

Art in America

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Mark Lewis

TORONTO,

at Art Gallery of Ontario

by Rebecca Dimling Cochran

The Art Gallery of Ontario commissioned filmmaker Mark Lewis to create work exploring what it means to be Canadian today. Lewis was an interesting choice for this task, as he was born and raised in Canada but now resides in London, and thus has both an insider's viewpoint and a more distanced one. His project takes the form of six films, three of which (between around five and twelve minutes each) are shown here as large-scale projections in connecting galleries. There is no narrative or single character to weave the films together. Instead, Lewis's portrait is additive: each distinct location, subject, and perspective layer one upon the other.

In the first film, which shares the title of the exhibition, a young woman wanders through a park along a lakefront. She wears a tightly cinched coat, a black wool cap, and gloves to fight off the wintry chill. As she reads from the American author Richard Ford's novel *Canada* (2012), she occasionally mouths the words, perhaps even reading aloud, but the soundless film keeps that a secret. Instead, we notice her concentration as she devours the pages, oblivious to both the camera and the occasional passerby. She wanders through an empty pavilion and along the paths,

until she finally comes to rest at a picnic table. Only then does her gaze leave the page, as she stares into the distance, as if having reached an important passage that invokes contemplation.



Mark Lewis: *Valley*, 2017, video, 11 minutes, 33 seconds; at the Art Gallery of Ontario.

Things Seen (2017) takes place on a deserted beach with high cliffs in the background. A woman dressed in a wet suit slowly emerges from the water, directly confronting the camera. As she approaches, the camera begins to spiral around her, growing ever closer. She turns along with it, her gaze constantly on the camera, much like an animal wary of a potential predator. Just as the camera gets close enough to see the whites of her eyes, it begins to back away, as if sensing the danger in coming any closer. When the offensive intruder is far enough away to no longer pose a threat, the woman turns and slowly disappears back into the water.

Images of an industrialized city take the forefront in the third film, *Valley* (2017). The hovering camera swoops us through a landscape with railroad tracks, a highway, power lines, barbed wire fences, and a power substation. Signs of human ingenuity are everywhere, but the monochromatic gray landscape feels distant and cold. Eventually, the camera comes across an Indigenous middle-aged male. As snow begins to fall, he huddles in a tent hidden in the shelter of a pedestrian bridge, a home he has created for himself amid the desolate landscape.

Lewis's three different approaches behind the camera—in the first as observer, the second as intruder, and the third as documentarian—create a complex portrait. His Canadians are introspective yet interested in what others think of them. At the same time, they are protective and wary of those they feel threatened by. While they are advancing as an industrialized nation, they struggle to accommodate those left in progress's wake. It's an elegant portrayal: one that avoids stereotypes and addresses both the strengths and weaknesses of a nation's identity.