

**Kristie MacDonald** holds a BFA from York University, where she studied visual art and art history. She is currently a candidate for the Masters of Information degree at the University of Toronto, specializing in Archival Studies as well as devoting a significant portion of her time to Museum Studies. Her work engages notions of the archive and the collection, as well as their roles in the evolving meanings and contextual histories of images and artifacts. Her practice is interdisciplinary, drawing on sculpture, printmaking, photography and installation. In 2008, she received the Toronto Friends of the Visual Arts 10th Anniversary Award Graduation Scholarship for Studio Practice. She was recently a visiting artist at the University of Windsor.

**Jen Hutton** is a Toronto-based artist and writer.

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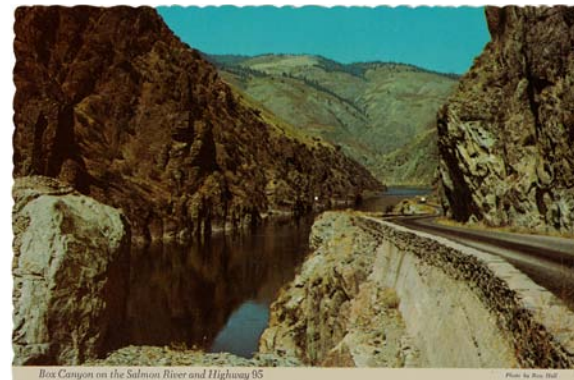
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# Kristie MacDonald

## Home and Away



Box Canyon on the Salmon River and Highway 95

Photo by Rex Bell



Incomplete Archive: Speculative Forgeries of Cards 1, 2 and 5 (detail of Card #4), Found letters, postcards & stamps, relief prints, wood, glass, acrylic artifact stands, 4' x 3.5' x 13" 2010



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## Kristie MacDonald: *Home and Away*

by Jen Hutton

*Home and Away* indicates a relative positioning of static and moving bodies, witnessed from a domestic interior and/or from a traveler on the road. The familiar here coupled with the foreign there. This private/public duality is ultimately combined in the postcard, a subject that Kristie MacDonald has explored in her print-based and sculptural works.

MacDonald finds both blank and used postcards in flea markets: rich sites for amassing these discarded yet highly personal documents from the past. A precursor to the immediacy of contemporary broadcasts such as email or social media platforms, the postcard was designed as a quick note that eventually came to bear a heavy mnemonic weight. Before picture postcards came into regular use in the late 19th century, plain, pre-stamped correspondence cards became available as a cheaper, expedited form of communication over regular lettermail. In addition, picture cards—inexpensive and accessible examples of popular art and celebrities printed in standard sizes—were collected and given away but never mailed. Conflating the two seemed like a natural fit, though it took some time to catch on. The Victorian critics bemoaned the lost art of letter composition with these briefer cables; British journalist and poet G.R. Sims wrote: “For the purpose of correspondence, they are practically useless. There is so much view, that there is barely room to write your name.... They are utterly destructive of style, and give absolutely no play to the emotions.”<sup>1</sup> The postcard’s perceived coarseness was a mild assault on prim Victorian values because it suppressed the flowery verbiage typical of the time, and made its contents public—or at least to the eyes of the postmaster and the mailman. Without an envelope, the postcard has always been a semi-public broadcast on a miniature scale.

Still, by the turn of the century, with travel and technological advances heralding a “new age of speed,” one eventually forsook certain values to conform to social rules of correspondence. As they do today, travelers who opt to scribble a short note on a postcard do so out of courtesy but also to register their presence in a particular time and place. The tipping point for mailed correspondence occurred during the 1889 Paris Exhibition, when the French newspaper *Le Figaro* decided to capitalize on the event by printing images of the newly erected Eiffel Tower on postcards. Available for purchase on site, a visitor could mail their card bearing a postmark from the observation deck. From there, the popularity of this enterprise spread to any surmountable landmark, or even, any place able to sell souvenirs.<sup>2</sup> It’s a type of “Kilroy was here” scrawl that claims a territory—marked by an image, a caption and, prior to the picture postcard, only a postmark—to not only a recipient, but, in concept, the rest of the world as well. As Susan Stewart has written, the picture postcard becomes a gesture tied to the original event or location but is still incomplete. It remains “impoverished and partial” in that it can never totally recoup the experience of the original context but can allude to it via a supplementary narrative projected on the object by the sender or the receiver.<sup>3</sup> Outside of this relationship many years later, MacDonald can only speculate on the personal impact of these cards as she mythologizes her anonymous subjects.

MacDonald’s *Incomplete Archive: Speculative Forgeries of Cards 1, 2 and 5* (2010) begins with a freestanding Shaker-style vitrine the artist built from red oak. Behind the glass are five, seemingly ordinary postcards held upright on plastic stands, a chronology of a family’s travels over the summer of 1976 and relayed to a couple living in Toronto. Each text follows a familiar pattern of minor news: weather reports, descriptions of the landscape, plans for the trip ahead. Two cards mention that one family member is fighting an infection; the style of cursive suggests the mother is writing the postcards on her family’s behalf. The glossy recto of each card is a commercial lithograph that captures the ubiquity of the American Southwest’s arid landscape.

A closer inspection reveals that these cards are not all what they seem. Three of the cards are careful fakes that MacDonald constructed by scanning and rearranging words from found cards written by the same sender, thus creating a plausible narrative that extended what little information she had. These new scripts were etched to metal plates and printed on blank cards of the same vintage and relative location, becoming prints upon prints. To enhance their “authenticity,” she fabricated postmarks based on information extracted from other cards and on the projected route she surmises they took from California to British Columbia. As in any cross-country trip, each postcard stands as a record of travel but lags behind like an echo: purchased in one location, written and posted somewhere else, and received often after the sender has returned home.

*Still Heading North* (2008-2010) began with the discovery of a single postcard addressed to a Mrs. Coles of Toronto with the eponymous words scrawled across it. Similar to *Incomplete Archive*, MacDonald has monumentalized this single, mysterious communiqué as a perpetually reproduced image. Though one can barely discern the postmark, the image in *Still Heading North* is hardly a marker of territory; we’ll never know if the sender eventually reached their destination or if they headed north ‘til they couldn’t go north anymore.



The written side of the postcard was transferred to a plate to be used in a dresser that MacDonald retrofitted as a working printing press. Like her postcard, the dresser itself was a found object—culled from the curb in downtown Toronto. It is a low-slung, two-drawer model with a painted, chipped exterior. Opening one of the drawers, the inner surfaces have been refinished and carefully fitted with compartments that the artist has hewn by hand. The bottom drawer includes a small section to soak and squeegee small sheets of pre-cut paper. The upper drawer is fitted with a steel roller and felts, so that with each close of the drawer it embosses a sheet of wet paper with a ghost of the postcard’s written words. The movement of the drawer is an echo of ordinary experience that in turn cranks out a banal message in perpetuity; coarseness giving way to poetic brevity.

MacDonald’s works seem to reinforce the basic idea that prints are mobile and sculpture is not. She channels a DIY ethos by adapting an existing piece of furniture to make prints, but as a press the object becomes a strange domestic hybrid. Like *Incomplete Archive*’s hermetic vitrine as a house for found and forged cards, the dresser’s other main function is a storage unit. Each print is returned to the bottom drawer to dry; as they collect in the drawer, the stacked prints appear as a soft quilted surface.

In MacDonald’s hands—by her appropriation—the postcards become hers, separated from their original events. As forgeries or mass-produced items, these postcards are hardly malicious. MacDonald’s thoughtful works reinscribe meaning to these cards by filling in the blanks that they are unable to fill on their own.

<sup>1</sup> Carline, Richard. *Pictures in the Post: The story of the picture postcard*. London: Gordon Fraser, 1971, 57.

<sup>2</sup> Conversely, it can be argued that a landmark’s status is only conferred due to the presence of a postcard or other souvenirs.

<sup>3</sup> Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993, 136-8.

Image: *Still Heading North*, found dresser, found post card, press felts, wood, steel, Plexiglas, rubber, installation variable (Dresser with drawers closed measures 3’ 2” in length, 22” in height, and 31” depth), 2008-2010