

## Natural Artifice:

Elinor Whidden and 12 Point Buck

by DAYNA MCLEOD

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Featuring photographs, installation and video projection, Elinor Whidden and 12 Point Buck charge head-on into deconstructing and assembling nature through artifice, representation, kitsch farce, consumption criticism and epic landscape in their shared exhibition at Gallery 44. While the collaborative duo of 12 Point Buck uses artifice and paper stand-ins of nature to question our nostalgic relationship to nature, Elinor Whidden inserts herself into Canada's heroic frontier history to circumvent and transform it into a post-apocalyptic future that quietly waits for car culture to die.



ELINOR WHIDDEN, *Sunny Lake Ridge* from the series *FORD Explorer*, 76 x 114 cm digital image, 2009 (PHOTO: Tanja Tiziana)

Elinor Whidden maximizes the breathtaking reality of nature and capitalizes on the authentic Canadian landscape within her series, *Ford Explorer*. Whidden subverts the automobile industry's agenda by imagining its demise, as it mysteriously disappears into Canada's bucolic landscapes leaving behind only innocuous remnants. Windshield wipers, side-view mirrors and the steel belting in tires are the only things left to scar Whidden's sublime wilderness. Her questioning of the colonialist practice of recording history in grandiose portraits of explorers and settlers gazing proprietarily

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over the landscape parallels the domination of the automotive industry over our contemporary car consumer culture.

Within her sculptural, performance and photographic work, Whidden questions colonialist representations of history and humanity's conquest over nature by infiltrating the very scenes she depicts with the ultimate symbol of progress: the car, or more specifically, car parts. Carrying, dragging and portaging windshield wipers deep into the Canadian wilderness, Whidden follows the fur trade routes of early voyageurs to create *Windshield Wiper Tent* deep in the wilderness of Northern Ontario. Whidden's lean-to shelter becomes a farcical, ineffective, obsessive accumulation of car parts of the past in a post-apocalyptic future where nature has regained control, featuring Whidden as the sole survivor. The contradiction in function cannot be lost on us here: both cumbersome and useless without the context of a car, 150 pounds of windshield wipers carried on Whidden's back like bundles of fur over a portage, become a satirical adventure in endurance, with the resulting *Windshield Wiper Tent* nestled in

the open landscape our reward. As the car industry slips into bankruptcy<sup>1</sup> and driving habits change, a future without cars may in fact be realized within our lifetime, and Whidden's prophetic wish of such a future may actually come true.

Capturing big skies, epic vistas, dense wilderness and the natural magnitude of the Canadian landscape, Whidden situates herself in her images simultaneously as an historical figure and a post-apocalyptic explorer. At first glance, we are drawn to the epic proportions of Whidden's images; *Sunny Lake Ridge* grandly showcases the vastness of the deep blue skies peppered with soft billowing clouds, while *Smoke Lake* and *Georgian Bay* feature a confident, masterful figure gazing over a rough and rugged landscape. The formal composition and feeling of vastness is reminiscent of paintings of the Canadian wilderness by the Group of Seven, Tom Thomson and Paul Kane. These paintings reflect a late 19th and early 20th century Romantic dream of a new frontier and humble attitude toward the majesty of nature in the untouched landscapes of the Canadian wilds. When we examine Whidden's photographs more

closely, we see anachronistic details that lead us to ask questions that complicate a seemingly colonialist depiction of our conquerable country. Questions arise about time, place, car culture, consumption and how we will survive when the last vehicle fails to start.

Dressed in t-shirt and cargo pants, Whidden strikes a slight pose in the traditional colonialist position, making post-apocalyptic man, a woman. Challenging the narrative structure and accuracy of our Canadian history and how we create narrative out of our collective memories, Whidden's lone figure travels through the epic vistas of Northern Ontario in both the distant past and distant future. Armed with a musket fashioned with a car's side-mirror, our heroine can see her past as readily as she sees her future, and guards against it.

Whidden cleverly references colonialist ideals mirrored in car industry rhetoric that we are bombarded with daily through television, print, and web branding propaganda; "built for the open road"<sup>2</sup>, "moving forward"<sup>3</sup> and "no boundaries"<sup>4</sup> are slogans that attempt to position the

car as a means of escape, freedom and adventure, and propose that you can just as easily experience nature by looking at it from the comfort of your car as you can by experiencing it first hand. Car windows and windshields act as mediator between a visceral or authentic experience of nature, allowing the driver to assume their rightful place as colonizer and to dominate the landscape simply by driving through it. It seems fitting then, that Whidden's occupation of this industrialist/colonialist position within her work should occur in her fantasy of their demise. Her photographs are documents of a process of her own exploration of colonialist representations of Canada, history, nature, conquest and consumption. The resulting performances ambitiously take a road less travelled through the act of walking, while playfully satirizing a romanticized new frontier and a modern day car culture that is trying desperately not to fall apart.

Where Elinor Whidden parodies the codes and signs of epic documentations of landscape, 12 Point Buck deconstructs representations of nature through artifice and examine our culture's disneyfication<sup>5</sup> of

wildlife in their photographic, installation and video work. Using the codes and language of a consumer culture that places kitsch on the mantelpiece beneath the big game, mounted moose head trophy, this Lethbridge Alberta collaborative duo challenges our experience of nature by questioning how we construct these experiences in the first place. Their work explores our longing to mesh with a collective nostalgia of nature and it's depictions. By playing with stylized pop representations of wildlife to examine how we romanticize, fetishize and trivialize the very ecosystems on which our lives depend. They begin by taking us on a search for the wild via dioramas situated in the vitrines of Gallery 44. Images of found landscape paintings and photos form the backdrop of their whimsical world. 3-D paper tole<sup>6</sup> figurine animals complement the scene, playfully pulling at our heartstrings while revealing the absurdity of their (re) construction. Soothed by these familiar representations of nature, 12 Point Buck reminds us of a shared figurative language of craft, allegory and metaphor that has transformed nature through our

ELINOR WHIDDEN, *Smoke Lake* from the series *FORD Explorer*, 76 x 114 cm digital image, 2009  
(PHOTO: Greg Manuel)

consumption to comfort us in our growing distance from the natural experience. These sanitized interpretations in paper, paint and plaster have transported us to an unquestioned homogenized landscape that has become a substitute for the real thing. Kitsch cultural objects are photographed, cut apart, and reassembled by 12 Point Buck to stand-in for real wilderness, focusing our attention on the artifice of nature's representation, and how we accept that representation despite it being airbrushed and constructed just as liberally as a supermodel on the cover of a fashion magazine.

But this distancing of the natural experience has a much darker side. "The whole Walt Disney philosophy eats out of your hand with these pretty little sentimental creatures in grey fur coats. For my own part, I believe that behind these smiling eyes there lurks a cold, ferocious beast fearfully stalking us."<sup>7</sup> Although Baudrillard is talking about the twisted and dysfunctional relationship with



nature that Disney has inflicted on us, and perhaps the corporate impetus of Disney itself, this statement also communicates how distanced we've become from our experience of the wild, and its potentially sinister repercussions. There are no helpful woodland creatures with sewing, cooking, and performance skills in real-life; according to YouTube, Pepsi drinking Thai monkeys, obese rabid squirrels, and grocery store gate-crashing bears are the closest we have to these artificial stand-ins, and they don't sing.

This disneyfication sanitizes and sentimentalizes our relationship with the wild, resulting in a dulled experience of the real thing. We need to look no further than Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man*<sup>8</sup> to see the harsh consequences of this numbing down of the wild in a real-life context. By removing the blood and gore of humanity's confrontation with nature, we anthropomorphize the unpredictable and threatening aspects of the wild to make it safe. But this safety is conditional on our buying into this new version of our relationship with nature. Enter *Deer Me*, 12 Point Buck's 5-minute video projection that



features a deer/man hybrid creature with fur coat and rubber deer mask awkwardly slipping and sliding through the barren, snow-spotted scrub brush landscape of southern Alberta. We hear the footsteps of the cameraperson; they are our eyes as we stalk the deer man on his precarious travels through the coulees leading down to the Oldman River. We hunt him, we observe him and we consume him, boldly assuming our "rightful" place in the deer man's habitat. He is both of nature and not: representative with the signs and symbols of the wild. He is a bastardized creature of the landscape who is a disjunction of our expectations of nature and the reality of nature; a fissure of these expectations that is hunted, fragile, precarious and temporary.

12 Point Buck reveal the vast difference between consumption in the wild as a means of survival, butt-up against our consumption culture that gorges on excess and is manifested in objects intent on decorating our homes. Their work points to how we have cultivated a shallow and unhealthy relationship to nature that has instilled a forgetfulness of survival and

the reality of actually living in nature; how we have evolved into a culture that permits a person to clear-cut land for their house and fill it with landscape paintings, Bambi figurines and wildlife photographs and call themselves a nature lover or environmentalist. We have boiled down the natural world into simplified terms that permit the exploitation of the land and mediate our experience of what is nature.

This false sense of security has distanced us from the original experience of the wild so much so that we must make a point of visiting nature. We take camping trips. We go on car safaris. We visit zoos. Postcards, souvenirs and images captured through the lenses of our digital cameras and cell phones also mediate our experience of nature. As we become more out of touch with the wilderness and are pushed further and further away from it into urban landscapes wrought with cement, hanging wires and high-rises, our experience of nature necessarily becomes more and more mediated by technology.

Yet despite this mediation, our yearning to bond with our natural environment remains unsatisfied. But which version

of nature are we yearning for? It is here where 12 Point Buck so cheekily interferes with our memory by stirring feelings of loss, hope, humour and adventure. They easily access our collective memory through familiar artifacts and crafting techniques from childhood like ceramic figurines transformed by paper tole or three-dimensional decoupage. They layer nostalgic artifacts in their work to stimulate the viewer into a sense of heartfelt longing. By rewriting these narratives and examining their effect on memory, 12 Point Buck asks if we are experiencing nature through our own actions in the wild, or plugging into a collective consciousness that remembers through artifice and representation.

Both 12 Point Buck and Elinor Whidden question the authorship of shared memory through Canadiana kitsch and epic landscape. Incorporating installation into their practices, they create rich and lush photographs and tableaus that speak to our sense of history and our relationship to the land and its inhabitants. Their aesthetic critiques our romantic relationship with the wilderness, the sentimentality we have

for the wild, and our nostalgic experience of nature. With tongue-in-cheek precision, they approach their subjects from different angles, united through a formal sense of beauty, and critical thinking.

1 Campbell, Colin. "The Decline of the North American Car," *Maclean's*, 12/1/2008, Vol. 121, Issue 47.

2 2004 Ford slogan.

3 2004 Toyota slogan.

4 2001 Ford SUV slogan.

5 "...Used to describe the process of turning the flesh-and-blood world we all inhabit into a replica of Disneyland sanitized, safe, entertaining and predictable." Ellwood, Wayne. "Inside the Disney Dream Machine," *New Internationalist*, Dec 98, Issue 308.

6 The art of handcrafting three-dimensional pictures from flat prints.

7 Baudrillard, Jean. *America*, 1986. Chris Turner, trans. (London: Verso, 1994), p. 48.

8 Herzog, Werner, Director. *Grizzly Man*, 2005. Werner Herzog's documentary that chronicles the life and death of bear enthusiast Timothy Treadwell through his own footage. Treadwell spent 13 summers in a national park in Alaska where he lived among bears, felt they 'trusted him' despite being warned by park officials of the dangers of his actions to himself, other tourists, and other bears. Treadwell and his girlfriend were killed and partially eaten by a bear in 2003.

## ELINOR WHIDDEN

Elinor Whidden received a BA in Canadian/Environmental Studies from Trent University, a BFA from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and a MFA from SUNY at Buffalo. She has exhibited throughout North America, recently showing work in Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Buffalo NY. In 2004 she was featured as an emerging artist on CBC's Zed TV and in 2007 she attended the Walking and Art residency at the Banff Centre. Whidden is the recipient of numerous grants and awards, including creation grants from Nova Scotia Culture, Tourism & Heritage, Ontario Arts Council, and most recently from Canada Council for the Arts. Whidden's exhibition *Ford Explorer* continues her quest to find a way to survive and adapt in a world increasingly threatened by contemporary car culture.

## 12 POINT BUCK

12 POINT BUCK has been working collaboratively for two years. In 2008 their first video *Deer Foraging* was shown as Part of the Toronto Urban Film Festival (aka TUFF) and in March 2009 their installation *Herd* appeared at Parlour in Lethbridge. From October through November 2009, they worked in situ at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery where they also launched their first publication self-titled, *12 Point Buck*. They will be exhibiting their work at Harcourt House in Edmonton in September 2010.

**CHAI DUNCAN** completed his MFA at the University of Saskatchewan before moving to Lethbridge in 2006. Since his arrival he has been an active member of the visual arts community and has served on the board of Trap\door Artist Run Centre as both a director and as vice-president. Duncan has taught classes in the art department of the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Lethbridge and currently holds the position of Art Technician in the faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Lethbridge.

**LEILA ARMSTRONG** loves dark chocolate and watches an inordinate amount of television. To justify these behaviours she acquired an MA in Media Studies from Concordia

University, and went on to do doctoral studies in communications at Simon Fraser University. When able to tear herself away from such thought provoking programming as "Paranormal State," she produces works inspired by her encounters with pop culture artefacts. Check out her blog at <http://leilaarmstrong.blogspot.com>

## DAYNA MCLEOD

Dayna McLeod is a writer and digital media artist who is obsessed with pop culture. Her writing has appeared in *CV Photo*, *Hour Magazine*, *MIX Magazine* and is a regular contributor to *NOMOREPOTLUCKS*, an online and print arts and culture journal. She has traveled extensively with her performance work, and her videos have played from London Ontario to London England- across Europe, North America, South America, Asia and a few times on TV. She conceived and coordinates [52pickupvideos.com](http://52pickupvideos.com), a video site whose participants make one video a week for an entire year. [www.daynarama.com](http://www.daynarama.com)

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ELINOR WHIDDEN, *Windshield Wiper Tent*, 183 x 122 x 107 cm scavenged windshield wipers, zap straps, steel, screws, 2009