

# BELOW THE SEA OF FOG

by Roger Larry

Exhibition

May 18 - June 15, 2024

Opening Reception

May 18, 2024, 1 to 5pm

Artist Talk

June 15, 2024, 2 to 3pm

**GALLERY 881**

881 East Hastings Street, Vancouver



# **Below The Sea of Fog**

## **Roger Larry**

Exhibition Dates  
May 18, 2024 - June 15, 2024

### **Exhibition Statement**

During the three plus years of the pandemic, we were all set adrift. The pandemic haunts us still. For myself, it was marked by my family's health challenges and my own work reversals as a feature filmmaker. We all have suffered. The act of creation was my refuge. I took over 15,000 images in this period. Before the pandemic most of my art production was film installation and photography. Most of the photography was tableaux of people at work and play. But as the pandemic wore on, I found myself wandering in Stanley Park focused instead on dark eerie landscapes that spoke to my state of mind.

In the year or so after COVID, I thought more about my photos and also about their location and I realized that the haunted quality I felt in Stanley Park during COVID was not, of course, solely my own. It was also entwined with the history of the Coast Salish people, the original Indigenous inhabitants of the lands now called Stanley Park. Before mounting this show, I went on tours with Coast Salish guides. I will not be sharing the stories the Coast Salish shared with me on those tours; that is their prerogative. However, I was advised by my Coast Salish guides that using the original Indigenous place names in the titles of the works would be a respectful way to allude to what has haunted the park long before me or COVID.

Ultimately, the show tells an elliptical story. It begins with a "Romantic" portrait and ends with an evocation of Armageddon. It's the culmination of the journey from the naïve and romantic to a gothic space where doubt and devastation reign supreme – personal, political, and environmental. - Roger Larry

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## Roger Larry Biography

Roger Larry is a filmmaker and lens-based artist. Three of his film installations, co-authored with Mark Lewis (2009 Venice Biennale Canada Pavilion artist) screened at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) PS1 in Brooklyn in 2013. He has a large body of photographs and film installations made over the last twenty years but is only now attempting to exhibit them autonomously. Roger was featured in a group show in December 2023 at Gallery 881, part of a sponsored competition by the international lens-based art magazine, BROAD Magazine. Roger is also one of the founders and curators of SlideNight, a popular quarterly salon of lens-based art in Vancouver.

Roger's feature films include Crossing (2004), Citizen Marc (2013), and Cool Daddy (2019). Citizen Marc is currently streaming on Amazon Prime. Cool Daddy is streaming on CBC Gem. Roger was also creative producer on Mark Lewis' first feature film INVENTION, which premiered to great acclaim at the Toronto International Film Festival and the Berlinale in 2015. - rogerlarry.art

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“Below the Sea of Fog / Overlooking  
Slah-kayu’sh” (2022)

Archival pigment print;

Finished wood frame

29 x 31 inches

Edition of 4

\$2500



“Where the Acheron Meets the Stolo”  
(2022)

Archival pigment print;

Finished wood frame

29 x 31 inches

Edition of 4

\$2500



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“Back Mound at Ahka – Chu No. 1”  
(2022)

Archival pigment print;  
Finished wood frame  
27 x 37 inches

Edition of 4  
\$2500



“The Lethe remembers Xwá’yxway”  
(2022)

Archival pigment print;  
Finished wood frame  
27 x 37 inches

Edition of 4  
\$2500



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“Back Mound at Ahka – Chu No.2”  
(2022)

Archival pigment print;  
Finished wood frame  
27 x 37 inches

Edition of 4  
\$2500



“Where the Lethe Meets Ahka - Chu”  
(2022)

Archival pigment print;  
Finished wood frame  
27 x 37 inches

Edition of 4  
\$2500



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“Beneath Ahka - Chu” (2022)

Archival pigment print;

Finished wood frame

27 x 37 inches

Edition of 4

\$2500



“From Ahka - Chu to Yggdrasil” (2022)

Archival pigment print;

Finished wood frame

27 x 39.5 inches

Edition of 4

\$2750



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“The Bend at Ahka – Chu” (2022)

Archival pigment print;

Finished wood frame

27 x 37 inches

Edition of 4

\$2500



“Path back to Xwáyxway” (2022)

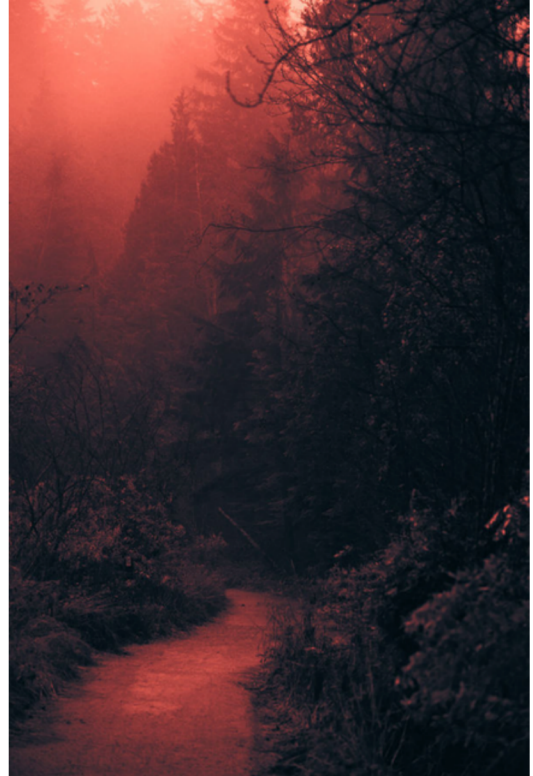
Archival pigment print;

Finished wood frame

41 x 61 inches

Edition of 4

\$5000



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## **On Roger Larry's Below The Sea of Fog**

**By Mark Lewis**

*My painting, I know what it is beneath its appearances, its violence, its perpetual play of force; it is a fragile thing in the sense of the good, the sublime, it is fragile like love.*

Nicolas de Stael, in a letter to his dealer Jacques Dubourg in December 1954

Amy Hempel's short eponymous story (barely eight lines long) from her recent collection *Sing to It: New Stories* (2019), opens with the following: 'At the end, he said, No metaphors! Nothing is like anything else.'<sup>01</sup> Or, everything is only everything if you forget about all the rest. Some years ago, a friend shared an experience she had on a plane, flying from Toronto to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. She was sitting next to a young man from Pakistan, aged around 22 or 23, en route from Karachi to take up a graduate scholarship at the University of Saskatchewan. He had the window seat; my friend had the aisle. As they were getting close to their destination, the young man tapped my friend on the shoulder and asked: 'What is all that whiteness down there?' My friend leaned over and looked out the window and of course everywhere down below was carpeted with snow. When I have retold this story, people have usually thought it cannot be true as they assume everyone, especially those travelling to Canada for postgraduate studies, would know what snow was, how it looked, that it was white. And sometimes I have thought that I have got the story wrong, that I have forgotten some detail or indeed made the whole thing up.

Recently I was flying to Saskatoon, probably on the same scheduled flight as my friend and the young man from Pakistan. I was going to Saskatchewan to make a film, and as I needed lots of snow, I was travelling there mid-winter. As the plane approached Saskatoon, I too looked out the window and for the first time I understood the young Pakistani man's puzzlement. There was indeed snow, lots of it, everywhere. But there was a strangeness to what I saw, and this was not simply due to the fact of snow. Looking out the plane window, the whiteness seemed to go on forever but with little articulation. In fact, it did not really look like 'snow' at all.

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It appeared as a strange and unworldly whiteness, with its own peculiar perspectival and spatial laws. It was strange too because it was not completely unfamiliar: there were still a few roads, buildings, occasional trees, etc., but nothing looked exactly right. I might well have asked the person next to me to explain what I was looking at.

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic arrived, its disaster *mise-en-scène* dramatic in arrival and effect, with huge death counts, immediate lockdowns, and restrictions on travel both near and away. To me it felt a little like going to bed one night, everything articulated, sharp and recognisable, and then waking to realise that while you had been sleeping the world had been both covered and confused by snow. Quotidian, second nature things became experiences thick with puzzlement and surprise. Think here of the then new ‘correct distance’ between people, even those close to you; or the missing repertoire of facial expressions of strangers and colleagues; or the geography of public space where the absence of much human life felt like a sign; or the silence in the high sky and the return of birdsong lower down. These barely noticed signs of etiquette and humanity (at its best and worst) became things to discover, think about, and reckon with. This was a magical defamiliarisation of our lives with formal, social, and political consequence. The Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky describes this effect or device – *ostranenie* – as the quintessential art effect, the work of the work of art – the work of making the world strange, again. Here art reveals a world that can look back at us, destabilise us, a world that challenges the viewer to see difference, to see something new, as if the world’s very form has been overdetermined by something homologous to an aesthetic effect.

For quite a long time, many artists could not go to their studios. Some could not even go outside because of health compromises. Many lost their income, some of which will never return. Art institutions that had supported and presented artist’s works shrank; others permanently disappeared. It was an unsettling and made-strange landscape. Thankfully, as far as I can tell, there seems to have been little appetite for an art of Covid paraphernalia.



One important effect of the Covid era is that it enabled, in comprehensive and readable form, political and cultural action, particularly Black Lives Matter and related decolonial interventions. Here the Covid paraphernalia was essential: from the masks that gave people confidence to join others outdoors; to the copious home-delivery cardboard boxes that were the material for inventive and beautiful home-made signs. 'Covid time' itself produced possibility, particularly for the young: it allowed time for spontaneous gatherings and protests where people could express their collective horror and anger at racism and discrimination, and articulate the need for a different, better future.

Most of all, the making strange effect of the virus revealed that it, like most other disasters of Capital, was not even handed in its punitive terror, and that race and class were significantly determinant. If there is any gift from Covid, even today after the many disappointments and ugly backlashes, I think it is a rare moment of political transparency, a significant and rupturous condition that though in retreat, still rumbles on. Some kind of sublime.

For Roger Larry, despite the uncertainties and gloom, the necessary life-style changes, the health threats, as well as imagined catastrophes, Covid 19, with its restrictive consequences, enabled a radical rethink of his artistic practice. The film he was working on with the CBC, about Vancouver as a centre for international stolen and untaxed money, was cancelled. Other projects in development were paused. Long recognised for his clever and thoughtful documentaries, his work as a show runner on network reality shows, and as an early Canadian pioneer rock video director, Larry began to take stock, to think about what he could do, how he might continue his artistic work otherwise. He had always loved photography and with the aid of a new high-resolution camera he began to photograph each day. Because of the pandemic he was unable to venture far, so he homed in on trying to understand and depict neighbouring Stanley Park.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Stanley Park is, literally and metaphorically, Larry's backyard. My son Oak, when he first met Larry in Vancouver some years ago, thought Larry lived in the park, so often did we bump into him there. Larry knows the park inside out, knows its history and its different iterations, and when I lived in Vancouver in 2011, he would always take me to special spots, framing up compositions with his hands (we only had Blackberries back then), and excitedly describe how this shot or that shot (and there were more than a few) would one day feature in a film he was working on. Well, these compositions, as far as I know, never featured in any of Larry's films. However, I am pleased to note that we can see some of them here in this exhibition of his recent work. These pictures are beautifully composed, carefully rehearsed (see above), and shorn of showboat pictorialism. Of course they depict the beauty of the park, but Larry's photos draw their critical strength from the staging of the park as a place of transformation, of historical and contemporary inhabitations, many of which have been neither righteous nor disinterested.

Each year trillions of digital photographs are taken across the world, many millions of which no doubt feature Stanley Park. Do we need to, and if so, how do we register the difference between these and the images that artists like Larry are making? Larry's pictures acknowledge this very vital and contemporary question, by drawing upon and provoking the complicated and referential histories of this kind of depiction. Landscape pictures did not always belong to iPhones and social media, but the fact that they might 'belong' there now is of no less interest to Larry than everything else. Julian Barnes recently wrote of the shock – and for some the disappointment – registered when standing in front of the actual subject or object of circulating reproductions. Barnes speaks particularly about the effect this circulation had on his experience of Velazquez's painting *Los Meninas*. He described how muted the colour and contrast of everything is when compared to their instagramification. Landscapes are transformed in this way and no photograph of 'nature' in general and of Stanley Park in particular, is readable without this long historical cabinet of pictorial execution. Larry's choice of black and white must be significant here; and more on this below.

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The fantasy of a virgin (North and South) American landscape was an invention of white colonialists, made after the one hundred years separating the arrival of the first white settlers and the eventual death of 90% of the indigenous populations through genocide and disease – a death toll greater than the entire European population of 1500. Fire farming, practiced for thousands of years across the Americas including the Amazon, disappeared, almost overnight, leaving behind a growing fantasy of untouched primordial nature. Today's beautiful 'intact' landscapes are brought into existence through and alongside this history of death and destruction. See for instance Larry's pictures of Beaver Lake, a place used for thousands of years by the Musqueam and Squamish. His pictures depict a zone once logged for profit and then some years later became an important summer spot for white Vancouver residents with its cafes, concerts, and cabins. The romantic sublime of the location today, where few people go and there are no longer concerts, is felt in Larry's photographs as an invention of all the images ever made of constructed and conflicted places like this. Larry's images ingest this and then detail nuance.

Many of the photographs Larry shows here have a mysterious dusk and darkness about them. Things merge, edges disintegrate and photography itself appears as material. Shooting in black and white is important for Larry, as it accentuates here the work's materiality, making it difficult, even impossible, to know if the images are appearing out of their darkness or disappearing into it. It is an important, definitional question for photography, where light can easily overexpose and wage war with itself. Think if you are looking for new planets in distant galaxies. You would know that all the wonderful magical light from hundreds of billion stars, both dead and alive, is simply pollution that stops you from seeing what you want to see. So, if you want to see something then, really see it, sometimes you need to see past the light, and catch the dark precarity. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, in a much-quoted passage, writes: "to perceive this darkness is not a form of inertia or of passivity, but rather implies an activity and a singular ability. In our case, this ability amounts to a neutralization of the lights that come from the epoch in order to discover its obscurity, its special darkness, which is not, however, separable from those lights." The darkness in Larry's photographs, like silence, is an important location; its full of meaning and therefore full of possibility. Darkness is also doubt, an unsettling uncertainty, a lack of self-confidence – what Maurice Merleau-Ponty found in Paul Cézanne, for instance: a doubt without end.

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It is in the inscrutability of Larry's photographs, in their darkness, so to speak, that Stanley Park begins to come alive with bits of everything. Indigenous populations have lived in The Americas for at least 17,000 and possibly as long as 130,000 years, and the 'nature' of The Americas has been tended, rearranged, protected, battled for, destroyed and at times surrendered to, by hundreds of diverse cultures across thousands of years. There is not even a single blade of grass in the park today that has not in some way been determined and formed through this historical nature-culture portmanteau.

The 'old growth' trees of Stanley Park, featured in some of Larry's photographs, were probably born on the grounds of ancient custodial ambitions. The land's most recent fate sealed in part because local Indigenous invention did not include firearms, and indigenous bodies were unable to fend off 'foreign' diseases often introduced deliberately. For the long curated and cared-for 'natural' landscape of the Americas, the white settler was a bad throw anomaly, uprooting and changing everything in less than a century.

It's by looking and thinking about Larry's images that the above thoughts came to me, more properly, to this text. And as I was writing about his work, I remembered a line from a letter Henry James once sent to the educationalist Graham Balfour: "the rarest works pop out of the dusk of the inscrutable, the untracked."

## **Mark Lewis Biography**

Mark Lewis is a Canadian artist, best known for his film installations. His work focuses on the technology of film and the different genres which have developed in over 100 years of film history. In 2009, he represented Canada at the Venice Biennale. He has had solo museum exhibitions at the Musée du Louvre, Paris (2014), The Power Plant, Toronto (2015), the Art Gallery of Ontario (2017), the Museo de Arte de São Paulo (MASP) (2020), and at numerous other international museums.

His work is in many collections including the National Gallery of Canada; Museum of Modern Art New York; Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris; the Centre Pompidou (Paris), the Museo de Arte de São Paulo and the Musée d'art Contemporain de Montréal, among others. In 2007, he received the Gershon Iskowitz Prize and the Brit Art Doc Foundation Award. In 2016, he received a Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts. He is Professor in Fine Art at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank the following for their help. In particular, I am grateful to Sandra Tomc and Mark Lewis who offered unfailing kindness and support throughout this process. Also absolutely crucial to the creation of this show was the help of my Coast Salish guides at Talaysay Tours, Candace Campo and Seraphine Lewis. Sincere thanks as well to Paul Ohler, Scarlett Larry, John O'Brian Monica Reyes, John Goldsmith, Printmaker Studio, Julie Lee, Hieu Nguyen, Nathan Chen, Michael Williams, Helga Pakasaar, Erin Siddal and Paul Armstrong.

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## About

Gallery 881 is a contemporary lens-based art gallery promoting the photographic arts through exhibitions, art sales, public events, and other visual art based programming. We offer a selection of artwork available for purchase from each exhibition, our Salon Wall, the Flat File Project drawers, and the Book Zine Wall - a library of independently produced publications. Gallery 881 is sponsored by PrintMaker Studio and is grateful to operate on the unceded traditional territories of the *xʷməθkʷəy̓əm* (Musqueam), *Skwxwú7mesh* (Squamish), and *səlilwətał* (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. Contact Director and Curator John Goldsmith for submissions and collaborations.

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