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2-303 Lansdowne Ave
Toronto ON M6K 2W5
416 849 2864
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Post and Pillars

Curated by Stefan Hancherow and Jennifer Simaitis

Alexis Boyle, Andrew Buszchak, Emily Davidson, Aryen Hoekstra, Miles Stemp

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In the mid 1830s Thomas Cole, an English-born, American artist whose work inspired the Hudson River School, conceived a series of paintings that dramatized the rise and fall of an ancient classical state.¹ His message was implicit: that maintaining a pastoral way of life is better served than giving into the imperial system of commercialization, capitalism and colonization, because, “all empires, no matter how magnificent, are condemned to decline and fall.”² *Posts and Pillars* considers the cyclical nature of civilizations and includes works from Alexis Boyle, Andrew Buszchak, Emily Davidson, Aryen Hoekstra, and Miles Stemp. Their work resonates with the five paintings from Cole’s *Course of the Empire* series (1834-36), through the exploration of post-capitalist critique, mass production, and fictional utopias.

Cole’s *Course of the Empire* series commences with *The Savage State*, depicting hunter-gatherers developing a primeval way of life within a lush wilderness. Stemp’s *Islands* (2013) are examples of fictional uninhabited environments. Flocked green masses are presented on mirrored glass cubes, which are arranged on the floor in a series of clusters, generating a reflection of the observer and their surroundings on the surface. The mirrored surfaces and imaginary islands are equipped with an analogy, one that demonstrates authority and control of economic systems, where a viewer’s reflection is made visible as value.³ Stemp’s *Longlamps* (2013), torch-like sculptures made of PVC tubing and compact fluorescent light bulbs, are aestheticized industrial goods wherein form supersedes its function. The bulbs in *Longlamps* hover near the ceiling of the gallery, becoming astral substitutes or stand-ins for hand-held torches, in either case illuminating the mysterious landmasses below.

¹ The Hudson River School were a group of New York City-based landscape painters that emerged about 1850 under the influence of the English émigré Thomas Cole (1801–1848) and flourished until the time of the Centennial. Because of the inspiration exerted by his work, Cole is usually regarded as the “father” or “founder” of the school, though he himself played no special organizational role. See: Kevin J. Avery, *The Hudson River School*, Department of American Paintings and Sculpture, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, metmuseum.org/toah/hd/hurs/hd_hurs.htm

² Niall Ferguson. *Complexity and Collapse: Empires on the Edge of Chaos*. “Foreign Affairs”. Mar/Apr 2010, Vol. 89 Issue 2, p18-32.

³ The mirror of production, in reference to Jacques Lacan’s mirror stage, allows the human species to become conscience within the imaginary. See: Jean Baudrillard, “Requiem for the Media”, *Utopie: Texts and Projects, 1967-1978*, eds., Craig Buckley and Jean-Louis Violeau, trans., Jean-Marie Clarke, Semiotext, Los Angeles, CA, pp. 281.

Like *Longlamps*, Boyle's linear representations of the human form, *Cute Couple* (2012), are fashioned from remnants of an industrialized domain. She aestheticizes bicycle wheel inner-tubes to create partners that generate a syntactical language of companionship and cohabitation. The genderless designs pinned to the wall act as traces of existence, which can be personified by the viewer.

The second painting in Cole's series, *The Arcadian or Pastoral State*, depicts an idyllic landscape of tilled fields and Greek architecture. Davidson's series of letterpress posters (2012) and Cole's painting share an optimistic perspective, however, where Cole looks to the past for inspiration, Davidson offers her utopia in a future context. Taking the role of a pseudo-agitprop, Davidson produces ephemera, posters and pamphlets that signify a future uprising that champions alternative social perspectives. Texts declare: "Join us for thought experiments and brainstorming on the undoing of the capitalist mindset", "Capitalism has fallen, art must be redefined" and "Fame is hierarchy: artists are already everywhere among us". The collection of works titled, *Another World: Archives of the Inner City Artists' Commune* (2012), are attributed to a fictional Halifax, Nova Scotia-based group of social activists who are rigorously attempting to break the cycle of the capitalist régime.⁴ Interestingly, although days and times for meetings are included on the notices, no reference to a year is made. Davidson accepts the impending downfall of capitalist systems; the posters become archives of the future, written in past tense.⁵

In Cole's third painting, *The Consummation of Empire*, indications of the natural world disappear and the river valley is covered in colonnaded marble structures. The classical façade of the metropolis does not reveal the forthcoming tribulations that will lead to its collapse. Hoekstra's *Screen Stack* (2013), and *Potential Screen III* (2013) share formal concerns with minimalist artworks. Except here Hoekstra uses modernist tropes, to disguise current underlying crises. The surfaces of the works appear stable, when in fact they are quite fragile and ephemeral. In *Screen Stack*, outmoded slide projectors throw red, green, and blue light, producing an illuminated tower against the gallery wall. The aesthetics of this work depends on electric current and the RGB-colour motif references a successful technological veil, television. *Potential Screen III*, a black cine-foil wall piece is seen of its element absorbing light rather than directing it. The potential for the screen to be a delineating surface for media is equaled by its fragility.

Buszchak's video *Complete Trust* (2012) is a montage of clips compiled from the game show *Wheel of Fortune* (airing since 1975). A resolute statement is revealed letter by letter: ALL MONEY IS A MATTER OF BELIEF, this assertion references writer George Goodman (1930-2014) author of *Paper Money* (1981).⁶ Buszchak wittily portrays game show contestants exclaiming our faith in the economy of exchange where "money is simply a symbolic tool, wholly dependent for its usefulness on the underlying trust and

⁴ The posters are printed with the use of very little electricity, which suggests that the collapse of capitalism did not occur without destruction, bringing with it infrastructural complications. It is reminiscent of similar metaphors in *The Hunger Games* and the revolution that occurs as a reaction to the inequality of the empire.

⁵ The works delineate the cognitive understanding of time, similar to the Aymara people whose concept of time is a mirror image of standard chronology, where the future is positioned ahead of oneself and the past behind. The Aymara locate themselves the other way around, "with the past ahead and the future behind." See: Inga Kiderra, *Backs to the Future: Aymara Language and Gesture Point to Mirror-Image View of Time*, University of California San Diego, June 12, 2006, ucsdnews.ucsd.edu/archive/newsrel/soc/backsfuture06.asp

⁶ George Goodman wrote a number of economic texts under the pseudonym "Adam Smith" in order to protect his identity.

belief of its users.”⁷ Game shows reinforce contemporary societal belief in this arrangement by allowing a handful of lucky contestants to vie for financial and celebrity enhancement.

In *Destruction*, Cole’s painting which succeeds the crowning state of the empire, the metropolis is ablaze while citizens flee from invading mobs. Boyle’s *Perfect Match* (2012) may have easily started the destructive fury; two red tipped matches are conjoined as a result of a manufacturing error. The mass production of material goods relies on objects that are consistent and precise, but when the system begins to malfunction, new and exciting aesthetic qualities emerge. Pinned beside the matches is another result of error, two plastic stamens used in fake plants are similarly fused, a fitting metaphor aimed at the struggle between the natural world and the mass-production that aims to mimic it.

Buszchak’s digital video, *Reality Show* (2010), exemplifies the downfall of an empire. An apt correspondence to Cole’s classical architectural motifs, *Reality Show* begins with a single Corinthian column atop a backdrop of the Milky Way galaxy. The video captures cursor movements and image manipulations being performed by the artist using Photoshop. Buszchak proceeds to copy, paste, and resize columns, placing them side-by-side across the screen. The placement of sequentially smaller columns continues until the column is reduced to a single pixel. That pixel becomes lost in an array of stars perhaps signifying the end of a digital empire.

Cole’s series culminates in *Desolation*; a painting absent of human life, left are fragments of colonnades, decaying beneath the natural environment. The cycle is set to begin again. As in *Desolation*, Boyle’s *Infinitive* (2013) pairs the natural world with the manufactured. There are two sets of rings, one set, the remnants of a tree knot propped up against the wall, the other, two rubber inner tubes used for tricycle tires lay relaxed on the ground, forming figure eights. The concentric rings represent the cyclical rise and fall of empires, where one ends it begins again. The course of an empire is embedded with the totality of society’s triumphs and tribulations. In this way *Posts and Pillars* presents a collective struggle amid the capitalist order.

⁷ Nuessle, Frank. "Distributed Capitalism: A Scientific Validation for "Going Local"." *World Futures* 69, no. 7-8 (2013): 450-478