

New Works by Kevin Schmidt

Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver, BC
September 17 – October 23, 2010

By Charo Neville

Far out on the distant ice-flow of the Northwest Passage a sign signals apocalyptic warnings to an unknown audience:

*"The sun turned black," "the moon turned blood red,"
"1/3 the sea turned into blood," "1/3 of the creatures
in the sea died," "lightning, thunder, earthquake,
hailstorm," "1/10 city collapses," "7000 people killed,"
"merchants weep," "no one buys their cargo anymore,"
"death, mourning, famine," "birds eat the flesh of all"...*

The halting messages, which proselytize horrific events drawn from the *Book of Revelations* in the *New Testament*, are deeply inscribed into stained cedar boards and form a billboard that stands at least fifteen feet high against a snow white backdrop that stretches miles with no other structures in sight. Kevin Schmidt's 2010 work, *A Sign in the Northwest Passage*, was carefully designed to float via counter-balanced barrels once the ice transformed to sea in the annual melt. Akin to a message in a bottle, its whereabouts is now unknown. The work adeptly utilizes the tropes of an advertising billboard to spread its gospel as it bobs along the rough northern seas (if successful), evoking a form of roadside/sea-faring evangelism. The Northwest Passage, which was the original crossing for Europeans to what is now North America, is currently a highly contested area due to its promise of deep-sea oil reserves, ironically a resource that has been one of the major contributing factors of global warming. Schmidt's gesture in this isolated arctic landscape, populated only by polar bear and seal hunters when frozen and tankers or scientific ships when passable, recalls the age old query: "when a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?" Despite the scarcity of audience, one must ask how effective this message would be if it were heard or seen. It is the silent, ineffectual nature of this sign that makes it so powerful. We are not to mistake this work as a political statement or to identify the artist as an environmentalist, however, the floating billboard marks this site symbolically in relation to larger world issues and extends in its complexity to an investigation of the language of signs, the

reception of art, and the very notion of experience or journey.

A large-scale photograph of the sign in situ, framed by the same cedar wood used to make the sign, was installed on one wall in an exhibition of recent work by Kevin Schmidt at Catriona Jeffries Gallery in the fall of 2010. Here the sign was given greater life by reaching a broader public, but its resonance as a sign immediately became flattened through the context of gallery viewership and its static objecthood. However, Schmidt reflexively acknowledged the inability of the single image to convey the extent of the project or to stand-in for the sign itself by reminding us of the historical aura of documentary and conceptual photography. He disrupted the authority of the solitary framed photograph by offering the viewer an area to sit (in typical Canadian Tire camping chairs at a matching table) and flip through a photo book of selected images of the project from start to finish. The book functioned like a slide show or like the journals kept by sailors recounting their explorations into the Northwest Passage which were later published for notoriety. Schmidt's inclusion of four watercolours in this body of work also helped to flesh out the limits and possibilities of the white cube. In these modest, beautifully rendered paintings, which Schmidt made as gifts for each of his assistants who helped at different stages of the project, images of a favourite truck, and a proud hunter with his bounty, signal not just the end product, but an economy of trade through the personal and social interactions that enabled the project to happen.

This exhibition marks an important moment in Schmidt's practice wherein underlying ideas that have emerged in past works strongly coalesce. In the heroic work *Epic Journey*, Schmidt filmed the entire *Lord of the Rings* trilogy while projected on a screen mounted in a boat drifting through the industrial and ethereal landscape of Vancouver's Fraser River. Through the mediation of his camera during an epic 11 hours and 30 minutes (the total length of the trilogy), Schmidt critically disrupts the seamless drama and spectacle of a story that has become woven into the popular imagina-

