

VISUAL ART

Gwen MacGregor

by Dan Adler

Light in scale, a digital screen serves up a seductive scene made up mostly of grass, trees and sky reflected on the surface of a lake. Both vibrating and vibrant, this luxuriant little landscape offers a range of glistening greens, from bright to those bordering on brown. While admiring this palette, I am suddenly struck by the movement of a minute crimson craft crossing this aquatic body—and the digital monitor's width—according to the exertions of a barely perceptible paddler, propelling at an efficient and even pace. Moments later, the boat returns in the opposite direction, traversing at the same speed. I read the title and imagery of Gwen MacGregor's *The Thin Red Line* (after Terrence Malick and Rebecca Belmore), 2014, in terms of this event: a linear, performative path forged by a canoeist, an aquatic species of drawing that generates reddish ripples against a backdrop of pointy pines. As in the feature film with the same name by Malick, MacGregor's art tends to elevate occurrences that may conventionally be considered minor, thin or utterly incidental, often striving to render them reverently—so that viewers might contemplate them, but with an ambivalence about their relationship to (linear) plot advancement. However, after following this interpretive line, I paddle in a different direction, realizing that this petite BlackBerry monitor may in fact be a device for keeping time: every eight minutes, the sequence of lines commences once more. This portable appliance represents a ritual—one that is perhaps performed daily at a specific time—that is remarkably regular in nature (and of nature). I could structure my day around its comforting rhythms and cycles.



While not nearly as lush in appearance, *She Walked up the Hill Everyday*, 2004–14, offers a comparable consideration of a repeated ritual. A series of five photographs, based on low-res video stills, depicts a woman pushing a shopping cart along a length of road. Her portable container is full, and so exertion (and homelessness) is implied, particularly given the contrast with motor vehicles sometimes also captured by the camera, passing her by in a blur. The cart is topped by a live rooster, perhaps a companion or potential food source. The work's title is supported by dates and times supplied within each still, indicating that she performed this activity daily, and at around the same time. I wonder why she is being depicted. Such surveillance suggests that she may be of interest to the authorities, or her activities may be part of a larger project—one that documents and archives the myriad ways that people from diverse backgrounds stick to a schedule, particularly those who choose (or are compelled) to enact a structured set of actions that have little or nothing to do with institutional rules or doctrines. Her face is hidden by a hat, allowing me also to read her and her labour as a

relative of the anonymous, humble figures featured in Realist rural paintings, like those of Millet. Performing this task with a camera at dawn, daily, might be a means of structuring my own existence: waiting for her to appear, and getting a sense of relief as the cart comes into view, along with the sun. It is arguably more insightful and significant than the common forms of infotainment I may be spoon-fed each morning.

MacGregor has a longstanding concern with ritualized forms of drawing that stretch the doctrinal definition of what it means to be serious as an artist. For the series "Any Day Now," 2014, she engaged in the same exercise every day for a year: writing the date upon a small piece of paper, and then obscuring the word and numerals with small, cell-like shapes, applied in permanent marker. Sometimes remnants of language remain, but often little or nothing decipherable is left. And so I read these 365 pages as a record and a process. Perhaps the amount of detail or density reflects a degree of nervous energy (or idle time) on a given day—or simply the number of opportunities that the artist had to attend to the task within a 24-hour period. I consider how daily doodles of this kind can

4. Gwen MacGregor, "She Walked Up the Hill Everyday," 2004–2014, inkjet prints mounted on Dibond. Photograph: Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy MKG127, Toronto.

be advantageous as a craft-based activity, one that is felt in the body as much as within the mind. While her exertions may serve as a sign of work in general, the sign may further signify the inadequacy of language (as a mere date) to reflect the realities of experience. The series is reminiscent of Hanne Darboven's daily drawing practice—performed at the same worktable in a sequestered space at home—always aligned with calendrical and numerical sequences, and meaningless rows of UScript, rendered in lines across countless pages. Unlike Darboven, MacGregor's critique of verbal expression sometimes shifts from the sincere to the satirical, as in "The Overheard" series of predominantly abstract drawings, 2014, each based upon the writing of a pretentious phrase overheard within the academic world, and indicated by the title of each work. Words are produced in a paisley pattern or an incoherent spray of circular shapes, in a manner recalling Ed Ruscha's "censor strip" paintings from the 1980s—pairing a clichéd title with blacked-out shapes which similarly mock language's limitations and inadequacies. But in the end, MacGregor's art encourages me to have a greater awareness of how and why language and ritual plays a role in my own daily life. I end my visit to this intriguing exhibition with the thought that the artist is actually offering me compelling evidence of the myriad alternative ways of marking time. ■

Gwen MacGregor was exhibited at MKG127, Toronto, from September 13 to October 11, 2014.

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