

Archipelagic Pursuits: A Coming Together of Art Making and Sea Kayaking

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Abstract: This paper considers the archipelago as a model of exchange and commerce to explore the meeting place between art and what Denis Cosgrove has described as the “geographical imagination.” It does so by considering two artistic projects in which the domains of art making overlap the author’s interest in sea kayaking—the two together constituting a vernacular, personally inscribed practice. These projects, at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria (2006) and as part of Tasmania’s biennial *Ten Days on the Island* (2011), are contextualized by the work of theorists coming from geography and visual arts. The paper extends Katherine Harmon’s observation about the way that maps, “like artworks”, may highlight “differences between collective and individual experience.” Like the form of hand-drawn maps, another seemingly obsolete technology, the camera obscura, is presented as a means of invoking a heightened, experiential engagement with the (island) landscape.

Keywords: archipelago; art; camera obscura; Fiddle Reef; geographical imagination; island; mapping; sea kayaking; Tasmania

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Introduction

In two bodies of work, *Fiddle Reef remembered* (2006 and ongoing) and *Kayak/Camera-Obscura* (2010 and ongoing), I call upon a personal vernacular shaped by collapsing my art making together with an interest in sea kayaking, the two together invoked here as a means of navigating between further interests. These are, firstly, the meeting place of art and geography; and, secondly islands and archipelagos as types of landscape to which I am particularly drawn. In addition to engaging ideas of islands, these two projects share a mixing of traditional and experimental artistic practices, calling upon such seemingly obsolete historical forms as hand-drawn maps and camera obscuras to do so. They differ, however, in that the *Kayak/Camera-Obscura* project is centered around a private, interior space, whereas the *Fiddle Reef* project has its origins in a process of public engagement. In such respects, the former is analogous to the isolation and self-sufficiency that is associated with islands, whereas the latter may be considered to model ideas around archipelagic identity and exchange. In order to explore connections that these projects have to islands and archipelagos, it is useful to first have a basic understanding of each; and that in relation to my interest in sea kayaking.

Figure 1: Kayak/Camera-Obscura, Tasmania. Cross-section view, watercolour and pencil on paper, 2011.



Figure 2: A Camera Obscura on the Tamar, video, 2011, video stills: “Keplers Klepper,” Launceston Shipyard and Port Dalrymple, Tasmania.



During a 2010 artist’s residency in Tasmania, I traveled with two Klepper Aerius I folding sea kayaks of 1960-1970 vintage. Of largely the same design since the 1950s and having descended from a prototype introduced in 1907 by Johann Klepper, these comprise a collapsible skeletal wood frame that is assembled inside a skin of rubber and canvas. The Klepper kayak has been billed in equal measure as a boat for family recreation and a boat successfully used in a 1956 solo crossing of the Atlantic Ocean. My own experience with such kayaks lies somewhere between those extremes of wilderness experience—having taken a Klepper to such places as Scotland’s Outer Hebrides, Maine’s eastern coast, and to locations on the coast of British Columbia. Of the two kayaks that I brought to Tasmania, one was for general purpose kayaking, to such places as the Freycinet Peninsula and Schouten Island, and

the other was for the specific purpose of its conversion into a floating and navigable camera obscura. Playing off a five hundred year history of often room-sized optical constructions in which a lens or open aperture casts an inverted image of the exterior world onto a surface inside a darkened space, “Kepler’s Klepper,” is navigated by way of such an inverted image appearing on a translucent screen of varnished cotton suspended inside the kayak-cum-camera-obscura’s darkened interior. The twin halves of the kayak’s paddle project outwards from the interior space, reaching into the water in a manner reminiscent of an image from Descartes’ *Dioptrique* (1637) in which a blind man is seen to probe his way forward with the aid of two sticks crossed in front of him. This transformation presents a counterpoint to the otherwise efficient structure of a sea kayak: resulting in a vessel that is ambiguous with respect to its balance of utility and fancy. In this manner, “Kepler’s Klepper” was taken on Tasmania’s Tamar River, its journey documented by way of a video camera towed behind on a small raft (or with the camera raft anchored for some scenes), the video, *A Camera Obscura on the Tamar*, and associated drawings accompanying the kayak-cum-camera-obscura in exhibitions that were a part of Tasmania’s 2010 cultural biennale *Ten Days on the Island* (“Kepler’s Klepper,” associated works and ongoing projects collectively comprising the broader *Kayak/Camera-Obscura* project).

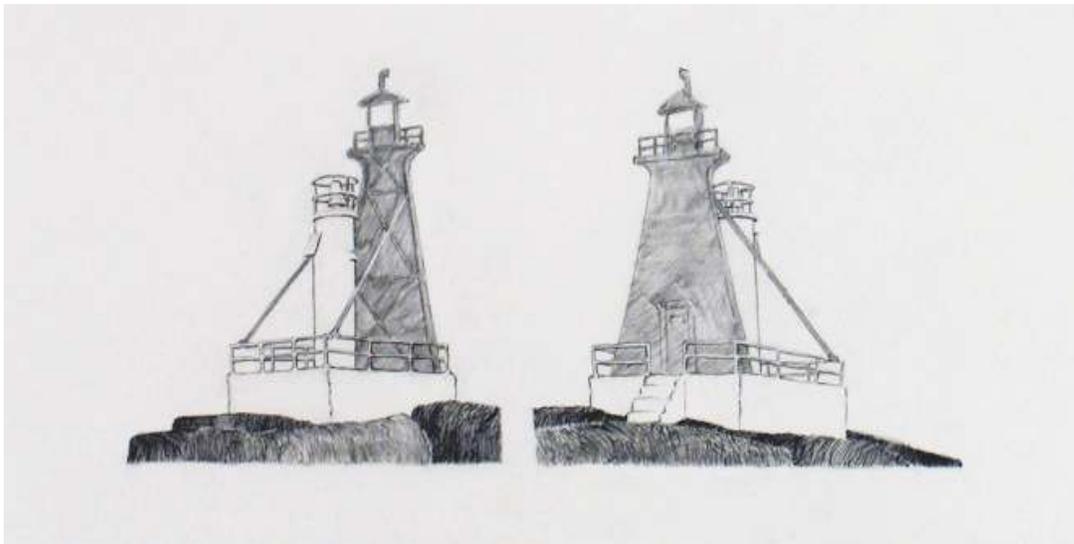
Figure 3: *Fiddle Reef remembered*, The Lab, The Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Canada, 2006.



Fiddle Reef remembered was a project undertaken in 2006 at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Canada, as part of *Witness marks: the exotic close to home*, an exhibition in collaboration with W.F. Garrett-Petts. Though the *Fiddle Reef* project was also experimental in nature and, like the *Kayak/Camera-Obscura* project, drew upon my interest in sea kayaking, it was different for having a very public presence and invitation to public engagement, barter, and exchange. The *Fiddle Reef* project may be understood as an exploration of readily

identifiable interests in place, mapping, and community engagement. Fiddle Reef, a mile off Victoria's Willow's Beach, at the southern tip of Vancouver Island, is a low-lying islet that covers up at high tide except for a cylindrical navigational beacon and its stonework base. The base is the site of the former Fiddle Reef Light Station (1898 to 1978) that I recall as a small wood-framed tower, white against the background of the archipelagic grouping of islands that shape Oak Bay. The archipelago is made up of two main outer islands, Chatham and Discovery, that define the outer limits of Oak Bay, and is otherwise made up of an array of smaller islets and reefs. Fiddle Reef itself occupies a transitional space, halfway between Willow's Beach and the larger clusters of islands further off-shore. The lighthouse was distant, even exotic; a perception coming from my being young at the time but also perhaps from the perspective effect induced by it having been BC's smallest lighthouse. *Fiddle Reef remembered* constituted a mapping and imaginary reconstruction (by way of drawings and a sculptural model) of the former Fiddle Reef light station. This project was not, in the usual way, first created, and then exhibited in the Gallery. Rather, it was created in 'The Lab', a space in the Gallery that encourages public engagement in artists' processes, with just a small preliminary drawing as a starting point to reimagining the former lighthouse. Otherwise, and except for regular excursions to Fiddle Reef, the seven-week project was realized in view of and in continued dialogue with daily visitors to The Lab, many of whom returned through the duration of the project to contribute their own stories through a process of creative exchange. Some of these same individuals took part in a concluding kayak tour of Fiddle Reef and other inner islands of the Oak Bay archipelago.

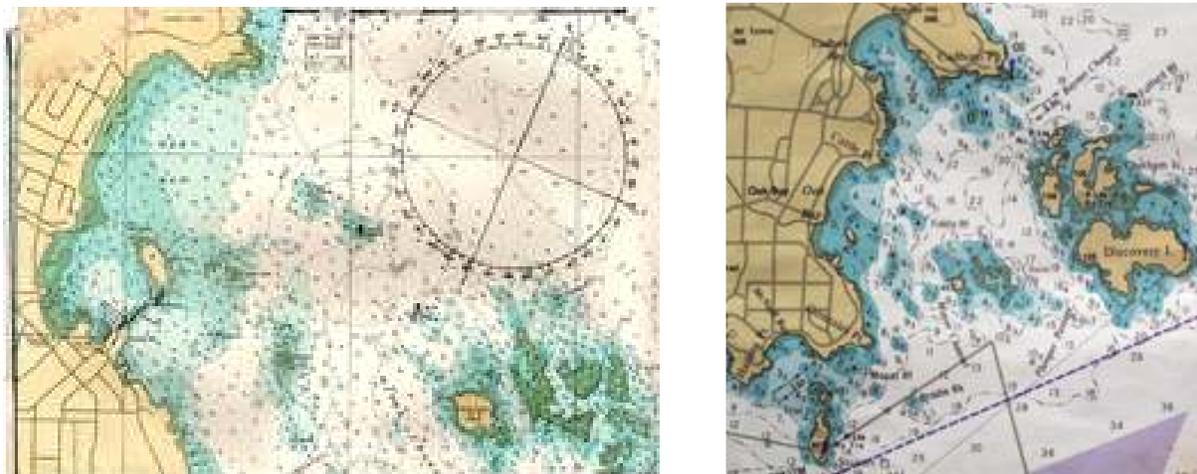
Figure 4: *Fiddle Reef remembered*, preliminary drawing (detail), pencil on paper, 2006.



When understood in general geographical terms, Fiddle Reef is just one among many rocky reefs and islets that make up the archipelago off Victoria's waterfront, a negligible notation on even the most detailed nautical charts. When considered on the largest of scales—the scale undertaken through my own, personal mapping—Fiddle Reef is an archipelago in miniature, one all but overlooked. On such a scale, the Reef, as the term infers, is a landscape of rocks, gravel beaches and, also, debris from the former light station that covers up with each flooding tide, the larger rocks becoming an increasing number of smaller islets until all are under water

except for the highest rock and the stone structure with its accompanying aid to navigation that are perched on top. As the tide ebbs, the process reverses itself until that miniature and ever changing archipelago forms again into just one island with its own out-lying islet a few kayak-lengths off-shore. To create the sculptural model, mapping the reef became a preoccupation; arriving at this understanding of the reef's topography became an activity that occupied many evenings after the Gallery closed for the day.

Figures 5a & 5b: Nautical charts (details), Canadian Hydrographic Service: 3723 "Trial Island to Cadboro Bay," 1973 (left); and 3449 "Race Rocks to East Point," 1980 (right).



The larger maps were generally created in The Lab and were based upon sketches and notations done on-site, with the primary map being taken out to the Reef for on-site comparison towards its completion. The resultant maps show three states of the tide: "near high tide," "near low tide," and "mid tide" (the stage represented by the sculpture). Arriving at this stage was a process of personal mapping, essentially a vernacular manner of mapping derived from navigational practices common to kayaks and other small boats. Such mapping required a few basic principles. Firstly, a number of readily identifiable reference points around the reef (rock high points, toppled concrete piers) were selected as reference points and, from these, compass bearings were taken to the outer corners of the tower base. As with determining a small boat's position at sea, a location is extrapolated through a process of triangulating and averaging three or more such bearings. Secondly, elevations (vertical measurements) were taken by using measured points along the shaft of a paddle to a fixed reference point (one of the tower's stair landings) and views of the horizon. I don't know of any particular surveying principle, technique or instrument that this method corresponds to; but, in kayaking, some distances (to the archipelago's more distant islands, for example) can be estimated by knowing the height of the paddler's eye-level above the water. While not quite the same procedure, this technique is suggestive of the rudimentary and improvisational nature of the principles involved.

As Katherine Harmon (2009, p. 10) observes, maps serve the function of "bringing order to chaos." "Like artworks," she writes, "maps are selective about what they represent, and call out differences between collective and individual experience" (ibid.). "Conventional maps, she writes, do no more than point the way to unpredictable, individual experience, while artworks embody those experiences" (ibid., p. 15). Daniels, DeLyser, Entrikin, & Richardson

(2011, p. xxx) outline how “mapping, reflecting, representing and performing” constitute four overlapping “modes of knowing the world”. They consider these as a means of “[framing] specific geographical practices” in the context of an expanding commerce between the social sciences and the humanities (including associated areas of creative practice). In addition to what is considered around expanded understandings of mapping as a metaphorical practice, what is of particular interest is a recognition of “the currency of performance,” and these geographers’ interest in the “various embodied, multi-sensory practices, of sound, smell and touch, and the expressly physical engagement with the material worlds of their making and meaning” (ibid., p. xxxi). Such multi-sensory experience is at the core of much artistic practice of recent decades (and of past centuries) and to the sentiment that artists share with human geographers in “[recovering] the geographical imagination” (Cosgrove, 1998, p. 34). Lucy Lippard calls upon Denis Cosgrove’s phrase in *Lure of the local: Senses of place in a multicentered society*, her 1997 book that has been highly influential in the visual arts community, and in which she presents memory as a further essential ingredient in meaningful engagement with the landscape. “Space,” she writes, “defines landscape, where space combined with memory defines place” (Lippard, 1997, p. 9).

Figure 6: “Fiddle Reef Map” (detail), pencil on vellum with underlay (right), 192cm x 91.5cm.

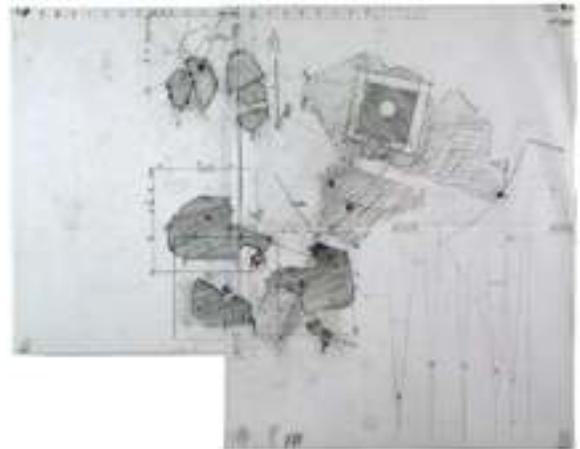


Figure 7: Anne Gee's "Fiddle Reef" letter, 2006.



Figure 8: Polaroid: Anne Gee and Penn Brown in The Lab, 2006.



The *Fiddle Reef* project, and the broader *Witness marks* project more generally, were shaped not only by my preoccupation with Fiddle Reef—and Garrett-Petts' longer-standing stories of "Jimmy Chicken" island—but also by the accumulated stories offered by visitors to The Lab. Alongside the growing model of the Fiddle Reef site and my large hand-drawn maps of the Reef, the visitors' contributions accumulated throughout the space. In varying ways, these contributions conveyed stories of growing up in or around the Oak Bay archipelago or of reminiscences having to do with other, more distant islands. In one instance, a return visitor left a 'Clayburn' brick, retrieved from the site on the Hisnit Islands, off the northwest coast of Vancouver Island, where stone was quarried by a family member for the construction of British Columbia's Parliament Buildings. Of such visitors' contributions, those by Penn Brown (a former Fiddle Reef light station keeper), and Anne Gee were the most pertinent. Her contributions were mailed to me from Masset, on the Queen Charlotte Islands, and included

watercolour drawings and written accounts of Jimmy Chicken Island, Fiddle Reef, and the larger archipelago that was her childhood playground during the 1950s. Gee, the sister of Jane Pallin who regularly visited The Lab during our project, held a long fascination with Oak Bay archipelago and Jimmy Chicken Island in particular ('Jimmy Chicken' being a colloquial, local name for an island officially named and charted as "Mary Todd"). Recalling a time several decades earlier, she wrote:

My first fascination, offshore, was Jimmy Chicken Island; but when I was older (11 or 12) and able to read maps (marine charts) and my family got a boat—all the offshore islands and the whole bay itself became a larger enchanted world, and Fiddle Reef a magical name.

Of Fiddle Reef in particular, Anne Gee recalled:

... the stout bright red-and-white lighthouse that seemed to preside over the islands and sea. It seemed far away, but I thought that it must be as large as a house; I saw, through binoculars, steps and walkways. I understood that people lived in it, and I could not imagine a more wonderful place to live! (Anne Gee, letter, 2006).

Like the domestic bric-a-brac that was literally stitched together to make up the collage-like sculptural representation of *Fiddle Reef*, Anne Gee's story came unexpectedly, finding its way into the project much in the manner that a piece of salvaged flotsam might be found and might become a treasured possession in a beach house. Such is the surprise that emerges from unplanned moments of collaboration and exchange.

Figure 9: Miscellany on wall, including Anne Gee's "Fiddle Reef" letter: *Witness marks: the exotic close to home*, AGGV, 2006.



Whereas the Kayak/Camera-Obscura project came to be characterized by individual, even isolated, self-sufficiency (in some ways an exaggeration of my predilection for solo kayaking trips), the *Fiddle Reef* project, with its structure of dialogue and exchange, may be understood as archipelagic in nature. In seeking to extend the concept outwards from its basic definition of being “a group of islands”, Stratford, Baldacchino, Farbotko, Harwood & McMahon (2011, p. 122) consider archipelagos as “fluid cultural processes, sites of abstract and material relations of movement and rest, dependent on changing conditions of articulation or connection”. Without the dual propositions offered by my own and W.F. Garrett-Petts’ contributions to *Witness marks*, and without the stories offered by Anne Gee and others, my *Fiddle Reef* construction would be as an island. With such multiple perspectives, however, any single understanding of “islandness” was contested, and was expanded through such “fluid, cultural processes,” as Stratford et al. (2011) describe.

The dialogic nature of the project that W.F. Garrett-Petts and I initiated in The Lab at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria may be considered archipelagic with respect to its commerce of stories and creative output; so too might the broader nature of the meeting place of artistic and other modes of research. In such respects, Garrett-Petts and I have shared a twenty year practice of creative and academic exchange, from our respective areas of disciplinary expertise in literature/criticism and visual arts. In highlighting such connections in our collaborative projects around research, teaching and exhibition practice, we would, however, share with Henry Buller (quoted in Hawkins, 2011, p. 473) that “good inter-disciplinarity requires strong disciplinarity”; though we may travel back and forth we each have our island home that we have come from and often return to.

Towards a conclusion, it is useful to return to a consideration of the *Kayak/Camera-Obscura* project and the *Fiddle Reef* project together in the context of such interests in ‘place’ and ‘multi-sensory [archipelagic] experience’. Hawkins (2011, pp. 472-3) writes:

Art practices have pointed us towards modes of bodily experience, emotional work and multi-sensuous being that might otherwise slip past ... [Much recent artwork] transitioned from *reproducing the visible* by painting the landscape, to exploring how to, in some sense, *make visible*, the experience of being-in and moving-through the world. Further, art practice has much to contribute to the emerging body of work on ‘haptic geographies’, and their explorations of how it is that we know and experience space and place (emphasis in original).

Whether moving slowly across the intertidal rocks of Fiddle Reef to carefully measure and map its topography or to navigate *Kepler’s Klepper* on the Tamar River by way of the camera obscura’s inverted images, these works rest upon haptic, physically and experientially inclined manners of engaging the landscape. It is the same approach that appealed to Patrick Geddes as a means of having his geography students engage experientially with their urban environment from inside Edinburgh’s public camera obscura during the late nineteenth century, where, with the aid of what was even then considered an anachronistic apparatus, the students not only observed the landscape that unfolded around them but did so by “inhabiting the instrument” to do so (Macdonald, 2011, p. 275). Kockelkoren (2004, p. 18) also considers the manner in which the camera obscura and other instruments of past centuries’ visual culture offer models that may be invoked to disturb settled habits of viewing. What, he suggests, is crucial if artists and others are to attentively engage with technology, is to recognize Heidegger’s distinction

between technology which is “‘ready-to-hand’ (*zuhanden*) and that which is ‘present at hand’ (*vorhanden*)”: the latter being a state in which a person or society is aware of the role that technology plays; where “we have to shift our technologically mediated performance of a task to the mediatory equipment itself”. Creating awareness of technology “present at hand” is a key concern for me and others interested in a haptic, experiential engagement with the landscapes that we inhabit or travel through, whether that technology is the aperture of a camera obscura or the paddle of a kayak.

Figure 10: Public kayak tour of Fiddle Reef, Jimmy Chicken Island and the inner island groups of the Oak Bay archipelago, 2006. (Photo: courtesy of Dasha Novak.)



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