



**rogue, vagabond, slave**

**Victoria Ward**  
at The Visual Arts Centre of Clarington  
June 7 – July 5, 2015

## Introduction

By **James Campbell**  
Executive Director/Curator

**"The woods are vast and dense  
filled with tiny beauties  
on mass they are bigger than your mind"<sup>1</sup>**

In the late Spring and early Summer of 2015, Victoria Ward brought "the woods" into the galleries of the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington. The words above were scrawled upon a sheet of paper, interspersed with loose, vital renderings culled from the artist's wanderings through the woods that embrace her rural cabin home near Gooderham and Algonquin Park, Ontario. These observances, these testimonials, filled sketch books whose pages were torn out to adorn the walls of our small main floor gallery. Tacked up as if on the walls of a studio, they danced through the room in continuous narrative, an illuminated manuscript of the artist's world.

She also brought the presence of humanity within that vast and dense realm, and the temporal "marks" that we collectively erect to live in, to worship in, or to fish from. "My work up to now has attempted to tell the story of how buildings and things we make as humans, get left behind when the cycle of an economy is done". Further: "In my paintings I reanimate them in order to evoke a sentient landscape. They are to me the residues of our need to mark ourselves onto the land."<sup>2</sup>

**rogue, vagabond, slave**

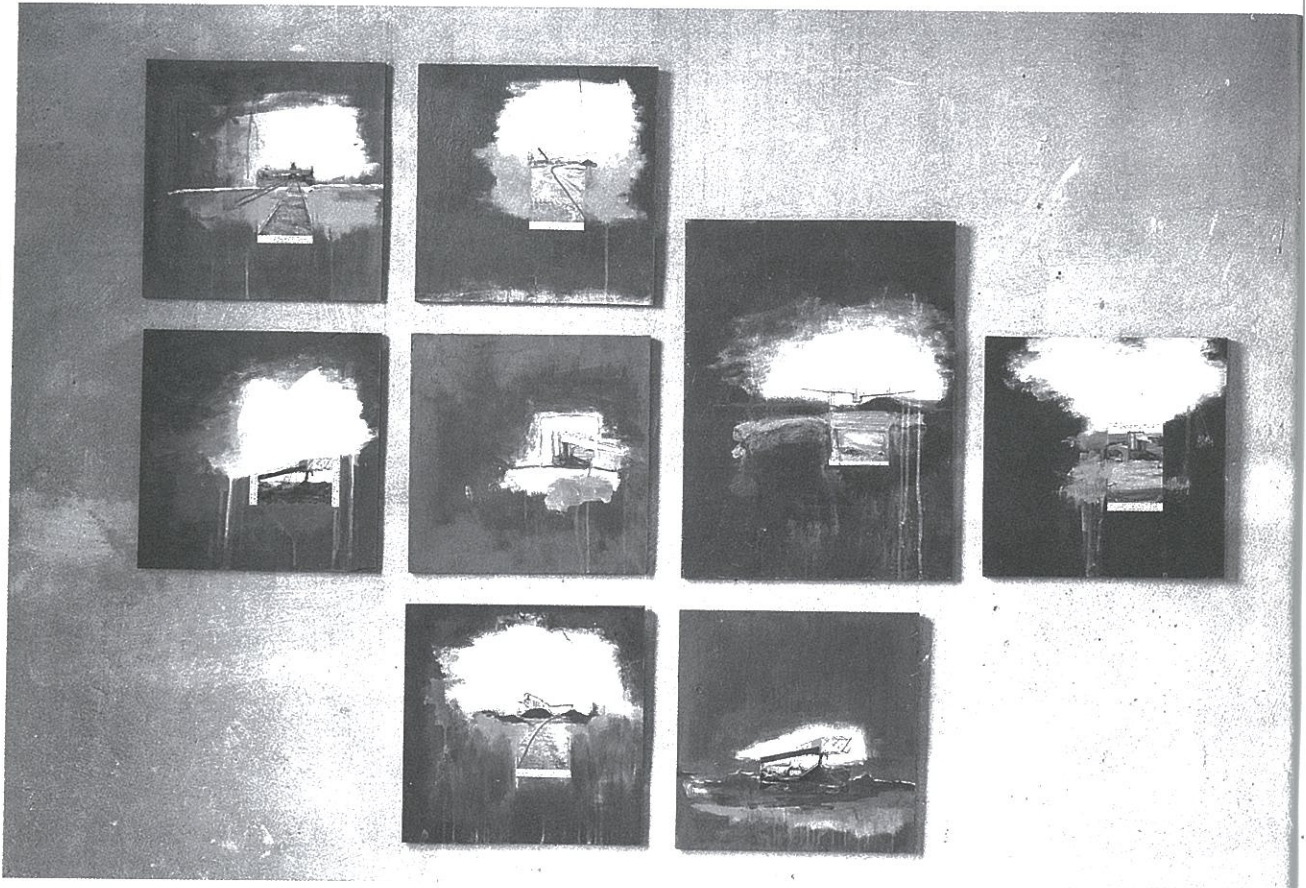
Seventeen acrylic on wood panel paintings hung in our large main floor gallery. On their vibrant, glowing surfaces were the artist's "reanimations"; these landscapes/humanscapes of memory do indeed charge the senses. In *Church at Twilight*, a familiar architectural form floats in a white veil; rendered in deep, rich red, it is a church, executed with the simplicity of a stencil. The white cloud that surrounds it pushes away darkness above. Blues, vibrant yellow, and earthen green and brown are stacked below, perhaps a progression of hills leading to a horizon. These 'hills' are unified. Ward has allowed water laden pigment to drip downward, unabated, to the base of the panel; roots, anchoring the land. Above them, the floating vestige of one of humanity's 'sacred' places.

In *Churchy Village*, our 'stencil church' continues its ascent to heaven, this time in cool blue. Below it, a full array of the things that humans make that get 'left behind'. Minimally defined ice huts of pale grey, brilliant red, and soft blue, and a pale white trailer; some float, some are anchored to 'land', some have begun to sink within it. Beneath them all, again, sequential bands of 'earth'. As Ann Jaeger observes in her essay in this catalogue: "Her structures are both detached from the landscape, and consumed by it."<sup>3</sup> This is captivatingly evident in *Church and Ice Hut*. Our stencil church has here temporarily returned to the earth; it rests on a lush green hill beneath it. To its right, that very earth, that landscape, has all but enveloped a pale white-grey hut. The drip roots here pull it gently down through greens, brown, red and black; a human structure, slowly, inexorably drawn into the layers of the earth.

Sensory 'marks' of the things we make continued in compelling fashion in our third floor loft gallery. In this magical, clerestory capped space, the artist embraced a new realm, and with hypnotic results; video projection.

*church & ice hut, 2014;*  
acrylic and graphite on wood; 62×62cm





*In the Pitch, Yorkshire paintings;*  
approximately 42×42cm each

As visitors entered the space, they were immediately confronted by two large, identically sized images, flush to one another, on the dark grey wall to their right. To the right, the unseen film maker wanders the woods, “stalking or being stalked”, as Ann perceives. Is it Victoria, in her woods, now camera in hand instead of sketch book? To the left, the brick façade of a factory, an industrial structure, frames a massive mechanized wheel, relentlessly turning. Interestingly, the walk through the woods to the right appears, perhaps, equally pre-ordained. The hand of humanity, the things that we make, turns ever on. The ‘woods’, the landscape that surrounds us and preceded us, is forced to accept our intrusions, as well as our embrace. In the end, that wheel will cease to spin. The roots of the earth will invariably, indifferently, draw it down as if an ice hut in the woods.

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On the West wall of the loft, directly opposite the projections, the artist took us to England. To the collieries of Yorkshire, in Kellingley. Victoria journeyed there in 2011 with her artist/partner, Gary Blundell. Eight small photo/acrylic collages were dynamically arrayed by Ann Jaeger, intermittently three top to bottom and four across. Each explored portions of the colliery, resonating immediately of an ageless human endeavor, indeed a way of life in the small coal towns of England; humanity drawing forth fuel from the earth. How appropriate that these pieces occupied a space where another timeless human endeavor once occurred; the grinding of grain in a 1905 mill. A primary source of heat from under the earth in England, and a primary source of food from the fields of Ontario.

These haunting small panels were predominantly black and white, with clouds of each blanketing centrally placed painted and photographic snippets of coal shoots, elevators and structures. These small dark jewels are reminiscent of Whistler's nocturnes; the hint of structures, light and

sound through blackened gauze. The blackness here is literal, signifying an end; coal mining in these small English towns has all but vanished. Victoria's visual and literary (some of the panels include related written notations) records preserve a part of this vanishing way of life. Another continuous narrative, illuminated manuscript, from the artist's life. Victoria's words "when the cycle of an economy is done" echo loudly here.

Artist and former VAC Curator, Maralynn Cherry, shared the following thoughts with Victoria after visiting the show: "There is a sadness, a sense of loss and yet an underlying rebellion born from a great resounding wit in your work. The politics here is every bit as rich as the wonder of your gestural palette."<sup>4</sup> Politics, economics, the 'footprint' of humanity in the wilderness, all imbedded within, and leaping from, Victoria's vibrant and bold "gestural palette". These elements are poignantly explored in Ann Jaeger's essay that follows.

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#### Endnotes

- 1 From the artist.
- 2 From the artist.
- 3 Ann Yeager, from her essay "rogue, vagabond, slave – Victoria Ward", in the exhibition catalogue.
- 4 Maralynn Cherry, from her observations to the artist.

## rogue, vagabond, slave

By **Ann Jaeger**  
Writer, Trout in Plaid

They speckle the countryside like blemishes, or from another angle, unpretentious havens – the trailers, churches, sheds and ice huts of rural Canada. Abandoned or not, they are metaphoric of civilization's encroachment on and tenacious claim to the landscape, as much as of mankind's imperative to carve shelter out of the wilderness.

With her portraits of these homely, outlier cabins as the primary signifier, visual artist, writer and arts activist Victoria Ward dances playfully and provocatively across two centuries of intersections between political thought and the arts in *rogue, vagabond, slave*. She dives into the entanglements of rural versus urban, industry versus nature, fairy tale versus political reality in a collection of paintings, text-embedded drawings, concocted artifacts and juxtaposed videos.

Abject, slightly shell shocked, yet remarkably perky in their lollipop pigments, Ward's ramshackle buildings melt into the landscape. They also float, drown, hover, are submerged. Some are outlined, reflected in the sky or water, or ringed with gentle halos. Clouds drip onto them; horizons dissolve beneath them. At times several are nestled together as if in conversation, a hive. Their lonesome windows glow like beacons and frame space in an unframeable, uncontrollable wilderness. Are they uninhabited or is someone watching us from within?

In *rogue, vagabond, slave*, financial wolves roam the dark, dense forests of capitalism. The light from a tiny cottage beckons along a breadcrumb trail of waning arts funding. Within could be a either a witch or a fairy godmother. This is not the iconic Canadian wilderness of stalwart rock and pine, but a fearsome, unpredictable weald. Ward summons the



8 psychologically loaded tales of the Brothers Grimm. Associations with hapless peasants, pathological stepmothers, manipulative talking animals, refuges hewn out of a dark wood dramatize present day suppression of cultural funding, corporate occupation and in particular the often fruitless toil of an artist's labour. One can almost hear the ring of the woodcutter's axe.

"Possibly the most German touch of all is the omnipresence of the forest, the place where fairy-tale heroes confront their enemies and triumph over fear and injustice. Rural German society traditionally depended on the Wald.

"...Storytellers knew that to place characters in a dark trackless woods would stir up associations of danger and suspense. 'The forest was not seen as a safe place. Townspeople would avoid it ... There were outlaws and illegal hunters. And Germans have always been afraid of wolves.'" <sup>1</sup>

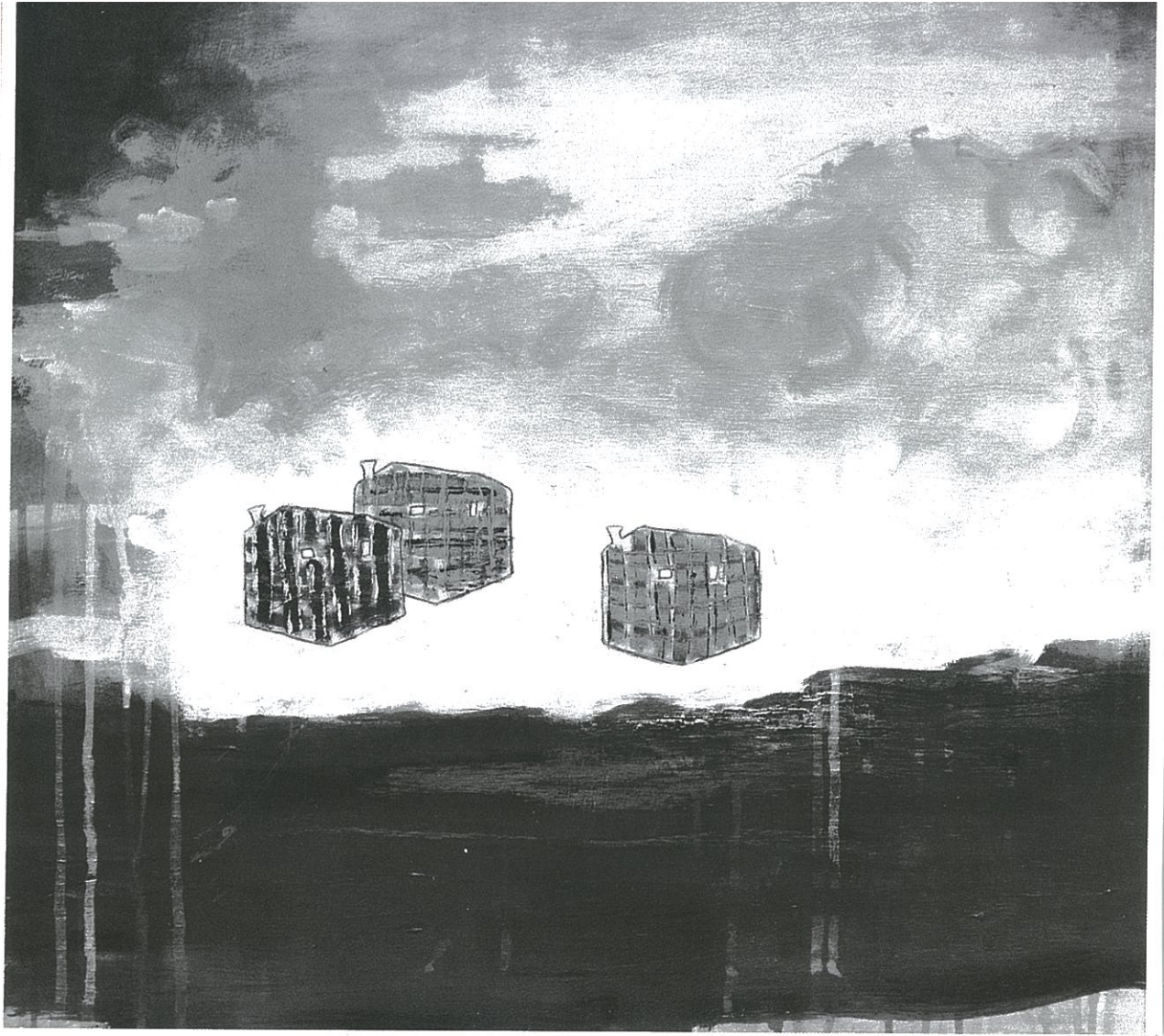
These little shacks, with their inherent impermanence, are emblematic of the fiscal precarity of the rural artist: sometimes at odds with a conservative community politic; diminished for avoiding the competition and implied authority of an urban art scene; easily lost in the fray for a few hardscrabble jobs; misunderstood as more outlaw than bohème; awash in in a sea of local cultural heroes and volunteers. "*Championing the amateur: you never have to pay for labour,*" writes Ward.

And yet the artist seeks the inspiration and authenticity of nature and the clarity that solitude nurtures.

It's sometimes difficult for urban denizens to imagine how easily nature reclaims that which is man made. Sumac and sapling push up relentlessly; one must maintain a constant offensive against marauding mice,

*rainbow shack, 2014;*  
acrylic and graphite on wood; 62 x 62 cm





mosquitoes, cluster flies and squirrels; snow lifts shingles and collapses gutters. The artist delves into this plight of instability, reminding us that without our vigilance, democracy is also being surreptitiously eroded into a plutocracy and mono-culture.

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**"The bourgeoisie have made further progress in the art of hiding the distress of the working-class. But that, in regard to their dwellings, no substantial improvement has taken place, is amply proved by the Report of the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Poor, 1885. And this is the case, too, in other respects. Police regulations have been plentiful as blackberries; but they can only hedge in the distress of the workers, they cannot remove it."**<sup>2</sup>

*"Place' is negated by globalization so that everyone is made to want and use the same things,"* writes Ward. Her structures are both detached from the landscape and consumed by it. Each one owns its rural penchant for individualism – several are clad in plaid as in *plaid icehuts 1*; one sits demurely under a twilight sky dimpled with stars in *rainbow shack*; the buildings in *pink shack*, *green shack* sit beneath a reddish cloud that reminds me of nothing so much as a bleeding heart; in *light show with shack*, the shack itself seems ablaze with Northern Lights.

Ward identifies as a painter and as such the work is comfortable in its own skin, grazing the schema of formalism. Her paintings are studies in figure-ground relationships and iconic shape.

Tongue in cheek, she also draws on museum display with its codified labels, and the aesthetics of provocation from the revolutions of France and Russia to Occupy Wall Street. In the selection of quotes and drawings scattered informally throughout the gallery, there are literary

*plaid ice huts 1*, 2014;  
acrylic and graphite on wood; 62×62 cm

'a little red, a manifesto in fairy tale form'  
Victoria Ward

I live on the edge of the Boreal forest. I can understand and appreciate why mythology has been projected onto the 'woods' over the centuries because it is a place of wilderness and for many the unknown. After living where I have for over a decade, investigating in an ongoing manner our attitudes about what 'nature' is and our place or role in it. I now understand intrinsically what historian Simon Schama meant when he said "landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected onto wood, water and rock."

You only have to look at eighty percent of what we deem in our culture to be frightening to see that most of what is scary takes place in the wilderness. The scary forest ethos comes directly from the Grimm Brothers' compilation of fairy tales, a nineteenth century phenomenon. This exhibition is an attempt to make tactile the ideas surrounding that of a rural fairy tale with the wilderness made benign, replaced by what I think is truly terrifying: unbridled greed.

The specific fairy tale of Little Red Riding Hood seemed an appropriate framework for my project because I am a girl living in a cabin in the woods. What I have tried to do is refresh the story with a more potent and current villain, that of the uncaring, ruthlessly amoral predator whose belief in their stature gained only by the lack of birth allows them to justify their greed. But what woods to put in Little Red's mouth: whose voices could possibly combat such a monster? Enter Karl Marx who was an innkeeper in the Grimms' Brothers.

When Karl Marx was a young journalist he concentrated for a time on newly minted Prussian laws about the lawful use of downed trees in the woods. Poor rural folk would collect the wood for heat. The new laws would make this illegal. One of the main theories for this was because the wood was needed for the local villagers, to aid them in maintaining their supplies of wine for the market place. Right away Marx was intrigued by a society that would make a law which helped businesses over people; he then began his lifelong fascination with economics, politics and morality.

While at first this all seemed whimsical and incongruous, Marx's espousing of justice for workers seems to fit well into a fairy tale since we now are witnessing the demise of a labour movement that had lasted well over a hundred years.

As always with art, these ideas swirled around for awhile and then landed together neatly as if I had planned it all that way; thank you to the mysterious force of inspiration.

After the Occupy Wall Street movement for changing the narrative in our culture, this project may have seemed more apt than without it. Photo: Paul Pines & Dan Tucker for the bookwork. Melissa Papp for her amazing wolf head creation. I want to thank In Field for ongoing support and inspiration, Andrew Ward for the website and Greg Blumfeld for forever being where I need him.



a little red, a manifesto in fairy tale form installation, 2013/15; museum cabinet with wolf head, photos and books

and illustrative nuances evocative of social commentary from the early folktales of Charles Perrault to Walt Kelly's Pogo ("We have met the enemy and he is us.") A copy of Ward's political satire of the Red Riding Hood tale, entitled a *little red*, is encased under glass as a museum curio. Its hand printed letterpress style is reminiscent of *Das Kapital*.<sup>3</sup> Next to it on a red checkered cloth is a life-sized wolf mask. This romancing of revolutionary culture can't help but raise the spectre of the banality of evil.<sup>4</sup> Handwritten text sectioned off with red masking tape stylistically calls up comic strips and political cartoons. "*The rural is demonized in our culture, the wilderness always depicted as scary, unpredictable, isolating. The rural is where the future of an economy exists and can become a barometer for everything,*" she writes.

The title of the exhibit has an historical reference: "*the Elizabethans created the poor law; not working was illegal. People who were turfed from the countryside during the reformation moved to London and became homeless, starving and eventually criminals.*" The unemployed were deemed rogues; the homeless became vagabonds who were eventually sentenced to forced labour.

Poets of the last century such as Whitman and Sandburg spoke of this too, the dichotomy between the euphoric freedom of nature and the thrall of the teeming energy of a city.

**"The people yes**

**The people will live on.**

**The learning and blundering people will live on.**

**They will be tricked and sold and again sold  
And go back to the nourishing earth for rootholds"<sup>5</sup>**

The final, mesmerizing meditation on these dualistic frameworks is a set of film clips projected side by side.

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On the right a shaky camera and crunchy soundtrack portray both predation and victimization as the camera slowly tracks through the forest. Though it is daylight, the tension is as palpable as an outtake from *The Blair Witch Project*. It evokes the idea of the creature, stalking or being stalked in an environment that could be either peril or vulnerable resource. The filmmaker is unseen, simultaneously subject and object. Does the forest exist without the projection of the human mind?

On the left the video shows the slow unrelenting motion of a large mechanical wheel, automated and amoral as it performs human labour in an elegant, effortless, ruthless way – a portrait of the seductiveness of self-perpetuating industry if there ever was one.

Ward's own comments thoughtfully sum up this multifaceted exhibition.

"My epiphany of becoming a rural artist is that humans are everywhere and that wilderness is a thing of the mind. The woods and wheel are both sides of resource extraction; nature and industry. We are both."

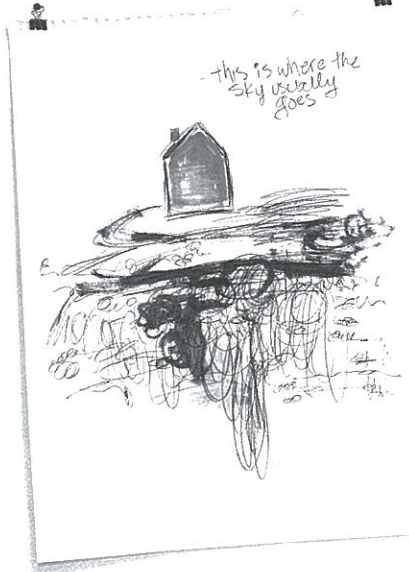
#### Endnotes

- 1 O'Neill, Thomas. "Guardians of the Fairy Tale: The Brothers Grimm." *Grimms' Fairy Tales*. National Geographic, 1999. <[www.nationalgeographic.com/grimm/article.html](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/grimm/article.html)>.
- 2 Engels, Friedrich. *The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844* (Cambridge University Press, 1845).
- 3 Marx, Karl. *Das Kapital, Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (Verlag von Otto Meisner. Germany, 1867).
- 4 Arendt, Hannah.
- 5 Sandburg, Carl. *The People Yes* (1936.)



*wheel and forest* video installation, 2015





landscape interventions, 2015;  
pen, acrylic on paper; 50 x 62cm

## Artist Statement & Bio

By **Victoria Ward**  
Artist

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The title of this exhibition comes from *Das Kapital* by Karl Marx and Fredrich Engels. While doing some research I came across an anecdote in the book regarding how England moved from an agricultural economy to an industrial economy beginning in the Elizabethan age. The aristocracy expelled people from their properties; people who had lived there for generations. There was an exodus to London and it created an enormous amount of homelessness. The Queen invoked a poor law that placed people into categories, if you had no work you were a rogue, no home you were a vagabond, and therefore you had to work as a slave. It was in a sense criminalizing poverty.

I titled this exhibition *rogue, vagabond, slave* because this is how I feel as an artist today. The contemporary art world's marginalization of landscape painting has been a fait accompli. Art used to investigate the natural world and our role in it. This duality was always a topic; I fear that these investigations are now rarely taken seriously.

The landscape paintings are about my ruralness: where I live. Being in the wilderness is desirable for creativity. Most residencies and retreats convey this idea: isolation is good for work. But the wilderness is not isolated; you are surrounded by diversity and the perpetuation of life. While this may seem romantic for some, it is for me a reminder of time and entropy. The Earth's gloriousness is indifferent to us. These little dwellings in my work are places of refuge, resilience and transformation. We take a stand in nature, we build, we develop and we gouge out the Earth just to stay here. Our efforts are remarkable and devastating.



Installation photo

I work with words in a very similar way that I paint. I push them around, use snippets of ideas, place them together and then pull them apart. These works live in a between world; they are guides for me but also serve my ongoing need to pull text and visual dynamics together.

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In Yorkshire I visited and created work inspired by the coal mines. I like to put human impact into landscape. I tried to make the last working colliery seem spectral because in a sense it is. What was important about coal in England is long gone.

The videos are reflective of the last decade. My epiphany of becoming a rural artist is that humans are everywhere and that wilderness is a thing of the mind. The woods and wheel are both sides of resource extraction; nature and industry. We are both.

#### **Bio**

Victoria Ward is an artist/writer and lives in a log cabin in the Ontario Boreal forest. Ward has been a professional artist for over 20 years and has had over 40 exhibitions across the country and internationally. A one time playwright in Toronto she now writes a blog that is read by over 2000 people and can be found at [hotspurstudio.com](http://hotspurstudio.com) and she can be followed @[hotspurstudio](https://twitter.com/hotspurstudio).

## Acknowledgements

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**James Campbell:** I wish to thank Victoria Ward for sharing her passion, vision and compelling insights through her painting, drawing, video projections and the written word. Hearty thanks also to Gary Blundell for assistance with installation and numerous other elements that led to a successful show. Sincere thanks to Ann Yeager for contributing a beautiful essay for the catalogue. A big salute to Dionne Powlenzuk for above and beyond efforts with the ever perplexing world of digital technology, and to Linda Ward for swift production of labels and requisite lists. Thanks also to Karen Henricks for another striking catalogue design, and to Jean-Michel Komarnicki for his excellent installation photography. As always, warm thanks to the people who believe in and support the VAC: our Board of Directors, The Municipality of Clarington, The Ontario Arts Council, The Rotary Club of Bowmanville, The Ontario Trillium Foundation, and our faithful membership and volunteers.

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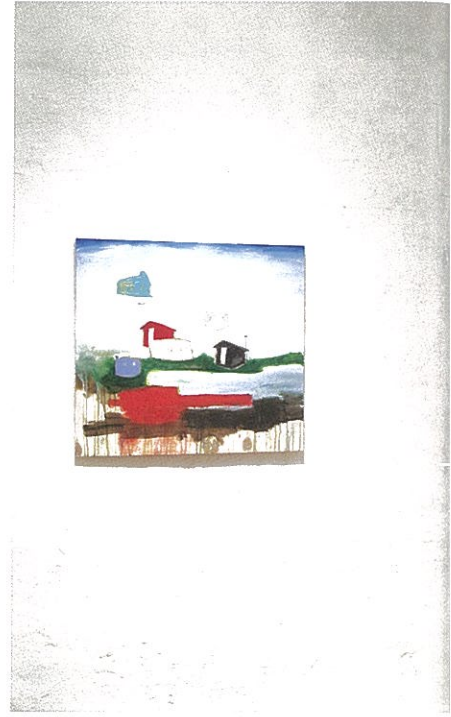
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