

Canadian Art

See It

Kevin Schmidt: Light Touches

JUSTINA M. BARNICKE GALLERY, TORONTO JUN 8 TO AUG 20 2011
by DAVID BALZER



Kevin Schmidt *Burning Bush* 2005 Video still Courtesy Catriona Jeffries

Curator [Barbara Fischer](#) has brought a second Vancouver artist to Toronto's [Justina M. Barnicke Gallery](#) this year: [Kevin Schmidt](#), following [Ron Terada](#) this winter. The two artists have much in common, both playing with notions of the readymade, the durational and the text-based, with a strong penchant for the sublime and mythic dimensions of popular culture. (Both are also represented by Vancouver gallery [Catriona Jeffries](#), and are part of the vanguard of the city's next-generation conceptualists.)

Where Terada zones in on art-world simulations and hierarchies, however, Schmidt embraces a kind of outlier aesthetic. From the beginning of his career, Schmidt has been an escapist: in his breakthrough 2002 video, *Long Beach Led Zep*, he played "Stairway to Heaven" on an electric guitar on a beach in Pacific Rim National Park, reinforcing the lingering gestures of romanticism as found both in rock music and in contemporary art practices.



Schmidt's Justina M. Barnicke exhibition acts as a digest of his work over the past couple of years, with a few intermingled efforts from the mid-2000s. Two durational videos—too prohibitively long to consume in the gallery in a single, sustained visit—suggest Schmidt's keenness to relate the pace of time through legendary narratives and iconography. In concept, both are quite simple. The 11-hour-long *Epic Journey*

(from 2010) is a single take of a floating screening, down the Fraser River in a motorboat, of the entirety of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy; the five-hour-long *Burning Bush* (from 2005) is a single take of a sagebrush in the Okanagan Valley decorated with the kind of lights that simulate flames. In both works, the loud drama of mythic narrative—that of Tolkien and the Book of Exodus—becomes muted by nature's (and, in the case of *Epic Journey*, passing cars') quiet, slow, elliptical movements.

Other works suggest Schmidt's recent interest in the semiotics of apocalypse. *A Sign in the Northwest Passage* is a performance project, installation, photograph and bookwork, the latter two presented in the Barnicke's space. (A process shot of the project is also currently on view at Toronto's Power Plant in billboard form.) Taking a page from artist [John Scott](#), Schmidt carved passages from the Book of Revelation into a large cedar sign and erected it near Tuktoyaktuk in the Far North, where it was rarely, if ever, seen, and was designed to float away once the seasonal ice had melted. As with *Epic Journey* and *Burning Bush*, Schmidt's audience becomes the ostensibly tacit natural world as much, if not more than, the art world.



Kevin Schmidt *Angel of Light* 2010 Installation view at Catriona Jeffries Gallery Courtesy Catriona Jeffries Gallery

The exhibition's highlight, 2010's *Angel of Light*, takes lyrics from Christian-rock group Petra and projects them as bouncy, multicoloured words across three walls. Here is a directness not necessarily seen in the other works, albeit one of seething irony: Petra takes the classic-rock conceit of exciting, transformative urban life and casts it as the picture of sin; Schmidt, with the aid of flashy, goofy technology, gives Petra's diatribe, including an invective against "neon signs" and "city lights," a party ambience. The conflicting messages appear to cancel each other out, leaving nothing behind but a barrage of colour—a curious mimicry of Schmidt's 2007 piece on the northern lights, *Wild Signals*, and thus of nature's mute, eerie beauty.



Kevin Schmidt *Epic Journey* 2010 Video still Courtesy Catriona Jeffries