

AMANDA ARCURI / MARK KASUMOVIC CURATED BY SARAH MUNRO

MARCH 3 - MARCH 27, 2010 RYERSON GALLERY

LAND MINE: Culling the Contemporary Landscape

SARAH MUNRO

LAND MINE: Culling the Contemporary Landscape

Sarah Munro

In the thick of the forest, in the still of the night, there is something unnatural afoot. Some strange presence, at once melancholy and mischievous, understated and ostentatious, encroaches on the environment. It is as harmonious as it is discordant. It adds to the landscape as much as it succeeds in stripping away. Appearing inexplicably at odds with the natural world, it reveals itself through this confluence of contradictions to be both ally and adversary to the unparalleled beauty of its surroundings. Indeed, it reveals itself to be human.

Human/Nature is an exhibition comprised of two emerging artists' nocturnal explorations of sylvan spaces. Mark Kasumovic's series, Ideal Landscapes, offers a critique of traditional landscape photography's overt aestheticization of the natural world. Embracing mankind's impulse to improve upon the inherent beauty of nature. Kasumovic's work suggests another strategy for refinement. It is through the electronic lighting of each landscape that Kasumovic repositions nature as a perfectly realized product ripe for human consumption. Amanda Arcuri's work, Present in Absence, also aims to embellish the landscape. Her time-elapsed invasions of public parks highlight humanized elements of nature via streaks of fire and strategically laid lights. However, in the speed of her performance, Arcuri's photographs all but eliminate the hand of the human who created them. Independently, these two artists illustrate alternate strategies for picturing landscape at a crossroads; in the wake of a perilously industrialized era where man and nature invariably meet. In tandem they address contemporary environmental concerns by alluding to the future of landscape photography: a united front founded upon the acute awareness yet unwavering optimism of an entirely new generation of image-makers.

Just as we have mined the earth for its natural resources – for diamonds, coal, oil and ore – so have we mined it for aesthetics. Born out of a longstanding tradition in other artistic media of exalting the earth, and of positioning the pastoral as the standard by which all other beauty is

measured, early fine art photographers fixated on the unmatched ability of the natural world to inspire artistic creativity, even within an allegedly mechanized medium. Among photography's many roles, some still in the process of being realized, was its simultaneous status as both a burgeoning art form and as a means of recording reality. That photography aligned itself with the landscape tradition which figured so prominently in painting was wise, as this ultimately served to legitimize a medium so far seen as inferior. That it rendered these landscapes with such fidelity, however, became photography's true selling-feature. As the medium was being discovered, so still were many regions of the world. Employed as a means of documenting these discoveries, photography was privileged as the first and most faithful means of representing man's triumph over uncharted wilderness. Timothy O'Sullivan's images of the American West, Reverend Harold Dauncey's pictures of Papua New Guinea, or any number of uncredited images illuminating Arctic expeditions, all provided proof of nature's splendour, so far largely unaltered by man.

As the mandates of many artistic institutions came to include photography, they subsequently allowed for the absorption of these intended documents into the realm of high art, thus increasing their value both fiscally and as perceived by the public. The popularity and – perhaps more pressing – saleability of such subsequent prolific landscape photographers as Ansel Adams, whose 1948 print of the earlier image

Moonrise, Hernandez recently fetched a staggering \$360,000 USD at auction, is proof positive of traditional landscape photography's significance to both the medium's maturation and its present state. With an established interest in landscape imagery and seemingly endless environments to mine, 20th-century photography charted a course parallel to that of industry: identifying, exploiting, and arguably exhausting their aesthetic resources. Just as the aforementioned reserves of oil and ore have revealed themselves to be finite – with many in immediate danger of depletion – so has the inherent aesthetic value of the virgin landscape. It is debatable whether contemporary image-makers are no longer content to depict the picturesque and pastoral, or whether an untouched environment no longer exists for them to illustrate. Regardless of the impetus, it appears evident that as the status of the natural world has shifted, so have our strategies for representing it.

One such strategy is to embrace the reality of contemporary landscape photography by addressing either implicitly or explicitly man's current environmental concerns, and by subsequently seeking a new standard of beauty within the presumed absence thereof. It is a strategy employed by Toronto-based photographer Edward Burtynsky, whose large-format images depict industry's systematic degradation of the environment as well as the unconventionally aesthetic artifacts thereof. Burtynsky positions himself high above the scene to focus on the textures, tones and

patterns that emerge organically from the vastness of his subjects. In a sea of assembly-line workers, in endless mounds of industrial debris, in the geometric wasteland of emptied quarries, Burtynsky finds beauty and order. Paradoxically, his aestheticization of the abhorrent eschews the aesthetic model of traditional landscape photography yet reignites our interest therein. The world is a very different place now.

An alternate strategy, as employed by two contemporaneous Canadian artists, Isabelle Hayeur and Scott McFarland, is the digital construction of otherwise impossible landscapes. While still seemingly banal in their ultimate execution, these images are to some extent representations of the artists' ideal environments; amalgams of elements extracted from various locations, during different seasons, and at disparate times of day. Digitally recombined into seamless vistas, they are images evocative of actual landscapes that did not – could not – ever exist. They are executed with a subtlety seldom seen in digital imagery; unassuming in their averageness yet suggestive of something more. They speak silently to the notion that nature can indeed be bent to our will, but unlike Burtynsky's work, these images do not necessarily present that concept as cause for alarm, rather as a reciprocal relationship. Where once man made art in the image of nature, now man makes nature in the image of art.

A third strategy, specifically engaged by the two emerging artists in this exhibition, is to tailor the traditional landscape model in accordance with LAND MINE: Cultivating the Contemporary Landscape

both of these approaches; to simultaneously embrace and eschew the notion that nature, and thus the artistic landscape, has been irrevocably altered by man. Indeed, the images are an exercise in binary concepts: a simultaneous convergence of conspicuousness and subtlety, of the natural and the unnatural, of the real and the ideal. From a generation fully cognizant of contemporary environmental concerns, Amanda Arcuri and Mark Kasumovic arguably aim to offset the oppressiveness of their reality through a shared theatricality. It is an end result arrived at in very different ways. Where Kasumovic's photographs act as an unassuming backdrop – each one resembling a strategically lit stage – Arcuri's images embody the performance that plays out upon it. From Kasumovic's still and silent clearings to Arcuri's, alive with implied motion, the duo's images represent a direct interplay of the aforementioned strategies, and a subsequently novel approach towards representing the natural world.

Like Burtynsky, Kasumovic's images can be seen as a cautionary tale. They are in part inspired by Susan Sontag's belief that, "so successful has been the camera's role in beautifying the world that photographs, rather than the world, have become the standard of the beautiful" (Sontag, Susan. On Photography. New York: Picador, 2001. 84.). Via the understated introduction of artificial lighting into his environments, Kasumovic alludes to an inherent human desire: to fix that which is not necessarily broken, in effect beautifying the beautiful. He likens the natural landscape to a product

conceived of, created, and marketed by man. As in an advertisement, the photographer carefully constructs a lighting scheme in order to emphasize specific elements – selling features – of the shot. It is the object itself, only better. As an advertisement might tout, it is "Nature: New and Improved". Implicit in this is the notion that man cannot be content with natural beauty; that he must intervene and, in doing so, change the way we see. However, while revealing how the hand of man has forever altered the way in which we view the world, Kasumovic's strength is that he does so with the subtlety of McFarland and Hayeur. So largely imperceptible is his influence over the scenes that, in specific images, we can hardly pinpoint the photographer's interference at all. It is only when Kasumovic intentionally increases that artifice through over-lighting and obvious staging, for example, that he succeeds in upsetting the carefully established equilibrium of presence over absence. Kasumovic's images are also indicative of a narrative, the creation of which is an inarguably human pursuit. The inclusion of manmade artifacts – a tree stump, a boardwalk, a beaten path – suggests some underlying purpose for this walk through the wilderness, and it is our resultant rationalization of the journey that further underscores mankind's compulsion to tame the untamable. That Kasumovic's images were captured at dusk only adds to the ominousness of their message: as daylight is all but exhausted, so is the hope of an existence unaltered by man.

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As with *Ideal Landscapes*, Amanda Arcuri's images oscillate between presence and absence, albeit taking a far less fatalistic approach. So too, her images are captured at night, however the strong sense of foreboding felt in Kasumovic's photographs translates into sheer wonder within the context of Arcuri's Present in Absence. In abandoned parks and amidst their sleeping pines, flashes of fire and light are ignited by an unseen hand. Existing as evidence of some lighthearted, almost impish, incursion into so-called natural spaces, they encircle trees, illuminate benches, and engulf picnic tables. That they enlighten environments already tamed by man is telling. Indeed, their paths of light point like neon signs to those tangible artifacts of human interference: to fire hydrants, to foot paths, and to trees all too perfectly aligned. However, it is a light far too fleeting to ever appear accusatory. It merely means to juxtapose the permanent ways in which man has impacted his environment with Arcuri's own ephemeral approach. In an age where man must consider his carbon footprint, this artist actively seeks to tread a little lighter. It is this hands-off approach that best aligns Arcuri's work with that of Scott McFarland and Isabelle Hayeur. As with their respective constructions of a computer generated Utopia, Arcuri's more performative incursions are impermanent: realized in photographs rather than the real world. Inherent in them, however, is a danger inconsequential to the digital realm. Unlike a computer, the tools with which Arcuri works have real world repercussions. Through their

insurgent introduction of fire into forest, Arcuri's images betray a delicate balance. Fire, like he who wields it, has the ability to indiscriminately destroy. It is only in the presence of personal restraint, in Arcuri's sensitivity to her surroundings, that nature and its adversaries can come to coexist. Through Arcuri they are made aesthetic allies. In relation to fellow photographer-cum-environmentalist Edward Burtynsky, Arcuri is equally interested in the atypically aesthetic by-products of human activity. Like Burtynsky, she focuses on the formation of patterns and shapes that inherently emerge from man's systematic interruption of a natural setting. As the inevitably Cubist structure of a rock quarry reveals itself only over time, so do Arcuri's images: each one being a time-elapsed accumulation of human interferences.

The work of Mark Kasumovic and Amanda Arcuri allows us to consider the notion of human intervention from both a positive and negative perspective. Arcuri's images suggest that mankind's impingement upon the environment can be fleeting, harmless, and even beautiful. Within her work, the evidence of human intervention is at once present and absent, and it is this ephemerality that affords us an unlikely optimism for the future of our world. Not all damage is inherently irreversible. By comparison, Kasumovic's work can be seen as a critique of mankind's mediation of the natural world; most perceptibly on the photographs thereof. Through the photographic improvement of landscape, his works seem to say, man has

set an entirely new standard for beauty. In fact, mankind's manipulation of the world around him has happened slowly and subtly enough that in images it is often impossible to differentiate between the real and the ideal. This is perhaps most damning of all, as in the absence of an acknowledged problem there will likely be no search for a solution. While affording the interpretation of a "real world" agenda, both artists avoid heavy-handedness through theatrical touches to their imagery. Their use of both artificial lighting and an elemental diversion like fire suggests a certain playfulness: in this age of hybridity perhaps the natural and the unnatural can indeed coexist. In turn, this imbues their images with both an ominousness and optimism, the conflation of which may just come to characterize a whole new generation of landscape photography.

present in absence

AMANDA ARCURI

















curriculum vitae

AMANDA ARCURI

BORN

Toronto, Ontario, 1987

EDUCATION

B.F.A. 2005-2009 Image Arts (Photography), Ryerson University, Toronto

EXPERIENCE

2007 Research Assistant, Phil Bergerson

SELECTED EXHIBITION RECORD

- 2010 Best of 2009: TOAE Award Winners, First Canadian Place Gallery
- 2009 Toronto Outdoor Art Exhibition, Nathan Phillips Square, Toronto Maximum Exposure, Gladstone Hotel, Toronto
- 2008 Holiday Show, Ryerson Gallery, Toronto Maximum Exposure, Gallery 1313, Toronto Parallax, Hangman Gallery, Toronto Third Year Show, Ryerson Gallery, Toronto
- 2007 Maximum Exposure, Ryerson University, Toronto President's Exhibition, Ryerson University, Toronto Holiday Show, Ryerson Gallery, Toronto

SELECTED GRANTS & AWARDS

- 2009 Honourable Mention (Student), Toronto Outdoor Art Exhibition
- 2008 Adina Photo Presentation Award, Ryerson University

PUBLICATIONS

- 2009 Function Magazine Vol. 10, Ryerson University
- 2008 Parallax, Hangman Gallery (Catalogue) Function Magazine Vol. 9, Ryerson University

dialogue

SARAH MUNRO AMANDA ARCURI MARK KASUMOVIC

SM: The genre of landscape photography is as old as the medium itself. How do you think your work within contemporary landscape differs from that?

MK: My body of work has been about critiquing the traditional landscape. Relighting as a way of playing with how landscape has often been captured in this ideal state.

AA: In the beginning you have people photographing an untouched landscape. It's the discovery of somewhere man has never been, and it was about documenting that. My work is doing the opposite. I like to invade space even more, spaces that have already been man-altered or man-made in some way, to alter them myself.

SM: Do you think it's an extrapolation on that tradition?

AA: To me this is the next step.

SM: Do you think that landscape photography has changed significantly in recent years in the wake of the green movement and contemporary environmental concerns? Is the way that we interact with nature different now than it was then?

MK: It's undeniable in terms of the kinds of films we've been seeing, the kind of photography. It's becoming this extremely hot topic: representing how a landscape has changed over time. In terms of the new topographers, there's always been this tradition of looking at human interactions in the landscape. But I think it's been pushed a little further, perhaps to how the landscape is being destroyed. That's why I find doing the exact opposite, trying to embellish what's remaining, is a funny way to twist that around.

SM: Do you think, bearing in mind that it's become sort of "in vogue" to deal with landscape and with green concerns, that it detracts from the work that you do?

AA: Well yes. I also think that if landscape wasn't the "hot topic" right now, I

would still be doing what I'm doing.

MK: (to Amanda) Was there a time when landscape wasn't a hot topic?

AA: I guess I should be enjoying that this is going on right now because it works in my favour, because I happen to be working in that realm. I just don't want to feel like I'm jumping on a band-wagon.

MK: But I don't think either of us are doing that. We're bucking the trend. It's not "environmentally sensitive" photography, it's not aestheticizing ruin. It's something different. Conventional landscape is always kind of cliché. Even if you are Ansel Adams making gorgeous prints, right now they're not going to have an impact because they're not fresh or new. There's always a way to improve or change something.

SM: In terms of big names, Burtynsky obviously has to be talked about; knowing that the reason he started making the kind of photographs that he did was a first year assignment at Ryerson.

AA: I remember a similar assignment with [Phil] Bergerson, to photograph an altered landscape. The first thing that came to mind was, "Alright, I'm going to alter a landscape". And that's what I did.

SM: So it wasn't a pre-existing altered landscape?

AA: Exactly. It was a landscape that I altered. It was that concept that got me started on my later work. Here I am, still using the landscape as a backdrop, still intruding with my man-made things, be they bags or fire or light. I've started to play with the materials I'm using, making more connections between the idea of "natural" versus "unnatural". Those lines, they're blurred. That's why something like fire is wonderful because it's man-made but it's still an element.

SM: Dealing with the same subject matter and coming out of the same school, in what way do you think he [Burtynsky] influenced your work?

MK: It's hard not to find the influence of Burtynsky on so many contemporary photographers. That whole debate over whether you should aestheticize a landscape that's destroyed inspired the project I'm working on. In a way it's about the over-aestheticization of a landscape. How much can people take? Because the Burtynsky landscapes are gorgeous and no one really denies that.

AA: Interesting that's the main thing you take out of Burtynsky's work. For

me it's the way that humans alter the landscape, but you're talking more about aesthetics.

SM: (to Amanda) I could make the argument that yours is an aestheticized image. It's beautiful to look at, and it's about pattern and shape and texture and colour.

AA: To me photography is still about the product, so I'm going to take every bit of care in making the best product I can. And those are things that help.

SM: There's also a fair bit of Surrealism and theatricality and playfulness and the performative that factors into your work. Can you talk about that?

AA: I do like to think of it as a performance – the landscape I chose is a stage for my performance – but talking about Surrealism is more interesting because we use juxtaposition so much. As a Surrealist would use juxtaposition to make, say, a lobster phone, I think we are taking the juxtapositions that happen naturally in the world and highlighting them.

MK: (to Amanda) Now that I've seen one of your big prints - you can actually see your feet moving - I think that immediately implies some sort of

performance. Whereas to me you were previously invisible, now you're visible.

AA: I'm invisible at first, and then you start to construct in your mind the way that this image was put together.

SM: (to Mark) It's curious you would point that out because of the direction your work is moving in. Not necessarily in this body of work, but in the body of work that has fed off of this, you incorporate elements of yourself.

MK: It's all a big test. As soon as you introduce a figure, you change something. I like imagining that there's someone there – that objects are belongings of some sort – rather than actually having someone there. There's a lot of work done right now with people trying to tell an entire story in one frame and I don't think it's overly successful. I think you need more than that.

SM: (to Amanda) In some of your work you're *very* present in those performances. I'm thinking about the body of work in which you're nude in your surroundings.

AA: I made that work prior to this series. It was about considering the process behind the piece, that's why I included myself there. I included myself nude because I wanted to make reference to Renaissance paintings. That and there's always the joke that every photographer does one nude project (laughs). Here I was very welcome to having a bit of my hands and feet present in the image because it did exactly what I wanted it to do in a more sophisticated way. We grow.

SM: If you had a choice, would you be there?

AA: (laughs) I enjoy fragments of my body being there. Don't get me wrong, I fully enjoyed doing the nude project. I learned a lot from those past two series and I really combined them in this series.

SM: (to Amanda) You expressly refer to yourself as a visual artist as opposed to a photographer. In what way is it important that they're photographs?

AA: If this was a performance piece, you'd be watching a video or you would be coming out into the woods and watching me. I do believe art is about presenting it in the form that is best. These performances are made for the photograph: the audience is the camera. They don't exist as

installations because the materials I work with are temporal. And it's not a performance because, as I said, it's about seeing it all at once in the image. These pieces are made to exist as photographs.

SM: (to Mark) If Amanda's work is about the images that result from performance, in what way are your photographs performative?

MK: They are not necessarily performative, but I like how there's a slice of time that they exist in. My images also exist in this realm that's only visible photographically. For a split second this scene occurs, then you record it and it's gone. In a way you can never actually see it before you see it on the film. Both of our projects have this subtext of speaking about the medium. I think there's a performance in terms of lugging gear into the woods (laughs), but I don't think there's an implication of a performance going on. There is that setting of a stage, though.

SM: Using artificial lighting mimics product photography, fashion photography, something that's entirely outside the realm of the natural. It's about taking this thing that's already beautiful and making it more beautiful, whereas original landscapes were all about nature's splendor revealing itself to you.

MK: It's a re-interpreting of something. In a way, it's a comment on my own feelings towards the landscape. This is the way that I think a dramatic landscape should look. It's also a comment on our expectations, on being disappointed when you see a landscape for the first time –

SM: The rainforest.

MK: The rainforest. Going to the rainforest and being disappointed is ridiculous. It's a comment, also, on patience: "I'm not going to wait for the right light, I'm going to make the right light, and I'm going to keep shooting it until it's perfect." Which is not really a natural concept.

SM: As with artists whose work is digital. You're both making false, idealized versions of something. It's about saying, "I'm going to pick and choose as to what I like and what I don't like, and what's aesthetically-pleasing to me." Put all of those things together and it's not real at all.

AA: For me it's important that I actually went into the scene and did it. Shooting film is another way to help people realize that happened. In my work there's also a lot of trial and error: being unsure as to what's going to be on that piece of film. I like to shoot film because it allows me to welcome

happy accidents.

SM: What's your relationship with nature now, given the kind of images you make and the amount of time you spend in solitude?

AA: The more time you spend with a space, a person, you're going to get to know them better. There was a big learning curve working in the dark, because my pieces are all shot at night. A landscape that you are familiar with during the day is a very different space at night. Being in a vulnerable state in a landscape really allows you to get connected with it, because you have to trust it.

MK: Carrying a large amount of equipment into the woods is a strange enough experience as it is, so for me it's about avoiding people, and when you do that it's just you and the landscape. Talking about the light, for me dusk is when I leave because it becomes this kind of unwelcoming place where I don't really seem to fit in any more. I take off because it's like going into your cellar at night: there's nobody there and you know it, but—

AA: That's a big thing: there's no one there and you know it. But is there someone there? There might be someone there.

SM: Given that you're both emerging artists, what do you think this is a jumping-off point for? What comes out of this?

MK: Every show is a learning experience. You want to have an interaction, a dialogue, to see what people are taking from what you're doing.

SM: How do you keep that fresh for yourself, and within the greater context? Landscape is not new. Altered landscapes are not new.

AA: I'm not going to use the word "landscape". I'm going to use the word "space". I see myself working with space for the rest of my career. What I get out of a landscape is the way I feel in that landscape.

MK: It may be over-done, but I don't think it's going anywhere. There's always going to be more to say. It's like people: portraits never get old.

AA: People change. The environment changes.

SM: (to Mark) No portraits for you, then?

MK: Trees. Portraits of trees.

ideal landscapes

MARK KASUMOVIC



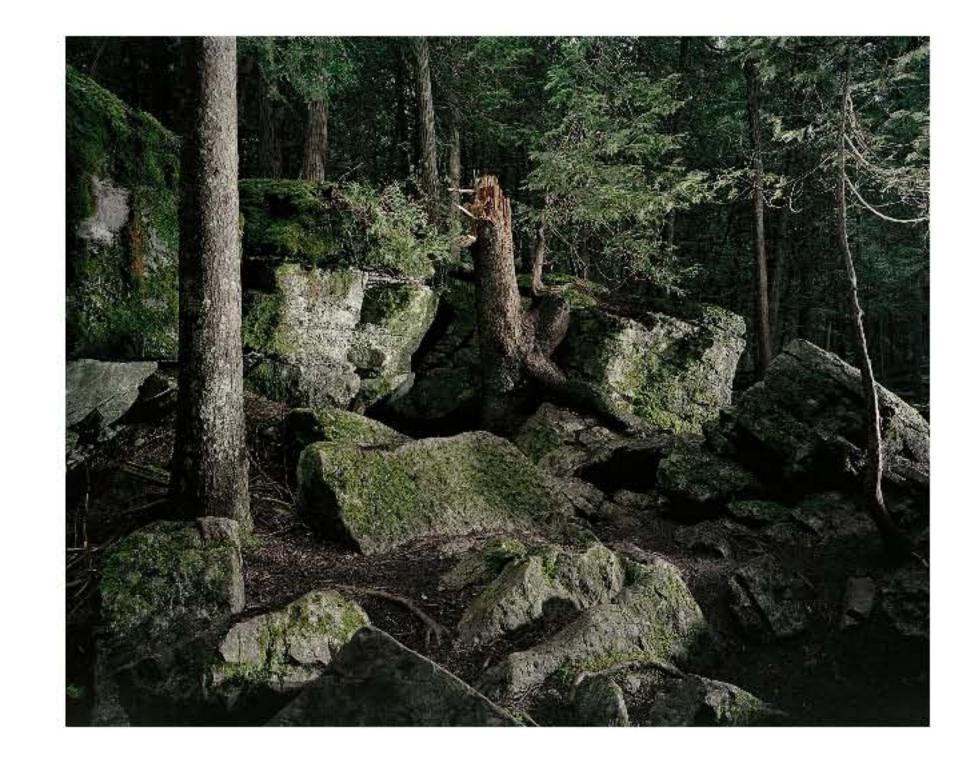
The Veil



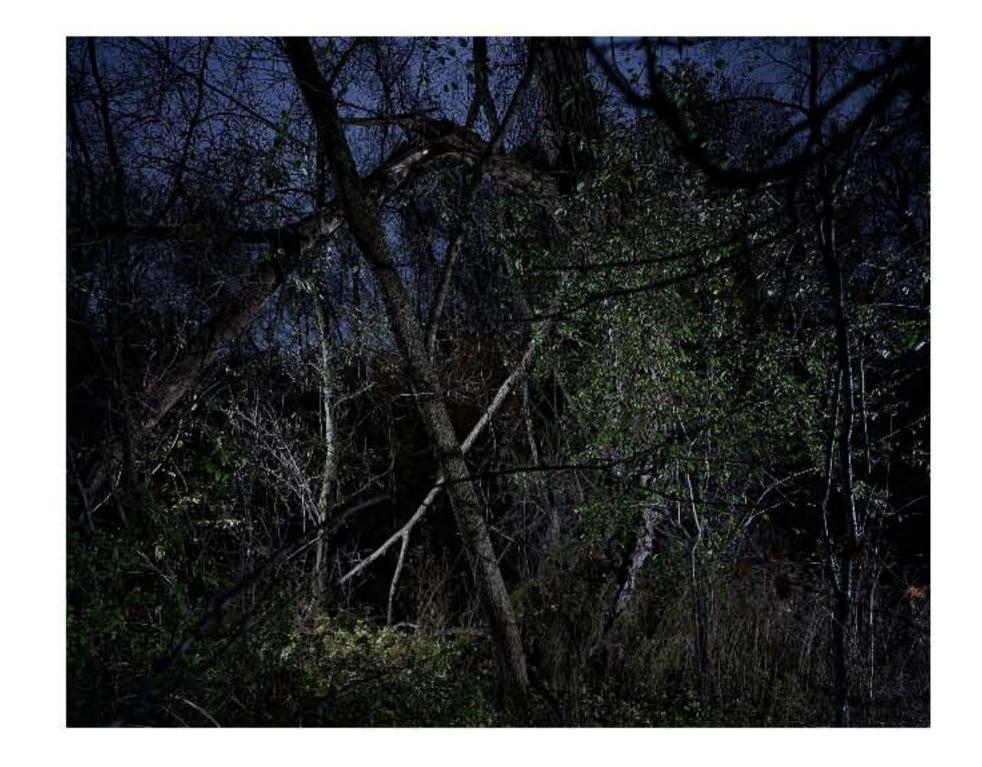
Branches #1



Path #1



Ideal Landscape #18



Dead End #1



Branches #2



Ideal Landscape #24



Path #2

curriculum vitae

MARK KASUMOVIC

BORN

Hamilton, Ontario, 1982

EDUCATION

B.F.A. Image Arts (Photography), Ryerson University, Toronto Media Studies, Humber College, Toronto 2005-2009 Certificate 2004-2005

EXHIBITION RECORD - SOLO

- I Can Hear You Humming, Toronto Imageworks Gallery, Toronto
- Empathy, Len's Factory, Toronto

EXHIBITION RECORD - SELECTED GROUP

MaxEx, Gladstone Hotel, Toronto

- Timeraiser: Toronto, The Fermenting Cellar (Distillery District), Toronto Flash Forward: Emerging Photographers, Griffin Museum of Photography, Boston
- Flash Forward: Emerging Photographers
 Lennox Contemporary, Toronto
 Photoweek Central 4, Washington
 BMO Art 1st 2009, Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto
 Snap! Live Auction Preview, Edward Day Gallery, Toronto
 Toronto Outdoor Art Exhibition, Nathan Phillips Square, Toronto
 - MaxEx, Gallery 1313, Toronto Third Year Show, Ryerson Gallery, Toronto Toronto Outdoor Art Exhibition, Nathan Phillips Square, Toronto
- Winter Salon, Loose Canon Gallery, Hamilton Constructed: Documenting a Boom, McMaster University, Hamilton

SELECTED GRANTS & AWARDS

- 2010 Untapped: Emerging Artist Competition, The Artist Project, Toronto SPE Conference Scholarship, Society of Photographic Education
- 2009 Ryerson Graduate Award, Ryerson University
 Ontario Winner, BMO Art 1st Invitational
 LOOK3 Scholarship, LOOK3 Festival, Charlottesville, VA
 Flash Forward 2008, Magenta Foundation
 Snap Stars, SNAP!09, TD Canada Trust
 Best in Show, MaxEx, Ryerson University
 Finalist, Student Fine Art Single, New York Photo Awards
- 2008 Adina Photo Presentation Award, Ryerson University Monaco Calibration Systems Award, Ryerson University
- 2007 Adina Photo Preservation Award, Ryerson University Irving A. Posluns Award, Ryerson University

PUBLICATIONS & PRESS

- "Photo's of a Modern Monolith", Amanda Happe, Torontoist (Jan. 11th)
 "Under the Radar", Guy Dixon, The Globe and Mail (Jan. 4th)
- Artist Feature, The Magazine Show, Cable 14 (Interview)
 Artist Feature, MagentaTV, Magenta Foundation (Interview)
 BMO Art 1st, Bank of Montreal (Catalogue)
 Flash Forward: Emerging Photographers, Magenta Foundation
 Ontario: Seasons of Discovery, Ontario Tourism Board
 SNAPl09, Act Toronto (Catalogue)
 Artist Feature, Function Magazine
- 2008 Photograph, Function Magazine Photo Editor, Function Magazine

HUMAN NATURE