

2016

# Harbour

Eric Stewart

*University of Colorado Boulder*

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HARBOUR

(On Wilderness, Landscape and Representation)

by

Eric Stewart

B.F.A. School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2008

A thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
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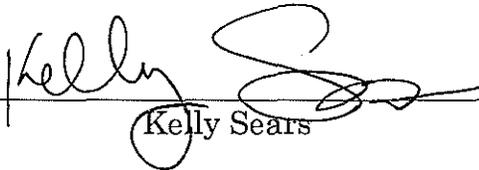
This thesis entitled:  
Harbour (On Wilderness, Landscape and Representation)  
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has been approved for the Department of Art & Art History



\_\_\_\_\_  
Dan Boord



\_\_\_\_\_  
Melinda Barlow



\_\_\_\_\_  
Kelly Sears

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we  
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Stewart, Eric (M.F.A. Art & Art History)

Harbour

Thesis directed by Professor Dan Boord

HARBOUR is a 16mm film focusing on the English Fascination with the Pacific Northwest. It evaluates ecological simulation and historic recreation to find in Landscape a stage for the enactment of the Other. In the 19th century English aristocrats were especially fascinated with the large evergreens of the Pacific Coast. Entrepreneurs and naturalists began importing spectacular trees, such as the California Redwood, throughout the United Kingdom. This importation of fauna was part of a circuit of appropriation through recreation; where the English simulated, in garden and greenhouse, the ecology of colonial landholdings while exporting English culture and architecture to said colonial locales.



## CONTENTS

### CHAPTER

I. The Nature of Cinema.....	1
II. The Pencil of Nature .....	3
III. Nature & Cinema .....	6

BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	19
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## The Nature of Cinema

“If the knowledge of a few individuals can only be acquired at such a price as the happiness of nations, it were better for the discoverers and the discovered that the south sea had still remain unknown to Europe and its restless inhabitants” <sup>1</sup>

-George Forster

How big is the world and is it knowable in its entirety? Underlying my artistic practice is a series of deep and ultimately unanswerable questions about the world we experience. The unanswerable nature of our deepest existential concerns is crucial to my understanding of art making, in that the creative practice is not motivated by the production of knowledge but instead by the production and analysis of experience.

Working predominately in cinema I have a vested interest in defining what cinema is. This task is difficult, for what constitutes cinema is vast and ever changing. At times the cinema is in color, has sound, contains language, actors and has nameable objects; cinema can make use of a camera, soundstage and lights but, none of these are prerequisites to what constitutes the cinema.

At bare minimum the cinema is a darkened space for the focusing of light. In this darkness is the attempt to formulate an awareness of experience itself. This focus on light and space in the cinema simultaneously

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<sup>1</sup> George Forster, son of John Forster renowned naturalist and enlightenment thinker. Quoted in “From Maps to Metaphors” pg. 34



creates an ontological and allegorical arena into which we project our existential notions of what it is to be a being in time that can experience the world through light and shadow.

Prior to the 19th century, moving pictures and projected light in the form of magic lanterns, zoetropes and flip books encompassed a genre known as Philosophical Toys; philosophical because if the lens is like an eye then the apparatus surrounding the lens is like the mind and the space between images becomes the space between perception. The blackness between frames is the space between thoughts and the space between being and non-being it is the very space of the mind or at least a space close enough to that of the mind that there is room for reflecting on that which is essential to being.

The ancient Chinese experimented with pinhole projection in order to study the sun's spots and the ancient Greeks<sup>2</sup> were aware of the pinhole phenomena between the apertures naturally occurring in the foliage of tree canopies. Plato's metaphoric cave<sup>3</sup> of course forms the basis for an inquiry into being, which investigates time, space and perception through optics and architecture. All of these ancient observations make the cinema a foundational aspect of human culture. The impulse underlying the cinema can be found in culture throughout time regardless of technological conditions.

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<sup>2</sup> *"Pinhole Photography: Rediscovering a Historic Tradition"* pg. 3

<sup>3</sup> *"Pinhole Photography: Rediscovering a Historic Tradition"* pg. 4



### The Pencil of Nature<sup>4</sup>

In Hiroshima and Nagasaki the shadows of the world's first Atomic Bomb victims were etched onto buildings and into the walls of where their bodies masked off the wave of energy and light that the nuclear bomb released. Like a child burning ants beneath a magnifying glass, light can write itself onto surfaces in ways both violent and subtle.

Light not only spills across walls and surfaces but also fills space. To explain the movement of light through space it was once proposed that space contained a medium called the Aether. Just as a tidal wave passes through the ocean, then light too must propagate through the something. Aether was this something, the stuff of space itself.

The theory of Aether holds existence in a condition of suspense. The theory tells us that existence is held taught within the confines a massive lighthouse and that space constitutes the curved membrane of the lighthouse's fresnel lens. Aether paints the world as perched in a watchtower on the edge of the continent looking out over a limitless coast into a boundless field of fluid energy. As we peer into the dark from our thin membrane of focus, space itself is like the bellows of a camera.

Inherited by way of Latin, Camera Obscura refers to a darkened space into which light is focused; this focused light, when captured chemically onto

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<sup>4</sup> *"The Pencil of Nature" by Henry Fox Talbot*



paper, is what we generally call photography and prior to 1830 when captured by hand was often called a drawing or a painting. This etymology reminds us that cinema is always in part architectural, that it is composed of a relationship between a lens (camera, projector, aperture etc...) and a point of focus (the negative or the screen) and like wind filling a sail photography discloses and captures a momentary energy moving through space.

The theory of Aether was dispelled with Einstein's Theory of Relativity. Early in his youth Einstein wondered what light would look like if one were able to travel right next to it, like a passenger on a parallel subway car what would the face of light look like if you could ride next to it and wave hello? All photography aspires to this question: What is it to halt light? What is it and what does it look like?

While the existence of Aether has fallen out of favor as an explanation of physical reality, it remains useful as a thought experiment in that it allows us to consider what it means to live in a world under glass, a world permeated by a translucent substance which light passes through; because ours is a world under glass, a world mediated through reflections and optics even more so now than ever before.

Whether a landscape or a building every space contains a social fabric whose threads weave themselves in time and this weaving is what we call history. When looking at the space depicted in a photograph or a painting our attention is usually focused into the dimensions of the illuminated side of the



camera; the place the photograph or painting seeks to represent – the subject matter. The thing we want to know is the thing being looked at; but what happens when we reverse our gaze and look into the space of the darkened antechamber of the camera itself. What social fabrics are contained in that dark space of projection whose only purpose is the focusing of light?



## Nature & Cinema

My films and photographic work contain an interest in landscape and the ways humans interact with the natural environment. My interest in landscape lies at the intersection of human nature and nature itself. Whether antagonistic or cooperative I interrogate these relationships as a means to reveal circuits of control and oppression while keeping open the possibility of transcendence.

HARBOUR is a fifteen-minute 16mm film that began by focusing on the simulation of nature in a container. The impulse underlying simulation is the foundation in all the arts of representation; from realist painting and sculpture to photography and the cinema. However the desire to recreate reality always falls short of reality itself and this falling short underlines the limits inherent in communication, understanding and perception itself. Internal subjectivities will always contend viciously with empirical certainties and objectivity.

I began by investigating three naturalists from the 19<sup>th</sup> century Nathaniel Bagshaw Ward, Archibald Menzies (pronounced Mingus) and David Douglas. With the support of a travel fellowship from the Center for British and Irish studies and the Deans Graduate Research grant, I was able to trace these naturalists' footsteps and examine their legacy in the landscape, from North America to the United Kingdom.



In the summer of 2015 I took a month long trip to Washington State where I spent two weeks backpacking the Olympic Peninsula, a large swath of undeveloped coastline still covered in Old Growth Douglas Fir and a vast expanse of wilderness. I chose to work with 16mm film and the spring wound Bolex camera because it freed me of the limitations of needing electricity while hiking through these distant and hard to reach wilderness locations. In the Olympic Peninsula I wanted to see what these explorers first saw when they reached the coast. I wanted to experience the places, which they named after themselves and the English Empire.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was an era when botany was bound within the practice of Medicine. Archibald Menzies a Scottish surgeon and botanist, it was his genuine enthusiasm for botany and horticulture that led him to be employed by the Royal Navy through which he accompanied George Vancouver on his state sponsored voyage to map and conquer the Pacific. During this voyage Archibald was the first European to undertake any kind of comprehensive classification of the flora and fauna of the Pacific. He named after himself, an array of plants from Polynesia to Alaska and this process of giving English and Latin names to the native plants of the New Worlds paralleled George Vancouver's system of projecting, through land surveys and place naming, the hegemony of the British Empire.

Following up on the imposition of English sensibilities over the Pacific landscape I visited the United Kingdom in the summer of 2016 where I



visited the ancestral home of Archibald Menzies. The gardens at Castle Menzies feature a host of plants and trees which Menzies brought with him to the United Kingdom, these include the Monkey Puzzle tree from South America and the notoriously difficult to transplant Pacific Madrone tree from Washington State among many others. Archibald had built an elaborate system of walled gardens and irrigation to construct environments for these non-native plants to live and thrive in Lowland Scotland, where they still remain today.

Adjacent to the ancestral home of Archibald Menzies is the town of Scone (pronounce Scoon), where David Douglas was employed as the Royal Gardener of Scone Palace. Following in the footsteps of Archibald, David Douglas traveled to the Pacific Northwest of America to continue the project of classification and observation. Douglas catalogued the Douglas Fir tree whose common name is in honor of himself, David Douglas, while its latin name, *Pseudotsuga menziesii*, is named in honor of Archibald Menzies. In the gardens at Scone Palace is the original Douglas Fir which Douglas raised from seed and adjacent to this premiere Fir is a large grove of trees all spawn from that original tree, this area is called Progeny Grove.

This process of re-exploring and re-interpreting the path of 19<sup>th</sup> century exploration was an attempt to unmake the west and to imagine North America, as it was pre-colonization. This project of conceptually erasing the Enlightenment and the Age of Exploration was a means to



reconcile the centuries of genocide and oppression over native peoples and the environment with the sense of wonder and discovery that drove these naturalists.

Thirdly my project looked at the experiments of Nathaniel Bagshaw Ward who was an English physician and amateur botanist in the habit of growing fern and butterfly specimens. In order to protect his specimens from the industrial pollution of London, Ward began experimenting with growing plants in enclosed glass containers, which he named the Wardian Case after himself. He described these transparent cabinets as the simulation of nature in a container<sup>5</sup>.

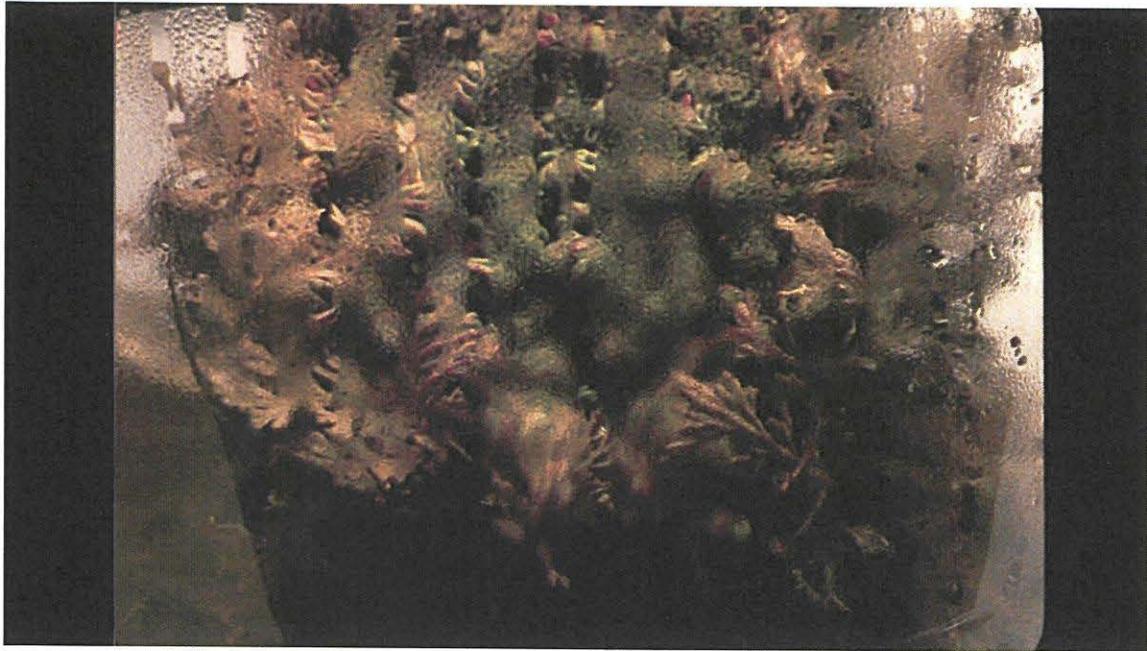
Once placed on boats these cases enabled a form of movement that was previously unimaginable, the transportation of living plants across the world's oceans, because these plants were safely shielded from cold temperatures, salt spray, and encapsulated in a regenerating supply of fresh water exotic flora and fauna was able to be brought from the South Pacific and North America into Europe. The Wardian Case was such a revolution for its time that Sir William Hooker, director of Kew Gardens London, 1841-1865, remarked that the case had imported into London six times as many plants in its first decade and a half of use than the entire previous century<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> in *"On the Natural Conditions of Plants"* from *"On the Growth Of Plants in Closely Glazed Cases"* pgs. 1 -19

<sup>6</sup> From *"The Remarkable Case of Dr. Ward"* in *The Telegraph* 1/19/2002





In the studio I used the experiments of N.B. Ward growing plants under glass as a way to guide a loose recreation of those experiments. Utilizing a Tobin time-lapse motor, the Bolex and a series of relays, I documented the growth of ferns, milkweed, narcissus, amaryllis, tulips, daffodils and iris's over a period of two years. I intentionally chose flowering bulbs and ferns because of the Victorian and European desire to feature these specimens of exotic and colonial landscapes in their homes and gardens.

I photographed these plants under artificial light using a timer that would turn grown lights on and off daily. Connected to this oscillating process of night and day, I connected a photocell and relay that would turn on the time-lapse motor. I used double exposure and in camera fades as a way to weave in and out of the static microscopic views.



I find in the Wardian Case kind of psuedo-cinematic space where this enclosure for the simulation of nature in a container and mirrors the drive of all the mimetic arts, from cartography to painting; the desire to represent the real in miniature.

Initially Ward's experiments under glass were attempts to shield his fern, moth and butterfly collections from the industrial pollution of 19th century London. Once insulated from the noxious urban atmosphere, his plants began to thrive. This illustrates the antagonistic relationship of organic life with industrial production and embodies the intersection of the human and the natural world.

The Wardian Case is a living diorama and along with the large botanical glasshouses that the case inspired, all form tableaux vivants of the natural world. These spaces extend landscape painting and photography into the 4 dimensional realm of experience; a realm that can be walked through touched and smelled. These glass enclosures are theatres of not just botanical spectacle but also stand as monuments to the power and novelty of industrial engineering and the aristocracy they serve. These monuments work similar to the conventions driving renaissance perspective and French formal gardens: conventions that symbolize humanities dominance over nature and materialize the accumulation of capital for a privileged and elite aristocratic class.



While the Wardian Case was first invented to insulate the natural from the industrial it paradoxically became a part of the mechanisms that dominated and commodified the natural world. The case reinforces the processes that enabled capitalism to entrench society within walls of steel, glass and alienation. It created a system where pieces of nature could be extracted, owned and displayed.



Elaborating beyond the botanical HARBOUR pairs ecological simulation in, the form of gardening, with historic reenactment by looking at the Victorian Heritage Festival in Port Townsend Washington, a festival in which 21<sup>st</sup> North Americans re-enact 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian England. This reenactment mirrors the gardens at Kew where we see 19<sup>th</sup> century North American trees growing in 21<sup>st</sup> Century London. This paralleling reveals in landscape a stage for the performance of the Other.



19<sup>th</sup> century English aristocrats were especially fascinated with the large evergreens of the Pacific Coast in North America. Entrepreneurs and naturalists began importing Redwood trees from California into the United Kingdom, where they were featured prominently in large rows and circular groves, in the hopes that one day they would attain they height and girth they have in their native California.

By documenting a grove of redwoods and tourists inside of Kew Gardens London the film frames this importation of fauna as part of a circuit of appropriation through recreation; where the English simulated, in garden and greenhouse, the ecology of colonial landholdings while exporting English culture and architecture to said colonial locales.

“In the West, the Italian Renaissance garden manifested the confluence of the contemporary valorization of classical Roman antiquity and the rediscovery and development of linear perspective with its consequent geometrization of space (as described and codified in the writings of Alberti)...”<sup>7</sup>. Continuing the linear rows of the Renaissance, this grove of Redwoods was planted in Kew Gardens and today these trees are considered some of the tallest in London. This grove is a collapse not only of space, by simulating North America within an English garden, but also a collapse of time, a site where the 19th century lives amongst the 21<sup>st</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> *“Mirrors of Infinity”* pg. 13



The film also examines a large Victorian glass house at Kew Gardens called the Palm House. Glass simultaneously separates and conjoins, like Ward's portable glass cases the Palm house insulates the exotic and wild from the urbane and local. This insulation and disjunction between what is perceived as industrial and what is perceived as natural is visualized by the capturing of the reflection of planes flying overhead in the glass panels of the botanical enclosure.

The Palm House at Kew Gardens is a large Victorian Glass house modeled on the London World's Fair's Crystal Palace in Hyde Park and after the hull of an overturned boat. Echoes of these glass structures can be seen in large glass skyscrapers of contemporary urban spaces. Illustrated in all of these are the necessary conditions of looking, the viewer and the stage as well as the connection between looking, inhabiting and the intruding. Looking is intrusive in the sense that what is looked at is changed by the act of being seen because looking negotiates the distance between subject and object, like an electric spark sight arcs over this distance with sufficient energy to transform the object of our desire.

Glass can be a prison and a portal, for glass permits the passing of light to the exclusion of anything else. The vitrine is an enclosure and the telescope a connective tissue. In many ways the botanical glasshouse can be thought of as the antithesis of the cinema in that the cinema is an opaque enclosure and a black cube, while the glass house is a transparent



architecture and a completely illuminated space. Similar to the pseudo-cinematic space of the Wardian Case, glasshouses however conduct many of the features performed by the cinema, specifically the recreation of place and landscape within an enclosed frame.

From an aerial perspective the glasshouse resembles the Black Maria Studio of Thomas Edison, whose black walls and glass ceiling created an enclosure filled with sunlight and was intended for the capturing of reality or in the language of early cinema, actuality. The surface of celluloid has also been compared with other glass structures such as stained glass in churches and glass was foundational to the early photographic processes like collodion. Cinema is always part architectural, extending beyond the bounds of the frame to include the theatrical space of projection and the darkened area of image creation, the camera's bellows.





The compositional strategies in HARBOUR intentionally continue the formal strategies developed in linear perspective. A system that privileges balance, symmetry and a centrally located vanishing point in order to demonstrate the principles of optics and space. This system of imaging was internalized into the landscape gardening of the French Baroque and was utilized most obviously in the gardens of Versailles as a means to symbolize Louis the XIV's control over nature. The gardens formal hedgerows insinuate through their long linear descent into the horizon the connection between Louis, infinity and the divine<sup>8</sup>.

Marcus Boon's in *Digital Mana*<sup>9</sup> describes the infinite in both transcendental and scientific terms. Boon's uses infinity as a concept similar to other thinkers' use of "the real"<sup>10</sup>. The infinite inherently exists beyond perception, conceptualizations and imagination. Infinity defies human understanding and bears similarities to the sublime and transcendental spiritual notions. The connections between infinity and divinity form the well from which we draw both language and representation in that they represent the source of creation itself. Through controlling representations of infinity systems of power, both monarchical and aristocratic, are manifested and given justification. "At infinity, aesthetics, mathematics, and

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<sup>8</sup> *"Mirrors of Infinity" pg. 59*

<sup>9</sup> *"Digital Mana" by Marcus Boon*

<sup>10</sup> *Specifically Baudrillard's description of the Real*



theology meet on a unified plane whose grandeur and perfection symbolizes God”<sup>11</sup>

The idea of “nature” exists similarly alongside concepts of “the real” and “the infinite”. Systems of power seek dominion over nature for reasons similar to why they seek to dominate and define the infinite and the divine. For in nature are the origin and the source from which things come. In an economic scope the “natural” forms the source of capital. Industrialism and Capitalism aspire towards becoming synonymous with nature and through its prowess at production and accumulation seeks to subsume nature.

The 19th represented infinity within the space of optical perspective and architectural fabrication. At Versailles infinity, sovereignty, and control were all intimately wound into and around each other, forming a nexus wherein its architecture stacked marble and its formal gardens formed rows. All of these lines and stacks seek to monumentalize Power by projecting through space areas of non-productive property and resources for the enjoyment of an elite or the distanced entertainment of the public. These spaces quarantine raw capital and this control over landscape forms a psychogeographic domain to testify to their owners’ vast and decadent ability to collect.

Accumulations of power need not be actual, however, Landscape photographs and paintings act symbolically to facilitate systems of

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<sup>11</sup> *“Mirrors of Infinity”* pg. 59



power. More abstractly we can think of map-making, as the enactment of Power internationally. This is the reason the British Empire so studiously mapped and charted. It was not only a logistical way to enact imperialism but also a symbolic way of outlining ownership and control, through projecting lines of power through latitude and longitude.

A map and a painting differ from the botanical garden in the obvious way that they depict places that are far away, distant and foreign, of course the garden quickly evolved to acquire the distant and foreign, but only through their becoming rooted in the local, the garden is not a vantage into the distant but a folding of the distant into the local.

The botanic garden stocked with fauna from the world over bears the same gesture as photography: to move beyond representation and enter into the realm of the compellingly complete simulation in order to become the phantom that convinces us of its authenticity. Just as commodities were sailed along latitudes of control so to is experience doled out and accumulated by way of botanical spectacles that demonstrate humanities control over nature. The palm tree growing in the United Kingdom demonstrates the empires ability to make the unnatural natural and to seemingly rewrite the laws of nature.



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