

Come in Under the Shadow

Curatorial Essay for *Rachel MacFarlane: Broken Images, Where the Sun Beats*

By Emily McKibbin

*What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water.*¹

I began writing this essay on an intercity bus in November, 2021. A passenger nearby was temporarily unmasked, sipping water from a thermos. Beside him was a gift bag, with one bunch each of red and white roses peeking out, Walmart-stamped cellophane indicating that they were purchased under a buy-two deal. Outside, the autumn leaves were burnt out and browning, the fall colours no longer at their peak. We were then leaving the city and were driving through suburbia—the type of sprawling environment that New York City-based artist Rachel MacFarlane was raised within.

But it wouldn't do to mention MacFarlane's suburban childhood without mentioning its proximity to the Case Woodlot, seventeen hectares of managed public wood and wetlands that have survived relatively unscathed since successive lumber harvests cleared the forests in the Aurora area's late settlement period, between 100 and 135 years ago.² It's the sort of pristine/not-pristine landscape that's so central to the global colonial projects of the last few centuries—one can find similar preserves in South Africa, or New Zealand, or the United States—and it's also the exact type of landscape that retains MacFarlane's fascination to this day. It is a beauty that appeals and discomfits in equal measures. And now, as the pandemic wanes for us wealthy residents of the global north, it is this beauty that pulls us outside of our homes once again.

MacFarlane's landscape paintings—like all landscape paintings made in this place now named and broken into Canada and the United States—are complicated. Inscribed by settler-colonial culture and informed by the digital realms of late capitalism, the paintings in *Broken Images, Where the Sun Beats* collectively speak to our difficult and troubled relationship to the natural world in our late capitalist moment. And had our exhibition planning not been interrupted by the global pandemic, this would have been more than sufficient for a critically engaged, formally rigorous exhibition.

¹ TS Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 1922. Available online: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47311/the-waste-land>. Accessed 7 September, 2021.

² Chris Gynan, "Managed Forest Plan: Aurora Woodlands, 2010-2019." (Aurora, ON: City of Aurora, nd). Available online: <https://www.aurora.ca/en/business-and-development/resources/Environment-and-Sustainability/AURORA-WOODLANDS-MANAGEMENT-PLAN-2010-TO-2019---images-reduced.pdf>. Accessed 5 November, 2021.

*“Isn’t everything funny—the day outside is a yellow Hell of tearing biting cold wind—fairly blinding with dust—why it’s mad—it’s wonderful too—I like it—it’s tremendous—still it is laughable.”*³
—Georgia O’Keeffe, 1918

Georgia O’Keeffe wrote these words in a letter to Alfred Stieglitz on a blustery February day in Canyon, Texas. The artist, then thirty, was slowly recovering from a bout of the Spanish Flu, which she caught in the first wave of the Great Influenza Epidemic of 1918-1920. It was this slow recovery that would ultimately drive her into the arms of the older Stieglitz, starting one of the most consequential love affairs of 20th century art history, but at this time she is merely a lethargic woman, sick in bed, unable to find the energy to paint: “You see, I haven’t even responded to the sunrise or the sunset or the bright shining day or the night sky...There hasn’t been enough of me—I can’t even write about it—It makes my head ache—.”⁴

What is a pandemic landscape? It seems paradoxical: when the pandemic hit, our worlds shrunk. A visit I had scheduled to New York City for late March, 2020 was first delayed, and later cancelled; MacFarlane’s final research trips for this exhibition were likewise first delayed, and later cancelled. MacFarlane’s landscapes in Brooklyn—and my landscapes in Barrie—were both suddenly bound by our barest necessities and the strength of our legs to carry us to acquire them. But when I think of pandemic landscapes, I think of *Tempest at the Earth’s Edge* (2020) and its “tearing biting cold wind” racing across rocks and scrubby brush. Prior to the pandemic, MacFarlane had travelled to Gros Morne, near the easternmost edge of the North American continent, where the evidence of tectonic plates grinding together and breaking apart finally proved their existence. Like all of the works in this exhibition, the experience was a physical immersion that she later recreated in a small paper maquette, painstakingly lit, and then painted at a scale exponentially larger in her Brooklyn studio, her dog Penny at her feet.

But what makes this particular landscape a pandemic one? Is it merely in its making during the height of those first two waves, before the availability of mass vaccination allowed a reprieve for those privileged and diligent enough to get them? Scholar Elizabeth Outka, in her book *Viral Modernism*, writes that the Pandemic of 1918-1919 was a “set of experiences and fragments that were haunting the culture but were difficult to represent.”⁵ Largely absent from our cultural memory, our last great pandemic seemed to offer us little in the form of representational strategies to capture this one—although there are some scholars, like Outka, who have assiduously captured its trace. Describing TS Eliot’s *Waste Land*—from which this exhibition takes its title—Outka writes that, in Eliot’s work, “it’s not just bodies that are affected— though they certainly are—but the city, the landscape, the vegetation, emotions, thoughts, minds, language, words, and even the poem.”⁶ Outka describes this as a “miasmatic residue,”⁷ an ambient or atmospheric trace that attaches itself to the totality of a pandemic experience. Is *Tempest at Earth’s Edge* a pandemic landscape? Absolutely. It’s there in the landscape, the vegetation, its moods, its brushwork, the struggle to find the materials with which to make it, and especially in that yellow hell of a tearing wind blowing through it.

³ Georgia O’Keeffe, “[Canyon Texas] (February 8, 1918),” in Sarah Greenough, ed. *My Faraway One: Selected Letters of Georgia O’Keeffe and Alfred Stieglitz, Volume 1: 1915-1933*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011): 250.

⁴ Georgia O’Keeffe, “[Canyon Texas] (January 23, 1918),” in *Selected Letters*, 245.

⁵ Elizabeth Outka, *Viral Modernism: The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019): 144.

⁶ Outka, *Viral Modernism*, 157.

⁷ Outka, *Viral Modernism*, 145.

*“He looked at the blue grass-lily and the red-brown sand-lily that grew under the sheltered hot sand-banks in the southern winter, for hours and hours. If he closed his eyes, he saw every vein and fleck of blue or vermilion. He would breathe in the fragrance with the wind and the salt. He would rest for days along the shores of the sea-lakes.”*⁸

—HD, 1919

Even before the pandemic, MacFarlane was concerned with the rise of algorithmically self-generating digital landscapes, and the irony of their appearance at this late stage of the Holocene extinction and climate catastrophe.⁹ In particular, she cites the emergence of “walking simulators,” video games that eschew traditional gameplay in favour of an immersion in seemingly natural environments. While these video games could be seen as low-impact ways for people to reconnect with natural environments—especially during the pandemic, when our access to the out-of-doors was constrained by successive waves of lockdowns—video games are actually a significant generator of carbon dioxide per year, with some twenty-four megatons generated annually from American gamers alone (and rising), roughly the same output as the entire nation of Sri Lanka.¹⁰ While MacFarlane’s paintings and their vivid palettes reference the digital era, it is not without performing some necessary function: critic Mitch Speed likens MacFarlane’s paintings to “new lenses, through which to encounter life’s actual vividness[.]”¹¹ For Speed, the works serve to retrain our eyes to become more attuned to the nuances of the natural world, and likewise to how we remember these scenes later.

And remembering the natural world, later, is central to the work of this exhibition and to MacFarlane’s practice as a whole. I asked MacFarlane if the lockdowns and the cancelled research trips impacted the works in the show, something I’ve often wondered as we’ve worked together for the last eighteen months. “I’ve never had a hard time accessing a place and rebuilding it from memory, like Banff, or the Case Woodlot, or Oro-Medonte,” she noted, reflecting on the generative landscapes of her earlier practice. “I think this experience made what memories stood out a little more clearly. The ones that really stuck with me were the ones I was supposed to paint... Being forced to not go anywhere else meant that I felt more inclined to find ways to recreate those places.” In this way, the lockdown resulted in not a dearth of content or inspiration, but a catalyst for formal innovation in how MacFarlane constructs and lights her maquettes and builds her paintings. In this, I am reminded of one of the latest works in this exhibition, *The Night’s Amphitheatre*, one of two night scenes presented in *Broken Images*. In it, the night sky over the Grand Canyon is alive with childlike meteors, primed canvas around which an inky night sky is painted. Below, the Grand Canyon’s peaks and valleys still hold that cut paper quality from the painting’s source maquette, reminiscent somehow of an 18th century mechanical theatre. The work encapsulates so many of the formal innovations of this past year, but it also speaks to something

⁸ H.D. “Notes on Thought and Vision (1919),” in Michael Greed, ed. *Visions and Ecstasies*. (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2019): 25.

⁹ The Holocene Extinction is the sixth known mass extinction event in our planet’s history, and the only one that is caused by human intervention. Scientists generally agree that half of the world’s higher lifeforms could be extinct by 2100, placing this mass extinction event at 10 to 100 times higher than any of the previous five. See Edward Osborne, *The Future of Life* (London: Hachette Press, 2003).

¹⁰ Simon Chandler, “US Gaming Carbon Footprint Is Huge as Platforms Target Greener Consoles,” 16 November, 2019. Available online: <https://www.ccn.com/us-gamers-carbon-dioxide-sri-lanka/>. Accessed 13 November 2021.

¹¹ Mitch Speed, “Altered States,” in *Fool’s Paradise* (Toronto: Nicholas Metivier Gallery, 2018). Available online: <https://www.rachelmacfarlane.com/blog/alterred-states-by-mitch-speed>. Accessed September 7, 2021

else, something intangible, something hungered: “There’s a lot of desire in the paintings to recreate something I’ve lost access to. That desire forced me to come up with new ways of doing that.”¹²

What was she trying to recover? What image of white dawn in the country, as she read in the book spread open:

Fear no more the heat o’ the sun

Nor the furious winter’s rages

*This late age of the world’s experiences had bred in them all, all men and women, a well of tears.*¹³

—Virginia Woolf, 1925

Interwoven through this essay are texts by artist Georgia O’Keeffe, writer Virginia Woolf, and poets HD (Hilda Doolittle) and TS Eliot. All four were stricken with the Spanish flu during the deadly pandemic of 1918-1920, and all are texts written during or shortly after they were ill. Yet, it was not until I undertook research for this exhibition that I learned of their illness—such is the cultural silence regarding that pandemic, which took the lives of Egon Schiele, Guillaume Apollinaire, Gustav Klimt and countless other artists, particularly young and emerging ones. But of course, this silence around illness has a long history: Woolf, no stranger to cyclical bouts of influenza and other, more pernicious, maladies wrote, in 1930: “Novels, one would have thought, would have been devoted to influenza; epic poems to typhoid; odes to pneumonia; lyrics to toothache. But no...literature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind; that the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear.”¹⁴

And, of course, this cultural silence around illness is all too familiar to MacFarlane. In her twenties, when she was a recent graduate of OCADU, the artist spent a year sequestered in what Susan Sontag has called the “kingdom of the sick”: immunocompromised due to radiation and chemotherapy, MacFarlane’s lockdowns began long before ours. It was then that MacFarlane honed her ability to recreate spaces from memory, to imagine those experiences denied to her—“feeling the breeze, hiking, the sun on my face,”¹⁵—the small, sensual pleasures of “a life lived in a living body.”¹⁶ A recurring touchstone for MacFarlane is EM Forster’s sole work of science fiction, *The Machine Stops* (1909), which details a dystopian world wherein all humanity dwells in solitary architecture floating above the earth’s surface. Only Kuno, the narrator’s son, has a desire for what Forster terms “direct experience”¹⁷—his is the longing to see the stars, not from the floating architecture of “the Machine,” but from the surface of the scarred earth, an ecologically ravaged landscape that has become inhospitable to life. One can imagine a younger MacFarlane, in a high-up hospital room or from her run-down two-bedroom apartment in Toronto, wanting something quite similar. “What consequence does the surrogate replacement of landscapes have?” she asked me, knowing all too well the human costs of an enforced separation from the world. “I’m trying to let my work be a kind of warning about this changing relationship.”¹⁸

¹² Conversation with the author, 3 November, 2021.

¹³ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (London: Hogarth Press, 1925). Available online: <https://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks02/0200991h.html>. Accessed 16 November, 2021.

¹⁴ Virginia Woolf, *On Being Ill* (London: Hogarth Press, 1930). Available online: <https://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks15/1500221h.html#ch3>. Accessed 16 November, 2021.

¹⁵ Correspondence with the author, 16 November, 2021

¹⁶ I owe writer Susan Scott for this phrase, from a personal conversation about illness—likely in 2015 or 2016.

¹⁷ EM Forster, *The Machine Stops*, Chapter 1. 1909. Available online: https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Machine_Stops/Chapter_1. Accessed 16 November, 2021.

¹⁸ Correspondence with the author, 16 November, 2021.

...Only,
There is shadow under this red rock
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock)
—TS Eliot, 1922.

There are anthropomorphic aspects to the paintings on view—valleys split like thighs (*Sandstone Horizon Junction*), or palm fronds that beckon like fingers (*Gossamer Dreams*). These moments hint at the ways in which the landscapes we're experiencing are mediated by MacFarlane, subsumed by the ongoing colonial projects that implicate us, and point to how a pristine landscape is as made or formed as a suburb or a city. That they can be as critical as they are earnest is a testament to MacFarlane's skill, to the emotional subtlety with which she approaches her source material and the work at hand.

Both the paintings in this exhibition and the texts from the artists—letters, essays, and poems—reflect an anxiety and an ambivalence about the world at large, indicating that our fears about re-emerging into the world have not only a historic, but an affective, precedent. But while those that re-emerged after the first pandemic had clearly demarcated global issues to confront, ours are more diffuse but no less urgent—climate catastrophe, systemic racial violence, the legacy of colonialism and the challenges of true reconciliation. To suggest that landscape paintings are somehow separate from these larger issues is to ignore how landscape painting has always been fundamental to the Canadian colonial project, a legacy that MacFarlane navigates with infinite care and self-reflexivity. MacFarlane's approach, as a white settler, is less about the specificity of landscape or some clumsy gesture to take ownership of it, but rather an attempt to offer a direct, personal experience captured through what she terms a "thick lens": MacFarlane wants to make visible our assumptions about place, territory, and colonial modes of being that emphasize exploitation and extraction under the guise of stewardship. In our settler colonial tradition, landscape painting created a narrative of a wild that required taming; in MacFarlane's capable hands, it is us, the viewers, who require such curtailment.

TS Eliot, before he shows us "fear in a handful of dust," invites us under the shadow of a red rock. The landscape of *The Waste Land* is precisely what the title promises: it is a miasmic landscape that cannot, does not, sustain meaningful life. Written after a total nervous breakdown, mid-pandemic and at the war's end, it is a despairing cry against what the world appeared to be at that dark moment. But it is notable that he invites us into the shade, a place where we might find comfort, in that landscape where "the sun beats." Like MacFarlane, Eliot mobilizes beauty in an attempt to carry us into awareness of the danger in which we find ourselves—the danger we ourselves have made. The world had then changed—the poem itself represented a rupture in literature, taking us into the modernist period—and we are, once again, at a breaking point.

Exhibitions of paintings don't change the world, but they do offer new ways of seeing it. *Broken Images, Where the Sun Beats* highlights how digital distance has begun to overtake direct experience in how we interact with the landscape, and asks us what the consequences of this might be. A process that began before the pandemic has now accelerated, offering new urgency to this question. What are the dangers of an experiential disinvestment in the physical world in favour of a simulated one? What would it mean to see the world as it is, to see it slowly, and to remember it carefully? What happens when we begin to see the harm that we've done in the landscapes that seem so pristine? A shift in an individual perspective is not nothing: if enough people are so moved, so changed, the world can follow suit. We have learned what collective action can do in the face of the pandemic, and the challenge now is to determine whether this power can be mobilized against the other, no less pressing, issues of our time. Eliot ends *The Waste Land* with lessons from the Upanishads: "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata. / Shantih shantih shantih." Begun as a funeral rite and ended as a benediction, the poem's malaise is transmuted into something more hopeful: a wish for kindness, a wish for restraint, a wish for peace.