

Sally Thurlow: Canoe Dreamings



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The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa
Art Gallery of Peterborough, Peterborough
Art Gallery of Mississauga, Mississauga
Thames Art Gallery, Chatham
Art Gallery of Algoma, Sault Ste. Marie
Tom Thomson Memorial Art Gallery, Owen Sound



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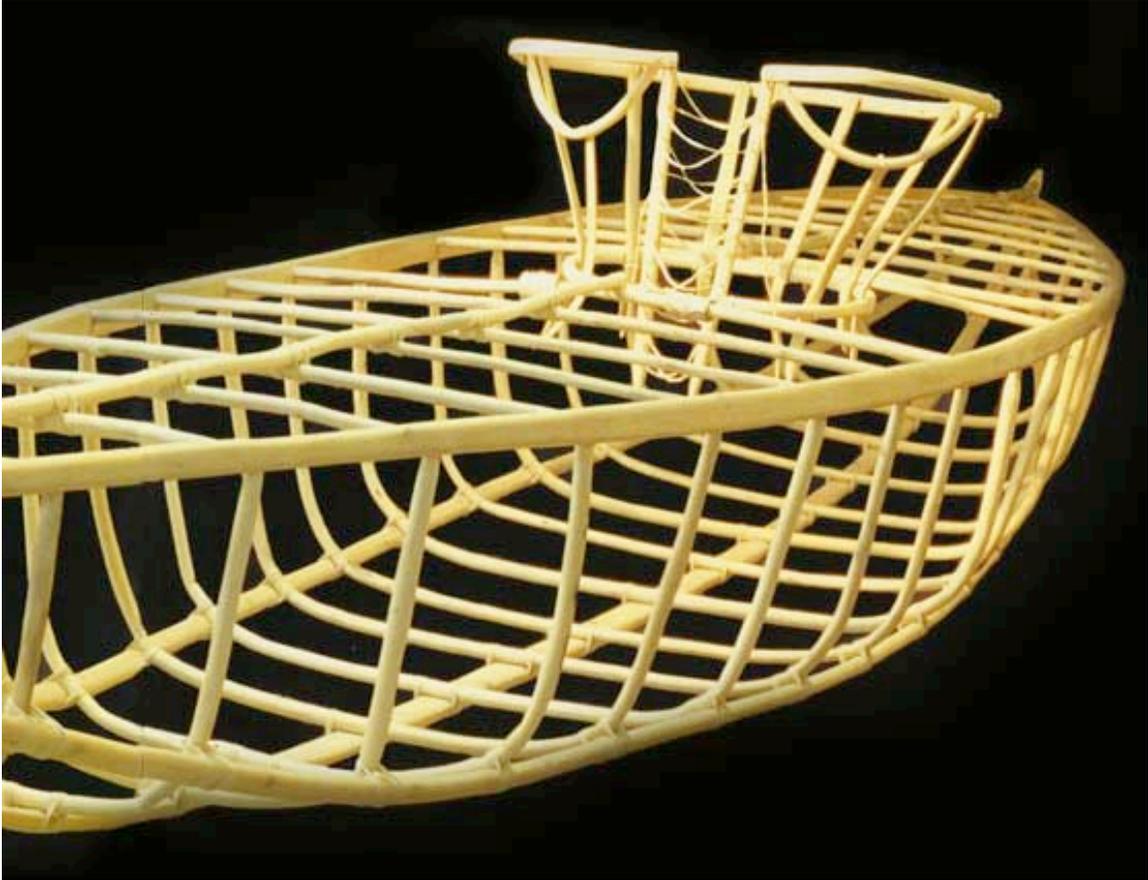
Sally Thurlow's *Canoe Dreamings* presents us with works that transform, quite literally. That is, her sculptures bridge the natural gap between the recognizable and the unexpected. An appropriately associative way of looking at what she has accomplished is to think of her particular medium of transport: the canoe which is not a canoe. Thurlow confronts the viewer with these familiar vessels and immediately pushes them into metonymic and metaphoric possibilities by the extent to which they are not canoes. But regardless of the artist's promptings to understand this work as mythic or loaded with meaning, the works themselves are delightful to apprehend in the concrete and sensory ways they play with idea and reality of "canoe". I compliment and thank the artist for this work. I am grateful to Curator, Linda Jansma, for originating the exhibition and to guest writer Jonathan Bordo for his insights and comprehensive exploration of Thurlow's work.

The Robert McLaughlin Gallery is pleased to present this exhibition for several reasons but especially because the artist lives and works in our regional community, and from our founding we have been committed to our local artists. Additionally, we are happy that the exhibition is the result of collaboration with the Art Gallery of Peterborough, the Art Gallery of Mississauga, the Thames Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of Algoma, and the Tom Thomson Memorial Art Gallery. I am most appreciative of having such good partners.

Finally, I thank the City of Oshawa, the Ontario Arts Council, and Canada Council for the Arts, for their crucial support.

David Aurandt
Executive Director





Drift: an essay on Sally Thurlow's *Canoe Dreamings*

Jonathan Bordo

Un bateau frêle comme un paillon de mai
Rimbaud *le Bateau Ivre*

I Boat Varieties

1.

It carries the title *Corset-Kayak*. The eye of a weathered post-modernist viewer is struck by a sculptural form that hyphenates a corset to a kayak to make *Corset-Kayak*. How to account for the allure of this sculptural object, its compelling symbolic form? *Corset-Kayak* murmurs with sly sensuality in its emancipatory gestures and a delicacy in the fabrication of a visual transgression. The mutual support of strong forms with ironic details defines *Corset-Kayak* making it a standard for all the works that comprise Sally Thurlow's collection of boats.

Corset-Kayak is a shimmering rendition of a kayak. Fashioned from fragile and light materials, suspended in the air, it skims across frigid arctic waters in its ethereal medium, pursuing water-born animals, analogous to the way a boat of skin and bone skims. So strong is her rendering it as a symbolic form, the viewer might momentarily accept Thurlow's skeletal outline of a kayak as a faithful replica of an Inuit kayak belonging in a canoe museum. The bound and slightly undone corset of a Victorian female subject occupies the place of an Inuk hunter, setting these conveyances in different directions. After all, a kayak is prosthetic in ways and for purposes that a corset is not prosthetic. The kayak has a perfection where form and function converge and unify at the boat's center to require a paddler perfectly fused in the cockpit.

The ancients created centaurs, human head and upper torsos wedded to the power and beauty of the body, legs and rump of a horse. What form more intimately merges the human being into the conveyance with more ergonomic efficiency? A human being becomes kayak -- a kayak-torsoed human being. *Corset-Kayak* might be the first but not the last of Thurlow's boats to take the animal as a theme in her invention of new totem objects.¹ The inanimate and animate combine in her work to create surprising animal forms, from the protozoic *Prime* to the post-human *Corset-Kayak*.

Whether fabricated from seal skin or bones and baleen as ribs, or even with newer materials and technologies, the kayak derives its perfection in part because its fusion of form and function cannot allow for mistakes. Weather and open water do not permit to the kayak the generous, mediocre and multi-purpose adaptability of the canoe, its forest and closed-water counterpart. The kayak is more like a rocket ship (*Genesis*) or a submarine (*Prime*). Thus when Corset comes to hyphenate kayak as if it were a new kind of kayak, it divests the traditional kayak of its utilities in order for the artist to reveal it as a symbolic form. The corset removes it from the shell of its watery *habitus*. The repressive binding up of the female body blossoms as the Kayak's theme. One asks: is there anything underneath that supports this seemingly capricious and even puckish transfer of the kayak from its arctic *habitus* to the Victoria and Albert Museum and its collection of female regalia?

The advent of European whalers in arctic waters in the late 19th century provides a clue to the hidden alliance between corset and kayak. Once the waters of the mid-Atlantic had been exhausted of whales, Europeans turned to the rather arduous and

¹ For a contemporary analysis of totemism see WJT Mitchell, *What Pictures Want* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), especially part 2.

inclement waters of the far North. Whale oil lit the lamps and lubricated the Victorian industrial machine. Whale bones and baleen found their way into domestic products such as umbrellas and the stays slipped into upright pockets on Victorian corsets, giving both stiffness and pliability. So *Corset-Kayak* is an aesthetic form that carries intercultural memory, underwriting the delicate transgression that couples two forms to produce a singular and self-contained sculptural object of lightness and suggestion.

2.

While *Corset-Kayak* correlates two objects into a unified sculptural form, a second sculpture draws its material and form from the purest of industrial debris that litters Highway 401. The artist takes the treads of two truck tires to make twin boats. Ever since I engaged these boats, lines from Virgil that I once had to translate in a high school Latin class suddenly returned:

When over the tranquil deep, from Tenedos, we saw –
Telling it makes me shudder – twin snakes with immense
Coils
Thrusting the sea and together streaking towards the shore:
Rampant they were among the waves, their blood-red crests
Reared up over the water; the rest of them slithered along
The surface, coil after coil sinuously trailing behind them.²

The artist incorporates the corset of *Corset-Kayak* into one of her boats. The corset begins as a partially unraveling corset to form handlebars-prow of the female tire boat. Between the corset, the headlights and the wires that look like shoulder straps, this tire boat is a biker broad. Her prow brings to mind the sinuous arched prow of a Viking ship.

² Virgil *The Aeneid* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) Lines 178-205.



ABOVE:

FIG. 1

Oseberg Ship

Oslo, Norway

[OSLO MUSEUM, OSLO, NORWAY]

RIGHT:

FIG. 2

Tire Vessels on the 401 2002

[TEMPORARY SITE INSTALLATION]

In making light of such heavy material to create these flotsam-and-jetsam-like creatures to suggest bikers, broads and Virgil, Thurlow, has fashioned a ready-made out of the refuse of the urban sprawl of a city devouring the countryside. The site of *Tire Vessels* is ominously out there, off-stage, invisible and threatening. Without having to say much, she manages to unleash a visual attack on the environmental catastrophe of a fossil fuel economy that might be likened to the snakes that asphyxiate Laocoon and his sons in Virgil.

What saved the whale from extinction in arctic waters was the dinosaur which brought fossil fuel that made possible the combustion engine – another thread connecting *Corset-Kayak* to *Tire Canoes*.



3.

Oh, Canada is a simulacrum of a sixteen foot prospector canoe held together by its wire mesh skin thrusting upward in a "V." The canoe spreads out as if the trunk of a tree had been split in two. "Broach" (from the French "branche") is the action of splitting apart and thus, in the argot of canoeists, when a canoe strikes a rock at the center thwart so that it swamps and even fractures, the canoe is said to broach. Was it broached by submerged and sharp rock on a Laurentian Shield river, the fatality of a fast spring run off? The

sculpture rests on a tranquil arboreal mound of maple leaves. The viewer is witness, not to the moment of impact, but to the evidence to its having been broached. A wanderer might happen upon its weathered remains, like the romantic ruin of a shack, an unmarked shrine to the wilderness on the edge of the ubiquitous Toronto subdivision.

The canoe might well be the material conveyance for a covenant that it contains, going back to the outset of the colonial era, an era that Canada has not fully left, when the French and then the English received from indigenous peoples the conveyance that would afford them *their* prospect to broach the interior of the land. With its passing from red peoples to white peoples, its bearings as a conveyance also shifted. It became an instrument for prospecting because whites could pursue their purposes for being here. The canoe was the gift of communication itself – an intercultural totem object that might be compared to a wampum belt. Collective continuance inevitably returns to that initial aboriginal gift. It requires that there be a return, that those who received the canoe acknowledge its provenance as a way of its being returned. The broaching of Thurlow’s *prospector canoe* expresses the anxiety of the majority culture’s claim to the possession of the canoe. Many breaches of the covenant preceded its broaching. The failure to properly recall this original gift might be the submerged sharp rock that burst open prospector canoe.³

Does *Oh, Canada* designate the canoe as the carrier of Canada’s emerging myth of hospitality?

Corset-Kayak, *Tire Vessels* and *Oh, Canada* are paradigm examples of the three distinct sculptural forms that comprise the ensemble of *Canoe Dreamings*. *Corset-Kayak* is a free standing sculptural object. *Tire Vessels* is a ready-made. *Oh, Canada* is the first of four assemblages, hybrid objects that invent their environment to support their sculptural assertions. Here is how they are distributed across these forms.

<u>Sculpture</u>	<u>Ready-Made</u>	<u>Assemblages</u>
<i>Corset-Kayak (CK)</i>	<i>Tire Vessels (TVS)</i>	<i>Oh, Canada (OC)</i>
Spirit Canoe (SC)	Wish Bone (WB)	Cradled Youth(CY)
Learning Canoe (LC)		System’s Failure (SF)
Genesis (G)		Ship of State (SS)
Prime (P)		
7 Generations (7G)		

³ A version of this text was offered as a pamphlet at BCE Place ...



II. Semiosis of an aesthetic turn

What object fashioned by humans is wealthier and more suggestive in significance and spiritual value than a boat? How quickly and readily we are able to discard the utility of a boat and invest in its conveyance as a symbolic value – the Egyptian death barge, Rimbaud's Drunken Boat, The Greek Temple as a winged boat. Indeed Thurlow effects her aesthetic turn precisely by shifting her focus from the thing and its utility or function to the thing in so much as it is a conveyance, a bearer of stuff, of meaning, of itself.

In the order of its fabrication and in the order of significance, *Learning Canoe* initiates her program because it names and exposes the bearer function. *Learning Canoe* asserts gender as form and text. It is a vessel strongly uterine in its suggestion and votive of mother and child. Its gender is inscribed with a tradition of painful cross-cultural contact that initiates colonial narrative as a palimpsest of the poem of Pauline

Johnson *The Song My Paddle Sings*. *Learning Canoe* initiates a particular ontogeny that continues with other works. The artist initiates her boat program with *Learning Canoe* not least because it is most literally canoe-like in terms of a northern American expectation. It is intended to start the viewer on her way. It is thus the first station. If her aesthetic turn on the bearer aspect is initiated with *Learning Canoe*, the other boats as bearers will carry cargo, warnings, messages, time past and future, cosmologies. Her boats will carry conflict and despair, reconciliation and hope.

That many of her canoes are bearers of time is announced with *Learning Canoe* because it straddles temporally the episodes of life between gestation and birth and infancy. *Seven Generations* explicitly establishes the theme of the boat as temporal bearer where the weight of history and yesterday's news is carried in a wake of paper boats – the wake of time as a wake of paper boats. *Genesis*, on its vertical thrusters, is set to carry the code of human life into the future while *Prime* belongs to some precursor washed up on the shore. After all, *Prime* is the likeness of some protean being thrust through the aeons, washed ashore and hollowed of meaning; a fish is not a boat but humans narrate stories of their being carried by fish, whales, dolphins. *Prime* is a pure temporal signifier, a signifier of the immemorial itself just like the proto-forms that Thurlow found in rocks that inspired its creation.



III History Lesson

From a taxonomic point of view, Thurlow's boats are not all canoes: a kayak, for example, a rocket ship, a gondola, and then there is a cradle between two shrubs, a procession of paper barks. Only two works are recognizable, discernable as canoes: *Learning Canoe* and *Oh, Canada*. Yet *Canoe Dreamings* takes its name and derives its force from the birch bark canoe that Cartier referred to as 'un barc' and that he encountered as he proceeded up the St. Lawrence River on his second voyage in 1535:

Ces gens-là se peuvent appeler sauvages, car ce sont les plus pauvres gens qui puissent être au monde; car tous ensemble ils n'avaient pas la valeur de cinq sous, leurs barques et leurs filets de pêche exceptés. Ils sont tous nus, sauf une petite peau, dont ils couvrent leur nature, et quelques vieilles peaux de bêtes qu'ils jettent

eux en travers. Ils ne sont point de la nature ni de la langue des premiers que nous avons trouvés.⁴ (The people who we met could be called savages because they must be the most impoverished people in the world. Except for their furs, fillets of fish and their canoes, they are not worth five cents. They walk around naked except for the furs that cover their gender and a few old furs that they casually wear...)

Barques, fish filets, and furs are the only notable exceptions that elevate the peoples Cartier encountered from their savage state of indigence. Thurlow's program arises from and deliberates about the aboriginal canoe and the cultural interaction that took place between indigenous peoples and French and English visitors. *Oh, Canada*, *Cradled Youth* and *System's Failure* are three assemblages that engage the painful, unresolved and unrelenting legacy of that contact going back to Cartier on the St. Laurent.

They require particular 'labor' because an ethical concern compels her into allegory. Each assemblage expresses Thurlow's need to create an environment to support the sculptural object as a superstructure. The sculptural superstructure of *Oh, Canada* rests on a forest floor; *Cradled Youth* consists of a cradle woven of branches, pulled between two live forsythia and dogwood bushes that have been uprooted for the exhibition while *System's Failure* holds the effigy of a dead warrior, clutching a t.v. remote, strung out in a hammock suspended between two tree stumps in the emptied space of the clear-cut of a cedar forest. These works are all painful reminders of an unresolved history. They are heavy, fraught with allegory, pointing an accusing finger at the dominant culture's negligence and wasteful power.

Why does the artist need to house the object in a fabricated environment of represented nature? What compels her into allegory? The need to construct this environmental plinth gives substance to the weight of meaning that she invests in these works. To answer that question invites further foray into the early modern history of Canada (1530-1758).

The *Canada* story of the canoe begins at least as narrative with Jacques Cartier and his quest for China through an inland passage of an uncharted land mass. Cartier referred to this vague and uncharted space by using the word "Canada." Sometimes "Canada" designates the vast circumference of lands that belonged to the tribes that he encountered as he proceeded up river. "Canada" is a "realm" of the savages, between

⁴ Jacques Cartier. *Voyages au Canada* (Paris: Editions de la Decouverte, 1992) 145.

the realm of royalty and Narnia. At other times, Cartier uses the word *Canada* to designate the destination toward which he thought he was heading.

'le lendemain deuxième jour dudit mois de septembre, nous ressortîmes de ladite rivière pour faire le chemin vers le Canada ...⁵ (The following day of the second day of September, we set out again on (St. Laurent) river in order to continue our way toward Canada.)

Canada as the name for a vague space, uncharted and unclaimed, often appears in the accounts of early European visitors. Portuguese maps name this vague space both as *Cana* and *Canada* – where *Cana* refers to *Caanan* of the Hebrew Scripture. The European prospectors brought with them the wilderness and the land of *Canaan* as scripture-inspired topics. Contemporary indigenous place-name practice for *Canada*, much in favor today, corrects the orthography of *Canada* to “*Kanata*” meaning “meeting place.” The most celebrated example of this usage is Robert Houle’s reframing of Benjamin West *Death of Wolf* which he retitles *Kanata*:



In Houle’s refiguring of the subject of the painting, Wolf’s death takes place under the gaze of an Iroquois witness. His death takes place on the terroir and the body of aboriginal people.⁶ *Canada* is both somewhere specific and everywhere. This vague space peopled by its indigenous inhabitants initiates the definition of wilderness as *terre*

⁵ Jacques Cartier. op. cit., 177.

⁶ For an analysis of Robert Houle see Ruth Phillips “Settler Monuments and Indigenous Memory” in Nelson and Olin (eds) *Monuments and Memory* (Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 2003), 281-304

sauvages. Kanata/Canada is wherever there is aboriginal presence. Canada is also the proper name of the wilderness.

Yet there is still another lexical investment for the name Canada. It too is indigenous in origin and might qualify Kanata=Canada to mean “meeting place”. The indigenous word *can-ow* surely contributes to the proper name Canada as much as Canaan and meeting place. *Canow* designates the special conveyance that allowed for European travelers to penetrate into this vast, vague and river articulated expanse. The canoe is the conveyance that heads toward Canada. To quote Samuel de Champlain in his account of the canoe:

The water here is so swift that it could not be more so, ... so that it is impossible to imagine one's being able to go by boats through these falls. But anyone desiring to pass them should provide himself with the canoe of the savages, which a man can easily carry. For to make a portage by boat could not be done in a sufficiently brief time to enable one to return to France, if he desired to winter there ... but in the canoes of the savages one can go without restraint, and quickly, everywhere, in the small as well as large rivers. So that by using canoes as the savages do, it would be possible to see all there is, good and bad, in a year or two.⁷

Champlain's expedition portaged their canoes over the very Lachine rapids that thwarted Cartier and thus advanced along “le chemin vers le Canada.” So the name-word ‘Canada’ also ingests canoe because the European adventure might have ended with Cartier. While they coveted the beaver as the staple for exchange, it was the European appropriation of the canoe that made the fur trade possible.

The canoe was a gift or an appropriation for which there was nothing to return, nothing to correspond to it. It was a pure gift because there could be no immediate return. Here is Harold Innis's terse summary of that intercultural engagement with the canoe as medium:

was the contact between Indian civilization of North America and the European civilization, as brought by the French, which produced a disturbance disastrous to the Indian peoples and of profound importance to the French and the

⁷ Harold Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 20.

Europeans, the contrast between diverse cultures produced a disaster for which no remedy was adequate.⁸

The return, a disaster for the indigenous people, was the plantation of the European colony in the evicted spaces of indigenous peoples. Instrumentality and form of life converge to yield the canoe as a symbolic form, a dominant cultural transcendental. Thurlow's canoes carry this particular history. The early modern legacy of the canoe in northern waters informs the three assemblages that make up Thurlow's visual meditation on the cultural condition of Canada. That the canoe has broached in *Oh, Canada*, that the cradle has fallen in *Cradled Youth* and the effigy of a hunter lies rotting on a hammock in the clear-cut of a cedar forest in *System's Failure*, are visual allegories to the colonial condition of Canada. More than any other, *Cradled Youth* evokes with quiet despair the condition of a breakdown in the transmission of the canoe as intergenerational object for cultural renewal. The sculpture *Cradled Youth* visualizes the terms of this communication between indigenous and settler Canadians: A cradle, a fragile barque that holds the child, takes on a poignancy once the viewer absorbs Thurlow's selections of dogwood and forsythia to hold the cradle because Dogwood is a plant indigenous to the Laurentian Shield whereas Forsythia, which was brought by an Englishman from China to England and from England to North America makes a subtle statement about a colonial past through environmental history. These two forces hold the papoose or the "Moses cradle" which is pulled apart between them. The baby falls out. Her history lesson continues in the present. Even if the residential schools only closed their doors in 1986, their aftermath endures.⁹

By restaging as post-colonialist gestures, the era of Canadian coloniality toward indigenous people (an era that may now be over), these assemblages make an ethical claim. These boats in particular are witness objects,¹⁰ burdened with allegory and offer an apology. They are gifts, gestures toward restitution for the original gift of the canoe given by indigenous peoples to Europeans.¹¹

IV. Driftwood

⁸ op cit., 83.

⁹ J.S. Milloy, *A National Crime* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press 2005).

¹⁰ Concerning witness objects, see my "Witness in the Errings of Contemporary Art" in Paul Duro (ed) *The Rhetoric of the Frame*. New York and London: Cambridge University Press, 1997). 178-203; 298-301

¹¹ Concerning keeping places, see my "The Keeping Place in Nelson and Olin" (eds) *Monuments and Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 157-182.

Wishbone consists of two fourteen-foot tree trunks. The artist takes driftwood washed up on the northern shore of Lake Ontario. She patiently extracts their form and draws out animal forms from their roots. Animal heads emerge from the decay.

If *Tire Vessels* cite Scandinavian forms, the animal forms of *Wishbone* recall the gargoyles of Norwegian stave churches as much as they evoke the totemic forms of West Coast carvers. They have an alliance with the upside-down tree trunks that stand as sentinels to constitute an aesthetic precinct and sacred circle that Thurlow has created above a cliff on the north shore of Lake Ontario.



The prow of *Wishbone* emerges in the frenzied clasp of two animals' mouths. It does indeed look like a wishbone. Yet it is one thing to look like a wish bone, quite another thing that the wishbone becomes a boat. Fashioned from driftwood, one asks, what is their drift?

Without something more to this form, *Wishbone* seems unfulfilled as a conveyance. To close the space at the back of the structure as if to stop up its dispersion, the artist suspends a Johnson outboard motor. This perpendicular arrests the indefiniteness of the form. The mechanical add-on makes *Wishbone* incontrovertibly a boat, a satisfying form. Does the completed boat-form called *Wishbone* carry more wishes than just the wish to be a boat? Is that enough? Wherefrom? Whereto? Is it to ferry passengers and cargo to hunting lodges on northern lakes? Who can forget *Black*

Canoe by Bill Reid, and its living cargo? What other clues does the viewer have to follow the drift of this form? There is a differential title in the two official languages of the Nation. In English, the title is *Wishbone*. In French, the title is “vers le Canada (Voltaire).” Perhaps the repressed wish of *Wishbone* is to be found in “vers le Canada (Voltaire)”:

Vous savez que ces nations sont en guerre pour quelques arpentes de neige vers le Canada.¹²

Referring to the Seven Years War and the news of the French defeat by the English on the Plains of Abraham, Voltaire dismisses the folly of this war outright in a few sentences. “These two nations are at war for a few tons of snow toward Canada.” The prepositional phrase that Voltaire uses “vers le Canada” is dismissive. France and England have fought a war for a few tons of snow not somewhere but toward somewhere, not in Canada but towards or in the direction of Canada. Further, the phrase ‘vers le Canada’ had already been used by Cartier to describe the impossible destination of travel. Voltaire makes ironic Cartier’s perhaps exasperated prepositional phrase “vers le Canada” by emphasizing the nullity of the destination when *vers* replaces *au*. – Canada is a place that is permanently suspended, unreachable, nebulous and worthless. So France and England are engaged in a war in a nebulous zone, a vague space, the Wilderness in short in a location that never finds its

¹² Voltaire *Candide*. (Paris: Classique Larousse 1989), 169.

destination. Already for Voltaire, Canada is the proper name of the wilderness.



Vers le Canada, in Thurlow's repetition betokens drift in the direction of Canada. Driftwood gathered on the northern shore of Lake Ontario fastened together to suggest the hull of a boat, equipped with a Johnson outboard motor is a conveyance to carry people *vers le Canada*. Boat people are its absent passengers: boat people within the nebula of Canada: cottagers on the way to the hunting lodge; boat people who just got off the boat; boat people who missed the boat; boat people who jumped ship; boat people still hidden in containers, boat people floating down the river to escape a disaster; boat people floating across vast oceans, boat people waiting in line to fill out applications that will be lost in stacks of paper (paper boats) that Thurlow has formed as pilons to build *Ship of State*. *Ship of State* is nothing but stacks of paper that Thurlow has rescued from the shredder – files, reports, grant applications, applications for refugee status. Is *Wishbone* the motorized Gericault *Raft of Medusa*?

Yet, when did the grand narrative of asylum and refuge emerge as the ruling value of Canada? A rather contemporary notion, indeed! The immigration record is not exactly stellar. The boat has been mostly full, no catalogue of negligence need be offered by way of reminder. Thus it might be worthwhile to date exactly when, in recent collective history, Canada viewed itself in terms of hospitality.

'WHY GO TO CANADA?'

93336666

Special Publicity Supplement

To The

Calgary Daily Herald

Next June the Herald will publish on a scale, hitherto unattempted in the West, a special illustrated edition, dealing with the commercial, social and unique climatic conditions of Southern Alberta.

In Alberta there are 162,000,000 acres of land and there are only 300,000 people settled on this Land, which is the best in the world for wheat raising. We shall not concern ourselves very largely in this publicity supplement with the growth of cities, but of the immense areas surrounding these cities. Of this population the cities and towns of the province would account for approximately 95,000, leaving only 170,000 odd for the immense areas around the cities. This phase of the west will be the principal feature in the Herald's Publicity Supplement.

This edition of the Herald will concentrate the gaze of the reading circle upon the LAND and although it is well nigh impossible to bring home to its imagination the vast extent of our Western Sunlight, we shall state the facts with compactness, completeness and vividness.

Writing to the Herald a few days ago, an English lady said: "All we want is more of our old country ideals

to come and join in our optimism, to take advantage of all the good things that Canada of ours is offering so freely. In lines to the east of the West, to leave their little island in its fog and its fetters, and to show in their life with a mighty assistance, headed from across the ocean with the golden light of unobscured property, WITH CANADA THE HOPE OF THE WORLD."

Next June the Publicity Supplement of the Herald will be Ready.

It will be circulated to the Four-Quarters of the Globe. Reaching more Homes, more Capital, more People than any previous issue of any paper issued in Western Canada.



One step toward the genealogy of this contemporary myth should be to return to the initial intercultural engagements and to ponder the hospitality that indigenous peoples, unmotivated, without precedent of prior reciprocal agreements, extended to the European travelers. Thurlow revisits these terms of reference for her last boat. Suppose it betokens the boat people who view Canada as an asylum, induced by Canada's cosmopolitan face where generosity seems even to sublime collective self-interest. Is hospitality Canada's myth?

*

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From the drift of *Wishbone* to the drift of the ensemble of twelve boats, the project might be thought of as a dream topography. Each boat is its own world, yet there is consonance to the way each boat might to form a route. One route might start with *Learning Canoe* and end with *Spirit Canoe*, but the choreography allows for endless combination and permutation and my route is just one guided by its own intuitions to travel, to travel carried by my own internal compass. Each viewer to his own route! The generosity of these forms is an invitation to travel.

The Mythology of *Canoe Dreamings*

In her approach to making art, Sally Thurlow is a contemporary storyteller and mythmaker, creating rich and diverse sculptural aesthetics to advance large ideas. Her exploration of the canoe form has become a deliberation on a number of feminist, environmental, political and spiritual issues in which the canoe becomes a cross-cultural symbol; through *Canoe Dreamings*, the form is *transformed* into a series of vessels that carry with them the past, present and future. It is said that the journey is as important as the destination, and Thurlow's studied vision furthers the role of the contemporary mythmaker.

Canoe Dreamings was formed through both reaction and invitation. Thurlow saw the exhibition *Into the Wilds* at the McMichael Canadian Collection of Art in 1998, and felt that something was missing from the contemporary portrayal of the canoe. While taking Cultural Studies courses at Trent University with Professor Jonathan Bordo, she was introduced to canoeing Camp Wanapitei in Temagami. She decided to send both her children there for a one month program, remembering her own canoeing experience as a young camper. At the same time, Thurlow was invited by Canadian Studies Professor Michele Lacombe to speak at a Trent University Colloquium entitled *Sacred Sites, Special Places* held at the Wanapitei Lodge, and it was in that mecca for canoeists that she formulated plans for a sculptural series based on the canoe form. The first sculpture started out as Thurlow's entry for a regional exhibition, and it became the jumping off point for the creation of twelve works of art that constitute *Canoe Dreamings*. These are highly considered works, the concept for each vessel revolving around cultural and ethical issues that are at the core of our Canadian narrative. In that context, the viewer is asked to read each individual work as an excerpt from that story.

Thurlow had other considerations while producing the work: the number of sculptures (twelve) becomes important in its perfect divisibility by four – seasons, compass points, and the native referencing of the four nations of the earth; twelve also relates to the twelve Stations of the Cross and the artist's own childhood instruction in the Roman Catholic Church. There are six light and six dark coloured canoes in the series, which she sees as representing light and dark, yin and yang, beginning and end. *Canoe Dreamings* is bracketed by two of the "light" boats: *Learning Canoe* and *Spirit*

Canoe, both translucent, floating vessels that represent the beginning and the end, birth and death.

“Beauty is essential in our lives; there is so much ugliness. So although my work deals with chaos, it is cloaked in beauty.”¹ *Learning Canoe* is a beautiful vessel, one in which a child would first learn to paddle. It was inspired by an example Thurlow encountered in her research on canoe history and canoe-making at the Canadian Canoe Museum in Peterborough, a unique museum dedicated to the history of the canoe. Like all the works in this exhibition, it is highly detailed with remarkable attention to its finish - the result of Thurlow’s earlier career as a clothing designer and manufacturer. The work is made of two layers of white silk organza over birch veneer ribs (its delicacy belies the rigours of canoeing in Canadian lakes) while mother of pearl buttons hold the ribs in place. Beneath one of the layers of organza, and on the ribs, is written verses of Pauline Johnson’s poem *The Song My Paddle Sings*. Johnson was a late 19th century Canadian of Anglo Mohawk heritage, a poet and recital artist who was a strong advocate of Native rights,

And forward far the rapids roar,
Fretting their margin for evermore.
Dash, dash,
With a mighty crash
They seethe, and boil, and bound, and splash.

Be strong, O paddle! Be brave, canoe!
The reckless waves you must plunge into.
Reel, reel,
On your trembling keel,
But never a fear my craft will feel.

Both Johnson’s poem and work are tributes to paddling and the indomitable spirit of youth. The poem is hidden from view, making Johnson Thurlow’s veiled muse – one who lives within and both inspires and teaches.² The limp paddle that lies across the boat, unable to propel it forward, is, to the artist, symbolic of the lack of direction found in many young people, despite their enthusiasm for life.

Corset-Kayak is fashioned after the small, one-person Inuit vessel (*kayak* means “one with water”³) known for its speed and agility. *Corset-Kayak* is a vessel that floats at waist height and is made of delicately structured driftwood. The corset, placed over the cockpit, is patterned after Thurlow’s own measurements,⁴ although the boat represents a universal feminist experience within its political and matriarchal contexts. In writing

about *Corset-Kayak*, (Thurlow's note books can be likened to the diaries and journals kept by early explorers and are imperative first steps in her work) she notes that the single-person vessel represents independence and self-reliance, qualities essential to a woman's journey through hostile, patriarchal social systems.

There is a consistent use of other's stories within Thurlow's own mythmaking. In *Cradled Youth*, the biblical story of Moses and the inter-cultural nurturing that he experienced between his Israelite birth and Egyptian adopted families, is referenced by the use of a basket. The work can actually be considered a natural performance. In 2000, Thurlow planted forsythia and dogwood bushes beside each other in her backyard garden. Her "Moses" basket, in the shape of a boat, was made of woven forsythia and dogwood branches, and placed within both bushes. Her photographic record over the following five years shows the bushes growing up and through the basket, eventually tearing it apart. The "work" was dug up, the roots placed in cement, with the resulting piece curiously de-contextualized for gallery viewing. Dogwood, native to Canada, and forsythia, native to Europe, represent the push and pull – give and take -- of two cultures. The branches of the separate bushes would eventually intertwine, breaking apart the seeming differences of each culture. Thurlow has made *Cradled Youth* primarily about hope in reconciling two communities, two nations.

Once you held shamans
Strong men who bestowed protection
Or power or healing or dreams.
Charms crawling on you like beetles
Stepped delicately over knotted spells
and brilliant mirrors.

From *Ghost of the hunter's coat*
Patricia Bentley

All but one of Thurlow's canoes is void of occupants, yet there is an implied presence or, perhaps, a vestige of past occupants. The exception is *Systems Failure*, the only work to include a figure, possibly the least hopeful work in the series. A hammock is tied between two cedar stumps, with smaller stumps around the periphery. The hammock itself is, Thurlow explains, "a morphing beetle on its back slung between the tree stumps."⁵ An unrecognizable, Kafkaesque figure lies inside the canoe-shaped hammock, vegetating among the clear cut, more comfortable with a television remote control than his rifle. Thurlow's interests lie in environmental issues, condemning such practices as clear-cutting when they mean a loss of traditional hunting grounds for

natives, stripping them not only of their land, but their dignity and pride. In *Systems Failure*, she is also communicating the cultural disintegration that she sees as prevalent in our television culture – as a mother, she is particularly aware of culture loss among young people enthralled by television programmes, movies and video games. The canoe “dream” in this work is nightmarish in its prognostications.

Our future, Thurlow conjectures, may lie beyond this world. In *Genesis*, our genes are blasted into the future aboard a rocket-like structure. The sixteen foot high sculpture can be seen as an up-ended canoe balanced and standing on tendrils of steel dowelling, swirling like a floor-sweeping gown. The rocket itself consists of twisted and branching steel rods that culminate in delicate nerve ending. Inside the rocket is a broken strand of DNA that balances a crystal ball/egg. The work, painted red, resembles nerves, blood vessels and stretched muscles: Thurlow has referred to it as “womb” rocket and sites Neil Young’s lyrics from *After the Goldrush*:

They were flying Mother Nature’s
Silver seed to a new home in the sun.

The vessels in this series of twelve consists of a variety of materials: transport truck tires in *Tire Vessels #1* and *#2*, driftwood and outdoor boat motor in *Wishbone*, an aluminum-screen covered version of a prospector’s canoe enclosing maple leaves in *Oh, Canada*, over one-hundred and forty paper boats in *Yesterday’s News: Seven Generations*, *Ship of State’s* skiff collaged with paper maps, photos and a stack of Clarington Council minutes and the translucent fibreglass of *Prime*. These works refer to society’s relationship with its past, its community and ultimately to its environment. Through them, we are given new stories and myths to assist us on our journey.

The closing chapter in Thurlow’s narrative is *Spirit Canoe*. Constructed of translucent white fibreglass, it floats above the viewer as a ghostly conclusion to our journey. “Cross-culturally, in primitive belief systems, the boat (or canoe) image is a soul-boat, a vessel for carrying the souls of the dead to the afterworld, often traveling through the skies.”⁶ Further to the myth, author Jim Poling explains: “If the person has lived a good life, the canoe travels safely to an enchanted island where there is bountiful game and firewood. If the person has lived an evil life, the canoe sinks and the soul spends eternity in the cold depths.”⁷ In the Roman Catholic ritual of Thurlow’s childhood, the Stations of the Cross allowed for quiet contemplation of crucial episodes in the story;

there is a similar quiet tranquility to *Spirit Canoe*, its simplicity a fitting ending to a series that challenges its viewers to embrace a new mythology woven into those of the past.

We'd like to think that a truly Canadian experience is to glide across a pristine northern lake in a canoe, but the reality, of course, is that the vast majority of Canadians have never seen a canoe, much less paddled one. Yet, the canoe remains a cross-cultural symbol of our past – its connection to Native peoples, its relationship to adventure and discovery and its ability to bond us more closely with nature. Thus Sally Thurlow's canoe works are metaphors for larger issues that affect society in general, specific communities and ultimately the individual.

Emily Carr, one of Canada's most respected artists, was not particularly comfortable in a canoe, but she saw it as a means to broaden her knowledge of Native culture and she understood its importance. To her go the last words:

Slowly the canoe drifted away from the moonlit landing, till, at the end of her rope, she lay an empty thing, floating among the shadows of an inverted forest.⁸

Linda Jansma
Curator

End Notes

1. Sally Thurlow's undated note book.
2. Falina Norred, "Circa and White Wampum, Sally Thurlow and E. Pauline Johnson (unpublished essay submitted to Professor Michele Lacombe, Trent University, 1999), 4.
3. Kenneth G. Roberts and Philip Shackleton, *The Canoe* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1983), 133.
4. Norred, 24.
5. Thurlow notes, undated.
6. Liz Wylie, *In the Wilds: Canoeing in Canadian Art* (Klienburg: McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 1998), 11.
7. Jim Poling Sr., *The Canoe* (Toronto: Key Porter Books Ltd., 2000), 103.
8. Emily Carr, *Klee Wyck* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Company, 1941), 111.

List of Works

Learning Canoe 1998

silk organza, birch veneer ribbing, tailor's chalk, embroidery, mother of pearl buttons, steel pins, pine

92.5 x 240 x 60 cm

(Oshawa, Peterborough: Art Gallery of Peterborough, Mississauga, Chatham, Sault Ste. Marie, Owen Sound)

Corset-Kayak 2000

driftwood cedar, bent willow spring shoots, linen strings,

127.5 x 305 x 52.5 cm (installed)

(Oshawa, Peterborough: Canoe Museum, Mississauga, Chatham, Sault Ste. Marie, Owen Sound)

Oh, Canada 2003

aluminum window screening, maple leaves, white pine gunnels, communication wire, steel,

240 x 480 x 150 cm (installed)

(Oshawa, Peterborough: Canoe Museum, Mississauga, Chatham, Sault Ste. Marie, Owen Sound)

Cradled Youth 2000 - 2005

forsythia and dogwood branches and bushes, cement

210 x 240 x 90 cm

(Oshawa)

Tire Vessel # 1 2001

transport truck tire, water, steel dowelling, truck headlights, wire corseting

105 x 330 x 65 cm

(Oshawa, Peterborough: Art Gallery of Peterborough, Mississauga, Chatham, Sault Ste. Marie, Owen Sound)

Tire Vessel #2 2001

transport tire

105 x 330 x 65 cm

(Oshawa, Peterborough: Art Gallery of Peterborough, Mississauga, Chatham, Sault Ste. Marie, Owen Sound)

Systems Failure 2002

fabric, paint, thread, aluminum window screening, television remote control, television antennae, cedar stumps

225 x 480 x 300 cm (installed)

(Peterborough: Canoe Museum)

Yesterday's News: Seven Generations 2002 - 2004.

Japanese rice paper, fishing line, steel hooks,

90 x 630 x 360 cm

(Oshawa, Owen Sound)

Genesis 2003-2004

steel rods, primer, crystal ball/egg

480 x 120 cm

(Oshawa and Peterborough: Art Gallery of Peterborough)

Ship of State 2004

wood, paper, steel spike

steel spike: 210 cm high

boat on stand: 90 x 210 x 90 cm

(Mississauga)

Wishbone 2005

Johnson outboard motor 10hp, paint, driftwood tree trunks, steel bolt

120 x 450 x 90 cm

(Peterborough: Art Gallery of Peterborough)

Prime 2005

fiberglass

44 x 345 x 44 cm

(Peterborough: Art Gallery of Peterborough, Mississauga, Chatham)

Spirit Canoe 2005

fiberglass

40 x 280 x 45 cm

(Oshawa, Peterborough: Art Gallery of Peterborough, Mississauga, Chatham, Sault Ste. Marie, Owen Sound)

Biographies

Born in Toronto, Sally Thurlow received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Fine Arts from the University of Toronto transferring to Trent University for Cultural Studies and Environmental Science. She has an Honors Diploma in Creative Fashion Design from George Brown College, as well as taking numerous fibre arts courses at the Ontario College of Art and Design and at Ryerson University.

She has shown her work in numerous solo and group exhibitions in Toronto, Oshawa, Bowmanville, Cobourg, Niagara Falls and Cambridge including *land'escapes* at the Clarington Gallery, Bowmanville, *Baghdad Museum* at the Visual Art Centre, Bowmanville and Propellor Gallery, Toronto, and *Memory and Nature: The Iris Group at the Millennium* at The Robert McLaughlin Gallery.

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