

Laura Lamb

UTOPIAS IN A LITTLE BOX

Utopias in a Little Box - An Introduction

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The Concept of Nature in Laura Lamb's Videos

PETRA WATSON

Artist's Statement (2003)

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Utopias in a Little Box: An Introduction

By Brian Foreman, 2003

This trilogy of short videos created by Vancouver artist Laura Lamb presents delightful, imagined worlds that are magically animated. For these videos, Lamb created little environments on a tabletop using a variety of materials, often consumer goods that one would find at second hand thrift shops. These miniature stage sets are visually rich. They range from idyllic parkland to a dense city made of glass, from meadow to desert, jungle and frozen mountaintop. Shot close up and often with soft focus, each set playfully intrigues and evokes a sense of wonder and even nostalgia in the viewer.

Laura Lamb
Utopias in a Little Box, 1986-1987

video
(37:21 minutes)
SAG 1996.08.01

installation view, Surrey Art Gallery, 2003

The Strangest Dream proposes a world at peace – a garden of delights, with plants flowering, birds singing and fountains flowing. Underscored by the lyrics sung by Pete Seeger that “all the world had agreed to put an end to war”, the video recalls post Second World War optimism for a new and better world, a time when Lamb lived in remote towns of Northern Ontario with her family.¹

A Day in Glass City evokes the modern city with its gleaming glass towers, while at the same time, suggests Victoria’s highly decorative architecture

of Victorian and Edwardian buildings. Lamb resided briefly in Victoria and was interested in how that city projected an image of an urban world of everlasting beauty and pleasure, an image that she began to question.

Reliable Clowns is a kind of travelogue. Four plastic clowns, manufactured by the Reliable Toy Company, start their exploration of the world in a flowery meadow. Their travels take them to a wind-blown desert sparsely populated by plants made from wires and transistors, down a river gorge and into a jungle



Laura Lamb, *The Strangest Dream*, 1986-87, video (11:50 minutes) SAG 1990.04.01.A (video still)

created from fabrics, netting and artificial plants. The clowns, who have been laughing all the way, end at the top of a windy ice-covered mountain where they find a glass piggy bank full of coins.

Laura Lamb has brought these three videos together with the idea of utopian worlds. Utopia, as a concept, was first used in the publication of Thomas More's book *Utopia* in 1516. Thomas More envisioned an island with lasting social order and peace. Since then, utopia has become a term for hope, and for social, political and economic change. Utopia is a state that one aspires to achieve. The roots of the word utopia derive from two Greek terms: *eutopos*, which means a place of happiness and perfection, and *outopos*, which means a place where 'no-where' exists. Embodied then in the word utopia is an ironic concept of a place that we desire to attain yet can never reach.

Lamb's videos present us with different versions of utopia.² Each of us has different expectations as to what form a place of perfection would take. For instance, at the time when Lamb created these videos, Vancouver was the host city for the 1986 World's Fair. There had been much discussion and debate about holding Expo '86 and what its impact would be on the development of Greater Vancouver and the entire province. Many people looked forward to seeing Vancouver transformed into a 'world-class' modern city. Others viewed the fair as a way to launch the province's tourism industry, and exploit the burgeoning "eco-tourism" business. Some people, however, worried about the resulting changes that would occur. For them, this would mean the loss of a peaceful, idyllic community. For each group, their ideal was something different. Now the province has entered into this discourse again. With the coming of the Winter Olympics in 2010, the same questions are

being asked. What will be the impact on Vancouver, the Lower Mainland and the Province? Who will benefit? And whose version of an ideal society will be realized?

Notes

1. Ed McCurdy, *Last Night I Had The Strangest Dream*, (New York: Almanac Music Inc., 1950). See Lyrics (accessed 2011-07-19).
2. One of the utopian ideals of the Twentieth century was the development of the suburb, a place of retreat from the urban core, where people would live in gardens and amongst trees in a genteel community. The Surrey Art Gallery has presented numerous exhibitions exploring ideas about suburbia in relation to Surrey's communities. Lamb's work was exhibited at the Surrey Art Gallery in an exhibition called *Arcadia/Paradise/Utopia* in 1993. It was acquired into the collection in 1996. In 2003, the work was presented in conjunction with the permanent collection exhibition *Worlds of Wonder*.

The Concept of Nature in Laura Lamb's Videos

Petra Watson, 2003

Utopias in a Little Box (1986-87) is a trilogy of three videotapes: *The Strangest Dream*, *A Day in the Glass City*, and *Reliable Clowns*. The work presents an inquiry into how our understanding of nature is not so much 'natural', but influenced by representation, traditionally painting and photography, and increasingly video and film. Historically the state of nature has signified a harmony with humans, hence the reference to utopia. In these tapes the observer

is given a significant amount of visual pleasure in viewing the fabricated tableaux—in spite of its sometimes, overbearing artificiality, but the only living thing that appears in the tapes is a goldfish swimming in a small aquarium. The visual splendor of these tapes, therefore, presents an ambiguous manifestation of human relations with nature.

In this trilogy Lamb presents nature in its diversity as something to be contemplated, following traditional conventions of nature, but natural perception is a constructed analogy that is as artificial as it is natural. In the tapes, the artist fashions memories of a sweet nostalgia, but she also suggests that in the world at



Laura Lamb, *A Day in Glass City*, 1986-87, video (10:30 minutes) SAG 1990.04.01.B (video still)

large a significant decline in the natural environment has taken place. Nature, therefore, is considered as untouched by human activity, and the videotapes set out to position nature as primarily a cultural artifact. This concept is where Lamb's tapes begin.

Nature in all three tapes is a 'material' world evoked with a playfulness, or sense of puppetry, realized through a reliance on our contemporary culture of disposal goods, objects gathered from thrift stores or having a five-and-dime department store aesthetic. The end result turns the pleasures of appreciating nature into a far darker world than the bright contrasting colours of plastic ferns and flowers that form the environments of the tapes.

Lamb's view of nature and society is significantly influenced by the humanist ideologies of her parents. Their ideas were significantly rooted in the communist idealism of the 40s and 50s, and a working class belief in a socialism that projected the sensibilities of a utopia immersed in nature. Lamb spent her childhood winters in Winnipeg and her summers in a cottage camp at Laclu, near Kenora, Ontario. This was the family business, and left-leaning people from industrial labourers to lawyers patronized the camp. Fittingly, the videotapes are submerged in a lush, if highly artificial, environment of water, similar to the lake of her childhood. The first tape of the trilogy *The Strangest Dream* is a tribute to the memory of her father.

Significantly, it is the soundtracks of all the tapes that turn the utopic brightness of an artificial environment into a world at the brink of a larger environmental disaster. Central to the soundtrack of *The Strangest Dream* is Pete Seeger singing: "the world had all agreed to put an end to war." Pete Seeger's strong social consciousness sets the background for Lamb's own dreamscape of her childhood at her parent's camp, and the naming of wildflowers

compose a landscape, not visible, but recalled as a memory or dream: Queen Anne's Lace, Golden Rod, Water Lilies, Wild Oats, Trilliums, etc. These are recalled as nature's bountiful gifts to humankind, but distance preserves their autonomy: "if you picked them they always had bugs." But sometimes nature provided more comforting plants that could be eaten: "rosehips, which wrinkled and got soft over the winter . . . seeds that were full of sweetness when you chewed off the skin."

The second video in the trilogy, *A Day in the Glass City*, was influenced by the city of Victoria where Lamb completed her MFA. Victoria is a very clean and pretty city, almost artificially so, and in many areas of its central core presents itself as if designed primarily for tourists. This tape presents this rose-coloured world submerged in a watery environment of trinkets and merry-go-rounds.

The third video, *Reliable Clowns*, presents a series of narratives performed by toy clowns (manufactured by Reliable Toys in the 1950's, hence the tape's name). Less contemplative, but consequently more serious in its utopic/dystopic analogy, this tape presents an increasingly technological environment—trees made from cast-off wires, for example. The clowns with their fixed, outlandish grins are immersed within a soundtrack of uproarious laughter mixed with music of a marching band. There is a sinister feeling that this is a darker side of the world, and this tape seems to sum up the message of the other tapes. Here the artists inserts in these tableau more direct questions of the transformation of the natural environment into an artificial, lived space, and the concept of progress is played out against a dehumanization of the modern world.

The "little box" of the title refers to both the highly, fabricated 'natural' environments of the videotape, and the video's original mode of presentation,

the small-scale video monitor or television. In this exhibition the tapes are projected on the wall of the gallery creating a surreal interpretation of natural beauty as a highly artificial tableau. Video came into its own as a medium used by artists during the 70s and 80s. At first, videotapes as art did not find an easy positioning within a fine art aesthetic or as a critique of the glossy images of commercial television. But today, video has moved from screening tapes on a monitor to being projected. These moving images in the gallery are finding an easier acceptance in the viewing space of a gallery, and consequently a larger public.

Lamb has a MFA from the University of Victoria. She has taught at Kwantlen University College; Emily Carr College of Art and Design; University College of the Caribou; School for Contemporary Art, Simon Fraser University; and the University of Victoria. Recent solo exhibitions include the Kwantlen Art Gallery, Surrey (2003); University College Gallery, Kamloops (2002); Access, Vancouver (1996); and the Floating Gallery, Winnipeg (1993). Group exhibitions include Surrey Art Gallery (1993); University of British Columbia, Fine Arts Gallery, Vancouver (1992); Glenbow Museum, Calgary (1991); and the 5th International Video Festival, New South Wales, Australia (1990).



Laura Lamb, *Reliable Clowns*, 1986-87, video (15:010 minutes) SAG 1990.04.01.C (video still)

Artist's Statement (2003)

Laura Lamb

My first art practice was making and performing with puppets, an activity I began as a child. I returned to puppetry as a young adult, performing for children's birthday parties and on the street, but abandoned it as I became involved, in university, in a more culturally sophisticated, modernist visual art practice (involving photography and text).

In part, my video works represent a return to my lasting fascination with puppetry. The essential quality of puppets is that they are inanimate objects, which come magically alive in their own special space, separate from the everyday world. Puppets tend to be humorous, I think, partly because of the discrepancy between their enchanting power and mystery, and their awkwardness and material humility. There is a marvellous gap between cause and effect that I find wonderful.

The first video in the trilogy *The Strangest Dream* was made as a tribute to the memory of my dad, and to his sensibilities, which have affected my own. His idealism and humanist utopianism were rooted in a working class culture of unionism and socialism that went back generations in his family. We lived half the year in an idyllic setting, which was also a family business, Lambs Camp, near Kenora, Ontario. The camp itself had a utopian past. It had been known in the 1920s as the One Big Union (IWW) camp. I was fascinated as a child with this and other glimpses of a past, which I connected to through my father's stories, his archaic British idioms and games, and family photographs of earlier times at "the lake". It seemed so strangely distant, a time when women wore long skirts and people made their own simple entertainment, yet I was linked to it through my father

and my home. I think that strange disjunction of time influenced an undertone of nostalgia and melancholy in my work.

The Japanese, apparently, have four different words for what we call melancholy (*furyu*). Two of those concepts seem to describe the mood of *The Strangest Dream*. One concept is *aware*, which is an awareness of the vanishing away of the world. The other is called *wabi*, which is a sad mood, in which something rather ordinary and unpretentious is glimpsed in its "suchness". In my work these melancholies interweave with a number of other ambiguous constructs of time, like utopia and dreamtime.

The second video in the trilogy is *A Day in Glass City*, an examination of my then location in a particular point of history and geography. Victoria is a pleasant place, full of pleasures and delights; sunny, pretty, clean, full of flowers and healthy, well-educated and prosperous people. But I felt an undercurrent of awareness that this was a temporary and fragile anomaly in the world. I was conscious of certain effort required in denying this fragility, an effort which created a grating sense of unease and anxiety within this seeming utopia.

The third video in the trilogy is *Reliable Clowns*, in which a collection of toy clowns, manufactured by Reliable Toys in the 1950s, take to the road laughing compulsively. It is a parody of quest narratives and of the modernist master narrative of progress.



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