

The Natural World That Remains to be Seen (and Experienced)

With her project *Orford: Territoire Insulaire / Orford: Insular Territory*, artist Geneviève Chevalier engages the viewer in a conversation about our collective and individual experiences of nature. By focusing her investigations on a particular place, her local provincial park, Chevalier asks us to reflect on how history, politics, and philosophy have shaped the way we use and experience the landscape. Without placing any value judgement on our interactions with “wilderness,” a term that has come to connote both a wasteland and a place for recreation that exists outside of everyday human culture, *Orford* questions the conceptual boundaries we have placed around the natural world. Chevalier’s multi-sensory and multi-disciplinary project opens up this simplified understanding by demonstrating how much our cultural attitudes and physical interactions with nature have shaped its very existence.

The nucleus of Chevalier’s project is Parc national du Mont-Orford, a protected site that is part of the Parcs Québec or la Société des établissements de plein air du Québec network, located in the Eastern Townships at the foothills of the Appalachian Mountain chain. A highly developed and much-used park with a rich history, Mont Orford was established in 1938 through the cooperation of local and provincial governments who worked together to purchase land for the public commons. From the hiking trails to the golf course, the lakefront where visitors swim and boat to the cycling paths, this recreation park offers many types of natural and outdoor activities. It is also an important point of exchange for people of the region, whether Anglophone, Francophone or Allophone, a place where the sometimes factious issues of language and identity can become secondary to the enjoyment of the outdoors. Cultural and artistic events take place within the park: the Orford Arts Centre offers a classical music academy, a summer festival, and exhibition spaces for visual artists. The importance of this park as a cultural and democratic institution cannot be clearer: Mont Orford represents a natural and heritage landscape, a place of importance both for its environmental value and cultural contributions to the community, and for its historic value as a signifier of social and political cohesion.

A recent threat to this protected and invaluable recreational space inspired and informs Chevalier’s *Orford*. In 2006, a plan was revealed by the provincial Liberals under Jean Charest to sell 459 hectares from the park for a large condo development and to divest the park of its publicly-owned ski hill and golf course. A five-year battle ensued between a coalition of environmental and community activists (organized as SOS Parc Orford) and the government, which led to the restoration of Park Mont Orford’s protected status in 2010. Chevalier’s artistic response to the near-dissolution of her local provincial park began in that year, resulting in a thought-provoking meditation on the importance of this natural site to her community, an exploration that takes a quasi-ethnographic look at how people enjoy and experience the landscape.

Bringing together photography and video with archival material and an audio recording, *Orford* uses different documentary formats to explore the various landscapes that make up Mont Orford Park. In the multi-channel video projection that dominates the project, Chevalier collages footage of visitors using and moving in the landscape — driving, paddling, sailing, and swimming. The sense of kinetic action and activity in the park is exaggerated by the composition of the video, which cuts from two to three channels, each a stream of images made up of multiple clips that randomly generate different combinations. The soundtrack keeps a strict beat, a pounding of waves, feet, paddles, and car wheels that emphasizes the almost frenetic movement of people through the park’s various thoroughfares and spaces. Presented alongside this video is a series of digital photographs of the park that at first glance appear as beautiful and pastoral impressions of Mont Orford’s natural splendour. Yet in each image we can find aspects of human occupation and usage. Sometimes these are deliberately added by the artist, as when she layers a topographical map over the image of one of the park’s peaks. At other times these cultural traces, a golf flag or a road marker, are present as a result of human alterations made to the landscape. These little reminders of how humans have represented and shaped the natural world are complemented by a display of archival documents and press clippings from the recent debates around preserving the park’s non-commercial status. Finally, Chevalier includes an audio recording of a talk by art historian and landscape theorist Benedict Fullalove, who was invited to give a public presentation at the park on the cultural history of wilderness.

Through this series of visual, auditory, and material interactions within the gallery space, Chevalier asks the viewer to consider the notion of art as a process-based form of research-creation. *Orford* reflects Chevalier’s deep interest in creating art that encourages the viewer to interact with various forms of representation, from ephemeral documents and digital recordings to more permanent objects of art, such as photographs. Chevalier’s creative process was similarly constructive and process-driven. She explored the park as a visitor, participated in park-organized activities, and organized a public hike as a way to open up the project to collaborative information gathering. As a result, *Orford* exists as an experiential whole that combines more traditional art forms with participatory art-making methods and exhibiting techniques. Chevalier’s art practice reflects the notion that our interactions with both nature and art have similar roots: each requires an open mind and a spirit of inquiry while fundamentally being grounded in a physical experience that takes place in time and space.

Orford not only engages the viewer through visual and theoretical considerations of landscape, but also focuses on current questions about how nature and wilderness are assigned worth and how much we are willing to protect them. While there are many ways to enjoy the outdoors — from the more sedate recreational practices of the day-tripping urbanite to the hardy explorations of wilderness backpackers — spending time in the landscape remains a challenge for many, especially for those of us without access to protected spaces. By making interaction with the community that so vehemently fought for Mont Orford Park part of her art-making process, Chevalier draws attention to the importance of community engagement in protecting and cultivating our existing natural places. At the same time, she points to the way that landscapes are shaped by their use and local needs, often at the expense of the idea of “pristine” wilderness. In a larger sense, *Orford: Territoire Insulaire / Orford: Insular Territory* asks the viewer to consider how nature remains an essential part of our sense of community and place, an important consideration today as we continue to put our natural world at risk.

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