

Seeing is not believing: From left Face lake, Johnson Lake and Little Blue lake — three views unblocked by the 'windows' that seem to create magical portals in the tree trunks.

Outside looking in on the natural world

VIEWFINDER | Kevin Schmidt's images show nature in a different way, compelling us to look beyond what we think we see

SAD WOLF

Kevin Schmidt
Catriona Jeffries Gallery
274 East 1st Ave.
until Oct. 7

BY CLINT BURNHAM

Kevin Schmidt is one of Vancouver's up-and-coming young artists, already known internationally for his Long Beach Led Zep video, for which he played *Stairway to Heaven* on an electric guitar, on the beach with the sun going down behind him. Called by Michael Turner the greatest music video never made, the work sealed Schmidt's reputation as an artist working on the knife's edge between nature and pop culture.

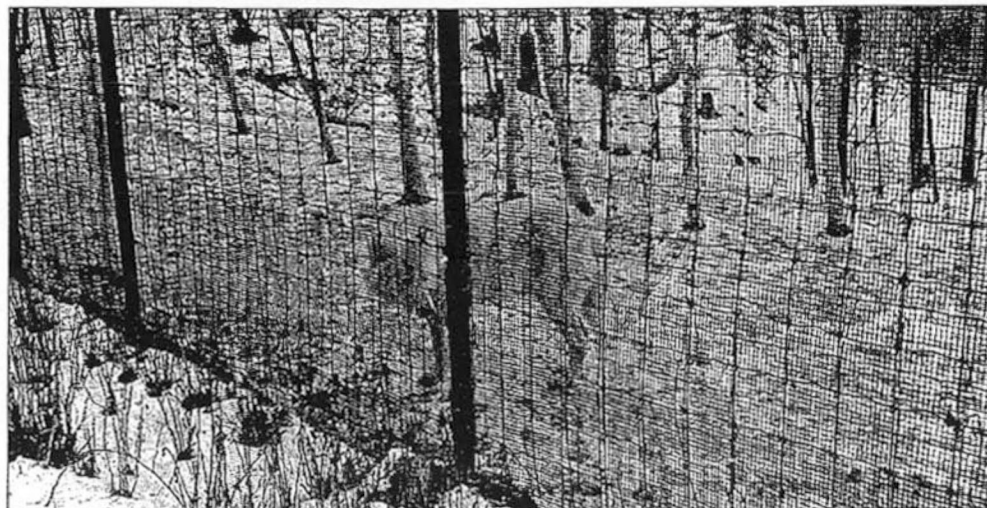
Schmidt's new work at Catriona Jeffries continues his quest to understand how we relate to nature. *Sad Wolf* is made up of two works: the DVD installation called *Sad Wolf*, and a suite of three photographs of lakes in the interior.

Schmidt's video piece was filmed at the Metro Toronto

Zoo and depicts a so-called "omega" wolf, the wolf that has been excluded from the pack. Over the period of 4½ minutes, the lone wolf paces through a thin layer of muddy snow, glancing furtively at the pack off-camera. The wolf approaches the pack, who seem to ignore him, and then moves away, looking back again and again. The scene screams pathos.

But this is an animal — or a group of animals — in a zoo. Truth be told, the wolves in the pack don't seem to be much happier than our loner. (This may be something that the Montreal shooter never considered, that the jocks and the popular kids are themselves unhappy.) We are reminded of the animals' caged existence by the fine grid of fence that separates camera from animal, a grid that, in Schmidt's large-scale projection, assumes a graphic quality all of its own. There is more of a hint of the minimalist paintings of Agnes Martin in Schmidt's images here.

In a poem about visiting the



A wolf excluded from the zoo pack looks back with loneliness — or could it be contempt?

Metro Toronto Zoo, Lynn Crosbie wrote: "I watched a female gorilla. She stared at me through the Plexiglass barrier as if she hated me. Then threw up in her hand and ate it. Never breaking eye contact." Like Crosbie, Schmidt directs our attention to how we look at animals, whether in the gallery or the zoo. And then, how animals look at each other. If the lone wolf looks at his pack with longing, is that how we look at animals, envying them their incarceration, their simulated natur-

al environments? Or is the lone wolf contemptuous of their mob mentality, their inability to stand out in a crowd?

This question of looking continues with Schmidt's three photographs, taken of Little Blue Lake, Johnson Lake and Face Lake. In each photograph a tree trunk is front and centre, blocking our view of the lake. And on each trunk is a small painting of the lake itself, offering in miniature the "perfect, unspoiled" view. What Schmidt did was find lakes around Mer-

ritt with just such an obstructing tree, apply some plaster to the trunk, paint a small scene, and then photograph the resulting panorama. The three photos line up nicely with their lakes all at the same level.

Schmidt here is playing with our expectations of painting and photography, and the tradition since the Impressionists of painting "en plein air," or outside in the fresh air. This is how to authentically capture nature. But what if a tree is in the way? Well, with painting,

you can just paint it out.

The effect is kind of magical, as if there were tiny portals in the trees providing a window to a complete view of nature. And the plaster edges of the tiny trompe l'oeil paintings are ragged, suggesting a collaged, ripped quality. But there is also something imperial about the desire for an uncluttered view — think of those West-siders who hire men to cut down trees to raise their property values. As he does with the *Sad Wolf* video, Schmidt has made work here that asks us to think about how we look at things, and what we expect to find.

When we look at animals, we are in a way expressing power over them. Even if they look back at us with anguish or anger, we are free and they are not. But looking is also a way of expressing subservience, isn't it? We say to a child we are admonishing: "Look at me." And looking at nature, too, is a matter of surveying one's domain, a domain that, if momentarily unspoiled, surely will not be for long. Kevin Schmidt's studied fascination with what we think about nature has borne wonderful fruit here.

Clint Burnham is a Vancouver freelance writer