shots are usually cropped details of a larger scene, or are interstitial spaces between buildings, at the ends of laneways or across properties. As well as locations and people, Kydd has recorded small still-life-like scenes, such as a tight shot of a typical diner meal in *Joshua* or the corner of a sculpture studio in *Mission*. In each place (*Mission*, *Vancouver* and *Joshua Tree*), the scenes play out over three monitors, nine in total, and run approximately six minutes in length. The portraits, landscapes and still lifes combine over the three monitors to create individual impressions of each place. Each monitor plays different selections of images that run at varied paces, generating a multiplicity of sequences that only repeat in the same order every five hours.

In *River Ganges Crash Crawly's* any focus on the artist's experience is left out of the aesthetic presentation. Thus, Drebert turns his two-month trip into a gesture devoid of, or—more aptly—unencumbered by details. For Owen Kydd, the experience of the journey is rendered with an accumulation of details. What Drebert keeps undisclosed and simplified, Kydd exposes and concentrates. In *Sergei and Maria* (2009) (figures 50 & 53), his new work for *Sentimental Journey*, Kydd travels over several weeks, up and down Kingsway, one of the longest streets in Vancouver. Kingsway, which runs diagonally across the otherwise gridded streets, starts in Vancouver and ends in New Westminster, and is a major commercial thoroughfare—but also a strange dead zone, dividing communities instead of linking them. It is also somewhat of a Vancouver landmark; Michael Turner has written a book of poetry, inspired by and titled after Kingsway.

Sergei and Maria (figures 50 & 53) is displayed over nine small monitors. As in Kydd's earlier work, video sequences of portraiture, landscape and still life come together to create a variety of scenes, building a narrative of images about a place. But in this new work, a couple become the center of a building but nonlinear documentary of Kingsway. The silence and stillness of the video shots, combined with Kydd's choice and combination of mundane scenes and sights negates any spectacular representation of these places. Instead, in all his work, he mediates his personal experience of each place by slowing it down, rendering it still, and fracturing it into sequences of images that play over several monitors. Even the grand scene of a crowded fairground in *Joshua* becomes subdued and somehow quiet. Kydd is still the lone explorer, using intuition and sensation to lead his way. Due to his somewhat staid and ordered display, however, he doesn't heighten the representation of his own creative power, but instead gives over his own experience to each of his subjects, grounding it in their day-to-day lives. The places he represents, in all their quotidian glory, take precedence over his romantic notion of what each place might be and



Figure 50 Owen Kidd
Sergei and Maria, 2009
video, nine LCD monitors
Dimensions variable
Duration 5 minutes
Courtesy Monte Clark Gallery, Vancouver

how it might affect him as an individual. What he represents becomes mundane, and outside of his perception and experience.

The Enlightenment's ideas of reason and rationality are foils to the true Romantic. The precisely ordered ideals and experiences of the Age of Reason become caricatures, something to react against and resist with intuitive response. Who would rationally use a ball as reason enough to embark on a two-month journey from Canada's west coast to northeast India? Who would enter the woods blindfolded, or attempt to build an anti-gravity machine? While not all the artists in *Sentimental Journey* make nature their works' primary subject, each begins a journey motivated by creative impulse. The work tends to be about their journeys and how those are represented, raising questions about the way the artist's experience translates materially to the viewer through the objects or information presented. For some of

these artists, their work must not only recount their travels but also be reenacted, yielding an impact that conveys their journey's essence, while for others it is more of a slow burn—playing out over many objects and images, unfolding as narrative.

It is clear there is a new Romanticism in the air. It is being wholeheartedly embraced and not filtered tightly through reason or ordered precisely. Of course there are questions. The Romantic figure of the lonely artist who focuses on self-discovery is still a character seen, with some suspicion, as self-indulgent and self-aggrandizing. And nature's ability to produce a transformative sense of awe that gives the individual a deeper understanding of the self has lost some of its edge. Yet, each work in the exhibition carries an optimism that is tied to Romantic notions of creativity.

- 1 *Sentimental Journey* includes work by Michael Drebert, Owen Kydd, Mike McLean and Laura Trunkey, Gareth Moore, Kevin Schmidt and Kara Uzelman.
- 2 Jean- François Millet quoted in Griselda Pollock, *Millet* (London: Oresko Books, 1977), 19.
- 3 *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Confessions*, trans. Angela Scholar, ed. Patrick Coleman (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), 5.
- 4 Iain Hampsher-Monk, *A History of Modern Political Thought: Major Political Thinkers from Hobbes to Marx* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 154.
- 5 Pollock, 15.
- 6 Rousseau, 5.
- 7 *Epic Journey* was first performed as part of *How Soon is Now* for the Vancouver Art Gallery, but is still a work in progress.



Figure 44: Gareth Moore
The Road Through the Forest by Lyman A. William, 2008
Various components
64 × 44 × 33 in.
Courtesy Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver and the Collection of Jane Irwin & Ross Hill
Photo: Scott Massey



Figure 45: Gareth Moore
The Road Through the Forest by Lyman A. William (detail), 2008
various components
64 × 44 × 33 in.
Courtesy Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver and the Collection of Jane Irwin & Ross Hill
Photo: Scott Massey