## On Jae Hoon Lee's Garden, Muriwai, and Sunset Hadleigh Tiddy

To get to the Victoria University Library's ground floor these days, provided that your way isn't obstructed and re-routed by the perpetual army of bright orange construction cones, you have one of two options: the first is from the north, coming in from the outdoor space in front of the Old Kirk building and heading down a long, florescent-lit corridor, past Louis' Café, and turning left. The other way is to come in from the west, by navigating through the giant, interlocking Hub, which you could have gotten to from any number of directions. Whichever way you choose, you'll be likely to encounter one or two of the more recent Victoria University Art Collection acquisitions: three 'digital manipulations' by a South Korean artist named Jae Hoon Lee. *Garden* (2010) and *Muriwai* (2009) hang side by side in the long corridor behind Louis, sitting quietly out of the major flow of foot traffic. *Sunset* (2007), the senior of the three, hangs by itself on the south side of the hub, across from the Sushi shop and above seats where students eat their lunch.

Each of the pieces are large c-type photographs of the natural world, digitally manipulated and printed with pigment ink onto photorag, framed behind glass. They are impressive specimens indeed: each is about five foot squared, which even if you're standing a few feet away still manages to engulf your vision with striking – almost lurid – colours. *Garden*, showing a birds-eye-view perspective on some kind of large bush or shrub surrounded by a concrete wall, is an intricate explosion of viridescence – complexly layered leaves shimmer and pop out of the frame in ways that seem impossible for a flat image. The first time I saw it, it had me puzzling for about ten minutes on what exactly was going on, and I even believed for a short while that I was looking at a stereogram. *Muriwai*, to *Garden's* right, is a little less intense – taken

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Actually, that's not entirely true: on the day I began writing this essay, the two pieces in the walkway had vanished from their usual spot beside the coffee shop. When your author visited them in order to take notes and photographs, he had a rather large fright, and spent the next half hour on a search that led him, eventually, into the deep, dark bowels of the Adam Art Gallery. It turns out that there had been yet another round of construction that was due to happen in said walkway, and an attentive and pragmatic curator had quickly whisked them out of harm's way for the time being, and they were now being (safely) stored in the workshop, and he was kind enough to take me down there to have a good stare. For the purposes of this essay, though, I'll just pretend that they are still up on the wall.

presumably at Muriwai beach, it's a picture of shallow waves gliding in under a dusk/dawn light. Like *Garden*, there's something going on in the composition and colouring of the piece that's tricky to pick out. *Sunset*, awash in celestial gold and blue, is much more clearly a manipulation: we see a cloud shown at an impossible angle, with surrounding clouds and sky breaking apart all sense of normal direction and perspective. Like the others, though, it's hard to see exactly *how* the photo's been manipulated. That, actually, is the major element of all three pieces: *inscrutability*.

Lee's work has always had a strong trend toward exploring the relationship between nature and technology. Many of his projects involve the digital manipulation of natural images just like this. *Nomad*, for instance, featured the "collaged landscapes of Nepal, Auckland, India [and] Korea", as well as a "slow moving work of the naked artist languidly performing in a gigantic tree". In one single-channel video called *A Leaf* (2003), leaves were scanned for a year before being digitally threaded together to create a virtual time-lapse of growth. Beginning in 2002, under a project entitled *Flesh*, he began documenting the daily changes in his body by scanning parts of his skin onto a flatbed scanner, recording the changes in colour, tones, and blemishes. This soon began to include the flesh of friends, acquaintances, and neighbors — a record of the way that the natural body shows up when perceived through intense digital scrutiny.

The fact that it was these artworks chosen to be hung in the new Hub building is telling. It's no secret anymore that the idea of University, as a whole, is in a state of decline: like the realm of Castalia in Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game*, were are growing more and more distanced from the issues of the "real world" – issues like global hunger, war crimes, climate change, animal injustices, and inequality. Professors refrain from taking political and ethical stances at the risk of losing their jobs. Swathes of students graduate every year, degree in hand, mistakenly expecting it to advantage them in the job market. Grad students hone their theses on ever-more increasingly narrow, arcane, and tunnel-visioned subjects, losing out on the broader and more balanced issues at hand. Of course, I'm just as guilty as anyone else – during a recent visit to my parent's

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> "Intimate Camera" by Aaron Seeto; http://jaehoonlee.net/intimate-camera/Accessed 22.9

house, I was suddenly left floundering when I attempted to explain next year's course of study: "It's, uh, about, you know, the role of genre and literary form in, um, the development of 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century Chinese Buddhist poetics." Really?

It's no surprise, either, that the academy's disconnection from the natural and social environment around us is manifest in the very architecture we inhabit. It's easy to see this in the changes brought about by the new Hub, for instance, and how it differs from the old Quad. What once had an open-air flow is now sealed in and airconditioned, barred from the elements by gigantic glass doors that look out onto a vista of concrete and brick. Where the sky once loomed overhead is now replaced by a jagged, tectonic ceiling with florescent lights, only a small strip of natural light available if you're at one of the edges of the room. Unlike the Cotton building and other areas of the University, there are no plants around, although the lime-green paint and light-brown furniture make a fair go of trying to emulate the colours. Giant flat-screen televisions (referred to romantically by I.T. Staff as wallflowers) line the back and sidewalls. Apart from the change of display on these screens, the area is totally void of anything connecting it to natural ways: no breathing, no movement, no wetness, no cycles, no life or death.

And this is why the choice of Lee's *Garden, Muriwai*, and *Sunset* is so potent. The pieces were acquired at about the same time that construction on the new Hub was completed, and have graced its walls ever since it was opened. These are the last remaining tokens of a world of which we are no longer a part, and as flat images are reduced to just that: tokens. In fact, they aren't even really accurate tokens of the world outside—they are bright, jazzy, fantastical, über-luscious. They are hyper-real and extra-ordinary. That's not to say they're not absolutely gorgeous—which, of course, they are, almost bewitchingly so—but that on a deeper level they reveal something fundamental about the way we think about the environment around us. The works literally embody our current relationship to the natural (and by extension, the cultural, social, political) world: that it is no longer *us*—that it is even, in some sense, *inscrutable*. No longer is it the place we inhabit—rather, it has become something to be viewed through glass, in passing, on the way to the library.