

Humour & National Identity in Canadian Contemporary Art:

Diana Thorneycroft, Simon Hughes & BGL

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ABSTRACT

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Simon Hughes and BGL

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This thesis explores the use of humour as a means to negotiate themes of identity in some contemporary Canadian art by Diana Thorneycroft, Simon Hughes, and BGL. To ground this exploration of humour as a theme this thesis looks at humour theory and specifies three different discourses of humour which appear to recur frequently within the practices of the artists chosen: incongruity theory, national humour, and irony. As a context for this discussion, the broader topic of contemporary art and humour is addressed. This thesis then looks at the individual artistic practices as case studies. Diana Thorneycroft's *Group of Seven Awkward Moments* series is analyzed for its use of Group of Seven paintings as backdrops for incongruous or uncanny scenarios related to Canadian identity. I examine Simon Hughes' artistic practice from 2002-2007 where Expo 67 and Canadian architecture are the focus, and he makes ironic use of Native imagery. Finally, the section on BGL looks at the way this artists' collective use irony and incongruity to juxtapose themes of folkloric Quebec life with contemporary consumer culture. All three case studies enable a discussion of how humour can be used to approach the loaded topic of Canadian identity.

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Introduction

Neither the use of art as a means to negotiate the idea of a national identity, nor the use of humour within an artistic practice is a new tendency. It is also not specific to Canada, yet it has come to represent a strong current in the practices of many contemporary Canadian artists. When art attempts to address subjects with an overly serious or reverential tone, it can in some cases alienate its audience, failing in its effort to facilitate a connection between the viewer and what is being expressed. On the other hand, when artists use humour as a strategy, to reach out to the audience, grab their attention, and make the work and message accessible, it succeeds because "humour makes us responsible for our foolishness, greed, hatred, and other shortcomings by making the object of its mockery personal and familiar" (Molon and Rooks, 8). While I found this to be a strong current in the practices of many contemporary artists, I wanted to look at artists who were using humour, more specifically, to deal with the idea of Canadian identity.

The word humour refers to a broad set of practices, but also to theory, technique, and to a mechanism of culture, among other things. What is humour, what is its effect, and why is it so closely linked to questions of identity? How has it been used in contemporary Canadian art? This thesis argues that the work of the artists Diana Thorneycroft, Simon Hughes, and BGL have used humour, albeit in very different ways, as a means to participate in a continuing historical discourse about national identity; at the same time these artworks also touch on the topics of Canadian art history, pop culture, and mass culture. The goal of this thesis is to analyze how this humour works,

and why, and I intend to do so through a review of some humour theory, then turning to a discussion of the artists and art practices in question.

Questioning National Identity

In recent years, the voices of aboriginal people, people of colour, and immigrants have been raised, to explicitly challenge matters of identity, belonging, and nationhood in Canada. This is the social context within which contemporary Canadian artists are working, when they engage with issues of nationalism.

At the present time the idea of national identity within Canada is therefore fraught and complicated precisely because of postcolonial questioning, and because of the emphasis on race and racism. And yet as authors such as Lance W. Roberts have commented, identity in this country has always been fragmented, with divisions between French-Canadians and the British in the early days of colonization, which evolved into conflicts between French- and English-Canadian after Confederation. Throughout this entire early historical period, furthermore, the conflicts between English and French would often serve to marginalize the identity claims of Aboriginal peoples, Acadians, and immigrants arriving from many parts of the globe. (Roberts 658).

The country's official commitment to multiculturalism began in 1971 as a policy introduced by Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau and was enacted into law in 1988 by Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. As anthropologist Eva Mackey suggests in her book *The House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada*, the Canadian Multicultural Act is meant to ensure the rights of all Canadians and create bodies and laws within the government that support the rights of minority groups. At

the same time, Mackey says that the policy also enforced what she calls “hierarchies of difference” (64), and remained a way for the state to govern difference in Canada.

Scholars and activists have also insisted that we must consider the notion of aboriginal nationhood when discussing the subject of national identity. As was the case with official policies on multiculturalism, it has been argued that the Federal Indian Act consolidated government power over Aboriginal peoples while simultaneously denying their voices. And yet this must be regarded as a more benign form of governance than what came before: Canadians are only now coming to terms with their country’s legacy of attempted assimilation and extermination. As Camille and Charmaine Nelson explain, “the systematic objectification of Native populations was a deliberate means of social, material, and psychic domination and control that facilitated the simultaneous European encroachment upon Native land” (13). Audra Simpson addresses the concept of indigenous nationhood more directly, and explains its radicality: “[t]he very notion of an indigenous nationhood, which demarcates identity and seizes tradition in ways that may be antagonistic to the encompassing frame of the state, may be simply unintelligible to the [We]stern and/or imperial ear” (qtd. in Nelson and Nelson, 13).

The discussion of Native rights alluded to above appear in a book that addresses the question of race and racism in Canada. The Nelsons set out to create an anthology of texts that tackles a variety of topics from different disciplines, but all with an eye to the ways in which the complex subjects of race and nationality play out within Canada. The book contains essays from 26 different contributors covering a range of topics, from the law, to pop culture, to politics, to identity. While the discussion of race and nationality in Canada is a not a new topic, the editors noted a pressing need for an inclusive

approach which integrated the perspectives of aboriginal people and people of colour, in order to properly address both institutional and everyday instances of racism.

It is important to discuss the complexity of the concept of national identity, because it can so easily be misconstrued. While various forms of group identity do exist within the nation-state of Canada, "Canadian identity" has rarely been fully inclusive and fully representative of the country's heterogeneous population. Throughout my thesis I have attempted to address Canadian nationhood in relation to these serious issues, while also recognizing that artists use humour to explore and expand the idea of what Canadian national identity can be.

Humour Theory

There is an abundance of theory in different disciplines addressing the topics of play and humour, and so I will examine some of these theoretical perspectives, in order to understand how Canadian culture and identity intersect with humour.

In philosopher Henri Bergson's *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, the author does not define the comic itself but instead puts forward some definitive characteristics of it: that it is specifically a human trait (3), that it occurs more often collectively, among groups and not individually (5), and that laughter expresses a disconnection from the subject (4). However, sociologist Stephen Crocker, in his discussion of Bergson's *Laughter*, has said that this view is primarily concerned with pre-modern religious thought and has to do with the expression of power relations while a more modern take on laughter is that it enables sympathy: laughing with others, not at them (79). Thus Bergson wrote that the comic occurs in the "absence of feeling" and that it "has no greater foe than emotion" (Bergson 4). One fundamental idea from

Bergson remains convincing, however: “[that] society demands flexibility [...] and laughter is a way of singling out whatever cannot bend with the contingencies of life and, through derision, of correcting it” (Crocker 79).

Another work that has significantly influenced contemporary theory on the topics of humour and play is historian Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, which was originally published in 1938. Huizinga recognizes certain similarities in the concepts of play and what he refers to as laughter and the comic, but he also notes certain key differences. Whereas in the comic, the effect derives from understanding and reason, the effect of play is distinct. The drive to play exists alongside our desire to produce and our tendency towards reason (related to the terms *homo faber* & *homo sapiens*, respectively), hence the title *Homo Ludens* (Huizinga 6). The tendency to play as well as the general rules that seem to guide our experience of it exists also in animals and children – there is order in play. Huizinga’s central idea is that “in play there is something ‘at play’ which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action” (1). It creates another level of meaning, different from that of our reasoned spatial knowledge or understanding.

Incongruity Theory

Many contemporary theorists seem to agree with Huizinga and Bergson, offering that humour and playfulness are ways for us to negotiate the banal or difficult parts of everyday life. A significant development in humour theory that philosopher Simon Critchley (among others) addresses is what is commonly known as incongruity theory, in which “humour defeats our expectations by producing a novel actuality, by changing the situation in which we find ourselves” (1). Incongruity theory proposes that laughter

comes from the recognition of the fundamental incongruity of two elements within a whole. According to philosopher John Morreall, aspects of this idea, if not in name, has appeared in many works by other philosophers who have examined humour(10). A central tenet of incongruity theory is that it humour is related to disrupted expectations. Our expectations are set up by patterns learned from our lived experience. We grow up and into certain socially determined patterns: the meaning of the walk signal in traffic lights, the sound of a siren blaring down the street. When these patterns are disrupted - the walk signal suddenly says “Run!”, the typical siren sound is replaced by that of a kitten meowing, an incongruity is perceived. And just because our expectations are disrupted once does not mean the humorous effect is a unique result - “once we have experienced something incongruous, of course, we no longer expect *it* to fit our normal mental patterns. Nonetheless, it still violates our normal mental patterns and our normal expectations. This is how we can be amused by the same thing more than once” (Morreall 11).

Morreall draws on philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation* to develop his interpretation of incongruity theory. The effect of incongruity theory comes from the way we organize and distinguish things around us - for example, linguistic categories can become the cause of perceived incongruities. As Schopenhauer says: “In every case, laughter arises from nothing other than the sudden perception of an incongruity between a concept and the real objects that are, in some respect, thought through the concept; in fact laughter itself is simply the expression of this incongruity” (84). Of course laughter is not the only reaction to the mere perception of incongruity - there is also the possibility of “fear, disgust, anger...puzzlement or

incredulity” (Morreall 13). Morreall also discusses the other possible results of incongruities other than laughter - “the grotesque, the macabre, the horrible, the bizarre, and the fantastic” (13). Psychologically, humour occurs in spite of the incongruity that undermines our sense of reason, perhaps as a measure of self-protection (since laughter has physiological benefits)(Morreall 14). However, many more theorists have argued that since human beings are rational creatures who strive to understand everything, incongruity is a form of cognitive dissonance that could not possibly be enjoyable (Morreall 15). Anthropologist Elliot Oring counters this by specifying the conditions for incongruity which make it possible for it to have a humorous effect.

Oring’s central argument around humour revolves around what he calls *appropriate incongruity* - “the perception of an appropriate relationship between categories that would ordinarily be regarded as incongruous” (Oring 1). This is related to incongruity-resolution theory and incongruity theory, both of which pop up frequently in humour theory. Incongruity-resolution theory states that humour results from the resolution of the incongruity, while incongruity theory is just that - the idea that basic incongruities can be humorous (Oring 3). Oring brings up the important point that children’s ability to recognize humour in simple incongruities lays the foundation for the development of an adult sense of humour (4). While incongruity, though the use of incongruous elements, definitely plays a part in the artworks I look at, it is just one of the many ways in which the artist expresses a humorous effect.

National Humour

While having a basic understand of the types of incongruity theory will be helpful to my project, it is also important to attempt to understand humour theory within

a national or local scope. Elliott Oring addresses the idea of what national humour is and how it comes about, saying “despite the recognition that jokes and anecdotes migrate, the content and style of a people’s humour is usually assumed to be particular to the people to whom it belongs” (97). According to Oring, despite differences in specific motifs, most national humours are inherently similar in structure and basic content, tending to integrate themes of language, class, and myth (100). Any study of a particular country or group’s sense of humour may attempt to “characterize and celebrate difference, but differences in history, language, and custom may mask more fundamental similarities” (97). In the chapter of his book titled ‘Colonizing Humour,’ which examines the notion of a national humour, Oring looks at three specific case studies (the United States, Australia, and Israel) and examines not only what makes them unique but also what they have in common (98). Despite the fact that Canada is not specifically included, since Oring speaks somewhat broadly about concepts like language, the idea of the “frontier,” and stereotypes, this chapter will nonetheless prove valuable to my discussion of the notion of national humour.

One factor that recurs in any sort of national theory of humour is that of language. Oring examines frontier language and its origins in the countries from which the settlers came, how they blended regional differences while also creating new words, turns of phrase, and obscene language. An interesting point is also the way these new dialects valued brevity in speech, or “straight talk” (102). Another factor is the use of tall tales and practical jokes. These modes of exaggeration serve “not generally to dissemble and deceive, for in many cases, the lie or exaggeration is so absurd as to be clearly recognized by the audience for whom it is performed” (Oring 104).

Oring discusses how settlers, or those on the ‘frontier’, differentiate themselves from the ‘civilized’ people back home rather than from the indigenous people actually living on the land, and how those differences are translated into a humour context. Many jokes in so-called ‘settler’ nations centre on the problems of adapting to the new environment. “Ultimately, the frontiersman... saw themselves as morally superior to the city dwellers and immigrants. While they recognized the rudeness of their own conditions, they also sensed that the society depended upon the hard and rude work in which they were engaged” (Oring 107).

While Oring’s text addresses the role of the native in the development of a national humour, it does so in a way I find unsatisfying. Oring simply claims that while “the portraits of indigenous peoples (in jokes) may be patronizing... they are not hostile” (110). Certainly in Canada this would be a difficult position to defend, since Native people have been mistreated and mocked in ways that are extremely hostile. While Oring’s text capably explains many characteristics of national humour, this remains a major fault and oversight in the text.

The use of persistent characters and archetypes is integral to the creation of a national humour. Although the character’s names may change, certain characteristics will always be present: “frontier characters are ludicrously portrayed as strong, slovenly, practical, primitive, direct, improvisatory, impious, egalitarian, playful, unsentimental, and unromantic” (Oring 111). While these characters are often born in an oral tradition or in specific locales, when their story gets spread, they become mythical creations and tend to stand in for or embody a facet of national identity:

“These very localized humours came to be conceptualized as national humours because of the place these characters held in the national imagination. What tends to become national humour is humour by and about the kinds of people who come to stand for the society as a whole - who are believed to embody the identity of the nation” (Oring 113).

Canadian Humour & Irony

If we are to consider the question of national humour we must consider the specific ways in which this concept exercises itself with Canada, and how it relates to national identity. While many of the authors I look at speak generally about ‘Canadian humour,’ they are often specifically speaking about English Canadian humour. As I discuss in the section on BGL, Québécois culture and humour is obviously quite distinct and not just because of the difference in languages, although it could be argued that Quebec also tends towards a very ironic type of humour. Most writing that deals specifically with the topic of Canadian humour tends to focus on Stephen Leacock. Leacock, a prominent Canadian academic and prolific author, was best known for his works of humorous literature, including *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912) and a volume on humour theory, *Humour: Its Theory and Technique* (1935). In his numerous story collections he used strategies of parody, metaphor, hyperbole, incongruity, wordplay, and irony (MacKendrick n.p.). My focus will be on authors who emphasize the importance of irony, particularly as it applies to the cultural effects of the presence of the American border and our colonial status. Much of the discourse surrounding the idea of a Canadian national identity points out the difficulty in maintaining this self-definition. The lack of an authoritative answer leads to jokes and

self-deprecation, which ultimately says a lot about what it means to be Canadian. In the context of this thesis, both humour and irony are regarded as forms of discourse that contribute to Canadian culture.

Canadian academic, post-modern scholar, and literary theorist Linda Hutcheon asserts that the essential characteristic of Canadian humour is “self-deprecating irony” (9). This stems from a continued inability to create an identity based on what can be recognized as inherently Canadian. This is where the title of Hutcheon’s book *As Canadian as...Possible...Under the Circumstances!* comes from; whereas Americans can use the phrase “as American as apple pie,” Canadians do not have such concrete and distinct signs to use as markers. For this Canadian self-deprecating irony to work, there needs to be among the audience “the twin conditions of context and community of belief” (Hutcheon 10). Hutcheon speaks primarily about English Canada, and she does not attempt to address Quebec’s different historical and political context. She says that attempting to define the (English) Canadian results in two things: either being defining against others (most often, the U.S.A.), or attempting to identify what Canadians have in common. Irony is often something Canadians use reflexively, particularly in a literary context (Hutcheon specifically cites fellow literary theorists Northrop Frye and Eleanor Cook (11)). Irony is used to take what we have in common and poke fun at it. By doing so, we acknowledge the dominant culture while also subverting it in a light-hearted way, and it is something everyone can do: “the comprehension of irony assumes no more than a set of shared values and a shared cultural context” (Hutcheon 15).

While Linda Hutcheon delineates different types of irony, her contemporary Beverly Rasporich expands on this in her essay “Canadian Humour and National

Culture”, arguing that irony is connected to Canada’s proximity to the American border, its former/historical colonial status (56) as well as the roots of irony in myth, particularly indigenous myth (64). Many of the tropes used in humour that is specific to Canada come from the desire of people, in the country’s early history, to create an identity for themselves. The idea of the Canadian wilderness and its ‘northernness’, often a motif in national discourses, comes from the Canada First Movement, which occurred in the period after Confederation (Rasporich 52). Another trope, that of poking fun at our neighbor to the South, has roots that go back even further than Confederation, in literature like Thomas Haliburton’s *The Clockmaker* from 1863 (Rasporich 56). The use of irony, especially in jokes made at the expense of Americans, serves to reconfirm our separation from them as Canadians. Rasporich rightfully recognizes that what is considered national identity or culture is often pushed as such by those in power, to the exclusion of minority groups.

Art and Humour

The use of humour and playfulness as a strategy in modern art can be located in various art practices and movements: in the Situationists use of détournement, for instance, or the incongruous juxtapositions found in Dada and Surrealism. However, within the field of art history and art theory there has not been much scholarship analyzing the relationship between art & humour. In many cases, the tendency to write about the subject has been taken by philosophers and literary theorists rather than art historians.

One author who has taken an in-depth look at the subject is artist and art theorist Sheri Klein, who wrote the book *Art & Laughter*. In this book, Klein specifies that some

types of humour appear more frequently in art than others, particularly parody, satire, the pun, paradox, irony, and dark humour (13). Some of these, particularly irony, as we have discussed, and paradox, have a stronger relationship with incongruity theory than others. Klein, however, does not discuss incongruity theory nor does she address the topic of national humour, although she does focus a section of the book on humorous works from First Nations, Metis, and Inuit artists, and use some Canadian examples, including Ron Noganosh and Brian Jungen. Klein's overarching message regarding the role of humour in contemporary art is summed up in the conclusion to the book, when she says "Through laughter, we can move beyond cynicism, alienation, and self-indulgence to a state of interconnectedness and personal enlightenment and new modes of communication, relating, and living" (132).

A similar sentiment is expressed in the catalogue for the 2005 exhibition *Situation Comedy: Humor in Recent Art*. The curators of this exhibition, Dominic Molon and Michael Rooks, explain in the introduction "*Situation Comedy* is intended as a reminder of the strong presence of the comedic gesture in contemporary art... [in order to emphasize] the transformative potential of humour in contrast to the stifling effect of dogma" (Molon and Rooks 9). Like Klein, Molon and Rooks group their examples according to the strategy they perceive the artists to use - theirs include "slapstick, self-effacing humour, art-related satire, failure and/or the pathetic, text inversion and wordplay, jokes, physical exaggeration, and the broader notion of "situational comedy"" (9). While both Klein's book and this exhibition catalogue are very important to the subject of humour in art, there are many aspects of humour that they do not address, like the concept of national humour, and for this reason my discussion relies primarily on

authors like Critchley or Hutcheon, who integrate those relevant subjects into their broader discussions of humour and irony.

While the artists and artworks I am focusing on belong to the last ten years or so; it is important to note a previous generation of Canadian artists who used humour (although humour has been part of the Canadian artistic practices long before that). The painter, filmmaker, and fibre artist Joyce Wieland is a crucial example in this sense. Wieland's work looked to "modify readymade signifiers of nationalism" (Sloan 90), like in her *109 Views* (1971), which transforms the idea of landscape through her use of medium (quilted cloth) and the multiplicity in the work. One of her most well known works is *Reason Over Passion* (1968)(fig. 1), a quilt that takes a famous phrase of Pierre Elliott Trudeau's and renders it in soft material, creating a playful take on a powerful politician's serious words. Another prominent Canadian example of humour and art coming together is the art practice of the conceptual group General Idea, active from the 1970s through the 1990s. General Idea was composed of three artists and many of their projects examined the products and effects of mass culture. Much of their later work took up AIDS as its subject and cause, but always with an ironic slant ("General Idea" n.p.). Much of what they produced were parodies of mass culture, like their *File* magazine (published 1972-1989), which took its name and logo from *Life* magazine, or the annual Miss General Idea pageant, which parodied mainstream beauty pageants. It was artists like Wieland and General Idea, among others, whose use of humour set the stage for a number of Canadian contemporary artists to do the same.

Diana Thorneycroft

Diana Thorneycroft's *Group of Seven Awkward Moments* (2007-2010) is a series of photos the artist took, of dioramas she made with various toys, figurines, and craft materials arranged in front of reproductions of Group of Seven and Tom Thomson paintings. Thorneycroft's artistic evolution is important to note, as the series that preceded *Group of Seven Awkward Moments* - the *Canadiana Martyrdom* series (2006) also involved dioramas showing an alternate history of martyrdom, elaborately offering up the toy likenesses of Canadian figures who have succumbed to violent fates. Thorneycroft then went on to initiate a project called "Group of Seven with a Twist", and the result was *Early Snow with Bob and Doug* (fig. 2) which features the characters made familiar by Canadian sketch show SCTV against a Group of Seven painting used as a backdrop (Thorneycroft, "The Creative Process" 46-47). The reception of the work encouraged Thorneycroft to expand upon the idea and create the *Awkward Moment* series; she explained:

"Awkward moment" is a phrase we use all the time. So I decided to join the two, the photograph with the expression, and the work became a search for playful moments in Canadian history or somewhat painful, difficult, unusual, funny and black humour moments in Canadian history ("The Creative Process" 47).

The importance of the work of the Group of Seven landscape painters in Thorneycroft's work is connected to the way their work has so often been seen as an emblem of Canadian national identity, while their art has been hailed as the prime example of a Canadian national art. Their work contributed to the "nationalization of nature in Canada, particularly in the development of foundational idea about northernness and wilderness" (O'Brian and White 4). Part of the awkwardness of Thorneycroft's

moments, or set-ups, come from the juxtaposition of the Group of Seven landscapes, regarded as representing the transcendent experience of the Canadian countryside, with some more superficial, less impressive emblems of Canadian culture as it actually proliferates - commercial logos, failed financial endeavors, 'hosers', the Trailer Park Boys, etc. This juxtaposition exists throughout, in the narratives depicting extremely absurd situations, while even the materials used reflect this superficial everyday quality - plastic toys, cardboard game pieces, and fluffy, glittery fake snow. The effect is that "the historical landscape, no longer in its original context, can no more compel us with its illusion of utopian paradise. Its mythology is scandalized and deconstructed" (Adamowicz-Clements 11).

As Sharon Adamowicz-Clements recognizes, this juxtaposition also creates an effect of the uncanny and I intend to argue that this also occurs in the work of Simon Hughes and BGL. The term uncanny, as it is used in critical theory, comes from Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay *Das Unheimliche*, and its basic meaning is "That which is unfamiliar—or more literally, un-homely—in the familiar or homely" (Buchanan n.p.). The uncanny occurs in a number of ways, one of which, Freud argued, is through unintentional occurrences of repetition, which goes against the psychological drive to repress (Buchanan n.p.). This creates a feeling that everything, despite seeming random, is controlled or pre-determined, which invokes a response of dread in whoever is witness to it. Like incongruity theory, the uncanny conjures a sense of cognitive dissonance. While the term in that case comes from the field of psychoanalysis, and is also frequently used in literary criticism, it can convincingly be applied to Thorneycroft's work with visual materials. *Group of Seven Awkward Moments* achieves its uncanny

effect through the use of familiar images, icons, and situations that become suddenly strange, unfamiliar, or disturbing. This transformation of ordinary Canadian images and artifacts leads to the viewer's sense of recognition that those elements have been interrupted; Thorneycroft thus achieves a deconstruction of the everyday Canadian experience. This is not to suggest that the experiences of all Canadians are the same, but simply that Thorneycroft has a knack for targeting subjects and motifs that would be most recognizable and familiar to those living in Canada. The effect of Thorneycroft's manipulation of images is both incongruous (relating to incongruity theory, as discussed earlier) and uncanny. Another level of 'uncanniness' in the series comes from the fact that the sinister situations are not always automatically evident or noticeable, and only become so with a closer examination. Thorneycroft has said that by using toys, the viewer is initially lulled and amused, but once the other elements become more apparent, the audience has "already accepted it's make-believe" ("The Creative Process" 50)

The experience of the uncanny is similar to the experience of humour through incongruity, as mentioned earlier, as both involve the disruption of our expectations of familiar things and experiences. The juxtaposition of different elements in the series evokes both the feeling of the uncanny and the ability to find humour in incongruity.

In *Group of Seven Awkward Moments*, the use of imagery taken from the canon of the Group of Seven, along with their associates, Tom Thomson and Emily Carr, goes beyond cleverness. It provides the guiding force of the series, situating it and its content as specifically Canadian. The Group's landscape paintings have undoubtedly achieved a mythic status in Canada. To understand the way that Thorneycroft's subject matter and

use of motifs confront and dissect the idea of a national identity, we have to understand how ideas about the Group of Seven and national identity came to be reified in Canadian culture.

While in the early 20th century, the tendency in discussing the Group of Seven was to uphold their position as purveyors of a national form of art through their contributions to landscape painting, more this view has been contested. In his essay “Wild Art History,” art historian John O’Brian questions the pre-eminence of the type of landscape painting championed by the Group of Seven from a number of different viewpoints, including post-colonial and Marxist analyses of these representations of a glorified and imagined wilderness (22). He critiques the fact that the Group of Seven presented an image of an untouched land despite transformations caused by the mining and lumber industries; also, he notes the contradiction between a Canadian identity portrayed as essentially ‘Northern,’ when the country’s population was increasing urban; and he calls attention to the racial problematic inherent within a vision of the ‘Great White North’. (O’Brian 22).

When the wilderness is seen as both an ultimate and universal component of Canadian identity, it makes landscape painting the ultimate expression of that identity, and the Group of Seven, then, the emblematic agent of that expression. Thorneycroft’s *Group of Seven Awkward Moments*, however, disrupts this, by inserting figures, animals, and other objects/signs of civilization into the landscape. As Thorneycroft has said herself, her work is “not about winds blowing, the sunset or the weather. There is more to us as Canadians than the landscape we inhabit” (“The Creative Process” 48).

By using distorted reproductions as backdrops, easily recognizable in some cases but tough to pinpoint in others, Thorneycroft uses these visual references to reflect the mythic status of the artists referenced. While Thorneycroft does use the Group's paintings in a way that deconstructs their prestige, she states that she chose them not to mock them, as she respects their work, but instead to call attention to the way they are revered in Canadian culture:

the intent was not to mock them, only to mock Canadians who adore their paintings without thinking about or knowing why they like the Group of Seven.

There are so many fine Canadian artists who don't get the same recognition and I wanted to be critical of that and of the narrow reading of what Canadian art is ("The Creative Process" 47).

The use of distorted reproductions of Thomson and Group of Seven paintings signals that the scenes we are glimpsing at in Thorneycroft's photos are an already mediated Canadian wilderness. While they may not signify actual historical events, Thorneycroft's use of Canadian motifs and signifiers placed in unfamiliar situations and settings becomes a deconstruction of history that nevertheless retains its sense of familiarity. In this way, looking at the work's relation to myth is equally important, not in the sense that myths represent falsehoods or made-up stories, but in that they are a way for a culture to express itself or "shape our ideologies and the set of values by which we operate as a society and a nation" (Adamowicz-Clements 5). The myths and history surrounding the figures used in the *Group of Seven Awkward Moments* has, over time, made them symbols in their own right, and Thorneycroft takes the generally recognized characteristics or attributes of each and turns them on their head.

As a first example, the RCMP, Canada's federal and national policing body, has its authoritative and respected status undermined by showing the Mountie as a clueless bystander in two works from the *Group of Seven Awkward Moments* series: *Northern Lights* (2007) (fig. 3) and *In Algonquin Park* (2007)(fig. 4). *In Algonquin Park* shows a horrific scene of multiple children bleeding after getting their tongues stuck to a frozen flagpole, against the backdrop of Tom Thomson's *In Algonquin Park* (1914). The RCMP officer, the sole adult and authority figure in the scene, seems to be cross-country skiing away from the panicked children. Similarly, in *Northern Lights* the Mountie simply points and watches an igloo in flames, pointing out the scene to a small child, instead of helping or getting help, while aboriginal figures gather around the scene on the other side of the igloo. This is all set against the backdrop of another Thomson painting, *Northern Lights* (1916). The humour in these works comes from the absolute ineffectiveness and ignorance of the authority figures in the picture, and the incongruity of their abnormally calm responses to emergency situations.

Another interesting motif in the *Group of Seven Awkward Moments* is Thorneycroft's use of animals; they are not simply shown as wild inhabitants of the landscape, but are instead shown as calculating, civilized, and often more aware than the other figures that populate the scenes. According to the artist, they act as decoys, setting up our expectation for threatening or wild behavior, and subverting this expectation by making the animals the ones who are able to sense the sinister nature of the scenes ("The Creative Process" 49). An excellent example of this occurs in *Northern River* (2008)(fig. 5), which has Tom Thomson's *Northern River* (1915) as its backdrop. What appears as an innocent scene of children playing in a park as adults look on is actually more

sinister, as the two women on the park bench are actually drinking from a bottle of wine sitting beside the bench, oblivious to the fact that on the bench beside him, a child is being preyed upon by an old man with his pants undone. The sole example of responsible behavior in the scene comes from the bears in the background, as the mother bear appears to be chasing after her cub with concern. Of course, the ‘awkward’ nature of the *Group of Seven Awkward Moments* prevails, as this moment of conscientious behavior is interrupted by what the cub seems to be running towards - two moose copulating in the forest in the right side part of the scene.

A similar situation, in which the animals are the only ones exhibiting rational behavior, occurs in *March Storm, Georgian Bay* (2007)(fig. 6), which uses A.Y. Jackson’s painting *March Storm, Georgian Bay* (1920) as its backdrop. While the adults and children on the left side of the scene look on at the hockey game taking place in front of them (Montreal Canadiens vs. Toronto Maple Leafs, courtesy of a vintage tabletop hockey game), the animals, all on the left side of the game, all seem to anticipate the ‘March Storm,’ and are beginning to flee from it, while the humans remain unaware.

In *The West Wind* (2008)(fig. 7), the bear is even more literally the voice of reason. He stands on the shore with a megaphone, like a lifeguard, looking on with apprehension at the man standing precariously in the canoe, against the backdrop of Tom Thomson’s *The West Wind* (1916-1917). *The West Wind* is actually one of three ‘Awkward Moments’, which focus on the mysterious circumstances surrounding the death of Tom Thomson. Thomson was experienced in the wilderness, having spent a lot of time in provincial and national parks, and he even worked as a fire ranger, but in the

summer of 1917, he disappeared while on a trip on Canoe Lake. He had set off in a canoe on July 8, and the canoe was found overturned and empty later that day. Eight days later his body was found in Canoe Lake, and the death was ruled accidental. His extensive experience in the wilderness, as well as the circumstances surrounding his burial (his family had his body exhumed two days after being buried near Canoe Lake so that he could be buried in a family plot at Leith, Ontario) led to speculation that his death may not have been accidental, and the speculation has continued to this day (Davis n.p.).

Thorneycroft, in her series, has presented scenes that hypothesize three possible causes of Thomson's death. In *The West Wind*, Thorneycroft reinforces the idea that Thomson's death was accidental, speculating on how it might have happened with the trademark black humour that permeates her series. Thomson's death here would appear to have happened because he stood up in his canoe to pee into the 'West Wind'. This seems to be a visual allusion, of course, to the phrase 'pissing into the wind', which means to try something that has no chance of succeeding. It is even more humorous, then, in light of something Thorneycroft said about her experience creating the series: "One of my intents was to subvert Tom Thomson [and the Group of Seven], but they have ended up subverting me" ("The Creative Process" 53).

Thorneycroft's *Jack Pine* (2008)(fig. 8), with Thomson's famous *Jack Pine* (1916-1917) in the background, positions Thomson's death as possibly having been a murder, a crime of passion by a jealous lover. In the scene, the same figurine that appeared in *The West Wind* appears caught *in flagrante delicto* (as much as dolls could be caught as such) in a tent, with a doll that is supposed to represent Winnifred Trainor,

his girlfriend (Thorneycroft, “The Creative Process” 47). This leads to the speculation that the figure watching them from afar could be a jealous rival of Thomson’s, but speculation about Thomson’s sexuality could also mean that the figure would be a rival of Trainor’s (“Ideas of North” n.p.).

Thorneycroft’s trilogy on the death of Thomson also includes *Byng Inlet* (2008) (fig. 9) with Thomson’s *Byng Inlet, Georgian Bay* (1914-1915) in the background; this work portrays his death as a suicide. The same plaid-shirted figure from the previous two entries to the series now lays facedown in Canoe Lake, while the figures on shore remain unaware, except, perhaps, for the figure with binoculars that looks out onto the lake, which appears to be the same figurine that ‘played’ the jealous figure in *Jack Pine*. In these three works from the series, Thorneycroft has successfully created an ‘awkward moment’ out of some of the final moments of the life of a man seen as an iconic figure in Canadian history. She has managed to do so in a relatively respectful way. The uncanniness of the dolls she uses separates her version of Thomson from the real-life figure, and thus allows her to portray these hypothetical events in a way that is funny, without actually making fun of Thomson, the person.

Her treatment of Grey Owl, another ‘iconic’ figure, is comparable, despite the fact that his lasting impact as an important character in Canadian history is less certain. In *Grey Owl and Anahareo at Beaver Swamp* (2007)(fig. 10), Thorneycroft alludes to the questionable history of the figure of Grey Owl, a man who was known in his lifetime (1888-1938) as a Ojibwa-born nature conservationist, but was revealed after his death to have been Archibald Belaney, an Englishman, who, at 17, decided to move to Canada and try to pass as indigenous. He was also later revealed to have been

bigamous and the father of many illegitimate children. Anahareo, one of his wives, was Mohawk, and more specifically, was the woman who encouraged him to write about his experience of living in the Canadian countryside. In Thorneycroft's scene she is a doll pointing a gun at the figure 'dressed up' as Grey Owl, with an elaborate white suit with fringes, and a hat over his braids portrays her. The porch of their cabin filled with beer cases, Grey Owl is portrayed as a drunk, whose conservation efforts in this scene amount to him simply hanging around animals, while Anahareo seems to be the more responsible figure, carrying their child on her back. In Thorneycroft's retelling of this story, Grey Owl's status as a hero to a generation of Canadians concerned with conservation is challenged, and his long-suffering wife has been empowered, as shown by the way she reacts to him.

The effect of *Grey Owl and Anahareo at Beaver Swamp*, for a viewer with any passing knowledge of Grey Owl, is one of unmasking an icon or beloved childhood hero. After all, like Tom Thomson, Grey Owl became a larger than life figure, almost an embodiment of the Canadian wilderness itself. However, while the canvasses of the Group of Seven effectively worked to erase any aboriginal faces from the wilderness, Grey Owl made a pretense of native authenticity by concealing his white heritage. Thorneycroft demystifies the character of Grey Owl by putting him in a costume-y white jumpsuit more evocative of old western films or late-era Elvis, and by bringing speculations about his family life to the forefront. The ridiculousness of a man drinking beer and looking like he's shooting the breeze with a bunch of friendly animals while his wife brandishes a shotgun takes the conventions of a suburban domestic scene and upends them. With this piece, Thorneycroft has effectively taken the narrative of Grey

Owl and readjusted it for both a comedic and a more truthful effect – which is funny, given that Grey Owl spent the majority of his adult life carefully constructing that very narrative.

Simon Hughes

Like Diana Thorneycroft, Winnipeg artist Simon Hughes' art practice has also encompassed different artistic modes and styles. . The works of his that I will be focusing on were created mostly between 2002 and 2007. They are drawings that juxtapose images of wilderness with stereotypically Canadian architectural and design elements, which are then populated with small holographic stickers of aboriginal figures, which are themselves stereotypical; this type of sticker is marketed to children for play and scrapbooking, and is often sold in dollar stores. In these works, Hughes creates a space for the negotiation of identity by using a “vocabulary of Canadiana” (Enright n.p.) that comprises familiar shapes and motifs. The pop-culture aboriginal figures that inhabit the spaces then provoke post-colonial questions about the construction of a Canadian identity. Loaded with Canadian architectural motifs and references to the North, his work portrays a place filled with hybrid log-cabin/glass-tower buildings that resemble both Expo '67 pavilions and Lego play sets. These elements are used in a way that is comparable to how Diana Thorneycroft uses highly recognizable Group of Seven paintings as backdrops for her photographs.

The holographic stickers depicting aboriginal people that Hughes uses in his work are kitschy and retro not only in their materiality, but also in the image that they reproduce. There are a few ‘types’ of stickers used repeatedly. While not clearly identifiable, they seem to be all male, and appear to be wearing clothing characteristic of

Inuit culture – specifically anoraks and mukluk boots. This type of vaguely Northern Native clothing further reinforces this type of image as stereotypical. This kind of visual stereotyping of Native figures came out of a discourse of “emotionally-laden, nostalgic and romantic Indian images that strategically confined Aboriginal people to the realm of the past” (Butler 4). While it would be possible to consider Hughes alongside the many generations of artists who participated in and upheld this colonial discourse, I would like to argue that the material aspect of the stickers and the nature of the spaces that Hughes places them in adds a dimension of criticality to his practice.

Much in the same way that Thorneycroft’s *Group of Seven Awkward Moments* calls attention to the role of the Group of Seven in Canadian nation-building, Hughes’ work looks at the architecture of Expo 67 in a similar light. Expo 67 was the world’s fair or “exposition universelle” staged in Montreal in 1967 to commemorate Canada’s centenary. Separated from the daily life of urban Montreal by its location across the two nearby islands (Ile Saint Hélène and Ile Notre Dame), Expo 67 represented Montreal to the world in a way that had little to do with the everyday lives of Montreal citizens. The theme of the fair was Man and his World, from an expression used by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, and the result was that the fair represented a humanist vision, of a “unified planetary community” (Kenneally and Sloan 6). Despite the fact that issues of Quebec and Canadian nationalism were a source of tension throughout the year, it is remembered in a particularly nostalgic light by Pierre Berton, who called it “that one perfect moment (now forever lost) of Canadian unity” (qtd. in Kenneally and Sloan 7).

While Berton's claim to Canadian unity as expressed through the fair can be contested, there was a sort of visual unity as to the design and architecture of the fair - the aesthetic was thoroughly contemporary and stylish:

Almost every pavilion was striking for its modern-looking appearance, and indeed very few national pavilions referred to vernacular or nationally specific architectural traditions. Thus the ingenious geometry of Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome for the United States, the unusual 'folded-paper' architecture of the Cuba pavilion, and the abstract shapes of the Canada pavilion could all become iconic manifestations of the event, the modern language of the buildings proclaiming a unified project, despite the many historical and political differences between these countries (Kenneally and Sloan 11).

Hughes specifically references a particularly emblematic example of the fair's aesthetic in *Pulp and Paper Pavillion, Expo '67* (2002)(fig. 11). The actual 1967 Pulp and Paper pavillion was a building with its roof covered in stylized representations of coniferous trees of different sizes, but in Hughes' version the geometric trees make up a sort of modernist forest, one that his holographic stickers of Native figures awkwardly occupy, their heads covered or body parts cut up by the opaque trees. The stark contrast between the figures and the space they stiffly stand in creates a sort of humourous take when the theme 'Man and His World' is considered, since these men (and indeed the Aboriginal figures are all apparently male) seem quite out of place and uncomfortable in this particular world.

Hughes uses an even more distinctive visual reference when citing the pre-fabricated units of Habitat 67, in *Habitat* (2002)(fig. 12). That this building represents an

important moment in Canadian architectural history is particularly significant. Habitat 67 was a:

...centrepiece; ... a visionary building project conceived by 23-year-old Canadian architect Moshe Safdie. His community-living prototype... epitomized utopian architectural thinking at the time. It promised a revolutionary approach to high-density urban life by using prefabricated, mass-produced "boxes" to build a unique, hive-like complex of harmonized living and working spaces (McLaughlin 78).

This ideal behind the construction of Habitat 67 fell victim to a number of factors in the years following the Expo, among them the structural limitations of the 'boxes', and a lack of financial and political support for the more utopian aspects of the planning. Habitat 67 is now entirely composed of high-priced residential units.

One of the most strongly worded reviews of Expo 67's architecture and its effect on the fair came from architectural historian and critic Reyner Banham, who said of Habitat "...we can all join in on congratulating Moshe Safdie on actually getting a fifth year student thesis built" (qtd. in Singh Riar 195). The main failure of the architecture of the Expo, was, to him, that it did not rise above the aims of previous fairs, which is to say that buildings were constructed to be emblematic, and show off for the fair's architects and hosts. The hope was that the architecture would retain all of its functionality outside of the temporal boundaries of the fair:

in Banham's view, then, Expo 67 could only make its 'major contribution' by presenting an architectural complex responsive to far more indefinite and open-

ended needs than the typical desire for monumental display and codification demanded by the regime of the fair (Singh Riar 196).

The disconnection between ‘man’ and ‘his world’ that Banham sensed in the fair, and specifically in the structure of Habitat 67, is something that is echoed in Hughes’ *Habitat*. In it, Hughes has re-created the structure of Habitat 67 and removed it from its locational and environmental context. It floats in space, lacking the greenery that commonly surrounds Habitat 67 in pictures, particularly noticeably in the gardens of the residents. Here, as we see through the windows of the units, the spaces are empty, uncomfortably occupied by Hughes’ familiar holographic stickers of aboriginal people. Due to the uniformity of some styles of the stickers, which repeat themselves, the majority of the figures seem to be staring out the windows in the same direction, out into the also-empty space outside the units. They appear disconnected from their surroundings not only because the plain paper contrasts with the bright colours of the sticker, but also because they float within the space, never becoming involved with it, and never fully occupying it - something that reflects the concerns that critics had with Habitat 67.

Hughes echoed the shape of Habitat 67 without specifically referencing it a few other works, including *Rustic Condos w/Ice Sculptures* (2004-2005)(fig. 13). The negative connotations of condo development set the viewer up, particularly in relation to the topic of neighborhood gentrification, which became common in the later part of the 20th century. In this artwork, the Habitat ‘units’ are built like log cabins, and ice sculptures depicting various subjects, some figural and some abstract (including a Magritte-style *Treachery of Images* pipe) decorate the balconies. This combination of

Canadian urban (condos, modernist public art) and rural (log construction, icy weather) signifiers creates an almost absurd construction.

Hughes also references modernist sculpture in *Driftwood Museum* (2004-2005)(fig. 14), building a tower filled mainly with escalators, leaving room for only a few items of sculpture (much of it phallic), on each floor. The hints of institutional critique are also present in *Department of Ducks* (2002-2003)(fig. 15) which visually echoes some early conceptualism like Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965) while also calling to mind the multitude of departments that exist (many of which seem outdated or overly specific) within the government of Canada (for example, the legal name of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development is still the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (Treasury Board of Canada n.p.)).

Hughes' architectural focus, as seen through the previous two works, is not strictly residential, and his spaces often feature a sort of bureaucratic repetition and banality. This type of repetition is seen in *Hospital* (2002-2003)(fig. 16), in which each hospital room looks exactly the same, and Hughes' holographic stickers occupy 6 out of 8 rooms in the exact same way. The bars on the windows on one side of the building reinforce the melancholy of the building. In *Office Tower, Vancouver* (2004-2005)(fig. 17), Hughes' once again repeats the same layout throughout the floors of a building, with one exception in the floor that houses plants and heat lamps. On most floors, the same elements are present in the exact same spot - water coolers, cubicles, a large computer, and filing cabinets, the only difference on each floor being in the paintings that decorate the east wall. The static immobility of the stickers and the way they occupy

the space reinforces a sense of the mundane. The fact that Hughes specifies that the office tower is in Vancouver in the title is interesting, since Vancouver is known for its fairly recent expansion as a metropolis. In terms of city planning, Vancouver was designed to have a residential core integrated with its commercial core, in order to reduce urban sprawl, unlike many of Canada's other major cities. However, what this has led to is an abundance of downtown residential buildings, while "office towers are rarely proposed in downtown Vancouver and make up only 10 percent of new downtown towers approved in the past five years," leading to surprising effects unique to Vancouver, such as the fact that many commuters leave the downtown core for outlying suburban areas for work, and so Richmond may surpass downtown as a business centre, "rendering downtown a residential suburb/bedroom community" (Bogdanowicz n.p.). Whether or not Hughes is aware of the slowly disappearing office towers in Vancouver, his work seems to point out of the sense of obsolescence in such structures.

While thus far I have discussed Hughes' tendency to feature architecture from different Canadian cities, specifically Montreal, when we realize that Hughes is from wintry Winnipeg, all of a sudden the starkness of his landscapes, the snowy palette, and the isolation of both the buildings and figures within makes a little bit more sense. This is an extreme version of the Canadian experience. . It is significant that two of Hughes' largest works are ones portraying his hometown, *Northern Landscape* (2006-2007) and *River Saga* (2006). In *River Saga* (fig. 18) the monumental size (3'4" x 21', comprising 18 panels of 20"x28") creates a sort of epic landscape of Winnipeg, specifically, the Red River settlement. The Winnipeg of *River Saga* doesn't exist on a linear timeline. Some

elements are indicative of the city - the train yards; while others are exaggerated (the fort around the glass condos) or altogether made-up (almost everything else - the geodesic igloos, the floes of ice which make up the ground and seem to be solid yet steadily dissolving). Beyond the fantastical architectural details that typically fill Hughes' spaces, there are more subtle elements, such as the fact that some of the sticker-figures seem to be picketing something, and the fact that trains are transporting the gold away from the city. By including elements like these, "Hughes treads a fine line between biting commentary and silliness, celebration and bleak despair, in this epic and ambivalent portrait of his home" (Dempsey and Millan 105).

In *Northern Landscape* (fig. 19), Hughes brings together all the thematic and visual motifs that he used in his work between 2004 and 2006, and places them in his hometown. Hughes himself has echoed this sentiment, calling *Northern Landscape* "the culmination of it all" (Enright 46). On the left, a building recalls Habitat, while the towers in the centre echo *Institute* (2008, mixed media). A geodesic dome containing buildings and a tropical climate sits next to another dome, this one in the form of a beaver dam composed of logs. As in *River Saga*, Hughes places all this on unsteady terrain, with the ground breaking up into angular ice floes. The small icebergs in the water in the background look as much like the modernist abstract sculptures in *Rustic Condos w/Ice Sculptures* and *Driftwood Museum* as they do chunks of ice. Hughes' repetition of his own, fantastical architectural constructions evokes the repetition in the structures that populate Canada's cities - condominiums, office towers, and cultural institutions. By doing this Hughes creates a hypothetical urban Canada (that retains both

its strong ties to our hinterland past and to a fantastical modernism), which, in the space between its playfulness and severity, creates a dialogue about urban life in Canada.

In every example, this dialogue is reinforced and heightened by the presence of the sticker-figures that populate his landscapes and structures. The contrast between the holographic, sparkly or brightly coloured stickers and the flat, geometric space they occupy in Hughes' drawings emphasizes a gap in between ideas of personhood and this serious, established and recognizable space. In his monumental works, like *Northern Landscape* the tiny size of the stickers is emphasized even more by the vastness of the space they inhabit. These figures fulfill various roles, calling attention to the relationship between modernist architectural space and its inhabitants, while also commenting on the way the image of the aboriginal citizen has become objectified.

Hughes' use of aboriginal sticker-figures to populate the geometric architectural spaces of his drawings creates a sort of ironic juxtaposition. In Beverly Rasporich's essay on Canadian humour, she specifically mentions that much of the Canadian drive attraction to irony may have to do with the influence of Aboriginal culture and the appropriation of elements of native culture like the trickster myth, "[which] teaches us the best way to deal with inconstancy and uncertainty is by doubling over with laughter" (Rasporich 65). It is not evident that Hughes is deploying the idea of the trickster because of the static nature of the personages on the stickers he uses. While the trickster is a shape-shifter, and usually a larger-than-life character in the narratives he inhabits, the figure here could be seen as reserved and dignified (an alternative reading of these figures as stiff and kitschy is also, however, valid, as I will discuss shortly.). However, the trickster is "a function of [his] landscape, and further... its haphazard and unwilling

manipulator” (Ellis 55), something that can also be said about the figures in Hughes’ stickers; Hughes himself has echoed this stance, saying “the racial aspect with the stickers was just part of what I was doing. I found [the] pieces to be more about architecture and how history is represented in architecture” (Enright 46). This is one of the only occasion on which Hughes has discussed that aspect of the stickers, although he does frequently discuss them in more general terms. While the characters are inserted into a sort of historical narrative in the Hughes artworks I’ve focused on, they necessarily remain silent. It is only in one of his final works featuring the stickers, *Institute* (fig. 20), where Hughes portrays the figures occupying various floors of a mental institution (based partially, if not architecturally, on the MK Ultra experiments from the 60s at McGill(Enright 46), that they are finally given “voices,” in the form of multiple speech bubbles, featuring long passages from vintage books Hughes had collected about the MK Ultra experiments and from books by John Lilly, an American doctor who experimented with psychedelics.

Despite the fact that the artist himself has not extensively discussed his sustained use of the stickers, it is important to further analyze Hughes’ use of Native figures within his artwork. Previously I argued that the material aspect of the stickers and the nature of the spaces that Hughes places them in adds a dimension of criticality to Hughes’ practice. Nevertheless, it is important to approach this kind of representation carefully and thoughtfully, because Native people in Canada have been calling attention to the long history of distorted visual imagery that accompanied their historical subjugation. I would like to argue, though, that by inserting these figures into imaginary yet thoroughly contemporary spaces, the artist is subverting the ‘vanishing race’

discourse that these kind of stereotypical representations usually reinforce. In other words, Hughes uses these stereotypical Native figures ironically. The idea of the vanishing race comes from salvage ethnography, in which “during the nineteenth century people began to sense the urgency of collection for the sake of preserving data [of groups] whose extinction was feared. In this awareness the tradition of salvage begins and from this derives its force” (Gruber 1290). This perception was bolstered by the creation of images of Native Americans by colonial/white artists. As historian Steve Conn explains, “viewing images like these [...] nineteenth-century Americans could almost literally watch Native Americans disappear from the realm of history and enter the more inchoate world of the past” (36). In the twentieth century, these types of images were frequently used in a commercial context and often were quite kitschy, much like Hughes’ stickers are. The effect of kitsch is one of:

solemnity and a complete absence of irony [...] The kitsch object declares itself “beautiful,” “profound,” “important” or “moving,” but such values are not internally achieved; they derive merely from the kitsch object's subject matter or connotations (Dutton n.p.).

So, while the kitsch object would normally work to reinforce this view of Native Americans belonging to the past, Hughes’ subverts this in two ways. By using these images within futuristic spaces and landscapes, he is subverting the connotations of the ‘vanishing race’ that images like this used to carry. Further, the very playful, paradoxical effect of his work topples the status of the kitsch object as solemn or lacking irony.

While Hughes has continued to make works that recall modernist abstraction and Group of Seven landscapes, with some signature flourishes that remain, he rarely uses

the stickers anymore. The way these Aboriginal figures occupied buildings, and their interaction (or lack thereof) with the surrounding space was for several years the driving element in his art, introducing humour and playfulness as it applies to Canadian identity.

BGL

Québec collective BGL is composed of artists Jasmin Bilodeau, Sébastien Giguère, and Nicolas Laverdière, who have been working together since about 2000, when they met at Université de Laval in Québec. Some elements in their work, like the recurrence of toys and miniatures, and references to Canadian wilderness, specifically their repeated use of pine trees, recalls the work of the two artists already considered, while others, like their use of Montréal alleyways and Québécois green and white road signage, speaks more to their specific milieu. Through the ambiguity found in their work -- their juxtaposition of natural and man-made elements, and the tension between nature and consumerism - it can be said that BGL's work addresses the nebulousness of Canadian identity (even if the artists themselves do not explicitly self-identify as Canadians.) Their practice is situated at the margins between art and everyday life. The idea of BGL as a collective, and the non-specific and non-referential initials of their name, is a sort of corporate parody that calls attention to consumer society. However, the three members emphasize that while this parody of North American, or Canadian, or Quebecois society has a critical edge, it is ultimately coming from their standpoint as participants of that society, and they do not disassociate themselves from that which they critique (Ninacs 82).

Part of the visual and conceptual appeal in BGL's work comes from the interplay of the dual themes of technology and everyday life, and there is also a strong focus on

the media and pop culture. The playful and fun elements in BGL's work does not dull its critical edge. Like Thorneycroft and Hughes, their work shows a preoccupation with North American culture, but they also focus on specifically Québécois elements, which is interesting in light of the fact that most of the theory I have looked at concerning national identity focuses on the question of English Canada. While it would be impossible to sum it up in an introductory paragraph, it is important to note for my analysis of BGL's work that while French-Canadian culture has been influenced by French, British, and American culture, as it exists today it remains very distinct from English Canadian and North American tendencies. Humour is an important part of French Canadian culture, from early folklore to the use of irony and black humour by popular Québécois writers like Roger Lemelin, Jacques Ferron and Dany Laferrière (Hathorn, n.p.).

Writing about BGL for the exhibition catalogue *Le Ludique*, Marie Fraser mentions the importance of the concepts of pop and kitsch in relation to their work, especially the images that are presented to us everyday via pop culture, specifically television (107). Such images manage to be glossy and aspirational while also simultaneously banal because of their constant proliferation and saturation in everyday life. In their work, BGL appears to be confronting this idyllic banality by presenting a playful take on it, while also addressing subjects like the intersections between industrial and consumer culture and nature. In my discussion of Diana Thorneycroft and Simon Hughes I mention the tendency to a sort of cultural quotation of typically Canadian elements. One reference that recurs in BGL's practice concerns the Québec town of Saint-Jean-Port-Joli, which, since the early part of the 20th century has been known for

its folkloric woodworking culture, particularly through the use of folk or religious subjects. However, in BGL's oeuvre, woodworking is presented in unexpected and monumental forms. In *Perdu dans la Nature* (1998)(fig. 21), life-size replicas of a car, grass, and a hot tub, all made entirely of wood, were installed in a gallery. As was the case with Thorneycroft, BGL's ability to craft a clever or biting title for their artworks is on display here – the above title translates to 'Lost in Nature,' which one presumably would be if one attempted to drive the car, which, in the installation, sits delicately on dozens of thick wooden facsimile 'blades of grass' that stick up from the floor. Nearby in the installation is what looks like an empty aboveground swimming pool also composed entirely of wood. While on the surface it may seem drained of reference, the fact that Quebec leads Canada in the popularity of above-ground residential pools, further grounds the work in the Quebecois middle-class culture that BGL frequently addresses (Ninacs 82). Placed next to the vehicle that can't ever be driven, the pool seems to imply the futility of installing and maintaining an expensive container of water that will probably be used no more than 3 months out of the year. A showy luxury convertible and a swimming pool, the trappings of middle-class consumer lust, are (as they are in real life as soon as winter hits) rendered useless, and, "as though to drive the point home, both the automobile and the pool are made of cast-off materials, by-products of a consumer society based on obsolescence and mismanaged abundance" (Ninacs 82). By cast-off materials, Ninacs is referring to the wood that BGL recycled and salvaged during an artists' residency in Saint-Jean-Port-Joli (Fraser 108). While *Perdu dans la Nature* certainly has a critical edge, it is important to remember that the artists themselves proudly represent themselves as "consenting suburbanites" (qtd. in

Ninacs 82), each of them from a different small town in Quebec. In this way the work comes across as a playful ribbing on Quebecois consumer society instead of a humourless critique.

The production of these sort of consumer objects rendered in natural materials and drained of their use value is something that re-occurs in their art practice, as in *BGL Mobilité* (fig. 22) in which the group produced dozens of ‘pretend’ cell phones made from blocks of wood, between 1997-2003. As BGL has said, “playfulness is a way to get people thinking without being annoying. It’s more fun. If the way you say things is fun, then you’re not just left with the more unpleasant side of an idea; you get the seductive side too” (qtd. in Ninacs 83).

While Simon Hughes imagines and draws intangible architectural spaces, one of the currents in BGL’s work from the start has been to make these sort of imagined, fantastic spaces real: “While still classmates at Université Laval, the three artists already had a keen desire to destabilize our usual appreciation of place by making fabricated architectural inventions plausible” (Ninacs 83). One way in which BGL does this is by transforming everyday articles into toy-like objects, as we have previously seen in works like *Perdu dans la Nature* and *BGL Mobilité*. An example of this mode occurs in *Peine débuté, le chantier fut encore* (1997), an installation made of salvaged wood, paint and tile, built and presented in Québec City’s Galerie L’Œil de Poisson. The title, loosely translated, is “this worksite just started”. The installation was composed of 3 structures built by the artists:

a white ceramic sandbox/greenhouse/temple on wheels, filled with toys; a traditional Québec house furnished with a garden swing and a Melamine

cupboard; and a sugar shack made of logs whose delightful ornamentation seemed drawn from the confines of a fancy reception hall (Ninacs 83).

This project served to create an immersive experience for the audience, creating a sort of grown-up and blown-up (to adult size) play space for the visitors to the gallery. The material recalls the wooden building blocks children are often given as toys, while the resemblance to real, functional spaces common to Québécois society brings to mind toys that are “play” versions of the objects and environments one would typically encounter in adult life. This is something Roland Barthes talks about in his essay *Toys*, arguing that most toys seem to exist as a way for adults to see themselves in children, in that the toys aid in a form of play that is a “microcosm of the adult world” (39). These type of toys (Barthes’ specifies that French toys are the issue, but from his descriptions it’s clear that the type of toys he is talking about proliferate) are miniature and artificial versions of adult objects, or miniature adult professionals themselves (ex. toy soldiers). The toys are a way to instill children with values of the adult (capitalist, Western) society and prepare them for their eventual initiation into that world. The result is a lack of creativity in the child’s play, and, as Barthes says:

faced with this world of faithful and complicated objects, the child can only identify himself as owner, as user, never as creator; he does not invent the world, he uses it: there are, prepared for him, actions without adventure, without wonder, without joy (39).

In his essay, Barthes champions building blocks as a more important form of play since they allow the child to invent their own forms and structures. BGL takes toys and play out of their usual context as activities exclusive to children, almost undoing this process

of assimilation into adult life that Barthes talks about, while also calling attention to it, and the way that we, as “adults”, interact with spaces, particularly art spaces.

This theme continues to occur in BGL’s practice, in works like *Villa des Regrets* (1999)(fig. 23), an in situ outdoor installation that took place in Granby, Québec, again made of salvaged wood. The structure resembles the timber framing of a new house. There are very few clues to the fact that it isn’t in fact part of a house under construction. The one element that gives it away is the timber frame built to resemble a satellite dish that hangs off the side of the main structure. The result is that it looks like a jungle-gym version of the type of ‘new construction’ homes that have come to characterize suburban sprawl in Québec.

A different take on the transformation of objects from everyday life into toys appears in *Buffet Froid* (2000, wood and salvaged containers). The title, and appearance, suggests a snack machine or cafeteria-style case full of pre-packaged food and beverages, yet all the containers have been salvaged, and are empty. At least visually, the work suggests the type of toys with strong branding, like the kind of McDonald’s play sets that come not just with plastic food, but facsimile plastic containers. The absurdity in having a plastic container toy that looks like the real plastic containers used by fast food franchises is easily recognizable. The work also points to the role that these containers occupy as wasteful objects, reminding us of BGL’s frequent environmental concerns. This is expressed in a more concrete way in *Abondance difficile à regarder* (2000, in situ intervention with salvaged containers)(fig. 24), in which the empty bottles and containers were recycled into a structure that resembles stained glass.

While the work that I have looked at by Diana Thorneycroft and Simon Hughes repeats certain motifs of Canadiana to attain a specifically Canadian national humour, the case of BGL is different, and it becomes evident that Canadian humour doesn't come solely from the urban centres of English Canada. While, as I mentioned earlier, Canadian culture seems to define itself against what it is not, this is also true of Québécois humour, which has its own solid historical and cultural foundations. While the aspects of Quebec culture that BGL engages with are distinct, their strategies (playfulness, irony, engagement with both history and popular culture) are definitely comparable to those used by the other artists I have discussed.

In this thesis, I have attempted to explain why humour has become a popular strategy for contemporary Canadian artists looking to explore themes of national identity within their work. A number of examples of humour theory have been cited, from incongruity theory, to theories of national humour, to discussions of the Canadian tendency towards irony. Each artist I have used as a case study has used humour to different, yet always effective ends. Diana Thorneycroft's *Group of Seven Awkward Moments* takes stereotypical signs and signifiers of Canadian identity and mixes them in a playful yet incongruous way, to address the parallel roles played by art history and pop culture, in constructing a sense of national identity. Simon Hughes' work uses a consistent (if less immediately recognizable) visual vocabulary that recalls the slogan "Man and His World", the rallying cry of Expo 67 held during Canada's centenary celebration – although in his artwork we become witness to the negotiation of identity within different kinds of spaces, whether modern or nostalgically folkloric. BGL shifts this type of investigation to approach Canadian (but often specifically Québécois)

identity in ironic terms, addressing nationhood through the intersection of consumer culture and nature. Each artist confronts the social contexts within which concepts of Canadian national identity have changed in recent years. That these artists have managed to integrate themes of Canadian art history, pop culture, architectural theory, kitsch, environmental themes, and mass culture (among others) into their overarching presentation of Canadian identity speaks to both the power of humour and the impressive pluralism of Canadian culture.

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FIGURES



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Figure 2: Diana Thorneycroft; "Group of Seven Awkward Moments: Early Snow with Bob & Doug"; *Diana Thorneycroft*; <http://dianathorneycroft.com/portfolio-seven-awkward.php>; web; 11 March 2014.



Figure 3: Diana Thorneycroft; "Group of Seven Awkward Moments: Northern Lights"; *Diana Thorneycroft*; <http://dianathorneycroft.com/portfolio-seven-awkward.php>; web; 11 March 2014.



Figure 4: Diana Thorneycroft; "Group of Seven Awkward Moments: In Algonquin Park"; *Diana Thorneycroft*; <http://dianathorneycroft.com/portfolio-seven-awkward.php>; web; 11 March 2014.



Figure 5: Diana Thorneycroft; “Group of Seven Awkward Moments: Northern River”; *Diana Thorneycroft*; <http://dianathorneycroft.com/portfolio-seven-awkward.php>; web; 11 March 2014.



Figure 6: Diana Thorneycroft; "Group of Seven Awkward Moments: March Storm, Georgian Bay"; *Diana Thorneycroft*, <http://dianathorneycroft.com/portfolio-seven-awkward.php>; web; 11 March 2014.



Figure 7: Diana Thorneycroft; "Group of Seven Awkward Moments: The West Wind"; *Diana Thorneycroft*; <http://dianathorneycroft.com/portfolio-seven-awkward.php>; web; 11 March 2014.



Figure 8: Diana Thorneycroft; "Group of Seven Awkward Moments: Jack Pine"; *Diana Thorneycroft*; <http://dianathorneycroft.com/portfolio-seven-awkward.php>; web; 11 March 2014.

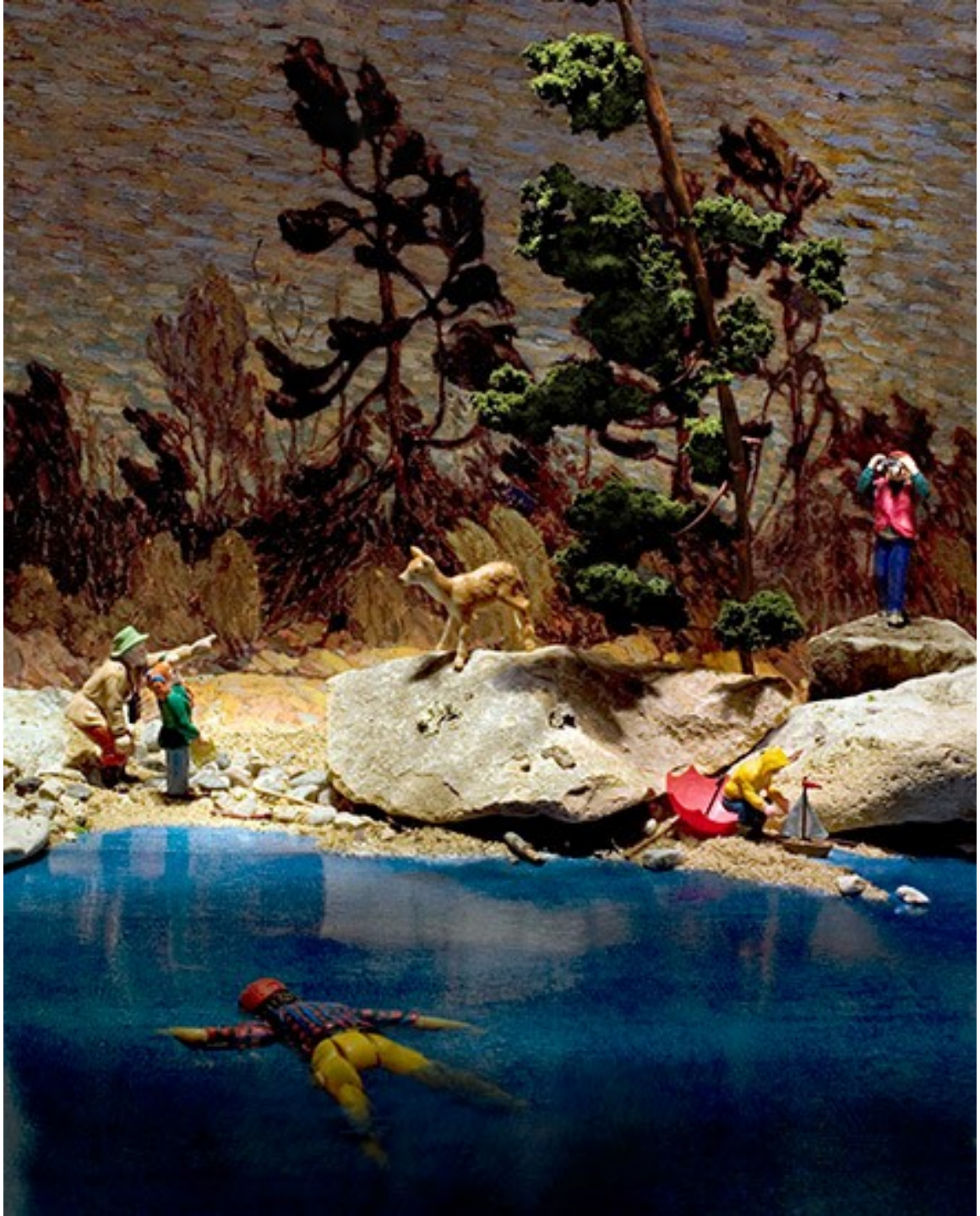


Figure 9: Diana Thorneycroft; “Group of Seven Awkward Moments: Byng Inlet”; *Diana Thorneycroft*; <http://dianathorneycroft.com/portfolio-seven-awkward.php>; web; 11 March 2014.



Figure 10: Diana Thorneycroft; “Group of Seven Awkward Moments: Grey Owl and Anahareo at Beaver Swamp”; *Diana Thorneycroft*; <http://dianathorneycroft.com/portfolio-seven-awkward.php>; web; 11 March 2014.



Figure 11: Simon Hughes; "Pulp and Paper Pavillion, Expo '67"; *Simon Hughes: selected work 2002-2003*; <http://simonhughes.ca/index.php?/project/2002/>; web; 11 March 2014.

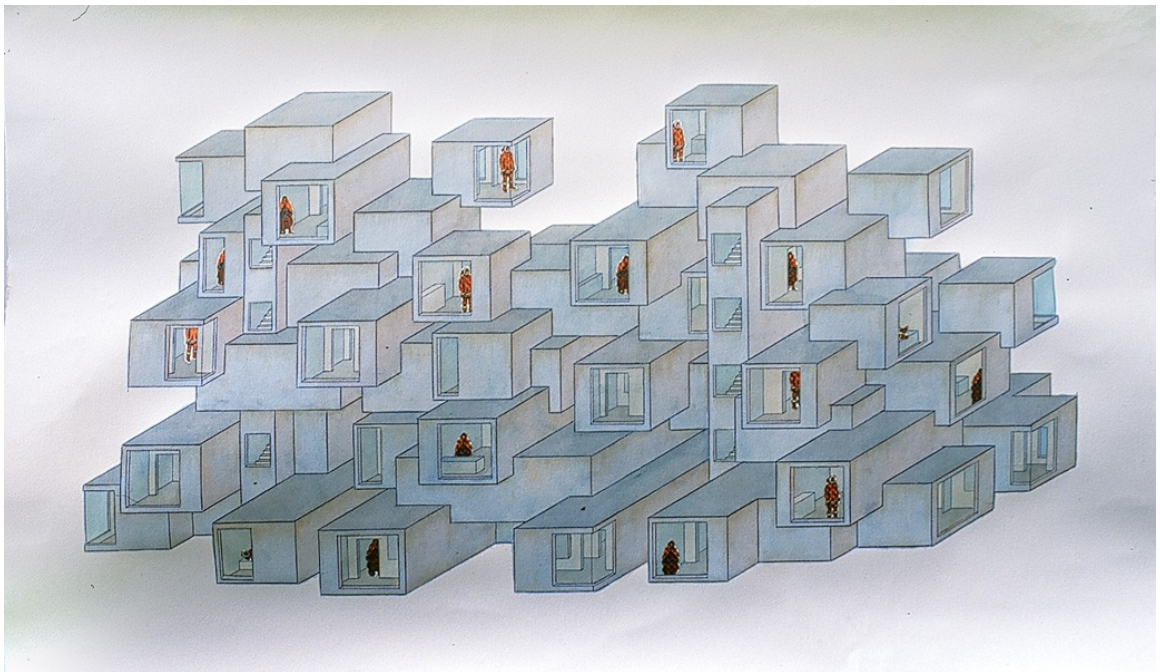


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Figure 13: Simon Hughes; “Rustic Condos w/Ice Sculptures”; *Simon Hughes: selected work 2004-2005*; <http://simonhughes.ca/index.php?/project/2004/>; web; 11 March 2014.

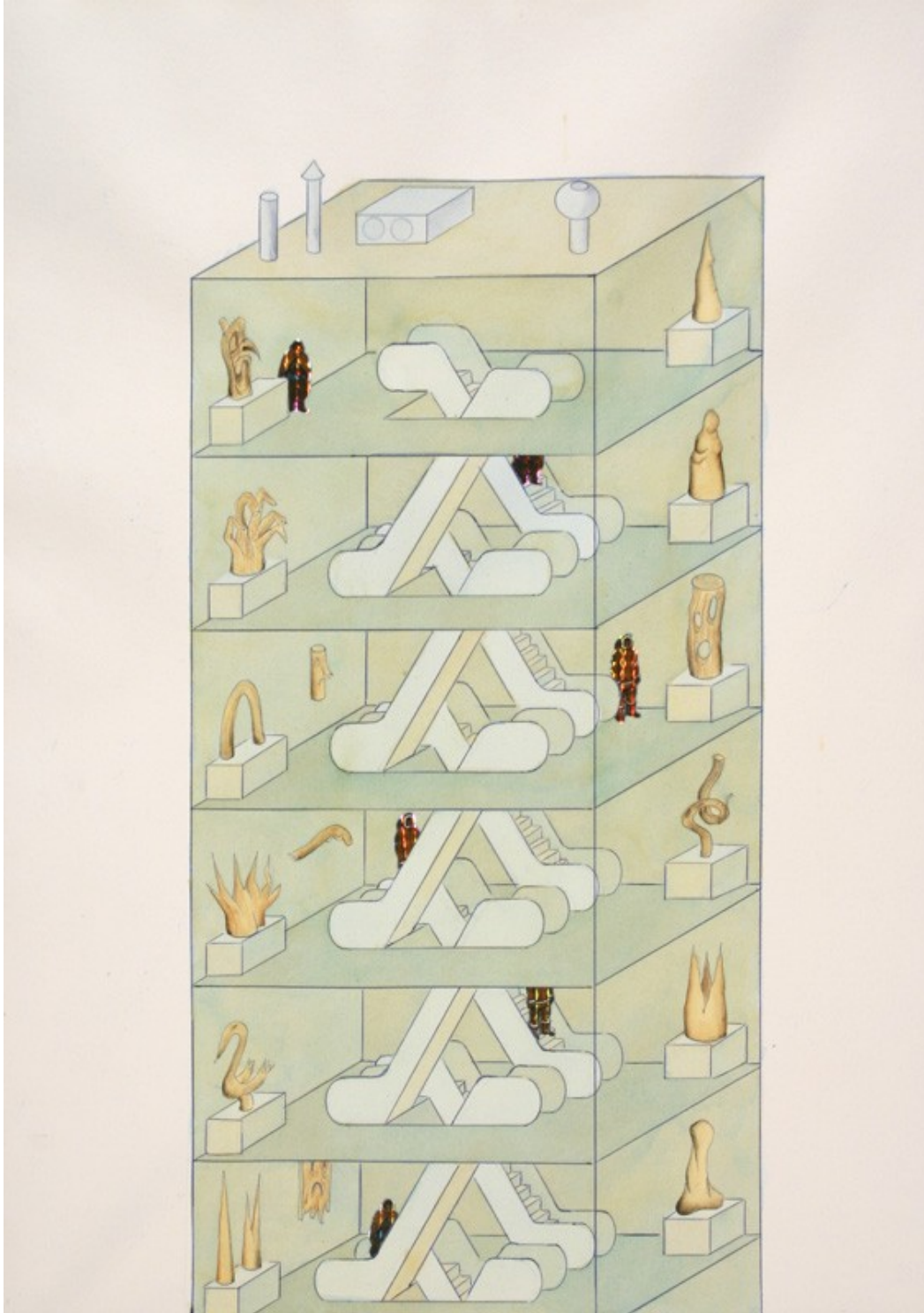


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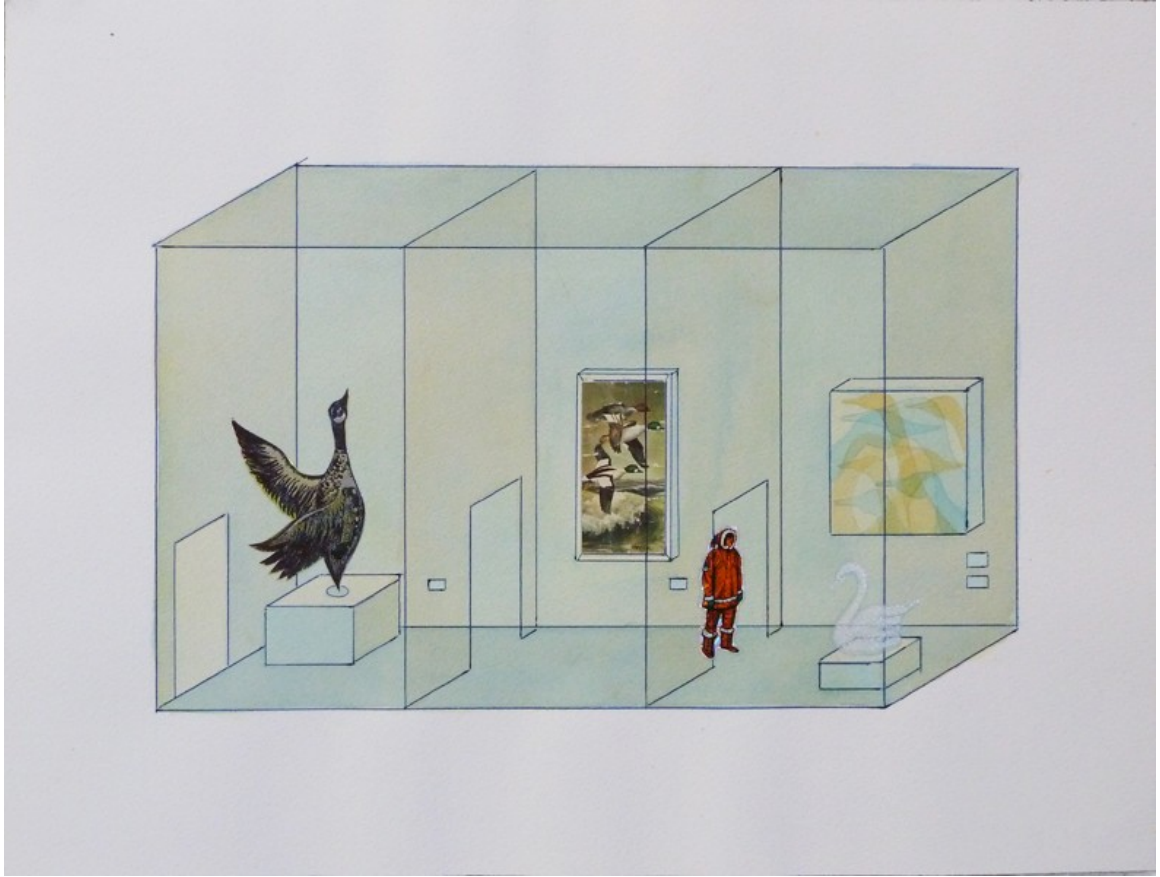


Figure 15: Simon Hughes; “Department of Ducks”; *Simon Hughes: selected work 2002-2003*; <http://simonhughes.ca/index.php?/project/2002/>; web; 11 March 2014.

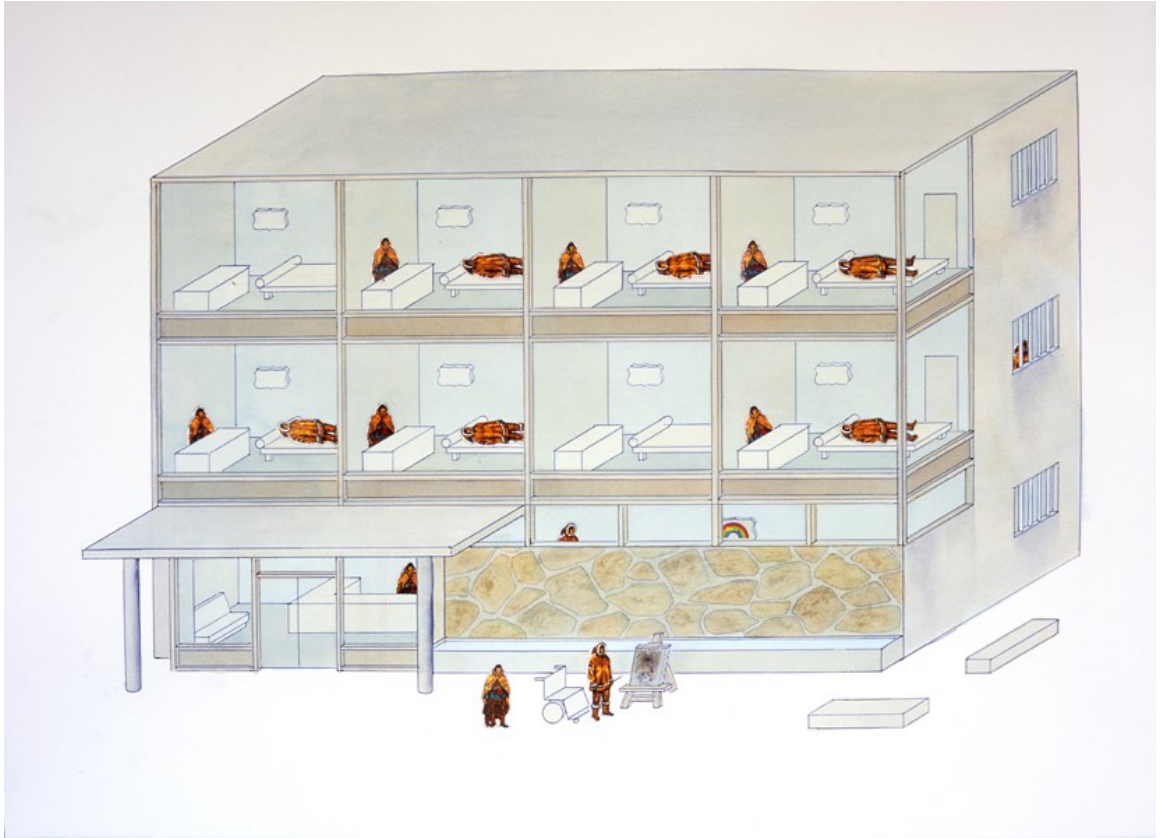


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Figure 19: Simon Hughes; “Northern Landscape” exhibition view and detail; *Simon Hughes: selected work 2006-2007*; <http://simonhughes.ca/index.php?/project/2003---2004/>; web; 11 March 2014.

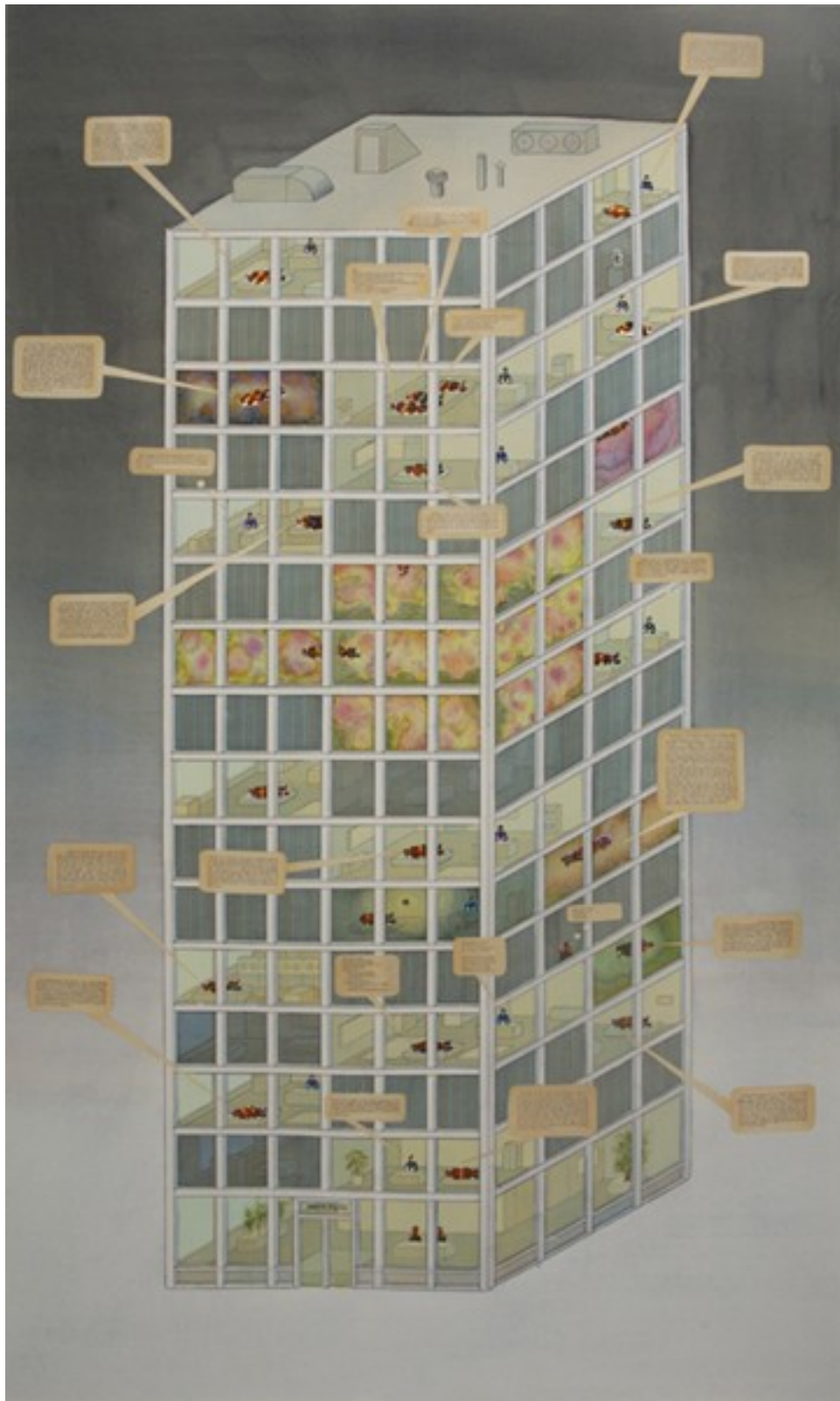


Figure 20: Simon Hughes; "Institute"; *Simon Hughes: selected work 2008-2009*; <http://simonhughes.ca/index.php?/project/2007---2008/>; web; 11 March 2014.



Figure 21: BGL; “Perdu dans la nature”; *Art Gallery of Nova Scotia*;
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Figure 23: BGL; “Villa des Regrets”; *Art Bank Works of the Week*;
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Figure 24: BGL; “Abondance difficile à regarder”; *4 installations pour le Grand Hall du Musée du Québec*;
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