

# Vicky Alexander

## INTERIOR PAVILLION #4

Vicky Alexander  
BY CHRISTOPHER BRAYSHAW

Vicky Alexander: Interior Pavillion #4 (1989)  
BY PETRA WATSON



Vicky Alexander  
*Interior Pavillion #4*, 1989

mixed media sculpture  
(216 x 63.5 x 5 cm each panel,  
120 cm in diameter when installed)  
SAG 1994.02.01

Acquired with the assistance of the Surrey Art Gallery Association  
and the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition  
Assistance program / et avec l'aide du programme d'aide aux  
acquisitions du Conseil des Arts du Canada.

Photographs by Cameron Heryet

### Vicky Alexander

By Christopher Brayshaw, 1999

Vicky Alexander was born in Victoria, B.C. in 1959 and received her BFA from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NASCAD) in 1979. Her photographs and sculptures have been exhibited throughout North America and Europe, including exhibitions at the CASH/Newhouse Gallery, New York City; Kunsthalle



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Bern, Germany; Gallery Brenda Wallace, Montreal; Vancouver Art Gallery; and Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver. Alexander's work often uses modernist architecture and industrial design as a conceptual frame for examining broader issues of representation and artifice. Alexander's photoconceptual critiques of modernism thereby share parallels with the work of other Vancouver photo-based artists like Jin-Me Yoon, Ann Ramsden, and Allyson Clay.

Alexander developed *Interior Pavillion #4* (1989) following her work on two groups of thematically related photographs of building facades and the "lamine murals" popular in 1970s dentists' offices and suburban shopping malls, in which brightly coloured landscape scenes are laminated onto building support walls to "naturalize" what is often regarded as an oppressive or threatening environment. *Interior Pavillion #4* was also informed by Alexander's consideration of pavilions' historical usefulness. In 18th century classical gardens, pavilions are small, unthreatening pieces of architecture seamlessly inserted into nature. Their high roofs and open sides invite viewers to step inside and view the surrounding landscape as a series of "landscape pictures," framed by the pavilion's doorways. Alexander's *Pavillion* thematically reverses this process. Her pavilion is not sited outside, but is rather placed indoors.

In the place of open doorways, *Interior Pavillion* provides opaque panels of medium-density fibreboard, some laminated with fake woodgrain, others with "lamine murals" depicting a garishly coloured landscape scene. Alexander's pavilion literalizes the historical pavilion's usefulness as a picture-making machine, converting the *architectural* framing of a landscape into actual *framed pictures*. Alexander's pavilion also critiques the sad illusionism underpinning 1970s architects' use of "lamine

murals" as a way of humanizing urban space. The murals installed in urban shopping malls and offices are meant to be viewed from a single vantage point, the place at which their illusion of a transparent "picture window" seems most natural. Alexander's pavilion subverts this effect by displacing a lamine mural in three dimensions, forcing viewers to fruitlessly circle it, looking for a way in, and to thereby encounter its alternating series of landscape images juxtaposed with *faux*-woodgrain, a forcible reminder that the ostensibly "representational" landscape photographs are just as deceptive as the fake wood. In this way, Alexander asks viewers to consider the ways in which architectural forms have historically inflected residents' responses to the environments around them.



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**Vikky Alexander: Interior Pavilion #4 (1989)**  
by Petra Watson, 1998

Since the 1980s Vikky Alexander has appropriated mass-media images and used them in her art work to investigate photography as a highly reproducible image-making technology, broadly assimilated within a mass cultural environment. Alexander's use of appropriated images<sup>1</sup> neither directly quote or suspend the immediate, first-hand reference to the image, but instead work to problematize the very activity of perception and interpretation as it applies to both the production and circulation of an image within mass culture.

These appropriation strategies explore the contradictions inherent in ideologies of nature in the twentieth century, and how these same concepts are located in the pictorialization of nature<sup>2</sup> - the conflation of nature and landscape. Alexander's investigation of photographic representation within mass culture positions nature as just another product for display and mass circulation. Alexander's strategy of using appropriated images is also a critique of the conventions that define artistic production as highly emotional and individualistic; her work denies the traditional concept of the original, expressionistic artwork.

Alexander's appropriation strategies - using images that already exist and are in mass circulation - investigate the presumed oppositions between nature and culture. But when Alexander wants an image of nature, she does not directly produce one herself, but appropriates another image in such a way that she reveals that "nature" is already closely implicated in a system of cultural representations and values. Therefore, nature is a constructed category. Furthermore, nature is positioned as marked by

economic, social and political histories of modern, industrialized, urban societies.

The landscapes that Alexander appropriates position nature as firmly imbedded within representation - the pictorial conventions of a view. Images, therefore, motivate spectators to look at landscapes in a specific way, and a pictorialized idea of nature is consequently projected onto the landscape. Landscape as a way of seeing nature relies on an extensive or commanding sight or view and, therefore, modifies the way we look at, organize and evaluate "nature."



Vikky Alexander, *Interior Pavillion #4*

*Interior Pavilion #4* (1989) is a hexagon - a plane figure with six sides and angles - made from six hollow-core doors. They are hinged together to each other - as a door would usually be to a door frame - except



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there is no entryway into the architectonic pavilion/sculpture, which produces a sense of disappointment - frustration. A dark stain gives a burnt appearance to the wood grain of three of the panels. Cropped images of a mossy rain forest completely cover the remaining three panels. The images are taken from wallpaper murals that, when purchased as a panorama, bring nature into the home (just as the 1960s suburban picture window attempted to do) or waiting room. For Alexander, the wallpaper design represents an urban fantasy of nature - the illusion of a sense of place, and all the contradictions that this implies. Within this metaphor of landscape is an idealized and nostalgic image of the "natural" that conceals the economic conditions between urban reality and nature that the city exploits for its survival.

In this work, and other works that explore representations of nature, such as *Lake in the Woods* (1992)<sup>3</sup>, Alexander has positioned images within self-contained structures, or room-environments, in order to alter the audiences' perceptual approach to the image. The sculptural elements of the piece redefine relationships between the viewer and the object by fusing interior and exterior space, and re-directing visual relationships between the perceiver and that perceived.

Nature in Alexander's work is objectified and symbolized by a "view" that can be pictured, but not fully understood or accounted for. Nature becomes the backdrop for examining representation in general. Alexander positions the viewer as always aware of how nature is framed as an object of categorization progressively "pictured" in a domesticated and interiorized manner. Nature, therefore, is always understood by Alexander as overdetermined and hence "unnatural." While images of nature within

contemporary society cannot fail to include issues central to ecological conditions, Alexander's intentions are more directly linked to exploring how images of the landscape are the result of a long series of social and cultural developments, and learned perceptions, many of which are closely tied to photographic representation.

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Footnotes:

1 Appropriation techniques (ready-made images cropped and manipulated), conceptual forms and elements of simulation are used by Vikky Alexander to produce illusionistic effects that function as a critical strategy. As Alexander wrote in an artist's statement for the exhibition "Obsession," at the Coburg Gallery, Vancouver, in 1983: "the world is no longer informed by direct experiences but through two-dimensional medial presentations in the form of billboards, televisions, newspapers and magazines. I use these forms of information as if they are the only resources available." In *Interior Pavilion #4*, Alexander appropriates images of nature from wallpaper; in the earlier 1980s she used appropriated images of fashion models from glossy magazines in works such as *Pieta* (1981), and both images of nature and fashion models in *Yosemite* (1981).

2 The "pictorialization of nature" is a way of looking at nature that has come to dominate and thus to distort nature. When thinking of landscape as natural, such naturalness implies being untouched by human beings; this flies in the face of history, both economic and aesthetic. The most decisive period in the formations of pictorial conventions of landscape depiction occurred during the Renaissance with the development of linear perspective and the information of market towns that defined values and ideologies in opposition to the rural countryside.

3 *Lake of the Woods* (1992) is in the collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery. In this room-environment piece, Alexander placed full colour photo-murals of an image of a lakeshore, trees and rocky outcroppings on one wall. Mounted on the opposite wall, at

eye level, was a row of mirrors supported on panels of medium brown, wood-grained composition-board shelving. Because of the positioning of the images and the mirrors the viewer usually looks at the mural through its reflection in the mirror, providing a position which frames the landscape with an increased illusionistic depth and metaphoric space. The mural's grainy colour images (the result of extensive enlargement of the original photograph) also provide evidence of other forms of manipulation. The images, abruptly cropped by Alexander, suggest that parts are missing

from the whole - the image is now digressive and inconclusive. The panoramic view has been truncated; I am using the word "panorama" here simply as a shorthand for the kind of extensive, wide-view, sought out by tourists and mass cultural image-makers alike - and experience of composed nature brought into a whole and ordered view.

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13750-88 Avenue  
 Surrey, BC V3W 3L1  
 Phone: 604-501-5566  
 artgallery@surrey.ca  
 www.arts.surrey.ca  
 www.surreytechlab.ca



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