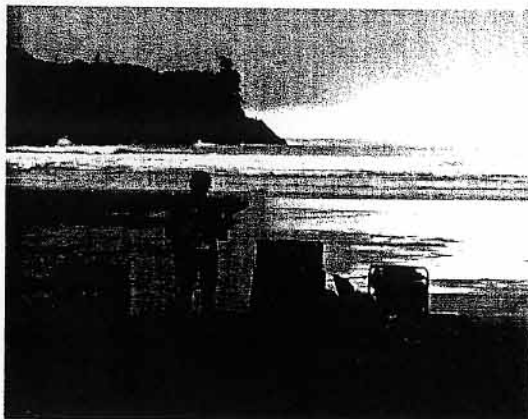


THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND

Michael Turner



— "Why, it's just like that story about Father's dying wish to have his bust sunk in Vancouver harbor, and his ashes sprinkled on the water there, about James and Thomas out in the rowboat, and both of them hitting at the bust with their oars because it was hollow and wouldn't go down, and the storm coming up while they were there, blowing his ashes back in their beards.

— "There was never a bust of Father, Anne. And I don't recall his ever being in Australia."
William Gaddis

It is a scene familiar to many British Columbians. Forested bluffs overlook a pounding surf, the first glow of sunrise reflects off a wet sandy beach, an ocean vista extends the width of the Pacific. The west coast of Vancouver Island, just south of Tofino, probably Long Beach. Maybe you've seen the brochure: "Visit 'Supernatural' British Columbia". But that was years ago, the old government, the one that promoted Vancouver as a place where you could ski and sail (all in the same day!) before taking a float plane up the coast to watch whales.

Standing in the centre of Kevin Schmidt's video, *Long Beach Led Zep* (illustrated opposite), are two Marshall cabinets, six feet apart. A guitar lies atop one of the cabinets, an amp head on the other. To the right, a portable gas-powered generator. A figure appears, dressed in gumboots and Gortex. He gives the generator a yank and instantly the engine is competing with the surf. He flicks on the amp head and picks up his guitar, slinging the strap over his shoulder. He takes a pick from his pocket and begins.

As familiar as the surrounding landscape is to British Columbians, Schmidt's A-minor arpeggio is familiar to millions more. We can name that tune in four notes. The song is Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" (1972), at one time hailed as the greatest rock song ever. For those born in the 1960s, "Stairway To Heaven" was a party staple, a coming of age make-out number that, admittedly, makes more sense now than it did then. Re-reading it I can't help but see it as a metaphysical response to Bob Dylan's "Like A Rolling Stone" (1965), considered by many the lead-off song for The Sixties and arguably his greatest hit.

"Like A Rolling Stone" is Walt Whitman on amphetamines, a rollicking experiment in blues, folk and rock recorded off-the-floor in two takes. It is urban and raw — a litany of angry

recriminations that can't wait to pass judgment. "Stairway To Heaven," on the other hand, was recorded at a time when rock was being 'refined' into metal; when Sixties youth culture, having revealed itself to be just as hypocritical as those it condemned, embraced its contradictions or fled the city to start anew, in places like British Columbia's west coast. Structurally, "Stairway" has more in common with Blake and Wagner than Dylan's pentatonic rocker – its drug is mushrooms, its landscape pastoral, its mood a form of escapist melancholy unknown to Dylan's confrontational New York City. "Like A Rolling Stone" would sound absurd performed on the west coast of Vancouver Island. "Stairway To Heaven" doesn't.

"Stairway" works on the strength of a single guitar part ("Like A Rolling Stone" is ensemble-driven); and no matter what note the guitarist is playing, the listener knows exactly where they are in relation to the song's obtuse yet unforgettable lyric. Everyone familiar with "Stairway" can quote at least a couple of lines. And what do those lines point to but "trees" and "brooks" and "songbirds"; the sun rising and falling; wandering, mystery, intrigue:

And if you listen very hard,
the tune will come to you at last
When all are one and one is all,
to be a rock and not roll.

An artist performing "Stairway to Heaven" on a deserted beach on Vancouver Island. It sounds incongruous at first, a parody, the subject of a Dylanesque reproach. But there is harmony to this image. Waves crash at the right moments, and the absent lyric is made all the more present by the backing landscape. (Like I said, you see "trees" and hear "songbirds"; it is "dawn.") But as his fingers journey over the fretboard, they begin to wander. Mistakes are made. And Schmidt's pose is anything but heroic: he clings to his instrument as if dowsed by a rogue wave.

Long Beach Led Zep is either a child's first recital or a lunatic's last hurrah. Which, I'm not sure. But one thing I do know is this: the song is not out of place. As for the performer, well, I think that's just the point.

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At thirty, Kevin Schmidt is the youngest of the eight artists in *Hammertown*, all of whom are Canadian and, with the exception of the peripatetic Euan Macdonald, reside on the southwest coast of BC, mostly in Vancouver. At least half the group would identify sculpture as an important part of their practice. Yet some of those sculptors might say the same about drawing and video, just as those who work in video might say the same about drawing and sculpture. Half have exhibited photographs. Most have exhibited in more than one medium.

Landscape figures strongly in the work of these artists. So does space, the availability of which distinguishes a younger west coast from an older, more storied east, perhaps accounting for the monumental scale in which many of these artists have been working. Further to that I would add an interest in social, aesthetic, and technological histories. Finally, if I were to go out on a limb, I would concede that enough of them are curious about childhood to make it a topic of discussion.

In a recent issue of *public*,² guest editor Christina Ritchie evokes Philip Aries on the historical construction of childhood in Western culture, identifying childhood as a marker for "profound transformations to social structures, moral values and systems of production." Ritchie goes on to say that, "as one of the few experiences we all share, childhood is a ready magnet for whatever neuroses and insights we [as artists] wish to project." Indeed, it is this shared experience that has provided the framework in which many younger artists (from the digital designers to the 'neo-folk' essentialists) are currently working, "remind[ing] us of the tremendous powers of observation... children seem to possess." But what I find most relevant in Ritchie's "Introduction" comes later, where she mentions the way that artists interested in the concept of childhood "assert the continuing value of play as a means of self-discovery and insight. For the most part they commend as virtues those traditional attributes of childhood – weakness, imbecility, irrationalism, and amorality – that were, in the past, used as arguments for its discipline and disparagement."

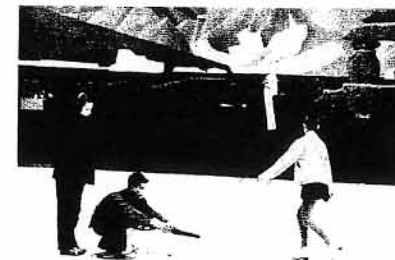
More than any artist in the show, Schmidt's *Long Beach Led Zep* meets Ritchie's four virtues. There is "weakness" (flubbed notes), "imbecility" (he could have been electrocuted), "irrationalism" (the beach is no place for high-volume electrical equipment), and "amorality" (people are sleeping!). In terms of point-of-view, we are reminded of the child's "tremendous powers of observation" by virtue of the camera's fixed position: the camera, like the child, does



little more than stare (considered rude when I was young), so the spectator could not possibly be an incredulous adult – not for seven minutes! Only a child could stare for that long. Only a child could be frozen for seven minutes.

The child's point-of-view is also apparent in Shannon Oksanen's *Spins* (left). Like Schmidt's *Long Beach Led Zep*, the camera remains fixed as we watch a teenaged figure-skater perform a succession of dance moves (but no jumps) on a set consisting of shoveled snow and twinkling stars. The film is a silent loop, shot in high contrast black-and-white, and recalls the early days of cinema. However, it is not the skater that first attracts us but the gaze. The skater is someone the child admires, someone they want to be when they grow up. Unfortunately that's as close as they'll get, for there is too much distance between the camera and the skater, reinforcing the notion of the skater as ideal, a music box figurine come to life. But the viewer's spatial distance is only half of it; the other half is temporal. Because the audience for this piece is adult, we are reminded of our own failures (to become figure skaters) by virtue of our advancing age. That is one reading. Another concerns Oksanen's interest in moments where emerging forms cohabitate with those entrenched, only to distinguish themselves through new technologies and specific languages. The most obvious example is motion picture film, which began by recording theatrical performances from the perspective of the theatre audience. With the advent of multiple cameras, zooms, cutaway shots and editing, less (and more) was expected of the actor. Soon, motion picture performances became focused not on the theatrical audience but on the men behind the lenses, the movie-makers who, after a day's shooting, would take these performances and stitch them together behind closed doors. It is no wonder, then, that the term 'movie magic' still has resonance: one of the earliest film pioneers, George Méliès, was a magician.

Spins is reminiscent of an earlier video work by Oksanen called *Compulsory Figures* (1999, opposite, top). This video also depicts a skater, who, unlike the skater in *Spins*, is still a child. And whereas the former is performing an ice dance in perfect silence, the latter (her skates scraping and scuffing) is practicing her compulsory program – a series of prescribed movements skaters are accountable for when in competition. What both pieces have in common, however, is the



theatrical background. While *Spins* uses the night sky, the backdrop in *Compulsory Figures* resembles an Inuit rock sculpture atop a figurative landscape painted by one of the Group of Seven (a group of Canadian painters who are recognized as our country's original Moderns). At first, the landscape seems at odds with the younger skater's routine, for what is she doing but carving out pure forms – circles and figure-eights. When I first saw *Compulsory Figures* my reading of it was very different from my reading of *Spins*: because then it was the skater's routine and its relationship to the landscape I was interested in, not the gaze.

As a fan of competitive figure skating I have despaired the decision by television networks to stop their coverage of the compulsory program. The explanation for this (I phoned the network) was based on the perception that compulsories are boring and that viewers are only interested in the more animated (read: entertaining) dance program. However, the real reason, according to a friend who works in television, is that broadcasters had trouble providing excitable commentary for something as rigidly formal as the compulsories. Indeed, this tension between so-called boring formal exercise and the more animated dance program parallels one of the central tensions in the popular history of art: this notion that art should be lively and colourful, our artists bold and exuberant. (The same can be said about rock 'n' roll, which Schmidt effectively subverts with his rote performance of "Stairway To Heaven.") But I'm sure there are many of us who would enjoy listening to commentators animate compulsory programs, much in the same way many of us enjoy reading Donald Judd's pathologically descriptive art reviews of the work of Dan Flavin.



Euan Macdonald's *Two Lions* (2002, left) employs the fixed-position camera as well. *Two Lions* is also about looking – in this case, at a lion (and occasionally a passing lioness). We see the first lion in repose, and we seem to be looking at him for a very long time. The absence of sound (which

Oksanen uses to similar effect in *Spins*) only intensifies the relationship between viewer, gaze, and subject, and it is not long before we stop asking questions of what we are seeing and respond to the lion's periodic movements with narratives of our own. As children we might remark on how unhappy the lion is, a first indication to our parents that they raised us to be compassionate (isn't that the real reason we take children to zoos?). Which leads us back to questioning: we presume this lion is in captivity because of a chain link fence behind him. Nevertheless because his presence fills the frame via the artist's zoom lens, the nature of his captivity is vague – perhaps it is this: a camera focused on his every move, his privacy blown out of proportion, his status as 'King of the Jungle' ridiculed. What of the lioness? She inserts herself between the camera and her mate. She seems pissed off, as if she doesn't like us looking at him. Or maybe she's hungry? With all these readings, there are many more lions than the two we've been looking at. Even if there were only one lion we could still call this video *Two Lions*.

Macdonald's *The Shadows Path* (2001, illustrated page 45) plays with time in a different way. This video follows a shadow as it retracts with the setting sun over a bucolic countryside. An aerial shot, we begin in mid-flight, and it takes a moment for our eyes to adjust. Once they do we notice that the video has been slowed down, as evidenced by the strobing texture of the image. Indeed, it is through this process of slowing down that a tension is created, as in a childhood nightmare, where the faster you run, the farther back you go. It's an anxious feeling, one that leads me to ask more of the point-of-view: because now, with the slow-motion effect, it appears as if the camera is not so much tracking a shadow but looking for something, much like we are looking for something when viewing the Zapruder film³. Surveillance comes to mind, as do conspiracy theories involving spy cameras on commercial flights. Yet this is a pastoral landscape, and surveillance cameras are usually seen as urban. Once again we are reminded of the ostensible incongruities contained within *Long Beach Led Zep* and *Compulsory Figures*. And again what seems like an incongruous pairing is quickly contradicted. As the aircraft prepares to land (it is a helicopter) we see the swirling grasses below, an appropriate abstraction given the remarkable tension Macdonald creates by playing mechanical speed against solar time.

In an exhibition where moving images and sculpture dominate, the work of Damian Moppett provides a hinge. His images are still photographs, while his latest models (making their debut in catalogue form – opposite, top) are not so much sculpture as architectural maquettes. Like Macdonald, Moppett is interested in landscape and social control – most recently, a historical

representation of the pastoral known as the 'kermis', a 16th-century bacchanal undertaken by European peasants at the end of harvest. Moppett's exploration of the kermis appeared two years ago, in a work entitled *Peasant Dance* (after Rubens, who was among the first to paint the kermis from the peasants' point-of-view). *Peasant Dance* consisted of a series of location snapshots taken near Los Angeles' Chinatown district paired with a written treatment for a film, to be based on the kermis. Accompanying the sequence was Moppett's own recreation of Ruben's famous painting, illustrated below. (Earlier this year Moppett extended the kermis project, recreating a new series of Rubens paintings, but also introducing an architectural model of a skateboard park). With this new work, which includes a selection of goat photographs (and as-yet-unfinished tree fort models), Moppett appears to be pushing his project further towards abstraction.



Having established a relationship between historical and contemporary models of social control (the kermis was sanctioned by paternalistic landlords, while the skateboard park is the city's official alternative to skateboarding on public amenities), Moppett has set his sights on the particulars of his source material. With the kermis paintings, the artist has activated tertiary characters such as goats, which Rubens employed as symbols animating the carnal passions of his human subjects, recasting them in lead roles for *Hammertown*. But these are not goats Rubens might depict; these are goats photographed just before shearing. Although in most of Moppett's photos we recognize these creatures by their horns, eyeballs and muzzles, they are, in the extreme, anonymous woollen tangles, abstractions, more like bathmats than anything evocative of sexual congress (indeed, if they were further removed from their pastoral setting



we might be tempted to think of them as just that). Abstraction can also be found in the models of skateboard surfaces Moppett has installed in trees. What looks like a skate ramp only looks that way, perhaps less so because of its context. Like the skater who uses his board as a medium of physical graffiti, Moppett has taken the sanctioned (though now abstracted)



boarding surface and conformed it to nature, reversing the relationship architecture often occupies when it imposes itself on the landscape.

Like Moppett's goats and tree forms, and the skaters and landscapes in Oksanen's film and video, Luanne Martineau is interested in social and aesthetic relationships, specifically tensions between realism and abstraction. However, unlike Moppett, who uses an art historical referent from the 16th century to parallel a contemporary phenomenon (skateboarding), Martineau's work, like Oksanen's, focuses on history's overlaps and in-betweens. Martineau uses popular media to create hybrid works that attempt to reconcile the perception of realism as inherently socio-political, while Abstraction, as an aesthetic advance within Modernism, apolitical.⁴ Drawing on *The Yellow Kid* comic-strips of 19th century cartoonist R. F. Outcault, which had as its object the Irish American working-class immigrant, as well as a skit from the 1950s television program *Your Show Of Shows*, Martineau traces the institutionalization of racism and working-class hatred in contemporary North American media.

Knitted Accumulation Sculpture (2001, above) is a recent work of Martineau's which refashions plaid patterns from *The Yellow Kid* cartoon using an antiquated knitting machine. The resulting fabric is employed in the creation of large, stuffed tubular pillow-like shapes. When displayed these soft forms, built from acrylic and mohair, resemble both a tartan shit heap and Modernist sculpture. In *The German General* (illustrated page 54) Martineau has created a styro-stuffed sculpture based on a skit from *Your Show of Shows*, where a fussy, almost childish German man (played by Sid Caesar) is dressed by his beleaguered valet who scrambles to see that the 'general's' whims are met. As with most sketch humour from the period, the punchline inverts what we think we've seen into its opposite: the 'general', it turns out, is nothing but a lowly hotel doorman.

Martineau's *The German General* is not so much a portrait of a stereotypical German receiving his come-uppance as a landscape where attitudes towards race and class are played out. Remnants of the skit are to be found in the piece. The band of colour at the foundation of the sculpture is battleship grey, the same colour Hugo Boss used when designing the uniform of Nazi infantryman. As for the off-white surface where buildings are represented as both flaccid



and semi-erect, that seems obvious, given that any discussion of Nazism and, in the case of *The Yellow Kid*, the plight of the Irish (as the "niggers of Europe"), invariably evokes questions of racial purity and physical and intellectual superiority.

Martineau works to similar effect with graphite and onion-skin drawings. An ongoing project that began with tracings made from cartoons the artist later recycled into collages, Martineau begins (again) by layering one image over the other to create varying degrees of density and distortion. Once completed, Martineau crops her collages to conform to a square-frame format. In her latest drawings, *The Four Seasons* (2002), we see what resembles a series of landscapes. Shacks and tree stumps, old barrels and barbed wire, window frames and Modernist sculpture. In the middle of *Fall* (above) is an explosion, the word GLOMP issuing forth (onomatopoeia being the best abstraction we have for the language of sudden impact). Yet these drawings are not abstractions, nor are they the abstract backgrounds we might associate with a Daffy Duck cartoon; they are too dense and layered, and there is too much figuration going on 'inside' them. Indeed, these drawings are somewhere in-between Ashcan School and Abstraction, a palimpsest, a socially-conscious lyric rooted in narrative figuration. Working backwards from the finished image we see that Martineau's drawings began not as a performative action based on a semi-conscious emotional state but as clear-headed exercises in the formation of foundational narrative. This peeling back of the onion skins, so to speak, reminds us of the cumulative effect jokes like *The Yellow Kid* and *The German General* have: how, after repeated retellings, in numerous social contexts, comedic forms abstract to form the basis for a generalized attitude that is imposed upon those being 'othered', in an effort to bolster who 'we' think we are. This, I believe, is what Moppett is getting at with his architectural models.

At first glance, the drawings and sculpture of Myfanwy MacLeod appear to have much in common with the work of Martineau, for MacLeod too is interested in cartoon, television and movie references. However, MacLeod opts for a more literal approach (in the Swiftian sense), using an odd combination of monumental scale, weight, and minimalism to impress upon the viewer the gravity of what's bugging us.



Of the artists in this exhibition, MacLeod was the first to work with large format sculpture. Earlier works such as *My Idea of Fun* (1997, illustrated page 50), based on a fiction by English writer Will Self, featured a man's head inflated to gigantic proportions, with a hole in the back big enough to accommodate even Self's wildest dreams. (As with much of MacLeod's work, the psycho-political nature of this piece is personal – yet the subject of local lore!). Last year MacLeod simultaneously unveiled two thematically-linked works at two

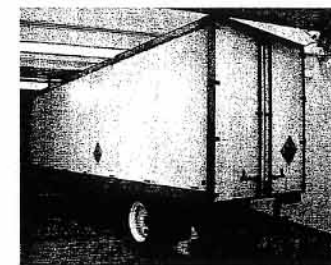
local galleries. The first, entitled *The Tiny Kingdom* (2001, above), was a full-sized outhouse modeled on the one featured in the children's classic *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (1968); the second, *Miss Moonshine*, showcased a series of drawings that (like Moppett) elevated the hillbillies in John Boorman's 1972 film *Deliverance* to star status. Although something bad in us recognizes an amity between hillbillies and outhouses, the better part knows that the sources for these works come from entirely different contexts: the hillbillies are from the 1972 American South, and the outhouse, which is Victorian in design, is from England. Yet this is the point: what MacLeod shows us is not the spatial and temporal equivalent of mixed metaphors, but two places out of time within their own social and historical settings. In *Deliverance*, the rural hillbillies are living in a world so old it might as well be the past; in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* an adventurous family belong to a past so fantastic it could well be the future. That the hillbillies and the family are so at odds with the civilizations they are confronted with parallels an anxiety many younger artists are faced with today: an art world that appears increasingly compacted and inbred.



MacLeod's latest work marks a return to her preoccupation with satire and disembodied parts. Using yellow cedar recycled from an old WELCOME TO WEST VANCOUVER sign (West Vancouver is Canada's wealthiest municipality), MacLeod has fashioned a human-scale gesture – one hand pulling on a boot, a toe caught in the sole – to create *Our Mutual Friend* (illustrated left). The title, of course, refers to Dickens's satirical novel, where a man of

despicable nature, Silas Wegg, goes to great lengths to buy back his amputated leg – not to 'regain himself' but to put a stop to the leg's accruing value as a 'monstrosity'. MacLeod's interest in body parts is also evidenced in a work entitled *Sausagefinger* (1996, illustrated page 46), which consists of a series of Polaroid photographs the artist shot of her hands, each finger sporting a monster pork sausage. Here, what initially appears to be a poke at the (romantic) notion of 'the hands of the artist' and the (fetish) objects they are said to 'create' quickly turns grim. For these are ghastly images, made even ghastlier by the Polaroid's deficiencies as a film format, its inability to distinguish between human flesh and sausage meat. Indeed, the work takes on a new and horrific layer given recent local events: the remains of at least seven bodies which were discovered at Robert Pickton's Lower Mainland pig farm. Even more recently, the revelation that these bodies, believed to be among the 73 women who have disappeared from Vancouver's downtown eastside over the past twenty years, may have been mixed in with pig parts and sold to a local sausage manufacturer.

While MacLeod's work has scaled down (for the moment), Geoffrey Farmer's work appears to be getting bigger. *Trailer* (2002, below) is the principal component in an ongoing project entitled *The Blacking Factory* (after another Dickens story, this one concerning the author's impoverished childhood, where he was forced to work in a shoe polish factory). *Trailer* is a life-sized shipping trailer, the kind we associate with film and television production. Everything needed to transform a landscape or an actor into a filmic subject is contained within these trailers – which, for the past twenty years, have become a regular feature on British Columbia's roads and highways, as many Hollywood companies have been using the province as a cheap backdrop for America's towns and cities (the Canadian dollar is currently worth 63 cents US). However, unlike Hollywood's trailer, Farmer's *Trailer* carries with it social issues. Despite having real wheels and a welded steel frame, *Trailer* is something of a sham – or to use film parlance: a prop. The viewer need only look underneath to see that its walls are veneer, its rivets plastic. In its first exhibition, *Trailer* was accompanied by two additional works. *A Box With The Sound Of Its Own Making* (2002), after Robert Morris, is a projected video FX sequence showing the gallery's imploding exterior. *Daily*



landscapes in which they live. Earlier I mentioned the "Supernatural" British Columbia tourist campaign. What I didn't mention was how uncomfortable many of us were with this campaign. Yet we endured, despite the consequences, putting up with questions like "Why does it rain all the time? It's not raining in the brochure" at every turn. I also mentioned the Group of Seven painters, how their work, much of it completed before the Second World War, persists as 'official' Canadian Art, and is the standard by which many Canadians continue to judge contemporary production. Another concern is our current government's willingness to forsake the natural landscape in favour of oil and gas revenues, concurrent with stalled land-treaty negotiations with First Nations people – a strategy that will keep Natives from sharing the rewards. These are consequences artists in Canada live with on a daily basis. There are many different conceptions of land and landscape operating in the country, and I think this is reflected in this exhibition.

The four videos in *Hammertown* all say something about landscape. Schmidt struggles with it in *Long Beach Led Zep*. The skater in Oksanen's *Spins* performs against an idealised night sky whose magical quality is now evidently transparent. Of the two videos provided by Macdonald, both the lions' natural landscape as well as their artificial landscape is removed and assumed; while in *The Shadows Path*, the landscape is not so much a surface for a retracting shadow but an object of scrutiny. With the sculptural works, Moppett's take on the municipal skateboard park as a model of social control has more in common with Macdonald's zoo than a place for fun and play. Martineau's *The German General* makes landscape out of portraiture, while her landscape drawings assume a topography based on their method of construction. MacLeod's sculpture alludes to landscape through her choice of materials and their source contexts. Farmer's *Trailer*, like those ubiquitous film and TV trailers, becomes a defining feature of both our interior and exterior landscapes. Jungen's cooler defines a landscape of colonisation and subjugation.

These practices are, in my opinion, as diverse as the economies that have evolved from Canada's 'official' beginnings as a country rich in natural resources. Of course I could be wrong. In fact, given that governments and corporations are becoming increasingly occult in their public and private practices, I would not be surprised if a raven were to arrive at my window one evening and, like "the songbird who sings," quoth a little Led Zep: "sometimes all of our thoughts are misgiven."

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Gaddis, William, JR (Penguin: New York), 1975, p. 3
- ² Ritchie, Christina, *public* 21, Toronto, 2001, p. 7
- ³ The Abraham Zapruder home movie of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas in 1963 is the only known film of the entire assassination. It is a silent, 8mm colour record of the Kennedy motorcade just before, during and immediately after the shooting. The two major investigations into the assassination, the Warren Commission in 1963-64 and House Select Committee on Assassinations in 1977-78, relied on it to answer questions about how the shooting happened, and it is often played in extreme slow motion.
- ⁴ MacLeod, Myfanwy, *Lubberland* (Stride Gallery, Calgary), 2001
- ⁵ Medina, Cuauhtémoc, *Gerzso: the indoamerican gothic*, Tate Modern webcast, 2002