

UNIT 17

Andrew Dadson

Green Piece

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In Between and Through Fences

by Andrea Valentine-Lewis

Andrew Dadson (b. 1980) often involves the natural environment, urban and rural, as he contemplates and enacts his painting process. Whether he incorporates organic materials such as soil and sand with paint on canvas, or directly paints onto our surrounding landscape, Dadson uses the medium of paint to reflect upon the marks, both insignificant and catastrophic, that humans leave upon the environment and use to communicate. The works in *Green Piece* were created over the summer months at specific site vicinal to Unit 17, within the 2950 block of West 4th Avenue in Kitsilano, Vancouver. This site was the former location of a chain restaurant and now, in its state of flux, has become the home to vibrant ecosystems that have emerged through the cracks in the pavement; this seemingly desolate and uninviting lot is now a lucrative and nurturing zone for the emergence of several species of plants. Lucy R. Lippard once spoke of gravel pits and her notions are useful in grappling with “in-between” urban spaces such as parking lots, construction sites, roadsides, and spaces between and through fences. She says, “as ruins, gravel pits are decidedly unspectacular. Their emptiness, their nakedness, and their rawness suggest an alienation of land and culture, a loss of nothing we care about”.¹ This statement suggests that “we” (read: Western society) only nurture land when it outwardly nurtures us. When sites are transient, unfit for human occupancy, or simply unattractive, we tend to turn away in revolt. *Green Piece* seeks to confront that tendency and illuminate the enriching possibilities of precariousness. The instability, here, being the lucrative and nurturing cracks in the pavement and the plants that grow between them.²

Green Piece

Dadson has been painting onto the landscape since 2003. These earlier iterations consisted of predominantly painting onto residential lawns by sectioning off angular plots with make-shift stencils or following the curvature of garden beds and spray-painting the sections in white or black biodegradable paint. To document these events, Dadson would situate himself at an upward angle looking down upon the painted section and capture the scene using film photography. In 2006, his painted landscapes began to encapsulate sites with much more robust dimensionality. Rather than the low-pile and two-dimensional lawn scenes, these later works would be documented straight-on. In 2014, Dadson painted several hills in a construction site in Richmond, BC. *Black Hill* is a particularly striking work that employed black paint to highlight not only the sand and silt hill, but the wild grasses and detritus that made their home there. While

¹ Lucy R. Lippard, *Undermining: A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West* (New York: The New Press, 2014), 14.

² While my ideas are pointing towards a decolonial worldview, I acknowledge that there are many Indigenous scholars whose thoughts will better address these important notions. I have listed some further reading by scholars Zoe Todd, Daniel Wildcat, Kim Tallbear, and Vanessa Watts in my bibliography.

working at this construction site, Dadson recognized that plants and other wildlife were thriving in these unassuming environments.

The works of *Green Piece* push Dadson's practice of photographic painted landscapes by narrowing in on individual plant species, rather than larger surface areas that may encompass several species, soil and other geographical identifiers. For the works in *Green Piece*, Dadson painted no more than a few inches; these highly detailed images were then stitched together to combine various grasses, clovers, thistles, and other unplanted species. The larger-than-life inkjet prints enable an opportunity to view small species as their own jungle terrains of intertwined stems, leaves, buds, and fibers. *Green Piece* premieres Dadson's use of coloured earth pigments and the result is celebratory: foxtail barley is captured in a vibrant pink (cochineal), red clover in sky blue (indigo), black medic in orange (ochre). Notions of borders and fences can be witnessed in Dadson's employment of strategic cropping, allowing for the unpainted foliage to frame the painted section and yet suggest an infinite expansion beyond the frame itself. The painted section then, represents a brief temporal moment for these unplanted species within a shifting geography.

Weeds

Unplanted species are commonly referred to in Western society as "weeds," a singular umbrella term that is intended to be utilized to distinguish the plants that invade gardens, lawns and other maintained private or public spaces from those deemed attractive or useful. According to George Usher's 1966 *Dictionary of Botany*, a "weed" is defined as, "a plant growing where it is not wanted by man."³ This specialized and presumably outdated volume broadly defines plant-related terminology, reducing complicated concepts to single sentences. While Usher acknowledges that plant taxonomy is a highly biased and complicated field,⁴ his decision to proceed using this methodology is one of the many examples of where humans continue to categorize and define nonhuman entities despite acknowledging the flaws in doing so. The reiterations of such actions over long periods of time condition future generations to accept these methodologies and to re-enact them. Which species fit under this broad category can change throughout time. Millet, for example, used to be considered a salient Canadian crop and in the last 30 years, it has become recognized as a threatening agricultural weed.⁵ What remains consistent is that "weeds exist only in relation to us".⁶

Each work in *Green Piece* introduces species that thrive within this Kitsilano site and have inherently unique and sometimes significant histories. An ethnobotanical overview of even one plant featured in Dadson's work can reveal the complex ways that individual species can affect ecosystems both negatively and positively. For the purpose of simplicity, focusing on the plants in the works *Creeping Thistle (Cirsium arvense) Black* and *Red Clover (Trifolium pratense) Blue*, can illustrate these complicated narratives and how they relate to the natural world at large. As the titles suggest, creeping thistle and red clover are the plants of focus for this particular essay.

Creeping thistle or *Cirsium arvense* can be easily identified by its strong, tubular stem supporting irregular jagged and spiny-toothed leaves. Thistles blossom pink-purple fragrant flowers that attract bees and other

³ George Usher, *Dictionary of Botany*, (London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1966), 398.

⁴ George Usher, *Dictionary of Botany*, v.

⁵ Nina Edwards, *Weeds*, (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2015), 11.

⁶ Nina Edwards, *Weeds*, 7.

pollinators.⁷ Acknowledging the pressing fact that pollinators are an imperative element to ecosystems, the thistle should automatically be valued and not considered unwanted. Peeled stems, roots and leaves can be consumed and provide high levels of nutrition, including an impressive amount of protein.⁸ *Cirsium* was likely introduced to Canada in the early 17th-century from Europe, Western Asia and/or North Africa.⁹ Considering *Cirsium* as a settler is a complex notion that cannot be sussed out within this essay alone; however, it is important to recognize the origins of plants and how they interact, invade or even support Indigenous species and collective ecosystems.¹⁰

Red clover or *Trifolium pratense* originated in South-East Eurasia but has since been globally distributed.¹¹ Red clover can be identified, like all varieties of clovers, by its three (or sometimes four) rounded leaves and spherical flowering heads. When consumed in moderation, Red clover is valued as a forage crop¹² due to its ability to be easily digested and its high protein content.¹³ The health benefits associated with clovers and animals are currently being examined as applied to human health and disease prevention.¹⁴ With all of these benefits in mind, how does the red clover become designated as a “weed?” Returning to George Usher’s definition, “a plant growing where it is not wanted by man,” we can speculate that manicured gardens and the American lawn are two locations we do not often witness clovers – and if we do, their fate is often fleeting.

With these two – albeit condensed – examples of ethnobotanical overviews, we can begin to understand how umbrella terminology can be inefficient and detrimental to ecosystems. Dadson’s enactment of painting becomes an opportunity to draw awareness towards these unplanted species that are temporarily able to exist and flourish without the threat or competition of planted species (“non-weeds”). They are “allowed” to take up residence in this site because it is not maintained by humans and therefore, the weeds are unthreatened.

In-between Spaces

George Usher’s definition for “weeds” is insightful because it reiterates this separation between humans and nonhumans. His definition points to not only a humanistic authority figure but also stresses that there are pinpointed sites where plants may grow that are considered unsuitable. As alluded to before, gardens and lawns become the opposite of “in-between spaces”. The American lawn becomes a particularly useful social structure to examine as it relates to the dichotomy between “good” and “bad” nature, and for the purpose of this essay, how it has contributed to a societal understanding of weeds and in-between spaces.

⁷ Nina Theis, “Fragrance of Canada Thistle (*Cirsium arvense*) Attracts Both Floral Herbivores and Pollinators,” *Journal of Chemical Ecology* 32, no. 5 (2006): 918.

⁸ Lori Vickers, Kari Bondaroff, and Sandra Burton, “Nutritional Value of Thistle,” Peace Forage, January 2017 http://www.peaceforage.bc.ca/forage_facts_pdfs/FF_104_Grazing_Weeds_Nutritional_Value.pdf.

⁹ Raymond John Moore, “The Biology of Canadian Weeds 13: *Cirsium arvense*,” *Canadian Journal of Plant Science* 55, no. 4 (1975): 1036.

¹⁰ For further reading on Indigenous plants and wildlife, please refer to Vancouver-based Indigenous artist T’uy’t’anat Cease Wyss’s website for information and further resources: <https://indigenousplantdiva.wordpress.com/>

¹¹ Evan Sivesind, “Factors Affecting Isoflavone Concentration in Red Clover (*Trifolium pratense* L.),” Master’s thesis (McGill University, 2005), 16.

¹² A forage crop is one such as grass or hay to be fed to horses and cattle.

¹³ Evan Sivesind, “Factors Affecting Isoflavone Concentration in Red Clover (*Trifolium pratense* L.),” Master’s thesis (McGill University, 2005), 16.

¹⁴ Evan Sivesind, “Factors Affecting Isoflavone Concentration in Red Clover (*Trifolium pratense* L.),” 18-19.

The soft, blanket green ground covering we are accustomed to, was first introduced by Americans after the civil war; even up to the mid twentieth-century, visitors to the United States considered the consistent presence of manicured lawns to be novel and uncanny.¹⁵ Between 1930 and 1945, it was common for magazine articles and advertising to provide information and guidance on maintaining lawns and gardens, indicating that a well-manicured yard inherently reflects a higher social status.¹⁶ Many texts that reference the phenomenon of the American lawn refer to an ideal lawn to be free from weeds or animal presence (Bormann 2001, Teyssot 1999; Jenkins, 1994). When life and culture settled and strengthened after the devastations of WWII, the focus on lawn maintenance intensified.¹⁷ The lawn (and in turn, nature) was recognized as one thing we could control in an era where everything appeared uncertain and unsafe.¹⁸ If the notion of human-control-over-nature is present within the construction of the ideal American lawn, we can only fathom that weeds and other pests connote a state of the opposite: of being wild, disorderly, and perhaps even threatening. Considering the persistent environmental crises that we are all experiencing, what is a threatening weed but a beacon of hope for a plant-filled future among the ruins?

Concluding Remarks

The site where Dadson discovered and marked these plant species in paint is a location that will soon become an active construction site and later developed (presumably into a condominium with commercial offerings). The black medic, red clover, creeping thistle and foxtail barley that have taken up residence in this location will inevitably be eradicated once again by humans. This shift will also affect the pollinators that have fed on and spread the sweet nectars these plants have provided. The images in *Green Piece* become emblematic of the resilience of nature and remind us that without human intervention, wildlife will continue to thrive. Transplanting these plants-as-images from their site of origin at the lot and into the gallery enables the preservation of life now unforgotten and increases the awareness of the species that exist within and beyond the 2950 block of West 4th Avenue. Coloured pigments demand us to acknowledge and celebrate persistent plants and in-betweenness.

¹⁵ Virginia Scott Jenkins, *The Lawn: A History of an American Obsession* (Baltimore: Smithsonian Institution, 1994), 2-3.

¹⁶ Virginia Scott Jenkins, *The Lawn: A History of an American Obsession*, 92

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 93.

¹⁸ Georges Teyssot, *The American Lawn* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 2.

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