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Carrie Walker and Tim Gardner examine the nature world

by [Robin Laurence](#) on March 18th, 2015 at 10:22 AM



Carrie Walker's *I did what nature does #5* pulls wildlife art out of its context and sets it adrift on a sea of white.

Carrie Walker: The Effect of Space

At Elissa Cristall Gallery until March 28

Tim Gardner: Nocturnes

At Monte Clark Gallery until April 4

Bunnies, birds, and polar bears. Nighttime surfers and moonlit motorcyclists. High-art images versus low-art clichés. In their concurrent shows, Carrie Walker and Tim Gardner demonstrate aesthetic challenges and nifty similarities.

Although their styles and subject matter differ, both artists work realistically and with great dexterity in the difficult medium of watercolour, and both use their art to examine our relationship with the natural world. More intriguingly, both push the boundaries of the genres they are exploring, bringing their work scarily close to kitsch without falling into that dubious place.

Walker is best known for a drawing-based practice that employs animal subjects as metaphors for human actions and vectors of human emotions. In the past, she has used pen and ink to isolate heads of wild creatures in the middle of large sheets of white paper, confronting our attitudes toward the birds and beasts we share the planet with.

In her current body of work, on view at Elissa Cristall Gallery, she examines what it is that distinguishes her imagery from that of wildlife artist Robert Bateman, with whom she is sometimes compared.

Although wildlife art can be popular, it is generally scorned by critics. Walker's decision to investigate this genre smacks us up against our biases while also—paradoxically—distancing us from them.

Copying certain pictures out of the early monograph *The Art of Robert Bateman*, Walker has chosen to depict each animal in meticulously applied watercolour while dropping out the original landscape background (and foreground). These omissions, she writes in her artist's statement, have "left each creature stranded on a sea of white".

The emptiness or incompleteness, she observes, alters the way we read the image. Her compositions, which include stencil-like intrusions of white space where rocks or snow or foliage would have been, also call representational conventions into question. Walker asks us to closely consider each image—and each animal—within a context that is formal, cultural, and conceptual.

By hand-drawing multiple copies of two of Bateman's images, a chipmunk and a little brown rabbit, Walker also investigates the practice in wildlife art of making and marketing thousands upon thousands of mechanical reproductions of the original painted images.

As she bases each image on the previous one, the chipmunks reveal only slight variations

through their 20 separate versions, while the nine bunnies undergo a process of evolution through subtle abstraction, becoming almost robotic in appearance. These works ask us to think about how most of us are exposed to wildlife, that is, through reproductions of paintings or photos rather than directly, through sightings in natural settings.

Walker persuasively argues that mass-produced images constitute our contemporary environment, at a far remove from the forests, grasslands, and tundra that are home to creatures we recognize but do not know.

Gardner's nighttime landscapes, seascapes, and cityscapes, on view at Monte Clark Gallery, take on the capital-R Romantic tradition while also flirting with the kind of small-r romanticized imagery found on posters, calendars, and greeting cards.

Tim Gardner plays with Romantic tradition and the aesthetic of postcards in works like *Night Ferry*.

The Vancouver Island artist has made an international reputation as an astute observer of the tropes of masculinity, from college-age beer-guzzlers to youthful individuals engaged in outdoor sports such as hiking and skiing. As he has matured, so have his male subjects, who are often placed within awe-inspiring mountain scenes that evoke 19th-century Romantic landscape painters such as Caspar David Friedrich.

In a work such as *2 Men With Moon, LA*, the reference to one of Friedrich's favoured compositional devices is explicit. Here, however, Gardner places his foreground figures on Mount Hollywood, overlooking a city demarcated by a grid of lights whose lurid glow seeps upward into the night sky, toward a yellow moon. One of the two guys holds up a smartphone whose screen shines white, like the tiny stars that also glimmer in the darkness—the digitally mediated darkness.

Other night scenes place men, alone or in comradely pairs, on a night ferry between Vancouver Island and the mainland, atop a snowy slope overlooking a mist-shrouded Matterhorn, and in a canoe on Lake Louise.

In each of these scenes, Gardner employs a range of evocative blues lit by brilliant or muted whites, often exploring the washy and painterly qualities of his watercolour medium. (By contrast, Walker employs watercolour as a drier, drawing medium.)

The effect is both thoughtful and seductive, messing up our understanding of visual clichés and of art's role in the social construction of landscape.

GEORGIA STRAIGHT

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