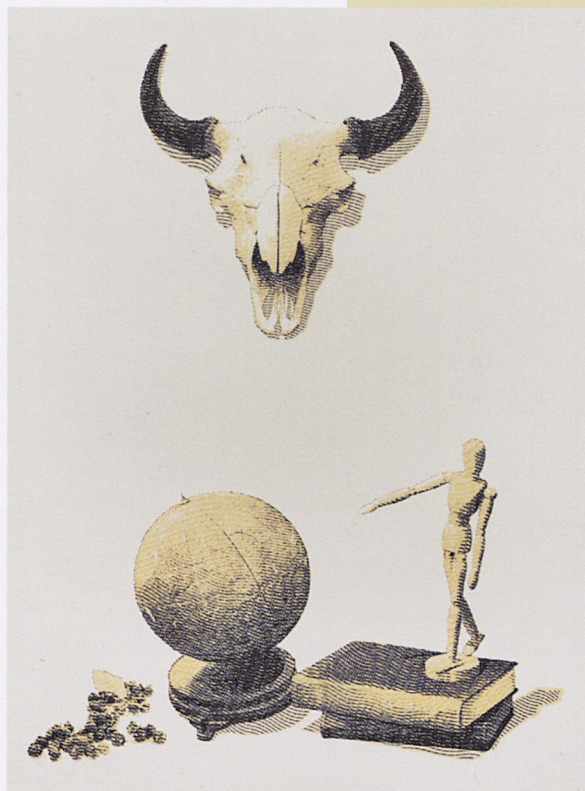


LEE HENDERSON

A Hand That Points Aligns the Air
Visiting Artist Residency Exhibition

October 20 –
November 18, 2017

Artist Talk and
Opening Reception
Friday, October 20
6:00-9:00pm



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LEE HENDERSON: A HAND THAT POINTS ALIGNS THE AIR

BY DANIELLA SANADER

“And you really get such a queer connexion when the philosopher tries to bring out *the* relation between name and thing by staring at an object in front of him and repeating a name or even the word ‘this’ innumerable times. For philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*.”¹

Raise your hand and point your finger. Is that the direction in which you’re headed? Is that somewhere you can access, a place where you deserve to be? Straighten your arm, lock your elbow, tuck three fingers and one thumb inwards to your palm, point your index finger forward. (*There.*) There are three gestures staged throughout Lee Henderson’s print series *A Hand That Points Aligns The Air* (2017): an outstretched palm becomes a perch for a resting crow; a miniature artist’s mannequin points stiffly at a painted globe; languid fingers reach downwards to graze against the crown of a cracked skull. Dark lines twist and crisscross along each palm and finger, vagaries of tone in litho layers of yellow, blue and black.

Here’s how it happened: Lee renewed his Canadian passport. It’s a new design, issued by the Canadian government in 2013. Flip through those blank pages and you’ll perhaps recognize a similar aesthetic technique. Niagara Falls, Terry Fox, Ottawa’s Parliament Hill, shown in densely-rendered lines that twist and crisscross. Lee’s asking you to look a bit closer, to squint your eyes and peer. These aren’t just delicate marks, but rather a narrative of nationalism on infinite repeat. It reads: CanadaCanadaCanadaCanadaCanadaCanada CanadaCanadaCanadaCanadaCanadaCanada. Here’s an image of the Fathers of Confederation rendered with the name of the nation they would establish. Here’s an image of Indigenous symbols built through the very language of colonization, spelling out their surfaces as if to be colonized was their political—historical, biological, cosmic—destiny.



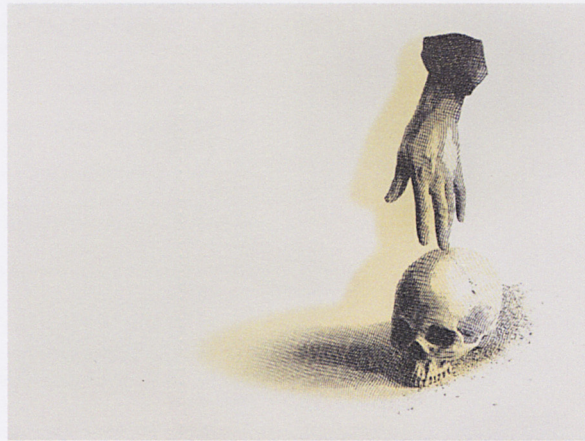
Perhaps a passport is like a pointing finger. Both stand in for larger subjects, both *identify*: your age, your address, your citizenship, your microchip, your fingerprints, your DNA. Both stake claim. (There. *Here*.) It's a declaration that's embedded in the twists and whorls of your fingertips. Watch as they snake outwards and constitute the land around you, watch as they stitch you into the fabric of this place. Watch the careful sleight-of-hand² as that document—that pointing finger—doesn't announce your claim to territory so much as illustrate the authority that was, somehow, already deep within your skin.

Perhaps a passport is like an open palm. Here I'm thinking of palmistry, of reading lines and creases. Divining where you've been and where you're going, all from the wrinkles on your hands. In your passport, stamps at airports accumulate like signs of age, signs of use. Here's your love line, your health line, your life line: Lee calls his prints *memento mori* for the nation-state. Throughout art history, a *memento mori* hasn't represented death itself, but stands as a reminder that it's waiting around the corner. Still-life paintings include arrangements of a skull, an hourglass, a barely-wilting bouquet, a half-used candle: death is on the other side of all our worldly things. Yet no *memento mori* would be complete without an image of *vanitas*, symbols of the human illusion of permanence. Lee shows us these in abundance: a book in hardcover, a painted globe, a mapmaker's compass. Tools for knowing, for exploring, for marking territory. (A passport, a nation.) Repeating their marks and gestures allows us to declare authority in the face of something unknowable.

However, who among us hasn't felt the disorientation of a name wandering away from its referent? Repeat any word enough times and it begins to lose its meaning. Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote

(continued overleaf)

[continued from overleaf]



about language going on holiday (no passport required), about philosophers producing misguided relations between words and things through language-games and repetition. It would seem that nation-states have an opposite power: as if repeating a name—through the printed word, through gesture, through institutions and decrees—secures its place in history. Yet, as Lee points out, perhaps the truth lies somewhere in the middle: just as Canada is constituted through these repetitious gestures and utterances, perhaps they can also break down, render the nation-state nonsensical. Language left on holiday. If you repeat that name long enough, what forms of dissonance can it produce?

Or rather, what would a *memento mori* for Canada look like? A breakdown of sovereignty, written in the very language that declares its permanence? Lee has arranged these simple vignettes, staged like the cluttered desks of philosophers, mapmakers, artists, those historic figures who have often constructed our *vanitas* worldviews. These scenes are built from those same syllables on infinite repeat—CanadaCanadaCanada—yet they're not promising the same impossible authority. Perhaps it's in the staging: Lee's prints are no more or less symbolic than the images of Terry Fox and Niagara Falls in his passport, but they wear their breakdowns more clearly. Around that human skull, dense shadows fade as the words grow more and more diffuse, more fractured. A trail of Canadas evaporating onto lush Arches paper, like the end of a life line. It's not here yet, but it's not far off. Maybe you can follow its inevitable trajectory. Maybe you can trace it in the palm of your hand.

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1953): 19.

² Here, Lee suggests the French equivalent for the phrase: *legerdemain*. He tells me he loves its archaic wordiness.

Artist Bio

LEE HENDERSON

Lee Henderson's practice includes video, photography, installation, sculpture, performance, and text. His work moves in constant contemplation of death, in senses grand and minute, somewhere between the persistence of collective histories and the brevity of individual lives. Notable recent exhibition venues include The Phillips Collection at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the Magenta Festival Boston, The Zero Film Festival (USA); The Dunlop Art Gallery, The Mendel Art Gallery, The Rooms Provincial Art Gallery, and Zalucky Contemporary (Canada); and Samaband Islenskra Myndlistarmanna, Reykjavik (Iceland). During 2017 he has been a Visiting Artist at Open Studio, and the Canadian Artist in Residence at Glenfiddich Distillery (Dufftown, Scotland). He teaches at OCAD and Ryerson Universities, and is represented by Zalucky Contemporary in Toronto.

Lee Henderson would like to thank Pudy Tong, Daniella Sanader, Juliana Zalucky, Anna Gaby-Trotz and all at Open Studio.

Author Bio

DANIELLA SANADER

Daniella Sanader is a writer and reader who lives in Toronto.

VISITING ARTIST PROGRAM

Through the Visiting Artist Program, Open Studio is accessible to all professional artists, with or without printmaking experience, to explore and develop new bodies of work through print media. Every year, four artists each produce their work in the Open Studio facilities followed by a two-person exhibition in the Open Studio Gallery. See openstudio.ca/residencies for further information.

Images

Front Cover: *A hand that points aligns the air (centre)*, 2017, photo-lithograph, 30" x 22". Printed by Pudy Tong under the auspices of the Open Studio Visiting Artist Residency program.

Interior: *A hand that points aligns the air (left)*, 2017, photo-lithograph, 22" x 30". Printed by Pudy Tong under the auspices of the Open Studio Visiting Artist Residency program.

Back: *A hand that points aligns the air (right)*, 2017, photo-lithograph, 30" x 22". Printed by Pudy Tong under the auspices of the Open Studio Visiting Artist Residency program.

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