

To See a World in a Grain of Sand

An essay by Hannah Keating
Exhibition organized by Jamie Wright



Larry Kissick, *Moontide*, 1976, screen print.

For its close association with the Romantic sublime, the opening line of “Auguries of Innocence” is one of William Blake’s most popular (read, quoted) lines of poetry.¹ It captures a view of God’s eternal presence in all creation: “To see a World in a Grain of Sand/And a Heaven in a Wild Flower/Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand.” Echoing Blake’s view of the cosmic in the everyday, artist Mark Tobey wrote in 1954, “[on] pavements and the bark of trees I have sometimes found whole worlds.”² Tobey converted to the Bahá’í Faith in 1918, and throughout his career was fascinated by the Zen art of calligraphy. He was among a generation of American artists who derived creative inspiration from the widespread popularization of Eastern religions in the 1960s. Despite theological and temporal differences, both artists express a similar attentiveness to the presence of the infinite within the finite. In more recent history, scientists have uncovered

the microcosmic complexity of life and the infinite extent of the universe, which, apart from discrepancy in scale, also frequently resemble one another in structure and appearance. One need only flip through the pages of a textbook or browse the internet to view microscopic images that evoke human anatomy, Earth’s geology, and the cosmos. The artworks in this exhibition interact with a legion of such scientific, theological, and cultural concepts. They meander within a network that demonstrates the tendency of culture to spill across borders and entangle with diverse influences. This network includes Christian and Buddhist traditions, classical and medieval architecture as well as twentieth century counterculture and printmaking. It’s a winding road, but such trips often reward travellers with a worthwhile view.

The earliest works in the show are two watercolour paintings by David Milne. While Milne led a life of relative poverty, he is a distinguished figure of Canadian modernism. Seclusion as a catalyst for art making was an irresistible draw for the artist who built three backcountry haunts for painting over the course of his life. These lodges demanded economical living but provided Milne with the time, space, and inspiration for his work. Unsurprisingly, Henry David Thoreau was a major influence; Milne emulated Thoreau in his regard for the natural world and in his intellectual musings on nature, art, and living. Milne, however, who lived for thirteen years in New York City, was not a total recluse. He was married twice and became a father with his second wife, Kathleen Pavey. Through it all, independence and closeness to nature were top priorities, but, as with many notable figures of historical importance, an almost mythic aura now surrounds his withdrawn lifestyle.

In addition to an avowed interest in American Transcendentalism, Milne was a formalist.³ Correspondence with friends and dealers, along with personal essays and diaries, constitute a formidable record of Milne’s life and philosophies. As such, much of his writings concern pictorial matters and his artistic ambitions align with the formal concerns of shape, line, and colour characteristic of other modern artists. Milne’s watercolours are the products of a spontaneous

process. Painting his surroundings with sure and rapid marks, the artist sought immersion in the visual world and a corresponding encounter, an immediate and emotional response, from his viewer.⁴ Collapsing the phenomenological experiences of viewing the world and its representations, *City Lights of 1941* illustrates the attention Milne pays to a complete vision, where quickness of line serves the overall effect. Watercolour is an apt medium for this hurried and expressive painting.

In comparison, Winston Leathers' spontaneous gesture in his *Hidden Landscape* series is more experimental. In his photographs, forks and tributaries read as metropolitan highways seen from the window of an evening flight or as watersheds revealed in infrared aerial reconnaissance. Like worlds found in the bark of trees, the image shifts between multiple views. Scale oscillates and perspective is without obvious orientation. But these coincidental landscapes were constructed rather than found. Fused with heat and pressure, minerals, window screens, motor oil, and sheets of coloured acetate were sandwiched between two pieces of glass and photographed with a macro lens. As records of chemical reactions, the plates and resulting photographs produced unpredictable abstractions. The spontaneity of this process appealed to Leathers as an expression of nature and the interconnectedness of life, an interest informed by his exposure to calligraphy and Zen Buddhism. The artist became acquainted with calligraphy at the University of Manitoba School of Art and then encountered the work of Ulfert Wilke and Mark Tobey at the University of British Columbia.⁵



David Milne, *City Lights*, 1941, watercolour.



Winston Leathers, *Views from the River: Hidden Landscape Series*, 1989, laser generated image.

At UBC, Leathers developed a long-term fascination with Zen Buddhism, as digested and propagated by western interpreters like Alan Watts. With Jack Kerouac and D.T. Suzuki, Watts was a major figure in the Beat generation and therefore a central voice in the counterculture movement of the 1950s through 1970s.⁶ His book, *The Way of Zen* (1957), was, and remains, one of the bestselling books on East Asian spirituality in the West. A hybrid spiritual movement, Zen Buddhism in America combined dharma traditions from Asia with "American enthusiasm, idealism and innovation."⁷ Interestingly, Milne's favourite, Thoreau—along with Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and others—were captivated by Hindu and Buddhist texts. As the first generation of western intellectuals to have access to actual texts of eastern spirituality, their exposure was "often very limited," according to historian Richard Hughes Seager; "but what they lacked in knowledge, they compensated for with ardor and creativity."⁸ These were the writers who introduced American audiences to Buddhism and, importantly, were a direct inspiration for members of the Beat generation. In subsequent decades, religious disillusion, anti-war activism, and environmentalism proved fertile ground for American Buddhism, if not actually caused by its influence. And while the period also saw significant growth in institutional Buddhism, the ideas and frameworks of Zen permeated vast corners of popular culture.

Larry Kissick, a Winnipeg printmaker, made images of growth and rebirth, cycles and utopia that resonate with the popularized frameworks of hybrid spiritualities. *Moontide* (1976), for instance, is a marine portrait of

yellow and red. Behind the coral lies a green ocean: waves of grass, row upon row. There is blue too, the night sky, which holds the moon at its centre, the choreographer of the maritime drama. In the piece, the moon hangs suspended from an invisible line; reaching out, you could almost touch its radiant face. Glowing full and bright, its lunar geographies are flattened; the viewer is far, despite feeling close. The sky is in pieces, holding itself and the tidal magistrate together by dense arrangement only. Circles, cycles, symmetry. The border of moons, full to half to new, are strung like pearls. Tiny treasures from beneath the waves, pearls are formed in concentric layers like the trunk of a tree, measuring time and filling space. Here, celestial and terrestrial bodies are one and scale is unimportant. Scuttling at the base of the composition are crustaceans, one at either side of a near-symmetrical picture (like the human body, which is symmetrical with the exceptions of parted hair, heart offset to the left, and that enigmatic appendix, etc.). The print is decorative and carefully designed, but is also surreal and psychedelic. The red grotto forms a threshold, that liminal space between here and there, becoming and being.

Kissick's work also fits within a broader cultural milieu that includes music, literature, art history, and the city's thriving print culture of the 1970s. As Robert Enright describes in a 1981 review of Kissick's work for the Winnipeg Free Press, the sumptuous pattern of French Rococo is evoked by the artist's attention to design and his inventive decorative surfaces. Enright suggests that the elegance of Kissick's "vision of vegetable consciousness" in *A Vegetable's View of Spring* (1973) mimics "the gilding on the Sun King's carriage."⁹ In *Cycles* (1976), Kissick engages with visual culture and architectural history. A pair of buildings, one solid, detailed, and classical, another airy, empty, and futuristic, frame a fantastical scene, complete with Edenic garden and partially unclothed women. The female nude, the mythology of paradise, and the cyclical trends of history are all recurring motifs from the history of art, which are brought together in Kissick's bold and colourful serigraph. The artist's graphic approach pleases the eye first, then emotion and intellect second.¹⁰ Exhibiting locally, Kissick's images are familiar to Winnipeggers who were exposed to a rich and diverse printmaking scene through The Grand Western Canadian Print Shop. Cooperative and communal, the print shop

reduced the gap between artists and the public. Such democratization complements the theme of unity, so far discussed in terms of nature and culture, spirituality and aesthetics.

Whereas spontaneity played a central role in the works of Milne and Leathers, the squeegee of the silkscreen artist is all but spur-of-the-moment. The serigraphic process may be open to fortuitous new directions, but generally, the art form calls for deliberate plans and execution. Kissick's intricate scenes are a case in point. Urquhart's biomorphic lines conjure the impression of a more casual, impulsive sketch, but, they were similarly produced with the predetermination of a silkscreen print. Another parallel is the theme of rebirth. In *Worlds Apart: The Symbolic Landscapes* of Tony Urquhart, Joan Vastokas analyzes the proliferation of symbols pertaining to life, death, and regeneration in Urquhart's oeuvre. Thresholds, as sites of transformation and transition, are a recurring motif in his work, along with flowering plants, circles, and graves.¹¹ For instance, the thin, wavering lines of *Branches* (1972) articulate fragility, growth, and unrelenting currents of change. The work recalls the upward and sprawling reach of trees, the meandering of rivers, and the scattering of veins. Urquhart's approach to art depended upon a notion of universal symbolism and his interest in European Gothic cathedrals and graveyards informed much of his imagery.

Abstracted or extrapolated, the serene, strange, and surreal worlds pictured in this exhibition share a mutual interest in nature. Proposing unity and wholeness, the artists' works are informed by music, literature, and the ethos of twentieth century spirituality. They pull back and zoom in, offering diverse perspectives of the natural world that point to interconnectedness, layers, and perfect imperfections.

Endnotes

1. William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence," The Pickering Manuscript (1802).
2. Mark Tobey, "Mark Tobey," The Art Institute of Chicago Quarterly 49, 1 (1955), 9.
3. John O'Brian, David Milne and the Modern Tradition of Painting (Toronto: The House Coach Press, 1983).
4. O'Brian, David Milne, 89.
5. Oliver Botar, The Hidden Landscapes of Winston Leathers and Wayne Foster (Winnipeg: School of Art, 2005), <http://www.umanitoba.ca/schools/art/content/galleryoneoneone/wl05.html>, accessed January 3, 2017.
6. Richard Hughes Seager, Buddhism in America (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 4.
7. Seager, Buddhism in America, 4.
8. Ibid., 40.
9. Robert Enright, "Larry Kissick," Winnipeg Free Press (Sept. 19, 1981).
10. In an artist statement published in an exhibition pamphlet, Larry Kissick asserts his priorities in this order. See the Winnipeg Art Gallery's Artist File.
11. Joan M. Vastokas, Worlds Apart: The Symbolic Landscapes of Tony Urquhart (Windsor: Art Gallery of Windsor, 1988).

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