

“The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing that stands in the way. Some see nature all ridicule and deformity... and some scarce see nature at all. But to the eyes of the man of imagination, nature is imagination itself.”

William Blake

Richard Watts - Weight of the Soul

Nature is the source and substance for Richard Watts art. Like the Italian Arte Povera group, Watts' process involves accessing materials from the world around him. Selecting what to work with is an intuitive process that reflects a developing worldview on sustainability and nature. For Watts, this worldview is not just a way of seeing, but an entire cosmology. As Richard Watts commented in an interview at his studio north of Toronto, “I believe in North America we are now in a post-historical period.” That post-historical world is one where the traces of context, of accumulated time and history are hard to seize on, particularly as web communication exists in a cyber-world whose records are as transient as they are impermanent. Working with nature as the medium, and raw material source becomes a way of creating art that reaffirms the cycle of life.

Not only does nature become the handle that, for Richard Watts, opens the door to our unconscious proto-human history, but it is also the underpinning of civilization in all its manifestations. This explains why Watts, became interested on boats, metaphors for a journey, for migration, and quintessential relics of the human cultural experience over the centuries, wherever you live. Richard Watts is an artist whose vision is sensitive to the times we live in. Watts will use trees, boats, rock faces, and architectural remnants as the real life positive he prints his art from. Transforming nature into art involves understanding the medium in microcosm, and as part of the macrocosm. Nature contextualizes scale as it does space, and keeps us human. Richard Watts effectively re-produces forms just as nature does.

Like Canada's Group of Seven, Watts brings art about nature to the urban audiences. Watts' "earth skins" communicate a deeper meaning about the language and process of nature's systems. His art is a form of writing, or printing, that involves a positive and a negative. His art is written into the rocks, onto trees, and even uses abandoned boats, relics of the human interface with nature. Nature in Richard Watts' art tells an incredible story. Nature is the artwork from which Watts'

artwork is generated. The narrative he builds is ever changing, and each individual artwork has myriad effects, of light, like stained glass, that flow through the membrane of each piece. Watts integrates his expression to reflect the cycles of life, where a tree may die, but is transformed through mushroom and bacteria back into a permacultural cycle.

Watts' expression brings nature's voice back to the art gallery or museum in a very direct way. Light becomes the active medium and transforms, enables us to read the traces of nature, of human activity, and interpret these traces with our own eyes. The physicality of Watts' art is testament to life, and challenged a screen-based or parallel imagery that is segregated from nature by technology's latest gadgets. Watts' reaffirms the physics of material culture, and the lessons experiential learning can communicate direct from its source.

A deeper essence emerges through the language of his art when he was a student at art school. The fetus molds were made when he was 30 at Ontario College of Art & Design. Separated after a 13 year marriage from his partner, a doctor, and with two sons Watts looked after the children at home. The molds Watts made from nature were initially not art, merely an experiment and a way of trying to build a

language of experience that could deal with the separation from a third son still as yet unborn. The molds existed in nine stages, that paralleled that of his partner's nine stages of pregnancy, after separation. The molds suggested a presence, a proof of his own presence, but equally the existence of a greater still as yet unborn presence, that of his son. They embodied an attachment to something seemingly intangible and an attachment that was emotional. In effect Watts was giving birth synonymously with his former partner. Medical diagrams became the source for making clay forms. The forms were projections, of what was imagined as developing unseen inside the uterus. The resulting forms - the negative shapes - were like bones left after the "fetus" was gone. The molds were a painful testament to Watts' own growth as a person in a difficult phase of his life. Later on, he cast a bone form made from a tree out of doors. This tree/bone form expressed a sense of impotence - and became a symbolic act, a kind of birth but an unresolved one. This performance-like action, for Watts, was a response to a feeling of helplessness. The vision was of an irreparable world, or at least a world increasingly disabled, unable to deal with the sporadic rains, the excessive heat, and effects of the sun that are changing local environments worldwide. To compensate for this sense of helplessness, of witnessing something that cannot be stopped Richard Watts' realization was that he could reproduce

nature and in so doing celebrate nature's solemn and enduring place in our lives as both source and substance for everything we consider to be human.

Nature is a book, and Watts pulls the pages from reality for this book. Close to theatre, to Murray Shafer's nature theatre, Richard Watts' art is an absurdist gesture in a dislocated world, an attempt to bring some coherence to his worldview, nature being that medium of coherence, with its own natural history, a history that continues according to laws of physics and biology regardless of what humans may do to nature.

As Watts began to transfer nature into art, it became easier to deal with emotions involving personal loss. Loss became a universal concern, and loss of first growth forests, of weather systems, of resources and of human cultural contexts all became part of the metaphor of the Earth Skins Caspar David Friedrich and J.M.W. Turner likewise projected their Romantic worldview of nature through their art. Friedrich projected nature as a force juxtaposing this with hierarchical iconic religious elements in the landscape. J.M.W. Turner simply let nature express his vision of God's universe. Richard Watts on the other hand sees God in the details, or as William Blake writes in *Auguries of Innocence*,

“To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.”²

Richard Watts, at his most effective, communicate a worldview through his art. Traces of nature become windows through which light activates the medium and we get a glimpse of the ontological processes that are part of the cycle of life. As Thomas Berry writes: “We consistently think of the human as primary and the Earth as derivative rather than thinking of the earth as primary and the human as derivative. This must change.”³

After a monumental Lebanon cedar was damaged by a 1999 storm on the grounds at the Palace of Versailles, Arte Povera artist Giuseppe Penone made *Tra Scorza e Scorza* (2008). The sculpture involved two casts from the original tree bark, in effect reinventing the space of the original tree’s growth in the present, planting a young tree within. Just as Giuseppe Penone has done for his exhibition at Versailles, Richard Watts finds the tree object in the landscape and reinvents it, gives it a new site in space. And searching for found materials from nature is a kind of Arte Povera

that draws on availability, but this time nature is the source. The forest becomes like a cathedral providing its bounty to the artist. The artist gives it a new interpretation

Like the conceptual artist German artist Wolfgang Laib, who works with beeswax and rice for his installations, Richard Watts unframes the nature context and re-configures it into artwork as environmental as art can be. The process of mold making or replication is, like photography a way to “print” elements that exist in the three-dimensional. Viewers re-phrase their experience. The process is comparable to William Henry Fox Talbot’s early “light drawings”, photographic studies of ferns, flowers and natural elements in the nineteenth century. The choice of site and subsequent re-casting makes these elements – a tree - an old boat or canoe – a barn’s siding – powerful agents of a transformative vision. Traces of the rock, the tree bark, or wood from the boat or barn that remain activate the work, and our memories of place and of nature, particularly if we visit to see these works in a gallery or urban setting.

Richard Watts’ boat prints are tactile, visceral remnants of a past

history. These evocative works imply a journey, movement through the land via rivers, or around the land on the oceans. Are the boats a metaphor for the soul's journey? These unstretched large-scale works are like testaments to life. Light moves through them, and we get a sense of the grandeur of nature in the microcosmic details we can "read" in the Earth Skins become maps of life. Their lines and nature's geometries, give us a sense of the invisible flow of energies in our universe.

Selecting elements to be printed into Earth Skins on site in the forests is close to performance art. These works are like backgrounds for some cosmic stage set, where nature is the source and a cathedral that designs itself unconsciously.

It is the re-siting of these elements, as Earth Skins, that gives them an added sacred feel, as if we were in a church, but nature's church. Watts' lighting animates them from behind. Likewise, a boat from Nova Scotia becomes a source for art that engages us in a dialogue with our own ancestral history. Watts achieves a balance between nature and manufacture. The hull of a boat becomes majestic, its remnants recalling the Romantic painter J.M.W. Turner's paintings of shipwrecks. The very design of the boat, its skin and bones skeletal

structure, becomes a metaphor for our own body structures, and of life's ephemeral cycle.

Earth Skins are like nature canvases created in the landscape. It's an open process, Richard Watts' way of layering natural rubber from tree sap (vulcanized latex) up to six times onto a found form, whether a rock face, a tree, wooden boats, old barns or farmhouse walls. The resulting works are like relief sculptures that embody aspects of continuity, a sense of time's endless flow, nature's procreation always there. This process of embalming forms has cultural and natural historical associations. Back when he was making his first Earth Skin casts from rocks, Richard Watts described the process with gusto and intensity in these words,

"Last week I made the first "rock skin." The energy that dries them is geothermal: heat coming out of the rock. The skin is made with latex tropical rubber tree sap-- vulcanized to withstand heat and cold. Like our own, it is naturally mould and fungus resistant, durable, and waterproof when dry. Walking through the woods I found a young pine tree. A porcupine had eaten a section of the bark around the base. The sap came down to cover the wound with a milky yellow skin slowly hardening.

Like white blood cells. When the "skin" comes off the rock it removes fragments of shale, lichen, earth, twigs, insects, which become embedded in it. It records in detail where it came from, becomes a writing, a scroll, but not human writing. The different thicknesses, densities, materials in the skin create a sculptural image of the earth's surface warming, and connect it to human skin when light shines through. When I make them I shed my skin and replace it somehow: a sense of death, and resurrection.⁴

At Art College, and not being old enough to have a child, Watts made a work that dealt with the nine stages of pregnancy. The tree was cast in winter so as not to decay. Latex molds were placed on a chain link fence with a photo on that fence like an animal skin. Ten years later, Watts observed it at home and when the light shone through it, he became aware of how the tree cast could express the essence of ephemeral. The Earth Skin became a way of connecting art back to life...

And this is the way Watts realized a connective aesthetics, an art form

that drew from life and went full circle, awakening a sense that life could be the context and content for art. As source for art, nature frees up the process. There was no gap between the two. The body of the earth paraphrased aspects of the human body. Nature was sensual, a tree could be a voice speaking to each of us, and a boat could tell a tale simply through that which remains...

In the recently published *Image and Imagination: Essays and Reviews by C.S. Lewis*, the fantasy writer describes the links between reality and the artistic imagination in writing. This could as likely apply to the artist's process as well. Lewis writes, "What we do when we imagine is to suppose a reshuffling of universals taken from the actual world.(...) Always the real world is the bank on which the poet (like the painter) draws his cheques; and though a metaphysical lyric may be a fine and private place, all the meanings embraced within it are but passengers who come from there from the public, eternal, objective world of reality and haste thither again. (...) You may change, as much as you please the character which your objects would have in reality; but reality furnishes both that which is changed and that by which you change it."5

When Watts discovered the hull and remnants of a 30-foot long Hong Kong-built deep-water mahogany boat on Georgian Bay he had the ingenious notion of transposing it, and setting it up under the

Manhattan Bridge in Brooklyn Bridge City Park in New York as The Ark, part of the Brooklyn Artists' Coalition 25th anniversary sculpture show. "I wanted to show The Ark at a place which is kind of the official entrance to the United States with the Statue of Liberty. It suggests we are all immigrants that we all originally came to this country in boats. Because there's a lot of Middle Eastern and Old Testament references in the work, it does relate to the Twin Towers too." Actually siting the piece involved re-locating the Ark several times, frustrated by red tape, Watts used a forklift to put the Ark in a Brooklyn Park site. Bureaucratic red tape regarding official forms, eventually caused Watts to haul the boat to a site right by the river without any permission. Support came from the New York-based artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude, who ensured that Richard Watts' Ark would not be fined, ticketed, or terminated by public authorities. For Watts, Ark in part was "(...) for my father, a minister who'd gone to Princeton. Boats are structures that come right from our lives. (Ark) is a work about shadows and memories that come from loss. It's meaning is in the human interactions all around it. It is an epic in miniature." 6

The boats embody a sense of time's passing, of the voyage of life, and of the excitement that journey can potentially embody, particularly if we remain connected to the forces of the universe and our place in the

cosmology. Richard Watts is the guide, who directs us to re-examine the physical, tactile world of nature we are so disconnected from.

As a structure, the Ark, went through re-interpretation, and the associations changed from a relic or wreck on a shoreline, to an outdoor art installation work that references migration, a journey that could be spiritual as much as physical or historical.

For Water Line (2007) an ongoing project boat-based installation to be sited under the Gardiner Expressway in the Fort York area, Richard Watts intends to suspend altered boat sculptures along the Lake Ontario shoreline as it was in the year 1812. The site under the Gardiner Expressway, approved by Toronto Temporary Projects and Fort York, will ensure high visibility, as motorists and citizens will refer to these while in transit or traveling to and from work, or simply from nearby sites in the city. One of the boats would be in the process of emerging out of the ground, another would be partly in the air, and a third would be suspended from the air. Sculptural, and site specific Water Line describes an imagined shoreline from 1812, animating a dialogue about history, natural and urban transformation over time, while drawing and bridging the contexts of time and space, of culture and nature. The yet to be realized Gardiner Expressway Water Line

seeks to change attitudes in Toronto, regarding temporary public art and can awaken us all to issues of climate change, how shorelines change over time.

As George Monbiot, the author of *Heat*, a book on climate change writes, "We are often told we are materialistic. It seems to me, we are not materialistic enough. We have a disrespect for materials. We use it quickly and carelessly. If we were genuinely materialistic people, we would understand where materials come from and where they go to. But, at the moment, the entire global economy seems to be built on the model of digging things up from one hole in the ground on one side of the earth, transporting them around the world, using them for a few days, and sticking them in a hole in the ground on the other side of the world." 7

Richard Watts' synthetic castings, his Ark project, the Water Line project are all about bringing our vision of the earth we live on back to life. They underscore the fact that we are living our lives in a world undergoing rapid and destructive transformation in the face of globalization, of rapid fire industrialized activities in scales never before seen that all contribute to climate change. Tree sap material is layered on rock faces, trees, abandoned farmhouse walls, old barns,

and wooden boats. When dried Watts pulls these skins of. The results of the process when light projects through them is like seeing a tapestry. Here is an art where light expands the context, causing each work to glow backlit. Porcupine quills, traces of insects, leaves, and other materials all add to the visuality of these stories drawn from the microcosm of nature.

Richard Watts' Mobile Art Circus is a rescue operation, a public environmental installation made for the City of Toronto and visitors to the Pan Am Games in 2015, to be installed near the waterfront Development at the conjunction with the Don River.

Nature, like humanity, has an inbuilt memory. For Richard Watts life becomes a living museum for Toronto's Pan-Am Games proposal. The artist is the conduit, the catalyst and the connector of the contextual energies embodied by the horseshoe shaped arrangement of five containers being "pulled" by his Ark sculpture previously exhibited in New York.

The original size of a standard shipping container used in world trade shipping is 6.1 metres long, by 2.4 metres wide, by 2.6 metres high. This cubic measurement is the most standard size of a container used for transporting goods in shipping for Asia, North America, and Europe. What is inside these containers defines our living standard and on the

other side, it can be what destroys nature in its original context. Watt's containers will include the Earth Skin Tapestries, and newly produced Skins pulled from rowing boats in Toronto. Watts is contextualizing this installation/artwork for the Pan-am Games event, and bringing cues from sports and nature. Watts' containers will have Earth Skins pulled from trees on Centre Island and the Toronto Metropolitan region. Once again, nature is referenced within the bioregional context of Toronto, while the broader context is the seemingly endless change humanity is bringing to the earth e live on.

The Ark that pulls this Circus-like event has been reconfigured, taken out of its functional context, and is now redefined as part of the art event Watts' is producing. The Ark also references the Bible and the Flood.

For Richard Watts, art and nature is not an idiom. It involves the reintegration of human culture and life into the ecosystems we all depend upon for our survival. Watts' art becomes a device to contextualize human culture, placing it within a context of life on earth. The container also references economies of scale. Containers pervade the global shipping and world trade "circus" This is a circus that involves transport, an oil dependency, and also references migration, just as the boat pulling the this artwork does.

Likewise, the water-meter "pirates" that are part of this art spectacle are functionality turned into art. Playful recombinations of structures that "contain" water, so essential to life, just as the pipes are essential to bringing water to our homes and apartments in the city. The "Condo people" are freeform sculptures, part concrete, part structural, who walk and occupy the space surrounding Richard Watts Mobile Art Circus. Painted onto the outer walls of these containers we find murals of land and water-based animals and creatures, as well as endangered species, produced by eminent and active Toronto muralists and graffiti artists. Watts is once again contextualizing a dialogue between nature and human culture in an age where the balance is close to, if not already tipping.

Nature, usually associated with permanence, context and bio-specificity, is placed precariously in these containers and these tree imprints are life stopped in time, like a photograph. The World Tree, like the Tree of Life, are universal metaphors for the human journey, as spiritual as it is mysterious, and the principle of life all this set within the axiom of space. Can nature be contained? Richard Watts' Ark seems to answer that it is the way we define contexts that ultimately limits our progress. Even as nature is contained, the container itself is nature. All materials, all contexts are part of nature, and so the containment expresses the nature of human intervention in

the environment. There are both economic and cultural connotations to the Mobile Art Circus, for containers also represent displacement of culture and of nature.

Richard Watts' body of work becomes a process art that reawakens a sense of mythology, of the stories we create that give a sense of life's journey. As Joseph Campbell author of *The Power of Myth* has stated, "I think of the mythological image as an energy-evoking sign that hits you below the thinking system (...) Essentially mythologies are enormous poems that are renditions of insights, giving some sense of the marvel, the miracle and wonder of life." With Richard Watts, the structure and forms are derived from what he finds that reaffirms his search. That search involves a worldview...

- John K. Grande

1. Joseph Campbell with Michael Toms, *An Open Life*, Harper Perennial Library, 1990
2. William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*,

3. Thomas Berry, "Art in the Ecozoic Era," Art Journal (Summer 1992), p. 48.
4. C.S. Lewis, Image and Imagination: Essays and Reviews by C.S. Lewis, Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 2013
5. Peter Godard, "Exhibit a Boatload of Trouble", Toronto Star, Sunday, August 12, 2007.
6. Richard Watts cited at www.enginegallery.ca , artist's file.
7. George Monbiot <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/human-footprint>

JOHN K. GRANDE, has contributed his views on art to a variety of arts publications including Artforum, Sculpture (USA), Vie des Arts, British Journal of Photography, Vice Versa and Landscape Architecture. Grande's poetry include The Landscape Changes(Gaspereau/Prospect Press), Homage to Jean-Paul Riopelle, Black Peat(The Print Factory, Ireland 2012) and Grass Grows with Thomas May at the Grass Blade Institute in

Nuremberg, Germany (2013). He has authored numerous books and catalogues including David Sorensen (Bombardier, Qc.), Art, Nature et Societe (Editions Ecosociete), Jouer avec le feu; Armand Vaillancourt (Editions Lanctot), Eco-Art (Pori Art Museum, Finland), and Art Nature Dialogues (SUNY Press, N.Y. USA). Recent shows include Eco-Art (co-curated with Peter Selz at the Pori Art Museum, Finland, 2011).Kathy Venter - LIFE, Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art, Toronto (2013). Art in Nature (Borim Press, Seoul, South Korea) won the national public prize in 2012.