

February 5 - 28, 2009

Opening Reception: Thursday, February 5, 6pm - 9pm

Celeste Toogood

Far Off Kin

Celeste Toogood is a graduate of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Upon graduating, Celeste returned to Toronto and continues her practice of silkscreening, drawing and making sculptures. Using colour and texture in her work, she investigates the meaning of representing the "natural" world. Celeste generates her imagery, and finds inspiration while hiking, snowshoeing and canoeing in Canada's wilderness. Seeking knowledge about plants and ecological systems, she aspires to renew the relationship that humans have with their natural environment. Celeste's work has been shown in Tokyo, the U.K., Netherlands, Baltimore, New York, Philadelphia, Vancouver, Montreal, Halifax and Toronto in various group shows. This is her first solo show in Toronto.

Malcolm Sutton is an editor and writer living in Toronto. He has studied at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Concordia University and the University of Ottawa, and is presently writing his PhD dissertation on the fiction of Robert Coover and Gilbert Sorrentino. Other ongoing writing projects include "1001 Xanadus," a collaborative work with artist François Lemieux.

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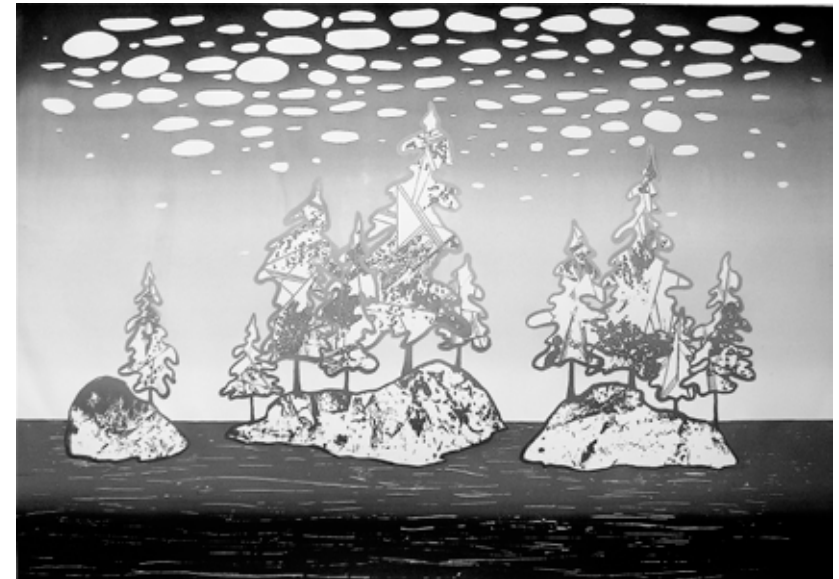


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Untitled, screenprint on paper, 2008



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Negotiating the Natural: Celeste Toogood's *Far Off Kin*

by Malcolm Sutton

We talk of deviations from natural life, as if artificial life were not also natural.
—Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," *Emerson's Essays* (Harper & Row: New York, n.d.), 390.



Untitled, screenprint and ink on paper, 2008.

The images are deceptively simple: isolated landscapes void of animals and the sun, without humans. The trees crowd in with the exposed rocks, the sky gathers itself, and encircling and corralling these possibly haphazard and natural arrangements is the white of the page. Natural arrangements, and yet, how natural? Do the prints depict something stumbled across in the woods, or something conceived by a landscape designer?

In this new series of prints, *Far Off Kin*, Celeste Toogood guides us through this unusual negotiation, a negotiation of the natural in an age in which nothing goes untouched and in which we approach the idea of nature with a degree of apprehension.

In a conversation we had at her studio, Toogood introduced me to a term she'd been thinking about while working on the series: specimen. The meaning that she drew on, of which I wasn't previously familiar, opened a door onto her present project. Specimen, in the case of a tree, means one allowed to grow to full roundness, unconstrained by inter-arboreal competition for daylight or underground barriers to root growth. The oak at the edge of the farmer's field, for example, or the elm arcing outward to its distinct breadth, safely away from its diseased kin. Though one might think this is a tree's natural form, fullness is often achieved when people have tempered or upheaved the habitat. A tree on a lawn granted space enough to round out, or a young tree purchased from a nursery

are also considered specimens. Because they emerge both naturally, in forest clearings and rocky shield land, and artificially, as cultivations for homes and gardens, specimens act as a kind of middle ground for the negotiation.

On a lot a few hours drive north of Toronto, Toogood observes and sketches the Canadian Shield landscape. The rocky earth with its limited soil composes islands of plants that to our eyes are beautiful, calming, rugged and natural. In Toronto, where she lives, she takes a course in landscape design, exposing her to certain guidelines and treatments of rocks and trees that mimic northern views. Such compositions, eventually installed to suit the taste of a homeowner, might be considered artificial.

There are also groups of specimens found between the city and the country—something Toogood has observed from a car—in the grassy spaces triangulated by highway turnoff ramps. One wonders how these came about at all.

Underlying the negotiation, then, are observations of nature in disparate circumstances. There is a sense in the prints of long-past halcyon days in which humans leave no mark, suggesting our separation from nature. Under a different lens, however, the strangely familiar compositions might be mistaken for familiar compositions might be mistaken for those of a landscape designer, naturalistically crafted for our pleasure, or of those seen by highways, isolated as though under quarantine. Still other subtle gestures in the prints—a heavily laid line, a tangle of sky—point toward a dark unreality: the land going to hell through human negligence and misuse, and anticipation of unknown devastations that will come to it through our terrifying new weather.

Toogood arrives at this ambiguous play between naturalness, artificiality and fantasy after producing a series of prints that celebrated a highly artificial view of animals. This earlier series of portraits, *Predator/Prey*, represented woodland beasts in high-psychedelic colourings and overlappings—Toogood's far-out kin. *Far Off Kin*, by way of mellow washes and hues, takes us into a realm of the perhaps farther-off kinship of rocks and trees. Toogood's shift indicates a more measured approach to thinking about and representing the natural world. We are drawn to these rubbings, these inked fields, and these gnarly or pellucid skies, as we are drawn to the pleasing distortions of storybook illustrations. But as we are taken by the beauty of the prints we are also pulled into the negotiation, and pressed to confront our conception of nature which is at stake in them.