

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

VISUAL ARTS

Film artist Mark Lewis on how to crash Canada's birthday party

Lewis discusses his recent project, *Canada*, a portion of which will be debuting at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto this week in a show of the same name



A still from Mark Lewis's 2017 *Things Seen*, a single screen video commissioned by the Art Gallery of Ontario. COURTESY AND COPYRIGHT OF THE ARTIST AND DANIEL FARIA GALLERY, TORONTO

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Canada's sesquicentennial may have been 150 years in the making, but it managed to surprise Mark Lewis.

"It's serendipity," Lewis explains of his recent project, *Canada*, a portion of which will be debuting at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto this week in a show of the same name, theoretically as part of the grand national celebration. "I wasn't aware we were having a birthday party."

The world-renowned film artist – based in Britain but still identified with the country he grew up in, including representing Canada at the 2009 Venice Biennale – was not inspired by the nationalistic soul-searching that the historic marker seems primed to prod. Rather, he was drawn in by the name, or by the idea of the name, of the expansive and unfixed identity Canada has suggested for most of its 150 years.

“It’s always intrigued me that its origins have been slightly confusing,” Lewis says. “Though it’s now definitive that it’s from the Iroquois *kanata*, for the longest time there was this kind of dispute over the name, and all these sorts of mythological origins. You know, supposedly when the Portuguese arrived in Newfoundland and could find neither gold nor precious metals, they just said ‘*Ca nada*,’ which in Portuguese means ‘Nothing here.’ There were all these different stories about it.”

The apocryphal explanations of mid-century Canadians, though, have nothing on the bizarre mix of metaphors that people who live beyond its borders have attributed to it. One of the more potent meanings, for Lewis, came in the form of Richard Ford’s 2012 novel *Canada*, about an orphaned boy who escapes to Saskatchewan. “It’s a book that creates Canada as the unconscious,” Lewis says. “I spoke to Ford about it, and he said that’s exactly what he meant by it: Canada is a place that nobody knows anything about, but has this extraordinary fantasy about.”

Insomuch as you can apply just one reading of the films that make up Lewis’s *Canada* explorations, this sense of Canada as an unconscious place might be the richest vein. In Lewis’s eponymous film, a young woman reads Ford’s novel in a seaside park, Lewis’s camera tracking her in one of the artist’s typically unbroken, though perhaps a little more restless than normal, shots.



A scene in Mark Lewis's film, *Canada*, tracks a young woman reading the 2012 book *Canada*, by Richard Ford. COURTESY AND COPYRIGHT OF THE ARTIST AND DANIEL FARIA GALLERY, TORONTO

Lewis refers to it as his entry in “woman reading a book subgenre” of realist painting, and it has the usual echoes of internal mystery and longing for connection that most of those provoke. But its cascading titles – the book *Canada* giving rise to a film and then exhibition of the same name, as part of a Canadian sesquicentennial – swirls the piece into even more opaque thoughts: The viewer is left grasping for a sense of a reader’s idea of a novelist’s idea of what *Canada* might mean. Any nationalistic concepts are so thoroughly fuzzed that you are wandering through that very unconscious, left to circle back on yourself and sort through what *Canada* might mean to you – if such a question even has any place in this intimate moment.

“What we’re doing with this moment in *Canada*, celebrating the 150th anniversary of Confederation – it feels like we’re trying to celebrate a particular history and a particular narrative,” says AGO curator Adelina Vlas, who selected the films from Lewis’s series.

“Historical facts, that’s how we write history: a series of events. But there is life, human life and human experience that exists outside those facts

that are much more diverse – and, I think, also, more nuanced. And I think Mark is trying to get to that more nuanced and subtle understanding of Canada.”

You can see this even in the locations Lewis chooses. Canada is in a sort of hybrid space: The park is touched by obvious signs of human encroachment – the film begins framed by a rain shelter, and eventually the reader sits at a picnic table – and yet there are moments where the camera seems to be looking off into a great expanse, the sea or the trees swallowing everything in the background, leaving the woman alone in a seemingly untouched space (one of the benefits of filming in Stanley Park).

Another film in Lewis’s series, *Valley*, takes this idea even further. Filmed in Toronto’s Don Valley, close to where the (concrete-encased) Don River meets the (industrial) shore of Lake Ontario, it is a riot of tableaux that never quite rectify themselves into one coherent place. It opens with a tree and the river, a road in the distance. As the camera floats around, we get more intimate with the tree before pulling back through to the railroads, highways and towering warehouses that have defined the area since the mid-20th century, the leftovers of modernity. But even the idea that this might just be an industrial dead end is complicated: In the middle of the film, the camera tracks across a man who has set up a tent amid a rough and rusty bridge; he turns on a Walkman and nods his head to the beat as the camera, and the river, flow by. Life, in its various forms, cannot be contained by the structures we put around it, any more than a place can be contained by the images we use to try to capture it. (A similar sense of the struggle to reduce a moment occurs in the AGO show’s third film, which features a woman on an empty, windswept beach staring down Lewis’s camera.)

As expansive and evocative as these notions can be, they also seem to play into a familiar and troubling notion of Canada: The idea of the land as a blank canvas is the same one that was used to brush away both the aboriginal people who lived here well before the country came to be, and the horror inflicted on them in the making of the place. Even the cutesy apocryphal stories of what the name Canada means have a sinister undertone: “You could argue that the insistence on keeping the name mythologized was an attempt to deny the ontological notion of the nation,” as Lewis puts it. “It was a continuing denial of the First Nations influence.”

Lewis seems to want to lean into this fraught history, to get us to deal with both the horrible and hopeful implications of a place that has been, particularly beyond its own borders, thought of in pseudo-mythological terms. There is a hope in the idea that the definition of Canada hasn't been fully written yet.

“That’s one side of that notion of the unconscious,” he says. “The other side of that is that it can be a place for utopian goodness.

“I think it makes it the worst and best of things,” he continues. “It’s an opportunity: If a name is floating, hasn’t become fixed on a particular thing, which I think it is, then it’s an opportunity to get better.”

Mark Lewis: Canada runs April 13 through Dec. 10 at the Art Gallery of Ontario

- Barry, David “Film artist Mark Lewis on how to crash Canada’s birthday party”, *Globe and Mail*, April 11, 217.