



THE GREEN OF HER

A SCUM ON THE SURFACE

DANIELLA SANADER

I know where I am, but I do not feel as though I'm at the spot where I find myself. — Roger Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychæsthenia”¹

What do I look / like when no one is looking? — Patricia Lockwood, “Nessie Wants to Watch Herself Doing It”²

In Angela Grauerholz’s photograph *By the Lake, Oakville* (1995) the printed surface is hazy, perhaps even foggy, but it’s a picturesque scene. Tall trees frame a manicured lawn and a rocky shoreline, and a cluster of figures stand at a short stone wall that separates terra firma from the waves of Lake Ontario. This is an image of Gairloch Gardens, a park south of Lakeshore Road East in Oakville, Ontario. Half of Oakville Galleries’ exhibition space is located at Gairloch—the other half is downtown at Centennial Square, the site of this exhibition. Montreal-based Grauerholz spent time at Gairloch in late 1993 building a portfolio of photographs titled *grounds, tended, preserved, enclosed, safe, careful, guarded* (1995). *By the Lake, Oakville* was included among Grauerholz’s other moody and atmospheric images of Gairloch’s gates, ponds, shrubs, paths, and trees; the image was also editioned as a standalone piece alongside another work titled *The Gate, Oakville*—both are included in this exhibition. In *By the Lake, Oakville*, the image is so hazy that it’s difficult to pinpoint exactly where the lake ends and the sky begins. Lake Ontario seems calm enough, but the picture still feels ominous: the cluster of figures could be posing for a snapshot or they could be looking toward a threat slowly materializing on the horizon.



Although I have lived near Lake Ontario for most of my life, I've never heard any monster stories about that body of water. Loch Ness has Nessie; Okanagan Lake has Ogopogo (N'ha-a-itk in Salish). However, there are traces of evidence for a Lake Ontario cryptid.³ Online research leads me to stories of Kingstie, a Kingston-based lake monster spotted in 1934 but exposed as a hoax in 1979,⁴ and a *Torontoist* article about miscellaneous historic monster sightings in the Toronto area, ranging from headless creatures like giant earthworms to blue-grey bristly monsters with alligator teeth.⁵ Gaasyendietha is a fire-breathing dragon that dwells in the depths of Lake Ontario, according to Seneca folklore.⁶ Several crypto-zoology blogs indicate that Gaasyendietha was observed by sixteenth-century

Angela Grauerholz, *By the Lake, Oakville*, 1995, silver print. Collection of Oakville Galleries, purchased with the support of the Corporation of the Town of Oakville, the Elizabeth L. Gordon Art Program of the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation and the Oakville Galleries Volunteer Association, 1995.

French explorer Jacques Cartier, who allegedly mentioned the creature in his diary,⁷ yet I cannot find any other sources to confirm this. I was born and raised in Hamilton—a city where E. coli, pollution and industry make lake swimming deeply unadvisable—and I can't help but wonder what toxic conditions human interference has created for all manner of lake dwellers.

As fragments of stories, sightings, myths, and hoaxes circulate around deep-dwelling lake creatures, it remains clear that we have a seemingly bottomless fascination with the unknown—those mysterious forms of life that could be submerged within depths, hidden from view. The works included in *The Green of Her* explore these subterranean spaces of fantasy. The exhibition proposes new landscapes in unlikely or mundane objects—from fur muffs to folded napkins to floral carpets—and imagines the creatures hidden within their midst. Mining the permanent collection of Oakville Galleries, *The Green of Her* stages both the mundane realities of the home and the murky depths of the underground as strange and hybrid spaces. While offering their creatures solitude and protection from external threat, these environments also depend on them in turn, proposing new ways of understanding how we relate to the worlds we inhabit.

The Comforts of Home

*[...] The green
of her is a scum on the surface, she would like
to look at herself. Should I have a memory?
she wonders. Of mother washing my frogskin
in muddy water? I do not have that memory.
My near-transparent frogskin? Mother washing
it with mud to keep it visible? I do not have that
memory, almost, almost.*⁸



From lake bottom to living room, the comforts of home can be complex and ambiguous forces. In Patricia Lockwood's "Nessie Wants to Watch Herself Doing It" —included in the American poet's sophomore collection, *Motherland Fatherland Homelandsexuals* (2014)—Loch Ness is described as a space that both supports and secludes the famed monster that dwells there. For Lockwood, the lake gestures toward Nessie's memories yet denies their validity; it constitutes her body yet renders her murky within it. Nessie relies on the lake for survival yet longs to understand herself as separate from it. "The green / of her is a scum on the surface"⁹; there can be no easy distinctions between Nessie and the environment that hides, sustains, isolates, and cares for her.

In her three-video series, *Beyond the Usual Limits* (2003–2005), Toronto-based video artist Deirdre Logue documents this push-and-pull between

Deirdre Logue, *Beyond the Usual Limits Part 1* (still) from *Why Always Instead of Just Sometimes*, 2003–2005, multi-channel video installation. Collection of Oakville Galleries, purchased with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance Program and the Corporation of the Town of Oakville, 2009.

comfort and concealment through a series of mundane yet absurd gestures. *Part 1* sees Logue—clad in a T-shirt and underwear—worming her way between the mattress and box spring in her bedroom. In *Part 2*, a sped-up video loop shows Logue painstakingly wrapping up her hand using an entire carton of bandages. In *Part 3* she gingerly covers her ear in black paint, before the video reverses and her ear is slowly re-exposed. *Beyond the Usual Limits* tells a peculiar narrative about disappearance, obliteration and the comforts we seek in familiar things. A bed is the ultimate source of intimacy and coziness, yet Logue seems uninterested in relaxation; rather, it's as if she's attempting to dissolve completely within its flowery void. Her excessive use of bandages hinders and heals her hand in equal parts, and she has described her painted ear as blocking out what she doesn't want to hear: "I see the 'disappearing' ear as shutting out, a sealing off of the entry point of language."¹⁰ In *Beyond the Usual Limits* Logue's repetitive labours toward concealment are each displayed on a continuous loop: her body appears, dissolves and reappears like an ongoing reminder of those anxieties from which we try to hide.

Hiding anxieties within everyday objects also stands as an apt description of the sculpture-based practice of Liz Magor. *Carton II* (2006) and *Humidor (Brown)* (2007) both appear to be mundane subjects—a folded pile of laundry and a pair of well-used mittens, respectively—yet they are revealed to be hollowed-out casts of polymerized gypsum filled with neatly organized rows of cigarettes, matches and lighters. Human vices disguised in preparation for some projected catastrophe. Like Logue's work, Magor's disrupts the easy familiarity associated with everyday objects, imbuing these items with an anxious futurity: there must be dark days on the horizon to require a concealed reserve of nicotine. In Magor's hyper-realistic work, the well-loved textures of the domestic—the soft, the warm, the cozy—are made hard, fake and unfamiliar. Ultimately, both *Carton II* and *Humidor (Brown)* deal in false senses of security: a difficult oscillation between the protection against threat and exposure to disguise.



Angela Grauerholz's photograph *Flowered Carpet* (2007–2008) also turns mundane surfaces into spaces for new possibility. A broad swath of floral carpet fills the frame, and two floral armchairs are placed at its edge. Grauerholz captures the evocative moment where these diverging patterns meet—partially blurred yet also clashing, sensorially dense yet wholly ordinary. The subtle shifts in tone across the carpet seem to imply that its flatness could carry strange and unforeseen depths. What could be hiding in that hazy flowerscape? Has someone just exited the frame, their presence still reverberating on the carpet like waves across a body of water? As in Grauerholz's *By the Lake, Oakville* and *The Gate, Oakville*, the atmospheric tone in *Flowered Carpet* could be interpreted as picturesque or sinister (or maybe some uncanny combination of both), turning a decorative finish into fertile ground for unknown sensations and associations.

Installation view of *The Green of Her* at Oakville Galleries at Centennial Square, 17 January–6 March 2016. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.



Living room and lake bottom finally converge in Paulette Phillips's *The Floating House* (2002), a video installation that depicts a mid-century Canadian farmhouse drifting off the coast of Nova Scotia. Set to an ambient soundtrack featuring the ghostly echoes of family activity, *The Floating House* implies a loss of home in more ways than one. Phillips drew on historical accounts of the Newfoundland resettlement program of 1954–1975, a government-mandated redistribution of communities during which houses were pulled by tugboat to new sites across Newfoundland. In perhaps the ultimate visualization of a loss of place, the house slowly breaks down and sinks below the surface. Yet, the dreamy, fantastical nature of the video—taken alongside my continued crypto-zoological inclinations—leads me to wonder if this sinking home is necessarily a

Paulette Phillips, *The Floating House*, 2002, 16mm film on DVD projection. Collection of Oakville Galleries, purchased with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance Program, the Corporation of the Town of Oakville, the Edna Powers Memorial Fund, and individual donors, 2005. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.

destructive image. Like the works of Logue, Magor, and Grauerholz, *The Floating House* carries an ambiguous quality, as if this descent could create the opportunity for a new landscape, a new state of living. And after all, the video is displayed on a loop: continual breaking down and building up; dislocation and rebirth in infinite repeat.

A Place to Hide

*To these dispossessed souls, space seems to be a devouring force. Space pursues them, encircles them, digests them in a gigantic phagocytosis. It ends by replacing them. Then the body separates itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses. [...] He feels himself becoming space, dark space where things cannot be put.*¹¹

Camouflage can prompt a number of feelings, among them relief in disappearance and aggression directed from hunter to prey. In his 1935 text on strategies of mimicry among insects and other organisms, surrealist writer Roger Caillois described camouflage's ability to create the sensation of dissolving into space, a confusion of where a body ends and surroundings begin. As in the above quote, he likened this process to a loss of place felt by those living with schizophrenia¹²—an engulfment by the world, transformation into that “*dark space where things cannot be put.*” Although, I doubt Caillois would have envisioned this primordial blackness as, say, the scummy greens of Lockwood's Nessie or the flowery sheets of Logue's bedroom. Throughout *The Green of Her*, artists map these sublime depths in deliberately less-than-fantastical ways, exposing the ordinary desires and anxieties felt when facing an inconceivable void.

For instance, Isabelle Hayeur's *Aube* (2005) seems to exist at an impossible vantage point. A tiny sliver of a neighbourhood is visible at the top of this digital print, under which dark geological strata appear to stretch



downward without end. Like Magor's sculptures, *Aube* feels "real" yet betrays a subtle distortion of fact. The work is part of Hayeur's series *Excavations*, in which the Montreal-based artist composes dense landscapes through digital means: condensing sources as varied as construction zones, garbage dumps, and UNESCO World Heritage sites into a single image. Like much of Hayeur's work, *Aube* speaks to the environmental degradation caused by the exploitation of natural resources and the development of quasi-urban "non-places" such as suburban housing developments. Yet watching *Aube*'s tiny houses floating above these impossible depths, I'm reminded of the overwhelming sense of simultaneous dislocation and possibility in Phillips's *The Floating House*. Printed and hung in this large vertical format, *Aube* has a downward pull that is impossible to resist.

Naoko Matsubara's *Mountain Echo* (1970) also deals in impossible vantage points. Matsubara's ongoing experimentations with Japanese



woodcut techniques have here created a destabilized forested world without any conceivable orientation — I am not sure if I'm looking up at slivers of sky behind a layer of branches, or out across an overgrown wooded scene; or down at a forest floor of roots, leaves and stones. Matsubara's dense treatment of this woodcut's surface creates an unmoored space where the landscape seems to stretch out in all conceivable directions at once. Likewise, Luanne Martineau's *Saskatchewan* (2008) likens a landscape to an outstretched body. Named after the province of her birth, *Saskatchewan* is one of Martineau's characteristic drawing-turned-sculpture-turned-collage works. Hand-sewn triangles of Japanese paper — covered in graphite and dripping with silk thread — spread out across the wall like rivers and tributaries, roads and pathways, limbs and swaths of skin.

Installation view of *The Green of Her* at Oakville Galleries at Centennial Square, 17 January – 6 March 2016. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.



Understanding this hanging collage as an alternative rendering of her birthplace turns *Saskatchewan* into a cartography of the networks of memory, as opposed to a geographically “accurate” depiction of the province. Like Hayeur’s *Aube*, Martineau’s mapping of Saskatchewan creates a new place through material accumulation.

In *The Divers* (2006), Wendy Coburn’s strange depths generate new contexts for queer fantasy. A beaver fur muff has been turned on its side and transformed into a pastoral scene: a deep pond fills its centre, and along its edge two naked women can be seen lounging and diving. Here playful and crude euphemisms abound—muff diving, beaver as vagina, lesbian sex—yet it would be reductive to dismiss Coburn’s sculpture as a lewd joke. Obliquely referencing the long art-historical precedent for romanticized images of female bathers (think Cézanne and Renoir), Coburn

Wendy Coburn, *The Divers* (detail), 2006, fur muff, figurines, and plastic. Collection of Oakville Galleries, purchased with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance Program and the Corporation of the Town of Oakville, 2009. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.

transforms a reclaimed object into a scene of queer pastoral intimacy. These dark cavernous spaces generate desire over anxiety, eschewing Caillois's fears of total dissolution and depersonalization through camouflage. Ultimately, Coburn's work serves as a reminder that there is room for pleasure in losing oneself, and space for fantasy in everyday things.

Something Else Entirely

Reading about lake monsters inevitably leads to reports on various hoaxes. They're impossible to avoid in crypto-zoological discourse; stories of individuals looking to cash in—financially and culturally—on the frenzy of curiosity surrounding the unknown. I am intrigued by the materials used to construct each monster hoax. Nessie as depicted in the infamous “Surgeon's Photograph”¹³ was built from a toy submarine and sculpted wood putty; Kingstie's body was a barrel filled with empty bottles.¹⁴ Like Magor's sculptures—which trick an eye eager for veracity, only to ultimately betray their “fraudulent” materials—each falsified creature is bolstered by an accumulation of everyday things, functioning almost like a sculptural readymade.

Kingstie's barrel body was filled with empty bottles, and Tricia Middleton's sculptural materials are not dissimilar. *Crone (sister)* and *Crone (baby)* (2012) are both built from found objects like jars, bottles, cans, cups, and bed sheets, coated in messy drips of coloured wax and glitter. These stalagmite-esque forms were repurposed from detritus found in the Montreal-based artist's studio and even from works in prior installations—both *Crone* sculptures were previously used in a large-scale installation by Middleton at Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens titled *Form Is the Destroyer of Force, Without Severity There Can Be No Mercy*. Like the oscillation between healing and hindrance with Logue's bandaged hand, it is unclear whether or not these crone siblings are trapped—even fossilized—within their waxy layers, or gestating, cocooning and



protecting themselves before emerging renewed. Lumpy and glittery, they are grotesque and exuberant all at once, perhaps echoing the pleasure of Coburn's divers through a giddy mutation into material excess.

Therese Bolliger's fleeting charcoal drawings also disguise everyday items through an ambiguous transformation. Titled *Towards Anonymous Gesture* (1989) and *Study for Anonymous Gestures 1–3* (1989), these drawings are preliminary sketches for a large-scale installation titled *Anonymous Gestures*, exhibited at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at

Installation view of *The Green of Her* at Oakville Galleries at Centennial Square, 17 January–6 March 2016. Left: Therese Bolliger, *Towards Anonymous Gesture*, 1989, charcoal on paper. Collection of Oakville Galleries, gift of Micah Lexier, 2000. *Study for Anonymous Gestures 1–3*, 1989, charcoal on Arches paper. Collection of Oakville Galleries, purchased with the support of the Corporation of the Town of Oakville and the Edna Powers Memorial Fund, 2002. Right: Valérie Blass, *Presque plus*, 2008, found objects, paint and composite fibre. Collection of Oakville Galleries, purchased with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance program and the Corporation of the Town of Oakville, 2012. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.

the University of Toronto in 1989. Resembling blossoming flowers, mountainscapes, distorted limbs, or maybe even dazzle camouflage,¹⁵ the drawings are in fact abstracted interpretations of folded napkins. Bolliger was informed by an early-Renaissance social manual—and potentially the first cookbook—by Bartolomeo Sacchi, titled *De Honesta Voluptate et Valetudine* (On honourable pleasure and health) and published in 1474. As countless social values, political machinations, emotional conflicts and bodily needs have played out over dinner tables across history, Bolliger was interested in exploring how these varied influences could crystallize in a single gestural object. Her napkins are more than what they appear to be—whether folded fabric or charcoal marks; they build new architectures, topographies and associations with limited visual means.

Coming full circle to our murky and monstrous beginnings, Valérie Blass's *Presque plus* (2008) is a sculptural assemblage featuring a swampy-textured ghillie suit overlaid on a metal armature. The juxtaposed materials form the shapes of two figures conjoined at a strange, almost sexual angle. The ghillie suit is a form of camouflage often used for blending in with heavy foliage, associated with uniquely solitary modes of violence such as hunting and sniping. In Blass's reconfiguration, the loneliness of camouflage is perhaps tempered as her creature finds its perfect mate. Loneliness is central to Lockwood's Nessie as well, a weariness with visitors who crowd her shores but fail to understand her needs: "Visited only / here by believers. Is so deep-sea-sick of believers. / When will the thinkers come for me here, where / the green stretches out before me, and I am my own / front lawn."¹⁶ Yet instead, Blass's almost grotesque, almost erotic pair—indeed, her figures exist in a perpetual state of "almost," the perfect play on her title—could provide an alternative to the presumed solitude of murky depths. Alongside Middleton's *Crone (sister)* and *(baby)* and Coburn's *Divers*, Blass's figures find uncanny company in isolation—whether it's forged through sex, friendship, allegiance, or simply finding one's double reflecting back in a body of water.

* * *

In April 2014, to honour the eightieth anniversary of the publication of the “Surgeon’s Photograph” in the *Daily Mail*, Google trained its popular Street View cameras on Loch Ness.¹⁷ The service is still available, the most recent footage recorded from a boat in March 2015. As I write this, I’m inching along the loch’s surface, my place marked by a Nessie avatar. This March day in Scotland is somewhat grey and cloudy, not unlike Grauerholz’s image of Gairloch Gardens in *By the Lake, Oakville*. I don’t see anything out of the ordinary, but I’m also not surprised: Google’s prescribed route only lets me move back and forth along the lake’s perimeter; there’s no capacity to wade into deeper waters.

From cozy familiarity made uncomfortable and fragile, to unmoored landscapes and transfigured objects, *The Green of Her* looks to Oakville Galleries’ permanent collection for moments of transformatory camouflage. Like Nessie, Kingstie, Gaasyendietha or something else entirely, these exhibited artists eschew the rational frameworks that separate truth from hoax, and science from myth, instead imagining new forms of life in unfathomable places. These works are by no means an alternative to Google’s all-seeing eye, systematically mapping the surface of Loch Ness. Rather, they turn inward and downward, deliberately muddying our view where we might otherwise seek clear waters.

ESSAY NOTES

¹ Roger Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” trans. John Shepley, *October* 31 (Winter 1984): 30. ² Patricia Lockwood, “Nessie Wants to Watch Herself Doing It,” *Motherland Fatherland Homelandsexuals* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 26. ³ A cryptid is an animal whose existence has been suggested—through folklore, crypto-zoology, myth, etc.—but whose existence has not yet been proven by scientific research. Famous cryptids include the Loch Ness Monster, Sasquatch, and the Yeti. ⁴ John Robert Colombo, *Mysteries of Ontario* (Toronto: Houndslow Press, 1999), 117. ⁵ Patrick Metzger, “Toronto Urban Legends: The Great Serpent of Lake Ontario,” *Torontoist*, 16 January 2013, <http://torontoist.com/2013/01/toronto-urban-legends-the-great-serpent-of-lake-ontario/>. ⁶ *Wikipedia*, s.v. “Gaasyendietha,” last modified

24 September 2015, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaasyendietha>. ⁷ Tabitca, "Gaasyendietha, a Dragon in Lake Ontario?" *cryptozoo-oscify* (blog), 20 April 2010, <http://cryptozoo-oscify.blogspot.ca/2010/04/gaasyendietha-dragon-in-lake-ontario.html>. ⁸ Lockwood, "Nessie Wants to Watch Herself Doing It," 26. ⁹ Ibid. ¹⁰ Deirdre Logue, interview by Mike Hoolboom, http://deirdrelogue.com/writing/interview_with_hoolboom.html. ¹¹ Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychæsthenia," 30. ¹² A comparison with definite shortcomings by contemporary standards regarding the stigmatization of mental illnesses, yet one that creates an evocative point of inquiry. ¹³ Published by the British *Daily Mail* in 1934, the image is now commonly understood as a hoax, staged for vengeance. "The Surgeon's Photograph" was planned by the stepson of Marmaduke Wetherell, a big-game hunter who was ridiculed by the *Daily Mail* for falling for an earlier Loch Ness hoax: Nessie footprints made by a hippopotamus-foot umbrella stand. For more on this, see Stephen Lyons, "The Legend of Loch Ness," NOVA, PBS, 12 January 1999, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/ancient/legend-loch-ness.html>. ¹⁴ Colombo, *Mysteries of Ontario*, 117. ¹⁵ Dazzle camouflage was a First World War strategy for naval camouflage designed to disrupt a reading on a target's direction and speed. It appears like boldly angular black and white stripes across a ship's exterior. ¹⁶ Lockwood, "Nessie Wants to Watch Herself Doing It," 27. ¹⁷ Rishi Iyengar, "You Can Now Search for the Loch Ness Monster on Google Street View," Newsfeed, *Time*, 21 April 2015, <http://time.com/3830798/loch-ness-monster-google-maps-street-view/>.

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