

# Vines and Borderlines

Curated by Hannah Keating

When first adapted into English, *vignette* was used to describe a decorative border drawn onto the blank pages of a book, most often those appearing at a chapter's beginning or end. Borrowed from the French noun for vine, a vignette typically mimicked the curl and creep of plants that cover and wrap their way around edges and across surfaces. Such illumination made those pages beautiful, but also marked a transition in the space and time of the text, a natural break where the reader might pause and reflect. Eventually the term referred to a head-and-shoulders portrait, typically engraved or photographed, whose limits faded gradually into the background: a likeness that emerges from the page as if from dreamy memory.

A third use appeared at the turn of the twentieth century. Taking hold of the notions of likeness and borders, it was the name given to short, evocative descriptions. In the context of theatre and literature, it describes a brief representation or set of parameters. In this sense, it recalls the original meaning of the word as a frame, one that contains the specifics of fine details, but also produces open spaces and suggestions of more to come. The artworks in this exhibition are vignettes of utopia and dystopia and of security and threat. They are narrative but fragmentary, and ask viewers to ponder everyday banality and spectacle, space and world-making, and the relationship between the borders that define, create, confine, and permeate.

David McMillan's photographs of Pripjat, Ukraine capture spaces abandoned by humans fleeing an invisible but serious threat. Radiation from the 1986 meltdown at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant rendered the surrounding area unliveable; with few exceptions, the evacuated have not returned.<sup>1</sup> Pripjat was a Soviet city conceived and erected as a worker's paradise and in McMillan's images it is pictured in various stages of collapse.<sup>2</sup> Plants and outside breezes invade walls that formerly defined *indoors* and the once-lauded utopia has become a symbol of dystopic disaster. Nevertheless, like other nuclear accident tourists who visit these sites, McMillan discovers scenes of peaceful reclamation that evade the singular horror one might expect. Indeed, the visible presence of nonhuman life eases and aestheticizes the severity of the accident so that the photographs are at once cautionary, post-apocalyptic, and paradisiacal, due to nature's act of repossession.

Within the area of evacuation, widely known as the Zone of Exclusion, radiation exists at above-average levels. Overtime, the absence of humans has opened a space for nonhuman animal populations to thrive and it has become something of a wildlife sanctuary. Situated at a radius of roughly 30 kilometers from the epicentre of the explosion, the area's perimeter meanders throughout Ukraine and across the Belarusian border. While the accident has been attributed to inadequate security measures in the reactor's Soviet-era design and neglect of safety procedures during a routine test of the facilities, the shape of this disaster-made place was determined by many interacting forces. For one, the zone is located between Ukraine and Belarus due to Soviet occupation and the ambitions of an empire. Parallel to the development of nuclear power in the twentieth century was the race for nuclear weaponry, international posturing, and intimidation tactics; McMillan's photographs are positioned within this history and so become cautionary tales of the scale and devastation of nuclear war. In addition to these human actors, and their errors, the actual particles of radiation play a role in shaping the dimensions of the place. Unseen, except by radiation detection devices, they assert an authoritative presence that has forced human exclusion from the area.



David McMillan, *Tree in Classroom*, 2005; *Village Office with Damaged Ceiling*, October 1996, 1996. Chromogenic colour prints. Collection of the School of Art, courtesy of the artist.



Glenn Lewis, *Survival Paradise I*, 1976.  
Serigraph. Collection of the School of  
Art; donated by Bill Lobchuk.

In a similar way, Glenn Lewis' print reminds us of the simultaneous and collaborative place-making of human and nonhuman agents. The suburban Vancouver home in *Survival Paradise I* (1976) is adorned with a mossy weight. Its yard and porch proliferate with growth; leafy bodies both fill and form the space. The decay of the home's wooden slats suggests the region's moist climate and affirms the persistent revolution of the cycles of time. French theorist Georges Perec once wrote "space melts like sand running through one's fingers."<sup>3</sup> Like time, spaces resist stasis, as illustrated in the *Survival Paradise* series.

"Space melts like sand  
running through one's fingers."  
- George Perec, *Species  
of Spaces and Other Places*

Inserted into this scene of transgressive lawn management—transgressive from the perspective of most North American suburbs, but perhaps not in this, a 1970s pocket of west coast hippies—is a highly-manicured garden. The two are contrasting images of colliding borders, one free-spirited, the other carefully conceived and mathematically precise. Planted and pruned, the garden is a collaboration with nature. In the ornamental garden, the gardener forms bushes and shrubs into walls. Districts are carefully defined so that flower beds are contained in one pattern or other. Stone and earth guide the soles of feet; fountains and views interrupt and redirect gazes; aromas excite and please. Constant and vigilant attention is required from the gardener, even when the intended aesthetic is more free form. It's all storytelling and Lewis' horticultural interests rest in its metaphoric association with myths of paradise and utopia: Mazes recreate the passage from birth, through life, to death and gardens feature in creation myths the world over. The narrative of the garden is constructed in the turn of a path, in the rewards at the centre of the maze, or at its conclusion when the walker breaks free.<sup>4</sup>

Treading the familiar paths of her neighbourhood, an attentive walker can sense its boundaries as they yield to new spaces. When crossing a street, circling a corner, or passing a fence, the structure of the walker's world reveals itself. Other times a mere shift in the architecture, children playing on the road, or cars clogging the streets make her aware she is somewhere new—if distracted, she might not notice at all. Change *and* connection coexist at the border; it is the street that both separates houses and "enables us to get from one house to another."<sup>5</sup>

Behind glasses and under hats, swathed in scarves and warmed by mittens, the figures in Libby Hague's lithographs are wrapped in the physiological and psychological borders of self. Structure is established in the geometry of the city, which also frames and separates. Figures look, notice, walk, and gather: actions well suited to the street, but unusual choices for centre stage. They are moments of brief public encounter and appear as vignettes from filmic montage. The performative and material nature of public spaces facilitates the exchanges and border crossings that are inherent to acts of noticing and gathering. What do these people see? And why does that crowd gather? Is the man looking the flâneur, or are you?



Above: Libby Hague, *The Women Walking*, 1978; *The Crowd Gathering*, 1978; *The Man Looking*, 1978. Monochromatic lithographs. Collection of the School of Art donated by Dr. Ben Shore.

Below: Andrew Valko, *False Security*, 1985. Woodcut. Collection of the School of Art; donated by Anna and Lyle Silverman.

Viewers certainly occupy a voyeuristic position in Andrew Valko's *False Security* (1985). The yellow hula hoop in this print reminds me of childhood swimming lessons. In a game of water-based limbo, the hoop was half-submerged for the first round, then raised higher and higher as kids, one by one, leapt through the void. We did so with high formal ambitions, holding in our minds visions of Sea World and the Little Mermaid, convinced we were replicating balletic dives. When jumping through the hoop, most kids made up for their lack of grace with fearlessness or some profound sense of security. After all, the person holding the hoop



was a life-saver: the red tank top with stretchy-banded whistle was the uniform of someone who wouldn't let you down (or, more exactly, drown). Other kids were more wary. They didn't trust the hoop or themselves. And in this print, I am equally suspect.

Here, the hoop is a floating target beneath which a transient figure swims. He is below the water's surface and therefore out of reach. Just as the hoop attempts to enclose him, the swimmer stretches beyond its circumference.

And yet, the hoop also acts like a pause button. As if from a surveillance camera, viewers occupy the narrative tension of a moment held fast in time and space and yell "caught!" If we press play, the story will assuredly unfold with a watery attack. But the nature of that attack is ambiguous. An unwelcomed splash or a more sinister assault, we can't be sure. Valko's squared-in drama withholds the story's end.

Like the surveyor who records and represents natural terrain and political boundaries, Valko maps characters from an unnamed narrative onto a grid of tiles, each of which hover in their own state of precarity. In this way, the artist captures the false security of buoyancy and of order, but what of borders? In a global world, mass migrations and the rise of nationalism have brought the transgression and fortification of state boundaries to the fore of political discourse, popular media, and for innumerable individuals, into the drama of daily life. That is to say, borders frequently carry the same charged qualities of that innocuous yellow circle and the saga of place-making continues.

*Vines and Borderlines* demonstrates how edges, frames, and margins construct and constitute space. Like those early scripts of tendril and leaf, they are fluid and entangled. The artists employ overlap and intrusion to question the nature and culture not just of borders, but of space, security, and the constant construction and reconstruction of



place. Walking links these works. From the casual strolls of Libby Hague's lithographs to the catastrophe tourism of David McMillan's photographs to the wandering path of the maze, there are movements and crossings. In *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, Tokyo, Venice, and London*, Lauren Elkin describes walking as an act of "mapping with your feet." She says it helps her to "piece a city together," to sort out things on her mind, and "above all, [she walks] because it confers — or restores — a feeling of placeness."<sup>6</sup> Because in walking you perceive and cross borders, apprehending meaning, spaces, and other movers as you go.

## Endnotes

1. Despite the evacuations, some residents have returned to their homes and a number of power plant workers enter the zone to complete a decades-long project that will disassemble and fortify the damaged facility.
2. George Johnson, "The Nuclear Tourist: An Unforeseen Legacy of the Chernobyl Meltdown," *National Geographic* (October 2014).
3. Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Places*, edited and translated by John Sturrock (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 91.
4. Glenn Lewis, *Bewilderness: The Origins of Paradise* (Vancouver: The Vancouver Art Gallery, 1979).
5. Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Places*, 46.
6. Lauren Elkin, *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, Tokyo, Venice, and London* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2017), 21.

## Exhibition Checklist

1. Libby Hague (Canadian, b. 1950). *The Crowd Gathering*, 1978. Monochromatic lithograph. Collection of the School of Art; donated by Dr. Ben Shore.
2. Libby Hague (Canadian, b. 1950). *The Man Looking*, 1978. Monochromatic lithograph. Collection of the School of Art donated by Dr. Ben Shore.
3. Libby Hague (Canadian, b. 1950). *The Woman Noticing*, 1978. Monochromatic lithograph. Collection of the School of Art; donated by Dr. Ben Shore.
4. Libby Hague (Canadian, b. 1950). *The Women Walking*, 1978. Monochromatic lithograph. Collection of the School of Art; donated by Dr. Ben Shore.
5. Glenn Lewis (Canadian, b. 1935), *Survival Paradise I*, 1976. Serigraph. Collection of the School of Art; donated by Bill Lobchuk.
6. David McMillan (Canadian, born in Scotland, 1945). *Tree in Classroom*, 2005. Chromogenic colour print. Collection of the School of Art, courtesy of the artist.
7. David McMillan (Canadian, born in Scotland, 1945). *Village Hall, April 1995*, 1995. Chromogenic colour print. Collection of the School of Art, courtesy of the artist.
8. David McMillan (Canadian, born in Scotland, 1945). *Village Office with Damaged Ceiling, October 1996*, 1996. Chromogenic colour print. Collection of the School of Art, courtesy of the artist.
9. Andrew Valko (Canadian, born in Czechoslovakia, 1957). *California Resurrection*, 1985. Linocut on paper. Collection of the School of Art; donated by Anna and Lyle Silverman.
10. Andrew Valko (Canadian, born in Czechoslovakia, 1957). *False Security*, 1985. Linocut on paper. Collection of the School of Art; donated by Anna and Lyle Silverman.