



ECOCENE

CAPPADOCIA JOURNAL OF ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES



Volume 3/Issue 1/June 2022

Ecocene Arts



A Wilderness of Smoke and Mirrors: Exploring Interstitial Spaces in the Anthropocene

Keith Langergraber

Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Vancouver, BC, Canada

keithlangergraber@hotmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0001-6798-5922

Langergraber, Keith. 2022. "A Wilderness of Smoke and Mirrors: Exploring Interstitial Spaces in the Anthropocene." *Ecocene: Cappadocia Journal of Environmental Humanities* 3, no. 1 (June): 107–14. <https://doi.org/10.46863/ecocene.76>.

Artwork/ Received: 24.03.2022 /Accepted: 31.03.2022

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.



A Wilderness of Smoke and Mirrors: Exploring Interstitial Spaces in the Anthropocene

by Keith Langergraber



About the Artist

Keith Langergraber (keithlangergraber.com) studied at the University of Victoria and the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, is a lecturer at Emily Carr University of Art + Design, Vancouver. His research-based practice draws upon disparate references that run from utopian and dystopian literature, art history and outsider subcultures to the narratives embedded in a particular site. His work has been exhibited widely in Canada and abroad over the past twenty years.

A Wilderness of Smoke and Mirrors: Exploring Interstitial Spaces in the Anthropocene

Keith Langergraber

In the evening they came out upon a mesa that overlooked all the country to the north. The sun to the west lay in a holocaust where there rose a steady column of small desert bats and to the north along the trembling perimeter of the world dust was blowing down the void like the smoke of distant armies. The crumpled butcherpaper mountains lay in sharp shadowfold under the long blue dusk and in the middle distance the glazed bed of a dry lake lay shimmering like the mare imbrium. . . .

—Cormac McCarthy

Monument 83/Holdover Peak is located along the international border of Canada and the United States. Situated in a subalpine clearing of E.C. Manning Park in southwestern British Columbia, this area is part of the shared traditional territories the Stó:lō and Similkameen First Nations. It was traditionally used as a meeting ground for fishing, hunting, and trading, and the present-day Skyline Trail was a well-used travel route. Monument 83 is notable for its location as a fire lookout site. The US Forest Service built a cupola-style log cabin in 1930, but an international border survey during the 1960's determined that the existing lookout was actually located on the Canadian side of the border, so it became the southernmost fire outlook in Canada (Redwic, n.d.). Today two fire towers exist, situated in a burnt-out region: the old lookout onto the Canadian side and the more recently built fire tower on the American side of the border, which is still used occasionally (see Fig. 1).

Taking this location as a starting point, I recently created a body of work that explores this architecture in relationship to personal utopias, extending notions of geographies that are tied to places of isolation. The artwork is based on my research about creativity, loneliness, alienation, and moral disintegration in relation to catastrophic climate change and consists of a site-specific sculptural installation that was situated at the Vancouver Art Gallery Offsite location. Other disseminations of the

artwork include an artist book, film, and sculpture piece that was exhibited at the Two Rivers Art Gallery in Prince George, BC.



Figure 1. Langergraber, Keith. *Monument 83 (Holdover Peak)*, 2020. Film still. Videography Keith Langergraber and Heather McDermid.



Figure 2. Langergraber, Keith. *The Wilderness of Mirrors*. 2021. Installation at Two Rivers Gallery. Jonathan Kyrein photo.

The Wilderness of Mirrors

The Two Rivers Gallery is in an area frequently exposed to wildfires. In the installation *The Wilderness of Mirrors* (2021), I present modeled and scaled fire tower structures in a sculptural arrangement (see Fig. 2 and 3). The structures consist of a series of kit bashed and 3D printed models and other assembled materials joined together—sometimes stacked, sometimes overlapping. Collectively, they form a complex geological landscape that furls out and around a wooden shaped platform that moves towards a larger representation of a quarter-scale recreation of the cupola cabin found at Holdover Peak. The whole is dotted with sculpted tree forms, quartz crystals, and old log cabins. Ladders and stairs wove their way through the tower structures, referencing a labyrinthian enigma of hyperobjects such as climate change (Morton 2013). The work somewhat resembles a natural history model—asymmetrical and baroque in its level of obsessive detail. The work speaks to memory and time through a debris of fallow structures, ruptures, and rises, pointing towards future calamities brought about through climate change.



Figure 3. Langergraber, Keith. *The Wilderness of Mirrors*. 2021. Detail of installation at Two Rivers Gallery. Jonathan Kyrein photo.

The film and artist book were created as a throughline to connect one art piece to another. The book resembles a narrative storyboard of the film that deviates the images into abstraction (see Fig. 4). Notions of fire are represented by gestural shapes and small hits of red personify its living movement. Within the flowing, somber landscapes, the destructive and rejuvenating properties of fire serve as a reminder that this medium recognizes few physical borders. Towers are abstracted with ladders and stairs amalgamated into architectural impossibilities, mirroring the more subdued shapes of the mountain ranges worked into the pages with ink washes. This juxtaposition personifies my uneasy relationship with the natural world in our time of climate upheaval within the Anthropocene.

In the film, the main character, Chris, (an eccentric firewatcher whose isolation begins to catch up with him as the empirical world of common sense begins to dissolve), is replaced by hyper-naturalist surreal shifts. The introduction of an alter ego in the narrative is used as a strategy to work through my own climate anxieties. In the film, I model the drawings from the illustrations in the book. As Chris begins to obsess over small glacial lake shifts, he is convinced they are moving from day to day. After his chance meeting with an American hiker, he struggles to come back to the hard truths of life, and his obsession with the elusive mountain lake pushes him further from the confines of reality. Another example of this shift is Chris's conversations through a ham radio, which he uses to report back to dispatch. Over time, his communication becomes more erratic as his obsession with the mountain lake grows. At the climax, Chris finally finds the lake high in the alpine meadows. Here the protagonist is catapulted into an indecipherable reality, oscillating between hope, fear, and despair played out through a labyrinthine structure of memories, dreams, and echoes representing the mental anxieties that will only be magnified as the devastation wrought from climate change becomes more manifest.

Straddling the borderline between geographic territories and his own symbolic landscape, the desire for an extended sojourn is weighed against the inescapable reality of a fast-approaching winter. The hand drawn 2D animation in the film depicts crossed radio signals and echoes that could be read as calls for help for what is looming on the horizon and expose how entropy affects ideological structures as well as physical ones. The book's narrative points to the fact that one cannot retreat into the wild and escape the calamities wrought upon the planet by our species.



Figure 4. Langergraber, Keith, *The Wilderness of Mirrors*. 2021. Detail (page) from artist's book. Scanned drawing with color correction by Heather McDermid.

The Dusk Meridian

Within this collected oeuvre, *The Dusk Meridian* (2022) is the largest piece that I created in relationship to my research on fires and climate change, and it was made as a poetic response to grapple with such forces. *The Dusk Meridian* (2022) is a multi-media installation that was installed at the Vancouver Art Gallery Offsite space, outdoors in downtown Vancouver, BC (see Fig. 5 and 6). It features half-scale and quarter-scale replicas of the two fire towers that are physically close but imaginatively separated as they sit on either side of the border that divides Canada and the US. Lighting features prominently in this piece, with slowly changing red and yellow light beams washing all sides of the sculptures. The nuanced lighting reflects in a mirage-like manner in the infinity pool in which the sculptures sit. The larger tower creates moody, hulking shadows that counter the surrounding abundance of the urban slick steel, glass, and concrete architectural structures of the city.

The title refers to the time/space between the setting of the sun and the onset of darkness, and is also a nod to *The Blood Meridian*, Cormac McCarthy's apocalyptic, neo-Biblical novel set on the US-Mexico border (1985). These references are reiterated in the phantasmagoric light projected on the fire towers, the pool of water on which they sit, and the wall behind them, evoking an interstitial condition somewhere between the setting of the sun and the approach of an apocalyptic wildfire. The artwork explores the

psychological and physiological responses I have to the transitional time right before nightfall, and the way my eyes function differently at this time of day and the mood that comes upon me.

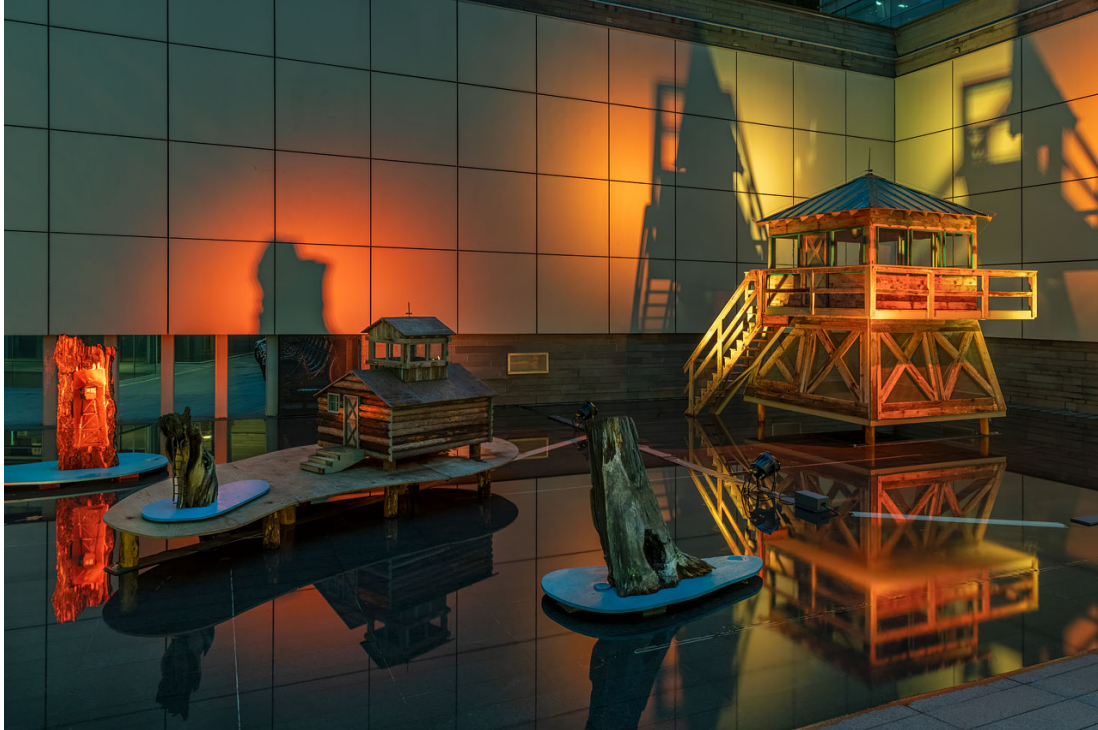


Figure 5. Langergraber, Keith. *The Dusk Meridian*. 2022. Site-specific installation at Vancouver Art Gallery Offsite. Ian Lefebvre/Vancouver Art Gallery photo.

My work serves as an allegory for crossing a point of no return, passing into darkness, where the devastation is wrought by widespread wildfires—a phenomenon unconstrained by abstractions such as national borders—becomes the norm. Thus, the fire towers of *The Dusk Meridian* (2022) can be seen as witnesses to this transition, much like barometers that measure climactic changes that have already arrived. Dusk brings with it changes in consciousness and perception and mirrors the uneasy feeling that I have encountered in this liminal landscape. This change is hypnagogic, and I feel the most at unease at this time of day in this boundary region. I feel that these shifting states mirror the universal climate anxiety we all feel within the Anthropocene.

In the process of making this installation, I wanted to complicate the tendency to romanticize landscapes and challenge preconceptions around borders. To do this, I have created a foreboding, visual atmospheric work that entices and moves the viewer beyond romanticized ideas about high alpine sunsets. Often the most beautiful sunsets come during or after a fire, or in places where there is a great deal of air pollution. To emulate

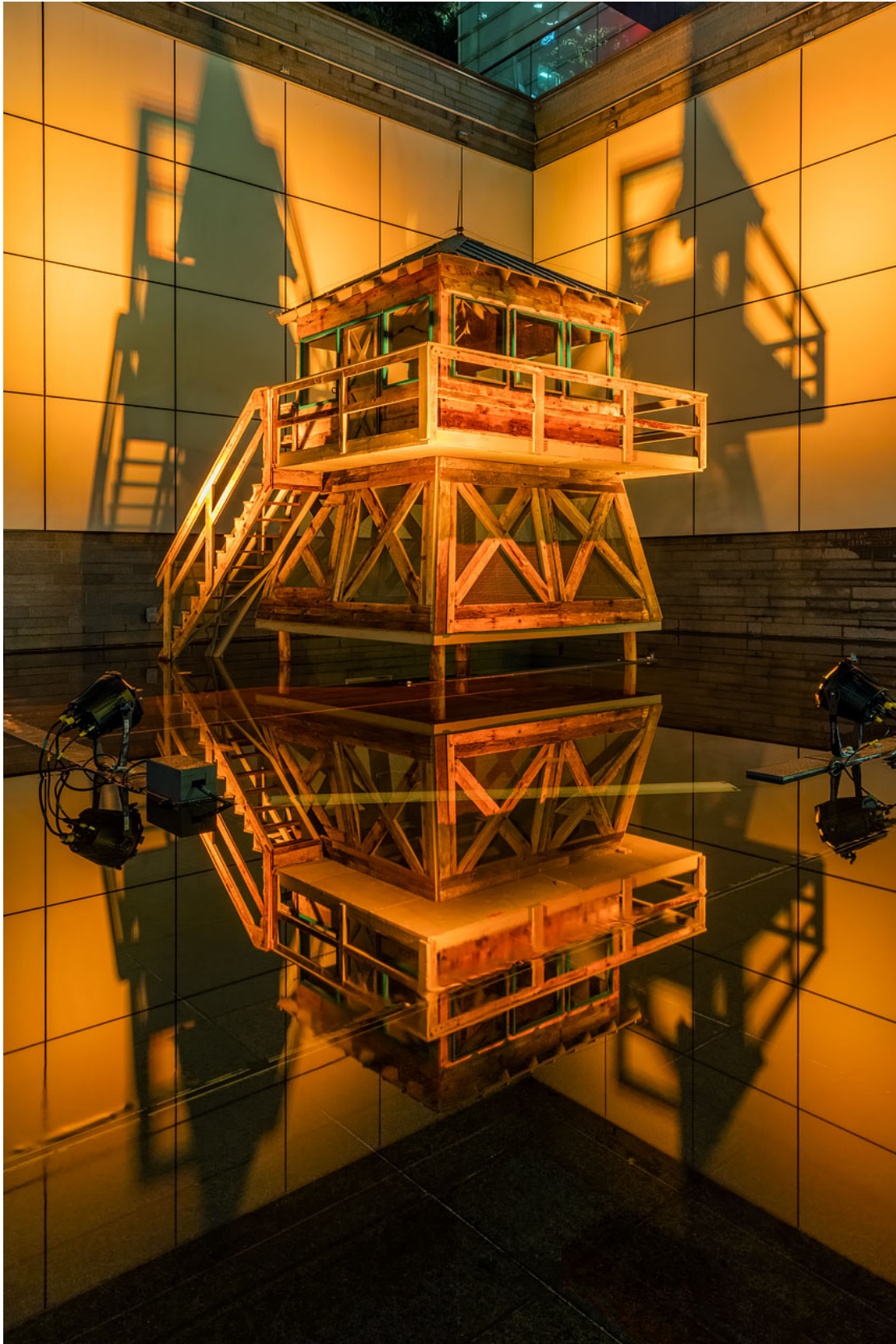


Figure 6. Langergraber, Keith. *The Dusk Meridian*. 2022. Detail of Site-specific installation at Vancouver Art Gallery Offsite. Ian Lefebvre/Vancouver Art Gallery photo.

these tensions about living in indeterminate times, I have included a variety of colder colors in the lighting structure that slowly change over time, which creates a more meditative and contemplative tone to contrast the darker notes found in the work. For example, several blueish forms represent the two high mountain tarns (small mountain lakes) that I frequently visited during my research in this area. I lit these forms to allow for pauses and for the darker aspects to emerge and to open up different temporalities in the work. This idea became more pronounced with the introduction of other elements such as the water filled infinity pond that allowed for mirage-like reflections of the light, fire towers, and stumps to transpire. This space of prismatic hybridity is contrasted with the stark, rigid geometry of the larger buildings surrounding the piece. All of these different sculptural/painterly temporalities within the piece allowed for me to have a deeper engagement with the materiality and to reflect on the vocation of the firewatcher: alone, but always on point watching for wisping drifts of smoke on a distant horizon.

References

- McCarthy, Cormac. [1985] 1992. *The Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West*. New York: Vintage International.
- Morton, Timothy. 2013. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Redwic. n.d. "Monument 83 Peak (Holdover Peak)." SummitPost. Accessed March 11, 2022. <https://www.summitpost.org/monument-83-peak-holdover-peak/917136>.