

Artists in a land of wanderers

A new exhibition tracks the journeys of five emerging British Columbia artists – some across physical terrain, but also their treks through art history, world culture and artistic genres, **Sarah Milroy** writes

OTTAWA

The West has always been the domain of wanderers and outsiders, drifters off the grid of societal expectation. In the contemporary art of British Columbia, this theme has a special place. You can see it in the photographic work of Liz Magor of the past 20 years – her pictures of hippies and indigent makeshift housing – and also in her sculptural investigations into the practices of hoarding and hiding in the wild. You can see it in Jeff Wall's backlit Cibachromes of homeless people, or Roy Arden's documentation of the urban wilderness and its rootless migrants.

Making an exhibition of new art from British Columbia, National Gallery of Canada curator Josée Drouin-Brisebois at first thought she would be dealing principally with this motif. The exhibition *Nomads*, though, ultimately has a wider purview, exploring the meandering way of thinking and working that is being practised by five emerging B.C. artists. Landscape is traversed, but so is history, world culture, media and the categories of high and low art.

The most literal nomad in the group is Gareth Moore, who has been gaining attention for his odd and eclectic installations documenting his travels from Marfa, Tex., to Paris, France, to the coast of California. Like several in this exhibition, he is presenting a



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puppets that he made from dismembered picture books acquired at a Vancouver second-hand store. Some of the characters are recognizable (Trudeau in his hippie days makes an appearance, as does a jowly John Diefenbaker), but the faces are mostly hard to place, interspersed with sculptural heads from world archeology and art history. The darkly comic collages of German modernists Hannah Hoch and John Heartfield are called to mind, as are the medieval passion plays that once toured Europe. All the world's a stage, and Farmer's menacing and enchanting cast of characters are among its most exotic players.

Althea Thauburger is another kind of traveller, showing a new film work that sheds light on the phenomenon of tou-

times comic and extremely beautiful meditation on community and belonging.

The work of Hadley + Maxwell (Hadley Howes and Maxwell Stephens) is as contemporary and edgy as Thauburger's is primeval, a mixed-media gallery-sized installation that responds to one of Western culture's sacred pop touchstones: the Rolling Stones' 1968 recording sessions for *Sympathy for the Devil*, as documented by the French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard. Godard's *Sympathy for the Devil* was a highly political film, marrying images of the band with fictional footage of the Black Panthers and other political agitators, and it would become the source of a struggle between filmmaker and producer when Godard protested the ending imposed by the producer: the conclusive performance of the title song. Godard wanted to leave things open-ended, so Hadley + Maxwell have obliged him, "unfinished," as they say, Godard's film with their work here: 1+1+1.

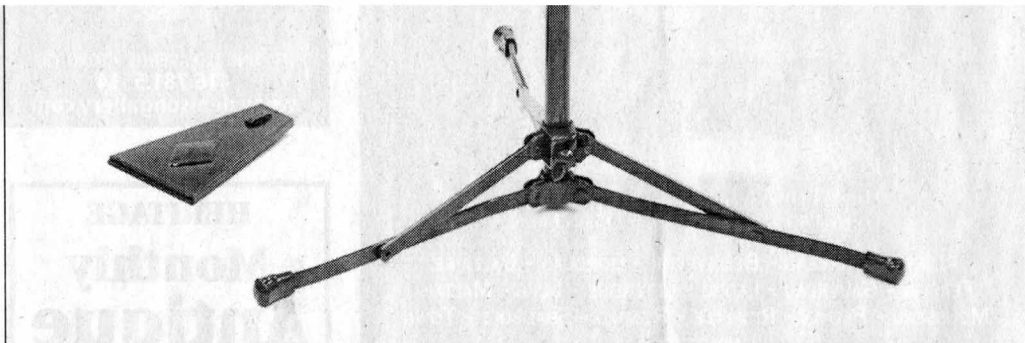
Their installation, shown here in its largest of several incarnations, includes projected sequences of the Stones in rehearsal borrowed from the Godard film (blown up large enough to clearly reveal the image pixelation) as well as sharply focused images of contemporary musicians jamming (among them Maxwell and fellow Vancouver artist Kevin Schmidt). One sculptural vi-

work in progress that shows no signs of coming to rest any time soon. With his assemblages made from found materials on the road travelled, Moore invokes the historical tradition of the Grand Tour, infused with a hobo aesthetic. He calls the work *Uncertain Pilgrimage*.

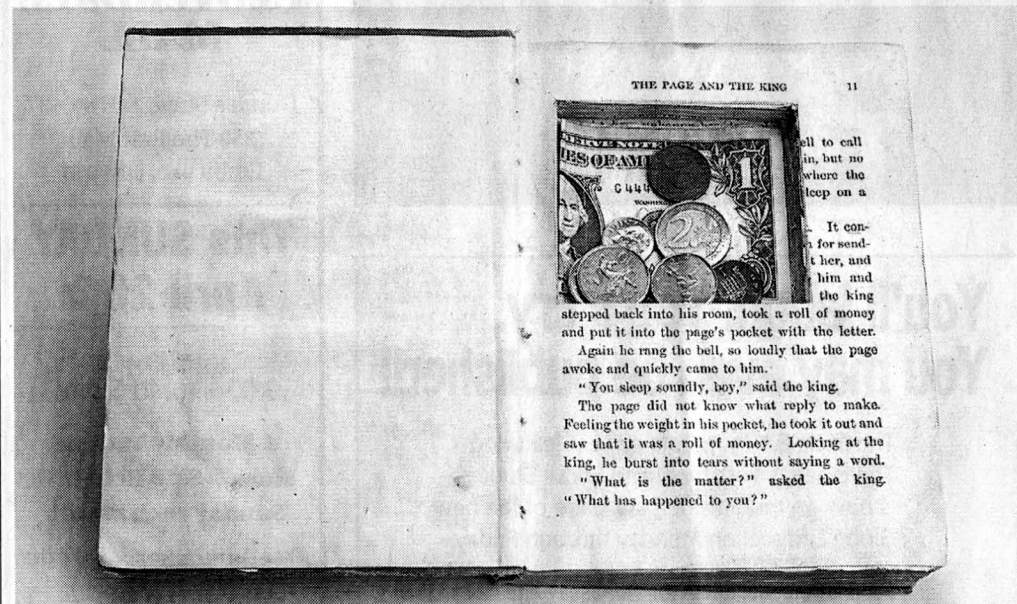
One photograph documents a pair of moss-covered running shoes he discovered by a roadside, an intriguing image that conflates motion and stasis. A video projection records images of movement that he has captured: cars on the freeway, wind through the grass, airplanes, waves on the ocean. A modified walking stick – that signifier of the 19th-century French *flâneur* – has been rigged out by Moore with compartments to hold a cigarette, a match, and a pencil, for spontaneous acts of creation. A standing vitrine holds a pair of heavy men's shoes that he has made, each cobbled together from two pairs nested back to front, simultaneously coming and going.

Moore has also instigated a migration of sorts within the gallery, harvesting three lesser known paintings from the gallery's collection for inclusion in his installation, all of them records of landscape at dusk. The work feels like a mini-museum, gathering together objects that evoke the motif of the peripatetic artist, at home nowhere and everywhere in the world.

Myfanwy MacLeod wanders between historical periods, making work that relies on antique postcards, and comic retro images of drunks in popular culture, flunk-outs from social decorum. Her principal work



Above, *Colour Field for Charlie* (2008), a replica of a snare drum used by Charlie Watts in recording *Sympathy for the Devil* and part of 1+1+1, Hadley + Maxwell's response to a sacred pop icon. Below, Gareth Moore's *The Page and the King* (from *Uncertain Pilgrimage*), 2006-07. NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA



here is a cast acrylic sculpture of a tousle-haired drunkard in tails, a figure who (as accident would have it) looks remarkably like the globe-trotting Vancouver artist Rodney Graham, with whom she shares an interest in the comic grotesque. Her little man crawls on all fours up a pedestal, bleary-

eyed and dishevelled. Another work of hers here is a perfectly art-directed pastiche of a frontispiece for a fictive volume titled *The Complete Practical Distiller*, typeset to suggest the manuals of the 19th century. (I wonder, isn't distilling what artists do?) Exploring the theme of inebriation, MacLeod

spotlights the idea of escape through altered states, but her thematic connection to the show seems the most tenuous of the bunch.

Geoffrey Farmer's *The Photographer and the Surgeon* also seems to stretch the show's theme a bit, but it is a delight all the same: a group of 365

rism – that perverse human fascination we have with travelling far distances in order to see things that stay put and remain unchanged. Last summer, Thauberger spent some time in the isolated Fassa Valley of northern Italy, where the rare dialect Ladin is spoken, an ancient Romance language that has survived in seclusion. Working with local villagers, she recorded a rather rough-hewn performance of a traditional myth: the tale of how Death was defied by the old woman Poverty. Refusing to respond when summoned by Death, Old Poverty instead trapped Death in a tree, permitting his release only on the grounds that he would travel the world and not come back to bother her village. Thus Poverty lives on forever, and Death, too, roves the planet, bent on his relentless mission.

Several themes spring to mind. Poverty, like death, is part of the human experience, and always will be. But the video also suggests how we long for the rootedness these people have in their landscape, their culture and rituals, their antique language and their storytelling traditions. By contrast, the artist's fate is to be the itinerant recording angel, her perspective perpetually in flux by virtue both of her profession as detached observer and her role as tourist from a fast-paced urban culture.

Thauberger has made several other sociological studies in the past – her poignant debut video work *Songstress* (2002) comes to mind, in which she spotlighted amateur female teen singers performing a capella – but this is her best work to date, a haunting, at

gnette in the space involves a snare drum (of the sort used by Charlie Watts in Godard's film) and a metronome bathed in red light against a scarlet scrim. Articles of clothing worn by the band in Godard's footage are echoed here (a white ruffled shirt, a pair of men's pink boots, an orange T-shirt) and they have about them the air of religious relics. Theatrical lights with coloured gels are scattered through the space, lending an atmosphere of morning-after disarray.

The song was an anthem of the 1960s, with a tribal drumbeat that seemed to call a whole footloose generation together. Revisiting it as they do, Hadley + Maxwell take a trip across time to a utopian moment when massive social change was afoot. But the togetherness of 1968 today seems almost quaintly anachronistic. Hadley + Maxwell's fractured reiteration thus seems to express a more contemporary zeitgeist. Like the other works in this show, the world view expressed here is one in which every individual is adrift in an infinite sea of information (each to his own iPod and bookmarked preferences) in which past and present are suddenly simultaneous through technology, in which every image from art history and film are retrievable in a nanosecond, and in which each of us finds ourselves navigating an ever-smaller planet. We hash through, and then we rehash some more. Irresolution is in the restless wind.

» *Nomads continues at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa until Aug. 30* (<http://www.gallery.ca> or 1-800-319-2787).