

Landscape and I

by Michael Turner

—making landscape of self,
the stopped line or silence—

Barry McKinnon¹

Any mention of landscape, be it social or economic, whether as noun or verb, invariably returns us to “a picture representing natural inland scenery” and something “to lay out (a garden, etc.).”² In the history of art, landscapes, like portraits and still-lives, belong to the *petit genres* and are situated below the *grand genre* of history painting—a hierarchy established in 1667 by André Félibien and evoked by contemporary photo-based artists working in the pictorial tradition. As a *petit genre*, landscapes were once considered inferior, focused not on the big issues (the metaphysical and philosophical consequences of significant events) but on scenes of everyday life.

In her film *The Gleaners and I* (2000), Agnes Varda begins with “Volume E–G” of *Nouveau Larousse illustré*, where, under “gleaner,” we are shown a hand-drawn illustration of Millet’s *The Gleaners* (1857) (figures 4 & 5). “To glean is to gather after the harvest,” she tells us, before pointing out how the noun—gleaner—is defined by its transitive verb: “A gleaner is one who gleans.” She continues, “In past times only women gleaned. Millet’s *Glaneuses* was in all the dictionaries. The original painting is at the Orsay.”



Figure 6 Leonardo da Vinci
Portrait of Mona Lisa (1503-06)
 Oil on wood
 30 x 20⁷/₈ in.

And with that, Varda takes us to the Orsay, to a static shot of patrons looking at and posing before Millet's painting—and from there, to an older woman standing beside a harvested field. "Gleaning, that's the old way," the woman says, glancing at the field. "My mother'd say, 'Pick everything up so nothing gets wasted.' But sadly we no longer do because machines are so efficient nowadays." Intercutting the woman's story (told while demonstrating the "stooping" process), are details from additional paintings and, as if to underscore the technological change to which the woman refers, from early motion pictures.

Varda's film is called *The Gleaners and I*, but as with all films, its content provides more than its title. True, we learn about gleaners—no longer only women, but men too: the young and the old, the poor and the middle-classes, artists known and unknown, those who live in the country and those who live in the city, the homeless and the housed, those who embrace consumerism and those who resist it—just as we learn about filmmaking: Varda's

first foray into digital photography and the concentric structures she creates when editing (the cinematic equivalent of harvesting?). But what of the landscape, the fields and roads on which she and her subjects tread—"the object of one's gaze," "a distant prospect: a vista" (to return once again to the dictionary)?

Although Varda is generous with establishing shots—farmers' fields, street markets, curbside refuse, roads—it is her portraits, not her landscapes, that seduce the viewer, her subjects having more in common with the seeds from which stories sprout than with what remains of the harvest. Again we return to the dictionary, where landscape is further defined as "the background of scenery in a portrait or figure painting"—the best-known example being Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (1503–1506) (figure 6).

In the past, a commissioned portrait included the land on which its subjects roamed—the portrait being a record of oneself as well as one's holdings, as if the two were indivisible. With the *Mona Lisa*, the landscape is a perspectival impossibility, containing multiple vanishing points: a vast, imaginative space featuring jagged mountains, lakes, rivers, inlets, roads, bridges—a composite as mysterious as the subject herself. There are no people in the *Mona Lisa*'s landscape (at least none that we can see). The subject takes up half the painting.

The relationship between the subject of the *Mona Lisa* and its landscape brings to mind an earlier Varda film, a feature. *Vagabond* (1985) is the story of an independent-minded young woman hitch-hiking through Southern France, sleeping outdoors and in abandoned buildings, open to—and victim of—the ambitions of those she meets. Rarely does she reveal herself, apart from her fondness for children, animals, cigarettes, booze and drugs—and her contempt for being "a secretary." Her first words

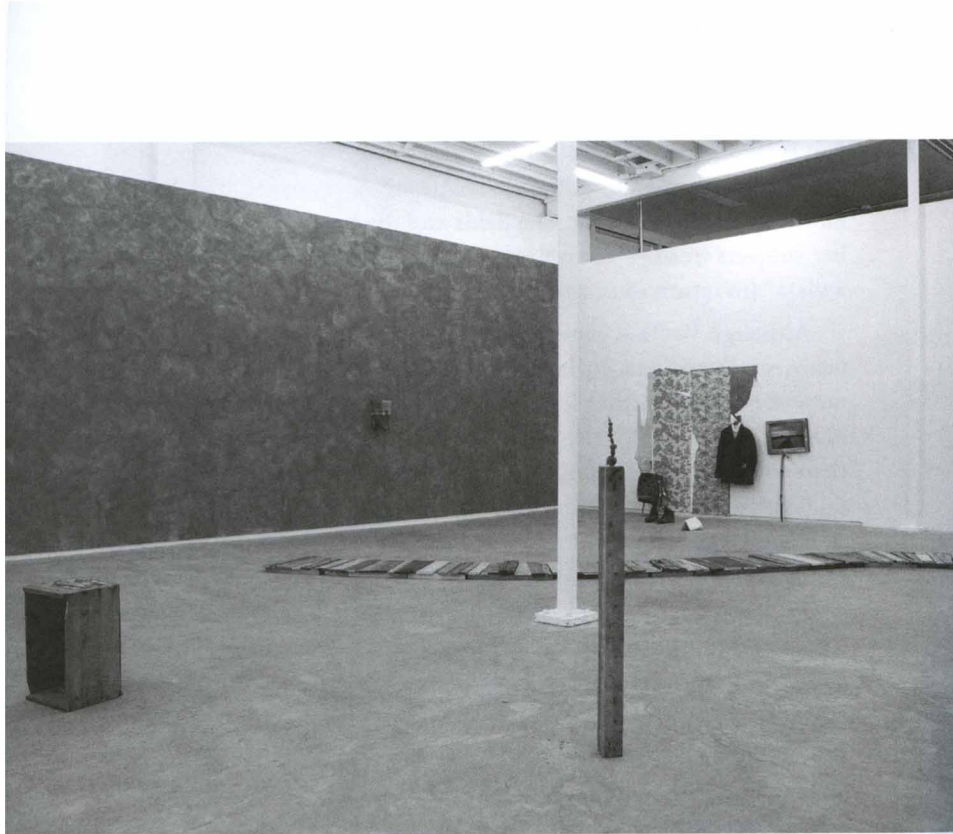


Figure 7: Gareth Moore
Uncertain Pilgrimage, 2009
 Installation view, Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver
 Photo: Scott Massey

come in response to the truck driver who gives her a lift. He talks of the town she is leaving as being empty in winter. "The camping season is over," he says. "No one's here!" To which she replies, "I am."

Vagabond opens with a wide-shot of a vast and orderly vineyard, before zooming in on a worker gathering sticks. Varda cuts to a tracking shot of the man as he discovers a woman's frozen body. Police are called, statements taken, and the woman's death is ruled an accident. From there the film steps back in time, where, like Botticelli's *Venus*, our protagonist emerges from the sea, a birth witnessed by two teenage boys, through whom, and through all who meet her—a truck driver, a mechanic, a squatter, a homecare worker, a philosopher farmer, an arborist, a Moroccan labourer, a gang of rounders—her story is told. Of course it is their story, for the woman, like the *Mona Lisa*, is merely the portrait before which multiple perspectives appear—a Deleuzian monad who, in passing through their lives like a ploughshare, reveals not only the furrows of conformity, but also its variegated crop: a composite of lust, duress, libertine contradiction, admiration, moral righteousness, maternal compassion, racism, sexism, fear, and exploitation. The vagabond's name is Mona.

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During a recent artist talk, Isabelle Pauwels spoke of her childhood desire to become an explorer, and in doing so reminded us how one becomes an artist.³ Not long before Pauwels's talk, Gareth Moore opened *Uncertain Pilgrimage* (2009) (figure 7), the product of a year-long trip through Europe and the United States. Like Pauwels, who maintains that propositions informing her

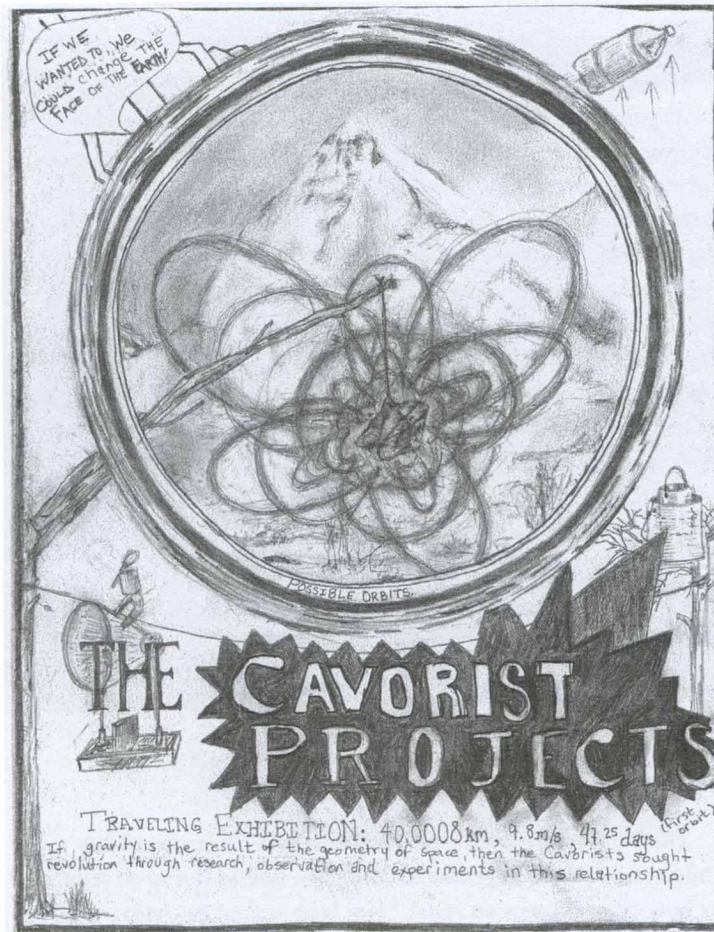


Figure 8: Kara Uzelman
The Cavorist Project Poster, 2009
 Pen on paper
 Courtesy Sommer & Kohl, Berlin

video works do not emerge until the editing process, Moore's pilgrimage was not a journey with clearly demarcated goals, but an open-to-outcome *dérive*, one that involved artist residencies, retail jobs and chance encounters. Dressed in a 1940s-styled suit he made while apprenticing under an old school Vancouver tailor, Moore engaged in multiple modes of transport—planes, trains, cars, buses, boats, bicycles and on foot—gathering up and storing (through memory, photographic documentation, his own pockets) what was lost, discarded or left to rot. It was only upon returning to Vancouver that he began to compose his interrelated exhibition, transforming the commercial gallery into a hybrid folk art emporium, antique store, rustic farmhouse and contemporary art installation. Pauwels did something similar with *B & E* (2009)—a video map of her childhood memories, combined with an itemization of her Belgian grandparents' estate.

Like Pauwels and Moore, Kara Uzelman also set out in the name of art—to a residency in Dawson Creek, Yukon. However, unlike Pauwels and Moore, Uzelman was more forthcoming about her intentions, namely, a desire to stage experiments based on her reading of H.G. Wells's *The First Men On The Moon* (1901) and, in particular, on the work of "Joseph Cavor," a character whose obsessions included, among other things, anti-gravity. What resulted was *The Cavorist Project* (2009) (figures 1, 8, 41–43), a lyrical exhibition of discrete objects, assemblages and associations similar to Moore's in its consideration of materials, construction and layout but, like Varda's *The Gleaners and I*, predicated on a pre-determined idea—an imperative of the scientific method. This is not to suggest that the uncertainty of Moore's pilgrimage aligns him with Varda's *Mona*, though it does lead one to wonder what impressions he left amongst those he came in contact with and

how that might haunt the way we experience his exhibition. In Uzelman's case, the "product" of her experiment is not what can be proven but that which, as evidence, falls away.

Prior to their journey works, both Moore and Uzelman undertook projects that involved, respectively, the studio and home of each. Moore and Jacob Gleeson's *St. George Marsh* (2005–2006) was a former residential convenience store repurposed into an artist workspace, one which retained a semblance of its past. I say semblance because what at first appeared to be a neighbourhood corner shop had more in common with an outpost devoted to Canadiana than a place to buy milk and eggs—the conflation of store and museum, commodity and nation, merchant and artist providing endless food for thought. The "retail inventory" was eventually shipped to Catriona Jeffries Gallery's loading dock and offered for sale; from there, it went to the Belkin Satellite, a summer residency that had Moore and Gleeson refashioning the contents into a habitable structure. The conversion of goods to domicile brought to mind their passage from retail store to retail gallery to public gallery, a kind of linguistic somersaulting where content, form and value mutate against a steadily shifting context. A more immediate conversion could be found in a project Uzelman undertook in 2006, where she excavated her backyard based on methods taught to her under the apprenticeship of archaeologist Ross Jamieson. The results of her excavation (glass bottles, rusty cans, etc.) were refashioned, exhibited and returned to their source. This process was not dissimilar to Michael Drebert's recent work, *River Ganges Crash Crawley's* (2009) (figures 9, 46, 52), where a ball, taken from a children's play centre in Coquitlam, British Columbia, was dipped in the Ganges River and later re-integrated into the Crash Crawley ball room.



Figure 9: Michael Drebert
River Ganges Crash Crawly's, 2009
 Crash Crawly's, Coquitlam, Canada (documentation)

Kevin Schmidt and Owen Kydd also stage work outside their studios, drawing on location—and art history—as material. Schmidt is widely known for a projected video, *Long Beach Led Zep* (2002) (figure 12), that had him playing Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" (1971) on electric guitar during a sunrise at Long Beach, B.C. Like the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich, the piece brings to mind notions of landscape, the sublime, and the figure in and against Nature. A more recent work, titled *Wild Signals* (2007) (figure 13), saw that gesture reversed—instead of the artist alone, armed with a guitar and an amplifier, we had only

the concert staging (PA, lighting rigs) with a pre-recorded musical “figure” (the theme from Spielberg’s 1977 film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*) beckoning from a snowy sub-arctic landscape. Kydd’s more recent work, a series of three-piece monitor displays, took him to places like Mission, British Columbia, and Joshua Tree National Park in California (figures 14 & 15). Working with the *petit genres* (though not discretely—the panels are not generically specific), Kydd subjects landscape, portrait and still-life to the ostensibly objective ethnographic view. Like Schmidt, Kydd favours fixed-perspective static shots, more common to painting than documentary filmmaking (much of *The Gleaners and I* is handheld). Each of these soundless triptychs employs a permutating system whereby the contents of the monitors are of unequal length. Thus whatever combination is seen is never the same as what just happened—or is about to.

Schmidt’s interest in landscape and figure can also be found in the paintings of Tim Gardner. A key to Gardner’s work lies not only in his working from photographs (a method employed by Gerhard Richter) but also in the time it takes (up to two years) before he can call upon them as models. Implicit here is the notion of contemplation, how repeated viewings of a single image—in different contexts, under different circumstances (recall the multi-perspectival background of the *Mona Lisa*)—affect its recitation as a painting. Repetition is brought to mind in works such as *Two Men on a Bus, Moving Through the Landscape* (2006) (figure 16). At first glance, one is drawn to the mountain outside the bus’s window, especially since the position of the clouds suggests that the mountain might be an active volcano. But as we refocus (on the foreground), we see two middle-aged men, both of whom appear indifferent to this natural wonder, as if they have seen

it all before. And if it is indifference, like the indifference that emanates from Varda's Mona, might we perceive these men in a new and perhaps unfair light: not tourists exploring the Andes but Alberta oil workers on their way back from a two-week drunk in Red Deer?

Another misrecognition of the landscape can be seen in Mike McLean and Laura Trunkey's *Moraine Lake, Lake Louise* (2009) (figure 17). Here, a photo of a lake and the mountains surrounding it are further surrounded (and bisected), this time by a black frame. The effect of the frame, as modern and rational as the window of a recreational vehicle, calls into question the categorization of the work: a diptych composed of two images or an interruption of one. At first it appears to be the latter; however, on closer inspection (at the centre of the work), there is an irregularity suggesting the union of two—a failed montage. *Moraine Lake, Lake Louise* brings to light the artists' interest in our parkland's backcountry hiking areas, which, given the increase in RVing and car "camping," have transformed the pristine from the sublime to the occult.

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Near the end of *Vagabond*, Mona escapes a burning building and wanders into a town on the verge of its annual wine-stomping ritual—only she does not know this. Suddenly she is accosted by costumed men hurling grape dregs, charging after her as she runs from them, screaming. Later, while stumbling through a vineyard, she trips, hits her head, and eventually dies of exposure.

To suggest that Mona is an explorer would be inconsistent with Varda's intentions. For Mona is little more than an object moving through the landscape, a catalyst, presented to us in documentary fashion, for the attitudes of those she comes in contact with. I would like to think Mona is not unlike the ball in Drebert's *River Ganges Crash Crawley*, if only I believed the Ganges was a source of spiritual and transformative power. Nor do I believe that Crash Crawley's is its antithesis—a place in need of healing. I am, however, convinced of the likelihood that Moore's passage through the landscape created responses similar to those inspired by Mona, but whether evidence of those encounters occurs in *Uncertain Pilgrimage* is moot, unavailable, deeply personal, or indeed uncertain. From what I have seen of Uzelman's *The Cavorist Project*, with its methodological framework and archival sensibility, such encounters are irrelevant, owing to the hermetic nature of the Wells text.

Although Uzelman's aesthetic is similar to Moore's, she is closer to Kydd, Gardner, Schmidt and Drebert with respect to art making, while Pauwels, who eschews thesis-driven explorations, produced a work that shares something with the anthropology of Kydd and *The Gleaners and I*. So we have two different approaches, each capable of similar outcomes.

When I first saw *The Gleaners and I*, I immediately thought of *Vagabond* (both were shot in Southern France). Only later did I realize that it was not the films' similarities but their differences that allowed me to think of them together. In this instance, Varda's replacement of the fictive Mona with herself, a mostly hidden figure—as opposed to Mona, who is imposed upon the landscape: a device not unlike Uzelman's Wells text, Drebert's ball or Gardner's source photos. Thus *The Gleaners and I* is not a portrait

or a figure in the landscape so much as an attempt to reveal what goes on behind the figure. In the same way, I have referred to Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*: in the sense that our desire to discover what is hidden speaks to our need to understand how the landscape can be a site of competing perspectives. This is the first thing I think about whenever I return to McLean and Trunkey's *Moraine Lake, Lake Louise*.

- 1 Barry McKinnon, *Pulp Log* (Prince George: Caitlin Press, 1991), lines 1–2.
- 2 *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Landscape."
- 3 A talk given on the occasion of the artist's exhibition, *B & E*, at Presentation House Gallery, Vancouver, January–March, 2009.