

Western Drift - Drifting West – David Pirrie’s Terrible Objects



In June 2004 David Pirrie showed paintings titled Subduction Zone at Verge Gallery. Pirrie's title for that previous body of work references the geological processes by which material is cyclically uplifted and pushed back down to the earth's mantle, some 700 kilometers below the surface. Subduction is called the earth's mixmaster; it is important to us in Vancouver because the land on which you are now standing is an unstable subduction zone. Subduction relates to Pirrie's new works, as well as to the landscape that you see outside the window here at SFU.

The history of mountain pictures goes back several millennia, especially in Chinese art. In European picture-making the mountain problematic has been with us since the Renaissance, with Leonardo's mountain backdrops being some of the most stunning, if idealized geological structures ever painted. The late-18th century sublime introduced the idea that the horrors of the mountain environment could also be enticingly beautiful. By the 1880s Michelet had published his book *The Mountain* and Cézanne wrestled with 'his' mountain in his many depictions of Mount Ste.-Victoire.



Painting landscape, whether mountainous or not, has become something of a lost art in British Columbia. In 1985 we had a hint of a renaissance in BC landscape painting – I am thinking of Vicky Marshall, Phillippe Raphenal and even Julie Andreyev, who has a landscape work hanging in this atrium. But by 1995, speculative, risk-taking depictions of the BC landscape had largely deserted painting and migrated to the world of contemporary photography. David Pirrie has the mountain painting 'territory' virtually to himself, along with, notably, Arnold Shives, who, like Pirrie, is a serious climber.

David Pirrie's paintings address the idea of the mountain in a systematic way by separating individual mountain units from their surrounding context. In the painting Mt. Shuksan, the mountain's geology is rendered as a purplish glow. In The Spickard Group, we see an expanse in which a single person, had Pirrie chosen to depict one, would be a speck much smaller than the micro-humans seen in, say, the photographs of Andreas Gursky from a decade ago. Like the paintings, Pirrie's drawings are also a form of cataloguing, a type of technical meditation on topography and mapping. The result of this strategy, I would suggest, is the first critical and formal breakthrough in picturing Canadian mountains since Lawren Harris's paintings of the Rockies done between 1925 and 1935. Pirrie is positing that isolated mountains in a monochrome field will provide insight into these land masses and our relationship to them.

Pirrie's own words best describe his involvement with mountains: "For the past three years I have taken specific mountain peaks and rendered them in a form of

captured stasis, with allusions to geological breakdown, problems of formal composition, spent violence and geology." This instability combined with stasis is referenced by invoking subduction zones and geological breakdowns, through which Pirrie reminds us that we are living on borrowed time here on the BC coast, seismically speaking.

The pursuit of mountains is part of what the mountain theorist Robert MacFarlane calls the "pursuit of fear." Extracting the once-feared mountains from their physical context, Pirrie converts mountain units into objects for study, floating them in a monochrome sea, which is what these mountains were doing 100 million years ago.

When Edmund Burke published *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* in 1757, he wrote what is still the best summary of the relation between fear and pleasure: "...that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime, that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling." Kant refined this a few years later by seeing that the mind's feeling of the sublime depended on the tension created by attraction and repulsion operating simultaneously.

Burke's "terrible objects" are not terrible in the contemporary sense; rather, we might reconsider mountaineering as a terroriste activity - harmless, but one that seeks that source of the sublime, that combination of admiration and fear that makes mountain recreation the unforgettable experience that it is.

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