



Above: David Campion and Sandra Shields discuss the Character Portraits during the artists' public tour of *Grand Theft Terra Firma*. Photo credit: The Reach Gallery Museum.

Reframing the Colonial Status Quo

Grand Theft Terra Firma at The Reach Gallery Museum

Laura Schneider

The Reach Gallery Museum Abbotsford has a dual mandate as a contemporary art gallery and a community history museum and archives. The intersection of these mandates presents a fruitful opportunity to reconsider the kinds of colonial storytelling that museums have been involved in for centuries. In developing the exhibition schedule for 2017, The Reach used the words of Justice Murray Sinclair as our guidepost: "Reconciliation is not an aboriginal problem, it is a Canadian problem. It involves all of us."

One exhibition in particular provides a useful example of inter-

disciplinary collaboration at the intersection of contemporary art and history museums. *Grand Theft Terra Firma* offers an opportunity to reconsider how exhibition rhetoric is crafted, which narratives are foregrounded in cultural institutions and how artists can employ historical research to challenge established narratives in profound and discomfiting ways.

Created by artist duo David Campion and Sandra Shields (Deroche, BC), *Grand Theft Terra Firma* is a photography, text and installation-based exhibition that was presented at The Reach from January 26-May 7, 2017. In their research, the artists used resources more com-

monly associated with the work of museum curators, including historical objects, photographs and archival documents. They combined these with a robust, collaborative approach to exhibition-making that involved Indigenous advisory bodies, Stó:lō friends, neighbours and community members and professional actors. In their exhibition, Campion and Shields underline the representational power of museums as storytelling technologies, and the tendency for Canadian museums to valorize the historical events and figures involved in the "settlement" of the land. In so doing, they unsettle the familiar narrative of progress in the name of civilization, and instead bluntly frame the colonial project as

a morally bankrupt act of greed and violence.

The exhibition takes its title and conceptual framework from the immensely popular and controversial video game series *Grand Theft Auto*. The highest selling game of all time, the controversy surrounding it comes not just from its violent content, but also because in order to win, players must adopt the persona of a gangster and complete missions that include heinous, criminal acts. In other words, success is achieved when the “bad guy” wins. The art exhibition’s titular riff suggests a not-so-subtle similarity between the game and settler colonial histories. *Grand Theft Terra Firma* unfolds not as a game itself; indeed, as the artists have stated, this “game” has already been played, the results of which shape our current conditions.

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Grand Theft instead unfolds as a gaming guide, adopting the genre’s formula of introducing the game’s avatars or characters and their missions, detailing the “power objects” necessary for gaming success, and

sharing “screenshots” of key moments in game play.

Early in the exhibition, visitors encounter two super-sized strategy texts mimicking the opening pages to a gaming guide. Visitors are instructed to:

Pick your thief and play your part in the crime. Collect items of colonial memorabilia and use your unique talents to complete your missions. As you steal the land out from under the Stó:lō make sure your moral compass never finds true north...

The “characters” in the exhibition typify players in the colonial narrative and include: the Governor, the Royal Engineer, the Settler, the Pioneer, the Miner, the Whiskey Trader, the Priest and the Land Speculator. Though one of the strengths of the exhibition is the detailed historical research that was undertaken to reconsider the narrative with regard to particularities of place, specifically S’ólh Téméxw (now known as the Fraser Valley), this series of character photographs also resonates because of its generalities. Campion and Shields take the opportunity to include factual details in the fictional biographies that connect their characters to the global conquests of the British Empire. For example, the Royal Engineer’s biography reads:

... He is fresh from a tour in India where he stood with

her Majesty’s finest as they took Delhi....Keen for duty anywhere but the subcontinent, he jumped at the chance to survey new lands in the wilderness of British North America... He was there in London when the Colonial Secretary, the great man Lytton, delivered his famous send off speech... “Children yet unborn will bless the hour when Queen Victoria sent forth her Royal Engineers to found a second England on the shores of the Pacific!”

Grand Theft Terra Firma highlights that museums have the tendency to valorize the historical events and figures involved in “settlement” of the land.

In creating these eight large-scale photographic portraits, the artists employed regional actors who posed in period costume before a common backdrop depicting an English Tudor-style house. The photographic backdrop selected by the artists is a reproduction of a backdrop used by early Chilliwack photographer James Orville Booen in the 1890s. Many of Booen’s photographs are featured in exhibitions at the Chilliwack Museum and Archives. This version of the backdrop was painted by Brenda Patterson and Shannon Bettles, both of whom worked at the



The Royal Engineer

As the younger son, he was destined for the military life and took to it like a duck to water. He always follows orders and never married, turning his affections instead to Queen and country. He is fresh from a tour in India where he stood with her Majesty's finest as they took Delhi. Unfortunate that so many innocents were bayoneted, but how else to restore order? Keen for duty anywhere but the subcontinent, he jumped at the chance to survey new lands in the wilderness of British North America. He loves the challenge of laying the chain, end to end, in neat lines across the ground. He was there in London when the Colonial Secretary, the great man Lytton, delivered his famous sendoff speech. He can still hear the ringing words: "Children yet unborn will bless the hour when Queen Victoria sent forth her Royal Engineers to found a second England on the shores of the Pacific."

Mission: Playing the Royal Engineer, you are the specialist who cracks the safe and opens up the land for profit. The invisible lines that you mark on the land are key to the imperial sleight of hand.

Photo: David Campion & Sandra Shields, *The Royal Engineer*, 2014, inkjet print on vinyl, metal electrical conduit, aluminum, 65.25 x 43 in.
Photo credit: David Campion

Chilliwack Museum and Archives at the time when the exhibition was being developed. The backdrop is one of a handful of installation elements intended to collapse the distance between the photo-based work on the walls and the physical space of the gallery.

Like the backdrop, additional installation elements highlight the artists' use of historical collections. A replica outhouse in the exhibition is papered with reproductions of *The British Colonist*, accessed using an online repository developed by the University of Victoria. Another installation depicts the Colonial Secretary's desk covered with letters that, as Campion and Shields have stated, "borrow liberally from writings from key figures of the time including Secretary of State Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton and Governor James Douglas with a strong dose of Land Commissioner Joseph Trutch."

Fifteen still-life photographs in the exhibition depict the "power objects" that gamers are encouraged to acquire to succeed in their quest. The artists worked with a number of regional museums, and used online repositories, to source images of the objects that include a bible, a cannon, a Hudson's Bay Blanket, a gold pan and a plow.

Perhaps the most impactful photographic series in the exhibition is a group of ten "screenshots," digital compositions developed in cooperation with the aforementioned actors and local members of the



Above: David Campion & Sandra Shields, *Hudson's Bay Blanket*, 2016, inkjet print on vinyl, metal electrical conduit, aluminum 26 x 26 in.

Stó:lō community. The screen shots depict significant moments in the region's colonial history including a story told by Leq'á:mél elder Susan Lewis about her pregnant grandmother who was forced to leave her farm at Tlat-whaas (Norrish Creek) in the 1870s. The poignancy of these images lies not only in their relationship to the historical record, but in the fact that the settler actors employed for these scenes appear in period costume while the Stó:lō cast appear in contemporary dress, underscoring the ongoing implications of these past events on lived experiences in the present moment.

In the common settlement narrative found in many Canadian museums, the colonial project is characterized as a benign act of civilization. *Grand Theft* challenges audiences to imagine how Canadian history might look like if told from another perspective.

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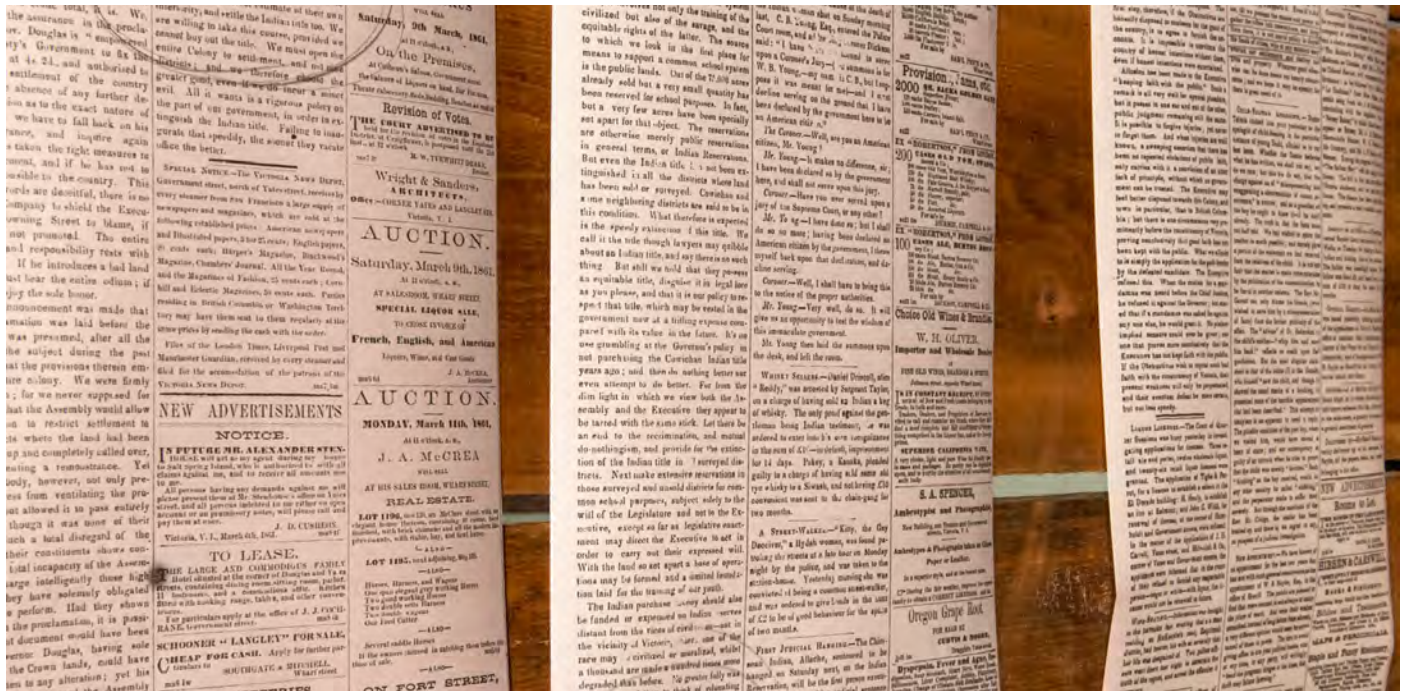
Photo: Installation view of the Colonial Secretary's desk as presented at The Reach Gallery Museum.
Photo credit: David Campion



Above: David Campion & Sandra Shields, *Moving Mary Jane*, 2016, inkjet print on vinyl, metal electrical conduit, aluminum, 65" x 35"



Below: David Campion & Sandra Shields, *Survey Party*, 2016, inkjet print on vinyl, metal electrical conduit, aluminum, 65"x 35"



Left: Close-up view of the reproduced copies of *The British Colonist* in the reproduction outhouse. The artists circled segments that illustrate the kind of racist language and sentiment common in the publication.

The potential for this exhibition to cause strong reactions—particularly as it was presented adjacent to The Reach's community history gallery—was not lost on us. We also wondered whether visitors would be able to assimilate the history presented in *Grand Theft Terra Firma* with more benevolent versions of the narrative as told in “real” history exhibitions. Indeed, some of our visitors took exception to the tone of the exhibition, and they were given ample opportunity to respond either anonymously in writing to our response basket, or in the numerous public discussions we hosted during the course of the exhibition. Overall however, we were surprised by the overwhelmingly positive response to the artists’ reframing of a familiar story.

This unique and destabilizing exhibition reminds us that all museum work—collecting, making exhibitions, publishing, educating—is fundamentally grounded in the contingent activities of representation and interpretation. The project combines historical research with an undaunted artistic vision to retell the story of our nation in a way that begs questions about authorship and bias, truth and mythology, perspective and privilege.

Grand Theft Terra Firma is currently touring across Canada and will open in Halifax at St. Mary’s University Art Gallery on June 8, 2018.

Laura Schneider is the Executive Director at the Reach Gallery Museum in Abbotsford. Schneider’s gradu-

ate research examined the representation of Indigenous history and culture in Ontario’s community museums and proposed collaborative, community-based and pluralistic strategies toward the decolonization of these institutions. Schneider has served as the Director/Curator of the Cape Breton University Art Gallery, co-founder and chair of the Lumière arts festival in Sydney, NS, and a member of Nova Scotia’s provincial arts council, Arts Nova Scotia.

