



**Window
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Observations

Megan MacDonald

September 13 – October 12, 2013

Megan MacDonald's *Observations* is, at first glance, reminiscent of a very strange fairy tale. Gazing kittens nestled in delicate foliage amid remarkably fluffy clouds and pink skies do not a Toronto landscape make. Yet the familiarity of the natural forest (castle worthy indeed) and Internet-meme-esque cats evoke a comfort that is as undeniably awkward as it is intriguing.

MacDonald's reference to and imitation of the recognizable Hudson River School tradition is contrasted through her play on content. Though painted in a similar romantic style on the two canvases and the accompanying vase, the kittens challenge the HRS form that traditionally represents serious discovery, uncharted exploration, and bleak settlement. The use of this romantic style to portray the harsh wilderness and tamable unknowns of colonialism's manifest destiny is subverted to reveal our continued quest for understanding place. These kitschy kittens humourously, if harshly, remind us of our humbling idealization of historical landscape and our simultaneous search for inclusion within it.

Remaining true to the HRS style, MacDonald's collection of Toronto studies has been synthesized to build the geographic landscape in *Invaders at the Cove*. The cityscape remains distant from the detailed foreground, presenting the cat as larger than life and the focus of the display. In this way, what becomes subverted is not the landscape itself, but rather the narrative style it represents and the history it works to uphold. In fact, MacDonald's commitment to HRS is reflected in her use of the ornate framing of *Portrait* that begs for the work within to be taken seriously, coyly undercut only through her dedication to feline portraiture.

The third element of *Observations* continues this interruption of traditionalism in the romantic era. MacDonald's *Vase*, also painted with romantic kitsch lends itself to the colonial tradition of extracting valuable cultural objects from their communities or nations of origin to be displayed as ahistorical markers of discovery. Perhaps in a crude

comparison, this 'treasure' is much more literal in its representation, bravely calling into question the zealous romanticization of tokenism that is characteristic of this era. The treasure's superficial sense of inclusion, deeply flawed and equally falsified, gives temporary relief to the viewer, while gently cautioning that we have, in fact, continued such a practice. The cats have inadvertently become a contemporary comment on this outdated genre, emerging as tokens of our own post-colonial time and demonstrating that what we continue to choose to present as treasure is not really treasured at all.

The deception inherent in MacDonald's token vase reflects a more extensive awareness of her work within the gallery's window space. A direct reference to the practice of 'window dressing', the combination of HRS paintings and treasured vase contribute to MacDonald's disruption of the romantic style. Not only does *Observations* undercut the intentions of the genre both in medium and in message, the very act of doing so rebuilds the façade it works to subvert. In a taste of irony, the placement of the pieces together within the window space pay homage to the practice, while independently continuing to challenge the priorities that the romantic narrative presents.

MacDonald's strength lies firmly in her ability to disrupt our interpretation of landscape, favouring a DIY-kitsch approach to expose the finer and more amusing conundrums hidden within the genre. *Observations* forces viewers to reconsider their own impressions, questioning the contributions they make to the figurative landscape, and exploring the implications of the rise of the hopeful, incandescent kitten.

- Greer Brabazon