

The Small Big Picture



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1. Bill Burns, *Directors with Logs* (after still from Brion Gysin/William S Burroughs/Ian Somerville, *The (sic) Films* 1950s–1960s), 2010, chromogenic print, 16 x 23.5. Courtesy the artist and MKG127, Toronto.

2. Bill Burns, *Northern Lights with Trees*, 2010, watercolour, 9 x 12". Courtesy the artist and MKG127, Toronto.



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Bill Burns is the fabricator of small worlds that contain big ideas. It's easy to look at the objects he makes and think of them as adorable. But beneath the comfort of scale and the familiar subject matter is a rigorously applied vision that is equal parts aesthetics, sociology and politics. "My overall work comes out of a genuine spiritual interest in animals and in our relationship to them," he says. "The more I get to know about animals the more I realize that it is not just an ecological or a biological problem. Species loss is a problem for writers and cinematographers and artists because to imagine a world populated only by people and rats and coyotes is to imagine an impoverished world."

In "Safety Gear for Small Animals," his classic work begun in 1993 and continued for almost a decade, he made miniaturized versions of products (respirators, safety vests and hard hats) that would help animals avoid workplace accidents. In "How-To Help Animals Escape from Natural History," he set up tableau photographs showing animals fleeing the confines of natural history books, and in "How to Help Animals Escape from Degraded Habitats," he placed rodents inside a Volkswagen and rats curled up inside the comfortable housing of a drill.

Each of these projects was an example of Burns bringing nature into culture. He works a variation on that idea in his recent, staged photograph showing a group of Veblenesque economists (the individuals are actually Toronto artists, including his dealer, Michael Klein, as well as artists Luis Jacob and Amy Lam) who contemplate logs on which are written the names of important international art world figures, like Matthew

Marks and Nicholas Serota. The image is a re-staging of a still from a Brion Gysin/William Burroughs collaboration called *Thee Films*, but it performs a triple entendre as a play on celebrity and a surreal strategy. Burns sees it as a combination of "down home humour and Bunuelian surrealism," but it has a serious side as well. "It's an examination of the art world and its extremely specialized and very unpredictable economy." He situates the natural logs inside the context of the Veblen good, the idea that people prefer to buy commodities that cost more. "The structure of the art economy revolves around this kind of thing," Burns says, and then cites Dave Hickey's observation that "things go on in the art world that would be called felonies in any other jurisdiction."

In his most recent body of work, he continues to examine politics through objects that have been reduced in scale. "Boiler Suits for Primates (Island Life: GTMO)," 2009, is a collection of objects that prisoners would be given on arrival at Guantanamo Bay. Part of the project is a do-it-yourself kit providing construction plans for the camp's surveillance tower. Burns calls them "my IKEA plans," which he sent to a museum in Denmark where they were built in half-scale. (The usual scale of his objects is five to one.) He is aware that small isn't necessarily innocent and the tower underlines that complication. The world in miniature is a world that lends itself to the panoptic gaze: when things are small, every thing can be seen at once. The cute gaze becomes the surveillant gaze, and the little world turns from funny to fearful. ■

SEVERAL YEARS AGO I MET AN EDITOR FROM NEW YORK AT THE BANFF CENTRE FOR THE ARTS IN THE HEART OF THE CANADIAN ROCKIES. HE OPERATES AN IMPRINT CALLED SEMIOTEXT(E). HE ASKED ME TO PREPARE A BOOK REFLECTING ON MY EXPERIENCES WITH CURATORS, CRITICS, COLLECTORS AND ANIMALS. I WAS DELIGHTED. THE FOLLOWING PICTURES AND CAPTIONS ARE EXCERPTS FROM MY WORK IN PROGRESS.



ALMOST EVERYTHING I HAVE LEARNED ABOUT THE WORLD COMES FROM MY OBSERVATIONS ABOUT WORKERS AND DRONES AND QUEENS.



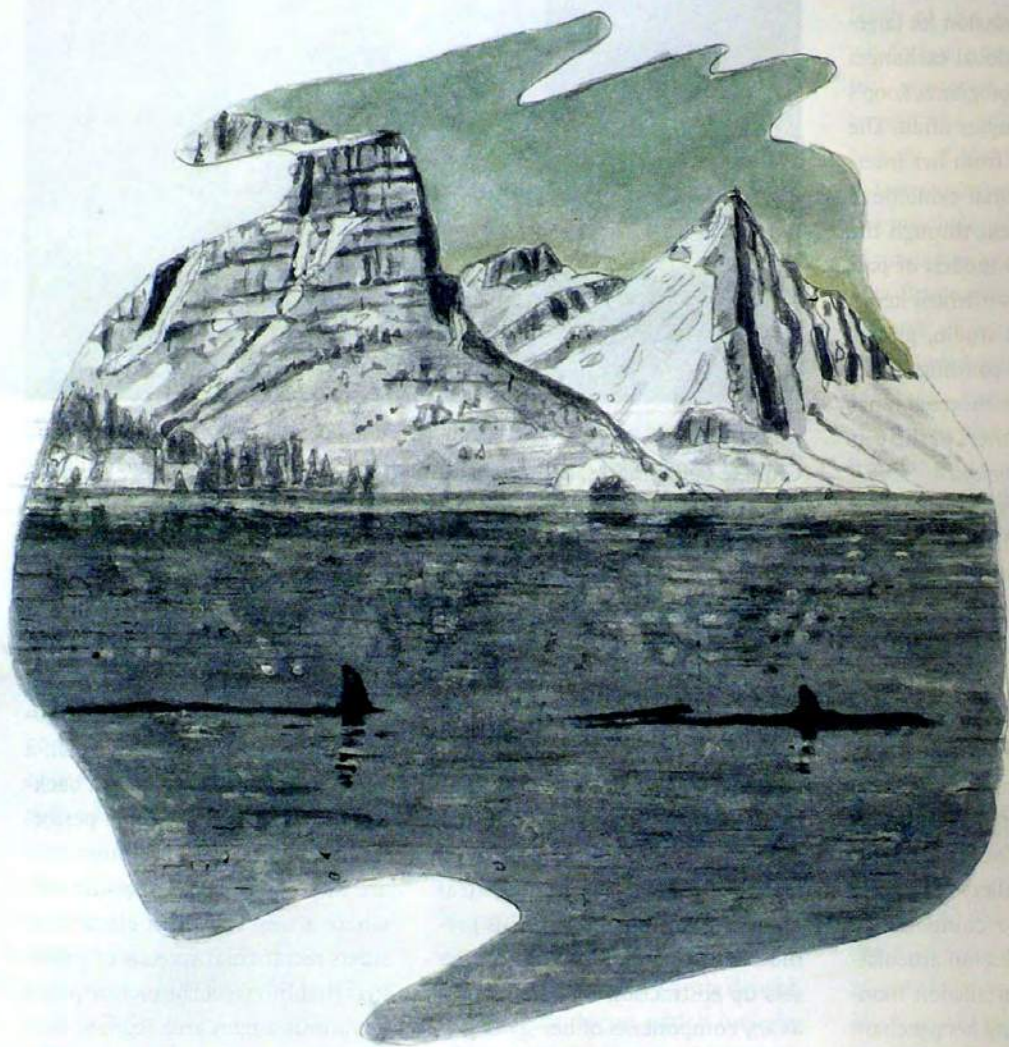
THE FACT THAT CURATORS ARE FOND OF UNGULATES HAS PROVEN AN ENORMOUS BENEFIT TO ME. MOOSE STANDING IN MARSHES HAS BECOME ONE OF MY SPECIALTIES.

I HAVE DEDICATED SEVERAL WORKS TO THE MASKED PUDDLE FROG OF THE AMAZON RIVER BASIN. THIS PROJECT IS DEDICATED TO THE COMMON TREE TOAD (PICTURED AT RIGHT).





I ALLOWED THE YOUNG ESSAYIST TO BELIEVE
THAT IT WAS A PARTICULARLY EXCEPTIONAL
EVENT, BEFORE LONG SHE COINED THE TERM 'GEO-
THERMAL MAGIC'.



THE AIR CLEARED AND THE WATER GLISTENED AS
THE GERMAN CRITIC JOINED THE TOUR. A
FEEDING FRENZY ENSUED