

Ideas of North

In his groundbreaking radio documentary *The Idea of North*, Glenn Gould sets out to articulate what he sees as the quintessential defining element of the north. Echoing the themes of his complementary radio documentaries in the *Solitude Trilogy* (*The Latecomers*, 1969, and *The Quiet in the Land*, 1977) it is solitude and isolation that he seeks to project as the critical aspect of the northern experience. *The Idea of North* remains the best known of the set, both because it was the first in the trilogy of experimental audio works and also due to the iconic Canadian subject matter. *The Idea of North* was, appropriately, produced and broadcast in 1967, Canada's centennial year, a time when, in a wave of populist and nationalist fervor, such institutions as the National Film Board of Canada, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and Radio Canada were investing in scores of projects promoting the country. In 1967, Montréal's Expo pushed, through its pavilion designs and content, the now familiar contradiction of the country as a vast wilderness of pristine landscapes and resource extraction.

1967 was also the year that the National Film Board produced a classic short film of the national anthem, the last version to be screened in movie theatres and at the end of the broadcast day on the CBC. The film includes all of the cliché images of Canada, the Rocky Mountains, Winter Carnival in Québec City, Prairie grain farms, fishing boats in the Maritimes, hockey at the Montréal Forum. It also includes an aerial shot of a lone dogsled racing across a vast white expanse of arctic ice. There is nothing around, just wide-open empty space. The dogsled hurtles through the same void of white within which Glenn Gould (actually Colm Feore in Francois Gerard and Don McKellar's 1993 film *Thirty Two Short Films About Glenn Gould*) will stand. Gould/Feore remains in the distance calling out his ideas of north and then walks off camera. These images, the lone dogsled and the isolated Canadian eccentric musician/composer lingering in a frozen landscape, continue to persist and to be perpetuated in spite of the dramatic change in the arctic due to climate change and concentrated human settlement.

Back in 1930, two other cultural icons of Canada had also gone north. A.Y. Jackson and Lawren S. Harris (founding members of the Group of Seven) ventured into the Eastern Arctic with the RCMP aboard the borrowed sealer the S.S. Beothic. Jackson had been north on the same voyage three years previously with the Nobel Laureate and amateur painter Dr. Frederick Banting. These trips represented a first encounter with the Arctic for each artist and would have a profound impact on their respective works. For Jackson and Banting, the voyage expanded their experience of a country they were both deeply committed to and shared a distinct concept of. For Harris, the Arctic reinforced his idea of Canada as a northern nation but also fueled his move into a more refined and abstract method of painting the landscape.

While Jackson, well set in his ways, brought his long established methodology to the northern landscape, Harris was a painter very much in transition, not only stylistically but also, more profoundly, philosophically. Through his Rocky Mountain and Lake Superior paintings, Harris had begun to move beyond the nationalistic vision he had promoted in the past. He had begun to see the northern landscape through the filter of Theosophy and Transcendentalism, philosophical/religious movements that emphasized the divine in nature and cultivated exploration of a true reality beyond surface appearances. Harris searched for (and projected on to the landscape) order, purity, a “searching light” and “an elevating, transforming and unifying power,” qualities he found in abundance in the Arctic. In the isolated icebergs and simple triangular mountain/island forms hovering in ethereal space, Harris appears to have found the purity he was searching for in the natural environment.

It was he (Harris), more than any other Canadian painter, who was responsible for integrating the Arctic into the Canadian landscape tradition. This was probably because the exaggerated simplicity of his style expressed the mental picture that Southern Canadians had of the Arctic. - Peter Larisey, *Light for a Cold Land*, Dundurn Press, 1993

Images opposite: Lawren S. Harris, *Eastern Arctic*, 1930

Harris's Arctic is a mythic place, an idealized place that has grown distant from contemporary realities of the north. The other, peopled "reality" of the north, is strongly projected in the far less well known photographs and films Harris shot on the 1930 trip and these documents stand as a fascinating contrast to the artist's paintings. It is a persistent contradiction, as Harris' austere vision is what many Canadians, in this age of global warming, challenges for Native communities and precarious sovereignty, still imagine the Arctic to be.

The potential of this stark vision of a north that is a cold empty expanse of ice and harsh conditions peopled only by a scattering of Inuit is fading, literally melting away. The Northwest Passage that Sir John Franklin and his crew died in reckless search of has become a vast expanse of open water during the summer months that is easily navigable. Icebergs continue to melt and snowcaps recede to expose bare earth. Industry has moved north establishing permanent settlements. Inuit communities struggle to maintain their identities and cultures while their control of the land is challenged by international sovereignty debates driven by the appetite for oil, gas and resources. The north of Harris and Gould exists only as a museum piece, if it ever existed at all.

There is unnatural detritus accumulating in the north, the waste materials of settlement, the cast-offs of travelers and the garbage of industry. There is nothing unique about this material that distinguishes it from the kinds of waste found strewn around the globe — bits of machinery, food containers and packaging. The latter material, not the things "used" but the packaging needed to deliver it, appears to be ubiquitous. One substance that would stand out in more southern regions, blends in to the terrain in clustered mounds reminiscent of Harris' Arctic forms. The pure white Styrofoam that protects the goods shipped north is simply cast aside (its structural and insulation properties rejected and ignored) to break down into the tell tale little balls that will break down no further, will not go away or melt away like the ice and snow

Images opposite: Lawren S. Harris, *Davis Strait, Eastern Arctic*, 1930

it mimics in the artificial landscapes of Christmas displays. Will these little white balls become as omnipresent as nurdles, the tiny plastic resin pellets that are the most basic ingredient of plastics manufacturing that are now more common than plankton in the world's oceans?

Sir John Franklin left behind his fancy dinnerware (bone china and silverware) and tin cans soldered with the lead that poisoned his crew. John Rae who, unlike Franklin, relied on and adopted the ways of the Aboriginal peoples of the north would discover his fate. Half a century later Roald Amundsen would also adopt traditional ways to survive in the north but as the 20th century progressed, traditions would fade, particularly in the realms of transportation and settlement, resulting in a resource intensive sedentary lifestyle that imports vast quantities of stuff from the south. And so the piles continue to grow and the debris breaks down and the little white balls swirl in a gradually warming arctic wind. Will the arctic become like the North Pacific Gyre with its spiraling mass of waste plastics trapped and slowly churning round, a residue of lethal consumption reminiscent of Franklin's cans sealed with lead? This mass of material culture lingers on as an active "collection" that creates an accidental museum that cannot be contained.

Patrick Mahon's ***Cold Storage*** exhibition project drew on, manipulated and rearticulated this growing collection of matter, structures, memories and ideas. Engaging in a form of graphic study that was both interpretive and documentary, he recorded and framed chaotic scenes of waste mixed with snow and ice, mechanical parts, oil tanks and building debris pushed aside and piled high to form disturbing hybrid snowbanks. With their complex web of line, limited colour range and layering of elements, his drawings are strongly reminiscent of Canadian currency and are a reminder of the roots of Mahon's work in print culture. Central to the exhibition, was a gallery within the gallery, a constructed room housing delicate glass forms derived from the artist's collection of bones. This room, a manifestation of the structures described in the ***Cold Storage*** drawing series, offered an elegant display that combined museological and commercial models of inventory and presentation. With its facade of waste Styrofoam packaging and insulation, the space, and its

contents, appeared to play on conflicting connections to the north. Is Canada's north a place to be valued and preserved (environmentally and culturally) or a new terrain of industrial expansion and trade?

Mahon's *Vitrine* drawings employ the artificial framing device, graphically rendered within the drawings, of the display case. They refer specifically to the vitrine dioramas of New York's American Museum of Natural History. The AMNH is an institution with a stained history of interaction with the Arctic and its indigenous peoples, a history that Kenn Harper's *Give Me My Father's Body* is such a haunting and troubling record of. (The book tells of a group of Inuit taken to New York City by Robert Peary and literally put on display in the museum.) To Peary's generation of adventurer/explorer's, the north was a land to be conquered and acquired, its people ripe to be eradicated through cultural assimilation, and the museum played an active role in this program. Repurposing the museum's vitrine form to frame scenes of waste projects a heightened level of manipulation and construction. There is nothing natural here, an impression reinforced by the cube structures of the **Cold Storage** drawings with their sharp silver outlines.

Mahon's iconic bland cube storage units blot out the refined elegance of Harris' mountains, islands and icebergs and loom as ominous barriers to the racing dogsled and Gould's lone contemplative figure. As the north continues to be developed and settlements expand, one can imagine these units multiplying exponentially across the landscape. They will steam and groan, a white noise of hidden heaters and machinery within, and unlike the traditional igloo, well-rounded and hunkered down against the elements, able to return to the elements, the cube will be buffered by wind, its design repeating the flawed fundamentals of the so-called "temporary" structures (the houses, offices and work buildings) shipped north, structures that will breakdown to end up amongst the piles of detritus at the edge of town. There will be a light within, not a warm light of burning mammal oil but a harsh cold light of blue fluorescent, its humming and buzzing drowned out by the roar of a diesel generator. Mahon's glass bones, brilliant fragile reminders of a more traditional form of northern waste, will be out of place here. The storage units

will fill with the equipment and packaged goods now necessary to sustain the new northern economy while Harris' northern scenes remain preserved in the climate controlled storage rooms of southern museums in cities strung along the border with the United States where they will occasionally be brought out as reminders of a distant fading past that never was.

One day, in the dead of winter, the power will fail. It will be dark and silent. Solitude. Isolation. And then, maybe the radio waves carrying Gould's plaintive voice will bounce back to us. Maybe there will be the sound of a lone dogsled gliding past on its frozen runners. Maybe, in the brutal darkness, we will hear the sound of silverware scraping over an empty plate of bone china while the Styrofoam forms squeak in unison with the cutlery as they rub against each other and the walls around us abrade themselves into little tiny particles of artificial snow.

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The S.S. Beothic approaching Franklin's Camp, Eastern Arctic, 1930 (photographer unknown)