

Richard Watts, Land Artist

Artist Statement 2024

My work focuses on our relationship to nature and the environment, in the context of North American history colonization, and how the continent was originally travelled --- in wood, skin, and bone crafts along the waterways. It also explores global climate change issues, particularly water, deforestation, species migration, and seasonal shifts. Another exploration is the relationship between urban culture and rural/wilderness, where our resources come from. In earlier work I salvaged objects from energy and water systems in urban infrastructure: industrial water meters from beneath the city, residential oil tanks, old fishing boats. These objects were reconfigured like organisms, to tell stories related to the earliest transportation forms, and ancient stories about climate change. The objects travelled to different places, becoming characters in their own story. Boats represent a collective and individual history, and life journeys. Tanks and meters are open bodies emptied of their fluids. Our own bodies depend on these fluids.

For one project, "Ark", I sandblasted and gutted a 35' vintage wooden fishing boat from Georgian Bay, moved it to the city, and turned it into a 'walking boat/whale' pierced by utility pipes. The sandblasting is the sound of history passing. The work was shown under the Manhattan Bridge in 2007 as a transitional object between Canada and the U.S intended to draw attention to climate change issues. A related series, "Salmon Run" based on abstracting canoe and aquatic animal shapes in gestural form, was commissioned by the City of Kelowna in 2006. A project in Edmonton, called "Lock", involved reconfiguring six cottage boats in front of City Hall using the road as a "dry lock", according to climate change themes (2008).

Current Projects:

After "Ark" went to New York I began retrofitting a large barn on a wooded acreage in Eastern Ontario to create a workplace that is also an installation related to boundaries between 'nature' and 'culture', wilderness and civilization, and a sort of museum outside traditional boundaries. In it are the water meters -- urban artifacts displaced elsewhere, industrial 'animals' safe in the ark. Water system refugees. On the grounds are sculptures made of stacked pipeline systems, and an altered oil tank installation extending into the woods.

In my practice I respond strongly to environment. In 2007 when I changed locations from an urban to a rural context, I became influenced by the Canadian wilderness landscape in a different manner. This change and the subsequent body of work has resulted in the museum shows for *Earth Etchings*, including the MacLaren Art Centre (Barrie, 2012), Two Rivers Gallery, B.C. (2014), Tom Thomson Museum survey exhibition (Owen Sound, 2019), Wilfrid Laurier University (Waterloo, 2021), and others. An upcoming exhibition, "Passages", at MA Rouyn-Noranda, Quebec, involves an installation called "Ghost Forest" (2026), primarily based on the *Insect Writing* series. Another future exhibition is in discussion at The New Canadian Canoe Museum in Peterborough. Many of the canoes and boats I have worked with are from the Peterborough area and were made there.

The *Earth Etchings* involve a transformation process, going into a cocoon of sorts and using a moldmaking process to layer cocoons on various forms -- the process a butterfly (and other insects) go through, as well as people during transitions in their lives/consciousness. When the cocoons open, the forms become projections related to Canadian/American and global history, our life journeys, couples and relationships. The patterns ants and beetles make on logs and trees when they chew or 'carve' around them, sometimes have the symmetry of their own self-portraits. This latest series, "*Insect Writing*", involves imprinting these patterns, using the trees as etching plates; the resulting works look like musical scores, heart monitor graphs, and bear resemblance to ancient scripts. . . origins of our own languages. In some ways the body of work I have developed is a new form of Landscape Painting. The works can be translated into many permutations and materials, including glass, which is interesting conceptually as we need a "new religion" based on nature's stories, rather than largely centering human narratives in the 'cathedrals' of the future.

Richard Watts

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