

UTOPOS

September 11 – October 10, 2020

Callum Monteith

Alex Tedlie-Stursberg

Curated by Andrea Valentine-Lewis

If this is paradise I wish I had a lawnmower – Talking Heads, 1988

In 1516, Saint Thomas More wrote a socio-political satire called *Utopia*, which was split into two parts: in the first, More remarks on life under Henry VIII's controversial reign, and the second traces the accounts of traveler and philosopher Raphael Hythloday – particularly his five years spent on the artificial island of Utopia. Forgetting to ask where exactly the island is located on the then-developing Map of the World, More can only situate Utopia in the ballpark of the “New World,” akin to the South American voyages undertaken by Amerigo Vespucci around the same time. What made Utopia so enticing to More was not its geographical terrain but its radical political system that revealed a potential alternative to Henry VIII's England; in Utopia, every man (and woman) laboured and had more spare time, education was prioritized, and politicians were elected – not brought into power by nepotism; more spectacularly, no Utopian held private possessions or property which seemed to result in lesser crime and thus, lesser need for prosecution. More's Utopianism – at least following those particular characteristics – does not seem like a completely unwarranted proposal considering North America's current political climate.

- But could it actually exist? -

The title for this exhibition stems from the Greek term, *Ou-topos*: *Ou* (not) and *Topos* (a place); the term *Utopos* holds two other meanings: “the good place” and, simultaneously, “the place that cannot be.” In their work, Callum Monteith and Alex Tedlie-Stursberg explore the notion that utopianism – in its colloquial meaning and its associated ideologies – can only really exist within the confines of the imagination, because in reality, humans rarely satiate; utopian visions allow us to endure the present by dreaming of substitute modes of life (read: desire). Today, we can consider fantasy and science fiction as Utopia's offspring – modes that are attractive and enticing but do not exist without

aliens, wicked witches, technological malfunctions, flying meteorites, in addition to social and political turmoil. Monteith's paintings and Stursberg's sculptures work to abstract the unattainable Utopia by residing within intermediary spaces: between nature and culture and between the organic and the artificial.

- Callum Monteith –

Monteith (b. 1988) lives and works in Glasgow where he practices mainly painting and photography. His primary interest is in the way that forms and colours together affect optical perception: not only in the way his forms taper and squish out similarly to the undulations of waves, but in the way that specific shades of colours bounce off one another to create volume and dynamism. Taking cues from English painter Bridget Riley (b. 1931), Monteith selects his palette based on how each colour will react with its neighbour and how that colour informs the next. In *Eidos I-V*, Monteith expands his typical two-colour palette to four colours, challenging his own practice but also pushing the affective dimension of his paintings. By choosing shades of violet and magenta, he explores tones that would be common to the sets of 1960s and 70s science fiction films. In Riley's optical art paintings, paint behaves as light, and repeating, stylized patterns act as movement amplifiers; as a result, her paintings are dizzying and evoke some of the dances of the natural world such as the flickering light that bounces on the surface of the ocean on a sunny day. While Monteith's work also interrogates optical perception, his paintings are not intended to evoke natural forms, but rather his sharp-lined shapes and combination of light and dark tones incidentally reference organic signifiers such as leaves, stems, and limbs of the body. With such a flat composition, it is remarkable how much texture and movement can be perceived across the picture plane.

Conceptually, and in relation to the notion of Utopianism, Monteith is guided not by Thomas More's 16th-century satire, but by Plato's *The Republic* from 376 BC. In this Socratic dialogue, Plato explores his term "forms" which he uses in lieu of "ideals." He develops this notion after reflecting on the way that laws and principles are largely intelligible. He imagines that instead of referring to something as an "ideal," he suggests visualizing the *form* of something (e.g. the "form of friendship," rather than the "ideal of friendship"); this shift towards the tangible acts as a template, a guide, a blueprint, or a model of something, rather than getting lost in syntax. In Monteith's paintings, titled *Eidos*

I-V – Greek for ideas (1-5) – forms stand in for utopian ideals. Particularly following the two meanings for *Utopos* (“the good place” and “the place that cannot be”), Monteith challenges beauty and idealism by presenting flat, coloured segments that equally suggest the organic as they do the artificial.

In a similar vein, he takes some of his inspiration from Swedish painter Olle Bærtling (1911-1981) who was known for painting what he referred to as “open forms” – partial triangles whose three sides do not enclose by virtue of the limitations set by the canvas’ perimeter; each shape is distinguished by a black outline that at first appears straight but is actually curved so as to suggest movement extending beyond the picture space. Theorist and curator Lawrence Alloway described Bærtling’s work in a way that moved him from the Minimalist and Constructivist bubbles he was often contained within. Alloway says, “geometry in Bærtling’s paintings is not used to demonstrate absolute order but rather to emphasize its provisional and unstable nature.”¹ While the Soviet artists of the Constructivist movement made revolutionary work to reflect a future-oriented utopian society, Alloway suggests that although Bærtling’s work follows a similar terrain, it evokes a dynamism – a here-and-now quality – that “is neither symbolic nor representative of any literal utopia.”² Much like Riley’s paintings I discussed earlier, Monteith’s dynamism occurs in the way the colours and shapes intervene with optical perception. As stated previously, utopian visions often reflect desire and are future-oriented; similar to Riley and Bærtling, Monteith’s paintings present forms that stand in for larger ideals in the way they subjectively interrogate optics and reach beyond the limits of the canvas.

- Alex Tedlie-Stursberg -

Tedlie-Stursberg (b. 1980) lives and works in Vancouver where his practice is predominantly sculptural. By turning to the materiality and the form of discarded objects – found through thrift, salvage, or trade – he reflects on the ways that commodities shift and recontextualize as they are taken in-and-out of circulation. Adding to this momentum, Tedlie-Stursberg repurposes the debris of contemporary life into sculptural assemblage. It is in this way that he also acknowledges the (sometimes dependent) relationship between human

¹ Lawrence Alloway, “Bærtling”, Loeb Student Center (exhib.cat.), New York: New York University, 1964, unpag.

² John Peter Nilsson, “Contradictions Reconciled,” Moderna Museet, 2007, <https://www.modernamuseet.se/stockholm/en/exhibitions/olle-baertling/contradiction-reconciled/>.

beings and inanimate objects. He often recasts these found objects in different metals such as bronze and aluminum thus increasing their lifespan within this reoriented existence; further, this material transformation creates a marked distance from their prior form as source commodities; in this renewed state, Tedlie-Stursberg's sculptures become quasi-organic entities resembling something otherworldly: landed asteroids, dragon's eggs, neo-relics, amalgamated hunches, and unknown knowns. As we experience the environmental crises affecting our planet with increasing severity, we are forced to recontextualize and reorient our own societies. In many ways, Tedlie-Stursberg's work proposes an alternative, and while it may not be a utopian idealism, it is future-oriented. By evoking fictional or ancient forms through the undissolvable materials of today, he realizes a possible future for the humans of tomorrow.

In March of 2017, Tedlie-Stursberg traveled to Sointula, Malcom Island, British Columbia for an artist residency. There, he was taken by the history of the island – particularly, its existence as the backdrop to a short-lived utopian community established in the early 20th century. Lead by Finnish utopian socialist Matti Kurikka (1863-1915), two-thousand descendants of namely Finnish immigrants gathered in Sointula seeking refuge from the “exploitive employment conditions” of the mining industry on Vancouver Island.³ Residents of Sointula – “Place of Harmony” in Finnish – were united by idealism and were “sufficiently communal” and isolated from other towns and cities.⁴ Kurikka created his own Finnish-language newspaper where he distributed his visions including his motto: “Freedom with Responsibility.”⁵ Incidentally, Kurikka's utopian idealism rejected Christianity and the church more broadly and “drew paradoxically upon nostalgia for an imagined past;”⁶ he named his utopian commune the “Kalevan Kansa (‘People of Kaleva’) Colonization Company,” after the Finnish folk hero Kaleva.⁷ In order to achieve this “pure” way of life after having experienced modernity, Kurikka turned to the wilderness – which Malcom Island had (and has) in abundance.⁸ Kurikka's “wild” ways spilled into his views on women and “free love” and while

³ Michael Kluckner, *Vanishing British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005), 161.

⁴ Justine Brown, *All Possible Worlds: Utopian Experiments in British Columbia* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2000), 23-24.

⁵ Brown, *All Possible Worlds*, 30.

⁶ Brown, *All Possible Worlds*, 30.

⁷ Brown, *All Possible Worlds*, 30-31.

⁸ Brown, *All Possible Worlds*, 31.

his visions on that subject apparently did not come to fruition, tensions built between him and his community and between men and women more generally.⁹ In the end, it was a great fire and its corresponding economical downfall that eventually broke Sointula's own Utopia around 1904.¹⁰

As Tedlie-Stursberg explored Sointula and Malcom Island in 2017, not only did he experience the affective remnants of a past society, he collected found objects around the island including shotgun shells and polystyrene marine flotsam. While Kurrika's utopian commune may have dissolved (rightly so), Sointula remains to be a destination where nature and culture collide. Flotsam is an archetypal example of this collision in that it is, of course, an artificial by-product of industry, but it has since been shaped by the rolling sea into an entity that appears organic in formation. For this exhibition, Tedlie-Stursberg includes works that incorporate similar found materials. His work *Wheel* (2020) is composed of a large concrete ring ornamented with expelled lighters; as circles and rings traditionally connote unity and cycles, the use of coloured lighters poke fun at contemporary human culture. His work often evokes a dark humour, one that both comments on and participates in commodity exchange, political ideologies, and human belief systems.

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UTOPOS presents a new body of work for both artists. Negotiating with the (dystopian) global pandemic(s) of today and yesterday, the notion of utopianism is reoriented once again. In its initial stages, *UTOPOS* predominantly remarked on the environmental crises and the version of utopia that contains nature into manicured gardens and green carpeted expanses. While this still rings true and can be echoed in David Byrne's lyrics for the Talking Heads' song, "Nothing but Flowers" (as seen below) we also consider the version of utopia elicited by many city officials (e.g. police states). Utopia may be, in theory, considered a "good place" but it is simultaneously – and more consequently – a place that cannot be.

⁹ Brown, *All Possible Worlds*, 33.

¹⁰ Brown, *All Possible Worlds*, 34.

*There was a factory
Now there are mountains and rivers
You got it, you got it.*

*There was a shopping mall
Now it's all covered with flowers
You've got it, you've got it.*

If this is paradise I wish I had a lawnmower.

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Callum Monteith (b. 1988) lives and works in Glasgow, Scotland, where he works in painting, photography and printmaking. Monteith's practice interweaves notions of nature, philosophy and aesthetics with a particular interest in how we construct our ideas of self through fictions of alternative places or imagined landscapes. Recent exhibitions include solo exhibitions *Shelf Show #3* at Cockburn Street, Edinburgh, *PARADISAL* at The Briggait, Glasgow and *PLANT ROOM*, a group exhibition at Hanson Street Project Space, also in Glasgow (2019).

Alex Tedlie-Stursberg (b.1980) lives and works in Vancouver, BC, where he is a multidisciplinary artist with a key focus on sculpture and installation. His work has been exhibited in numerous galleries across North America and Europe; recent exhibitions include *MASS RESIDUE* with Field Contemporary and *SUPER, NATURAL*, a group exhibition at Unit 17, Vancouver (2019), *Holy Wave* as part of Glasgow International, Scotland and *Everything Flows* with Burrard Art Foundation, Vancouver (2018). Stursberg is currently employed as a Sessional Instructor at Langara College Visual Arts Program. He is currently developing public artworks for Ballard Fine Art in Vancouver.

Andrea Valentine-Lewis (b.1991) lives and works Vancouver, BC, where she is an independent curator, a freelance writer, and a teaching assistant for SFU's School for the Contemporary Arts. She is a recent graduate with an MA from the Department of Art History and Communication Studies at McGill University where her research was funded with a Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

We wish to acknowledge with respect the territory of the Coast Salish, Á, LENENEØLTE (WSÁNEĆ), Te'mexw Treaty Association, and the Lekwungen/Songhees whose land this space stands.