



# FANTASY GARDENS

Stuart McCall & Neil Wedman

The history of Fantasy Garden World, a former Richmond, BC nursery and theme park, is one filled with an eclectic mix of characters and converging narratives, now to include this exhibition by Vancouver artists Stuart McCall and Neil Wedman. Although history plays a key role in the works of McCall and Wedman, the purpose of *Fantasy Gardens* is not to produce a didactic historical exhibit but to bring two divergent contemporary art practices together through a shared history. These works have been pulled from the eye of a historical storm, so to speak, where facts, fantasies and human foible have conspired to bring them to this place.

In May of 1992, Neil Wedman attended the criminal trial of the recently resigned Premier of British Columbia and leader of the BC Social Credit Party, William (Bill) Vander Zalm. Vander Zalm was charged with criminal breach of trust in the sale of Fantasy Garden World, a nursery and roadside theme park he purchased in

of their grand scale and elevated themes, Wedman's drawings evince a sense of irony, subverting these generic conventions as they represent Vander Zalm at the shameful depths of his decline. For Wedman, an artist drawn to idiosyncratic historical phenomena and intrigued by the 'comic dimension' of Fantasy Gardens, the trial presented the opportunity, like the final act of a tragicomedy, to observe the closing of curtain.

Working independently of the news media Wedman was free of the constraints typically placed on contracted courtroom illustrators. His drawings reflect this autonomy in relaxed yet purposeful expressions of line and a refined aesthetic renders them more closely to life drawings than to courtroom illustrations. Of the numerous pencil sketches that Wedman produced during the two-week period twenty-two of the drawings appear in *Fantasy Gardens*. What began as drawings made with subversive intent,

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## Converging Narratives

1984 and subsequently sold to a Taiwanese conglomerate while premier. Although allegations of impropriety had already led to Vander Zalm's resignation in 1991, he was acquitted of all charges following a two-week trial by judge in 1992. Vander Zalm was the first premier in British Commonwealth history to face a criminal breach of trust charge.

During the trial Wedman sat in the vacant jury box, joining courtroom sketch artists hired by news agencies to record what became a sensational event in provincial politics and the news media. Interested in exploring the visual and discursive strategies of 19<sup>th</sup> century history painting, and intending to paint a large-scale work based on the trial, Wedman produced numerous sketches, primarily of witnesses but also the Counsels, Chief Justice and Vander Zalm. Unlike traditional history paintings, however, that seek to immortalize and commemorate by way

became a series of intimate portraits recording individuals participating in a historical event. The portraits dually function with a specificity and anonymity. Some of the individuals will be recognizable to those who know them, however many will not. The individuals exist somewhere between then and now, known and unknown, and appear as fleeting as the manner in which they were drawn.

Fast-forward nearly two decades. For years Stuart McCall had driven past the Fantasy Gardens property and in 2008 he learned that it was slated for re-development. His curiosity surrounding the dormant park coincided with his interest in documenting derelict structures and properties in states of transition. In the spring of 2010, he first entered the park with his camera, passing through more than a decade of tangled growth. McCall returned several times that year to photograph the buildings and gardens during



NEIL WEDMAN *Cross Examination of Fay Leung by Peter Butler* (detail), 1992-94, pencil on paper, 18" x 24"

the spring and winter seasons. McCall's decision to photograph in black and white reveals a garden in what seems, a silent state of suspension. The buildings on the site have been long empty of activity and the statuary, toppled or broken, is in ruins. Though pockets of rhododendrons and lupines still flower, and views of a small bridge across a lily pad-covered pond suggest a picturesque past, a sense of pathos pervades. The last time McCall visited the site was in the fall of that year when all but one of the buildings was demolished. One photograph from this visit, not included in the exhibition, depicts a swath of land and the stand-alone salvaged replica of a Dutch castle. A selection of fourteen black and white photographic works documenting the empty park is included in the exhibition.

In its heyday, the defunct tourist attraction was known to have been a great source of pride for Bill Vander Zalm and his wife Lillian who purchased the 21-acre botanical garden in 1984 for 1.7 million dollars. The Vander Zalms transformed the property from the site of a modest nursery into a surreal landscape that centered on a faux-Dutch village and included biblical themed gardens and a functioning miniature railroad that transported visitors throughout the grounds. A large working windmill announced the entrance to the gardens while Giverny inspired ponds, a plywood replica of Coevorden Castle and a version of Noah's Ark formed an assemblage of mixed periods and fantasies. The Vander Zalms even lived for a time in the castle that was originally gifted by the Dutch city of Coevorden—the ancestral home of Captain George Vancouver—to the people of Vancouver for Expo '86. Following Expo, Vander Zalm purchased the Castle from Vancouver and had it moved to Richmond from its previous location on Georgia Street.

Four years after the Vander Zalms' purchase of the Fantasy Garden property, their application to the Agricultural Land Reserve commission to lift development restrictions was approved, dramatically increasing the property's commercial value. In 1990 the Vander Zalms sold Fantasy Garden World Inc., to Tan Yu, head of Asiaworld (Canada) Development Corporation for an estimated 16 million dollars, prompting a public investigation of the transaction that eventually led to the 1992 breach of trust trial. The park remained open for several more years, before closing permanently.

*Fantasy Gardens* came together by way of circuitous serendipity. It was McCall who first suggested bringing the two bodies of artwork together for exhibition. When looking at a drawing of Wedman's that he owned depicting a garden gate, McCall was struck by some of the pictorial similarities to his photographic prints of Fantasy Garden World. In a later conversation between the two artists, Wedman reminded him of his own drawings of the Vander Zalm trial, and the circuit was complete.

The drawings and photographs created nearly 20 years apart, in spite of their different treatment of recording history, share an irony in their documentation of the public spectacle of a failed Premier and a tattered theme park with a name that includes 'Fantasy' in its title. Both artists share a stake in how that history is remembered; Wedman was recording 'history' live, as it was being made, and McCall recorded the ruins of a history many years later. Wedman's light pencil drawings carry the authority of documentation and provide an elegant counter point to the weight of McCall's richly dense almost melancholy landscapes. Together they present a portrait of a poignant history.



NEIL WEDMAN

*Wilburt Hopper, Chairman, Petro Canada*  
(detail), 1992-94, pencil on paper, 18" x 24"



STUART MCCALL *Fantasy Gardens 4441*, 2010, Archival Inkjet print, 18" x 28"

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**FANTASY GARDENS**

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**COVER**

Stuart McCall, *Fantasy Gardens 4408* (detail) 2010,  
Archival Inkjet print, 18" x 28"

Vancouver artist, **Stuart McCall** is an artist creating primarily photo-based works. He began his career as a commercial photographer in 1982. His images have been published widely, featured in publications that include Time Magazine, Fortune Magazine, Saturday Night, Photography Monthly, Boston Globe, Times of London, as well as in books by National Geographic and Douglas & McIntyre. His work has been recognized by Communication Arts, the Lotus Awards, and International Photography awards. Living in Vancouver, BC since 1968, he has been making images for over 25 years.

Since the 1990s he has worked with Vancouver artist Neil Wedman on various photo based projects which have been exhibited widely. These include "Every Bus Stop from My Place to the Racetrack" 1997, and "Movies 'til Dawn" 2009. Represented in Vancouver by the VAG Art Rentals and Sales and in Calgary at the Axis Contemporary Art Gallery, his work has also been shown at the Surrey Art Gallery, Port Moody Arts Centre, and Canvas Gallery in Vancouver.

**Neil Wedman** is an artist with a thirty-year studio practice. Making paintings stands at the core of his practice but he has devoted equal attention to producing drawings and works on paper including print editions, book-works and photographs. He has also made a number of short films and musical recordings although not many of the latter.

He is currently completing a cycle of work that will constitute two exhibitions; *Selected Monochromatic Paintings and Works on paper Part 1* opened in January 2012 at the Equinox Gallery and *Part 2* will open exactly a year later at the Charles H. Scott in 2013. In the meantime he continues to live and work in Vancouver where he was born and is represented by the Equinox Gallery and teaches at Emily Carr University and Simon Fraser University.

**RAG**

