

ARTS

Schmidt's landscapes examine assumptions

VISUAL ARTS

KEVIN SCHMIDT

At the Catriona Jeffries Gallery
until October 7

◆ These days, a picturesque vista is a hard sight to fully absorb. Somewhere in our minds, it blends with picture-perfect images of English Bay at dusk or the backdrop to a Hollywood love scene; the beauty of the natural world becomes another referent, and a potentially cheesy one at that. Contemporary art, ever self-conscious, often responds as any rebellious teen might—it's just *so* over it all, rolling its eyes over some poor schmuck's heartfelt expression of love or, worse, his landscape painting.

So what's a sensitive contemporary artist to do? Check out Kevin Schmidt's new work, on view at the Catriona Jeffries Gallery, for some—dare it be said—earnest investigations into the wilderness.

The show is sparse, consisting of a looped video projection and a set of three large photographs. The video, originating from machinery in a makeshift "cage" visible outside of the projection room, documents six minutes in the life of an omega wolf in captivity. The wolf, occupying the lowest rung of the social hierarchy, is an outcast, relegated to a peripheral, fidgeting existence; it walks in mournful circles, hesitantly approaching the pack, only to retreat moments later. Under the title *Sad Wolf*, the work plays to the viewer's impulse to anthropomorphize, and the images challenge both man-made archetype (the image of the "lone wolf") and nature's order (this animal would likely die in the wild); it is an uneasy portrait of a subject, and a viewer, kept in limbo.

The photographs offer a more fixed perspective. Part finely crafted trompe l'oeil, part landscape portraiture, they are framed identically: a picturesque lake is foregrounded



Johnson Lake challenges our notions about landscape images.

by a tree in the centre of the image. A portion of each tree has been covered with plaster, and a sweetly rendered watercolour of the vista behind is painted on this incongruous white surface. At first glance, the effect is strangely digital, the smaller image seemingly Photoshopped in after the fact. Snapshot aesthetics here combine with a painter's impulse and an advertiser's visual trickery: Schmidt layers these languages together in a single frame, somehow combining the clever twists of media with a sincere desire to represent the natural world—and to understand the emotional qualities still left to us in observing it. It is a deft manipulation, and one that reflects the multifaceted associations that now define our consumption of the landscape image.

Schmidt's work has been described as embodying a kind of "West Coast Sublime": images driven by the beauty of our natural surroundings while acknowledging, by means both achingly earnest and coolly pop-savvy, that the potential transcendence of a sunset (or a lake, or a wolf) has been emptied out in the popular imagination. Schmidt confronts this vacuum with work that presents meaningful options to what we've seen before. As it turns out, the sun hasn't set just yet.

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