

Romantic Commodities
with reference to *The Sled*

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Romantic Commodities, a body of work created between 1991 and 1993 explored the persistent presence of urban experience and commodity culture in conceptions of the wilderness landscape. Such interests stemmed, in part, from an interest in museums (in the context of an emerging body of criticism having to do with cultures of display) and, in part, from an emerging personal interest in sea kayaking. At the time of the first exhibition of *Romantic Commodities* I was provisioning a folding Klepper kayak for a trip to Scotland's Outer Hebrides; this body of work was about the manner in which we provision ourselves to go into the wilderness. The exhibition comprised an eclectic range of works that included photographs (some of museum and outfitting company displays and others as complex photographic tableaux in the manner of those created in nineteenth century frontier town studios), actual outdoor merchandise (such as a rack or Gore-Tex® clothing), sculptural works utilizing such things as salvaged kayak parts, and other sculptural works. Primary among these was a 1992 work, the *Storm Kit*.



Storm Kit, painted canvas/tarp, over collapsible framework, with bottled water and lid, Stride Gallery, Calgary, 1993

Storm Kit mimics a small tin can survival kit common at the time in outdoor supply stores. The careful packaging of teabags, matches, boullion cubes etc., within these survival kits is indicative of the prevalent commodification of our natural environment. In this sculptural work these items have been replaced by bottled water, something which seemed a cultural anomaly in the early 1990s, albeit a portent of an ever-increasing management of the wilderness landscape. On the front face of the can, a figure is depicted in the manner of a nineteenth-century engraving*, crouched beside a fire, and

* My interest in such material stems from early editions of Scott's Antarctic journals which had always been around our family home. In response to asking my father of his own interest in such material he has recently (2005) told an interesting story of he and his boyhood friends being able to walk into "storage rooms" in what is now Cambridge's Scott Polar Research Institute, seeing and handling many of what are now regarded as rare, precious artifacts, and freely browsing through boxes of what must have been Herbert Ponting's original photographs.

inside a makeshift shelter. He is protected from the environment by the contents of the survival kit and the slogans printed on its surface. This image lies behind the construction of *The Sled*, a work created in 1995 at the Banff Centre subsequent to *Romantic Commodities*. From the survival kit's image and scenario of survival and depravity *The Sled* becomes a situation of relative luxury. The fire depicted on the survival kit is replaced in *The Sled* by a "Coleman" lantern, "Coleman" heater, "Whisperlite" stove and an "Outback" oven. These are all carefully fitted within *The Sled*'s complex skeletal structure, a structure hidden underneath a rough, rocklike outer canvas shell. The poles of an accompanying shelter (also mimicking that depicted on the "Storm Kit") are collapsed and suspended alongside *The Sled*, its various hatches are fastened shut in a clam-like manner to complete the contours of the rock, and sleeping bags are strapped on; everything in its place. Once packed in this manner, the rock, mounted on skis, becomes a personal vehicle, its contents carefully protected and stowed in a manner somewhere between a sixteenth century caravel and an RV of the 1990's.



Rock, painted wood and canvas construction with brushed-steel chair base (front and back views), 1991

The rock-like form as well as the manner of *The Sled*'s skeletal construction is derived from "Rock," another, work from *Romantic Commodities**. "Rock" was not initially made as a sculptural work but, rather, as a bas-relief background component for a larger group of faux rocks that formed the base for one of the photographic tableaux. In this respect I consider the sculptural attributes of *Rock* to have emerged as an intuitive gesture that is in contrast to the more deliberately considered ideas that generally lie behind the *Romantic Commodities*.

* In addition to *The Sled* "Rock" also provides a point of departure for *Torhamvan/Ferryland* (Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, 2005)