

SAM COTTER

Groundings
Main Gallery



Sam Cotter, still from *Alternating Currents*, 16mm film, 2023, 2:40.

Groundings is a new body of work by Sam Cotter that addresses connections between the transportation industry, resource extraction, and histories of landscape art in Canada, exploring their respective roles in economic expansion and in bolstering Canadian cultural identity.

Through experimental 16mm films, photographs, and digital video works, *Groundings* opens a space for considering landscape, industry, as well as the structural properties and hallucinatory potentials of cinematic representation. The film and video works deploy long takes, fixed perspective, extended camera movements, hand dying and flickering afterimages in response to industrially mediated landscapes. Together the works weave parallel narratives from the late nineteenth century, including the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, implementation of standardized time, and the development of major industrial and hydroelectric projects as a way to examine both real and idealized visions of the Canadian landscape.

Through implicating the patronage of early landscape painting and photography as necessarily tied to these layers of extraction,

Cotter unpacks the role that the image of the natural landscape plays in creating a shared sense of place, fostering connection, and promoting a national cultural identity across settler-Canada. Implicated within these colonial processes is a flattening of time and space in which mountain ranges are blasted and cleared to allow linear movement, time is harnessed and abstracted, and the violence of the displacement of peoples and stealing of labour is obscured by images of pristine and uninhabited landscapes.

Sam Cotter is a Toronto-based artist engaged in excavating histories, with focus on the media and technologies that have shaped the past and present. Working with research, text, and image, Cotter regularly employs photography, film, and installation to examine issues of visual representation and artifice. Central to the construction of all of his projects is an embedded documentary element mediated through a self-reflexive filter.

Sam Cotter: *Groundings*

Curatorial Text by Kate Whiteway

It wouldn't be controversial to say that the words "Canadian art" have lost most of their former shine. More than that, they've lost their meaning. Intended as a cut and dry museological category, the designation now raises more questions than it answers. In a thrillingly critical essay published in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, Richard William Hill describes how the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, in lock step with most of this country's major public art institutions, is more graveyard and giftshop, than gallery. Permanent exhibitions of dead artists, private interests veering into public governance, and the trinketization of Indigenous art amount to what Hill, sounding the alarm, calls "zombie nationalism."¹ The undying corporate tradition of art in this country.

Since the 1960s at least, contemporary Indigenous and Canadian artists have worked to divorce artistic production from nationalist ideology, creating work that erodes all those persistent

myths of *terra nullius* (nobody's land) and *tabula rasa* (clean slate). The marriage of the Group of Seven and the National Gallery of Canada, endorsed by the post-war federal government, is now commonly seen for what it was, arranged and incredibly procreative. The state had been patronizing Canadian art since the Canadian Pacific Railway's (CPR) earliest survey in the 1870s. The railroad made development, extraction, and settlement achievable in the emerging nation-state. This train-altered reality, collapsing time and space, relied on the production of a new consciousness produced by photographers and painters. Commissioned by the CPR and incentivized with equipment and free rides, the images they created turned the land into icon.

Sam Cotter's exhibition *Groundings* pulls back from the manicured omissions of the traditional landscape genre, as if he was a state-commissioned artist gone rogue. Rebellious against the consolidation of settler identity as being rooted the natural world, the works center the literal and ideological infrastructure that makes such idealization possible. Using techniques of early cinema, developed in tandem with the industrialization of the country,

the works reinvest the optics of landscape art with new critical sensing capacity.

Five moving image works are inspired by the formal logic of structural film and its potential as a conceptual vehicle. A pair of 16mm film loops are projected onto a centralized exhibition structure. Seen from a moving train, *Double Track* (2023) shows tracks running parallel and then converging as if by magnetic pull. Each time the tracks touch, the film stock changes colour. The alternating orange and blue hand-dyed stock references the early film technique known as “day for night” where tints were applied in post-production to achieve an effect of artificial evening. *Double Track* establishes a formal rhythm, pulling the viewer into the space through the feeling of persistent motion.

Projected onto the structure’s verso is *Alternating Currents* (2023) which introduces the exhibition’s second protagonist, Niagara Falls. Beneath 125 feet of bedrock are tunnels that give access to what the tourist attraction *Journey Behind the Falls* calls “open cave entrances”.² One of these “entrances” is called Cataract Portal. Cotter’s static camera reveals the portal’s edge – a stone

archway shaped like an open eyelid, framing a silky and turbulent fog. The image begins to blink with black frames in rhythmic gradation, picking up momentum until the absence of light meets the image at a rate of 1:1. Strobing out, the vision goes black.

Filmed lying flat on the tracks, *Devouring Distance* (2018) places the eye in a position only a machine can take. Clouds in the sky float on vertically, in parallel with power lines. Passing over the camera, the body of the train becomes a kind of exquisite corpse. Each carriage is distinct in colour and shape, like scenes stitched together at warp speed. Both the landscape and the train create machinic views where the space of viewing and the object of vision are necessarily separate.

In *Tunnel* (2023), the camera performs a vertigo effect, beginning at the base of the falls and slowly reversing down a tunnel while zooming in. The body and the eye split. The tunnel, built in 1901 to drain water from the falls into the Niagara River, was recently opened for tourism, allowing the visitor to “become the water.”³ The attraction holds the central contradictory logic that animates Cotter’s work. Through balanced engineering, the image of the falls as pristine,

untameable nature is pitted against the needs of hydroelectric generation, which syphons off as much water as possible without impacting tourist expectations. As Cotter writes, “The projects of extracting resources from and colonizing space and of creating representations of those spaces in an idealized form becomes a central logic of empire.”⁴

A pair of photographs stand in contrast to the moving image works. In one image, a man sits on the edge of the billowing and effervescent Niagara Falls. Nearby, a camera stands on the uneven plateau of rocks, capturing the scene. In the second image, a painter (Frederic Marlett Bell-Smith) sits with a bright, blank canvas overlooking a lake and mountain. CPR tracks cut prominently through the vista. In the resulting painting, *Hector Lake, Kicking Horse Pass* (1887), the painter omitted the tracks. By subtly altering the archival stock images from William Notman Studio Photos, and printing them on a reflective, silvery substrate, Cotter opens the weight of history and industry to contemporary speculation.

The exhibition ends with *Phantom Ride* (2018), a tracking shot of

the back of a tanker truck that reflects in it the passing highway and surrounding fields. The camera is mysteriously invisible due to distortion produced by the conic shape of the tanker, while the highway and landscape look like they are being sucked into this central blind spot.

It resonates to close an exhibition that critiques the embedded nationalist ideology of landscape art with an image of the highway. Like the railroad of the late 1800s, the highway has recently become the site of a hyper-nationalist agenda. During the so-called Freedom Convoy of early 2022, protesters created truck blockades at border crossings and in downtown Ottawa to express opposition to the federal government’s regulation of the pandemic. In stark contrast, blocking thoroughfares became a central point of resistance to the Coastal GasLink Pipeline proposed to cut through Wet’suwet’en First Nation territory in British Columbia. Acts of “civil disobedience” spread in solidarity across the country in early 2020, with coordinated CPR blockades hitting major economic arteries. Specifically in Ontario, protesters gathered enough power to unsettle much of the country’s industrial functioning.

The point is, these infrastructural thoroughfares – railroads, highways, and waterways – remain the veins through which visions of the nation-state are shaped and contested, and it is the parallax view of the artist that shows us obscured paths.

¹Richard William Hill, “Graveyard and Giftshop: Fighting over the McMichael Canadian Art Collection,” *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, edited by John O’Brian and Peter White, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007.

²“Journey Behind the Falls,” Niagara Falls Canada, <https://www.niagarafallstourism.com/play/falls-experiences/journey-behind-the-falls/>

³“The Tunnel at the Niagara Parks Power Station,” Niagara Parks, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZDndXge4lpE>

⁴Sam Cotter, “Parallel Tracks,” Art Museum at the University of Toronto, 2018, <https://www.samcotter.ca/Parallel-Tracks>