

# Newtopian visions

*Exhibit explores practical utopian ideas in post-Confederate Newfoundland*

By TARA MULLOWNEY  
 THE TELEGRAM

From a distance, Peter Wilkins' newest pieces look like optical art from the 1960s — his seemingly abstract patterns and colour combinations almost make the pieces vibrate.

Upon closer inspection, however, one can see the pieces aren't made up of mere patterns: they're made up of furniture. Airport furniture, in fact.

"I'd heard about Gander airport, and then I was flying back from some place in 2006 and I had a copy of Wallpaper magazine, and they had a big feature on it," Wilkins said. "I saw it, and I thought, 'Oh my gosh, that's just amazing. I have to go and do something there.'"

Gander International Airport was once an international hub, as a refuelling stop for flights travelling across the Atlantic.

By the 1950s, about 13,000 flights per year were passing through the airport, many carrying Hollywood stars like Bob Hope, Marlene Dietrich and Ingrid Bergman.

As a result, a \$3-million international terminal was built in 1959, but less than five years later, technology eliminated the fuel stops, and the flights passed over Gander on their way to London, England.

As a result, the mod furniture has remained mostly pristine, and, for Wilkins, a photographer's dream.

When curator Bruce Johnson mentioned to Wilkins his idea for an art exhibit exploring practical utopian ideas in Newfoundland, Wilkins was excited to have an outlet for his idea.

"It was lots and lots of fun," said Wilkins, who spent about a week at the airport last winter and spring,



"Island," by Janaki Lennie. — Submitted photo

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Peter Wilkins

filming and taking photographs. "It was just so wonderful being at Gander airport, taking the raw footage and the photographs of this amazing furniture. It's genuinely an amazing space, and then to be able to play

with the image and create from it is the ultimate delight, really."

Johnson's exhibit, called "Newtopia," opened at The Rooms Friday, and features the work of four local visual artists — Wilkins, painter Janaki Lennie, and photographers Scott Walden and John Haney.

The artists' work focuses on developments in post-Confederation Newfoundland, including the airport, American military presence in Pleasantville, Smallwood-era industrialization and the lure of big oil.

In addition to his large manipulated furniture images, Wilkins has produced pieces of video art for the

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Janaki Lennie

exhibit, also featuring the airport: one called, "Coming," the other, "Going."

"It's a long, long corridor and it looks like you're walking down it and you're going to get to the end, but you never get any closer," he explained. "If you turn around, it's

exactly the same thing (in the other direction), so you're torn between coming and going.

"I've also animated the furniture to sort of make it breathe or move, as well, so you can then look at the still ones of the furniture and the moving ones, and question what you're seeing."

Wilkins has also produced a high-definition, moving video of the airport's Mondrianesque terrazzo floor.

Australian-born Janaki Lennie, who moved to St. John's from Houston, Texas, about 18 months ago, produced a series of five small oil paintings called "Islands" for the exhibit.

True to the majority of her work, Lennie's paintings could be called "nostalgic futurism," featuring graded skies, sometimes with fragments of tree branches, and include mist-drenched, rocky islands, and man-made structures like street lamps or highway lights.

"This body of work is new since arriving here in Newfoundland and working through the physical landscape, but also the ideas and the mythology that has to do with islands and living on islands, and the sort of romantic appeal," Lennie explained.

"The real sort of isolation and quality of life that one encounters while living on an island, versus the romance of them.

"My paintings are very romantic, but each of them has an element that brings you back to reality."

Her pieces aren't meant to be of recognizable places, Lennie explained, but rather a "feeling" of the local environment and her emotional responses to it.

"They're sort of symbolic and strange, but they're also very nostalgic," she said.

"Newtopia" will be on display at The Rooms until Jan. 25.

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"Coming," by Peter Wilkins  
 — Submitted photo

