

**Interview with Lillian Ross-Millard of *Company Town*
July 2020**

Victoria Mohr-Blakeney: Tell us about your video work Blue Smoke – what will audiences encounter when they see your work through the front window of Artspace?

Lillian Ross-Millard: I think of *Blue Smoke* as a poem which takes shape as a multi-faceted video work. The video installation at Artspace is another component to what will be looping on companytown.ca. In both spaces, online and at Artspace, the viewer will encounter a pictorial patchwork of Peterborough from online mapping platforms, with intervention on my part which creates a tension with the familiarity of the landscape. The pairing of text and images manifest differently in the two iterations of the piece.

VMB: Tell us about your artistic process – how did you create Blue Smoke?

Lillian Ross-Millard: The process involved a lot of research and discussion in a collective setting amongst the other contributing artists. I remember sitting in my kitchen watching the kettle boil after reading the report**. My mind was flooded with images of oozing creosotes, floating asbestos, and blue smoke which were described in the report. The peculiar horror of that imagery combined with the mundane action of watching a kettle boil for some reason made everything fall into place after that. The contrast between horror and the everyday became the tone which informed *Blue Smoke*. In hindsight, it feels as though the composition of the video fell into place almost immediately after that kettle boiled.

VMB: What inspired you to respond to Peterborough's legacy of the General Electric through video?

Lillian Ross-Millard: The choice to respond in the form of a video is second nature to me as a video artist. However, something unique about my approach to *Blue Smoke* is that I typically perform physically in my videos. In this instance, I've opted to rely more heavily on text and found imagery. Part of the reason behind this was a practical solution to creating work safely during Covid19 times. Unable to travel to Peterborough to shoot in situ, I became fascinated with exploring its streets on Street View and GoogleEarth. This combined with the research we were doing on the PTBO General Electric factory, I found myself thinking a lot about folk music as I observed the landscape in the online environment.

My dad is a kind of folk musician, both a songwriter and a collector. He shared a lot of this material with me as a child, profoundly affecting the way I experience Southern Ontario, and all of Canada for that matter. The voices in these songs were not patriotic, but full of restlessness, pain, and even anger. Despite this

underbelly of feeling, the songwriters (my father included) always seemed to have a sideways eye on the beauty of the landscape. I've inherited this way of seeing beauty simultaneously with loss and corruption. I cannot seem to disentangle the two perspectives when I stand on Ontarian soil, and was aware of this very acutely while researching General Electric in PTBO. This inspired me to write a script which behaved like a folk song, but which presented itself alongside a contemporary and urban landscape.

VMB: You will also showcase video work on the companytown.ca website – what does it mean for you for your work to be presented via both physical and digital platforms in Company Town?

Lillian Ross-Millard: I think I touch on this in the first question. There is something interesting to me about the idea the two platform versions are the same work but composed differently, incorporating the same text and imagery but in different configurations. The two contexts allow the language and the visuals to operate on each other in different ways. This aspect of *Blue Smoke* resonates with a character who comes through in the text, who is clearly trying to remember or understand something about their past and their surroundings. I like to think that the two different versions of *Blue Smoke* are two different attempts to understand the same thing. I'm not sure if they succeed or fail, but multiple attempts are certainly required.

***The Report of the Advisory Committee on Retrospective Exposure Profiling of the Production Processes at the General Electric Production Facility in Peterborough, Ontario, 1945-2000*