

## Drawn Like Money

*The nature of our government, our bilingual heritage and the diversity of Canada's geography and wildlife are emphasized by the portraits, legends, landscapes, birds and national symbols which appear on every bank note.* display text.

*Paper Puzzles exhibition, Currency Museum, Ottawa*

If aspects of our nature as Canadians are visible through bank note design, and every bank note provides the cryptic combination of elements which signify "Canada", who is depicted, and where?

Patrick Mahon has drawn directly from the syntax and "authority" of the engraved line of banknote design in his *Vitrine* series installed as part of **Cold Storage**. These large scale drawings employ a hand-drawn line that mimics the engraving line of banknote currency. The layered and intricate approach to the images, and the blue and purple colours chosen, refer specifically to five dollar and ten dollar Canadian bank notes. Mahon's complex drawings signify "the diversity of Canada's geography" but in a manner quite unlike official banknote representations. Made from drawings and images gathered at Baker Lake in 2006, Mahon's work questions ideas of the north as uncontaminated and untouched, or as home to traditional Inuit lifestyles (as was pictured on the 1975 issue two dollar bill). By overlaying line drawings of discarded oil drums, excess building supplies and mounds of piled up snow, Mahon represents a landscape that is anything but pristine. Mahon's ongoing interest in print culture, and this engagement with currency as part of that culture, makes it interesting to consider Mahon's **Cold Storage** project in direct relation to the history of Canadian banknote design.

Since the Bank of Canada's first issue in 1935, a series of contrasting and often contradictory images have appeared from one series to the next. Successive series populate, de-populate, and repopulate ever changing "Canadian" landscapes. Allegorical beings in strange Greco-Roman dress take up residence in the first issue, dominating the landscape and reassuring us of the

prosperity to be found in an inhabitable and hospitable land. The landscape is set in the distance and poses no threat. It is almost completely obscured as the archetypal and supernatural figures foreground and fill the frame. On the two dollar note, a seated female with fruits of the harvest represents the Harvest Allegory and a kneeling figure exhibiting the produce of the field to the Spirit of Agriculture graces the 1935 twenty dollar note. As allegories for European domination of the New World, these images clearly represent a wilderness tamed.

In contrast, the following 1954 series replaces the Spirit of Agriculture on the twenty with a vast landscape of trees and snow. Simply titled "Laurentian Winter" there is not a single soul in sight and the landscape does nothing to reassure. A mythicized, allegorical encounter with the land is replaced by one of stark realism. The landscapes of the 1954 series are predominantly uninhabitable, wild, and alien. In relation to the landscape and its people, this series shows a great deal of "It" and very little of "Us".

In the "Scenes of Canada" series following the '54 issue we see another set of stark contrasts. The landscape is repopulated and busy with activity. It has become inhabitable again, but without the assistance of supernatural beings. Technology, natural resources and manufacturing transform the landscape, depicting nation-building activities in a Canadian nation-state. They lend authority to the creation of an idea of Canada and legitimize this formation. Curiously, the only unpopulated scene is one contained within a National Park; the wild as gated garden. The ten dollar bill in this series eradicates all signs of Nature presenting the techno-scape of Sarnia's Polymer Corporation. Into this new configuration of It and Us, a third term is introduced by the first appearance of Them in Canadian banknote design. "They" are the Inuit pictured on the two dollar note issued in 1975 in a traditional hunting scene on Baffin Island. In the harshest of landscapes depicted, they represent an exotic Canadian "other" in another land.

These shifts and contradictions come to mind when considering the complex issues Patrick Mahon grapples with in the exhibition **Cold Storage**. When Mahon explores the contemporary north, it is piled up with debris and waste. His experience in the north, first as an elementary school teacher in Chesterfield Inlet from 1987 to 1988, then as part of the Art and Cold Cash Collective working periodically in Baker Lake, Nunavut in between 2004 and 2007, is an informed and personal relationship. Working with Jack Butler, Sheila Butler, Ruby Arngna'naaq, and William Noah, the artists of this collective consider the transformation from a barter economy in the north to the industrial expansion of capitalism.

If the imagery on a denominational note can shift from a Rocky Mountain peak (Mount Burgess, 1954 \$10 note) to "Chemical Valley", (Sarnia, 1971 \$10 note) to a lone, fish clutching osprey (1986 \$10 note), to a tribute to Remembrance and Peackeping, (current \$10 note), then what might this suggest? Clearly, as Patrick Mahon has realized in his *Vitrine* drawings, the landscape of currency is a rich one to mine. Focusing on Patrick's color choice of the ten and the five dollar notes, it is interesting to trace changes in both denominations. The \$5 note has gone from Mile 996 on the Alaska Highway at Otter Falls, (1954) to an image of a salmon seiner in Johnstone Strait off Vancouver Island, (1972), to a belted kingfisher in the middle of nowhere (1986) to the current image of children frolicking in a winter wonderland.

The stark winter of the 1954 \$20 has become a much more playful season today. Within this winter wonderland an allegory remains. A barely legible excerpt from Roch Carrier's "The Hockey Sweater" floats to the right of the skating rink depicted. Long considered an allegory for Franco / Anglo tension, the Hockey Sweater, tells the sad tale wherein a young Carrier, a Maurice Richard and Montreal Canadian fan, is forced to wear a Toronto Maple Leaf hockey sweater.

The complexity, contradiction and politics involved in considering bank note design history apply equally to readings of Mahon's work. His *Boneskidoo*



drawings depict images based on caribou and seal bones found on the land in Nunavut alongside pictorial references to snow machines. A graphic interest in the logos found on these machines is incorporated as well. In this sense, traditional relationships to the land are linked to images from the remains of spent modern transportation technology. The fragility of this relationship can be felt in Mahon's glass forms made from his collection of animal bones which he has housed in a white "igloo-like", makeshift room, built from discarded Styrofoam forms. These industrial forms once held the various televisions and other packaged commercial goods shipped north. Much like the contradictory trail of conflicting concerns discovered in looking back at currency, Patrick Mahon's combinations and overlaid images present a north that has no fixed imagery but is constantly shifting between change and nostalgia, expansion and preservation.

**Laura Millard**