

Framed by darkness, a Victorian costume drama unfolds amidst silent forest fog. Hunkering at the precarious edge of landscape we act as voyeurs to 16 minutes of mute and mesmerizing play. *Afternoon Croquet* by Karin Bubaš depicts a croquet game *in medias res*, but a grander, less literal game is underway as the photographer's slow-motion video projection elongates and complicates the inherent cinematic elements of the relationship between landscape and wardrobe. As in her still photography, Bubaš maintains meticulous control over the positioning of the photographer and subject, subject and landscape, and most notably, as she manipulates the relationship between costume and landscape, celebrating a Hitchcockian appreciation of the power of artifice to narrate the coexistence of the sinister and the lovely.

In the beginning is the forest; four heads emerge in the foreground as their figures with backs to us stride into the scene from somewhere behind the camera's left shoulder. They carry their mallets. They walk as if through us, oblivious to us. Not until they are some distance away, arranged on the middle ground, do they turn to show their faces, now too far away to be read.

The photographer ensures that we are not privy to conversation or expression, the distinguishing marks of unique identities or relationships. For Bubaš, faces must be obscured from this work because the expressiveness of the face would otherwise dominate the landscape. It is crucial to her type of storytelling that the figures be shown to belong not to themselves, but to the landscape, even if that union is incongruent and temporary.

We become entangled not in human drama, but in the continual rearrangement of colour, pattern and form, so that this interaction itself becomes subject. The figures are primarily models for carefully selected costumes recalling the Victorian era of "crinoline croquet" when the fashionable set showcased their finery. Two females in heavy navy cloaks offer contrast to a woman in a white dress and a man outfitted in tan and white. Two blonde straw boating hats balance the two dark ones. The croquet mallets twisting lazily at their sides unite them. As the game is played, these costumed figures separate into pairs, cluster into groups of three and four and emerge again as ones, all this in a slow, balanced,

ongoing dance. The figures float within the croquet arena—delineated by the wild edge of the woods and a giant, mossy tree—highlighting not their own identities, conflicts or drama, but the character and activity of the landscape itself. The billowing capes reveal the silent breeze and reflect the greenish-blue tint of the fog. The full-sized figures that entered the space through the foreground shrink against the girth of the ancient tree, the overhanging mist and the fore-grounded tangle of roots. The upper-class finery clashes with the dark, unstable terrain. The frivolity of croquet finds an uneasy spot amidst the incessant moodiness of the ancient moss and roots. Beside the giant base of the tree, the human figures play like Lilliputians in the safe grassy middle ground for a time, until their abbreviated story ends. After all, in *Afternoon Croquet* the landscape determines time. The mist moves in from somewhere at the camera's left as if to replace the players, who seem cued to move out of the croquet arena and then off stage, leaving behind forest, lawn and tree. And there is something ghostly about it all, as silent figures cloaked in a bygone era disappear. The show is over. The landscape remains.



In *Afternoon Croquet* Bubaš is “farming”¹ her images, to use Jeff Wall’s term, rather than finding them. She skillfully places figures into the chosen landscape, choreographing rather than merely recording. In denying us access to the revelation implicit in facial expressions, for instance, Bubaš challenges the viewer to ask what narrative landscape and individual belong to. By arranging her human subjects in a landscape meant at once to embrace and repel them, somewhere between comfort and fear, hovering in the middle ground about to be swallowed into the night or snatched into the thickets, Bubaš cultivates relationships at once natural and surreal. Ultimately, this genteel game of croquet taking place under the canopies of the primeval forest posits what the artist

¹ Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 2004), 49.

terms “a sort of identity crisis”² in which the relevance of Victorian bourgeois ideals in the uncivilized sawmill outpost of Moodyville is called into question.

Further complicating the “identity crisis” is the second part of Bubaš’ installation in which the elegant royal blue cloak worn by an actress in the film becomes memorabilia. Draped on a mannequin and preserved in a glass box, as if in a time capsule, the costume contributes a distinctly self-referential dimension to the film. The replica Victorian cloak commissioned by Vancouver designer Sunja Link sweeps the craggy landscape of the film with an air of privilege and civility but as a precious artifact of a bygone way of life, the costume also becomes a memory of the film. As if plucked out of the fairytale, the cloak represents what Bubaš calls “privilege as a form of value,”³ a form that survived only briefly after its transplant into North Vancouver’s rugged nascence. The viewer too becomes lost somewhere in space and time. Ultimately, Bubaš’ two part installation takes place in some liminal space, not only between landscapes—the cultivated croquet lawn, the raw dark forest, the clean-lined gallery—but between times. In retrospect, then, it would seem that with each viewing of the film the audience bears witness to a haunting of the very moments when the rules of civilization are about to turn.

As with any haunting, the case of *Afternoon Croquet* leaves the relationship of the croquet foursome a mystery. From whence do they come and where do they go after they play for us? With no definitive answers to be had, we come to recognize that the unifying theme in Bubaš’ work surpasses the individual narrative to play with the more fundamental, and more universal, tension between artifice and nature, the imposition of one on the other. Finding myself anxious amidst this deftly layered interplay of colour, form, time, space and speculation, I recognize that it is the unsettling vitality of the piece rather than its aesthetic composure that truly invigorates me. It is the thrill of shadowing these figures on the edge of landscape, on the cusp of story and history, in the thick of form and fog. It is the chase into the unknown which keeps me in the game even as the screen turns to white and I adjust my eyes to this world.

² Karin Bubaš, *Artist Statement*, Moodyville Exhibition, 2007.

³ Karin Bubaš, *ibid.*









12:25 a.m.: Ectoplasm pours from
the mouth of the artist
acting as medium while
contacting the gallery ghost,
during a séance.