



from shangri-la to shangri-la

*Quaggan, the Manx boatbuilder whom we had now met, told us, rocking under our windows in his boat one warmer evening when the settlement was like a minuscule Genoa or Venice in a dream, of the Manx belief that at the new moon the birds on the ninth wave out from the shore are the souls of the dead.*¹

Over the past hundred-odd years, the Canadian West Coast has been the site of the development and (usually) the subsequent dissolution of a range of endeavours driven by idealist pursuits of the perfect lifestyle. In the early twentieth century these pursuits included the formation of a socialist community at Sointula, founded by Finnish immigrants near northern Vancouver Island, as well as the short-lived Aquarian Foundation cult established by Edward Arthur Wilson (aka Brother XII) at Cedar-by-the-Sea, near Nanaimo. These impulses can also be seen in the Vancouver Community Arts Council's 1949 exhibition *Design for Living*, in which the rationalization of design and architecture was proposed as the path to a more egalitarian society; in the 1960s counter-culture's search for off-the-grid "back-to-the-land" self-sufficiency in the liminal spaces between town and country; and in the more recent advent of Vancouverism, a form of urban planning based on the inclusion of high-rise condo towers in the urban core that has played a significant role in the contemporary mythologizing of Vancouver as one of the most liveable cities in the world.

The Vancouver artist Ken Lum has drawn upon a facet of these histories in *from shangri-la to shangri-la*, a site-specific

LEFT: *from shangri-la to shangri-la*, 2010 (detail)

artwork created for Vancouver Art Gallery Offsite. The components of Lum's sculptural installation take their form from the architecture of squatters' cabins that were erected on the north shore of Burrard Inlet, in an area near Dollarton known as the Maplewood Mudflats, during the early to mid-twentieth century. The Maplewood squats are among the most thoroughly documented and notorious manifestation of a long tradition of squatting in the Lower Mainland, a practice that can be traced back to the influx of Euro-Canadians in the late nineteenth century. By the 1940s there was an informal but cohesive community of squatters living in the ramshackle cabins that lined Maplewood's intertidal zone. The most acclaimed resident was the English-born writer Malcolm Lowry, who lived there from 1940 to 1954 (despite numerous attempts to evict him) and who portrayed his idyllic life as a mudflat dweller in his novella "The Forest Path to the Spring." By the 1960s, the area had attracted an assortment of hippies, artists and displaced loggers, who sought out the possibilities for self-sufficiency and direct contact with the rhythms of nature as an alternative to the accelerating pace of development in Vancouver and its suburbs. The longstanding tension between the squatters and the rate-paying residents of North Vancouver came to a head in December 1971, when most of the mudflat dwellings were burned down by civic authorities in order to make way for development. Today, a portion of the mudflats are contained within Cates Park and, ironically, a trail memorializing Malcolm Lowry winds through the nearby forest.

from shangri-la to shangri-la consists of scale replicas of three squatter's shacks: the dwelling occupied by Lowry and his wife Marjerie Bonner, together with the slightly more elaborate residence of Dr. Paul Spong (later the leader of the Greenpeace Save the Whales campaign) and the cabin built by the artist Tom Burrows, who arrived on the mudflats in the 1960s and lived there until the community's destruction. Lum's replicas are situated on the

main thoroughfare through the downtown core of Vancouver, in marked juxtaposition to two emblematic structures from different moments in the history of the city's development. Kitty-corner is Arthur Erickson's iconic MacMillan Bloedel Building (designed in 1965), a structure in which the application of modernist principles to a lumber company's headquarters was intended to bring solidity to the then-chaotic space of the city's centre. Adjacent to Lum's installation is the recently completed Living Shangri-La, the tallest building in the city and a glass walled icon of Vancouverism that has been permitted to stretch above the neighbouring buildings in order to add interest to what is considered an otherwise banal skyline.

The acute contrast between the rustic and provisional character of the shacks and the rigorously engineered mass of the nearby towers is not so much an attempt to recover a lost arcadian moment or to establish an overly-simplified duality between past and present. Considered in relation to the surrounding environment,

these reproductions of mudflat shacks appear as a kind of vestigial memory, traces from a foreclosed moment in the Lower Mainland's history that proposed a rustic conception of the ideal life in dramatic contrast to the visions of abstract perfection embodied in the surrounding architecture. In marking a history of diverging world views, they extend an invitation to consider the ongoing processes of idealization that shape our understandings of the city and the way citizens and community are constituted in the spaces these processes produce.

Grant Arnold,
Audain Curator of British Columbia Art

¹ Malcolm Lowry, from "The Forest Path to the Spring" in *Hear Us O Lord From Thy Dwelling Place & Lunar Caustic* (Markham: Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 1979): 235-6.

BELOW: *Tom Burrows' house on the Maplewood Mudflats*, 1970
PHOTO: Tom Burrows
Image courtesy of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia



About the Artist

Ken Lum (b. 1956, Vancouver, Canada) is based in Vancouver. He studied at Simon Fraser University and New York University before earning a Master of Fine Arts Degree from the University of British Columbia in 1985. Over the past twenty years, Lum has exhibited widely with solo exhibitions in Berlin, Brussels, Buenos Aires, Edinburgh, Frankfurt, Geneva, London, New York, Ottawa, Paris, Seoul, Stockholm and Vienna. He has participated in many group exhibitions and represented Canada at the Istanbul Biennial, São Paulo Biennial, Shanghai Biennale, Gwangju Biennale and Documenta 11.

CREDITS:

Ken Lum
from shangri-la to shangri-la, 2010
(front and inside images)
site-specific sculptural installation
Courtesy of the artist

PHOTOGRAPHY: Trevor Mills and Rachel Topham,
Vancouver Art Gallery

ISBN: 978-1-895442-80-9
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Lum has held teaching appointments at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson; China Art Academy, Hangzhou; l'Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris; Akademie der Bildenden Künste, Munich; and the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, where he taught from 1990 to 2006. Lum has published extensively and lectured throughout Europe, North America, Australia and Asia, and is the co-founder and founding editor of *Yishu Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*. He has completed permanent public art commissions in Italy, Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Canada and was the recipient of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship and the Killam Award for Outstanding Research. In addition to his work as an artist, Lum has curated and co-curated major exhibitions, including the *NorthWest Annual* exhibition at the Center of Contemporary Art in Seattle (2004); *Shanghai Modern: 1919-1945* (2005); and *Sharjah Biennial 7* (2005).



January 23 to September 6, 2010

Offsite is the Vancouver Art Gallery's outdoor public art space featuring a program of rotating projects. Located downtown at the foot of the Shangri-La skyscraper development, Offsite serves as a hub for local and international contemporary artists to explore issues related to the surrounding urban context. As artists consider the site-specific potential of art within the public realm, projects may inspire, bemuse and stimulate broad audiences, and will respond to the changing social and cultural conditions of our contemporary world.



LOCATED on West Georgia Street
between Thurlow and Bute Streets,
Vancouver

Offsite is organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery and funded by the City of Vancouver through the Public Art Program. Offsite is supported by Ian Gillespie, President, Westbank; Ben Yeung, President, Peterson Investment Group; and the residents at Shangri-La. The Gallery deeply appreciates support for the Offsite: Ken Lum exhibition from the Michael O'Brian Family Foundation.

The Vancouver Art Gallery gratefully acknowledges the ongoing financial support of the City of Vancouver, the Province of British Columbia through the BC Arts Council and Gaming Revenues, the Canada Council for the Arts and the Government of Canada through the Department of Canadian Heritage.



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Ken Lum

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