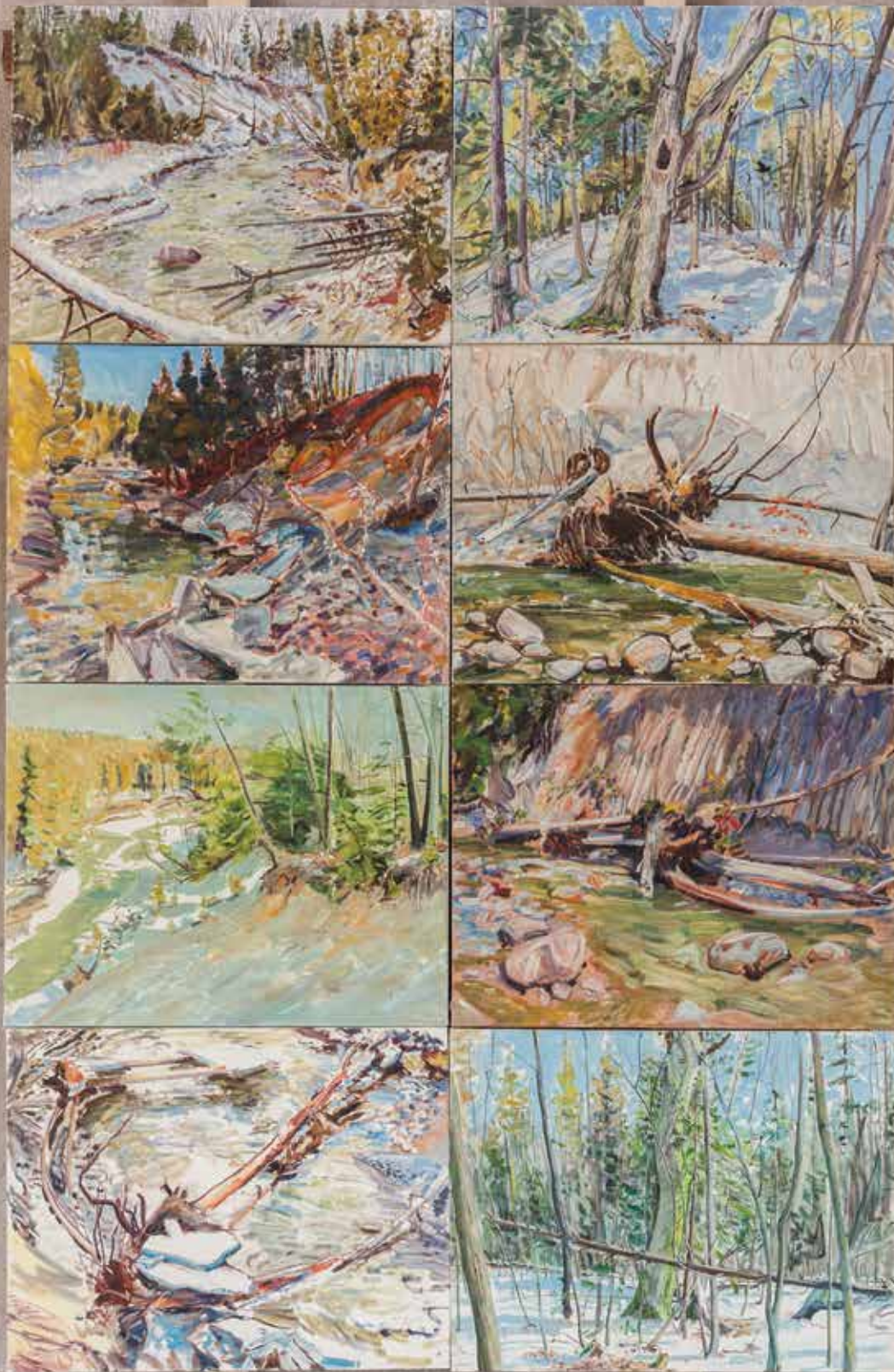


DRAWING A LINE

Tony Cooper

The Visual Arts Centre of Clarington

James Campbell, Curator



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Tony Cooper

ESSAY BY JAMES CAMPBELL

FOR THE PAST THREE DECADES, Orono, Ontario artist, Tony Cooper, has traveled into the heart of Killarney Provincial Park on the north shore of Georgian Bay, near Sudbury. With paint box in hand, he has paddled and portaged its many lakes, camping in the interior, producing vital on-site oil sketches in varied environmental conditions and times of day. As the artist states: “I work physically on the land, to maintain a presence and to observe directly the changes and effects of the elements over time. I choose to document sites repeatedly, building up a composite of viewpoints that attest to the dynamic experience of place.”⁽¹⁾ In the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington exhibition, more than two hundred small oil-on-panel paintings occupied our three gallery spaces. All embody and celebrate a “dynamic experience of place.” They do so as individual pieces, and when mounted flush together within wooden supports and framing, expand to a unified field of images, woven together into a surface of inflected strokes. The larger arrays assume a sculptural presence, with the adjoining panels providing an ongoing ‘filmic’ narrative.

“Place”, in these works, embraces more than Killarney. Ongoing journeys to Bowmanville Creek have resulted in a journal of numerous oil sketches created en plein air, in varied seasons. Cooper also repeatedly engages “urban/industrial site documentation”⁽²⁾, exploring the ongoing construction of a Thornhill, Ontario, condominium project. He has set his easel before local steel mills and cement plants. Regardless of subject, each panel exudes an honesty and spontaneity, “an immediate and lively response” to places and things the artist is immersed in as he creates an on-going history of site. Cooper’s visual documents of place, the elements, time past and present, both enchant and compel. They make us ponder *our* place.

Tony Cooper describes the Willisville area of the La Cloche Range, which extends from La Cloche Provincial Park to Killarney, as a “pristine area of quartzite ridges and crystal clear, turquoise lakes.”⁽³⁾ In a letter written ca. 1930, A. Y. Jackson recalls a night that he had camped, with paint box in hand, within the hills of La Cloche: “the lake is like a sheet of glass and the moon which has just risen over the hills, is sending a big silver shimmer over the water and straight into the tent.”⁽⁴⁾ In the centre of Cooper’s large two-sided multi panel piece, *Vigil*, we see a beaming silver-white moon, throwing a strong light across Georgian Bay, and over the distant ridge of Manitoulin Island. Struck by the vivid contrast in the dark of the night, Cooper set up his paints by moonlight. He worked quickly in the dark to capture a fleeting moment, with short bursts from a flashlight to check the colour. The result is a magical nocturne. This central moon light painting is surrounded by 17 other vistas from the surrounding area. We witness a compilation of diverse views of quartzite stone and rock faces, tangled roots and mountain lakes. The obverse side of this installation carries us through a continuous montage of seasonal changes in the Willisville mountain terrain. When studied closely, panel by panel, we observe the artists precise



THE MAIN GALLERY

and individuated strokes of colour. From ten feet away, perception restructures our depth of field, and we are carried into a visually sumptuous space. A foreground rock face carries us downward to meet a shimmering lake, then to small islands and a far shore dotted with pine and spruce, finally to a progression of distant hills.

Vigil is a site-specific conceptual piece. An arch, made of two wooden posts with a cross lintel, stands from floor to ceiling. Pressure holds the two posts in place. Two arrays of paintings on both sides of the installation (18 panels per side) are suspended from the cross lintel. The piece fuses with the post and beam architecture of the VAC main gallery, and is set obliquely to the square of the building. This is a sculptural installation. The 36 oils incorporated are not bound to a wall; we may walk around them and the structure that supports them. Two large rocks and an undulating log, “quoted directly from the environment”⁽⁵⁾, are suspended by ropes running through pulleys, which hang from the cross beam above the paintings. A compelling visual and intellectual journey is triggered. Upon study, we realize these boulders actually counterbalance and support the joined paintings. The piece exudes tension, the supporting ropes taut from the burden. The log and one of the rocks are actually suspended above the floor; they, and the paintings above them, hang in the balance. When one views this piece, this tension of natural splendour supported by man-made rope and the weight of a stone, we may be led to ponder the tenuous future of the pristine havens of Killarney. The title implies that we bear a collective responsibility to ensure that this splendour is maintained.

Appropriately, the piece was created to be part of a touring exhibition, “The Willisville Mountain Project”, featuring 40 artists with a strong connection, and commitment, to this region. In sympathy with this group’s concerns, and those of others, Vale Minerals, holders of the deed for the area, relinquished mining interests in the region. For the present at least, this gateway to the silica mountains and turquoise lakes has been secured. In stark contrast, to the immediate south, Lawson Mountain is only a quarry pit now.

Elemental Exposure was completed in 2012 and was installed to occupy the majority of the main gallery’s largest wall. This large work constructs a scenic panorama that encompasses much of the viewer’s periphery. In this piece, three groupings, nine panels each, are held within two 14 foot long, horizontal boards. Separated by roughly a foot, the spaces between the nine panel groupings reveal taut ropes that travel from two large rocks on the floor to pulleys above that are anchored by hooks imbedded in the brick wall of the Mill. Counterbalance and tension are again at play through the support mechanism of pulleys, ropes and suspended boulders. Dramatic shadows, cast by gallery lighting, enhance a palpable space between the piece and the wall behind it. The La Cloche range is floating before us.

In early July, I went to Bowmanville Creek with Tony as my guide. After parking the car, we wandered away from the road and through the brush to the creek bed, gradually tracing its path northward for roughly a kilometre. He was showing me specific spots he had been to, many times before, over the preceding seasons, and years. As in Killarney, he was armed with his paint box, and his inquisitive eye. He pointed out particular bends in the creek, quiet pools away from the rapids and swirling eddies, and the geometric beauty of fallen limbs and branches from creek-lining trees. Wandering his exhibition weeks later, I revisited those magical places. His ‘composite viewpoints’ from those repeated painting visits are captured in numerous interconnected panels.





Tell, (a word used by Australian trackers and card sharks who read body language), incorporates 23 juxtaposed studies, a composite of images that read like a fractured whole. This piece embodies winter. Stands of trees cast their purple/blue shadows over snow. Fallen trees and branches have created random sculptures in flat areas, and on the downward slope of the creek bank. The multiple paintings focus on the flowing creek and flood plane as it meanders toward Lake Ontario. The flow of water, under inevitable gravity, marks the constant progression of time. The history of its enduring forces are etched in the valley sides that angle downward to the creek. This history is imbedded in Cooper's panels. Deep blues and hints of green reveal the icy temperature of the water, and that translucent middle area between moving water and shore where ice is slowly forming or melting. All revel in the same sure, quick strokes that stitched Killarney. Three of the panels present non-representational (perhaps) watercolours. Orb-like shapes of flowing blue, deep blue, black and light washes, mirror the cold of the water and ice, yet do so without identifiable visual reference. Perhaps a contemplative break in the interconnected film stills that carry us through the snow, ice and fallen branches of winter in the creek. Once again, in its entirety, the whole montage presents a unified field of vision. As with *Vigil* and *Elemental Exposure*, the scale encompasses our periphery, viewing becomes an interactive experience.

The creek emerges again in the nine panel piece, *Early Spring (Trout)*. Winter has withdrawn and green begins to emerge. The passage of time is reflected through studies of some of the very points the artist had visited in winter. In two of the bottom panels, trout are clearly visible making their way upstream, unaware of the fallen branches bridging the creek above them. Wood components again appear, here in two horizontal boards between the three groupings of three works. The three central panels introduce another material: cement. Tony has applied cement onto the boards with gestural swirls of the trowel. Pigment is added, reflecting the earth tones present in the six panels of the creek in spring. Although unified with the six creek panels, these cement pieces depart from traditional landscape interpretations, in both surface application and material. They owe more to a Modernist recognition of surface; a non-traditional material is employed in a dynamic way within a landscape subject (as are the sculptural components in *Vigil* and *Elemental Exposure*). Indeed, Cooper acknowledges the influence of the likes of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg (Rauschenberg's "Combines" of the 1950's and 1960's) in this light.

The use of fresco, cement, enamel and bronze within the landscape milieu is not new to Cooper. These materials were employed and integrated when he produced *Reflection on Place*, a 10 foot by 30 foot double sided wall. This fusion of painting, sculpture and fresco, incorporating multiple connecting panels, was installed on the grounds of the VAC in Soper Creek Park in 1994. This project initiated the Visual Art Centre's "Art on Public Lands" sculpture program. This was the first opportunity for Cooper to place a work within the landscape, in direct relation to the elements and topography. In the words of the artist, it allowed him to "bring the space of the gallery outside to a wider public."⁽⁶⁾





Above: *Reflection on Space*, 1994; fresco, aluminum, steel, enamel; 10 ft. high x 30 ft. wide x 6 ft. deep
 Below: *Early Spring (Trout)*, 2013; oil on panels, coloured cement and walnut wood; 34 in. high x 45 in. wide

Visible through *Reflection on Space* is one of the two wolves and one coyote from Mary Anne Barkhouse's Art on Public Lands installation *Fugue 1*; 2011; wood, paint; sizes various
 Below: *Chestnut Sequence (Orono Creek)*, 2013; oil on panels, walnut, 20 in. high x 44 in. wide





Tell ; 2007; oil on panels, watercolour on paper; 7 ft, 7 in. wide x 50 in. high



THE small GALLERY

“...for as long as there has been city poetry, writers have drawn contrasts between the urban and the rural, between sophistication and simplicity, commotion and tranquility, innocence and experience.” ⁽⁷⁾

The preceding excerpt is from *Urban Poetry*, by Christopher Miller. One can easily imagine replacing the word ‘poetry’ with ‘painting’, and ‘writers’ with ‘painters’; the observation still resonates. During 2012, the artist made repeated visits to a major construction site in Thornhill, Ontario. He witnessed and progressively documented the rise of a condominium building, carefully noting construction equipment, the fortress-like wooden forms that would hold wet cement, skeletal scaffolding and crane towers that

reach upward, hinting at the structure to come. The inner workings of a rising building are rendered with the faithfulness of an engineering schematic.

In *Condo*, of 2012, nine connected panels are juxtaposed in three rows. The edges are flush, however the surfaces of several panels are not on an even plane. Some of them push forward into the viewer’s space, others recede. An undulating ‘cubic’ surface results, mirroring, perhaps, the mechanized dynamics of an ongoing building site over time. “Space is transformed on a massive scale and the earth is cross sectioned.” ⁽⁸⁾ The earth is transformed, cut, incised and implanted by the intrusive hand of man. Indeed,

commotion over tranquility, as Miller poetically observed. However, through geometric purity and magical light and shadow, the nine panels in *Condo* exude a calm; an almost haunting calm. Not a human being is visible, the cranes seem at rest; is it Sunday afternoon, perhaps? Within this captivating serenity, these images assume an almost runic guise – the underground hallways and catacombs of the Coliseum, its tiered spectator seating above suggested by the open, columned spaces that will soon provide homes for Toronto commuters

In the monumental oil on panel piece, *Condo Project*, of 2012, the artist shares a playful ‘flip’. This mural scaled oil, on joined wooden panels, strikes a commanding presence at six feet in height, and more than seven feet in width. Yet it is a sketch. A sketch frozen in process, on a scale that matches its monumental subject. Resting at its base is the more familiar incarnation of a ‘sketch’- the identical subject and composition on a 10” x 13” panel. Three concrete blocks support the piece, employing again the sculptural addition of an unexpected material. In this instance, the very objects required for the completion of the building depicted. The artist also placed four concrete blocks in the centre of the room; a seat, for us to view the piece, from the very vantage point the artist assumed to paint it.



Above: *Condo*, 2012; oil on panels; 30 in. high x 39 in. wide



Right: *Condo Project*, 2012; oil on wood panel and concrete block; 6 ft. high x 7.5 ft. wide

In a hypnotic nocturne executed some 20 years ago, Tony has captured a highway 401 corridor icon: St. Mary's Cement. Entitled *Cement Plant (Night)*, this piece was executed with enamel on steel panel. A beautiful, lustrous surface is the result. The brush slides over the coated metal with dashes of white pigment that carefully indicate the factory structures and components revealed by the glowing lights in the surrounding darkness. Slight hints of cool blue are contrasted with minimal hits of red; the familiar red lights which adorn industrial building tops. Much belying the rugged building it depicts, the composition exudes a translucent delicacy, as if capturing a glowing structure of glass. In the multi-panelled vertical piece, *In the Light of Day*, this cement plant is depicted in several large on-site paintings. The monolithic towers and rising conveyor belts of the cement plant, the discarded clutter and railway tracks of its surrounding area are here clearly defined, void of mystery. In the bottom panel, the exposed, striated surfaces of the quarry walls are realized with remarkable precision.



Cement Plant (Night), 1994; fired enamel on steel; 10 in. high x 13 in. wide

Page 21 left: *In The Light of Day*, 1997; oil on canvas, wood, cement, 100 in. high x 26 in. wide

Page 21 right: *In the Dark of Night*, 1997; oil on canvas, wood, cement, 100 in. high x 26 in. wide





Also in the small gallery, exhibited, in counterpoint, to these urban/industrial studies, are a series of two rural subjects. Entitled *Northumberland 1*, and *2*, these pieces embody the simplicity and tranquility of an ancient land. Each piece is comprised of three panels. For any of us who have driven along Highway 2 between Port Hope and Bowmanville, these six panels strike an immediate chord; that particular, gentle rhythm of the subtly rolling hills of Northumberland. Here we see the signature of the Oak Ridges Moraine and its gravel hills, deposited during floods at the end of the last ice age. The top three panels reveal darkened, threatening, cumulous clouds, looming over ploughed fields, receding toward the horizon. The bottom three are awash in sunlight, illuminating the varied tones of our rural countryside. Like all of Tony's works, these panels are not photo-mediated or retouched in any way. They form a painted documentation, an on-site record of observation: they are, of that time and place. His oils celebrate the gestural immediacy of the on-site sketch, a tactile, physical act, in direct response to the environment.



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Northumberland Hills 1, 2004; oil on panels; 10 in. high x 39 in. wide

Northumberland Hills 2, 2004; oil on panels; 10 in. high x 39 in. wide

Page 23

Haida Gwaii Triptych, One, 2012; oil on panels, 10 in. high x 39 in. wide

Haida Gwaii Triptych, Two, 2012; oil on panels, 10 in. high x 39 in. wide

Ninstints (Haida Gwaii), Eagle clan mortuary poles, 2012; watercolour, 10 in. x 13 in.

THE LOFT GALLERY

“It is imperative that the artist reveal through the medium in which he is happiest, what he sees, thinks and feels about his surroundings.” ⁽⁹⁾



Materials and vision reach a compelling and congruous apex in the loft gallery space. Four multi-panelled oil pieces occupied the east and west walls of the space, while the centre of the room was cross-sectioned by a monumental sculptural installation entitled *Armature for Ascent*. The piece is formed of two, five by five inch wooden beams that reach to a height of 18 feet, and were placed at angles to form a triangular cross, intersecting at roughly 12 feet with an overlapping joint. When upright and leaning against one of the cross beams that support the clearstory of the loft roof, the piece appeared to become part of the building's structure. With linear clarity and simplicity, the piece interacted with, joined, the space that it occupied. The peak reached up into the clearstory area of the loft, piercing the natural light pouring through the upper windows, a fluid ascent that guided our eye and mind to the upper confines of the space. The work did not impede our physical or visual access in any way, rather it welcomed a walk through its portal. When standing at either end of the room and looking back toward the work, its bottom 'legs' framed the paintings on the opposing walls.

The eastern wall of the loft featured *Winter, 2012-13*. This sweeping piece contains 33 interconnected oil panels, each a study from Bowmanville Creek. As with pieces in the main floor galleries, a myriad of viewpoints trigger an active viewing experience, a visual journey over, into, and beyond picture surface. Multiple extending panels give the work an irregular perimeter, implying an ongoing peripheral compositional journey. As with *Condo*, individual panels are mounted on varied levels, projecting forward, receding back. An undulating 'rift' in the visual grid results; the creek projects forward, then moves back. This fractured surface alludes to the rupturing of ice in the creek. One rectangular space, at bottom right, leaves a void. We see a wooden frame, awaiting an oil panel; it frames only a section of the gallery wall. This single 'window' ignites imagination, our eye and mind spontaneously composing within that space. When we step back and view this work through the 'legs' of *Armature of Ascent*, that succinctly congruous fusion of vision and materials occurs. That simple wooden frame connects with the multi-angled beams and supports within the space it occupies.

In *Drawing a Line*, Tony Cooper's multiple oil panels do assume the interconnected power of a filmic narrative. Interconnected 'frames', revel in a creative moment that occurred at a specific place, at a specific time. That 'moment' is the result of a deep affinity with subject, honed through repeated immersion within those realms, be it a creek, a building site, a factory, a rock face, or rolling countryside. His inclusion of natural and man-made materials in most of the installations lift these narratives into the sculptural, igniting a dramatic, and decidedly 'modern' re-interpreting of landscape painting. Yet at the root of every single piece, abides a consistent truth; a passion for place.



Previous pages: Loft installation view of *Winter 1*, *Untitled*, and *Winter 2*

Right: *Armature for Ascent*, 2013; wood beams; 17 ft. high x 8 ft. wide

Next pages: *Winter 2012-13*; oil on panels; 60 in.. high x 9 ft., 9 in. wide



ARTIST’S STATEMENT

IWORK PHYSICALLY ON THE LAND, to maintain a presence and to observe directly the changes and effects of the elements over time. In the studio, I practice a type of constructive collection of images and objects, many of which are on-site paintings. This multi-faceted approach leads to an almost cubist or filmic reconstruction of experience, over time and through space. The works engage memory and the visual imagination, often incorporating the exhibition space and architecture within a self-reflexive sculptural presence. Scale changes, as the smaller panels are built into arrays and large installations combine support structures and framing devices. Scaffolding intersects and gravitational tension hoists the cross-referential panels within the parameters of the gallery spaces in site-specific installations. It is important for me to make these configurations in relation to the exhibition space when possible, as the immediate sense of surrounding space adds to the visceral visualization process that the work calls forth.

I choose to document sites repeatedly, building up a composite of viewpoints that attest to the dynamic experience of place. Nature as subject and medium is integrated with the body in the act of oil painting on site, under the constraints of time, personal endurance and the elements themselves. These “test exposures” have risk and necessity attached to their creation, (not retouched or photo-mediated in any way). The paintings are an immediate and lively response to the environment, a type of abstract expressionism. When combined with other pieces into arrays, the arrangements allow for abstract elements, blank spaces, sections of raw material or drawings to be juxtaposed, creating a complex, cross-referential whole. These disparate works punctuate the representational imagery and set up comparisons that function like free-verse poetry, finally being resolved in the mind of the viewer. Some final installations have involved boulders quoted directly from the environment that, through the use of pulleys and under tension, counterbalance the other elements allowing gravity to hold the works in silent suspension.

Tony Cooper

BIOGRAPHIES

James Campbell

James Campbell has been Executive Director at The Visual Art’s Centre of Clarington since 2010, and assumed Curatorial duties in May, 2012. Prior to beginning his post in Bowmanville, he worked as an independent curator and art educator, his most substantial project involving the research and cataloguing of The Niagara Parks Commission Art Collection. For 14 years he was Curator of The Riverbrink Art Museum in Queenston, Ontario, an 1,100 piece historical Canadian and international art collection. In the late 1980’s, he was the first Director/Curator at The North Bay Art’s Centre. He completed a diploma in Administration for the Creative Arts at Fleming College in 1980, and his BA in art and art history, University of Toronto, 1984. He completed course work for his MA, art history, at the State University of New York at Buffalo, in 2009, thesis work is ongoing.

Tony Cooper

Born in England in 1950 and emigrated to Canada 1958, coming to Toronto. He studied drawing and painting at the Ontario College of Art from 1969 to 1972. His work has been shown in solo and group exhibitions at A Space 1972, Carmen Lamanna Gallery 1973, YYZ Artist ‘s Outlet 1983, Articule in Montreal 1984, Visual Arts Ontario 1990, The Station Gallery in Whitby, 1997, the Visual Arts Center of Clarington 1991, Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa 2002, the Peterborough Arts Umbrella 2008, Arts Space in Peterborough in 2010. The Willisville Mountain Project began in 2008, culminating in a series of exhibits that travelled throughout northern Ontario in 2009-10. He recently had a solo exhibition Minden in 2012. Cooper has been a recipient of both Canada Council and Ontario Arts Council grants.

ENDNOTES

- 1) From the artist.
- 2) From the artist.
- 3) From the artist.
- 4) Jackson, A. Y., from Naomi Jackson Groves, *A. Y.’s Canada. Drawings by A. Y. Jackson* (Clarke, Irwin & Company Limited, Toronto and Vancouver, 1968).
- 5) From the artist.
- 6) From the artist.
- 7) Miller, Christopher R., *The Encyclopedia of Romantic Literature* (Frederick Burwick, Editor, Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).
- 8) From the artist.
- 9) Carmichael, Franklin, *Art History Archive, Canadian Art* (arthistoryarchive.com).

Drawing a Line

Tony Cooper

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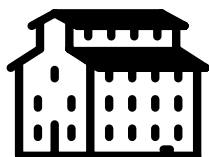
My sincere thanks to Tony Cooper and Maralynn Cherry for their hospitality and stimulating interaction during the organization of this exhibition. Thank you also to David Gillespie for an exceptional job with a challenging installation, and to Jean-Michel Komarnicki for his wonderful catalogue design. As always, a tip of the hat to Leita McDowell for her sensitive editing efforts. Final thanks to staff mates Dionne Powlenzuk and Linda Ward for leaping in whenever required.

James Campbell, Executive Director/Curator
May 2014

I am grateful to the Director/Curator James Campbell for his lucid text and encouragement in the planning and installation of **Drawing a Line**. For my shared time in wilderness exploring and painting with Greg Frankland, Kevin and Alan Cooper, Todd Tremeer, Paul Kovanen, Barry Smylie, Rowena Dykins and Maralynn Cherry. John Butler for his hospitality, on my frequent visits to Willisville Mountain during the research of 'Vigil'. Thanks to David Gillespie and Kevin Cooper for helping to mount the exhibition, Maralynn Cherry for helping with every aspect of my digital and my real life and Jean-Michel Komarnicki for photos and catalogue design. I would finally like to acknowledge the support of the Ontario Arts Council, the Varley Gallery, the Municipality of Clarington and The Visual Art's Centre of Clarington.

Tony Cooper

May 2014



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