

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

gathering

A Written Accompaniment to the Thesis Exhibition

by

Sharon Rose Hjartarson

A PAPER

**SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS**

**DEPARTMENT OF ART
CALGARY, ALBERTA**

September, 2001

© Sharon Rose Hjartarson



**National Library
of Canada**

**Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services**

**395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada**

**Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada**

**Acquisitions et
services bibliographiques**

**395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada**

Your file Votre référence

Our file Notre référence

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-65067-7

Canada

Abstract

This paper accompanies an exhibition of visual art entitled “gathering”. Chapter one provides a brief overview. Chapter two discusses the concept of “journey” in relation to Osprey Flats and the work that evolved as a consequence of my encounter with this landscape and adjacent sites. Chapter three acknowledges the artists who inspired me on my quest to discover my own artistic voice. The riparian community of Osprey Flats is discussed in an interview with naturalist and curator, Wayne Emerson Roberts in chapter four. The concluding chapter reflects on the work that evolved during the two years of my graduate program and inevitably culminated in my thesis show “gathering”.

Acknowledgements

For as long as I have dared to dream, my aim has been to obtain a Master of Fine Arts degree. An aspiration such as this cannot be attained without assistance from family, friends and teachers. They recognized my commitment and my determination to reach my goal. Their encouragement gave me the courage to act.

I owe a special thanks to my supervisor Ron Kostyniuk for supporting my decision to explore the natural world from an artist's perspective. Dr. Carol MacDonnell taught me a new view on art and young children. I have helpful tools to use when I return to the world of teaching the young. I would like to thank Professor Kim Huynh for her guidance. She recognized my efforts and challenged me to reach beyond what I thought possible. Professor Jed Irwin sought to inform me on relevant theories that pertained to my vision.

A heartfelt thanks goes to shop foreman Rick Calkins. I listened and learned!

Thank you to Graduate Secretary, Helen Miller. I sincerely appreciate the many times she pointed me in the right direction.

I am deeply grateful to Gerald and Louise Oxtoby of Innisfail for granting me permission to use their land along the Red Deer River for my research. They overwhelmed me with their generosity.

Last but not least, I lovingly applaud my family for their faith in my vision. I am truly blessed by their love and countenance.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate my thesis to Wayne Emerson Roberts, naturalist and curator of the Museum of Zoology at the University of Alberta (also known to his friends as Papa Bear).

I had the most incredible dream. I dreamed I journeyed along meandering rivers that sparkled and danced in the rays of the sun. I wandered through lush meadows, deep valleys and magical forests to a land called Osprey Flats. In my dream, I met a gentle and wise old bear who lived in a dusty den filled with the most extraordinary treasures that he had gathered from the forest floors, sandstone cliffs, gravel bars and meadows of this enchanted realm. This learned and rather shaggy inhabitant growled softly and pointed his paw in the direction of a comfortable old stump. I sat myself down and became instantly spellbound as he told me of his adventures in this natural land. The tales he spun of the sights he had seen and the memories he had stored freed my burdened soul. The vision and the journey did not fade with the waking light. On the contrary, the memories continue to nourish my artistic spirit to this very day.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Approval Page.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Dedication.....	v
Chapter One:	
Introduction.....	1
Chapter Two:	
Conception.....	3
Journey.....	4
Sanctuary.....	6
Gathering.....	12
Intrusion.....	16
Transformation.....	19
Chapter Three:	
Artistic Influences.....	22
Wolfgang Laib.....	24
Ana's Journey.....	31
Ana Mendieta.....	32

Chapter Four:

The Naturalist.....37

Ghostpine Springs Sanctuary.....53

Chapter Five:

gathering- The Exhibition.....56

Riparian Preserves.....57

Conclusion.....60

Bibliography.....62

Figures.....64

Appendix.....65

Works in the Thesis Exhibition.....68

~One~

Introduction

Introduction

The environmental encounter "gathering" evolved from two years of intense study and exploration. The final exhibition "Riparian Preserves" represents the culmination of experiences that I encountered on my journey through the natural world of Osprey Flats. Parallels are drawn between this sanctuary and the individual journey. The cycles of birth, growth and death so blatantly evident in nature become a poignant reflector for the human condition. I chose natural materials to convey this theme of transition and the passage of time.

My work is environmentally based with a strong sculptural component. Many of the works are three-dimensional. I do not think of my work as sculpture in the traditional sense. I think of it more as an "environmental encounter". I want the audience to experience the sensory stimuli that I perceived on my travels through Osprey Flats. The "encounter" is manifested in the selection of the natural materials I use to create my sculptures. Each sculpture evolved out of a direct experience with the environment. They are the manifestations of my journey both real and imagined.

The environmental stage unfolds in the ensuing chapters. Osprey Flats becomes the setting where the journey is revealed. Subsequent chapters discuss issues relating to the evolution of my work. I conclude with a summary of the work in my thesis show.

~Two ~

Conception

Journey



Fig.1 Journey, Fall 2000

Life is like a river. Its flow is at times smooth and gentle, at times turbulent and obstructed. Similarly the flow of life has its uncertainties, its gentle meanderings and its agitated and impeded passages. There are particular junctures on the human journey where an individual experiences exponential growth. How one responds to unforeseeable events determines who they are for the moment. New experiences washing over the individual will open uncharted passages that inevitably alter the course and the outcome of their existence. We are never motionless but perpetually moving forward in response to the current of the times.

An important transition occurred on my travels two years ago. This

experience changed the course of my art. I was introduced to a unique stretch of land along the Red Deer River. My acquaintance with this refuge began innocently enough. I went fishing. That day spent on the river was to become one of many. The peaceful tranquility of this landscape called me back. It became my sanctuary. My profound gratitude is extended to the angler who shared the secret of his favorite fishing hole. I am deeply indebted to him. His gift has altered the direction of my life and my art.

Sanctuary

For the past two years I have been creating natural sculptures from materials gathered along a stretch of the Red Deer River locally called Osprey Flats. Osprey Flats was given its name by naturalist Wayne Emerson Roberts who has spent many years fishing in the area. He named this region of the Red Deer River after the osprey¹ that migrate here to fish and raise its young. Roberts often observes the osprey hunt for mountain whitefish. The osprey soars high above the shallows, hovers momentarily, then suddenly plunges down to catch a whitefish in its talons. Not every stoop is successful. The osprey loses more prey than it successfully captures. While camping on the Flats, I witnessed an osprey seize a fish too big for it to carry. Unable to lift its prey, the osprey drifted downstream with the whitefish in its grasp. After a futile struggle the osprey relinquished its grip and the fish was released. Visible scars from the talons of the osprey are frequently found on mountain whitefish caught along this stretch of the river. They are reminders of a journey in a natural world where survival is paramount.



Fig.2 Osprey Flats, Fall 1999

¹The scientific names of the plants and animals discussed in this paper are listed in appendix 1.

My journey exploring the landscape in and around Osprey Flats has captivated me. I have hiked, canoed and camped along this stretch of river in all kinds of weather and in every season. I never tire of the solitude, and incredible beauty of this place. Everywhere I look reveals the richness of this haven. To my left are the soil and sandstone banks where bison bones lie weathered and exposed. To my right is an island strewn with logs deposited by the high waters. Behind me is a meadow filled with wild honeysuckle, purple asters and rusty willow. Across from me is another island fondly called Hawaii where a mule deer doe sought refuge to give birth to her fawn. The island cradled the two over the summer, protecting them from the coyotes living on the mainland. Above me soars a bald eagle circling the river valley in search of food. It lands near a pile of fish entrails left as an offering. The whitefish are rising to feed on the mayflies floating on the water. The abundance of this place called Osprey Flats calls me back. I feel at home here.



Fig.3 Late Winter Camp, 2001

Home is a powerful metaphor. It is a special place. It houses and comforts. It stimulates feelings of nostalgia and alludes to the passage of time. A house can be our sacred place away from the pressures of everyday living. It is our refuge where we gather to partake in the pleasures of intimacy and ritual. A house is all of this. One senses, however, that "house" metaphorically comprises something deeper and more meaningful. Gaston Bachelard describes the spiritual attributes of house. He states, "the house is one of the greatest powers for the integration of the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind... Without it man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of heaven and through those of life. It is his body and soul. Before he is cast into the world...man is laid in the cradle of the house"² This cradle of the house, says Bachelard, is imbued with sanctifying qualities. It is the one place we return to in our daydreams. Our entire past is contained within it. The memories we gather and store need not be precise he says, only reminiscent of our sacred space.³ This refuge, where all images have roots, becomes the center from which creative imagining radiates. The source of this creative imagery is generated from the accumulation of life experience.

The inner sanctuary described by Bachelard comforts and contains as we move with the current of the times. The current can vary with each bend in the river. Jean Vanier argues "The passage of life itself suggests a constant reoccurring movement from order to chaos...Our universe is constantly evolving:

² Gaston Bachelard, the poetics of space, trans. (The Orion Press Inc., 1964), 7.

³ Ibid., 7.

the old order gives way to the new order and this in turn crumbles when the next order appears."⁴ New order reveals a new course and new experiences that lead in new directions. Going fishing was one important juncture that changed the course of my journey. Osprey Flats became my metaphorical cradle that sheltered and protected me on my passage.



Fig.4 The approaching storm, the Flats, Fall 2000

Like the cradle of the house, Osprey Flats offers me refuge in its solitude. This solitary experience is manifested through the direct connection of being immersed in a rich riparian community of plants and wildlife that exist along the riverbank. Osprey Flats contains like the cradle. The earthen carpet of grasses and mosses becomes the floor. The banks and the forest form the walls that protect one from the storms of heaven and those of life. At its center is the hearth that warms the body and pacifies the soul. Earth, air, fire and water combine to form this natural refuge. This secure environment provides balance in the chaotic

⁴ Jean Vanier, Becoming Human, (House of Anansi Press Limited, 1998), 12.

and transient flow of life. Together with its rich flora and fauna, it furnishes me with a sense of equilibrium. The changing seasons, the cycles of birth, growth and death transmit a message of repetition and unity regarding my own moment in time.



Fig.5 Remains of a dead osprey, Spring 2000

Sights, sounds, events and discoveries experienced at Osprey Flats, both individually and collectively serve to inspire and stimulate my creative imagining. The rich array of color and shapes in the stones on the gravel bars for instance, beckons the explorer to pause and reflect. Even the smallest stone worn smooth from its journey down the river holds connections to a past. My favorite, the blue limestone, comes from ancient seabeds. The scattered fragments are the residues binding the distant past with the present. The discovery of a dead osprey strewn on the bank of the river in early May becomes a poignant metaphor for the fragile nature of the human condition. Shy pelicans float silently by my camp dipping their enormous beaks into the water seeking nourishment.

Their rhythmic feeding echoes the substance one craves in the cycle of living and dying. The bloated carcass of a deer floats gently downstream. A crow is perched on the remains, gorging itself on the rotting flesh. Nothing is wasted in this world. Death feeds life and the inevitable journey resumes. Aged driftwood beautifully stained and scarred, floats silently on the water. Its destination, like my own, remains a mystery. The drone from a hundred mallard wings lifting off the water at sunset announces the bald eagle's presence. The natural drama of predator/ prey commences with the approaching dusk. Time spent immersed in the sensory world of Osprey Flats observing, exploring and discovering is mapped and imprinted on my memory. Osprey Flats becomes a studio for the senses where experience finds expression and is transferred from memory to object, verifying the journey and the connection to this haven.

The richness of the river valley provides the physical materials needed to construct my work. The fragmented and decaying wood I gather to build my sculptures is pulled from the river or found on the gravel bars. The cattails used in the weavings grow in the low marshes adjacent to the river. Carving sticks are collected from the iron pools seeping through the sand. The blue limestone and coral are harvested from the gravel bars and islands. Iron stained bone fragments are dug out of the banks and riverbed. Each object I gather embodies a memory of my travels. Similarly each object is a remnant and reminder of its own history.

The natural sculptures that evolved during my time exploring Osprey Flats are an uninhibited response to the experiences I encountered there. The

sculptures become visual diaries of my travels. James Roose-Evans states "that one of the important functions of art is to hold a mirror up to nature and by so doing to probe, question, challenge;... Art sees beneath the surface. It is the graph of the human heart."⁵ An important function of my art is to reflect the images binding one to this place. My art overlaps echoes of the natural world with the human condition. The landscape of Osprey Flats, like the cradle of the house, provides the sanctuary where the physical journey and the inner journey are woven together. The sights, sounds, events and discoveries experienced on my travels both imagined and real are interlaced. The sculptures evolved as a natural consequence. Their evolution graphs my journey at this moment in time. They are the manifestation of my reflections and meditations encountered at this juncture of my life and my art.

Gathering



Fig.6 Gathering, Fall 2000

⁵ James Roose-Evans, Passages of the Soul, (Element Books Limited, 1994) ix.

For as long as I can remember, I have been gathering natural objects. I was raised in the transient community of the armed forces. My childhood was enhanced living in isolated areas of Canada where the only real playground for young children was the natural environment surrounding the base. One of my most memorable childhood recollections was going fishing with my father in northern Quebec. Occasionally, Arni would escape the demands of daily life and head to his favorite trout stream. My mother often sent my brother and me along to keep him company. I caught my first brook trout at age five. I remember letting it go in a deep puddle adjacent to the stream and watching it go round and round in a panic to escape. I also remember the fright I felt when I picked it up out of the water. It wriggled and squirmed in an effort to get away. I had no educated knowledge at that time, of the ecosystem supported by that stream and the cycle of life it cradled. With the innocence of early childhood, I made dams with the sticks and stones gathered along the banks. I caught and examined the frogs and bugs without empathy. I explored the bush near the stream searching for treasures. My early memories still feed my imagination today.

Camping in northern Ontario is another notable childhood recollection. My father would load the family into the car, three in the front and four in the back and off we would go on a new adventure. Dad would have a particular campsite in mind, one that would seize the imagination of the children and at the same time provide ample opportunity for the adults to relax. My parents would set up camp while my brother and sisters and I ran off to explore the woods and comb the beaches for natural treasures. Our day would begin just after sunrise and

continue through to sunset. Gathered around the campfire at night, we exchanged accounts of our exploits and discoveries. Stories were told of the journeys we shared and treasures we found. My childhood imagination was cultivated and enriched in this setting. The imagination that was nurtured and valued in my youth spilled over into adulthood. To this day I gather natural treasures on my travels. A fossilized shell from the Irish coast, a pebble from the Polish mountains and a caribou skull from the tundra in northern Canada are valued objects in my collection. The ritual of gathering has never been a novelty. It is a basic ingredient in the formulation of my artistic practice.

The ritual of gathering natural objects is a means of acknowledging self. Roose-Evans describes ritual as “one of the keys which can open a door into the realm of the imagination, that realm which is in fact, the world of the collective unconscious.”⁶ A ritual is a rite of passage when there is movement from the



familiar to the unfamiliar. The gathering of natural objects is the symbolic gesture that marks the passage. Each object collected embodies a memory of an encounter with the landscape and similarly each object has its own story. The ritualistic gathering generates an unalterable shift of understanding.

Fig.7 Beaver cuttings pulled from the Red Deer River, Spring 2000

⁶ Ibid., 1

We can never retrace our experiences exactly. The residues of our travels, our moment in time, are reflected in the objects around us. They are the keys that unlock the imagination and release the creative potential for everyday living. Our sense of time is transcended in the world of imagining. The objects separate the mundane and the trivial and reveal a passageway to other possibilities for finding new meaning in artistic expression.

The bones, stones, feathers, wood and plants I gather are significant. They are the key described by Roose-Evans that open passageways for the explorer. Contained within each object is the interwoven journey of the natural world and the world of the imagination. Each object is a fragment of a whole. It mirrors back to its caretaker perceptions of a world in flux. The scattered remains of the osprey, for example, become a poignant reflector for human fragility. It also illustrates the regenerative powers of nature. Life was offered to the scavenger through death. Similarly, the beaver cuttings mirror the ravages of time. The beautifully stained and scarred surfaces tell a story of a turbulent journey. The surfaces, worn smooth from the forces of nature, mirror the junctures on the human journey that mold and shape the individual. The meditative powers manifested in the natural objects open an entrance into the creative world where, as Bachelard states, all images have roots and where the non-knowing is translated into the driving force for generating new creative potential.

When I gather natural objects and arrange them in assemblages, I am

honoring them. The natural objects are in containers that are open as opposed to closed. They are cradled and protected in their temporary role as treasured artifacts. The objects are placed, not glued, nailed or bound in any fashion. They are not incarcerated but celebrated. To honor them in this manner is a reminder of the freedom I experience exploring the natural world of Osprey Flats.

Intrusion

To some my work reflects no more than a white man's notion of the land. I have been accused of romanticizing nature and at the same time interfering with the natural balance of the landscape that has cradled me. My response is simple. There is more to the world than concrete, steel and glass. We are contained and restrained by the environment we create for ourselves. We risk losing touch and therefore appreciation for the natural processes upon which we ultimately depend. There is both history and beauty in the natural objects we encounter as we explore the world outside of our artificial

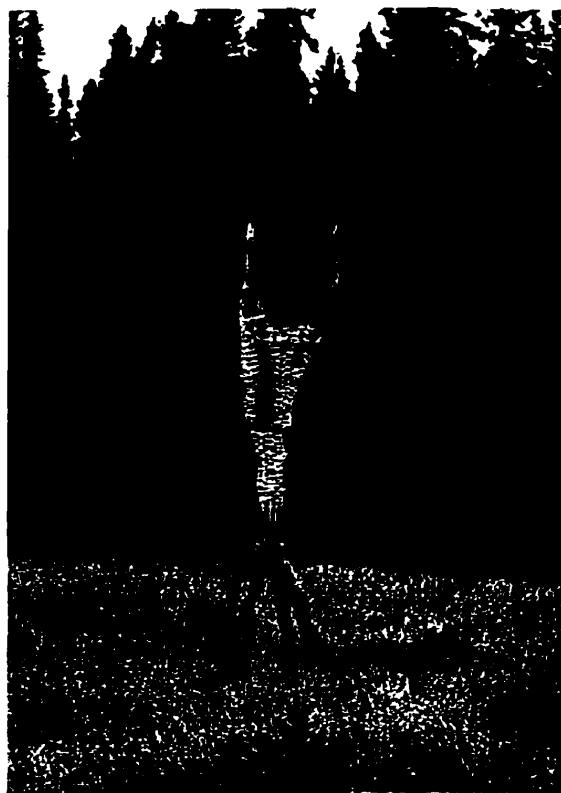


Fig.8 She is beginning to unravel, Fall 2000

habitat. They serve as reminders of both their existence and our connection to

them as part of our journey through life.

We are not separate from nature. On the contrary, we are as dependent on it as the osprey, whitefish, deer and poplar. My art mirrors the natural world onto the human condition and vice versa. Its reflective images are at times, disturbing and at times, comforting. Most importantly these reflections embody a meditative and thoughtful interpretation of time spent immersed in the shelter of nature. We all seek refuge at some point in our lives. For some it is a cottage by the lake, for me it is the natural refuge of Osprey Flats. Similarly we are all collectors of one kind or another. We collect art, antiques, clothes, cars and other man-made objects. I unashamedly admit that I collect natural objects. They are the amulets that stir my inner imagining and open new channels for artistic expression.



Fig.9 Earthworm, Spring 2001

While the gathering of natural materials from their normal setting such as a riverbank, gravel bar and the forest floor may appear to be intrusive or at least

have the potential to be intrusive by the disruption of the natural processes, it may be accomplished with a minimum of disturbance and may be almost undetectable except at the microhabitat level. If you pick up a stick or a stone, you may see that beneath it was a damp patch of soil occupied by an earthworm or other invertebrates. If you roll over an old rotting log you may find a rich community of plants and animals. Removal of the log would result in the loss of moisture and cover and would be life threatening for the microhabitat. While removal of a single log has little effect on the forest floor, commercial or industrial large-scale removal of decaying logs would result in the disruption of an important aspect of the decaying process and all the plants and animals that participate in it or benefit from it.



Fig.10 Rotting log on the forest floor, Spring 2000

Beaver cuttings occur in great abundance as part of dams, lodges or singly in the water, along its margins, banks and logjams. The temporary removal

of a small quantity by an artist constitutes a limited intrusion. Having picked up a cutting or two, the dams, lodges and logjams still remain to fulfill their useful purpose. Similarly rocks picked from tens of thousands on a gravel bar will not be missed. The dead or dying cattails selectively cut from thousands in a marsh do not damage the marsh ecosystem. The living roots will give rise to a new crop in the spring.

With an appreciation for life's natural processes and beauty, the artist may borrow his/her materials from the environment to incorporate into works of art and leave nothing more than the installations behind to celebrate and consecrate their communion with nature as part of their journey. I respectfully gather from the living communities I encounter on my travels through the Flats and return all I can to its rightful habitat.

Transformation

Many of the objects incorporated into my work are the remains of dead plants and animals like the osprey or beaver cuttings.

Fig.11 Bird perch made from fragmented beaver cuttings, Fall 2000



Their inclusion is not intended to focus on death in any morbid sense. This change of state is a significant and necessary juncture in the journey of all life forms. Death is not an end point but rather an end to that portion of the journey invariably followed by transition. A living aspen tree, for example, is home to a rich variety of animal life. Birds seek shelter in the aspen to build their nests and raise their young. Insects depend on the aspen for shelter and food. The living aspen is one of the main staples for the industrious beaver. It cuts the tree down and strips the branches and bark for food. The remaining stump of the aspen becomes a potential nursery for saplings or a home for mosses, fungi and insects. The bucked up branches and trunks may become part of the structure of a lodge or dam. Cuttings lying on the forest floor provide shelter and moist habitat for small organisms. Others are transported along the river and are deposited collectively in logjams. These enormous driftwood deposits provide protective cover for fish and small mammals. Some of the logs end up immersed



Fig.12 Bone vertebrae found on the forest floor, Spring 2001

in springs that support iron bacteria (water seepage that has low oxygen may contain ferrous iron which is utilized by iron bacteria). This complex transitory cycle of the aspen illustrates the rejuvenating process that occurs at the moment of passing.

Similarly the remains of bones found washed up on the gravel bars or dug out of the banks and cliffs were once members of the natural community. Through their death, they offered energy to the living. The coyote, flies, beetles, raven and magpies all benefit from and are dependent on carrion. The bones provide microhabitats. Remnants found in the water will often provide substrate for invertebrates such as the caddisfly and plants including mosses that provide food and cover for a variety of invertebrates. Others found on land are a rich source of calcium for mice. Life does not stop with death but is revitalized and transformed into the perpetual energy of nature. Both are interwoven. The parts are inextricably joined to form a sustainable natural community.

~Three ~

Artistic Influences

There have been many artists who have influenced my formative years as a student of the fine arts. The energetic mark making of contemporary British artist Frank Auerbach, for instance, affected me at a time when I was striving to unleash a similar passion in my own work. Other artists, and there have been many, were studied and mimicked in an attempt to find an individual form of expression that I could identify as my own.

The shift from a painting and drawing background in my undergraduate studies to a focus on natural sculpture in my post graduate program inevitably created a thirst for a different form of artistic knowledge. I began searching the library for artists who worked with natural materials as their main medium. The work of Alberta artist Peter von Tiesenhausen, for instance fueled my desire to create sculptures along the Red Deer River. As my own work progressed, I discovered that I was drawn to artists whose concerns not only found expression in the natural world but also concentrated on the metaphysical journey one experiences working on the land. Two artists, Wolfgang Laib and Ana Mendieta, both concerned themselves with the concept of journey and the spiritual and contemplative powers inherent in nature. The rituals indigenous to their work provided me with a framework with which to question and probe the very structure of my own artistic interests. What were the motivating forces shaping their art and was the use of natural materials essentially tied to their philosophical vision?

Wolfgang Laib

Wolfgang Laib has been hailed as a modern day shaman by some members of the art world; to others he is nothing more than a spiritual dictator whose personal convictions suggest an affinity to a higher power of which he is the scribe.⁷ Whatever the controversy surrounding Laib's oeuvre, the word most often used to describe its essence is 'spiritual.' The attention Laib has received from leading art critics has intrigued me. His gathering and sifting ritual has stimulated a metaphysical dialogue among members of the international art community. The pollen Laib collects for his pollen pieces is thought to radiate spiritual energy, one that is generated from a contemplative state. Art critics have suggested that this metaphysical essence is transferred from the ritual of gathering and sifting the pollen to the actual pollen pieces. As an artist who, like Laib, gathers materials from the land to create ephemeral sculptures, I am interested in whether the gathering and sifting ritual is spiritually significant or if it is a natural consequence that occurs from being immersed in the spontaneous rhythm of nature.

This internationally acclaimed artist was born in 1950 in the town of Metzingen in southern Germany. Laib initially trained as a medical doctor. His growing interest in eastern philosophy caused him to change the course of his journey. He retired from medicine and embarked on an artistic pilgrimage, one that immersed him in the richness of nature. In 1975 Laib created his first

⁷ Kathryn Hixton, "Wolfgang Laib," New Art Examiner, February 91, 40-1.

milkstone, a white marble slab with a slight indentation for holding milk. Two years later, he began collecting dandelion pollen from the fields around his village. In 1978 Laib exhibited his first collection of milkstones and pollen pieces in major German cities. His career escalated and in 1982 he was invited to show at the Venice Biennale in Italy. In March of 2001 his work was highlighted on the cover of Art in America. Art critics have struggled to find a category to describe Laib's work. Christopher Schenker stated, "to put it briefly and somewhat pathetically: the work of Wolfgang Laib affects the development of the counterpart to the atom bomb."⁸ Klaus Ottmann defines Laib's work as, "eidetic...the essential or universal form or idea underlying all experience. The work demands that any appraisal of it begin with the work itself, rather than with its historical context."⁹ Lily Wei comments, "Laib is often called a spiritual minimalist...His works are always pure, organic substances that represent the metamorphoses of nature..."¹⁰ Laib, on the other hand, simply states that his work evolves from his direct participation in nature. In an interview with Clare Farrow, Laib comments, "I hope my work and my life have become one...The beauty is there and you have to be ready for it. I could not create it myself but I can participate in it. Trying to create it is only a tragedy, participating in it is a big chance."¹¹ Laib's determination to work in union with nature has produced some surprising responses. Schenker argues, "The physical experience of Laib's work

⁸ Christoph Schenker, "Wolfgang Laib," Flash Art (International Edition) 123, Summer 85, 97.

⁹ Klaus Ottmann "and others," The Solid And The Fluid: Perceiving Laib, (American Federation of Arts and Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2000) 12.

¹⁰ Lily Wei, "Wolfgang Laib at Sperone Westwater," Art in America, November 95, 109.

¹¹ Clare Farrow, "Wolfgang Laib Beyond The Imagination," Art And Design, 9, no. 5/6 May/June 94, 29. .

is always accompanied by the perception of an indeterminate spirituality..."¹² How is this intangible spirit manifested?

Every spring, Laib ritually collects pollen from the fields around his village and studio in Germany. The process of collecting the pollens begins in early spring and lasts for six to seven months depending on the weather. When asked about the ritual of gathering the pollens by Farrow, Laib responded, "Working with this (pollen) you become not just a part of it but the same. You feel very close to it. I am the only one who collects the pollen... From the outside the work feels repetitive. From the inside it doesn't seem so."¹³ Laib discusses the meditative aspects of the solitary gathering ritual. He continues, "This work is concerned with something totally different in terms of your whole meaning, what you think you have to do with your life, what you have to gain and don't gain, what is big and what is small, what is much and what is little, all these things become the opposite of what they are used to and it becomes a question of everything and all."¹⁴ This meditative state is not uncommon. I, and most artists I know, enter into a form of meditation when focused on the act of making art. It is a space where time has no significance and is as Roose-Evans describes "a transition from one mode of being to another... resulting in an altered state of consciousness."¹⁵ Joseph Campbell has a similar definition of ritual. He describes it as "an enactment of a myth. By participating in a ritual, you are actually experiencing a mythological life. And it is out of that participation that one

¹² Shenker, *Flash*, 97.

¹³ Farrow, *Design*, 25.

¹⁴ Farrow, *Design*, 25.

¹⁵ Roose-Evans, *Passages*, 5

can learn to live spiritually.”¹⁶ Laib describes the mythical journey he experiences while gathering and sifting the pollen. “When working with this you become not just part of it but the same. You feel very close to it...For me having this experience in your daily life and work brings you into a completely different world in your own life...If you concentrate on something long enough you reach the point where you are no longer conscious of your own concentration. I think that is the state I am longing for.”¹⁷ This inner transition or state of equilibrium described by Laib becomes an integral component in the evolution of his art. Does this spiritual transformation defined by Roose-Evans and Campbell and experienced by Laib energize his pollen pieces?

Laib collects a variety of pollen from the pine, dandelion, buttercup and hazelnut tree. The pollens are kept in ordinary jars until he is ready to create a pollen piece. Farrow asked Laib to describe the process of sifting his pollen onto the floor. He begins, “It is something very beautiful...I sift the pollen through very fine muslin. It has to be a different fineness for the different pollens...The time it takes depends very much on the pollens...I have one small jar of dandelion pollen...It is very coarse and organic and it sifts very slow.”¹⁸ The energies accumulated during the gathering are now transferred to the ritual act of sifting. When asked about the energies and the powers of the pollen, Laib replies, “I have...sifted the pollen so often but the experience always remains new.”¹⁹ Art critic, David Galloway, in his review, “Wolfgang Laib,” discusses the spiritual

¹⁶ Joseph Campbell, The Power Of Myth, (Doubleday, 1988), 82.

¹⁷ Farrow, Design, 25

¹⁸ Farrow, Design, 28.

¹⁹ Ibid., 28

energies stored in the pollen pieces. He states, "The degree to which the artist stores up meditative energies is so evident that one hardly dare speak of it...A circle of pollen...is receptive to these energies. They are by their substance energy themselves and yet at the same time they embody the pure artificiality of sculpture."²⁰ Annelie Pohlen also comments on the magical potency of the pollen pieces. She states, "It is, perhaps the invisibility of this intensive labor- for it can nowhere be read into the pieces installed-... For if one conjured up an image of effort at all it is that of a kind of shamanistic discipline, a ritualized gathering of vital substances as if for an offering or sacrifice."²¹ Pohlen and Galloway's comments answer my question. They are acknowledging the special qualities stored in the pollen pieces. This suggests that the meditative energies Laib experiences when immersed in the gathering and sifting ritual, becomes part of the piece. His energy, says Campbell, is that of a true artist, "one who has learned to recognize what James Joyce calls the radiance of all things as an epiphany or showing forth of their truth."²² The pieces stand alone shimmering in the quiet radiance of color. The simple form becomes transformed. The small becomes the large, the part the whole, the insignificant the significant. Is Laib the shaman as Pohlen and other critics have suggested?

Laib possesses no magical powers. His experience is one shared by other artists. Campbell describes the common role of artists this way. "The artist is the one who communicates myth today..." He continues to define the contemporary artist or shaman, "the shaman's powers are symbolized in his own familiars,

²⁰ David Galloway, "Wolfgang Laib," *Art News*, February, 91, 159.

²¹ Annelie Pohlen, "Cosmic Visions From North To South" *Artforum International*, March 85, 79.

²² Campbell, *Myth*, 162.

deities of his own personal experience. His authority comes out of his psychological experience..."²³ I believe all artists are visionaries. Their role is to mirror the world around them. Laib's world is rooted in eastern thought and manifests itself in his participation in nature. He does not see himself as separate from the cycles of life that produce the pollen. His ephemeral pollen pieces resonate this energy of unity. His work is successful. The viewer is immersed into the sensory world of natural materials, its richness and timelessness.

The natural process of Laib's art is often misunderstood as shamanistic. His natural pieces reach beyond the primitive stereotype. Laib, along with a long list of successful artists, chooses natural materials and the land to express his message. Working with natural materials should not be confused with 'primal.' The natural world exists along side the artificial world we create for ourselves. In contrast to the industrial world of high technology and its fast pace to which we all must adhere, the natural world has much to offer. Jerry Manders, author of "The Tyranny of Television", comments,

Separated from our roots, from the organic body of which we are a part, from the sources of life, from the rhythms of the planet, from the sense of the sacred rhythms of the planet, from a sense of the sacred between human beings and the rest of life, living in our concrete artificial environments, we have effectively become like astronauts in space: afloat, unconscious, uprooted, adrift, living in our own abstract homocentric reality, utterly dependent on technology for sustenance, survival and knowledge.²⁴

Laib's pollen pieces bring nature to a world Mander claims is isolated, adrift and spiritually disconnected from the earth's healing potential. These pieces have

²³ Ibid., 85.

²⁴ Jerry Manders, "The Tyranny of Television, *Resurgence*, no. 164, May/June 1994, 22; quoted in John K. Grande, *Balance: Art and Nature*, (Black Rose Books Ltd., 1994), 49-50.

been sifted on to floors of major galleries all over the world. The simple geometric shapes of radiant color become suspended in time. Simplicity of life and the repetition of nature's rhythms are the participatory energies Laib invites his audience to experience. Whether or not the viewer is open to receiving his message is a risk the artist willingly takes. Laib comments, "I have been amazed to meet people whose only connection to the piece is hay fever!...The more the situation is like that, the more I feel it is important to do this work, to try and change the situation."²⁵ Laib's determination to expose the beauty of nature has enriched the art world. His pollen pieces provide another perspective, one unique in the simplicity of its materials yet highly sophisticated in its artistic interpretation.

Exploring Laib's participatory path has been encouraging. The energy resonating from his work reinforces the universal theme of natural rhythms and cycles. His pollen pieces, like the cattails I gather, tell a story. Its message is a simple one. Let nature speak for itself!

²⁵ Farrow. Design. 27.

Ana's Journey

My relationship with the artist Ana Mendieta began out of desperation. I had intuitively been creating natural sculptures from leaves and poles. Some members of the local art community received the sculptures with skepticism. Questions arose over the choice of natural materials. Weren't my choices primitive? Wouldn't my work be more current if I replaced the leaves and poles in my sculptures with a contemporary plastic to better represent our technological society? The sixties are over! Wasn't I living in a modern age? Other questions arose over the earth goddess stereotype. Was I representing the female from an essentialist perspective, one that classified all females under the same umbrella? What about the "Mother Earth" syndrome? Seeking artistic dialogue, I turned to the work of Ana Mendieta. Her rich legacy, the "Silueta" series, provided me with an artistic model from which to ponder such criticism. Was the use of natural materials and the landscape vital components to the art of Mendieta? Did her earth goddess figures stereotypically stir the nest of feminist critics? What drove her to work in the land? Was it a journey of spirit? Was her work relevant in a contemporary society? By setting aside my woes, I attempted to peer at the world through her eyes. Ana had much to teach me. Most importantly, I learned through her example to trust my intuition and listen to my creative voice.

Ana Mendieta

The resonating energies inherent in the oeuvre of Ana Mendieta retain power sixteen years after the artist's tragic death in 1985. Her soulful journey was scratched, dug, traced, burned and molded into the earth in remote areas of the world. At the age of twelve Mendieta was uprooted from family and friends in Cuba and transported to an Iowa orphanage. The cultural dislocation she experienced was to have a powerful impact on her artistic evolution. Her profound sense of isolation was projected onto the land. She states, "I have thrown myself into the very elements that produced me, using the earth as my canvas and my soul as my tools."²⁶ Seeking spiritual refuge in nature, Mendieta transcended the anguish of cultural dislocation in a traditional white society. Her spiritual quest evolved into the "Silueta" series of earth goddess figures. This series embodied her desire to meld with the earth.

This provocative Cuban-American artist's career emerged during the height of the feminist art movement in the 70's. Like other feminist artists of her time, Mendieta used her body to perform rituals that celebrated the historical cultural and intuitive powers of women. Her oeuvre challenged the myths of intuition verses intellect, culture verses nature and the common belief that the spiritual realm was male dominant. Art critic, Collette Chattopadhyay comments on the intricacies of Mendieta's work, "her work affirms the complex interrelations between nature and culture, intuition and reason as well as between the so

²⁶ Lisa Turner, "One With The Earth," Art News, May 94, 34.

called primitive and sophisticated."²⁷ Labeled an essentialist by some and a visionary by others, Mendieta's legacy survived the feminist essentialist debate of the 80's and became a testimony to the power of the earth goddess myth as a dignified deity. The earth 's soothing energies gave birth to her images She acknowledges her relationship with the earth, "I decided that for the images to have magical qualities I had to work directly with nature. I had to go to the source of life, to mother earth."²⁸ Mendieta rejuvenated the ancient earth goddess image through the repeated ritual of merging her form with nature. The solitary refuge of the land provided her with the impetus needed to express her creative potential. She commented, "I work with the earth. I make sculptures in the landscape. Because I have no motherland, I feel I need to join with the earth, to return to her womb."²⁹ "Silheuta," a series of goddess figures based on her form, evolved from 1973 to 1980. The ephemeral sculptures reflect the pain of her dislocation and at the same time celebrate her union with nature. The woman goddess connection was exalted as a dignified ritual for cultural healing. Nancy Spero comments, "Using earth, leaves, sand, stones, sticks, blood, water, tempera, tree trunks, gunpowder, grass, flowers and fire,...Ana became the earth and the earth goddess became Ana."³⁰ Mendieta incessantly engraved the silhouette of her body into the earth. Spero argues that this repetitive ritual was always the same yet never the same. The ritual contained the essence of the female form imprinted onto the earth only to be eroded by the timeless cycle of its natural

²⁷ Collette Chattopadhyay, "Ana Mendieta's sphere of influence," *Sculpture*, no. 5, June 99, 38.

²⁸ Jane Blocker, *Where Is Ana Mendieta?*, (Duke University Press, 1999), 45.

²⁹ Nancy Spero, "Tracing Ana Mendieta," *Artforum International*, April 92, 76.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

rhythms. One becomes poignantly aware of the passing of time and the haunting cycles of birth, death, growth and decay that emanate from her work.

“Anima (Alma/Soul) (Fireworks silhouette Series)” 1976, a bamboo silhouette lit with fireworks from her “Silhueta” series, illustrates how Mendieta used her form as a symbol for the elements earth, air, fire and water. Freuh describes “Anima” as a soul on fire, an impassioned, martyred body. “Anima” fades into the night to become part of the atmosphere.”³¹ The burning eulogy pays tribute to ancient goddesses and at the same time provides contemporary women with a connection to the spiritual energies within themselves. The potent force released in “Anima” transforms into the vital energy that unites the past with the present. Mendieta explained, “My art is grounded in the belief that there is one Universal Energy which runs through everything from insect to man, from man to specter, from specter to plant, from planet to galaxy. My works are the irrigation veins of the Universal fluids.”³² Mendieta’s martyred “Anima” dissolves into space and mixes with the air to become one with Mendieta’s circle of life.

Sadness flows from the work of Mendieta. Her ephemeral sculptures speak of cultural loss in a contemporary world perpetually bombarded with change. The “Silhueta” series have the disturbing aura of death and decay and at the same time exude a feeling of tranquility and peace. The sculptures disappear back to the womb of the earth and join with the “Universal Energies” that flow through her. For Mendieta this transition is a rebirth, a natural evolution in the cycle of nature.

³¹ Joana Freuh, “The Body Through The Eyes Of A Woman, in The Power Of Feminist Art, ed. Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, (New York: Harry Abrams Inc.), 1994

³² Blocker, Where, 34.

Mendieta's 'Silhueta' series is blatantly honest. Her desire to diffuse the pain of dislocation led her to the refuge of the natural environment where she was able to exorcise the rage trapped within her. She explained, "Art for me has been a way to sublimate rage. In fact it has been necessary to free myself from confinement and the fury of confinement."³³ Working with natural materials and the land was essential for Mendieta. Her vision found a voice that continues to resonate after her passing.

The legacy Mendieta left is a poignant reflector in the twenty first century. Mendieta's vision will not fade. Her art will survive as long as there is a human need to restore the balance in our ever driven technological age.. What have I learned from Ana? The artistic journey won't be without obstacles. The criticism will challenge but when the turbulence begins trust the voice inside to guide you through the agitated passages. Thanks Ana.

³³ Spero, Tracing, 77.

~Four~

The Naturalist

**Wayne Emerson Roberts, Curator of the Museum of Zoology at the
University of Alberta, Edmonton, interview by author University of Calgary,
May 13, 2001**

In the final year of my Bachelor of Fine Arts program, I had the good fortune to meet the curator of the Zoology Museum at the University of Alberta, Wayne Emerson Roberts. I was enrolled in a museum course and needed to identify a bone I had found while camping on the northern tundra. After helping me label the caribou skull fragment, Wayne offered to give me a tour of the facilities. I was totally absorbed by the natural history specimens that were stored on the tenth floor of the biological sciences building. One thing led to another and before I knew it, I was volunteering twice a week cataloguing specimens. During the six months that I worked for Wayne, I had the pleasure of listening to him tell stories of his adventures at a place called Osprey Flats. His descriptions of this haven caught my creative imagination. Under his guidance, I traveled to the Flats as often as possible over the next two years to work and gather materials. I relied on Wayne's expertise to assist me in the identification of the bones, insects, birds, animals, fish and plants I observed there. He did so willingly and I might add, very patiently. The following is an excerpt from a discussion we had on the rich riparian community of Osprey Flats.

S.H. During the six months that I assisted you with the cataloguing of materials at the museum, you often talked about a place called Osprey Flats where you would go to camp and study fish and other organisms. What took you to this particular spot to do your research?



Fig.13 Wayne Emerson Roberts fly-fishing on the Red Deer River at Osprey Flats,
Summer 2000

W.E.R I spent much of my youth along a part of the river where the Medicine River and the Red Deer River meet. I camped, hiked, canoed and fished there. There was a famous walleye hole downstream at the east end of the flats by the big bank. I made special trips to fish at this spot. I soon discovered that there was much more to this part of the river than walleye fishing. The undeveloped road allowance that led past Gordon Conn's farm was a quiet place close to the river. Because it was so quiet (lightly

used), easily accessible and rich in natural life, it was a good place to study animals. After a while Gordon encouraged me to camp on his riverfront. Gerald and Louise Oxtoby later extended the same privilege to me.

S.H. How did you come to work in the Zoology Museum at the U of A?
Can you talk about your role as curator?

W.E.R. My museum experience started at the research lab at the Vancouver Public Aquarium where I worked as a volunteer in 1963. I learned to collect, identify and preserve fish. I was fortunate in that when I came to the University of Alberta to do my undergraduate degree, there was a need in the museum for someone to work with Pacific coast fishes. I started to work part-time and was able to step into the curator's position full-time when the former curator retired in 1975. I really feel that the job and I were made for each other. I enjoy exploring and collecting natural history specimens on my travels. Often, when I would get back from a weekend trip or an evening walk, I would have treasures to identify and research. I am a regular customer at the museum myself. After 30 years my education continues, both in the world and in the museum. I enjoy teaching and providing information based on the collections and information stored in the museum. This involves museum tours,

lecturing, visiting schools, phone calls, letters, emails, displays and media work (newspaper, radio, TV). Much of the routine work involves caring for the collection (preserving, storing, cataloguing, etc.). This provides lots of learning opportunity rather than being purely technical or clerical.

S.H. What kind of research do you do at Osprey Flats?

W.E.R. I study mooneye, goldeye, mountain whitefish, lake whitefish, brown trout, northern pike, walleye, sauger, spoonhead sculpins and a number of sucker and minnow species in this stretch of the river. I have worked with northern leopard frogs, Canadian toads and red-sided garter snakes. I have also studied a number of aquatic invertebrates species along this stretch as well. Sadly, the Canadian toads and the northern leopard frogs have disappeared from Osprey Flats and much of their range in Alberta. It was here that I first noticed their decline.

S.H. Why the declines?

W.E.R. It is not known for sure what caused the declines. The toads may have declined owing to a lack of snow cover in the winter. The consequence is a deep penetration of frost. This results in the

freezing and ultimate demise of the over-wintering toads. Leopard frogs disappeared in a fashion that suggests a virus or other pathogen was involved. Most of the fish species have declined because of problems related to the early life history of the fish in an altered environment.

S.H. What do you mean by altered environment?

W.E.R. The Red Deer River was dammed. This created a barrier for migration as well as causing unnaturally warm winter water temperatures. The winter flow comes from the bottom of the dam where the water is warmest. The river gets coldest in the spring and then warms slowly as the dam releases its coldest water last. Healthy populations of fish in most of our lakes and rivers typically consist of all ages and classes of fish, from large numbers of youngsters to small numbers of very old fish. Some of the populations of fish species in the Red Deer River show severe signs of distress. This is best illustrated by the relative abundance of young versus older fish. Spoonhead sculpins are found very rarely today, (they were very common before the river was impounded) and young fish are absent. This species no longer reproduces here. Young pike and walleye are also uncommon here. They were once abundant. The adults are decreasing in numbers. Mountain whitefish youngsters hatch in February and

March. April was their normal hatching period before the river was impounded. They survive poorly and thus do not contribute much to the population of adult mountain whitefish. Large old fish dominate the population. There are considerably fewer whitefish than there were before. This is the most abundant food and sport fish (for people) in this part of the river. Mountain whitefish are also the most important fish source for the osprey at the Flats when they are feeding their young. Bald eagle, mink, and large predaceous fish such as the pike also eat them. Mooneye have increased in numbers since 1973 but are less abundant in this part of the river since it was impounded. While there seems to be lots of fish, there are far fewer than there were twenty years ago.

S.H. **What is interfering with the development of the young fish?**

W.E.R. **Impounded, regulated rivers have dirtier bottoms than free flowing unregulated rivers. Clean rocky bottoms are important for sculpins, young trout and other small fish. The water is cooler in the spring and early summer than it would normally be. This slows the growth of many organisms. Mountain whitefish that hatch in cold water that gets colder after they hatch don't grow and survive well. The spawning tributaries for other species such as the Medicine River**

are not backed up by the Red Deer River. It no longer acts as a dam as formerly occurred with spring and summer high water in the free flowing river. Warm, deep, slow flowing rearing habitat for small fish is not as plentiful as before. Suckers, pike and walleye do not reproduce as successfully as they did before the river was impounded.

S.H. You have talked to me many times about the richness of the riparian community at Osprey Flats. Can you elaborate on what you mean by riparian community?

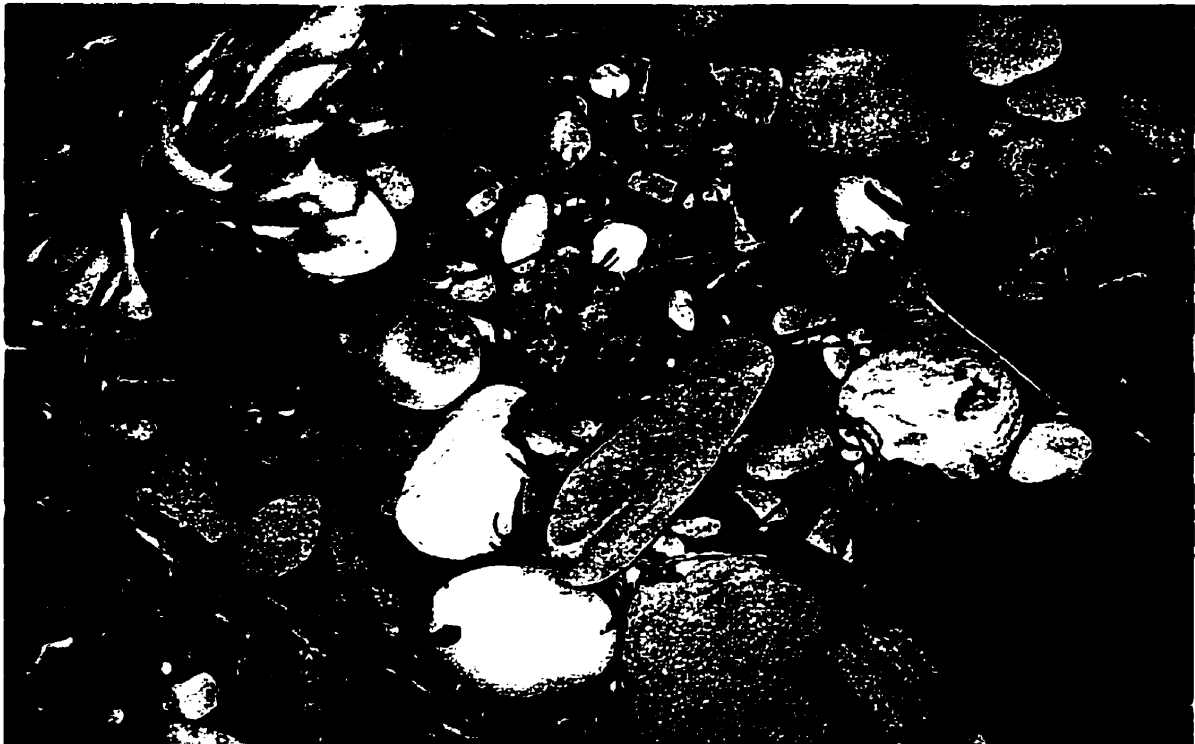


Fig.14 Killdeer nest, Spring 2001

W.E.R. Riparian literally means, "of or inhabiting a riverbank". Think of all the things that come to fish or eat aquatic invertebrates from the

shore or vegetation along the shore. Heron, kingfisher, mink, water shrew, frogs, toads and gartersnakes are some of the animals that are highly dependent on the food source of the river. Think of all the plants that grow in the varied and often lush habitat there. Willows, poplars, sedges, cattails, rushes, grasses can be found in abundance. Many birds like ducks and geese nest along the shores. Bank and cliff swallows and kingfishers claim the banks and cliffs. Other birds nest in trees and shrubs along or near the shore. There are too many to name. Animals live in and among the rich vegetation ranging from grassy meadows to old growth forests in the river valleys, (mice and voles of various species, shrews, hares, porcupine, squirrels, beaver, muskrat, mink and other weasels, deer and moose, coyotes). Think of all the insects and other invertebrates found within these areas. Many insects with aquatic larvae have adults that mate along the shore like midges, caddisflies and stoneflies.

S.H. Can you give some examples of animals that migrate to the Flats and others that make their permanent home there?

W.E.R. Most of the animals I named above can live elsewhere but because of the food, cover and quiet prefer to live along the river. Most of the birds migrate there for the breeding season. The aquatic and

semi-aquatic species other than birds are permanent (many insects, amphibians, beaver, muskrat, water shrew, mink). Deer and moose get much winter food from the willows and shrubs along the river. Some ducks, (mallards, common mergansers, common goldeneyes) over-winter on the open river. The eagles stay to feed on the ducks.

S.H. All of these animals have to find refuge or shelter. What are some of the interesting homes you have encountered on your travels through Osprey Flats?

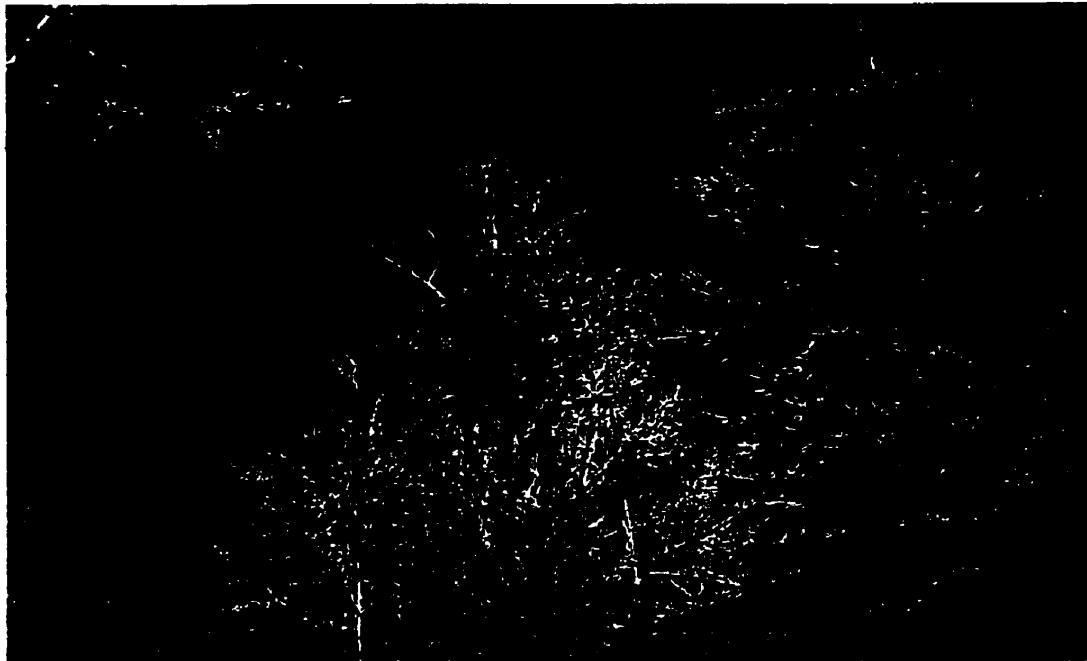


Fig.15 Eagle's nest down river from the Flats, Summer 2001

W.E.R. Animals that make and carry their homes fascinate me. Clams, snails and caddisflies larvae are good examples. There are others

that make tubes like some midge larvae and others that burrow like many worm like animals. Some make nests in holes in trees. They are called primarily cavity nesters because they actually make the holes. These are the chickadees and the woodpeckers. The secondary cavity nesters use found holes. Tree swallows, nuthatches, owls and flying squirrels fall into this category. There is a wide array of nest types and sites chosen by birds. Cliff swallows make gourds out of mud that are attached to the wall of the cliffs. The hidden spheres of the long billed marsh wren are camouflaged in the dense beds of the cattails. Orioles build hanging baskets in aspen trees. The roofed stick nests of the magpie are interesting structures. Herons live in colonies and make their nests in high trees along the rivers edge. Geese will nest on the ground, on top of beaver and muskrat lodges and even in abandoned hawk or owl nests in trees. I saw a goose nesting in an osprey nest on the top of a power pole this spring. The lack of spring moisture has put a premium on safe nesting sites for Canada geese. The immense baskets of eagle and ospreys are quite a sight to behold. There are also the little balls of grass made by meadow voles in the tent! Coyote and porcupine dens perforate the bank at the edge of the meadow.

The underground tunnels of the pocket gophers are betrayed by the periodic pushups of soil on the surface of the meadow. Beaver lodges can be immense structures and are often homes for many other animals both in summer and late winter.



Fig.16 Beaver lodge on Red Deer River, Spring 2000

S.H. We have talked briefly about the idea of sanctuary and the protective nature of Osprey Flats being cradled on all sides by old growth forests, meadows and banks. You have been going to the Flats for over forty years to fish and do research. Can you describe why you keep going to the same place? Has it anything to do with personal sanctuary?

W.E.R. As I learned about the Flats and its occupants I felt increasingly at home there. I remember how comfortable I felt as a youngster even when I was there alone in the dark walking either to my camp

or back to the road. It is a familiar place and I have many fond memories of my experiences there. It's like being in a benign wilderness and it's so easy to get to. It has a mild microclimate in the winter and gets lots of sun. The trees shelter the Flats from storms blowing in from the north.

S.H. We have also talked about the common concerns of artists and scientists. Can you elaborate? 'Nest insights', a show I did based on my experience journeying through the wetlands of Central Alberta, evolved from my encounter with the natural world. I relied on your expertise to assist me in identifying and clarifying the information I had gathered for my show. We could say the 'nest insights', was a collaborative art/science project.

W.E.R. Art and science provide different ways of observing and learning and expressing what we know or feel about the world around us. Both are necessary to more completely deal with our experience, understanding of, and relationship with nature. Neither art nor science can, in isolation, encapsulate our experience with nature and life. They are complimentary. An artist is richer and can be more effective if he/she understands the natural history of their venues, subjects and materials. Scientists need to view the natural world with more than a dispassionate, clinical point of view. There is

beauty and poetry out there (and more). What could be a better team than an artist interested in nature and a naturalist interested in art?

S.H. Do many artists visit the Zoology Museum seeking information and clarification?

W.E.R. Artists are presently our best customers at the museum. More artists, from kindergarten to working professionals, visit and use the collections for inspiration, models etc., than any other user group.

S.H. You have told me many stories about natural encounters you have had at Osprey Flats. Can you share a few of your most memorable ones with me?

W.E.R. My favorite deals with sharing a good fishing spot with the osprey. I would often come to the river in late summer and fall when the river was low and clear. I could expect to find the osprey fishing at the riffle at the end of the road. I would peek out from between the trees to see what was happening. If an osprey was actively seeking a fish, I would stay in the trees until a fish was caught or the osprey moved on. Only then would I cross the river and fish from the opposite side. Sometimes the osprey would come while I was

fishing and it would sit in a tree and watch until I moved on. Today, it seems that since I spent so much time fishing on the Flats, the osprey feeds as if I wasn't there. Long ago when I hunted, I was waiting along the flood channel south of the big bank for deer. Mule deer does came out of the bush. I thought a buck or two might follow. As I waited, a large bull moose came out of the trees beside me. It didn't see me and passed exceedingly close to me. As I was looking at him, a cow moose came out of the trees and noticed me. She was very aggressive and snorted and approached me. Fortunately it was more out of discomfort than anger and after a while she backed off much to my relief. I don't hunt anymore. My last hunting trip was many years ago. I went deer hunting in an isolated area and came very close to three large mule deer bucks in a meadow. I sat down and had a cigarette. (They declined. They had no bad habits). They acted as though they had never seen a person before and had no reason to fear me. When I finished my smoke, we each went our separate ways. I could not kill anything so beautiful. I get all the good experiences of the hunt today without the killing.

S.H. Can you explain what you mean by the good experiences of the hunt without the kill?



Fig.17 Wayne Emerson Roberts installing a nest for ducks on Osprey Flats, Spring 2001

W.E.R. I enjoy seeing wildlife and actively seek it out when I am outdoors. I like to watch animals by creeping up on them and/or letting them come towards me, as I remain motionless. Often, if I keep still, an animal will come very close to me. This is similar to hunting. The enormous difference is all I take away is the memory or a picture. I had a close encounter with a mule deer buck once during the fall season at Osprey Flats. I was hunched over the fire early one morning tending the coffee pot when I sensed that I was being watched. I slowly turned my head and discovered a deer looking over my shoulder. Sometimes when I stand quietly in the river fishing, the fish treat me like a tree or rock and begin to swim freely

all around me. It is a beautiful experience. When I clean fish, I leave the entrails along the shore in front of the camp for recycling (most frequently by gull, magpies, crows, minks). One morning I awoke and poked my head over the bank. A huge young eagle (they are bigger than their parents) was feasting on last night's offering. It is more interesting to see animals alive in their natural habitat as opposed to seeing them in the museum.

S.H. How did Osprey Flats receive its name?

W.E.R. I have always been impressed by how important the riffles at both ends of the Flats are as feeding areas for the ospreys. You can't be there from late April to September without seeing ospreys at both ends of the Flats. When the youngsters are fledged in late summer you can sometimes see several ospreys feeding at once. Osprey Flats is my name for the area.

S.H. Thank you.

W.E.R. You are most welcome.

Ghostpine Springs Sanctuary

Email excerpt, Tuesday, April 3, 2001

Naturalist and curator Wayne Emerson Roberts would often email me in response to a concern or question I had regarding my work. I had spent many months gathering cattails at Ghostpine Springs in preparation for the exhibit, "nest insights". The ecology of the sanctuary fascinated me. We would often discuss the relationship between the animals I observed and the cattail beds. I would like to note that Roberts was responsible for having Ghostpine Springs recognized as an official bird sanctuary. Here is an excerpt from his email where he describes in detail the natural world of Ghostpine Springs Sanctuary and the life it cradles.



Fig.18 The spring water source that feeds Ghostpine Springs Sanctuary, Winter 2001

“There has been a spectacular increase in the population of cattails throughout the marsh. The cattails have colonized many new areas including a dense strip along the road, berm, and open stretches along the north shore. Cattails are still expanding throughout the flooded shallows that occupy the northwest corner of the marsh. New pockets spring up each year and older patches become thicker. Long-billed marsh wrens chatter noisily throughout the summer. The boom of the bittern is heard regularly in the spring. Red-winged and yellow-headed blackbirds noisily defend their territories. Rails are heard and occasionally seen skulking through the cattails. The patchwork of cattails, sedges, rushes and open water is a haven for ducklings, providing them with abundant food and protective cover. Along the margin of the pond cattails are suspended and float in the water. The exposed roots provide cover for the spawning sticklebacks and fathead minnows. By late June or early July, a thick mat of floating filamentous algae on the water provides a large area of refuge for small fishes. To many this would look like an unsavory green scum, to the duckling it is a tasty meal.



Fig.19 Ghostpine Springs Sanctuary, Spring 2001

On frosty October nights, the shallow water freezes quickly and after period of below zero temperatures and deposits of fresh snow, the cattail beds become populated with a host of new residents. Protected from the wind and the cold by the cattails, many small mammals descend upon the sanctuary to spend the winter. Shrews, voles and deer mice seek refuge from the cold under the snowdrifts accumulated in the cattail beds. A number of species of weasels come to hunt, joining their cousin the mink who is a year round resident. Muskrats seek protection within their lodges. Evidence of grouse and partridge are discovered from tracks left in the snow. Similarly, coyote tracks are found along the margin of the beds. Black-capped chickadees come to forage in the cattails for overwintering insects. Chickadees are occasionally preyed upon by the northern shrike that watches closely from its perch in the trees along the edge of the sanctuary.³⁴

~Five~

³⁴ Wayne Emerson Roberts. Cattails. An email to the author, April 3,2001.

Gathering

Riparian Preserves

The Exhibition

Riparian Preserves

My work, like a journey, is an evolutionary process. This exhibition chronicles the transformation of my experiences in time and space within the sanctuary of Osprey Flats and adjacent sites. The work reflects the natural cycles and interdependency of birth, growth and death and subsequent transitions evident in the existence of all living things.

The materials I gather come from the riparian habitat of streams and marshes. They are reminders of my encounter within this natural haven. The cattails, for example, represent the perpetual cycle of regeneration. As Roberts stated, the cattail marsh provides sanctuary for an abundance of organisms. It produces the nesting materials for a wide variety of birds. The long-billed marsh wrens rely specifically on the cattail plant for a nesting site and building materials. The red-winged blackbird also utilizes the plant for constructing its nest. The dependence of these particular birds on the cattail plant is obvious. Like the marsh, the cattail vessel in 'nest insights' symbolizes both the evolutionary journey and the cradle that nurtures and protects in the natural cycle of living and dying. The transitory passage becomes significant. The cycle resumes with one feeding off the other.

The theme of journey and transition re-emerges in the series of seven ephemeral weavings. The memories of my travels are woven together in celebration of self. The poles, fragmented and scarred, embody the forces that have shaped and molded me as I journey through time. They become monuments marking the passage. By gathering the poles together, I honor that part of self that has endured, celebrated and moved forward. The three poles that

construct the weavings create a unity and balance. They symbolize the three aspects of self. One will topple and so will two. Three poles together are stable and strong.

The ritual of weaving the poles together is in itself significant. The rhythm and repetition of weaving becomes synonymous with breathing. Each breath we take strengthens our capacity to live. Similarly each reed woven is honoring a memory and each individual sculpture commemorates a rite of passage. Isolated they appear insignificant. Together they stand like beacons guiding one through the turbulence and into calmer waters. Releasing the weavings back into the cattail marsh will complete the cycle. It is my hope that the structures will provide refuge for the wildlife of Ghostpine Springs Sanctuary.

"Blanket" reveals the rich diversity of the common cattail. The cattail is the most intrusive plant at Ghostpine Springs Sanctuary. It shelters and protects the inhabitants throughout the seasons. Exposing the abundance of the seed, I am exposing its diversity. The common cattail blanket, like the rush basket that cradled Moses in the Bible becomes a metaphor for house both in the natural world and the modern world where slipping under the covers at night is a ritual in itself.

"Riparian Preserves" symbolizes the culmination of my experiences within the sanctuary of Osprey Flats and adjacent areas. The stainless steel shelving unit has five trays. Each tray represents one of the five habitats of the riparian ecosystem at Osprey Flats and adjacent sites. The first tray is filled with water samples and natural specimens gathered over the past two years from the Red Deer River and its tributaries. The second tray holds materials gathered from the

margins (cliff edges, logjams, dams, gravel bars and mud banks). Many of the objects accumulated from these particular areas have been deposited along the margins by the current. The third tray of samples contains natural materials gathered from the meadows adjoining the riverbank. The fourth tray holds remnants from the forests that parallel the river and the meadows. Last but not least, the fifth tray contains material gathered in the marsh.

Each item is bottled in a Wheaton snap-cap bottle (four dram) and preserved like museum a specimen. The natural materials have been variously treated much like scientific specimens using ethyl alcohol, borax, freeze-drying and air-drying. The shelving unit replicates shelving found in the Zoology Museum at the University of Alberta. It is illuminated to suggest energy, growth and knowledge. The shelving holds a wide variety of samples to illustrate the diversity of life along the river. The elements earth, air, fire and water are also present. The concept of time and space are divulged in minute quantities like fleeting moments. We have reminders of the ecological chain and the evolutionary journey. Fossil fragments of Devonian coral to the giant aspen clones are represented and banked. The producers, (aspens, grasses, flowers, shrubs), the consumers, (deer, moose, mice, beaver, porcupine, elk), the parasites, (tapeworms, leeches, fleas) and decomposers, (shelf-fungi, beetle larvae, blow flies) are all part of the collection. 'Riparian Preserves,' like the specimens of any natural history museum, represent a storehouse of knowledge. They document a journey both real and imagined.

The glass jars in themselves become a passageway. Like Alice, the viewer is invited to enter another world through the looking glass. As Roberts

stated in his interview, much of the work he does is to educate the museum's clientele through field trips, tours, school visits and lectures. His aim is similar to my own. I should like the viewer to encounter the rich diversity of the riparian community from my gathering expeditions on the Flats.

"Riparian Preserves Guide" embodies the memories of my travels through the Flats. By placing it in the standard museum display format, I am honoring the memory of my encounters within the cradle of this sanctuary. I am also respectfully acknowledging my place in the evolutionary flow, the one Mendieta poignantly described in chapter three, as the "Universal Energies."

Conclusion

The experiences I have encountered on my journey through the sanctuary of Osprey Flats and the adjoining areas parallels the personal and artistic growth that has evolved from this experience. Within the protective shelter of this natural community, I have gained the confidence to explore and expand my understanding and appreciation for the diverse richness of this region. This has been accompanied by broadening the scope of my artistic creativity. Osprey Flats, as I stated in Chapter Two, becomes a studio of the senses. Each specimen gathered has its specific story and natural beauty. This combination activates my creative imagination. The transitory state that is evident in the natural world of the Flats mirrors the transformation that has evolved in my art and life. This juncture is not an end but a new beginning.

Bibliography

- Bachelard, Gaston. the poetics of space. The Orion Press Inc., 1964.
- Blocker, Jane. Where Is Ana Mendieta?. Duke University Press, 1999.
- Broude, Norma and Mary Garrard. The Power of Feminist Art. New York: Harry Abrams Inc., 1994.
- Campbell, Joseph. The Power Of Myth. Doubleday, 1988.
- Chattopadhyay, Collette, "Ana Mendieta's sphere of influence" Sculpture (Washington D.C.) no. 5, (June 1999): 34-41.
- Clearwater, Bonnie and James. Ana Mendieta. Grassfield Press Inc., 1993
- Galloway, David, D. "Wolfgang Laib". Art News (Feb.'91):159.
- Grande, John, K. Balance: Art and Nature. Black Rose Books Ltd., 1994.
- Farrow, Clare. "Wolfgang Laib Beyond The Imagination". Art And Design, no 5/6, (May/June 1994): 25-3i.
- Hixton, Kathryn. "Wolfgang Laib." New Art Examiner, (February '91): 40-1.
- Lippard, Lucy. Overlay. The New Press, New York. 1983.
- Macdonald, Chel, Wayne E. Roberts and David M. Ealey. "The Vertebrate Species of Alberta." Alberta Naturalist. No 3, 1993.
- Ottmann, Klaus. Wolfgang Laib. American Federation Of Arts And Hatje Cantz Publishers. 2000.
- Pohlen, Annelie. "Cosmic Visions From North To South". Artforum International, (March '85): 76-81.

Roberts, Wayne, Emerson, Curator of the Museum of Zoology, University of Alberta, Edmonton. Interviewed by the author, May 13, 2001.

Roberts, Wayne, E. Cattails, email to author, April 3, 2001

Roose-Evans, James. Passages of the Soul, Element Books Limited, 1994.

Schenker, Christoph. "Wolfgang Laib," Flash Art (international Edition) 123, (Summer '85): 97

Spero, Nancy. "Tracing Ana Mendieta, " Artforum International (April '92):75-7

Tucker, Michael. Dreaming With Open Eyes. Aquarian/Harper San Francisco, 1992.

Turner, Lisa. "One With The Earth." Art News, (May '94):33-4.

Wei, Lilly. "Wolfgang Laib at Sperone Westwater." Art In America, (November '95): 109.

Illustrations

Photographs by the artist

- Figure 1** Journey, Fall 2000.
- Figure 2** Osprey Flats, Fall 1999
- Figure 3** Late winter camp, Winter 2001
- Figure 4** The Flats, Fall 2000
- Figure 5** Remains of a dead osprey, Spring 2000
- Figure 6** Gathering, Fall 2000
- Figure 7** Beaver cuttings, Fall 2000
- Figure 8** She is beginning to unravel, Fall 2000
- Figure 9,** Earthworm, Spring 20001
- Figure 10** Rotting log on the forest floor, Spring 2001
- Figure 11** Bird perch made from fragmented wood, Fall, 2000
- Figure 12** Bone vertebrae on the forest floor, Spring 2000
- Figure 13** Wayne Emerson Roberts, fly fishing on the Red Deer River at Osprey Flats, Summer 2000
- Figure 14** Killdeer nest, Spring 2001
- Figure 15** Eagle's nest down river from the Flats, Spring 2001
- Figure 16** Beaver lodge on the Red Deer River, Spring 2001
- Figure 17** Wayne Emerson Roberts putting up a nesting box for ducks on Osprey Flats, Spring 2001
- Figure 18** The spring water that feeds Ghostpine Springs Sanctuary, Winter 2001
- Figure 19** Ghostpine Springs Sanctuary, Spring 2001

Appendix

Plants

Juncus spp. – rushes

Carex spp. – sedges

Typha latifolia – cattail

Scirpus validus – bulrush

Salix spp. – willows

Populus tremloides – trembling aspen

P. balsamifera – balsam popular

Picea glauca – white spruce

Pinus contortus – lodgepole pine

Alnus tenuifolia – river alder

Symphoricarpos spp. – snowberry buckbrush

Elaeagnus commutata – wolf willow

Aster spp. – asters

Fishes

Hiodon tergisus – mooneye

H. alodiodes – goldeye

Esox lucius – northern pike

Prosopium williamsoni – mountain whitefish

Catostomus commersoni – white sucker

C. catostomus – longnosed sucker

Moxostoma macrolepidotum – shorthead redhorse

Carpoides cyprinus – quillback

Pimephales promelus – fathead minnows

Culaea inconstans – brook stickleback

Stizostedion vitreum – walleye

S. canadense – sauger

Cottus ricei – spoonhead sculpin

Amphibians

Rana pipiens – northern leopard frogs

R. sylvatica – wood frog

Pseudacris maculata – boreal chorus frog

Bufo hemiophrys – Canadian toad

Ambystoma tigrinum – tiger salamander

Reptiles

Thamnophis radix – plains garter snake

T. sirtalis parietalis – red-sided garter snake

Insects

Ephemeroptera - mayflies (many species)

Plecoptera – stoneflies

Trichoptera – caddisflies

Diptera – flies (primarily Chironomidae – midges)

Dermestidae (Dermestes) carrion beetle, one larva only

Silphidae (Thanatophilus) carrion beetle, both larvae and adults

(Nicrophorus) carrion beetle, both larvae and adults

Parasites

mites (on Nicrophorus and corixids – water boatmen)

Argulus (on white sucker)

Piagetiella (from pelican pouch)

Works In The Exhibition

To view works from the thesis exhibition, please refer to the original CD housed in the slide library of the Department of Art at the University of Calgary.

Blanket

2001

Cattail seeds, cotton backing

10 ft. x 5ft.

Journey

2001

Cattail flower-heads and stems

bees wax, steel frame

14 x 5 ft.

Untitled

2000-2001

Cattail leaves, found poles

Various sizes

Riparian Preserves

2001

Stainless steel shelving, Wheaton snap-

cap four dram specimen jars, natural

specimens, fluorescent lighting

5 ft. 6 in. x 2 ft. 6 in.

Riparian Guide**2001****Journal, museum display box****14x 20 in.**