



VISUAL ARTS

Mark Lewis's Canada, quietly in motion at the AGO

The Canadian artist, long-based in London, isn't quite so detached from his home and native land as he suggests



A scene from Mark Lewis's film "Things Seen," part of his "Canada" exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Far from the nationalist chest-beating one would assume, the artist engages a national dialogue despite himself. COURTESY AND COPYRIGHT OF THE ARTIST AND DANIEL FARIA GALLERY, TORONTO

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"MARK LEWIS: CANADA" reads the sign above the gallery door at the Art Gallery of Ontario, in big blocky letters, and you'd be forgiven for expecting an epic visual ode to the true north strong and free. The grand sweep of a boreal forest, maybe, the craggy peaks of the Rockies, or the vast, island-flecked waterways of the far west coast — pick your grandiose wilderness venue, bleeding maple-leaf red, at will. We've got plenty, from sea to shining sea.

Pause to consider, then, what lies beyond the threshold, where three big, silent video works capturing decidedly unheroic, not particularly Canadian scenes await: The sickly green of an industrial canal; a lone swimmer on a beach; a woman reading, seaside, in beatific light. Each of them was shot here, but less as intention than incidental fact.

“It could be Pittsburgh, Chicago — anywhere, really, where these kinds of things exist,” shrugs Mark Lewis, the London-based artist whose name is clamped so tightly to that of our home and native land, just a few steps away. *Canada*, the show, explains Lewis, briefly in town for the show’s opening last week, is simply drawn from *Canada*, the Richard Ford novel, about a loose idea of a northern ideal that lies just beyond the grasp of the American psyche.

Canada, the novel, takes place in Canada, but only partly. Stay with me here: *Canada*, Lewis’s show, is a reference to *Canada*, one of his three films in the exhibition, in which a young woman reads Ford’s *Canada* on a sunny shore (which is in Canada, but remember: that doesn’t matter).

If Lewis’s desire to detach seems strange, given the context — Canada, the country, is approaching its increasingly complicated 150th birthday — then maybe you don’t know Mark Lewis.

Raised in Hamilton but living in the UK for two decades, Lewis, 58, has made his name with meditative, languid film works, most often positioned at an ambiguous remove (more Canada: in 2009, he represented his homeland at the Venice Biennale). Recent works have included a slow-tracking film of an awkwardly angular intersection in London, and a dark and shimmering, unhurried visual pirouette through the innards of Toronto’s infamous Brass Rail (off-hours; no skin here).

In each, the protagonist is the camera itself, drinking in the scene from an ever-evolving perspective. It’s as though Lewis, a history painting enthusiast, is devoted less to his subject than a larger pursuit: Of introducing to the age-old, painterly contemplation of image and space the contemporary element of time.

Valley, the first of the films here, puts that on clear view. Hovering drone-like along the murky water, the camera pulls up and away to reveal a parallel freeway, a glass tower, a bridge. It’s hypnotic and sinister all at

once, as though an alien probe had been sent to earth to survey it for future appropriation.

Its eye drifts slowly, meticulous and fluid, its sweep recalling the vast tableaux of history painting; its content and composition, the early work of fellow Canadian art star, the conceptual photographer Jeff Wall (his 1986 work, *The Storyteller*, feels almost like its storyboard.)

Locals will quickly recognize the scene as the base of the Don River, a bike path curling nearby, cars on the DVP whizzing past the glass stacks of the BMW dealership. Lewis protests, gently, that it's a matter of convenience, and that his interest lies less in place than the grander scope of modernity and its transformative force, which remade land into raw material, energy, and the means to transport it.

The camera reveals what he means to describe: As it pulls back ever further, it drifts over the barricades of an electrical switching station and tilts up to a blue sky sliced into tidy, angular portions by the drab metal of a hydro tower and the taut power lines projecting from it. The idea of containment, apportioning — divisions, claims, property — is powerfully present here, and maybe that's where "Canada," and Canada, comes in.

In its sweep, the camera drifts past a man with long black hair, lingering near a squat utility bridge with a corrugated roof of pale fiberglass. Inside, he's pitched a tent; he's homeless, and indigenous, neither of which suggest the neutrality about the show's title Lewis claims.

"It's not a political statement per se, but a reflection of something I've seen," he says. "At the same time, I think it's important to acknowledge that homelessness and destitution exists at a much higher proportion in that community."

He pauses. "I can't say if anything good will come from depicting him. But I do know nothing positive comes from absence."

It's a quietly provocative statement here, on the edge of an anniversary rapidly evolving into an imperative to drag the most glaring absence in our national perspective to the centre of the frame.

Valley's long-look perspective on the mechanics of modernity can't help but brush up against how it came to be: Lands divided, conquered,

extracted and claimed from its First People, who have been pushed aside in the full breadth of violent and ugly ways ever since.

“Modernity,” really, is just a cleaner word for “colonialism,” which was at the very least its main event. Late-era contemporary art — sanctioned art, museum art — has typically shown not quite enough spleen to connect the two explicitly, hesitant to colour itself with positional politics. Recent years have seen a change (thanks, Ai Weiwei, Kerry James Marshall, Kent Monkman, among others). If there was ever an occasion to drop the veil of ambiguity, Canada 150 — a blunt marker of colonial conquest — is it.

Lewis, with a little prompting, allows that *Valley* absorbs those ideas. “If you wanted to stretch the idea of Canada, you could say Canada was built by infrastructure maps of territory, and expropriation,” he says. “And I think that’s very much in its name. It’s an Iroquois word” — meaning “village” or “settlement” — “but I think it’s a sign of its unconscious — that really, it was made through theft.”

Maybe Lewis isn’t quite so detached, and maybe *Canada*, the show, isn’t really just a tease-out of an American novel after all. In an adjacent room, *Things Seen*, a spectacular, ominous black-and-white film shows a woman emerging from a turbulent sea (it’s actually Lake Ontario, and the Scarborough Bluffs, but remember: that doesn’t matter).

The camera skitters across the beach as she emerges from the waves, angling left, almost as though to avoid meeting head on. Good choice. In her black wetsuit, she’s intimidating, ferocious. As the camera circles, drawing closer with every pass, the confrontation intensifies; things could escalate, and badly. In the end, the camera beats a hasty retreat, revealing its robotic tracks in the sand; she turns, satisfied, and disappears into the waves.

In its cranked-up sense of menace, it seems very un-Lewis like. Maybe it’s Canada, not *Canada*, getting to him.

“There was an idea of first encounter — what happens when one thing meets another and they don’t understand each other? What is the expected denouement? Is it conquest? Equivalence? Fear?”

I suggest that we have a lot of history available to compare notes, and not much of it good. Lewis nods. “Most of the people who came to the

Americas to settle were uneducated, unsophisticated, illiterate, and came because they had nothing. And when they arrived, they often met people who were far more culturally advanced than they were. As we know from today's politics, that can create anger and fear. And violence.”

The conversation turns to *Champlain's Dream*, the book on the French explorer's travels to New France and his relatively enlightened approach to the indigenous people he found here.

“He recognized immediately that this was a sophisticated society,” Lewis says. “He saw them as worthy partners, people you could learn from and accommodate.”

It seems a solid credo for the moment that, like it or not, Lewis's show addresses. (“That's not my intention,” he says, and shrugs. “It might be the AGO's.”)

Either way, by the time we reach *Canada*, the film, with its Richard Ford conceit, it feels a little flatly pretty. Of the three, *Canada* has the least to do with Canada, and feels more pale because of it. As it turns out, there's a lot of Canada in *Canada*, the show, whether Lewis meant for it or not.

Mark Lewis: Canada continues at the Art Gallery of Ontario to December 10.

- Whyte, Murray, “Mark Lewis's Canada, quietly in motion at the AGO,” *The Star Online*, April 11, 2017