

A Sense of Place reviewed by Joe Lewis

a version of one of Pat Hickman's river teeth installation image provided by Philadelphia Arts Alliance and used with permission. A Sense of Place Philadelphia Arts Alliance A group exhibition curated by Bruce Hoffman February 2 - April 28, 2012 featuring artists: Marian Bijlenga, Marcia Docter, Pat Hickman, Ke-Sook Lee, Amy Orr, Barbara Lee Smith, Wendeanne Ke`akaStitt, Bhakti Ziek Once on a visit to the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, in one of the European Galleries, I found myself on the Normandy coast with Gustave Courbet's 1866 "The Cliffs at Étretat" to my left and Claude Monet's 1866 "Rock Needle Seen through the Porte d'Aval, Étretat" to my right. A few years later I was on the beach at Étretat looking at the Rock Needle and cliffs the view was so familiar and even though I had never been there and was slightly disconcerting I felt like I was in a painting. Landscape has the power to transport the viewer to a place outside of where they are and it is this very powerful aspect which is so attractive to contemporary makers. This is what is at play through all the work in "A Sense of Place." Curator Bruce Hoffman has selected work from makers with a wide range of methods, material and approaches: Weaving- Bhakti Ziek, Embroidery - Marcia Docter, Quilting - Barbara Lee Smith and Wendeanne Ke`akaStitt, Sculpture - Pat Hickman, and Amy Orr, installation - Marian Bijlenga and Ke-Sook Lee. The exhibition can be divided into pieces speaking of physical local, pieces dealing with an internal landscape in which personal/ universal demons are battling it out, and pieces dealing with location as a metaphor. There is a feeling of the particular local presented in the work of Pat Hickman's installation "Lifeline" 2012, Ke-Sook Lee's "Green Hammock", Barbara Lee Smith's quilts and Wendeanne Ke`akaStitt's kappa work. Each of these makers comes to the individual location they evoke through their chosen material and method of working. As a basket maker primarily, Pat Hickman has worked with numerous organic materials to shape vessels, she has used these materials to create 3-D and 2-D pieces and explored their materiality. In recent years broken shattered driftwood refuse washing up on the shore line of Nova Scotia and Hawaii have, in her hands, becomes a brush stroke, a stitch with which she marks space. She refers to this material as River Teeth-- a name she has discovered through the writings of David James Duncan who describe them: "There is in every log a series of cross-grained, pitch-hardened masses where branches once joined the tree's trunk. Knots, they're called in a piece of lumber. But in the bed of a river, where the rest of the tree has been stripped and washed away, these knots take on a very different appearance, and so deserve a different name. River teeth, we called them as kids, because that's what they look like. Like enormous fangs, ending in cross-grained root that once tapped all the way into the tree's very heartwood." Installation shot of central area of Pat Hickman's "Lifeline" 2012 photo by Joe Lewis.

In three pieces wrapped around three walls, these river teeth provide a horizon line with a central vortex you can almost feel the tidal pull that has brought this debris to shore. The evocation of this dislocated beach is gentle yet frantic. It is a place of contemplation with the joy of beach combing in the hypnotic repetition of the river teeth the walls seem to be embroidered on the wall, each similar, each strikingly different, and all creating motion. Directly across from Hickman's piece, Wendeanne Ke`akaStitt's work hangs. It is made with traditional Hawaiian kappa cloth, [Bark Cloth] dyed, stained, or stamped then pieced and stitched. A master quilter, her use of Hawaiian Bark Cloth or Hawaiian Kapa is oddly reminiscent of Sonia Delaunay's quilts and printed textiles of the 1920s and 30s. In Ke`akaStitt's work, the mix of geometric shapes and curved lines and even the colouring is very art deco in appearance. This makes me wonder if in fact Delaunay and other creators of Art Deco Style had seen ethnographic material from Polynesian islands which is where Hawaiian artisans had to look in the 1980s when they were reviving this lost traditional "craft;" "All are dead who knew how to make coverings and loincloths and skirts and adornments and all that made the wearers look dignified and proud and distinguished". Samuel Kamakau, Hawaiian historian, 1870 Ke-Sook Lee's work "Green Hammock" image provided by Philadelphia Arts Alliance and used with permission

In a room of its own, Ke-Sook Lee's work "Green Hammock" which is constructed from US Army Nurse's uniforms dating from the Vietnam War is a quite piece. It is an installation that invites you to duck under it, walk around give it a push, dream of lounging on a beach. But you can't. I had the feeling, prior to reading the press release, that it demands a certain reverence. "Lee, who lived through the Korean War as a child, found the uniforms at an Army supply store, and recalls being struck by the way they were torn, marked, and missing buttons, and thus reflected the experience of the nurses who wore them. The form of the hammock suggests a temporary structure for relaxation (one which can be installed almost anywhere) but the fabric's own storied history connects the piece to a specific time and place" (from the press release). Barbara Lee Smith "Kojjinc Chorion" 2012 From tropical shores we next encounter the countryside. Barbara Lee Smith's quilts are like "plein air" [in the open air] paintings of the impressionists. They have the light touch of a pastel or watercolour presented as large panorama "Kojjinc Chorion" 2010 Painted, collaged and stitched textiles, and a series of small textile collages "You are here" 2010-11 collaged and stitched textiles. The small works were extremely detailed. They were not demanding and within the context of the exhibition offer a gentle reprieve as a trip to the country should be. While these works dealt with physical places the remaining works inhabit psychological / interior landscapes for the most part. Marian Bijlenga's "palimpsest 4" 2007, horsehair, cotton, viscose, stitched, was microbial. Amy Orr's "House of Cards" 2012 plastic, wood, and paper is an everyday nightmare

plaguing many people in the US and elsewhere in this current economic atmosphere. The plastic in this work is hundreds of credit cards. Petroleum based textiles are all around us so the inclusion of Orr's work in a "Fiber" exhibition works. For a Sense Of Place, what is more specific than our home? The reality of home is specific to everyone-- especially now that the fear of losing our homes is becoming more familiar. This piece may be the most blatantly political yet straight forward work in the show. On the whole curator Bruce Hoffman let a simple concept be explored by a diverse range of makers who presented engaging, distracting, entertaining and skilled work that led me on a very satisfying journey. Joe Lewis Notes[*1] Rock Needle Seen through the Porte d'Aval, Étretat, 1886, Claude Monet , oil on canvas 65.2 x 92.1 cm, Gift from the Marjorie and Gerald Bronfman Collection, Montreal, 2009 National Gallery of Canada (no. 43002) In the Fall of 1885, Monet took up residence in Étretat, a small fishing village and resort town on the Normandy coast. He likely began this painting at that time, then shipped it with some fifty other canvases to his studio in Giverny where he continued work, signing it in 1886. The lighting and tide conditions correspond to late afternoon, as the sun sets behind the cliff. Given the angle of view, Monet could only have been working from a stretch of shoreline that is exposed for a short time at low tide. Accessed 2012-05-13 [*2] The Cliffs at Étretat, 1866, Gustave Courbet , oil on canvas, 90.9 x 113.3 cm Gift of H.S. Southam, Ottawa, 1947, National Gallery of Canada (no. 4838) Situated near Le Havre on the coast of Normandy, the fishing village of Étretat, with its magnificent cliffs, was a favourite retreat for artists, including Delacroix, Boudin, and Monet. Here, in the Realist spirit, Courbet offers a factual record of the picturesque view, paralleling his candid depictions of everyday life. The artist customarily began his seascape paintings out of doors, and then finished them in his studio, where he applied paint with a flexible palette knife to highlight the random textures of the rocky cliff face, the cresting waves, and the surging foam of the shoreline. Accessed 2012-05-13 [*3] River Teeth In Nyack by Geoff Wisner http://www.geoffwisner.com/index.php/blog/comments/river_teeth_in_nyack/ Accessed 2012-05-13 [*4] kappa Cloth, Samuel Kamakau, Hawaiian historian, 1870. <http://www.kapahawaii.com/hawaiian-kapa-tapa-history.html> , Accessed 2012-05-13