

Discovery



ART

THE PLACES IN BETWEEN

Dawson, Y.T., is like no place on Earth — part ghost town, part frontier outpost, part imitation of both. Its population swelled to 40,000 during the Klondike gold rush and has been declining ever since. Yet even reduced to its current 1,800-odd inhabitants — some of them very odd, indeed,

whether native-born or part of the unlikely collection of artists, wayfarers and outcasts who have somehow landed here and never left — the place exudes an almost mystical presence, staking its claim at the confluence of the Klondike and Yukon rivers as if it belongs here every bit as much as the local grizzlies or the northern lights.

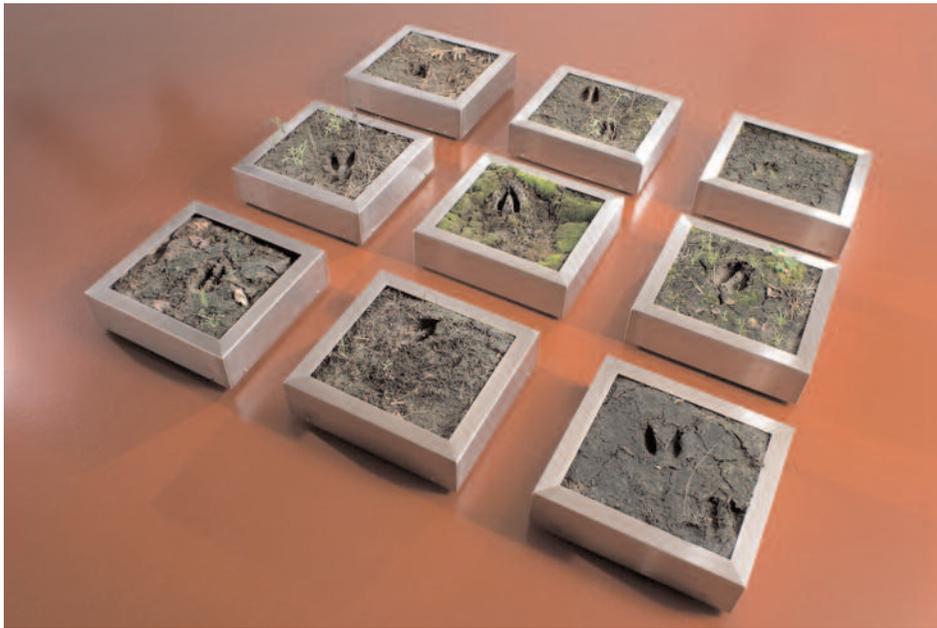
What better location, then, for a discussion of how the places we live help shape who we are. That is what has brought me, along with writer Alistair MacLeod and visual artist Iain Baxter&, to Dawson's Dänojà Zho Cultural Centre, dedicated to the area's First Nations, as part of a road show examining the role that place plays in the arts and in our lives. Launched in Windsor, Ont., in 2007, the *Sense of Place* project is the brainchild of Windsor Printmaker's Forum president Patricia Coates. The show has travelled to Chatham, Ont., Toronto, London and Whitehorse, with further stops planned for Sudbury,

Free to ignore moments of restlessness in the mind (ABOVE), by Dan Steeves, and *Adam Medley's Secrets of Ventriloquism — Now Revealed* (BOTTOM).

Thunder Bay, Corner Brook, N.L., and Cape Breton, N.S. Combining presentations and public discussions with an exhibition of print works on the theme of place that range from the literal to the esoteric, from traditional lithographs to actual deer prints encased in earth, *Sense of Place* shines a spotlight on how our environments imprint themselves on us, remaking us as much as we remake them.

My own role in the project has been mainly as a moderator in discussions between MacLeod and Baxter&, two artists who, at first glance, could not seem more different from each other. MacLeod, one of the giants of Canadian literature, writes fiction rooted so firmly in his native Cape Breton that his characters often seem as inalienable a part of its landscape as the sea that batters its shores.





Quarry, by Patricia Coates (LEFT).
 BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT: *Roots*, Dianna
 Rae Borel; *Muskkrat*, Erik Edson;
Jamu Di Condo, Kenneth Pattern.

Baxter&, meanwhile, who has long been the bad boy of the Canadian art world, takes inspiration from as far afield as Japan and outer space and delights in the ephemeral and the superficial as much as the lasting and the profound, an inclusiveness that is nicely summed up by the ampersand he appended to his surname some years ago. Yet for all the differences between these two, their discussions have revealed an uncanny complementarity. Baxter& tends to show us where we are going; MacLeod, where we have been. The goal in each case, however, seems the same: to help us understand where we are.

One of the revelations of our road show has been how much the “where we are” has shaped our discussions at each stop. It is a different matter to talk about place in Dawson or Windsor — where I notice a visceral attachment in people that seems to come, in part, simply from hav-

ing survived against adversity — than in Toronto, where the discussion is more about the loss of such attachment in an increasingly homogenized urbanness. But the bigger revelation has been that as much as every place is like no other, particularities, when they are entered into fully enough, have a way of becoming universals, so to understand one place fully is a way of understanding all places. As a young man, I couldn't wait to get free of the small farming community near Windsor where I grew up, yet it has turned out to be so deeply a part of me that it has come up again and again in my writing, not only as itself but also as a template for places as far-flung as a mountain hamlet in Italy and a first-century village overlooking the Sea of Galilee.

The job of making the particular universal is one that the arts do especially well, whether it is in the stories of

MacLeod's stories, the video is about how we place ourselves, and make a place for ourselves, in the surrounding landscape. Ultimately, such explorations are about understanding our own ecology, about seeing the places we come from not as mere spots on a map but as the sum total of a complex web of relationships.

Our stay in Dawson ends with a trek beyond the treeline into the Tombstone Range, where the ecology includes the two young backpackers from Austria we encounter, the grizzly someone spotted down the road and the countless varieties of grasses and mosses and berry bushes that carpet the slopes, with their subtle gradations of yellow-green and splashes of purple and red. This is a place, if ever there was one. Like no place on Earth. One afternoon is all it takes to leave its indelible imprint on us.

Nino Ricci

