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FROM GENRE TO GENRE

*Image Transactions in
Contemporary Canadian Art*

Ron Terada is a Vancouver-based artist who sometimes makes paintings (he is equally recognized for making sculptural installations and photo-based conceptual projects.) The “Jeopardy” series of paintings he executed in the years 1999–2000 have meticulously crafted coloured surfaces built up of many layers of pigment. Terada’s paintings are often referred to as “monochromes,” as if they were single-colour abstract paintings. But while the artist’s commitment to refined colouration might have resulted in abstract artworks, his paintings are instead enlivened by lines of block-like writing. *Jeopardy Painting (General Richard Montgomery...)*, from 1999, for instance, is a peacock-blue canvas with text that reads: “General Richard Montgomery was killed 31 December 1775 leading a hopeless attack on this Canadian city.” This sentence was

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lifted from the long-running television game show *Jeopardy!*: what appears on Terada's canvas is thus one of the answers that flash up momentarily on millions of TV screens, the show's well-known gimmick being that viewers (and contestants) are supposed to provide the missing question. This is an American television program, of course (even if a random clue refers to a bit of Canadian history, such as the American military's failed attempt to capture Quebec City in the eighteenth century) but the long-running program has been available in Canada for so long that it arguably no longer qualifies as an imported product. *Jeopardy!* is merely part of a familiar, everyday televisual world of long-runners and re-runs, which functions as a kind of stable ground against which newer, more specialized, or more local programs are presented.

So what do these fragments of televisual text signify when they reappear in this manner, detached from their original context and relocated within the contemplative space of modernist-looking abstract paintings? There is certainly a great deal of humour in these artworks, but there is also something uncanny about Terada's *Jeopardy* paintings. The familiar features of the game show are distorted, the ephemeral imagery acquires material heft, and in their painted incarnation, the statements now seem to emanate from somewhere else.

Terada's art practice is idiosyncratic and original in many ways, but this artist's interface with pop culture is hardly unique. In the Canadian art milieu, as is true of the international situation, contemporary artists have no qualms about their ability to borrow, quote, paraphrase, appropriate, sample, and so on from every aspect of pop culture. Given the ease with which the present-day generation of artists incorporate TV shows, games, movies, advertisements, and other such material into their artwork, it could be argued that we should now regard art as something that is embedded in an expanded field of visual culture. Visual culture might then be understood as a capacious cultural category, filled with diverse kinds of imagery and visual practices, some of which happens to be art. This definition of visual culture is rather unsatisfactory, though, from a methodological point of view. It seems to me that "visual culture" remains a worthwhile concept, but not if it simply designates a wide-open realm, where every variety of image coexists, where every kind of visual experience is possible, freely available to all. Instead, the value of visual culture as a designation is surely that it can help us negotiate the boundaries between different kinds of visual objects, practices of representation, and modes of spectatorship. Irit

Rogoff has insisted that what is at stake with visual culture is “the constitution of a new object of knowledge,” something that can only be achieved when it is understood that “the field of vision becomes a ground for contestation.”¹ Another point of view on this debate is provided by W. J. T. Mitchell, who urges us to regard “visual culture and visual images as ‘go-betweens’ in social transactions.”² These comments point to the need for new modes of analysis and interpretation, to address this cultural configuration.

Some of the most interesting art practices at present are those that join the relentless traffic in images characteristic of contemporary culture even as they make us more aware of the transformative processes at work within the realm of the visual. If the typical contemporary artist seems perfectly at ease borrowing visual elements from a music video or a tabloid newspaper, this is not to say that every instance of pop-cultural borrowing is going to be radical or even interesting. But some artworks do propose that a social/cultural transaction has been undertaken: this is evident in Terada’s series of Jeopardy paintings, I have suggested, and another striking example of this negotiation with pop culture is the work of Canadian artist Lynne Marsh, as in *Calling* (2000) a DVD projection that shows a single female figure moving through a digitally-constructed space reminiscent of computer games. *Calling*’s synthetic spatial environment has become unusually evocative, however, in a way that is reminiscent of landscape images produced within the terms of visual art. Terada’s paintings monumentalize the fleeting visual impressions of a television game show, and it is as if the artwork stages a confrontation between a TV quiz show and the legacy of abstract painting. Marsh has seemingly isolated backgrounds from the fast-paced and often violent narratives of commercially produced entertainment, and in this instance, the filmed sequence suggests a showdown between a familiar pop-culture game, and the art historical genre of landscape.

To track such negotiations or transactions across a field of visual culture, I am suggesting that the concept of genre is very productive. Genre allows us to discern specific codes, conventions, and pictorial formations within particular disciplines and cultural industries. Genre proposes a high degree of specificity, ensuring that the discussion doesn’t resort either to a transcendent category of “art,” or to a vaguely derogatory category of “pop culture.” I am admittedly approaching these artworks by Terada and Marsh as an art historian, and I am particularly interested in how an art historical genre (abstract painting/landscape art) is transformed

when it comes up against a pop-cultural genre (the quiz show/computer game). The results of these cross-disciplinary, genre-to-genre actions are compelling.

I will return to a more sustained discussion of both these artists, but it is important to recognize the genealogy of this question. Over the course of the twentieth century, the relationship between art and pop culture has arisen repeatedly in diverse artworks, practices, movements, and discussions. There is a fascinating 1920 painting entitled *Billboard*, for instance, by the renowned member of the Group of Seven, Lawren Harris, showing workers installing a large multi-coloured billboard. Here, Harris was interacting with the modern, commercialized cityscape, but this subject matter was anomalous at the time, and there was little in the way of a discursive or theoretical framework for this kind of imagery until several decades later. So despite such isolated moments, it is in the 1960s and 70s that the art/pop-culture question really heats up in Canada. In 1963, for instance, Joyce Wieland would insert a big comic-like speech bubble, containing the words “Howdy Stranger” in the middle of a painting called *Stranger in Town*. (The connotations of such things change: today this visual object is likely to remind us of the commercial “pop-ups” that punctuate every foray on the Internet.) Along with Greg Curnoe, Wieland’s early experiments with a “pop” sensibility were some of the most striking in Canada, while in Quebec, a distinctive cultural movement called “Ti-pop” included contributions from visual artists such as Pierre Ayot and Gilles Boisvert. Canadian and Quebecois pop experiments of the 1960s and 70s are unusual (as compared with contemporaneous international practices) for their degree of politicization. And so Ayot brought the strident designs of household products and commercial signage into his investigation of national identity, while Wieland clothed her feminist and ecological interventions in the colourful, plasticky language of cartoons and advertisements.

The response to this new tendency was occasionally harsh: the Canadian art historian Barry Lord, for instance, maintained that artists in Canada should actively resist the alluring pop style, and not mindlessly succumb to American cultural imperialism.³ (It is interesting, too, that he criticized not only content and subject matter, but also style, which is to say the surface appearance and aesthetic effects of pop culture.) Lord’s take on this question was informed by his particular brand of nationalist/Maoist fervour, but the apprehension he expressed about the influence of pop culture was part of a widespread discourse, within Canada and elsewhere, emanating from both right and left poles of the political spectrum.

There are vestiges here of the position taken up by the New York critic Clement Greenberg decades earlier, whereby avant-garde art was defined as a cultural arena that should defiantly resist pop or mass culture, remaining strong despite the continual threat of kitsch defilement.⁴

Outside of Canada, Umberto Eco was amongst those authors looking at pop art more sympathetically. He described how twentieth-century art could be understood as a process of translation and migration, moving between extremes of high and low culture. Eco's worst-case scenario was a dystopic kind of stasis, a levelling out of culture into a universally palatable middle-brow-ness. And so he offered the insight that "in pop art kitsch is redeemed," and that pop culture is "raised by the artist into a new state of aesthetic dignity."⁵ This vocabulary of depths and heights, of redemption and raising up, doesn't quite manage to dismantle the hierarchical attitude that locates art on top and pop culture at the bottom of a cultural continuum.

The notion that an artist condescends to notice some bit of pop culture detritus, and introduces it into the more sophisticated, more aesthetically durable category of art, remains problematic. Eco's account is indeed symptomatic of the 1960s, when there was a great deal of anxiety and hand wringing, but also much genuine debate, about the "problem" of pop culture vis-à-vis the category of art. The postmodern theorizing that arose in the 1980s was more sanguine about this relationship, and the artist's gesture of "appropriation" was now endowed with great theoretical and aesthetic complexity.⁶ Still, the prevailing postmodern attitude was that art could provide a critique of dominant systems of representation: the pop-culture fragment introduced into a work of art would accordingly be deconstructed, and its ideological pretensions laid bare. Neither of these positions seems adequate as a description of the contemporary situation: it doesn't ring true to say that the game shows and computer games referenced by Terada and Marsh are "raised... into a new state of aesthetic dignity," nor is the notion of "critique" adequate.

If we return for a moment to Wieland's *Stranger in Town* painting, it certainly seems that the cloud-like speech bubble was borrowed from comics as a kind of homage, because the artist had recognized a great pictorial invention. Neither did Wieland simply appropriate this comic-strip paradigm. Rather, the distinctive cartoon logic of the speech bubble is altered when it meets the history of painting. Wieland's painting shows additional white shapes that seem to be coming into

existence here and there throughout the painting, as if the speech bubble were an alien life form, virally reproducing and colonizing the otherwise abstracted shapes and carefully blended colours of the painting. The artwork thus stages an encounter between different modes of representation. Is this accomplished in order to assert the primacy of art as cultural form, as discourse? Or does this kind of project speak to a different attitude vis-à-vis the impact and significance of pop culture? It is interesting to consider how the legacy of pop art was regarded by Dick Hebdige, writing in 1988, which is to say, at the height of the postmodern moment. Hebdige argued that the most radical insight of pop art was that “popular culture and mass-produced imagery are worthy of consideration in their own right.”⁷ The art practices of Terada and Marsh are exemplary in this respect because it is evident that something complex and meaningful results from the confrontation with pop culture.

Ron Terada and the Televisual

Terada has gone through a lot of trouble to ensure that his language paintings can be compared to the monuments of twentieth-century abstract art; up close one can see that they are by no means slap-dash applications of a single colour, but instead, that the surfaces are built up out of many layers of paint, resulting in remarkable effects of transparent colour. It has often been noted that Terada’s paintings are structured according to a basic contrast or conflict. Christopher Brayshaw has written that the paintings “link two aesthetic forms often considered incompatible. One is the monochrome—a virtual emblem of modernist abstraction’s stately withdrawal from the world. The other is text culled from a wide variety of pop-cultural sources: Artforum gallery ads, newspaper personal ads, and high school yearbook quotations.”⁸ The idea that Terada’s artworks combine “two aesthetic forms” is not quite right, however, because the textual fragments gleaned from everyday sources are not aesthetic configurations in their own right. Indeed, it is precisely their marginality as cultural texts and their non-aesthetic identity that is so striking.

We might say that to create these works Terada reached into the back-catalogue of both twentieth-century TV shows, and painting styles. The kind of abstract painting Terada is reimagining here is monochrome painting, which is a sub-category of colour-field painting, otherwise known as post-painterly

abstraction—a movement that flourished in the U.S. as well as in Canada in the 1950s and 60s. Barnett Newman and Morris Louis are some of the key Americans, while it can be said that this form of abstraction was truly a cross-Canada phenomenon, including Guido Molinari and Yves Gaucher in Quebec, Ronald Bloore and other members of the Regina Five group, and on the West coast, Michael Morris, and Roy Kiyooka. While there are certainly differences between the individual art practices mentioned above, the colour-field project sought to eliminate recognizable imagery and figure-ground relationships, pushing aside illusions of spatiality and perspective, and crucially, dispensing with narrative content. And if these paintings are deemed “post-painterly,” this is to differentiate them from the theatrical gestures and painterly flourishes characteristic of other branches of abstract painting. Instead, the colour-field painters de-emphasized the brushstroke, the mark of the hand, and the sense of a direct link to an individual psyche. What this left was the unadulterated potency of colour, shape, and composition. In some accounts, modern art reached a climax with this permutation of abstract painting—a rectangular shape enclosing a refined blaze of colour. This is an important episode in the history of modern art in Canada, and yet it has been institutionally overshadowed, not least by the earlier Group of Seven artists. It is also true that the once-heroic history of abstract painting has been largely neglected by a contemporary art world fixated on issues of representation. But Terada’s paintings nonetheless do resonate art-historically in very Canadian terms.

To some artists and critics at the time, and for subsequent generations, that kind of pared-down monochromatic painting came to symbolize the high-modernist withdrawal from material, social, and historical realities. (It’s the other extreme from the apparent capitulation to pop culture and everyday life characteristic of the pop art impulse.) Recently, Mark Cheetham has considered the legacy of this art historical phenomenon, describing how eventually, “abstraction and especially the monochrome became, not special areas of competence, but rather experiments, infections, contagions.”⁹ This is to say that the modernist desire to achieve a “pure” form of painting was short-lived, and indeed this ambition was deliberately undermined by subsequent generations. While Cheetham doesn’t mention Terada, his book points to an ongoing dialogue with this highly charged episode in the history of twentieth-century art. And as Kitty Scott remarks about Terada’s *Jeopardy* series, “while each painting literally produces an answer, each appears to ask the ultimate riddle: What is painting?”¹⁰

The genre of abstract painting can also be regarded as a twentieth-century addition to the distribution of genres within the occidental tradition of art. Some of the most long-lived genres were landscape, portrait, and still-life, while the powerful academies of art ensured that the didactic power of the “history painting” genre was valued above all others. It should be noted, all the same, that the history of art is a history of proliferating sub-genres and hybrid genres: we can refer to Arcadian landscapes, realist landscapes, or surrealist landscapes, for instance. Richard Wrigley has remarked that while the hierarchy of the genres initially appears to be a rigid and conservative system, “yet it only endured because it was an extremely flexible framework which was capable of diverse applications.”¹¹ The advent of modern art is often described as doing away entirely with the taxonomic logic of genres, but it can be argued that genres never entirely disappeared from the artistic imagination, as a “shared syntax” and an invaluable “aesthetic code.”¹² And then, abstract painting is arguably one of the few entirely new genres to appear in the twentieth century.

In Terada’s work, the sub-genre of monochrome abstract painting is indeed subject to hybridity and contagion, and this is quite specifically due to the impact of pop culture, which has its own elaborate system of genres. Certainly, in the realm of television the concept of genre is indispensable—for scholars, but also for industry insiders as well as everyday viewers. Genre is crucial when networks come to devise programming, study the ratings, determine time slots, and so on. And as Graeme Turner comments, “For the (television) viewer, genre plays a major role in how television texts are classified, selected, and understood.”¹³ So *Jeopardy!* or any other game show cannot be understood in isolation; it takes its place amongst an intricately wrought package of televisual entertainment. Zeroing in on the specific genre in question, the skill-testing game show claims the attention of the television viewer in distinctive ways. It’s very different from watching a drama, cop show, soap opera, or sit-com, because of the absence of narrative momentum, and indeed this obviates the need for sustained attention from the television viewer; this kind of TV show is often turned on while people are doing other things, even if the program seems to be constantly interpolating the viewer. The intelligibility of Terada’s *Jeopardy* paintings depends on an everyday knowledge of televisual genres and the mode of spectatorship appropriate to this specific genre. And if all this seems somewhat obvious, William Boddy has suggested that the television quiz show is a peculiarly impenetrable cultural object: “As nearly authorless texts,

the quiz show has frustrated traditional auterist and generic methods of analysis imported from literature and film studies.”¹⁴

What the television viewer sees on his or her screen is a stage, the name of the show spelled out in enormous letters, the game show host standing behind a small podium, and three contestants lined up on one side of the stage, facing a mammoth gridded panel. Occasionally the camera retreats to show a studio audience in attendance. Day after day, year after year, the format is unchanging: parcels of information flash up on a screen, punctuated by the overdetermined glee or disappointment of the contestants. Each square on the display board initially indicates a quantity of money, and then flips over to reveal one of those signature answers that demand a winning question. At some points during the program, these texts will entirely fill the screen: white lettering with drop shadows against a brilliant blue field.

The *Jeopardy!* game show was first broadcast in 1964 (coincidentally the heyday of colour-field painting?) and is one of the most successful of all television game shows, and indeed one of the longest-running television programs more generally. The ephemerality of the originally aired show is an important factor to consider, especially now that the back-catalogue of American television is being made available to the public in the form of reissued DVDs. (I earlier used the term “back-catalogue” in relation abstract art, but this term is not commonly used in relation to works of art.) The back-catalogue implies an archive of half-forgotten material—those hit-parade songs, B-movies, and cancelled TV shows that were captivating once, but inevitably were supplanted by the next instalment of attention-grabbing sounds and pictures. At present, there is evidently a consumer base for re-issued episodes of *The Mod Squad* and for obscure recordings of soul singers from that same sixties decade, but do the thousands of hours of *Jeopardy!* programs constitute part of America’s cultural heritage and also deserve a second life? Is there a reason why these bygone pop-cultural fragments should be made to flare up now, and in a Canadian context? If the game shows and quiz shows broadcast in the 1960s, 70s, 80s, and 90s still exist in some material form, does anyone want to watch these again, or are they a definitive form of cultural waste? We might remember Nietzsche’s incisive comments about people who are unable to live fully in the present, because of their “antiquarian” attachment to the accumulated material stuff of history. The project of becoming modern subjects was undercut by this backward-looking tendency, Nietzsche suggested, “We are all suffering

from a consumptive historical fever and at least should recognize that we are afflicted with it.”¹⁵

And if these fleeting televisual moments have become historical fragments, so too do the questions themselves often refer to history. Scott Watson has remarked that Terada’s paintings demonstrate how “the reductiveness of the Jeopardy questions always lead to partial, myopic landscapes or truncated history.”¹⁶ Terada’s paintings certainly don’t impose a coherent historical narrative on these fragments, but the “pastness” of the televisual and art-historical genres does meet in the “objecthood” of the painting—and the result is a form of historical consciousness. It is crucial that Terada’s paintings are material objects that, at some point, must occupy an apartment wall, a corporate lobby... and that a gallery-full of Jeopardy paintings becomes an environment within which the visitor is immersed, materially and temporally, in an exaggerated here-and-now.

To some extent, this question of historicity coincides with the Canadian-ness of Terada’s project. Scott remarks on Terada’s “sly insertion of Canadian content” in the Jeopardy paintings.¹⁷ (Another notable example features the evolving career of hockey legend Wayne Gretzky.) This could also be said of another group of paintings created prior to the Jeopardy series. The so-called Personals paintings from 1994–95 also consist of monochromatic expanses of colour with overlaid text, but here the words are the kind of personal ad placed in a local newspaper. *Untitled* (I saw you...) 1995 is deep red with lettering that reads: “I SAW YOU at the Home Depot in Burnaby on Sunday Nov. 13th. We stood in same checkout line. You are Oriental and beautiful. You were looking at me too. Phone me at 5035.” (A small phone icon precedes the number.) This is undoubtedly Canadian content, with a site-specific dimension, for while the Home Depot hardware store in Burnaby might resemble many other big-box stores spread across the continent, only this suburban franchise was the site of this particular epiphany.

In fact we have no way of knowing whether this was an actual message intercepted by the artist, or whether he invented it in accordance with innumerable, comparable examples that can be read in any North American city’s freebie or alternative media. Either way, though, Terada calls attention to a distinctive form of expression within the contemporary urban context, one that communicates desire with telegraphic brevity, while also providing spatio-temporal coordinates in equally condensed terms: location, date, and time of encounter. And then too, the message includes a few key references to race, bodily disposition, gesture, and

glances exchanged. If the text's first appearance in a classified ad was as ephemeral as those TV-show texts, Terada's strategy of isolating and relocating the message calls attention to the pathos of one fateful moment in one person's life.

Whether or not Terada's Jeopardy paintings overtly reference Canadian subject matter, those fragments of text no longer float in a televisual no-place, banished to the margins of cultural history. Terada's painted words on canvas provide a new incarnation for words that only flashed up briefly on an illuminated screen; nor does the genre of abstract painting maintain its hermetic art-historical identity. The amalgam of quiz-show detritus and half-forgotten style of painting has resulted in a newly invigorated cultural object.

Lynne Marsh: Landscapes in Play

The question of genre arises in a different, but equally interesting way in the art practice of Lynne Marsh. In works such as *Calling* (2000), as well as in *Cowgirl & Future Stories* (1998), *Venus* (1998), and *Screeners* (2002), looped video or DVD projections show single or multiple figures, moving through digitally constructed, landscape-like spaces that are reminiscent of computer or video games. Such games are usually replete with textual instructions, prohibitions, and messages that purposefully conduct the viewer/player (along with his or her avatar) through the virtual space. In Marsh's work, it is as if the usual instructions and stories of such games have been stripped away, however, allowing the background to emerge as a newly mysterious space into which the artist then inserts herself. Here too I want to suggest that a productive cross-disciplinary mingling of genres has occurred, as the genre of action-adventure computer games comes up against the venerable art-historical genre of landscape art. In Marsh's work, this clash of genres becomes an aesthetic opportunity, allowing landscape to be re-invented yet again, as an art-form positioned at a moment of impact between technologies, historically-specific desires, and the natural world.

Marsh's work *Calling* features a mottled lunar-like environment, which is repeatedly traversed by a single female figure: this character is tall, slim, and dressed in a bright blue jumpsuit with matching headgear and goggles. In the 3.2-minute looping DVD projection, she moves towards the picture plane—that is to say, towards us—then turns and retreats towards the horizon-line that defines the rear of the fictional space. The figure repeats this movement, back and forth, back

and forth, until eventually, she collapses. As with the universe of computer games destined to be re-played ad infinitum, this apparent expiration or “death” does not really signal the end. Rather, the viewer/player is meant to learn the repertoire of gestures that make up the game—in Marsh’s case, these are limited to that crumple to the ground, a miraculous resuscitation, and a return to the paced-out measurement of the space.¹⁸ The artist hasn’t borrowed from or recreated a specific computer game here: it’s not that we can identify this mysteriously denuded locale as one of the backdrops in Atari’s *Cosmic Ark* (“the objective is to gather specimens from different planets aboard a cosmic ark, which contains the survivors from the city of Atlantis”) or the best-selling *Halo 2* (“a science fiction first-person shooter video game”).¹⁹ Nonetheless, Marsh’s invented spaces evoke the gaming world’s fantastic environments—those ever-multiplying sites of action and violence—even while the artist’s actions put into question what kind of activity/interactivity is appropriate in such imaginary visual spaces. Lesley Johnstone’s comments about other Marsh works are equally relevant here; the artist manages to create “a performative space based on a set of codified power relations.”²⁰

In discussing the process of negotiation and transaction undertaken by Marsh and Terada, it is important to bring forward the sophisticated theory of reception developed within the field of cultural studies. The emphasis on reception was meant as a corrective to the story of mass-produced cultural products thrust onto a population, and destined to be passively and unthinkingly consumed, along with whatever ideological content might lie embedded in those attractive and entertaining products. Stuart Hall’s influential essay “Encoding/Decoding,” which first appeared in 1973, introduced the idea of “negotiation” vis-à-vis the consumption of movies or television, to suggest both “the legitimacy of hegemonic definitions” but also the meaning-making that occurs “at a more restricted, situational (situated) level,”²¹ every time a new person encounters a particular pop-cultural object. And so an evening’s-worth of televisual entertainment will be imaginatively transformed, according to specific circumstances of identity-formation and social positioning, and according to the desires of those individual people on the receiving end of things. John Fiske would later argue that the most ordinary and banal of pop-culture images could become an important “site of semiotic struggle.”²² This line of thinking has been extremely relevant to questions of Canadian (or Québécois) national identity, since most of us consume vast quantities of American pop culture, even while the effects of that consumption remain unclear.

In a way, the artworks under consideration here seem to exemplify this theoretical model of reception. It could be said, in other words, that both Marsh's and Terada's artworks indicate how a single unit of pop culture can undergo a kind of metamorphosis once it comes into contact with an individual consciousness, an individual social subject. With these artworks, we can trace how some pop-cultural thing enters into the imaginative orbit of an individual consumer. The artist would therefore stand in for the viewer, reader, or consumer who appropriates that fragment of culture and adapts it to his or her own needs and desires. But this model is only partially useful, as it's not enough to claim that these artworks merely mimic or call attention to a process shared by everyone who sits back on their sofa watching tv. The crucial difference is that the artist's encounter with pop culture involves a material intervention, that the pictorial forms and historical conventions of art are called upon, and that this practice has resulted in a new cultural object. And so, while reception theory allows us to understand how tv shows and computer games can be re-narrativized, equally important is the engagement with style, medium, materiality, and genre that occurs through these art practices.

There is a distinctly Canadian resonance to Marsh's sustained attention to the question of landscape. The landscape genre in Canada has often been institutionally positioned and deployed as a means to bolster sentiments of nationhood, to consolidate a sense of collective identity. Recently, this nationalistic agenda, together with what John O'Brian calls the "predatory desire for wilderness" has been subject to much criticism.²³ Certainly many contemporary artists have been anxious to overturn some of the ideological and aesthetic conventions of traditional landscape art. And yet, the landscape genre has proven to have tremendous vitality as a cultural form, both within the world of art and across multiple sites within pop-culture and commercial entertainment. Lynne Marsh's landscape aesthetic seems to draw equally from these domains.

The adventures featured in computer games unfold against a series of constructed spaces, that can range from familiar-looking urban scenery to the more threatening and otherworldly landscapes demanded by science fiction and fantasy genres. The spatial imagery appearing on computer screens has apparently come about in a way that has little in common with the history of landscape painting or drawing; it is made not with an accumulation of brushstrokes or dabs of applied pigment, in other words, but rather through the technologized

manipulation of information. However, as computer games move towards increased realism, the pictorial qualities of the virtual worlds owe more and more to the traditional representational skills developed by artists, over many centuries. The gaming industry has indeed promoted the development of specialized cadres of artist/technicians, including “level artists,” “environment artists,” and “character modellers,” whose collective goal is to build up illusionary spaces bit by bit, according to well-established codes of realism.

Comparing Marsh’s fictive spaces to today’s state-of-the-art games, it is evident that she has not chosen to replicate the high level of finish, lighting, shadows, modelling, and texturization that might result in a convincingly realistic style. If anything, Marsh’s landscapes resemble early, primitive forms of video games, where the object-world as a whole looks suspiciously spongiform and lacking in substance.²⁴ In Marsh’s “games,” we become aware that realism itself is an especially slippery effect: an illusion of visual mastery is promised one minute, but the image hovers on the brink of unintelligibility the next. What is the aesthetic value of this partially real landscape, we might ask?

Marsh’s figures appear in landscapes that are so stripped down and elemental looking that they approximate a kind of wilderness. There’s practically nothing in the way of picturesque detail, something that might suggest the intricacies of plant or mineral life, nor is there any anecdotal evidence suggesting the historical build-up of human settlement. It is these starkly outlined figures against a landscape that so recall the cartoon-like figure-ground relationship of early computer games, but then again, these figures inhabiting rudimentary visual environments return us to the landscape genre at its most basic and structural level.

The woman who inhabits Marsh’s strange and unrealistic space moves with purpose, she seems to be looking for something or to want something, but then suddenly she expires. It is precisely this pared-down inscription of movement and desire onto a (quasi) natural environment that convincingly recalls the history of landscape art. Memorable landscape pictures manage to suggest that nature could provide an escape or refuge from collective life, that human history can be measured against the cyclical temporality of the natural world, that the changeable, ephemeral forces of nature can be provisionally stilled. If these qualities are not usually in play for the teenage kid who sends his avatar roaming and ravaging through a game, Marsh’s hybrid landscape pictures reassert those realms of experience. Marsh’s work also reminds us, though, that any incarnation of the landscape

genre can be taken seriously as a form of knowledge, positioning the natural world in relation to human history, society, and consciousness. And at the same time, the energy and exhilaration that accompany the playing of virtual games make their way back into the art-historical genre of landscape.

Both Ron Terada and Lynne Marsh make use of the game, and the idea of play, to negotiate the relationship between pop culture and visual art. I have described their artworks as image transactions, and a complex and aesthetically challenging process is indeed set in motion, while this is accomplished by mixing up the rules of the game, and the conventions of the genre(s). The artists are able to capitalize on both the historicity and flexibility of genres. Moving between one genre and another across disciplines and pictorial formations is possible because those specialized genres are made to morph and adapt. Here is the dynamic energy and inventiveness of pop culture, as well as its propensity for newness. At the same time, the emphasis on artistic forms implies tradition, monumentality, and aesthetic reflection. The hybrid objects that result from these encounters capture the very spirit of cultural change.

Notes

1. Irit Rogoff, "Studying Visual Culture," *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. N. Mirzoeff (London and New York: Routledge, 1998): 15, 22.
2. W. J. T. Mitchell, "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture," in *Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies*, ed. Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey (Clark Art Institute and Yale University Press, 2002): 243.
3. Barry Lord, *The History of Painting in Canada: Toward a People's Art* (Toronto: NC Press, 1974): 211–212.
4. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-garde and Kitsch," *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, [1939] 1961).
5. Umberto Eco, "Lowbrow Highbrow, Highbrow Lowbrow," in *Pop Art: The Critical Dialogue*, ed. Carol Anne Mahsun (Ann Arbor and London: UMI Research Press, [1971] 1989).
6. See Craig Owens, "Representation, Appropriation and Power," *Art in America* 70:5, May 1982: 9–21.
7. Dick Hebdige, "In Poor Taste: Notes on Pop," in *Modern Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Pop* (New York: ICA/London: MIT Press, 1988): 116–143.
8. Christopher Brayshaw, "Mono Maniac," *Canadian Art* 17:2 (Summer 2000): 36.
9. Mark Cheetham, *Abstract Art Against Autonomy: Infection, Resistance, and Cure Since the 60s* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 43.

10. Kitty Scott, "What's the Question?" *Ron Terada: 'What's the Question?' Jeopardy Paintings 09.25.99/10.23.99* (exhibition brochure), (New York: Real, 1999): n.p.
11. Richard Wrigley, *The Origins of French Art Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993): 286.
12. Wrigley 1993, 286. Museologically as well, the traditional genres have persisted. When London's Tate Modern opened in 2000, for instance, the thematic, non-chronological, and supposedly radical organization of the collection was surprisingly reminiscent of landscape, portraiture, still life, and so on.
13. Graeme Turner, "The Uses and Limitations of Genre," *The Television Genre Book*, ed. Glen Creeber (London: BFI Publishing, 2001): 5.
14. William Boddy, "The Quiz Show," *The Television Genre Book*, ed. Glen Creeber (London: BFI Publishing, 2001): 79–80.
15. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life* (Kessinger Publishing, 2004) (first published 1873): 2.
16. Scott Watson, "New Vancouver Modern," in *New Vancouver Modern* (Vancouver: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 1998): 24.
17. Scott 1999, n.p.
18. This description of Marsh's artwork is adapted from my own review essay: see Johanne Sloan, "Landscape Immersions: Lynne Marsh's Performative Spaces," *Art Papers*, March/April 2006. See also the exhibition catalogue.
19. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_best-selling_video_games (accessed February 2008).
20. Lesley Johnstone, "Figure, Architecture, Camera: The Strategic Modes of Lynne Marsh," *Lynne Marsh* (exhibition catalogue), (Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal and Rimouski: Musée régional de Rimouski, 2008): 56.
21. Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," *Media Studies: A Reader*, eds. Paul Marris and Sue Thornham (New York: New York University Press, 1996): 60. First published 1973.
22. John Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989): 97.
23. John O'Brian, "Wild Art History," *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007): 22.
24. See, for instance, Mark J. P. Wolf, "Abstraction in the Video Game," *The Video Game Theory Reader*, eds. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York and London: Routledge, 2003). Wolf contests the race for ever-greater realism, and argues, "abstraction represents perhaps the greatest area of potential for the video game medium," 64.