

Alex McLeod

PRISMATIC PLANES & EVERGREEN

Alex McLeod: Prismatic Planes and Evergreen

BY RACHEL ROSENFELD LAFO

Artist's Statement, 2014

BY ALEX MCLEOD



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Rachel Rosenfield Lafo, 2014

Toronto-based artist Alex McLeod is one of a growing number of contemporary artists who have moved away from more traditional art making practices to work exclusively in the digital realm. After graduating from the Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD) in 2007 with a focus on drawing and painting, McLeod combined skills he learned at school with self-taught proficiency in digital effects software programs¹ to invent fantastical, *hyperreal* worlds that he outputs as photographic prints, animations, interactive videos, and more recently sculptures.

Alex McLeod
Evergreen, 2011 (detail)

chromogenic print from digital file
on photographic paper
(101 x 152 cm)
Gift of the Artist
SAG 2013.05.02

Photograph courtesy of the Artist

McLeod's computer-generated land and cityscapes are immersive and seductive environments, sci-fi parallel universes that exist in an unidentifiable time and space, magical places that are subject to different laws of nature. Populated with the kinds of fake trees and miniaturized landscape elements found in model train sets or dioramas, with cartoony clouds resembling plastic bubbles, the scenes are rendered in vibrant colours with pulsating lighting effects or with reduced palettes dominated by abstract patterns. The buildings in the cities are a strange mix of architecture styles; some reference historical edifices while others are futuristic, as if we have wandered into a time warp. But where are the people in these complex, densely packed worlds? Do the scenes represent future visions of abandoned universes whose inhabitants have perished due to

environmental disasters, or the rebirth of civilizations not yet colonized? We are left to draw our own conclusions.

Despite the patent artificiality of their components McLeod's images are so convincingly three-dimensional they appear to have been assembled with props and then photographed, rather than constructed with digital rendering technology and launched from the mind of the artist and the depths of cyberspace.

In interviews McLeod often explains that his work is about the transformation of matter and themes of death and rebirth,² of worlds existing outside of time and space. These preoccupations locate his work within a worldwide trend in contemporary visual art and literature that explores "...topics of utopia,



Alex McLeod, *Prismatic Planes*, 2011, digital animation (3 min. 20 sec.) Gift of the Artist SAG 2013.05.01
Video still courtesy of the Artist.

dystopia and our changing relationship with natural and built environments.” These subjects have been the focus of numerous exhibitions in recent years, such as *After Nature*, held at the New Museum in New York in 2008,³ and many others.⁴ McLeod’s post-apocalyptic architectural and landscape fantasies and utopic structures also bear a relationship to the surreal fictional landscapes of contemporary Toronto artists like Luke Painter and Tristram Lansdowne, friends and fellow OCAD graduates.

McLeod’s imaginative creations clearly share a narrative sensibility with the computer and video games he played while growing up,⁵ while also deriving inspiration from sources such as industrial and environmental design, science fiction, Japanese Anime, antique etchings, and romantic landscape paintings. The artist’s pop-culture infused take on reality fits with a postmodern definition of reality as a construction of the mind reliant on individual interpretation rather than on a verifiable truth. His hyperreal worlds are thus more “real” than lifelike because they do not attempt to reproduce reality, but instead exaggerate it. This interpretation of hyperreality corresponds with the philosopher Umberto Eco’s use of the term in his comparison of Disneyland with a wax museum. Disneyland, from Eco’s point of view, is more hyperrealistic because the wax museum “...still tries to make us believe that what we are seeing reproduces reality absolutely, whereas Disneyland makes it clear that within its magical enclosure it is fantasy that is reproduced.”⁶ Similarly, when McLeod was asked why he draws attention to the artifice of his landscape elements, such as making his clouds look like they hang from strings, he responded, “Since the work is already artificial I thought it would be funny to embrace the artifice of it by creating recreations of real things.”⁷

The digital animation *Prismatic Planes* and photographic print *Evergreen* were both included in the 2013 exhibition *The future is already here: Alex McLeod and Brendan Tang*, a two-person show at the Surrey Art Gallery,⁸ that featured individual work by each artist as well as a collaborative augmented reality installation, *Lovechild*. *Prismatic Planes*, 2011, presents a mesmerizing and unsettling journey through a strange and densely structured city filled with barren trees, reflective skyscrapers, biospheres, colonnaded buildings, bulbous clouds, and much more. The jerky movement, shifting planes, flickering lights and pulsing electronic music by Emily Power (Thanh Phu and Greg Greber) create a heightened sense of anticipation and pre-apocalyptic anxiety that presages some unknown momentous event. The cave-like atmosphere of darkness illuminated sporadically by flashes of light and hanging stalactite-like forms imply that we might actually be in an underground city or on another planet. The beautiful and strange uninhabited city in *Prismatic Planes* takes its place among the many invented alternate worlds of science fiction literature and film, such as those depicted in Arthur C. Clarke’s Rama series.⁹

At first glance the photograph *Evergreen* looks like a charming toy land, replete with miniature trees and buildings, cartoon clouds, and bright colours. Yet here too, if we look more closely, there seems to be an underlying sense of unease. Fallen, leafless trees are scattered throughout the landscape, suggesting that all is not right in this empty world. As much as McLeod’s images delight us with their hypnotizing illusions, they also serve as cautionary tales, gently reminding us that our environment won’t be “evergreen” unless we take actions to save it.

Born in Scarborough, Ontario in 1984, McLeod attended George Brown College, Toronto before graduating from OCAD. He successfully straddles the worlds of fine art, advertising, and commercial illustration, exhibiting in museums, and public and commercial galleries, while at the same time working for clients such as Toyota and Condé Nast. Through an active web and social media presence McLeod has established a wide fan base. He has exhibited worldwide at MASS MoCA in North Adams, MA, and in galleries in Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Calgary, Surrey, BC, New York, Miami, Philadelphia, Chicago, Denver, San Jose, Japan, Barcelona, Rio De

Janeiro, Sao Paulo, and New Zealand. His artwork is represented by Angell Gallery in Toronto and Galerie Trois Points in Montreal. McLeod has received awards from the Toronto Arts Council and has works in public collections including the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (MOCCA), Toronto and BMO Financial Group. Along with artists Daniel Barrow, Barry Doupé, Amy Lockhart, Lorna Mills and Mark Pellegrino, McLeod was commissioned by the Toronto Animated Image Society in 2012 to create an animated experimental video for the exhibition *Hello Amiga*.



Alex McLeod, *Evergreen*, 2011, chromogenic print from digital file on photographic paper (101 x 152 cm) Gift of the Artist
SAG 2013.05.01 Photograph courtesy of the Artist.

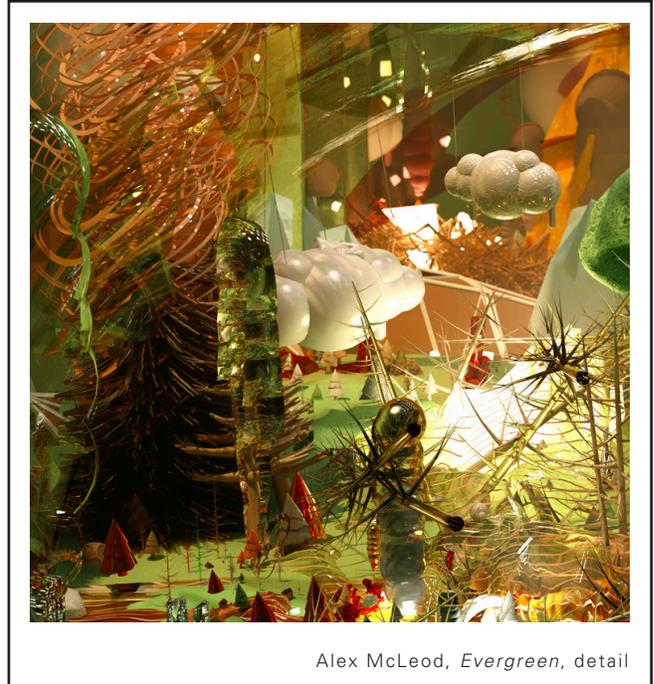
NOTES:

1. McLeod has listed some of the programs he uses in various interviews. See, for example, *Interview: Alex McLeod*, by Gareth Brown-Jowett for The Ministry of Artistic Affairs, August 15, 2011 and <http://ministryofartisticaffairs.com/blog/interview-alex-mcleod/>
2. Ibid.
3. Laura McLean, "Futurism Now: Structure and Process in Contemporary Art." *Arena Journal*, No. 35/36, 2011 [247]-264. http://www.academia.edu/2096607/Futurism_Now_Structure_and_Process_in_Contemporary_Art
4. Other examples include *Utopia/Dystopia: The photographs of Geoffrey James*, at the National Gallery of Canada in 2008, *Utopia/Dystopia* at the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts in Grand Rapids, Michigan in 2012, and *From Nowhere: Utopian and Dystopian Visions of our Past, Present, and Future* at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto in 2013.
5. For examples of computer games that have influenced McLeod see Kevin Holmes, "User Preferences: A Tech Q&A with Alex McLeod, the creators project, October 19, 2011, <http://thecreatorsproject.vice.com/blog/user-preferences-a-tech-qa-with-alex-mcleod>
6. Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, Harcourt Brace & Company, New York, 1986, p. 43.
7. "Hyperrealistic 3D Landscape," *Computer Arts*, UK, October 12, 2011, p. 14.
8. The exhibition was accompanied by a text, *The future is already here: Alex McLeod and Brendan Tang*, by Rachel Rosenfield Lafo, <http://www.surrey.ca/files/FutureAlreadyHereBrochure.pdf>
9. McLeod in particular acknowledges the video game RAMA that is based on Arthur Clarke's novel *Rendezvous with Rama*. See "Artist Profile: Alex McLeod," *NOW magazine*, Toronto, June 26, 2009, <http://www.nowtoronto.com/guides/pride/2009/story.cfm?content=170153>

Artist's Statement (2014)

Alex McLeod

Recalling the wide-open vistas of Romantic landscape painting while at the same time staging otherworldly dystopias, these CGI images act as hybrid spaces that imply an almost infinite recombination of the past and present, the real and virtual. Beneath their seductively polished surfaces, of glimmering fortresses and floating geometric abstractions, lies a haunting stillness that comes forth in the aftermath of cataclysmic events. And yet, from the twilight of devastation lies possibilities for hope and rebirth in our own digital milieu.



Alex McLeod, *Evergreen*, detail

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