

Canoe Fight: A journey of reckoning with “white wilderness”

Canadian visual culture is a powerful force in shaping ideas about what it means to be “Canadian” and it often does so in alignment with norms of colonial whiteness that perpetuate dominance over IBPOC¹ peoples and Indigenous sovereignties. At the same time, art that reveals and challenges these patterns has significant potential to help in re-shaping colonial mindsets and systems towards decolonial paradigms. Stó:lō scholar Dylan Robinson and settler scholar Keavy Martin state, while “almost nothing we can do will lead immediately or directly to the return of land or to the dissolution of Canada’s claims over Indigenous territories” called for by decolonial movements, “a wide range of diverse actions ... each play a part in the broader project of achieving justice.”² While Indigenous artists, scholars, activist and communities take the lead in this work, it is increasingly understood that non-Indigenous people (BPOC and white settler) have intergenerational responsibilities³ to mobilize these diverse actions from the particularities of their positionalities. Michael Farnan’s artwork does this with nuance and insight from a first-generation white settler perspective by holding an unflinching mirror to colonial desires that run deep in the dominant Canadian consciousness and skitter across the surface of everyday “Canadian” life.

In the exhibition, *Canoe Fight*, Farnan counter-appropriates commonplace activities, objects and images; metrics of colonial replication that are often dismissed as the harmless stuff of Canadian culture. By doing so he points to the ways familiar Canadian touchstones such as Group of Seven paintings, nature films, canoes and wilderness culture surreptitiously reiterate colonial claim. *Canoe Fight* shines a critical light on these symbols of colonial reasoning, bringing them out from the shadows of denial and innocence that are encoded into the mainstream Canadian psyche. In particular, he engages with expressions of (white) settler entitlement, keeping a sharp eye on the histories, narratives and politics of making place and meaning in the settler colonial context. Importantly, Farnan calls colonial desires and assumptions into question without reducing their complexities or skirting the ways he himself is implicated. I’ll note that, as a white settler viewer, artist and scholar, I am similarly implicated, and my discussion of Farnan’s work here reflects these factors of positionality, as well as my own commitments to activating the intergenerational responsibilities of who I am where I am *in relation*. It also reflects any limitations in apprehension that are entangled within my perspective.

The video, *Canoe Fight: From Reverence to Redress*, forms the core of this exhibition and its layered inquiries are also imbricated in the accompanying works. It begins with a scene that could have emerged from an NFB nature film and found a home within a Group of Seven painting. A wispy fog hovers over the rippling surface of a lake that is framed by trees displaying subtle autumn hues. Here, Farnan harnesses the symbolic potency of the Group of Seven’s landscape representations and their enduring ability to impart meaning and emotion as a “quasi-official image of Canadian national identity.”⁴ The Group’s paintings can be seen as having rendered Indigenous land—that is the territories of distinct and sovereign Indigenous nations—into “Canadian” landscape. In this way they rhetorically impart an exclusive state sovereignty while forming a ground for settler colonial fantasies of empty wilderness and desires for emplacement and extraction. These visions of wilderness as being there for the taking—for the

attachment and enjoyment of white settlers/Canadians—are no less present in the genre of nature documentary Farnan also references in this work.

As the video continues, sounds of the water are complimented by a guitar and fiddle, adding to the familiar filmic ambiance. A flock of geese fly into frame against the warm tones of a rising sun, their calls echoing the music. A canoe emerges from the fog with two figures paddling in unison. As a solo voice begins to sing *Land of the Silver Birch*, a song that recalls campfires and sing-alongs, the paddlers come further into view. The canoe is another charged “Canadian” icon that Farnan frequently enlists in his work. An Indigenous technology that has been co-opted and assimilated as a bedrock of mainstream Canadian life, the canoe ascribes meaning to Canadian identity much like the Group of Seven’s paintings. As settler scholar Bruce Erickson contends, the canoe, and its contemporary use as a vessel of leisure, reinforces a proprietary link between “Canadian” national identity and the wilderness.⁵ Representations of the canoe in Canadian culture, such as in the films of Bill Mason which Farnan directly references in these opening scenes, play a significant role in furthering these associations, creating a potent sense of settler colonial emplacement through both proximity and desire.

Amplifying these sentiments we see, from the paddlers’ point of view, a pair of moose that “wanders at will” on the shore while the song lyrics relate the same. The camera cuts to a sequence of common cinematic wilderness tropes: a set of rapids, a bird clinging to a lichened boulder, a tree with ochre leaves rustling in the breeze. As a viewer I am lulled into the familiar sensation of watching a nature documentary. However, while these scenes might on the surface pass as reverent homages to wilderness “Canadians,” Farnan’s tongue is already firmly planted in his cheek with a subtly satirical slant that is suffused with measured critique. In a nod to both reverence and redress, this intro section establishes an undercurrent of tension; a deliberate ambiguity that ebbs and flows throughout the video, and for that matter throughout the exhibition as a whole.

In the large-scale drawing *Mapping Canoe Fight* (2019), this merging of tropes and their subversion is mobilized through an interlacing of cartography and narrative. Charting Farnan’s research for the works in the exhibition, this imagery incorporates references to “settlement” histories (colonial invasion), as well as their intersections with Hollywood representations. This geo-political narrative includes, among other images, early Jesuit representations of the area where Farnan lives and works, Champlain with the Hurons fighting against the Iroquois, the map imposed on the Métis peoples in what is now Manitoba, Grey Owl’s cabin, and both the Jesuit missionary Jean de Brébeuf and film actor Pierce Brosnan in separate canoes.⁶ To briefly consider just one element of charged source material found within this work, the top left corner features Farnan’s take on allegoric depictions of industrious beavers that were deployed as early as the 16th century to align settler subjectivity with notions of labour and industry as civilizing, entitling principles of the settler colonial project. By visually mapping his research Farnan lets the viewer in on the complex underpinnings from which he draws, the resonance of which is only strengthened by being juxtaposed within this skillfully rendered work.

The video's nature documentary pretense is disrupted when the canoe comes clearly into view and we can see that the Bowman is wearing a taxidermy deer head with rumpled pelt flaps draping over his shoulders. As the singer slides into French, the occupant of the stern is now also visible; an adult Boy Scout figure that is a recurring alter-ego of Farnan's, here with a badge-encrusted sash slung across his shoulder under a snug life jacket. The Boy Scout is vernacularly recognized as a pillar of goodness with the official slogan calling for scouts to "do a good turn daily." Farnan complicates this portrayal situating the Boy Scout as "the loudest representation of the white settler culture trying to connect to ... a sort of white wilderness."⁷ He notes further that the Boy Scout ethic also represents an element of "discipline and control" in this endeavour, as well as the appropriation of Indigenous culture.⁸ The Boy Scout's presence ties an illusion of goodness to the colonial project and parallels the way perceptions of Canadian benevolence often overshadow the reality of its ongoing colonial ills.

All seems peaceful as the peculiar travelers continue their journey arriving at the shore and preparing to portage. Scenes of them alternately paddling and portaging with earnest expressions hint at a timeline disturbance, and this dissonance is heightened when shots of the Boy Scout character aggressively choking the Bowman in the bottom of the boat are interspersed. Through this combination of simulated violence and temporal disjuncture, fissures are formed in the comforting familiarity of the nature film or landscape painting so that their larger implications can begin to float to the surface. By the end of this intro sequence the paddlers are making camp as night falls with the understated camaraderie of fellow travelers who are somehow bound in place and relation, at least until the trip concludes, one way or another.

References to choking introduced in this opening sequence of the video are replicated in a set of screen prints titled *Canoe Fight #1-4* (2020). The prints re-imagine snippets of the video in a form reminiscent of instructional manuals that offer step-by-step methods for mastering all manner of tasks, notably those that may be needed on a canoe trip such as canoeing and camping skills and first aid. These sharp graphic renderings of how-to aesthetics echo the "discipline and control" emblematic of Boy Scout ethics. Farnan notes that he draws here on material culture from his childhood that lays out "the rules that are created around experiencing nature and wilderness."⁹ In this way the prints reflect desires for the mastery of colonial inheritance that is key to the ongoing colonial project. They also, I suggest, hint at colonial cravings for neatly packaged and conclusive answers that circumvent the labour and investment necessary for undoing colonial attachments. Farnan gently ridicules these superior and expedient notions, subverting the instructional tenor of the manual through the absurd acts that are depicted.

The *Reverence* sequence of the video opens with autumn scenery echoing that of the intro, although it is now coupled with a discordant soundtrack. The canoe traverses choppy waters in the sunlight. Otters swim by as it pauses near the shore. The paddlers

face one another in the boat, quietly, but with undercurrents of menace. The Boy Scout launches at the bowman, and as they struggle the boat tips, depositing them both in the lake. After a time they right the canoe but continue to wrestle, again falling into the water. Their grappling is awkward, encumbered as it is, first by the confines of the canoe, and then by the shallow water and their soaking clothes. Hostile, and at the same time oddly slapstick, the fighting is tinged with humour, which serves to heighten both the tension and ambiguity within the unfolding narrative. Fatigued, the paddlers rest across the upturned canoe as the deer head floats nearby along with their cargo. They drag the canoe onto land and come to rest side by side on a rocky ledge overlooking the lake. Now shivering from the damp and cold they look out over the water to a scene that draws us back to the visions of the Group of Seven, although both their leisure activity and its setting are now flecked with uncomfortable implications about the things settler Canadians often hold dear.

The large-scale oil painting *Canoe Lake Sunrise* (2021) also recalls the Group of Seven. Here a layering of brush-stroked washes depict a scarlet sunrise reflected in a roiling lake. The warm tones of the sky and water are bisected by a forested landscape that provides the backdrop for a stand of trees with a boulder leading the eye into the water of the foreground. Gleaned from a still from the video and stemming from a series of Farnan's plein-air paintings and the *Canoe Fight Dreams* (2019-2021) paintings that are featured in this exhibition, this work is a translation of a translation. By including it in the exhibition, and more specifically by creating this work *for* the exhibition, Farnan tugs on a thread that connects the Group of Seven's characterizations of wilderness with attachments that he and many of the viewers may share. Calling these desires into question, while at the same time asserting a form of reverence, the struggle or "fight" writ large in the video bleeds into this painting in ways that are disarmingly relatable. Although this painting on its own could perhaps be read as sliding further towards reverence, in conjunction with Farnan's larger body of work and in the context of this exhibition it effectively plies very real tensions between attachment and critique.

The *Redress* sequence begins with the pair paddling towards the camera, pulling up to shore and walking into the bush with canoe, packs, paddles and animal headgear in tow. After weaving through the trees, they arrive at a clearing that hosts a rustic log cabin, a fire and a pair of men; one is standing by the fire playing the fiddle, and the other is seated playing the guitar and singing in French. Our travelers wrap themselves in blankets and sip from cups filled with hot liquid, poured from a pot by the fire. This "visiting" scene alludes to the scales of relationality that are intrinsic to Farnan's work. As viewers we are left to decipher the specificities of the relations implied; the lyrics in English and French, the Hudson Bay and Boy Scout blankets, the beaded vest and nod to Métis fiddling and the detached interactions of the four men. Farnan's choice to leave the narrative open in this scene mirrors the rest of the video. There is ample room for the viewer's curiosity; space for us to not only reflect on our ideas about what we are witnessing and how we may or may not fit into the narrative, but also to consider the complexities of relations in lands that are invaded and unceded across Canada, and particularly, as Farnan points out, those at play where he lives and works.¹⁰ There is no tidy instruction booklet here. Rather this scene hints at the necessity for, and intricacies

of, engaging relationally through the “diverse actions” that play a role in achieving justice in these contested lands. It also speaks to the real relationships that form a vital aspect of Farnan’s work, regardless of whether they are made explicit in, or elaborated on for the viewer.

Not long after the paddlers settle in by the fire it starts to rain. Hard. Soon they begin to pack up and ready themselves to move on. Scenes of the Boy Scout persistently choking the deer headed bowman are intercut with shots of their packing and paddling. Time and again the bowman goes limp and is released by the Scout, only to come around bewildered, and to once again be attacked. As Farnan suggests, it is not clear who is “in the wrong.” Instead these actions speak to the seemingly intractable struggles “for and against” the cherished cultural icons that prop up an inequitable status quo.¹¹ As the music continues, shots of the pair paddling contently are punctuated with choking scenes until they float past a gathering of people on the shore who are all donning paper masks. What seems like it may be a final bout of choking, with the bowman appearing to at last be dead, is followed by a shot of the musicians at the camp, thus bringing them along on the ongoing journey.

Whereas in the video the aggression is cinematic and recurring, in the small sculptural work, *Canoe Dance* (2016), the choking gesture is immobilized in white resin. Offering another glimpse into the iterative nature of Farnan’s art practice, this work, which predates the video that anchors this exhibition, was a response to his 2015 video also titled *Canoe Dance*. He describes the *Canoe Dance* video as balancing reverence and redress, but perhaps being read too far on the reverence side.¹² In this sense *Canoe Dance* (the sculpture) serves as both foil for *Canoe Dance* (the video) and a jumping off point for *Canoe Fight: From Reverence to Redress*. Calcified into this tiny statue—this mini-memorial—the determined hostility of the fight is held in suspended animation that defies an outcome, speaking to Farnan’s interest in the grappling that occurs over the meanings and impact of revered pastimes and material/visual culture that help to school a settler colonial nation state such as Canada. The scale of this piece casts the viewer as towering observers of this conflict with a god’s eye view,¹³ a position that carries vastly different implications depending on who is doing the looking.

The final video sequence, *une dernière doléance*, takes a further step in asking the viewer to consider who they are, how they perceive and in what ways they enact reverence and/or redress. It opens with a song in which the singer dreams of a “wild forest... never settled, never tamed,” and a river that “whispers please come hither, come wander me once more.”¹⁴ The paddlers come into view on the Wye River, a placid marshy channel bounded by reeds that brings us more specifically into the territory where Farnan lives and works. The singer switches to French as the two paddlers draw closer to white buildings in the distance. These are the replica buildings of Saint Marie Among the Hurons, a Jesuit missionary in Wendake near what is now the town of Midland, that was built in 1639 and burned and abandoned ten years later. We see the canoe at a distance, but it is difficult to discern if the paddlers are still on board. A closer shot reveals one laying atop the other, motionless. The canoe and its

lifeless cargo float along the channel until a church comes into view, looming above them on the shore. The camera returns to the gathering of adults and children on the banks of the river, all of them wearing masks depicting either Pierce Brosnan or Kevin Costner. These characters trace back to Farnan's *Transformation Mask* series (2016) and other works, which use references to Hollywood films that call to mind fictional and real-life appropriations of Indigenous identity; Brosnan as Grey Owl being a white actor who played a white historical figure who built his legacy on "playing Indian," and Costner in *Dances With Wolves* being a white actor who played a fictional white figure who finds redemption in "going Native." The camera alternately pans this masked audience and the travellers who are now serenely paddling in the channel again. In the final shot the camera rests on the onlookers, masks blankly staring out towards the water - towards us, the viewers.

This exhibition is indicative of the way Farnan tackles the violent historical and contemporary manifestations of the settler colonial project with insight, humour and aesthetic precision, in particular those associated with what he refers to as "white wilderness." As he points out, the only story he can tell with authority is his own, and these works make highly effective use of the symbols and histories that have been part of his story as a white settler Canadian. By sliding between homage and critique (and playing the role of the Boy Scout) Farnan refuses the absolution of the "good settler," instead implicating himself in the desires of settler whiteness he holds under the proverbial microscope. His layered counter-appropriations reveal colonial projections embedded in fixtures of Canadian culture and beloved Canadian pastimes that often go unmarked. Each work, in its own way, teases out con/tensions between colonial replication and decolonial reparation, a journey of reckoning that Farnan implies is ongoing. At the same time they speak to the intergenerational responsibilities of those living in settler colonial states (occupying Indigenous lands) and the potential of considered, relational, positionality-driven arts-based resistance as a subset of the "diverse actions" to which Robinson and Martin allude. *Canoe Fight* offers a wealth of avenues for the viewers' learning, unlearning, recognition and reflection; plenty of room to be drawn in, provoked, amused and captivated, and to move out into one's life re/considering one's relationships with reverence and redress in the struggle for justice in settler states.

- Leah Decter

¹ Indigenous, Black, People of Colour

² Martin, Keavy and Dylan Robinson. "Introduction: The body is a resonant chamber." In *Arts of Engagement: Taking Aesthetic Action In and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016. 2.

³ Robinson, Dylan. "Intergenerational sense, intergenerational responsibility." In *Arts of Engagement* : 43-65.

⁴ O'Brian, John and Peter White, eds. *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*. Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007. 13.

⁵ Erickson, Bruce. *Canoe Nation: Nature, Race, and the Making of a Canadian Icon*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013.

⁶ Farnan's description from a discussion with the author that was a MacLaren Art Centre event. April 23, 2021. <https://maclarenart.com/event/zoom-discussion-with-michael-farnan-and-leah-decter/>

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ **ibid**

¹¹ **ibid**

¹² **ibid**

¹³ See: De Certeau, Michel, and Pierre Mayol. *The Practice of Everyday Life: Living and Cooking. Volume 2. Vol. 2.* U of Minnesota Press, 1998. 92

¹⁴ Lyrics from “Cry of the Wild” by Dave Hadfield with additional lyrics, translation and arrangement by Joel Allain