

Philippe Raphanel

VIEW

Philippe Raphanel: *View*, 1990

BY ANN ROSENBERG

Artist's Statement (1994)

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By Ann Rosenberg, 1998

Philippe Raphanel's *View* is immediately recognizable as an image of West Coast terrain seen through a window that overlooks rolling farmlands, wind-sculpted firs, the ocean and distant mountains. In the middle of the composition, a pervasive orange glow suggests a flash of brightness during a late afternoon storm; a time confirmed by the long shadows that the fence posts cast on verdant slopes.

As the viewer moves in to inspect the landscape, it becomes more menacing. The aurora of haze - so rosy and welcoming from afar - is transformed into a

Philippe Raphanel
View, 1990

graphite and pastel on Arches paper
(127 x 182.8 cm)
SAG 1994.08.01
gift of the Artist

Photograph by Cameron Heryet

pall of sulfuric smog that shrouds the waters beneath and chokes off the sun's penetrating light. Its unhealthy hue sours the greens of trees and grass. The tortured pines and precipitous hills that circle round the storm's calm centre threaten to smash the window and its quavering sash through centrifugal force.

Raphanel immigrated to Canada from France in 1981, and in 1986 he obtained the use of a studio on Hornby Island. According to the artist's statement, all of his art produced at this beautiful location is marked by

an "awareness of the impact similar environments had exerted on other artists of the past, particularly Emily Carr." It is not surprising that *View*, Raphanel's last large-scale drawing of "Hornby Island scenery," completed in 1990, bears some resemblance to Carr's late paintings of British Columbia shores.¹

As well as suggesting Carr's approach to landscape, *View* reverberates with European associations. It is reminiscent of Joseph Mallard William Turner's apocalyptic visions of manmade devices (sailing vessels, steam-driven trains and architectural



Philippe Raphanel, *View*, 1990, graphite and pastels on Arches paper (127 x 182.8 cm) SAG 1994.08.01 Gift of the Artist. Photograph by Cameron Heryet.

monuments) dissolving in the embrace of tempests, mists and fire.² Raphanel's intention to present his audience with a "whirling feeling that land, water and air are all part of a complex interconnection" is an objective that Turner and other artists associated with Romanticism would understand.³ But perhaps only a troubled soul like Caspar David Friedrich (painter of terrifying sunsets and winter graveyards full of angst-ridden mourners, tombstones and over-pruned oaks) might have a true appreciation of *View's* eerie light.

View also invites comparison with landscapes by other Canadian art history figures, including Tom Thomson and several Group of Seven painters who established the Canadian wilderness as a national subject at the beginning of this century.⁴ The thrashing trees depicted in Raphanel's drawing contrast sharply with a still, stolid pine in Thompson's *The West Wind*, while the undulant hills in the foreground of *View* recall the pastures A.Y. Jackson painted so obsessively. Like the huge canvases of desolate sites composed by J.E.H. MacDonald, Arthur Lismer and Frederick Varley, the Hornby Island landscape projects a powerful mood and the agony experienced by the earth as the storm drives the fence posts more deeply into her flesh.

Raphanel takes pains to ensure that spectators will ride on the waves of many sensations and will have a variety of associative responses triggered by the landscape and its numerous elements. At the simplest level, the fence posts are a realistic element in the Hornby Island scene. But these same posts also recall the prehistoric standing stones of Arelsburg and Brittany, coffin nails, railway spikes, thorns, bee stings and the numbers on a sundial. Likewise, Raphanel encourages us to see his storm-ravished trees as part of the real-world site *View* describes and as mourners who have let their hair down and whirl

on the edge of the hills like women in paroxysms of grief. Even a single slash of grey pastel has the ability to call for a number of interpretations. Is it a gust of wind or a splash of rain or the sheen of glass, or an abstract, painterly gesture?⁵

View could serve as an illustration for the dictionary definition of pathetic fallacy; a term used to describe art concerned with transitory and interrelated phenomena that arouse feelings (pathos) and present believable appearances that may have no basis in fact.

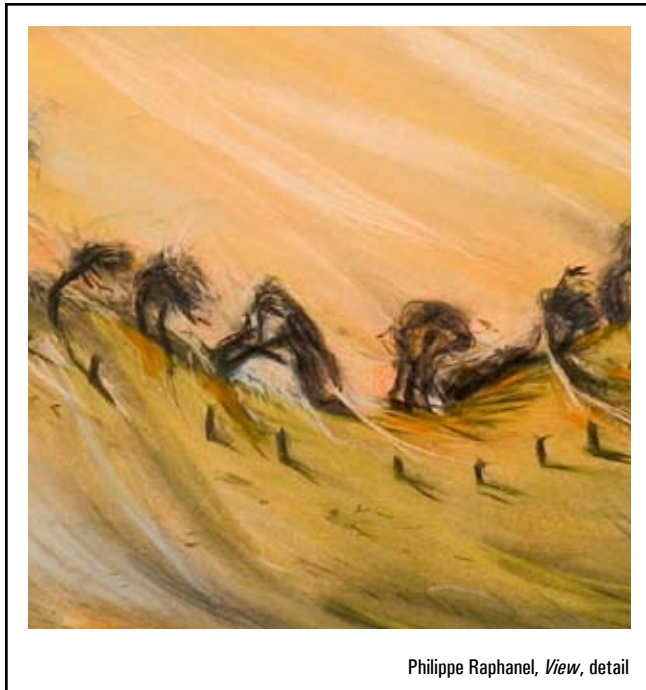
Raphanel's affinity with Romanticism, however, is an acknowledged fact. The canvases he presented in *The Young Romantics* show at the Vancouver Art Gallery (1985) and in his first solo show at the Diane Farris Gallery (1986) were broadly painted, emotion-arousing works that refer back to the arts of the Romantic era.⁶

The fallen logs and burnt stumps that preoccupied him at this time could be considered New World parallels to the dead and dying victims depicted in



Philippe Raphanel, *View*, detail

the foreground of *Massacre at Chios*, a large-scale Old World painting by the French Romantic Eugène Delacroix, an artist Raphanel admires. The chainsaws that are a common motif in Raphanel's work might also be seen as equivalents of the cannon that wreaks havoc on nature and nature's beings in the middle of the battle on the plains of Chios.



Philippe Raphanel, *View*, detail

As Mark Harris observes in a 1986 *Vanguard* article about the Diane Farris exhibit, Raphanel's cut logs are "never just wood, they are flesh" presented as "amputations" or "phalluses." To Harris, the wind-blasted trees in *Pathways 1 & 2* shake their leaves "like weapons in a never-ending war against the elements," suggesting that the rape of the land and the brutal dismemberment of trees has become the modern, ecologically significant grand subject for Raphanel.⁷

View — a drawing executed several years after the works Harris describes — soothes the viewer from afar with an impression of beauty and hope. At first

glance the landscape appears to be as idyllic as the panoramic vista in *The Embarkation for Cythera*, a work by Jean-Antoine Watteau, another French artist admired by Raphanel. And while no lords and ladies saunter in Raphanel's *View*, there is the same sensation-evoking landscape in his storm-abused, man-abused West Coast paradise.

Notes

1. Emily Carr (1871-1945) is a highly respected Canadian artist and writer who was born in Victoria, BC and studied art as a young adult in England and France. She first rose to prominence when her art was included in the National Gallery of Canada's Exhibition of West Coast Indian Art in 1927, the year she cemented her professional friendship with Lawren Harris, a founder of the Group of Seven. Her art is on permanent display at the Vancouver Art Gallery and is included in many important public collections. Many British Columbia artists have been influenced by her work (for example, Jack Shadbolt, Laurie Papou and Philippe Raphanel). Raphanel's *View* pays homage to the spirit and content of the vaporous renditions of West Coast forests and seashores Carr produced in the last decade of her life.
2. Joseph Mallard William Turner (1775-1851) was an English artist who created landscapes that, according to John Canaday (Mainstreams of Modern Art Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, N.Y., 1981 p.93), became purified to the point of "pure abstraction." In his late Romantic landscapes the elements of air, water and fire virtually consumed the representational elements in the scene and the canvas became a tempest of forms and colours that, in themselves, were emotionally expressive. A similar sense of turmoil, flux and atmosphere is apparent in Philippe Raphanel's Turner-esque vision of Hornby Island in *View*.
3. Romanticism: a mode of art and literature characterized by mystical passionate and self-expressive qualities in the visual arts. Caspar David Friedrich, Joseph Mallord Turner and Eugene Delacroix are 19th century painters associated with the movement. Aspects

of romanticism have influenced a host of later styles and artists including Impressionism, Expressionism, the Group of Seven and in British Columbia, Emily Carr and the Young Romantics.

4. The Group of Seven: an early 20th century Toronto-based art movement that did much to define and create a national style of landscape which in its earliest form was highly influenced by Impressionist and Expressionist responses to nature. One of its guiding lights was Tom Thomson, creator of *The West Wind* who died in 1917 before the group was officially formed in 1920. The most influential, long-surviving member of the Group of Seven was Lawren Harris who helped promote the art of Emily Carr long before he moved to Vancouver in 1942. Before his death in 1970, his works were almost purely abstract celebrations of spiritual light. In 1920 the Group of Seven included Lawren Harris, Franklin Carmichael, Frank Johnston, A.Y. Jackson, J.E.H. MacDonald, Arthur Lismer and Frederick H. Varley.

5. Painterly: an adjective that can be used to describe technical effects in other mediums (pencil, pastel, clay, and even music) where the “strokes” or “elements” are seemingly spontaneous and individually discernible.

6. *The Young Romantics* was an exhibition curated by Scott Watson for the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1985. Philippe Raphanel, Vicky Marshall, Atilla Richard Lucacs Derek Root, Angela Grossmann, Charles Rhea and Graham Gillmore, Young artists at the time of the exhibit were producing works that were characterized by the broad, gestural painting strokes and emotional response to subject matter one associates with 19th Century practitioners in the Romantic Movement.

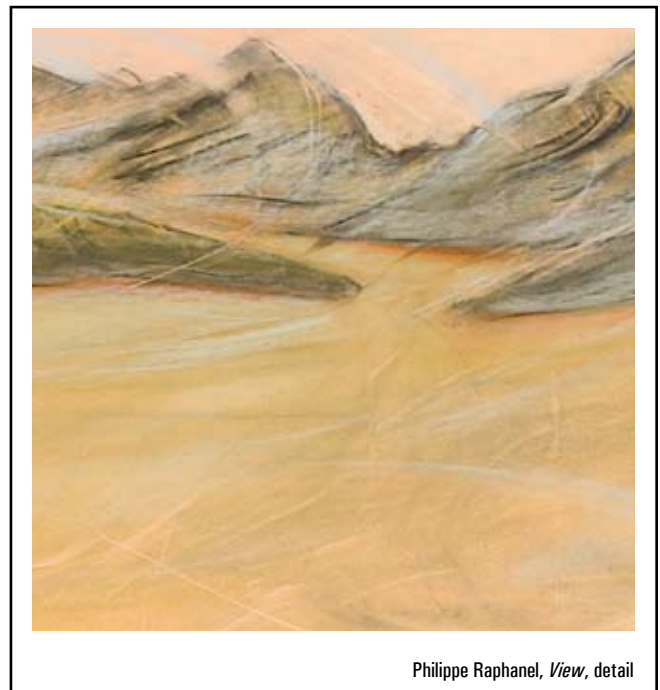
7. Harris, Mark. “Philippe Raphanel.” *Vanguard*. 15:3 (Summer, 1986) p. 45-6.

Artist's Statement (1994)

View (1990)

In 1986, I moved my studio from Vancouver to Hornby Island B.C. in a quest to develop a deeper understanding of what so profoundly affected me during my first visit to the west coast of Canada in 1976. I moved to British Columbia in 1981. From 1986 to 1990 I produced all my work in the isolation of this beautiful island, being very aware of the impact similar environments have had on artists of the past and particularly Emily Carr. Having come from France, where I always had an interest for the works of artists from the Baroque and Romantic periods (Fragonard, Watteau, Delacroix), I found that the exaggerated abundance and eroticism in those artists works was not that removed from the sensuality provided by British Columbia "wilderness". I also increasingly found that the feeling of abundance in nature was transforming. I then decided to include elements like telephone poles, garden and architectural structures, which reflect the penetration of human activities upon the "body" of nature.

View was the last large scale drawing I produced depicting Hornby Island scenery, looking south from a bluff to a farmland and to Vancouver Island in the background. My intention in this drawing was to present the viewers with a whirling feeling that land, trees, water and air are all part of a complex interconnection and that none of these elements can be viewed without taking into consideration the others.



Philippe Raphanel, *View*, detail

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