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Signals in Landscape

By Terence Dick | June 16, 2011



Kevin Schmidt, *A Sign in the Northwest Passage*

Reviewed: Kevin Schmidt, Don't Stop Believing at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, until August 20.

The single greatest artist talk I have ever had the pleasure to witness took place in the spring of 2005 at Mercer Union in Toronto when Kevin Schmidt, instead of delivering the standard theory-laden and/or mind-numbingly detailed career overview, appeared with a full band in tow and proceeded to recount details of his practice in a suite of catchy rock-pop numbers that had heads bobbing and fingers snapping alongside the requisite art gallery chin scratching.

Combine that with his 2002 video *Long Beach Led Zep* — like all good conceptual work, a no-brainer on paper that pairs two lowly forms (a sunset and *Stairway to Heaven*) to reach (but not really reach; really to reflect on the really/not really axis of reaching/not reaching) transcendence — and the youngish Vancouverite set himself up to be pigeonholed amongst similarly music-dabbling visual artists of the West Coast (Rodney Graham and Stephen Shearer come to mind). Things have changed in the interim, however, and while there is still a bit of rock'n'roll in Schmidt's recently opened survey exhibition at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery on the University of Toronto downtown campus (his gobo tribute to Christian rock stalwarts Petra being one, a screening of *LBLZ* being another), his work has progressed in its concerns to take on a far more traditional artistic focus, one that is familiar, if not essential, stomping ground for creative Canadians of all stripes. I'm talking about landscapes.

But first, the rock! *Angel of Light* is a text piece like no other. Visual artists have incorporated words into their work for decades. Some like Lawrence Weiner (see Weiner's recent *Paris Review* interview) stick exclusively to type, others

like Ed Ruscha meld the visual/semantic elements of the written word into painting. Others still follow Bruce Nauman and make bold and/or ambiguous statements in neon. Schmidt's contribution to this lineage is even more dynamic as he uses custom gobos — metal stencils placed before theatrical lighting in order to project a pattern, logo, or word onto a distant surface — to animate the lyrics of Petra's anti-Satanic prog-rock clarion call. Minus the music, the light show renders the hectoring apocalyptic pronouncements as a celebratory speech that is both doom-laden and fun (much like most heavy metal, I guess).

This "end times" thematic is an obvious link to Schmidt's end-of-the-world installation, *A Sign in the Northwest Passage*, which appears in the gallery as a large-format photograph and a photo-essay in book form. Taking a passage from Revelations (the most rocking chapter of the Bible), he constructed a hand-routed cedar sign and, with the help of local guides, anchored it in the ice near Tuktoyaktuk. The graphic warning as to the destruction that will ensue with God's final wrath was left in the barrens, holding court over land that could one day be exploited for its oil reserves, until the spring thaw when it would float away and spread the Word.



Kevin Schmidt, Burning Bush

Another Biblical reference serves as the centre for Schmidt's five-hour video *Burning Bush*. Timed to match the passage of the day, this single-shot portrait of a desert scrub made up to look like it's aflame is a good example of a landscape painting adapted to contemporary technology. What distinguishes it from a traditional canvas representation of the same scene is the incorporation of time. However, time here moves so slow that you end up doing what you're supposed to be doing with the painting — lingering, studying, reflecting — while you wait for the thing that isn't going to happen — action, drama, fireworks — to happen. In this, as with a number of his other works (e.g. *Wild Signals*, part of the screening mentioned below), Schmidt takes special effects used in theatre or on stage to add dramatic flair to reality as a way of turning our tired eyes to the wonders that surround us and, at the same time, producing work that is intentionally obvious in trying *really* hard. It's the visual art version of jazz hands. Which is not to say that art hasn't relied on bells and whistles to get our attention for centuries, but those old bells and whistles no longer work on attention deficient audiences like ourselves.

Then again, we exercise a lot of patience in some circumstances. Schmidt explores this in his 11-hour (!) video *Epic Journey*, which isn't so daunting when you consider it's a film of a screening of the entire *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The artist's twist is to project it in a small boat drifting down the Fraser River followed by another boat with the camera. As the tale of Frodo and his band falls in and out of focus, the immediate reaction is to contemplate Schmidt's journey in accomplishing his artistic quest. From the North to the desert and down the river, he makes these treks himself, taking on the role of frontiersman to capture the sights most of us plebes are too tied down to witness in the flesh. Like all good art (like all good rock), we taste the extremes of existence vicariously through those who are brave enough to go it alone.

Which brings us to the final work in the exhibition. Squirreled away behind a closed door at the back, *Sad Wolf* is a short video portrait of an omega wolf at the Metro Toronto Zoo. The scapegoat of the pack, but also the wolf who initiates play and helps ease tensions within the group, Schmidt's subject paces near the fence at the edge of the pen,

carefully eyeing his peers from a safe distance. Screened through a homemade projector, this video is the mournful ballad that closes the album, a song of camaraderie for wolf and artist, the lonely loners who see the world from its edges.

A screening of Long Beach Led Zep and Wild Signals takes place at the gallery on June 22 at 5 pm.



Kevin Schmidt, Epic Journey