

Desert Islands

What are we to make of the varied objects and images we see within the two rooms and immediate vicinity of Pith Gallery and Studios? From where has this constellation appeared and what order connects its forms? How might these stars be used to guide our journey across the ocean?

The exhibition *Desert Islands* developed through a series of conversations initiated by an eponymously titled essay by Gilles Deleuze. This essay, written in 1953, is one of the first texts Deleuze would allow to be published of his oeuvre. It is poetic, problematic, at times elusive in its direction and intention, and yet also contains many tendrils that grew to become the rhizome of Deleuze's later thought. We find in the text a youthful exuberance, and a utopian sensibility. Deleuze challenges the reader to follow their own intuition, to attempt oneness with the duration of the island, if only through the resurgence of myth. He lambastes *Robinson Crusoe*, draws inspiration from the Flood and geography, and creates a hybrid language that is technical, poetic and philosophical all at once.

Rather than simply selecting work to illustrate *Desert Islands*, the artists in this exhibition were presented with an invitation. Something of a challenge, although this challenge was quite vague: to take the above mentioned essay as a script or score for developing their work. Thus, the exhibition is an accumulation of responses, translations and reactions to *Desert Islands*. There is no over-arching theme that unifies the work and each artist was given complete freedom as to how they wished to respond. However, the Deleuze essay does form a narrative arc that runs throughout the works, if only obliquely. The essay becomes the centre through which each artist has passed during the progression of their travels. *Desert Islands* is a hub, a centre of exchange, a meeting of landforms, rivers, ocean and sky. And it is a meeting place for people, thoughts and dreams as well. Simultaneously, the essay is opened up by the artists' work, as they extend the text in myriad ways. One might say that the artists have given Deleuze many curious children, in the way that Deleuze gave so many of his forbearers (Spinoza, Nietzsche, Bergson) challenging children as well. I like to think that he would have approved.

So, one might say that the curatorial premise for this exhibition is experimental and generative, perhaps even collaborative. I feel this sense of collaboration extends far beyond the relations of artist to artist, or artist to curator, or artist/curator to visitors et cetera. Rather the exhibition encapsulates many layers of interrelation that include the architecture, community, history and organizational structure of Pith Gallery. The Pith building was only recently inhabited by artists and their supporters. This group of committed individuals took over the space and built studios, a gallery, and a soon-to-be bookshop from the remains of an illegal suite, a bottle depot and a donair shop. The goal of these pithy pilgrims is a common one: to make life, to start anew, to establish parthenogenesis through art. In respect to this idea, *Desert Islands* (the essay and the exhibition) seem fitting for the Pith endeavour, connecting directly with the renewed possibility inherent to the space. The various tangents of the artists' work play into these themes, populating the space with beguiling wonders of thought and imagination. At the same time the artists present positions from which to examine the context of the gallery in a more global scope. Hopefully, visitors to Pith will similarly reflect on the ways that the islands of this atoll might intermingle together and also interact with the broader world outside its boundary.

The Works

...Michael Coolidge's series of three hand-painted pillows titled *Drifts* are deployed throughout the gallery space. Each work depicts an empty quadrant of map; a cerulean expanse bounded by a black and white border, suggestive of the scale from a topographic map. The measurements represented by this scale nonetheless remain unclear, and we are left to imagine seemingly limitless ether. Visitors are invited to lay down at any of the pillows and partake in quiet repose or even deep slumber, perchance to enter the dream space of the desert island itself. One might be transported to the endless possibility of the unconscious, or left stranded in psychological uncertainty...

...Jason de Haan has contributed two works to the exhibition. These are a cyanotype printed during a partial lunar eclipse on the artist's birthday and a piece of driftwood with a gold ring mounted within it. The cyanotype hangs framed on the wall (It could almost be a picture of the full moon itself). The driftwood stands vertically, defiant of gravity as if placed under a magic spell. A suggestion of the peripatetic movement of the island and the seamless merging of process and time comes to the fore. With Jason's work we witness the meeting of vast durations and fleeting moments. The artworks become the locus and the trace for significant encounters on both a cosmic and humble scale...

... The work Amélie Guérin has chosen to present is a photograph that depicts a painting that has remained unfinished in her studio. The painting (begun before the conception of this exhibition) presents a tropical beach overlaid with a thinly painted smiling face. The scene is at once idyllic and coy, as the smiling face seems to besmirch Eden with its pleasure. This double entendre of the painting is extended further with the photographic separation placed between us and the art object. The incomplete work becomes the subject of yet another work; the painting is subsumed by the studio, and the studio returned back to the content of the artwork. The work connotes the ungraspable or unattainable. But simultaneously we find birth and rebirth, and a silver-lining sensibility. Even an unfinished work can find its way to begin again...

...The work produced for *Desert Islands* by Jona Hlif Halldorsdottir consists of two distinct pieces: a bottle of rum accompanied by a note, and a series of inkblot drawings. The bottle of rum is available for consumption and gallery visitors are invited to partake in a sip as they please. The note, presented alongside the rum, describes Jona's varied ruminations on the idea of the island, in particular the island of Greenland and its historic inhabitants. At the end of the exhibition the note will be sealed inside the rum bottle and set adrift down the Bow River. The inkblots that Jona has included are arranged on the gallery wall similarly to the Aleutian Islands in Alaska, creating a conflation of depth and distance. The inkblot reflects the emergence or erosion of the island; geological time is measured through a poignant human gesture...

...The only offsite work in the exhibition has been produced by Heidi Hove and can be found in the yard of the Alexandra Centre on 9th Avenue and 9th Street SE. Consisting of an aluminum plaque inscribed "In Memory of You", the piece activates the surrounding space of the community, suggesting a reflection on Inglewood and its changing urban fabric. The plaque itself is a form of site-specific guerrilla intervention, as it is mounted on a former information

panel that once described historic sites in the neighbourhood. Like the Moai (the large stone heads of Rapa Nui/Easter Island) Heidi's work constructs a statement of existence that also signifies disappearance. The plaque will be left in place at the Alexandra site after the exhibition has come to a close; a reminder to consider what is vanishing in a community that rapidly gentrifies...

...Working with the material of text itself, Jen Hutton has produced a drawing and site-specific work for the exhibition that are interrelated. Taking the term 'great Amnesiac' directly from Deleuze's essay, Jen has rendered the words as a watercolour of Arcimoldoesque pipes oscillating between self-contained system and palimpsest. These pipes create an exchange of information between the letters in the text, mapping various meanings and mediating the material that potentially flows through the term. *BOTTLED POET*, Jen's site-specific piece, also references the forgetting implied by 'great Amnesiac'. Upon remotely visiting the Pith site through Google Earth, Jen found an image of the gallery before it was a gallery. The signage of the former tenant of the building was still in place at the time of the photograph, spelling the words BOTTLE DEPOT on the front of the facade. Seeing a connection between this derelict space and the amnesia of a city, Jen created an anagram of the letters. This text within a text suggests that the site may be a metaphorical message in a bottle, with the artists making a last ditch effort to communicate before disappearance...

...Working collaboratively, Christian Kuras and Duncan MacKenzie have created a new painting for the exhibition titled *Various Kinds of Weather*. This work at first appears to be a straightforward representation of a weather station located on the south coast of England near Christchurch. Surprisingly, on closer inspection we find disembodied multicoloured eyes floating in the air and rays of light emanating from the station's antenna. These stylized elements are immediately recognizable as iconography rather than representation. For the artists these symbols suggest the importance of the station as a tool for understanding what lies beyond the horizon of perception and the perimeter of the land. The apparent isolation of the island is instead woven into an invisible, immersive network that is as much psychical as it is physical...

...*Roger* and *Peter/Pierre* are Mikhel Proulx's contributions to the exhibition. Examples of the artist's "Queer historiography", these works follow the lives of two men as they move from adolescence through adulthood. For both individuals, Mikhel has provided a range of documents regarding each man's history and experience, further clarifying the development and construction of their identities within very specific cultural parameters. With each individual we see their (auto)biographies opened up before us, and we begin to contemplate the meshing of their lives with the politics and customs of their time and place. Simultaneously, the work carries a sense of nostalgia or pathos as the history of these objects confronts our contemporary perceptions. The past infuses the present, and the conversation it propagates generates the possible future. Like the island, the past is something that we can come to and inhabit, but always remains deserted...

...Scott Rogers, July 2010...