



RIVER GRAND CHRONICLES:

SIX | SEVEN | EIGHT







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SIX

**PHIL IRISH:
WATERSHED**
(MAY 15 - JULY 5, 2009)

SEVEN

**SUSAN COOLEN:
GRAND SHADOWS**
(MAY 15 - JULY 5, 2009)

EIGHT

**GWEN MACGREGOR:
RESEARCH, FLOW CHARTS
AND DATA BANKS**
(JUNE 16 - SEPT 5, 2010)



KITCHENER - WATERLOO
ART GALLERY



RIVER GRAND CHRONICLES

The *River Grand Chronicles* series presents projects with a strong connection to the Grand River and the regions it winds through.

The series frontispiece exhibition, *River: Grand!*, featured contemporary and historical works created from the embrace of the Grand River's past and present influences. Historic paintings, drawings, prints, and photographs were brought together from significant collections and placed in the context of works by contemporary artists.

The *River Grand Chronicles* will focus on contemporary projects that cast the Grand River as either a conceptual or literal figure in visual storytelling. Major themes such as romanticized visions, traditional depictions of the landscape, and the complex and often neglected cultural history of the region, will surface in these important projects.

As with other KWJAG programming series, the *River Grand Chronicles* ask our visitors to consider how stories, be they fictional or true, have resonance beyond geographic boundaries.

Chapter 10 Futile Negotiations

Already in September 1780 the Indians of the Northwest and the South were in a state of alarm. Onagers in the Miami, Delaware, Hottel Wyandott, Tawawantse, the confederated tribes along the Wabash, the Choctaw from the north, Cherokee, Creek, and Shawnee from the south, met Brant and representatives of the Six Nations at Sandusky.

Brant held a place of honor in the council circle and made a strong plea for Indian unity which had been his dream for many years. The king's representative urged them to accept new terms, but Brant and a delegation were sent with their petition to Fort Stanwix to meet with the American commissioners.

Governor Clinton of New York tried to prevent Brant's meeting with the Indian commissioners, sent by General Washington to arrange an amicable settlement. Clinton had no intention of returning the Iroquois lands. General Schuyler made a deliberately aggressive speech with denigrating remarks about the "Four Nations," as he insisted on calling them. In 1784 it was obvious to all the Indians that neither the Americans nor the British were prepared to meet the Indians here the British Lake Ontario for the Indians. The Indian dream of an all-Indian confederacy was serious, and Chief Red Jacket and Chief Cornplanter (also Seneca) were left to argue the best course for the western Indians. Against the wishes of Red Jacket, Cornplanter considered treaty with the Americans which helped to bring peace to their land. Under the terms of all previous treaties, the Indians demanded not only the return of all property but also Indian hostages in a gesture of peace. The hostages were Aaron Hill, a Mohawk, and a Seneca. As the treaty and hostages were made, Brant at the time and perhaps was the only one to all the lands of the Indians present in the who ceremony. Brant proposed to agree to the



Brant, painted by William Bercy (1784-1823). Find out more about Brant who was one of the founders of Canada, Ontario.



AS IF ON RUNNING WATER

BY RICHARD WILLIAM HILL

*...one may certainly admire man as a mighty genius
of construction who succeeds in piling up an infinitely
complicated dome of concepts upon an unstable
foundation and, as it were, on running water.¹*

Nietzsche

It is not possible to step twice into the same river. ²

Heraclitus

There is a portrait of Mohawk chief and British army captain Thayendanegea (aka: Joseph Brant) standing on the banks of the Grand River. It was painted by William Berczy around 1805, about twenty years after Brant had led an exodus of Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy) Loyalists to the area along the Grand River. There the British rewarded their allies with what has become Canada's largest reserve, named after the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy. The city of Brantford commemorates his crossing of the river. In the painting Thayendanegea might be in the act of leading his people to Upper Canada, his right arm raised and finger pointing the way. At the same time we might also recognize the gesture as a familiar sign of oratory in classical sculpture. His contrapposto stance and toga-like blanket also add

to the classical impression and artists like Berczy knew that to honour a Loyalist hero like Thayendanegea (whose equally loyal dog looks up lovingly to his face seeking direction) nothing served better than a reference to the political forms of antiquity. I wonder about all this pointing though. While Brant was a true cosmopolitan educated both by his own people and in the British system, I suspect that when leading his people he would have probably pointed Indian-style, with his lips and a slight raise of the chin. That would have made a better painting, don't you think? Less mired in camp antiquity and more of the 19th century present.

But we are talking about the Grand River. Although Berczy has us look respectfully up at Thayendanegea he also contrives to keep the horizon line high enough to give us a view of the river itself, in part by placing Thayendanegea on a bluff. The river matters because it is both in the process of being invested with symbolic historical significance and already carries with it a set of much older and more general associations. The river is a boundary that Brant must ford. The river is a symbol of travel, of movement, of future prosperity. For the Haudenosaunee a river was also already a symbol of the political sphere in general. This can be seen on the Two-Row wampum, a belt made of purple and white shell beads and exchanged as legal documents between Dutch colonists in upstate New York and the Haudenosaunee. The belt has two purple bands running parallel on a white background. The belt is said to symbolize a river, which in turn symbolizes the space that the Haudenosaunee and the English travel down together in parallel, each in their own canoes; that is sharing the land, but maintaining independent polities. No doubt the Haudenosaunee knew their autonomy was at risk early on or they would not have attempted to bolster it with the exchange of Two Row wampum belts.

In this sense the river makes an excellent metaphor for their aspirations, with movement through space implying movement and endurance through time, but all framed within the continuity of the river itself.

So we have a river (and rivers in general) freighted with a wide series of associations. Artists trade in and play upon such associations, but often the challenge of looking is to be able to look with all of these associations in mind and still see something new. When Berczy imagined Thayendanegea on the Grand River he saw, as artists of his generation had been trained to do, classical antiquity. This allowed him to speak the visual language of his time to his audience, but in speaking that language he also missed some of what was immediately before him. It is always language's impulse to lead us away from what is sensuously present and into its own logic and history of associations. As art critic and historian Hal Foster noted several decades ago, even the wildest expressionist painter now has a vocabulary of gestures to deploy that we all recognize in advance.³ This mediating function of language is seen as a particular challenge in representing the alterity of nature, for which rivers often stand. Think of the nature Spirit Faust confronts in his study. The Spirit destroys Faust's faith in the ability of reason to capture all of nature, to, in Hegel's terms, plant "the symbol of its sovereignty on every height and in every depth."⁴ He asserts, "My name is Faust, in everything your equal." The Spirit scoffs, telling Faust that he knows only the projections of his own mind: "You match the spirit that you comprehend, Not me."⁵

And yet here is a paradox: running water has become a symbol of the failure of rational symbolic systems to grasp reality. As the quotes above suggest, they are a sign of the immeasurable, transient flux of life. The Skeptics were also fascinated by the elusive quality of water, which

impressed them by making a straight oar seem bent, for example.⁶ They saw this ability to distort light as a challenge to faith in the immediacy of sense perception. I don't think that it is a coincidence that Nietzsche sees this as, metaphorically, an architectural problem. I suspect that we modern folk are aquaphiles in part because of our built environment. A view of water raises property values significantly and many cities have re-organized their post-industrial waterfronts so that people can go down and look at the water.⁷ In a mystery novel I read a few years ago, the protagonist speculates that people keep fish tanks not so much because they like fish, but because they like to look at water. The transient surface of moving water provides one of the few visual respites from the instrumental rectilinearity imposed on almost all of our built environments. Beyond a few expensive rule-proving exceptions, we live in a world of horizontal and vertical surfaces that join at hard right angles. I can follow the modernists in celebrating this grid, I can see its beauty at times, yet one is bound to seek relief from any ubiquitous structure and for many of us a walk by the river provides that.

If artists can take up these threads of history and symbolic association, perhaps they can also negotiate the active border space between language's propensity to tell us what we already know and our desire to see what was sensuously present before them as they encountered the Grand River.

Richard Hill is a curator, critic and art historian who teaches at York University, Toronto. As a curator at the Art Gallery of Ontario he over-saw the museum's first substantial effort to include North American Aboriginal art and ideas in permanent collection galleries. He co-curated, with Jimmie Durham, *The American West* at Compton Verney, UK in 2005. His most recent curatorial project is *The World Upside Down*, which originated at the Walter Phillips Gallery and traveled to a number of Canadian venues. He is currently writing a book on the problem of agency in the art of Jimmie Durham, the subject of his PhD thesis.

Endnotes:

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," *Philosophy and Truth*, Daniel Breazeale, ed. (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1979) p. 85.

² As quoted in R. D. Mckirahan Jr., *Philosophy Before Socrates* (Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1994). p. 122.

³ Hal Foster, *Recodings* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1985). pp 59-77.

⁴ G. W. F. Hegel *Phenomenology of Spirit*, A.V. Miller, trans. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977, original 1807). ¶1241.

⁵ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust, Part One*, Phillip Wayne, trans. (London, etc.: Penguin, 1949). p. 48.

⁶ This example is reported by Cicero [*Academica*, II: 19, 79] and by Augustine of Hippo—a one time sceptic himself—who refutes it in *Against the Academicians*, P. King trans. (Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995). p. 75.

⁷ Lawrence Block, *The Burglar on the Prowl* (Harpenden, UK: No Exit Press, 2004). p. 35.

A painting of a waterfall with a large white number 6 overlaid. The painting is divided into two horizontal sections. The top section shows a landscape with a small house and trees under a pale sky. The bottom section shows a waterfall cascading over rocks, with a dark blue structure on the right. The number 6 is a large, white, sans-serif digit positioned in the upper right quadrant of the image.

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PHIL IRISH: WATERSHED





In recent years, Phil Irish's painting practice has relied on a form of collaborative cartography. In collecting hand-drawn maps from diverse groups of people, Irish is able to form a likeness of a place that aims to communicate more than just the physical attributes of land. For Irish and his collaborators, cartography is hardly an objective pursuit. These maps locate places of personal significance – places of revelation, trauma, or even solace.

These narratives, often annotated by the collaborators on their maps, become a crucial means by which Irish understands the landscape around him. When visiting and documenting the physical sites described by the maps, there is sometimes a discrepancy between his experience and that of his collaborators. What Irish has referred to as “tension and confluence between two different points of view” are often evidenced by a collision between representation and some form of abstraction within a single work, a tense reminder that the “document” is never fully objective.

Watershed is a continuation of this process with a specific focus on the people and the landscape along the Grand River. A lifeguard's account of saving a girl's life, a believer's account of baptism, and a young couple on the cusp of a new relationship are just a few of the narratives Irish draws from the river. In *Watershed*, the River is cast as a metaphor for transition and renewal – an essential way of looking at our evolving landscape today.















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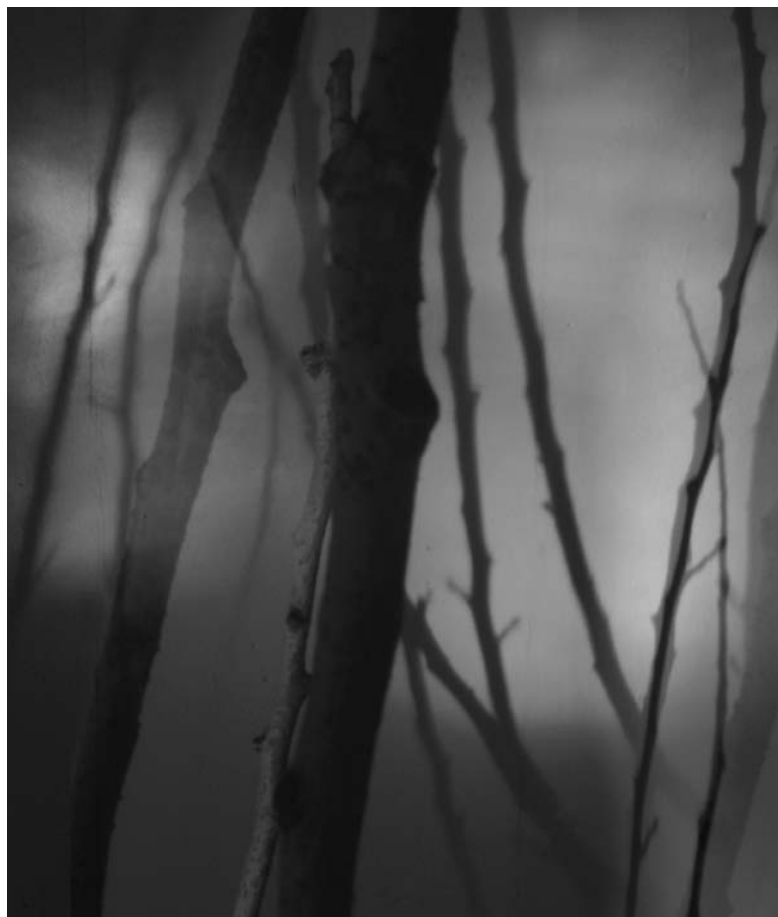
SUSAN COOLEN: GRAND SHADOWS

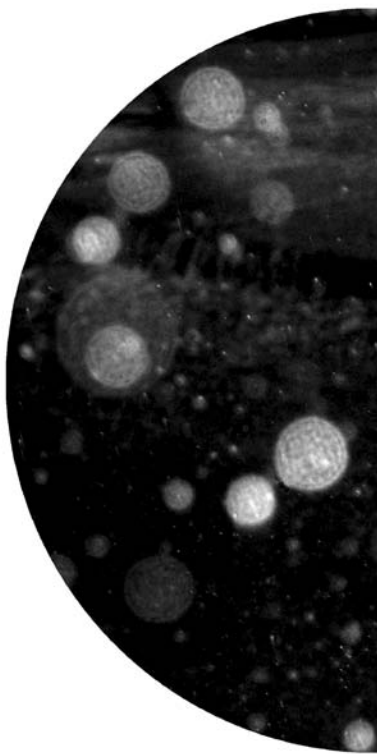


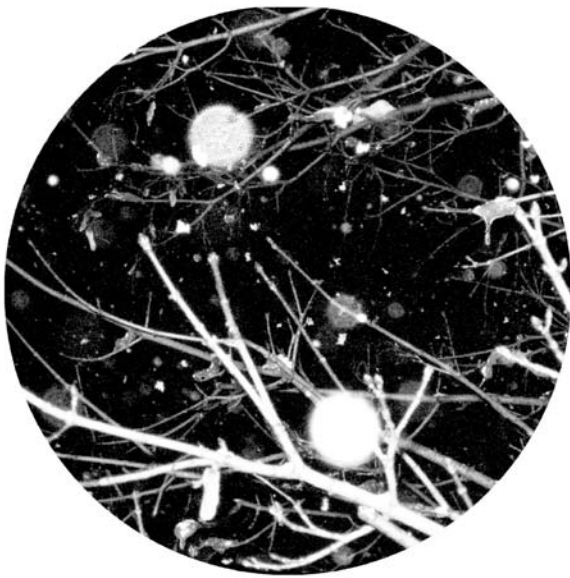
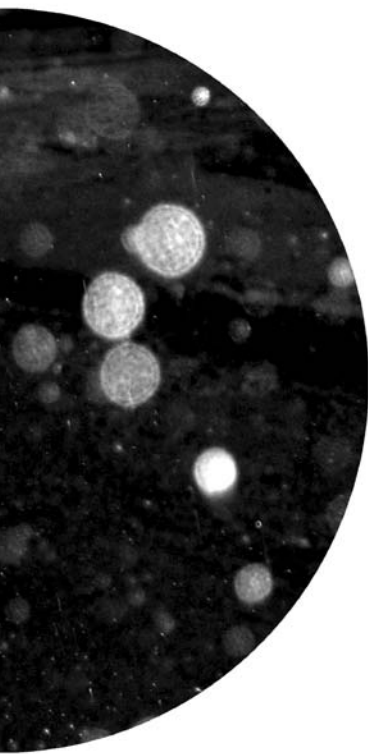
Susan Coolen's photographic practice originates in the childhood ritual of scavenging the shoreline of a small coastal village for washed-up treasures. Much of her work has its start in the ongoing act of gathering and collecting nature specimens, found objects, the flotsam and other detritus of daily life. As an initial means of responding artistically to these items, Coolen turns to her interests in natural history, museology, astronomy and mines their connection to the history of photography.

In *Grand Shadows*, Coolen explores her taxonomic impulse in a new way. These photographic light works, large image projections and small video works, all incorporate imagery drawn from her ongoing expeditions to the Grand River environs. Of this new work, Coolen states: "I percolated on the feel of the visual tangle of light and shadow, the lines and forms of trees on the river's edge environment, reflections, and to the sounds of the often invisible presence of its flowing waters. These expeditions, responses and the resulting studio work are expressed as a visual, spatial and auditory experience that is more suggestive rather than literal. Here I invite the viewer to wander within the gallery space and sense the Grand River as a place of atmosphere and inspiration."

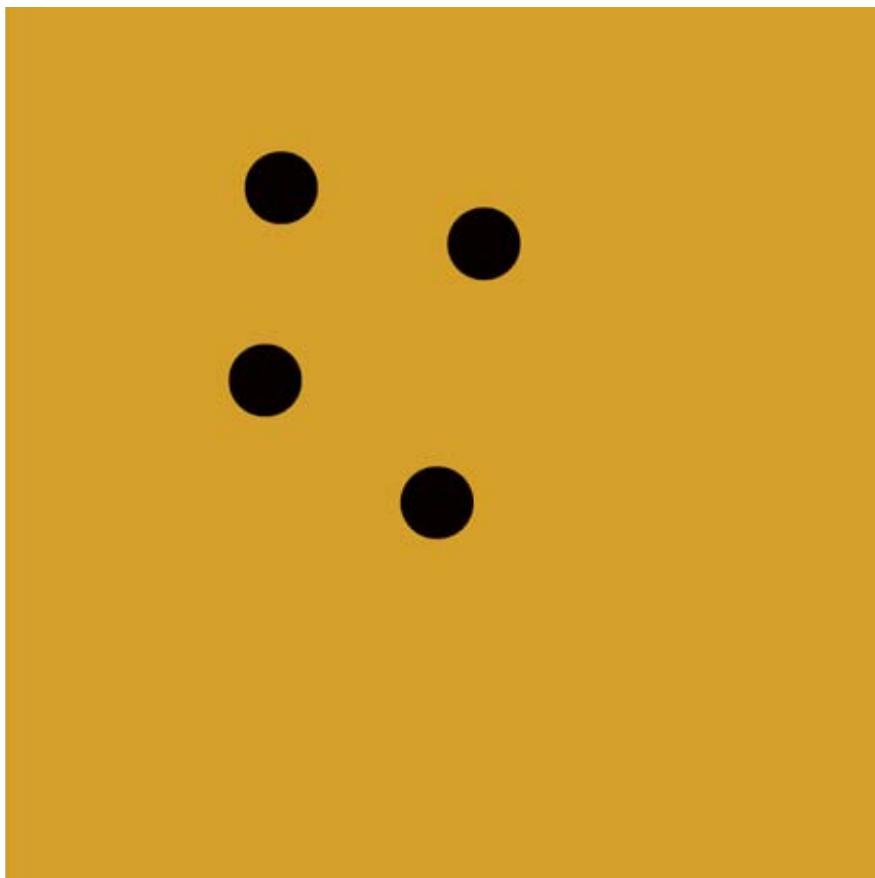












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GWEN MACGREGOR: RESEARCH, FLOW CHARTS AND DATA BANKS



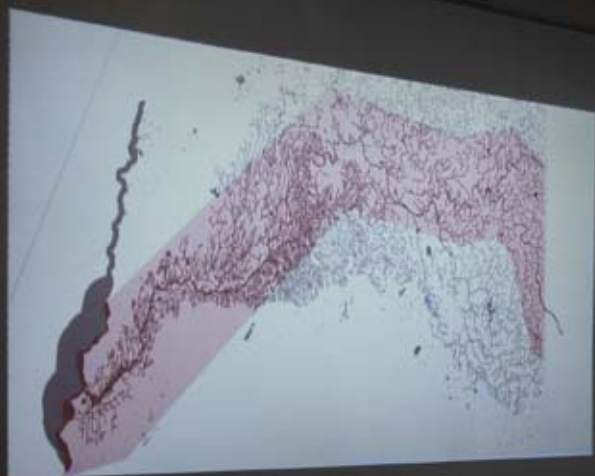
Gwen MacGregor's installations and video work often use the physical conditions of a chosen site as a springboard for explorations into the passage of time and its uncanny effects. Her research, which is inseparable from her process of making, relies on the gathering of data such as patterns of movement, geographical information, and ephemeral materials. Whether she is collecting video footage or photographing snow, MacGregor transforms natural phenomena and the incidental into artworks that explore how we understand our physical place in the world.

In MacGregor's *Research*, *Flow Charts and Data Banks*, the Grand River is more than just a scenic ribbon running through southern Ontario; it is the physical site of historic interactions and negotiations of the land through which it runs. How, for example, does one begin to understand in a contemporary context, the Haldimand Tract, an unfulfilled promise made 200 years ago between the Six Nations and the British Crown?

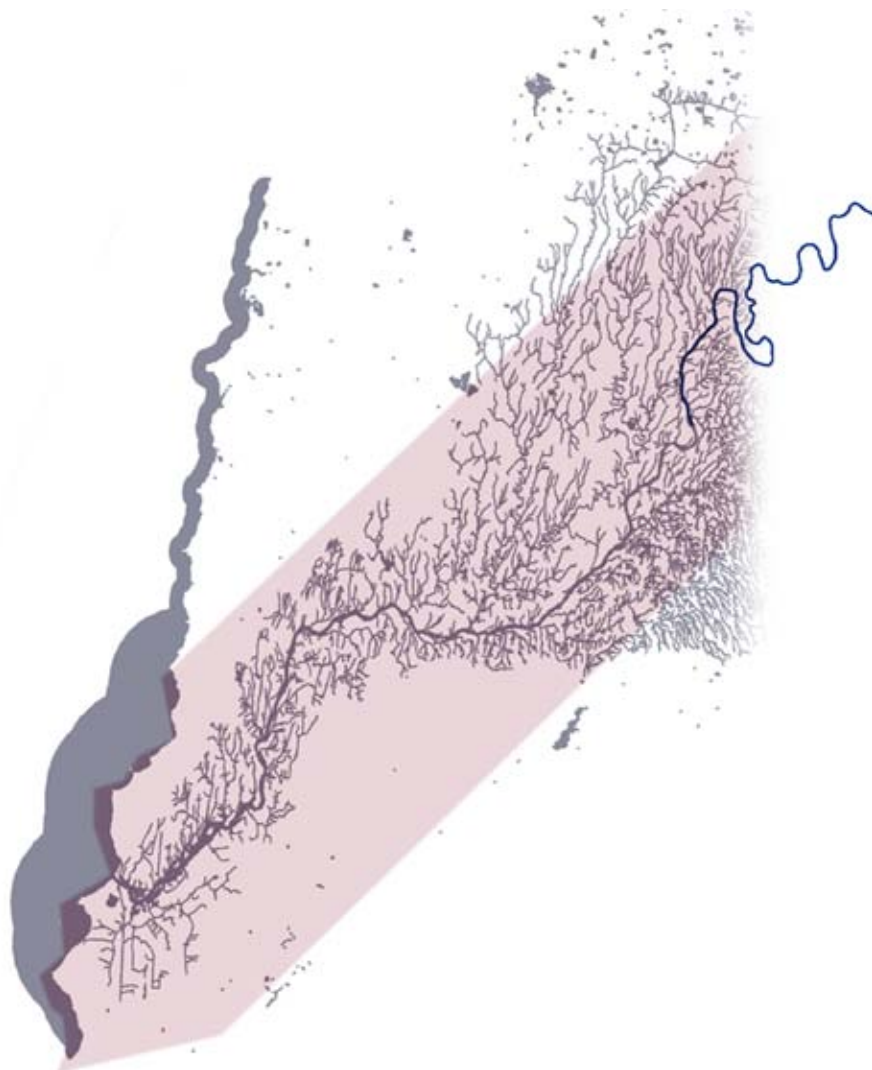
Over the last two years MacGregor has been exploring the possibilities of the Grand River as subject matter through both process driven exploration and analytical research. In the summer of 2009 MacGregor (along with fellow artist Gordon Hicks) canoed the Grand River from the headwaters to Lake Erie. Video documentation and GPS (Global Positioning System) information gathered from that trip has been combined with historical research material to create the new video works, *Headwaters to Lake Erie and Sheds*, included in this exhibition. The floor installation *Banks* combines a GIS (Geographic Information System) representation of viable locations for wildflower growth within the watershed. Made with recycled packaging from organic products, MacGregor's installation creates an imaginary landscape of the River's watershed. Together these works offer an environment of enquiry, possibility and understanding about the Grand River.

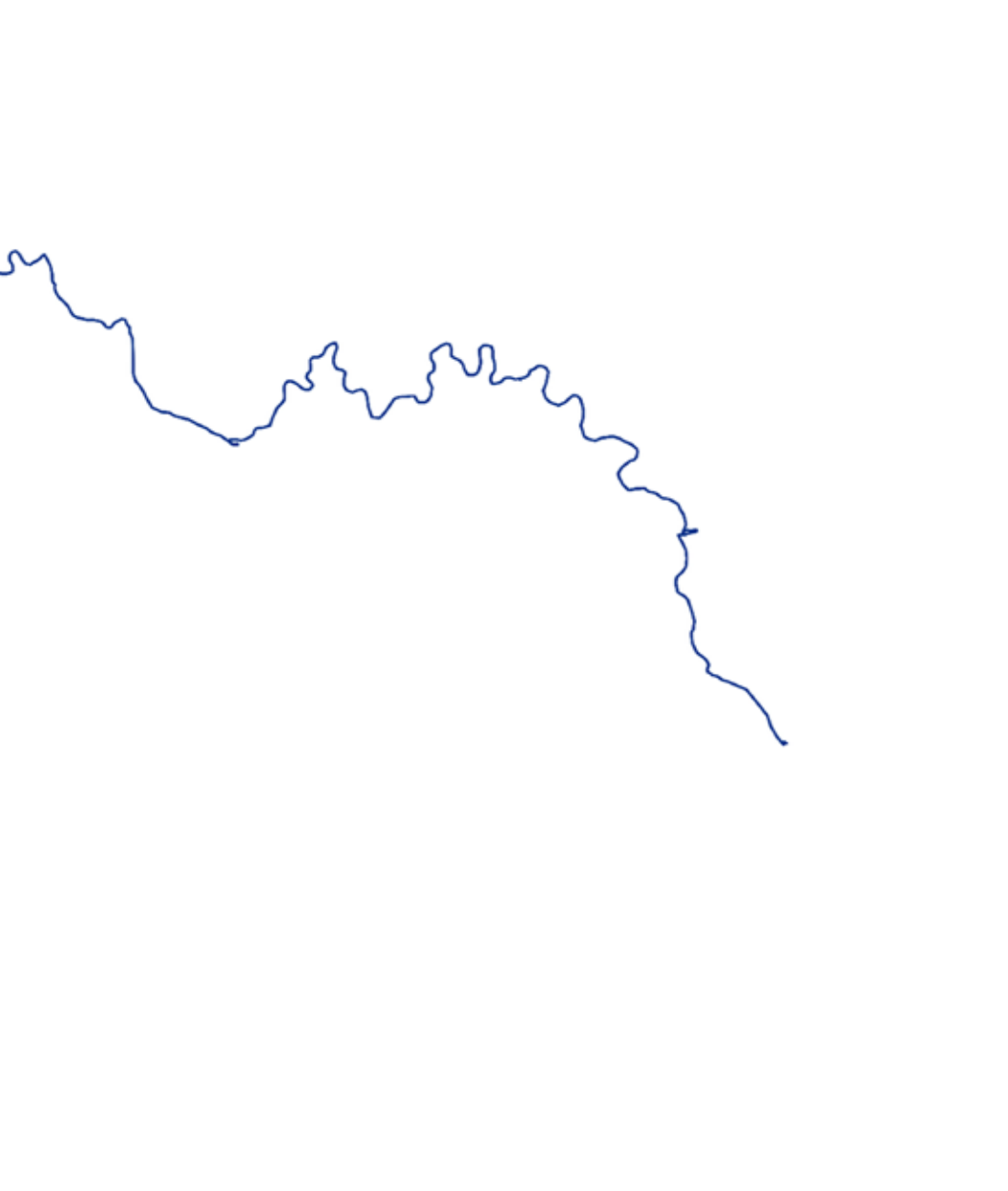












IMAGES

Phil Irish

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Susan Coolen

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Gwen MacGregor

Cover and back: *Headwaters to Lake Erie* (detail), 2010, Split screen single channel video, 25 minutes. Page 1-2: Image from Gwen MacGregor's canoe trip along the Grand River. Page 33-34: Image from Gwen MacGregor's canoe trip along the Grand River. Photo by Gordon Hicks. Page 35: *Headwaters to Lake Erie and Banks* (detail), 2010, floor installation with recycled material, drawings, paper maché, earth. Page 37-38: *Banks*, 2010, floor installation with recycled material, drawings, paper maché, earth. Page 39-40: Exhibition installation image. Page 41-42: *Shed*, 2010, Video animation, GPS record, 4 minutes.

Installation Photography: Robert McNair

All images courtesy of the artist.



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