



Robert Hengeveld
PATTERNS OF MIGRATION

Robert Hengeveld: Patterns of Migration

By Virginia Mitford

Boulders mark the boundaries of spaces, stoically blocking access to bodies of water, roads, parking lots. Their solid, certain weight holds down things that could otherwise be scattered in a gust of wind or slide downward onto houses and roads. In Western culture, at least, boulders are considered to be immovable and lifeless. While we pay them little heed, we routinely move them around with heavy equipment to construct different physical statements and boundaries. And then, once we place them where we want them to be, we expect them to stay put.

In Robert Hengeveld's project *Where Phantoms Meet*, the boulders do not stay put. The large chunks of rock are facsimiles of the real thing, engineered to move in a conversational choreography with one another around a space, defying their usual behaviour. However, are boulders really that immobile? In the rock slide above Dawson there is a reason that a bank of rocks was placed against the hill-- to prevent the other boulders from their possible downward tumble onto houses in the North End. Perhaps it is just that we don't usually see rocks move unless we are doing the moving, and the reality they can move independently of us—gradually obliterating the path across Moose Hide Slide for instance--makes us feel unsteady and a little frightened. Hengeveld's work is a very good reminder that our realities are much more unstable than we would like to believe.

In Dawson we are very familiar with boulders, living amongst the great expanse of worm-like tailings piles left over from a century of placer mining. Life strives to grow, ingrained in pockets between these piles of rocks and floating on the surface of murky tailings ponds that have been here for decades. Many species have taken an interest to these new environments; ferns, for instance, seem to thrive on these manufactured micro-mountains, and tourists come in droves to marvel at these mounds of rock and the dredge that created them. Would we react to these tailings differently if they were actually formed by natural processes? Whatever our feelings towards them may be, when tourists make their pilgrimage to this gold rush town, these boulders, which form the backdrop of their visits and our lives, inadvertently become a souvenir of the past--a stand-in for that history of vast environmental transformation and economic glory. In light of this recent white settler past and its repercussions, Hengeveld's work finds a perfect setting in our Northern town.

Acutely aware of our cultural and personal relationships with "natural" spaces and objects, Hengeveld uses blatant absurdity and exaggeration to make us question preconceptions about our natural realities. His work causes us to

consider how our struggle to keep *authenticity/artiface* or *animate/the inanimate* in neatly separated categories possibly just melds them together more tightly in our minds until ambiguity around what is real and what isn't causes us to suspend our disbelief around an elaborately constructed pseudo-natural setting. *Natural Revision*, Hengeveld's installation that John Hampton describes as "A DIY Garden of Eden crafted from the refuse of consumer culture" still manages to create a feeling of sublime awe reminiscent of a walk through the forest.

Where Phantoms Meet takes a different approach from this elaborately constructed scene. Instead of laying bare the internal workings of his creation as he does in *Kentucky Perfect* and *Can Crusher* (two highly mechanized sculptures that perform simple tasks), Hengeveld chose to hide the methods with which these boulders move. In a town with a booming tourism economy which relies on false-fronted buildings and narratives about fortunes being dug from the rugged and unforgiving Earth, two false-fronted boulders exchanging unspoken pleasantries suffices to shift the ground beneath us just enough. Our preconceptions of authenticity shift, or even shatter. Anthropomorphizing the boulders becomes a natural direction, because who doesn't find moving objects inherently personable? If we can so naturally accept the familiarity of movement and the humanity of *inanimate* objects, why do we bother creating categories of *life* versus *lifeless*?

How we cope with the created environment in a gallery setting can reflect how we deal with the wider environment we live in. All around this town, rocks are an ever-present reminder of the exciting, but also glorified and problematic (white) history of this place. Hengeveld's work, especially in this context, invites us to contemplate a boulder as more than an object--something conscious of its surroundings and animated through politics, history and our own assumptions about reality. The boulders are literally animated, in a conversation with each other and with the viewer, and while we try to guess who is the *phantom* in the situation, we can't help but develop real emotions around the piece.

Virginia Mitford © 2017

Virginia Mitford is an artist who divides her time between Newfoundland and the Yukon

notes:

Robert Hengeveld--Looking for Life in the Astro turf, John G Hampton, Backflash Magazine Fall 2011

Robert Hengeveld

Patterns of Migration

November 15 - December 16, 2017

ODD Gallery

ROBERT HENGEVELD is an installation and media artist whose work explores the boundaries between reality and fiction, and where we find ourselves within that relationship. This has often taken shape through the manipulation of familiar environments or common experiences: a rotating tree, a floating shopping cart, or a street lamp that occasionally breaks out into a flickering morse code, only to return to its normal occupation of habitual illuminating.

He completed a MFA at the University of Victoria. His work has been exhibited across Canada and internationally and is held in various public and private collections. His work has received various grants and fellowship including the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, Toronto Art Council and a recent nomination for the Premier's Award. Past exhibitions include Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center (Buffalo US), Art Gallery of Guelph (Guelph CA), Art Athina (Athens, GC), Alternator (Kelowna CA), Mercer Union (Toronto, ON), Mulherin New York (NYC, US), and Opinion Makers (London UK). This summer he participated in The Arctic Circle expedition along with other international artists and scientists.

Robert Hengeveld is represented by Mulherin Toronto + New York.

ARTIST STATEMENT

My art practice manifests itself in many different forms, but exploring and experimenting with our preconceptions of the world around us would be one way to summarize a given direction of the past several years. This has often taken shape through the manipulation of the familiar environments or common experiences: a rotating tree, a floating shopping cart, or a street lamp that occasionally breaks out into a flickering morse code, only to return to its normal occupation of habitual illuminating. In more recent works this exploration has taken shape in the creation of synthetic environments which both mimic and mock the natural environment which it references.

The works often hover somewhere between reality and artifice, fact and fiction. Though a shift in scale, material, context, giving sound to the silent object, or through the animation of the ordinarily inert, the work takes aspects of the everyday and gives them a subtle kick into the unfamiliar. These subtle shifts create a spectacle similar to the freak shows of years past where our preconceptions of the real are challenged. We are left to decipher between our memory and understanding of how the world works and an opposing current experience of it.

It is within the proximity to the real, in the blurred boundary between fact and fiction, that these works make their connection, where one's understanding of the world is challenged and their perception is placed in juxtaposition to their preconceptions.

– Robert Hengeveld, 2017

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