

April 4 - May 11, 2013

Opening Reception: Thursday, April 4 | 6:30 - 8:30 pm

What Lies Beneath

Laura Bydlowska, Susan Cunningham, Jae Lee,
Liz Menard, Jennie Suddick and Daryl Vocat



Laura Bydlowska, *Hillary House (Uncovering Layers of History)*,
etching on Washi, 24" x 19.5" (paper size), 2012.

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Gallery Hours: Tues - Sat, 12-5pm



The Hook

by Jenn Law

*Do not bite at the bait of pleasure, till you know there is no hook beneath it.*¹

The Bait

I don't remember exactly when I first heard the tale about the hook-handed serial killer preying on young victims, but it was probably when I was in high school. As the story goes, two teenagers are parked in a dark and secluded part of town in the throes of adolescent lust. The music playing on the car radio is suddenly interrupted by a news report that a serial killer, who has a prosthetic hook in place of one of his hands, has escaped from a local psychiatric asylum. Believing they hear scraping outside the car, the spooked couple decide to leave quickly. The young man drops off his girlfriend at her home. But when she gets out of the car, she screams when she sees the bloody hook dangling from the outside handle of the car door.

A classic urban myth, *The Hook* is a story told by teenagers to each other in school corridors and locker rooms. Left hanging, the hook offers a glimpse of a narrow escape, a cautionary tale of what might happen when one strays to the shadows for a moment of stolen intimacy. It is a warning to youthful bravado of the dangers that lurk in the margins of social life. As a narrative device, the hook literally and figuratively captures the imagination. But it also represents a moment of recognition, of staring mortality in the face and nervously laughing, while concurrently thanking the proverbial gods for a narrow escape. There is a glimpse of both humility and humanity embedded in the hook; dissuading us from becoming too smug about our abilities to cheat fate.

All good stories need a hook. They may not come to us in the form of high literature, but rather arise quite humbly in everyday conversation, in a snippet of gossip, a grapevine rumour or an urban myth. There is something fundamentally democratic about an urban myth — the way it is disseminated and repeated, embellished in every telling, always narrated from two degrees of separation. It is with us only so long as it is relevant. Intimately related by a friend of a friend, such narratives suspend belief just enough to hover precariously on the cusp of truth. These are the stories that get under your skin, that make the hairs on your arms and the back of your neck stand on end. Once they hook you in, they may never let you go.

In *What Lies Beneath*, six Open Studio artist members invite us to contemplate the ways in which personal and collective narratives inform who we are, speaking to our deepest desires — and fears — of what we might become. Incorporating printery strategies of replication and repetition, these artists engage narrative visions of the social environment that hover between truth and fiction, history and myth.

Things that lurk in the shadows

On the back wall of the gallery, a monster lurks. Not quite in focus, it is larger than life and yet barely emerges from the wall — a paper white ephemeral net of leaves and vines strung together to give the illusion of a myth materialized. But who is caught in this net — it or us? Jennie Suddick has conjured a giant based on legends of the Sasquatch. The Sasquatch captured popular imagination in the 1920s when a series of newspaper articles based on local indigenous legends were published in Vancouver.



There have been numerous claims of sightings across North America ever since with books, organizations, websites and documentaries devoted to proving the creature's existence.

Suddick's practice is playfully grounded in cryptozoology and the mythologized monsters that lurk in the shadows of our national consciousness. She taps into our romanticized imaginings of the natural world and our deep-seated fears of that which lies on the edges of culture in the untamed undergrowth. The Sasquatch stalks our nation's narrative imagination, blurring the boundaries between civilized suburbia and the primitive wilderness. Although most of Canada's population is concentrated in urban hubs, Canadian identity is strongly rooted in the landscape. The Sasquatch in many

ways personifies this relationship with nature — nostalgia mixed with a healthy dose of apprehension. This half-man, half-giant ape speaks to our longing for some things to remain untouched, left to the imagination, beyond the civilizing grasp of social life. Suddick playfully teases us with a glimpse of a creature both threatening and curiously mesmerizing that lies just outside of our reach, letting it slip through our fingers in order to maintain a sense of wonder essential to holding our gaze.²

Jae Lee's mythical beast originates from further afield. It is born of a South Korean urban legend concerning the alleged dangers of sleeping in an enclosed room with an electric fan, widely believed by many South Koreans to cause death from asphyxiation or hypothermia. This myth has been circulating since the 1920s and 30s, and continues to have a stranglehold on popular belief in South Korea. Today, social media has contributed to the global dissemination of this legend, which has found its way into the mainstream media, Internet blogs, and Wikipedia. "Fan death" has even become a topic for debate in scientific circles, with the claims upheld by South Korean medical authorities and the national government, despite widespread consensus by international researchers that the fears are unsubstantiated.



Lee has brought this fear to life as a traditional *Tokkabi* (or *Dokkaebi*) monster; a mythical creature common in South Korean folklore and fairy tales. Tokkabi are said to have transformed from inanimate objects, and are mischievous tricksters, fond of practical jokes and games. The face of Lee's lithographed Tokkabi fills the entire frame, its hair blown outward like a fan, its mouth parted and its eyes wide, as if peering through an opening at us, about to leap into our world to consume us. Gripped in its teeth is a crushed flower, said by the artist to represent the "extortion" of a person's life.³

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Acknowledgments

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EDITING & TYPESETTING Sara Kelly

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Perhaps originally the Fan Death myth belied anxieties connected to the industrial revolution and fast evolving new technologies. But the legend persists and, as Ken Jennings explains, “hierarchy and deference to authority are important in Korean culture, which can make myth-busting a challenge.”⁴ Fear, however seemingly irrational to those outside it, may take on monstrous form when fuelled by crowd mentality and the collective imagination run wild.

Tales told round the campfire

Daryl Vocat is likewise interested in group behaviour and the pull of collective paradigms on the individual. Vocat’s practice draws on adolescent rites of passage and “boy culture,” specifically viewed through the pseudo-military lens of the Boy Scout movement. Organized by Robert Baden Powell, a lieutenant general in the British army, the Scouting movement evolved from an “experimental” summer camp held in England in 1907, established to test ideas for Baden-Powell’s book *Scouting for Boys*. Based on his boyhood experiences and his military training, Baden-Powell’s publication is estimated to have sold over 100 million copies since 1908, and has become a tome on discipline, boyhood and coming of age. While rooted in ideals of community, fraternity and good citizenry, the darker side of this “master” narrative is that the conformity-driven idealization of male behaviour leaves little room for difference or for alternative narratives of masculinity to take hold.



The making of men is a rather messier enterprise than one might gather from a Boy Scout manual. On the threshold of adulthood, the often-uniformed boys in Vocat’s narratives are literally wrestling with their identities. Vocat’s images play, in part, on the proverbial tales told round the campfire; nothing bonds people together or wrests them apart like fear. Here, the wilderness is envisioned as a theatre of survival, a place where naturalized hierarchies are hard-fought and won, and the cruelties and vagaries of grown men are modelled to boys through role-playing with guns, boxing gloves, army knives, and camping knots that transform into nooses. As Robert Fulford writes, “it is the fate of all children to be conscripted into a drama they did not write but must perform.”⁵ Over-printed and layered onto a horizontal scroll, Vocat encourages conflicting narratives to compete and co-exist, obscuring the boundaries of where one vision ends and another begins.

As any Boy Scout worth his salt will tell you, one should be wary of going into the woods alone. The wilderness, after all, is an enchanted place, something to be both revered and approached with cautious respect. On the floor of the gallery, Liz Menard has fashioned a forest grave. Through a mound of painstakingly handcrafted paper leaves, a delicate cluster of translucent-white paper flowers, *Monotropa Uniflora*, poke through the compost. Also known as the Ghost or Corpse Plant, legend maintains that this oth-

erworldly specimen marks the place where murdered victims have been buried in unmarked shallow graves.

Indigenous to North America, Ghost Plants are relatively scarce and can be difficult to spot. Unlike most plants, they do not contain chlorophyll, accounting for their translucent appearance. Since the Ghost Plant does not rely on photosynthesis to generate energy, it can grow in very dark environments as in the dense undergrowth of the forest. Its waxy skin seems to melt to the touch and its stems turn black when cut or wounded. It is said that Ghost Plants grow where the restless dead wish for their souls to be set free; but only murderers can mark the grave, so once seen, the botanical sentinels wither and vanish, like ghostly apparitions.⁶

Menard’s practice examines the precarious balance between urban life and the natural green spaces on the margins of the built environment. Urban growth and human development increasingly infringe upon such spaces, threatening the survival of the life that dwells within. Delicate and ethereal, the Ghost Plant emerges almost unseen; single bell-shaped flowers hang down from thin, scaled stems like the bowed heads of mourners. Harbingers of sorts, they whisper of what lies beneath the surface, while grieving over the prognostic passing of something that once lost may never be regained.



Hidden depths

Precarious balance and parallel worlds is likewise a theme that Laura Bydlowska explores in her etched excavations of the secret realms hidden beneath the surface of urban life. Singular houses perch lonely and isolated in environments that threaten to consume them. The architectural markers of civilization and all its trappings are here dwarfed by the landscape and the vast cavernous spaces that seemingly extend for miles below. Bydlowska mimics the nature/culture divide in her printing process, allowing for a certain degree of chance to take over the formation of the mysterious underworlds, while intricately etched lines and straight edges define the parameters of the inhabited social world above.

Bydlowska reveals the sedimentary layers of history hidden by the passage of time. Perhaps there are stories here to uncover of ancient civilizations and peoples whose fears and hopes might not have been so very different from our own. The narrative that lies beneath offers a lure and a cautionary warning: human life and its monuments are ultimately fleeting, and we are ever vulnerable to the hidden sinkholes that threaten to give way under our feet.

Occasionally, narrative counsel comes in the form of a proverb. Susan Cunningham’s work, *Carry Fire and Water*, is inspired by a painting by sixteenth century Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder, titled *Flemish Proverbs* (1559). Also known as *The Topsy Turvy*

World, Bruegel’s painting critiques the absurdity and folly of human behaviour, and includes visual representations of 112 Flemish proverbs and idioms. Many of these proverbs are still in common use, but a few have faded from historical memory, as some stories do. Cunningham’s work focuses on a single forgotten proverb illustrated within the painting, “never believe someone who carries fire in one hand and water in the other.” It is a warning to keep one’s distance from those who are disingenuous.

Cunningham superimposes a screenprinted photographic image of herself over the outline of the duplicitous woman in Bruegel’s painting, literally creating a two-faced portrait. Both figures carry fire and water, each threatening to cancel out the other. Like Vocat, Cunningham’s printerly layering of imagery simulates narrative strategies, creating parallels between the past and the present, and in so doing allowing the precedents of human fallibility to perform as penance and consolation. Seeking to come to terms with a demoralizing personal experience, Cunningham’s story conceals as it reveals. As she explains, her work is “the tell-all in which I tell nothing. I confess everything but reveal nothing. The viewer comes to his or her own conclusions.”⁷

Indeed, convincing stories, like convincing art, always require a space for projection where viewers can insert themselves in the narrative. As Aslan in C.S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia* series reminds us, “No one is told any story but their own.”⁸ It is our own reflection, of course, that hooks us in and stays with us. Hopefully we emerge relatively unscathed.



¹Jefferson, Thomas. “Letter XXVIII. — To Mrs. Cosway, October 12, 1786.” *Memoir, Correspondence, and Miscellanies, From the Papers of Thomas Jefferson*. Ed. Thomas Jefferson Randolph. Second ed. Vol. II. Boston: Gray and Bowen, 1830. EBook #16782. Project Gutenberg, 10 Nov. 2012. Web. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16782/16782-h/16782-h.htm#link2H_4_0028>

²Suddick, Jennie. Artist’s statement, 2012.

³Lee, Jae. Artist’s statement, 2012.

⁴Jennings, Ken. “Is Your Electric Fan Trying to Kill You?” *Slate Magazine*. 22 Jan. 2013. <http://www.slate.com/articles/life/foreigners/2013/01/fan_death_korean_moms_think_that_your_electric_fan_will_kill_you.single.html>.

⁵Fulford, Robert. *The Triumph of Narrative: Storytelling in the Age of Mass Culture*. Toronto, ON: House of Anansi, 1999. 34.

⁶Menard, Liz. Artist’s statement, 2012.

⁷Cunningham, Susan. Artist’s statement, 2013.

⁸Lewis, C. S. *The Horse and His Boy*. Vol. Book 3. *The Chronicles of Narnia*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995. 165, 202.

Image Credits

p. 2 Jennie Suddick, *Timber Giant* (detail of work in progress), cut paper and screenprinted vellum, dimensions variable, 2013.

p. 2 Jae Lee, preparatory sketch for *Fan Death*, 2013.

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p. 4 Liz Menard, *What the Forest Knows* (detail of work in progress), etching, hand colouring, hand shaping on Gampi, Okawara, Kozo, dimensions variable, 2013.

p. 5 Susan Cunningham, *Carry Fire and Water*, screenprint and acrylic on wood, 48” x 24”, 2011.

Artists' Biographies

Laura Bydlowska was born in Warsaw, Poland and is an emerging artist living and working in Toronto. She obtained a B.A. (Hons.) in Art History and Studio Art from the University of Guelph and a Master’s in Museum Studies from the University of Toronto. Her print work has been featured in a variety of exhibitions including a traveling exhibition with the Ontario Society of Artists and the Japanese Paper Place *Under 30 at 30* exhibition.

Susan Cunningham is an artist, educator and long-time member of Open Studio. She has had various solo and group exhibitions locally, nationally and internationally. Cunningham’s work is represented in a number of collections including BMO, Seiko Canada and Foreign Affairs Canada.

Jae Lee was born in Seoul, Korea and has lived and worked in Toronto since 2001. She received a BFA and MFA from Hongik University, and received another BFA from OCAD University in 2007. Since then, Jae has been working at Open Studio as a lithographer, and has been running her own art studio since 1984. She has had four solo exhibitions and has participated in numerous group shows.

Liz Menard is a visual artist and educator, holding a Masters in Adult Education from The University of Toronto (2005) and a BA in History from McMaster University. Menard has exhibited extensively in Canada and received numerous awards including Open Studio’s Nick Novak Fellowship (2011-12).

Jennie Suddick is a multi-disciplinary artist based in Toronto. Her work has been exhibited in Canada, the U.S. and Europe. She earned her MFA from York University (2009) and holds both a BFA (2006) and Advanced Visual Studies Certificate (2007) from OCAD University. Her work deals with issues of Canadian identity, cryptozoology, museological display, and hyper reality through drawings, print and sculpture. She currently teaches at OCAD University and received the 2011 Donald O’Born Family Scholarship from Open Studio.

Daryl Vocat is a visual artist living and working in Toronto. He completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts at University of Regina in Saskatchewan, and Master of Fine Arts at York University in Toronto. His work has been acquired by the New York Public Library Print Collection, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, and the City of Toronto Fine Art Collection.

Writer’s Biography

Jenn Law is a visual artist, writer and researcher living in Toronto, where she works primarily in print media and hand-cut paper works. Law holds a PhD in Anthropology from SOAS, University of London, England, a BA in Anthropology from McGill University, Montreal, QC and a BFA from Queen’s University, Kingston, ON. She has worked as a lecturer, researcher, editor and curator in Canada, the UK and South Africa.