

**WATER RITES:**  
**Reimagining Water in the West**  
Edited by Jim Ellis

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# confluence:

## *artist's statement & portfolio*

leslie sweder

**Living in the city**, I have observed the tendency of our own urbanity to perpetuate a chronic disconnect from the land of which we are a part. This sense of disconnect drives my explorations of the landscape that has formed me, and my place within it. Out of a discordant situation I have developed a multidisciplinary practice that includes public interventions, painting, collaborative drawing, and photography. These practices are direct responses to and/or recordings of my surrounding environment, and each one implicitly feeds the others. As a whole, my practice is always mindful of people and place and the ongoing conversation between the two. To me, landscape is not what we see from afar. It is what we experience through all of our senses. It is what we are.

*Confluence* evolved out of this desire to immerse myself in my immediate landscape, to know intimately the movement of energy that surrounds and affects me. In order to know the pulse of our city and the land it grew out of, I chose to focus on its heart, the confluence of the Bow and Elbow Rivers. It is here I document the smaller movements of these rivers through *plein-air* studies (*Notes on Current*) and create photographs of the detritus along their shorelines (*The Things We've Left Behind*). Lastly, I take home objects whose original purpose is unknown to me, or which no longer seem to have a purpose. I study these objects through drawings in the studio (*The Dispossessed*). In *Notes On Current*, I draw on the traditional history of Canadian *plein-air* landscape painting (particularly the small-scale studies of Tom Thomson), the exquisite stillness of Agnes Martin, and the abstract landscapes of Gerhard Richter. I also pay heed to the

thinking of artists such as Otto Rogers who believed that “one of the distinct advantages of painting as a discipline is its static nature, its symbolic representation of movement by means of stillness.” As a whole, my practice is an investigation into the resiliency of nature and the fragility of life. The paintings are meditations on grace, transition, the linearity of flow, and the eternal cycles of nature. When the paintings are juxtaposed with the photographs and the drawings, which document the smaller visible traces of the human footprint, they further explore our reciprocal relationship with the river. When I look through the water to see the earth beneath it, it reflects my image up to the sky. Yet I am not the least bit interested in my own reflection. I am interested in the river as that liminal space that connects the earth and the sky. It is where we come to understand that what appears solid is empty and what appears empty is not. For this reason, the paintings become studies in space while exploring landscape and abstraction as related concepts. I do not interact with the river directly nor am I attempting to affect it. I allow it to affect me, to show me its nature and to teach me.

The Bow River as it runs today is an estimated 13,000 years old. This fact alone is humbling. I can't fully imagine what 13,000 years means, but I do feel the weight of my own years, and try to imagine all the changes and all that has not changed during this time. I focus on documenting what the water shows me during the time I sit on its bank. Although the river is a continual flow, it is different in every moment. It is never the same water, the same form, colour, or the same energy. You will not see what I paint in a single moment on the river — not as you would in a photograph. These works capture a gradual change in light and movement, including the life moving through it and over it. In this manner each painting becomes a study in time. I study the current of the river, its light, its sound, the smell, and the touch of the cool water gliding over my skin. This is a sensual practice and I use it to mine the many different expressions of the river. In this manner, I document the river's rhythm, movement, and energy. I appeal to the river's natural intelligence, in search of my own, but the river remains elusive. I am never successful in capturing it and somehow this keeps me returning.

It is from the river that I am learning how to move through the world with grace, how to be both soft and strong, how to negotiate conflicting energies, how to absorb new elements while letting things go when they do not serve me. When I look back on these words I have written, they sound lofty, grand — but then again, the river is grand. I am merely its student.

**58** **water rites** reimagining water in the west

**girl on a rock, SE end of st patrick's island bridge**

last light, 2017

oil on birch panel

8 x 10"







**spring run off, SW end of st patrick's bridge**

last light, june 20, 2017

oil on birch panel

8 x 10"





**SW corner of confluence**  
last light, august 17, 2017  
oil on birch panel  
8 x 10"



**new zoo bridge construction**

last light, july 8, 2017

oil on birch panel

8 x 10"





**62** **water rites** reimagining water in the west

**the brown apartment block, SE end of st patrick's bridge**

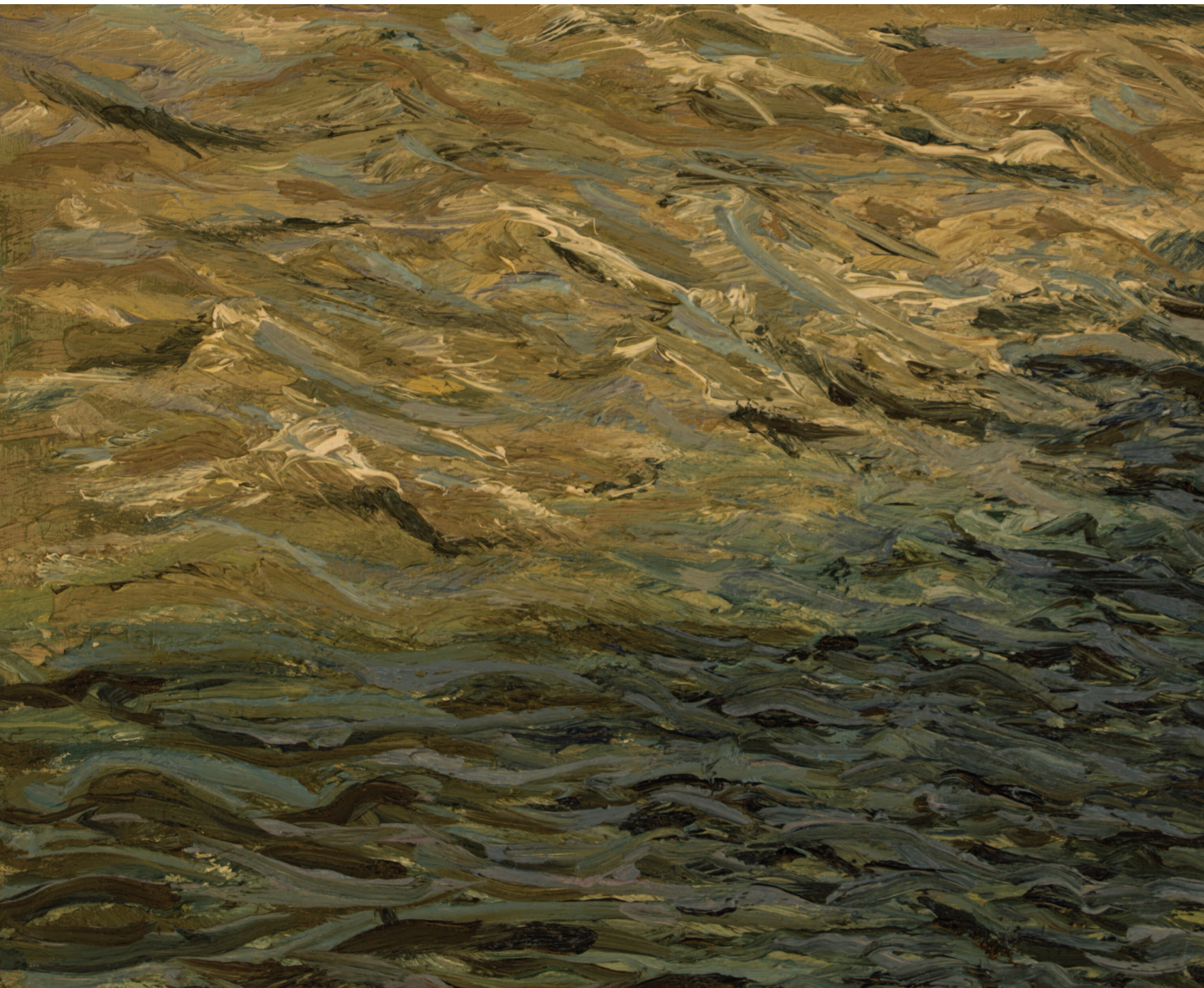
last light, july 14, 2017

oil on birch panel

8 x 10"







**SW corner of confluence**  
last light, june 12, 2017  
oil on birch panel  
8 x 10"