

CAROL SAWYER, "Vacant Lot," Jan 1 to Feb 7,
2008, Republic Gallery

by Ann Rosenberg

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"Borscht Belt", Carol Sawyer, "Borscht Belt," 2008, colour photograph.



"Untitled (seagull prints)", Carol Sawyer, "Untitled (seagull prints)," 2007, Lightjet print, 33" x 34".



"Borscht Belt", Carol Sawyer, "Borscht Belt," 2008, colour photograph.



"Untitled (glass)", Carol Sawyer, "Untitled (glass)," 2007, Lightjet print, 33" x 34".



"Untitled (bench)", Carol Sawyer, "Untitled (bench)," 2007, Lightjet print, 33" x 34".



"Untitled (puddle)", Carol Sawyer, "Untitled (puddle)," 2007, Lightjet print, 33" x 34".

CAROL SAWYER, *Vacant Lot*

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Carol Sawyer's photographs, videos, slide projections and sounds in installations linger in the mind long after they have been experienced. Although she is not currently as well known as Jeff Wall and his peers, in time her work will be judged to be among the best produced by Vancouver artists during the last two decades — it is always exquisitely wrought, strong in concept, poetic and leavened with a subtle sense of humour. Through mid September, several exhibitions of Sawyer's current work have opened in Vancouver, her first since she installed a 2004 permanent installation called *Tribute to the Cambie Works Yard*.

The recent show *Vacant Lot*, at Republic Gallery, a series of unpretentious photographs and a 15-minute accompanying DVD, drew spectators into the place that Sawyer makes so haunting in her work. This video which was shot on a tripod in various locations around the site, appears to have been filmed by someone as patient, alert and expectant as a heron awaiting the flicker of a minnow.

Several almost- square photographs and a single panorama document views into and out of a vacant lot surrounded by bramble-covered chain-link fence. Vancouverites will quickly recognize the subject — a large plot awaiting development near the old Canadian Pacific Railway Station. The lot abuts the park in front of the General Paints outlet at the heart of the Strathcona district, a piece of land in limbo, biding time before it becomes something else. Sawyer's sensitive archive pays tribute to transitional space.

The *Untitled* photos in *Vacant Lot* invite unrestricted interpretation, yet in every image, the word “untitled” is followed by a single word that identifies one thing of significance in each piece — a *puddle* on a section of unused, broken sidewalk or the impromptu *bench* so artfully constructed out of bricks, wooden planks and concrete blocks. In an interview, Sawyer said “*Vacant Lot* could be thought of as a ‘free zone’, which is a rare luxury in downtown areas.” In this place where nothing is supposed to happen, “there are creatures’ foot prints, thickets where the homeless camp at night and evidence that a group of young teens are constantly arranging the available pieces of wood and concrete bricks to make ever-more-challenging skateboard circuits and ramps.”

On the mesmerizing video, rotating advertising billboards turn, birds fly, and heavy rain falls into a huge puddle where the individual drops created ever-expanding overlapping circles in the surface of the pond. I realized that the audio component, which was tuned down to a barely noticeable level, often featured a repetitive noise, maybe the sound of the billboard mechanics. Finally, just as the video was about to go onto repeat, like the bird at the sea shore, I realized I was hearing it the sound of a skateboarder who was there and gone in a flash.

Among other works on view this year, three 20-foot-long banners were unfurled in Vancouver’s Main Public Library on January 4 as one component of her *Trace Ingredients* contribution to curator Karen Love’s *Memory Palace: Three Artists in the Library*. The banners depict stacks of books where the words on the spines read as concrete poems. *And Borscht Belt* is a book poem that will be part of the multimedia and performance show of the same name, opening at the VPL in April. The “traces” in these works are not of tire tracks or birds’ footprints as they were in *Vacant Lot* but rather the constant stacking and unstacking, and the pursued and accidental learning that takes place in libraries.

Republic Gallery

732 Richards St, Third Floor, Vancouver, British Columbia V6B 3A1

PHONE **604-632-1590**

EMAIL **info@republicgallery.com**

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