

A Slice of Life

The idea for the Upstream Benefits exhibition and symposium found its genesis in a comment made by a Canada Council grant officer who, when discussing an Oxygen Art Centre project proposal, suggested we look at the project through what she termed a “meta-curatorial” lens. A question to consider, she said, was “Why here?” Why is our location significant for making art, for the establishment and operation of an artist-run centre? What is interesting and urgent and important to us?

On reflection, I think one part of the answer lies in an appreciation of the rural, where we live. Rural Canadians comprise the country’s largest minority, constituting 20 per cent of the population. The bulk of Canada’s cultural and educational institutions, as well as its national media, are located in the urban. Hence, quite naturally, their major focus is on the urban (unless some disaster strikes the rural). This situation results in a national conversation that leaves the impression that what is happening in the rural—including the cultural life there—is negligible or unimportant compared to what is happening in the cities.

Countering this belief is that three things absolutely essential to the existence of a city are produced in the rural: food, power (hydro dams, coal, oil, and natural gas are all found and generate power in the rural), and raw materials (from paper to plutonium, the basis for every manufactured product originates in the rural). Thus, far from being an inessential backwater, the rural is the means by which the urban can exist. What rural lives are like in the 21st Century—including the art that is produced there—might therefore be of interest even to city-dwellers, since urban lives so depend on their counterparts in the rural.

Our location in the midst of the Canadian basin of the Columbia River and its tributaries has meant a further complicating of our position. As I talked with many West Kootenay artists about the big-picture considerations of what we’re doing with our art here, the idea began to take the shape of an exhibition and symposium, to produce a survey if you will representing a “slice of life” here, to prove to the art world we in the rural are creating! Then artist and curator Maggie Shirley came up with the title “Upstream Benefits.” The name of the project is a play on words, of course. The West and East Kootenays are recipients of U.S. money paid as a consequence of how the building of the 1964 Columbia River Treaty dams in Canada affected the region. This money is termed “downstream benefits.” These benefits are distributed to the arts through the Columbia Kootenay Cultural Alliance and the funds have a huge impact on the production and dissemination of new work in the region, including this very project.

So looking through this “meta-curatorial” lens, the “Upstream Benefits” project is a positive review of our lives as rural artists. Elements that could be seen as a disadvantage; remote and rural with limited access to services, also means awe-inspiring nature, space and time to think and create, a spirit of self-reliance and of community. The tremendous vivacity of the art community here is impressive—not only are our artists pursuing their own studio work, but they are engaging in a wide variety of activities in support of each other, not least of which is the operation of Nelson’s artist-run centre, Oxygen.

Miriam Needoba, Curator

Written in collaboration with author Tom Wayman, who has been instrumental in the development of this project over the last three years, including the “Upstream Benefits – Rural Art Symposium” that is being produced as a companion piece to this exhibition.