



Dyan Marie's

# CANADIAN EXPERIENCE

by Tila Kellman

*Experience Canada: Canadian Experience* reads the red and white text on Dyan Marie's large photographic installations located at The Tree Museum near Gravenhurst, Ontario. The Toronto artist is well-known for her photo-based art, which examines environmental and social issues. Mimicking the formats of commercial advertising, her billboard and banner installations reconfigure characteristic Canadian Shield landscapes in combination with peopled Toronto streetscapes. Nineteen banners with the same imagery hang from utility poles along a stretch of Bloor Street West in Toronto. Marie's installation dis-assembles the universal assumption that Canadian identity is entwined with its natural landscapes. It is a poignant critique of the ubiquitous advertising by Canadian tourism and heritage agencies that features the sparsely populated Canadian outdoors. *Experience Canada: Canadian Experience* also reflects on the notion of place and being Canadian. It asks the following questions: What might Canadian nature mean to Toronto's diverse population? Why should anyone assume that urban dwellers, especially from immigrant communities without a tradition of the great northern outdoors, identify with Canada's wide-open spaces at all?

Marie's images show people relaxing in front of small storefronts, walking along Bloor Street West, or walking in the woods. Whereas most images feature recognizable people standing in cityscapes or landscapes, the interiors of these contours of men and women are partially filled with forest scenes. Small details of these people posed against storefronts imply that they might come from a mixture of backgrounds. *Experience Canada: Canadian Experience* scrutinizes the promise of enjoyably losing oneself in the nature captured in Canadian landscape painting since the mid-eighteenth century. Institutionalized as the quintessentially Canadian experience by the Group of Seven and the National Gallery of Canada, this notion is perpetuated today in places such as Environment Canada's "Water & the Canadian Identity" webpage and the "Experience Canada" media pavilion at the G20 Summit in Toronto.

Marie's first billboard stood next to The Tree Museum entrance gate, advertising the sculpture park as visitors' chance to blend with nature. The second installation, a banner, was placed among trees against a granite knoll so that image and reality competed with each other. The obdurate rock and intervening



vegetation subtly presented the case that they are not just a landscape domesticated by photography that visitors can appropriate, but also a reality with its own distinct demands. The last billboard was strategically sited in a small, natural rock amphitheatre, overlooking a meadow surrounded by young (unthreatening) forest. The same scene is found in some of the photographs. The billboard partially blocks the long, inviting view so that the images precede the reality and you read the images first. They exemplify the proposition that images, especially photographs today, govern perception and understanding. What is, then, "Canadian experience"? Has it always been more about images supporting nationalist ideals of self-reliance, risking danger, or getting in touch with the spiritual from the haven of the city, and less about all that land out there?

Along Toronto's Bloor Street West, the hanging banners turn out to depict neighbouring shops, with their shopkeepers as the forest-filled figures. Marie, a resident of the area for more than 20 years and a friend of many of the merchants, photographed volunteers in front of their stores and collected

stories of their expectations of Canada. Many of them had been attracted by those famous, beautiful posters of unpopulated Canadian landscapes because they had seen not only room for desired futures, but also a lack of government regulation in apparently unpopulated territory. Not surprisingly, the realities of Canadian regulatory and physical environments and the difficulties of establishing themselves in cities far from the panoramic outdoors did not match the hopes and expectations of many of them.

The Canadian experience and the experience of Canada are made one. Canadians have a strong identity with the land, with nature, and the outdoors. Country scenes are populated with people and the people in the city are filled with the country. Bringing the two together is truly a Canadian experience to be proud of.

[www.dyanmarie.com](http://www.dyanmarie.com)