



Detail of "Diorama 1", 2017

***Obscura***  
**Angela Snieder**

**Exhibition:**  
January 12 - February 22, 2019

**Opening Reception:**  
January 12, 7:00PM - 9:00PM



**Alberta Printmakers - Main Space Gallery**

## Clarity through duplicity: On *Obscura*

by Daniel Harvey

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Let me be blunt: the work in Angela Snieder's current show, *Obscura*, lies to us. It lies deliberately, fully aware of its willful duplicity, while wearing a disingenuous "Who me?" smile. Her photographic prints and sculptural installations alike conspire to draw the viewer in and tell them a story, one that at first appears indexical and truthful, but which on deeper inspection reveals itself to be nothing more than a tissue of lies (literally tissue, in the case of her most recent camera obscura projection). And in this untruth lies the truth of the show's critique of mimesis, of the idea that we can uncritically believe the evidence of our eyes, and its blurring of the distinction between mimesis and anti-mimesis as it plays with the constructed nature of art in general, and particularly the (presumed) truthfulness of photographic representation.

Snieder completed a BFA at York in 2013, before moving to Edmonton, AB for her MFA in printmaking (2017). Her thesis show, which this draws upon and develops, comprised a series of photopolymer *Chine-collé* prints of diorama sculptures, large-scale digital prints pasted to the gallery wall, and a camera obscura room with three boxes projecting still images onto the walls. The sculptural elements of the *Obscura* work through a double inversion: first, the dioramas inside were built upside down, so that the images appear right side up when projected on the gallery wall. Second, where a traditional obscura functioned by introducing an exterior image into an interior space, in these the interior space of the diorama box inverts into the outside world. Each of the works, but most strikingly the projected images, appear almost as windows inviting the viewer to enter otherworldly landscapes. The works play with the idea of natural space, presenting imagery that appear at once cavernous and claustrophobic, natural and constructed, interior and exterior; the images resemble mineshafts, waterfalls, barren snowscapes, mountainsides, seascapes, and other spaces with potentially sublime and anxiety-producing affects. There is something uncanny about them, stemming from the trickery of scale, so that the images appear to be of a macro, almost geologic scale, while in fact representing the micro spaces of the diorama boxes. This current

iteration of the show extends the uncanny effect by adding elements of movement and sound to the camera obscura piece, mixing the appearance of video with the still images of the ghostly dioramas.

Consider, as an example, the "Storm" image from this iteration of *Obscura*. The 4' by 9' image appears to show us a vast, snow-covered waste, or a cave snaked by tendrils of steam or mist, or perhaps a smoke and ash filled landscape (of a kind that has become increasingly familiar in the last few years of rampant forest fires). Both fore- and background are indistinct, the former obscured by shadows resulting from the light entering from either side, the latter receding into a hazy blackness blurred by fog, smoke, or dust. The space feels capacious and naturally occurring, until the light draws your eye, and you notice the regularity of its entry points, the corrugated layers of the walls, and suddenly the scale tilts as nature evacuates the scene, and the constructed nature of the space becomes impossible not to recognize.

So. Angela Snieder may not be a liar, but her work lies. And far from being a weakness, *Obscura's* aesthetic duplicity provides, for me, its essential pleasure as art, and its interest as a cultural artifact of a period in which humans have become a geologic force<sup>1</sup> and the very concept of nature as something unaltered or unconstructed by humans seems increasingly naive.<sup>2</sup> This problem--our relationship with, and impacts upon the environments that surround us--stands as perhaps the most pressing issue we as a species have ever faced, and while Snieder's work certainly makes no claims to solve that problem (and really, what art could?), in its deception and its toying with the categories of nature and culture, of semblance and reality, it invites us to consider the ways those categories overlap, posing productive questions about how we understand their interrelations, and our own experience of them. *Obscura's* lies seem to me to follow in pattern of deception perhaps best described by Mark Twain in his "On the Decay of the Art of Lying," where he enjoins us "to train ourselves to lie thoughtfully...to lie with a good object, and not an evil one...to lie gracefully and graciously...to lie firmly, frankly, squarely, with head erect..."<sup>3</sup> Its deceptions are thoughtful ones, gracefully done, and in the end, truthful ones.

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<sup>1</sup> Captured by the term “the Anthropocene,” this idea has recently been explored by the Canadian visual artists Jennifer Baichwal and Edward Burtynsky in their eponymous 2018 documentary.

<sup>2</sup> On this, see Donna Haraway’s work on “naturecultures” (2003) and Kate Soper’s “Nature vs ‘nature’” (1995), among others.

<sup>3</sup> Twain, M. (1882). “On the Decay of the Art of Lying”. *The Stolen White Elephant Etc.* Boston: James R. Osgood and Company. pp. 217–225.

## Writer Biography

Daniel Harvey is an instructor and researcher in the Departments of Writing Studies and of English at the University of Alberta. Sometimes he writes things about art.

## Artist Biography

Angela Snieder is an artist and educator living in Edmonton, Alberta. She received her BFA from York University in Toronto, Ontario and has recently completed her Masters of Fine Arts in Printmaking at the University of Alberta. She has exhibited her work nationally and internationally, and has taught both in the University and in the wider community. Her art practice is based primarily in photography methods and photo-based printmaking, and explores themes of land and place and the relationships between physical and psychological spaces.

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