

If painting genres had captions, landscape's might be: "this is beautiful – it's all mine."

Kent Tate's films follow in that tradition, but they're of a different order – none of the self-flattering, consuming embrace that characterizes Western landscape painting. Rather, his landscapes might be captioned: "this is more than beautiful, and we're playing chicken."

An in-depth essay by Jeff Nye ("The Hypnosis of Time," Art Gallery of Swift Current, 2012) identifies time as the enduring leitmotif in Tate's work: geological time, the ephemerality and sublimity of weather and the pervasive incursion of industrial time. He rightly credits the artist's mastery in capturing the impossible 'stillness' of the prairie landscape and wonders what these real-time compressions would look like if the camera were allowed to record for an eon – which would confer the impossibility of even geology staying still.

The thing is, as sublimely 'still' as his landscapes are, Tate never allows his impeccably composed long shots of the wide prairie vistas to fully mesmerize. He intervenes, and his interventions: some are seamless, but others glitch out and assert themselves as Brechtian wake-up calls that subvert catharsis. The stupefying effects of gorgeous, high definition cinematography are persistently undercut with critical reminders in the form of floating figures, disappearing vehicles, ominous sound tracks and enigmatic animations.

Kent Tate's films are montages (in the creative, Soviet sense). They deploy the kind of jarring "collisions" of filmic passages that undermine transcendent response and redirect the viewer's attention back to this world and back to the film itself – as representation.

Of course, these techniques are well-oiled strategies, and whereas the likes of Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov and Bertold Brecht: the artists who first theorized montage and defamiliarization techniques, sought to inspire a sceptical detachment in their viewers (how to make them think), Tate is wary of intentional didacticism. He insists his work is "not a soapbox."

Ok, but repeated references to the "Anthropocene period" and "Holocene extinction" in his film descriptions are appropriate tags to his oeuvre – which ranges in tone from irony to tragedy. Overall – he approaches his subjects with a sense of wonder, imminent change, not-knowing and a deep appreciation.

His aesthetic spur is the land. You can feel the great craft he wields in capturing such sweeping scenes. But these are the establishing shots, or more precisely the establishing layers, and he works hard in the editing room to splice in his surrealist bit-players that function as accumulating commentaries, like disembodied Greek choruses. The message isn't cohesive: 'awe' is paired with 'quaint' and 'cute' rubs up against 'calamity' in an admixture of opposites or contrasts, but there is an accrual of honed perception and serious play, which compounds over the duration of each film and together – work to inspire an ominous wonder: not apocalyptic, but a kind of portentous awareness.

Tate's films are produced as independent, stand-alone works – featured in festivals and curated screenings around the world. They are generally short (4 – 10 minutes). In this installation, the gallery is divided in two. A screening room presents the films in their original single-channel format, and in the → space: nine LCD monitors are mounted on three walls – three to a wall. Each of the films is looped and repeats throughout the day. The soundscape

(composed and produced by the artist) is also looped and is heard in both spaces. The looping of films (of varying lengths) and sound means that particular juxtapositions of sound and image are random. But even when you watch the individual films with their original soundtracks, it soon becomes evident that they're all close siblings and aren't upset by this spatial fusion.

Each wall is titled which helps distill the artist's relation to his subject. Things we see, Things we do and Things we take away, point to observing the land, noticing industrial intervention and pondering the implications of resource extraction.

Shot almost entirely in Southern Saskatchewan, Tate's landscapes are both grand and vulnerable. Rippling grasslands beneath undulating cloud formations set the backdrop for pickup trucks and trains, pump jacks, combines and gigantic piles of potash. One spectacular night-time pan around a gas station after a rainfall becomes a recurring motif in several films and evokes contradictions in the cycle of industrial production and consumption. Neon signs and small fires are spliced into scenes to produce similarly contradictory reactions: "this is beautiful," "funny" and "awful."

While Saskatchewan is self-evidently, stereotypically and magnificently a 'land of living skies', it is also in fact – a land of industrial cultivation and resource extraction. According to the Nature Conservancy of Canada, over 70 per cent of the wild prairie grassland has been "converted" (to crop production, intensive grazing and other land uses). Don't let the big sky or oceanic fields in these films fool you. Even in Tate's most Arcadian passages, these are unequivocally industrial landscapes.

One of the films in the section: Things we take away, opens with a wide shot of a waterhole by a highway and big sky. Cars and trucks motor along and after 15 seconds, a huge black monolith descends slowly from the sky in the distance and becomes enveloped in a glow of white light as it meets the horizon. 2001 looms and as the alien machine meekly the ground, the scene cuts to badlands, then to urban outskirts: train tracks, a large grain elevator and a highway overpass in the background. Barely perceptible in the mid-ground, an animal (a bear dog...?) partially emerges in a puddle. Dissolve through sublime clouds to craggy, brown hills and rain clouds, to a city backdrop. An empty parking lot in the foreground leads up to a low commercial building where Tate montages an animated white silhouette of a buffalo nuzzling its head and rolling around on the prairie like a happy dog. Downtown, a skyscraper shrinks and grows taller in tumescent response to the rhythms of capital power.

While Kent Tate's vision is marked by an abiding reverence for the immensity and beauty of the land, he continually subverts it with glitch intrusions that check any stony-eyed, romantic reveries. They remind his viewers with lowbrow cackles, that Gaia is being pestered by fools who know not what they do.

Marcus Miller
August, 2019

Marcus Miller is Director of the Gordon Shelgrove Gallery at the University of Saskatchewan where he also teaches courses in the Department of Art and Art History on modern and contemporary art. He's published art criticism for a number of journals including: Contemporary Magazine (UK), Canadian Art, BorderCrossings, BlackFlash, Art Papers, Fuse, Galleries West, and the Canadian Medical Association Journal among many others.

PENEPLAIN



PENEPLAIN by Kent Tate

Art Gallery of Swift Current
September 7 to November 3, 2019



Kent Tate is an award-winning Canadian artist/filmmaker whose work explores the dichotomy between tranquility and activity in our natural and manufactured worlds. Time, motion and stillness are intertwined through Tate's work to act like a fulcrum upon which the environmental, social and philosophical aspects of his projects are held in dynamic balance. Tate has been exhibited/screened internationally at film/new media festivals, symposiums, juried screenings/ exhibitions and solo gallery exhibitions/tours.

For seven years Tate lived in southwest Saskatchewan with his wife Cheryl. During that time, he recorded an enormous amount of footage that chronicled his impressions of this vast and beautiful region, impressions that are both actual and fictional, imagined and real. His films since that time have received international recognition with screenings in London, Paris, New York and Berlin as well as nationally recognized screenings across Canada.

In PENEPLAIN Tate doesn't employ overt political arguments; he prefers a subversive poetic strategy to express his concerns about the dilemma/crisis he believes we are in.

Organized by AGSC with curator, Kim Houghtaling the PENEPLAIN is an exhibition with ten movies: SIGHTINGS – Pressure & Release – A Tree Gets in the Way – Turbulence – Prairie Grizzly's Peneplain – The Sun Comes out at Night – Nautilus – Landing Sites – Isolated Gestures – A Lake & A Field.

The movies in this exhibition are intended to be viewed as individual scenes in a multi-channel installation, or as cinematic sequences in a single-channel movie. These movies can be experienced with sound, or in silence, continuously looped, or in a single view. For Tate this exhibition is meant to be part refuge, part laboratory; a place where the viewer can explore time and space while navigating these various separate yet coexisting worlds.

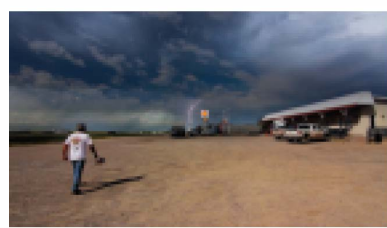
All film synopses written by Kent Tate:



SIGHTINGS | Moving Images & Music: Kent Tate | 4:12 |
During my childhood I spent countless hours daydreaming, often about beaming aboard an alien spacecraft where they would ask me about life on Earth. I would enthusiastically tell them my thoughts and observations about this or that which the space aliens always seemed to find fascinating. In retrospect I was engaging in a transference of my frustration that no one on this planet seemed particularly interested in my opinions.



A Tree Gets in the Way | Moving Images & Music: Kent Tate | 2:20 |
We are a determined species. We make plans and calculate in advance how to accomplish a goal. These calculations are not always completely accurate wherein something unanticipated can occur. On a warm spring day I saw this house on a truck being moved to an empty lot. It looked like it would take maybe a half hour to position the house. That was until its progress was prevented by a tree in the corner of the lot. This delayed the operation until the tree could be removed.



Turbulence | Moving Images & Music: Kent Tate | 5:00 |
Turbulence is a meditation on various places in the Canadian Prairies, places that are part of an ancient Precambrian seabed rebounding from the last ice age. This is a region that once had a dynamic range of plants and wildlife supporting ancient cultures that flourished here for millennia. Certain ideologies combined with well ingrained cultural practices are driving a rapid transformation of this region in ways that we may or may not yet imagine.



Pressure & Release | Moving Images & Music: Kent Tate | 8:00 |
I sometimes wonder if we are living in an age that is suspended in some kind of intractable inertia while suppressing both the past and the future, inducing a 'constant present.' This has created a fictional place where the rhythms of nature are ignored, a parallel world increasingly removed from the actual one.



Prairie Grizzly's Peneplain | Moving Images & Music: Kent Tate | 10:00 |
Whether we exert control or embrace chaos, every place has the capacity to embody our dreams, as well as our nightmares. Prairie Grizzly's Peneplain is a multi-layered story drawn from my sub-conscious response to the recognition that today we are in the midst of the Anthropocene period and the Holocene extinction.



The Sun Comes out at Night | Moving Images & Music: Kent Tate | 4:31 |
During a severe thunderstorm in Swift Current, Saskatchewan Buckminster Fuller appears, disappears, then re-appears in a gas station parking lot discussing World War I, the shift from animal/human power to the machine, as well as the law of thermodynamics and evolution.



Nautilus | Moving Images & Music: Kent Tate | 6:14 |
Unlike its close relative the octopus, the nautilus has a poor memory and yet it has managed to exist for half a billion years. Our ancestors have been on Earth for about 6 million years while modern humans evolved only recently. Humans have memories, a lot of memories. Whether real or false, these memories loom large in all that we see, hear, and feel.



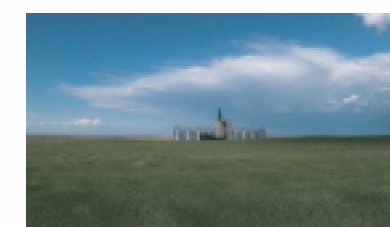
Landing Sites | Moving Images & Music: Kent Tate | 5:00 |
There are places that we seek, and there are places that find us. One can never know for sure which comes first; the seeking or the finding. Often the unexpected moment occurs, the unforeseen discovery.

Landing Sites in order of sequence: House on a truck – Car drifting on a flooded plain – Signs flying over a lake – A super storm engulfs a building – Ghost train – Lightning strikes a plywood structure – Rail yard secured by a fire fighter – Electrical discharge in central city – Outskirts of prairie dog town.



Isolated Gestures | Moving Images & Music: Kent Tate | 12:07 |
The story for me is in how light contrasts the absence of light in shaping forms within a given frame of time and space. I generally gravitate towards places that reveal the many layers of time, stimulating reflections on all the different life forms that may have existed in a particular location where I've set up my camera and tripod. This is when I imagine worlds that have passed, worlds that are present, and worlds that are yet to be.

Isolated Gestures in order of sequence: Calming is the lack of clutter – Seeking light suspended – Transmissions on a thin line – Thirst – Super Cell – Hunger – Vessel in rapture – Hiding in plain view – Invisible tension.



A Lake + A Field | Moving Images & Music: Kent Tate | 10:00 |
Filmed on location by Kent Tate on the south shore of Peed Lake, Saskatchewan and a field west of Swift Current, Saskatchewan.