

Mobile Art Circus, Richard Watts and Team

Richard Watts' Mobile Art Circus is a rescue operation, both serious and playful, a public environmental installation made for the City of Toronto/Luminato or another appropriate location. In this proposal Nature becomes a living outdoor museum, embodied in a horseshoe-shaped arrangement of five cargo containers being "pulled" by the Ark sculpture previously exhibited in New York and Toronto.

Cargo containers are being used increasingly in architecture, art, and design, as ready-made urban 'canvases' but also potential living structures.

What is inside these containers which ship our goods and resources around the world defines our living standard and on the other side, can be what destroys nature in its original context. Watts' containers will include the Earth Skin Tapestries previously exhibited in museum shows across Canada, and newly produced pieces from historic boats and trees along the Toronto Waterfront. It may be possible to include a piece from an old growth cedar in British Columbia. Nature is referenced within the bioregional context of North America. The broader context is the seemingly endless change humanity is bringing to the earth we live on.

The Ark that pulls this Circus-like event was taken from Georgian Bay and originally built in Hong Kong. It has been reconfigured from its functional context, and is now redefined as part of the art event. The Ark also references climate change and the fluctuating water levels occurring in the world. In its New York showing under the Manhattan Bridge, it received a Star feature and French CBC coverage, among other media (2007), and its siting was assisted by Jeanne-Claude (Christo and Jeanne-Claude).

The inner space between these containers will include multicultural and multigenerational music and dance performances, poetry, storytelling and theatre events when it is installed.

It is also possible to create a small 'store' in one container like a museum gift shop which would involve products with a contemporary design environmental theme, and employ young people: a portion of the proceeds could go to environmental groups.

The water-meter "pirates" that are part of this art spectacle are functionality turned into art and are originally the vintage water valves from beneath Toronto that are currently being replaced. They would be cast as playful, colourful animated "creatures", recombinations of these 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, animate and occupy the space surrounding the Mobile Art Circus installation. 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 tipping.

These tree imprints are life stopped in time, like a photograph. Boats, Trees, The World Tree, like the Tree of Life, are universal metaphors for the human journey, as spiritual as it is mysterious, and reference immigration and cultural recombination throughout history.

Energy efficiency and sustainability involve systems that, like nature create no waste but endlessly recycle, regenerate, recreate. The hope is the Ark and the Mobile Art Circus migrate to other cities, bringing a message of sustainability, permaculture and reinvention of humanity's place in nature.

Better Creative Contribution:

As Partners to this proposal, the artistic team behind the Canadian multimedia enterprise Better Creative (BetterCreative.ca) will also contribute original works to the Mobile Art Circus space, to view and interact with. Digital artists and entrepreneurs Kai Reimer-Watts and Abhilasha Dewan started the Toronto-based company in 2014 to focus on crafting “stories and images for a better world,” and have since worked with wide-ranging Canadian and international groups including Open Canada, 350.org and the Centre for International Governance Innovation in Waterloo. Work for the exhibition could include but is not limited to:

---soundscapes compiled from both Canada and India, immersing listeners in a rich transition from urban to more natural environments

--film/animation screenings and montages drawing on natural environments and plays with light, including “light electricity on trees,” water meditations from the Leslie Spit, and excerpts from an upcoming Canadian feature documentary on Climate Change

--interactive displays merging public education with art, exploring specific living ecosystems and ecology, particularly Canada and the Great Lakes, with possibility of audio guides to create a more museum experience

--light/multimedia installations exploring our national and global energy futures

Background and Previous Work—Richard Watts

My previous work relates to historical and contemporary human movement, transportation, and energy systems, in the context of environmental issues, especially water. I create symbolic stories by altering large water meters from beneath the city, heating oil tanks, and old wooden boats and canoes. These objects are reconfigured like organisms to tell stories related to ancient mythology—such as the Ark myth—as we live in an analogous historical period with rapidly fluctuating water levels, vanishing glaciers and islands, and increasingly unpredictable weather patterns. The resultant sculptural works travel to different places, becoming characters in their own story, and connect human activity to global events, particularly climate change.

A recent example is a work called “Ark”, a reconfigured vintage mahogany boat built in Hong Kong and later bought in Orillia in Ontario. It was once a deepwater fishing boat on Georgian Bay. I brought it to Toronto, gutted and sandblasted it, and took it apart like a body. The sandblasting is the sound of history passing, both a creative and destructive process. “Ark” was shown at DeLeon White Gallery in 2005 and in 2007 was reconfigured, pierced by large utility pipes with a legging system like a “walking boat/whale”. The sculpture is composed like Gericault’s Raft of the Medusa, and Bill Reid’s Haida G’waii, among other references. For two months in summer ’07 “Ark” was shown under the Manhattan Bridge in Brooklyn Bridge City Park, becoming a transitional object related to climate change issues between Canada and the U.S. The project received feature print and television coverage, in English and French (Le Telejournal D’Ontario, and a Star feature.)

From 2006-2008 several related projects developed, including a commission for sculptural steel forms along a salmon river in Kelowna B.C., preliminary approval for a project called “Water/Line” which involves suspended boat sculptures below the Gardiner Expressway in Toronto, and an artist residency with The Works Art and Design Festival in Edmonton, Alberta. In Edmonton I altered six cottage boats according to climate change themes, in front of City Hall. Most recently I purchased a large newer “barn” like an overturned ship two hours from Toronto, and the work changed from the skeletal forms of boats to more architectural concerns and in particular, the ‘skins’ that cover the structures—like the old Inuit hide-covered kayaks. I call these new works, Earth Skins.

The Earth Skins are made by layering vulcanized latex rubber with gauze onto surfaces in the Canadian Shield such as old growth trees, rock faces along rivers, old wooden boats and canoes, and abandoned architecture, to create large tapestries like thick translucent leather which when backlit become x-rays of the landscape, glowing images of climate change. Sometimes ‘drawings’ are embedded between the layers made of plant material or porcupine quills which become shadow patterns with the light. In a sense the process is an embalming of the earth. The material, vulcanized latex rubber treated to withstand heat and

cold, is one of the 3 materials required for the Industrial Revolution—the other two being fossil fuels, and steel. It comes originally from the Amazon rain forest.

From 2005-present the Earth Skins have shown both in Canada and the U.S. Recent shows include The Three Seasons exhibition in Ontario at the MacLaren Art Centre, Barrie (2012), and in British Columbia at Two Rivers Gallery (Museum) in Prince George (2014). The work was also included in the International Earth Art Exhibition at the Royal Botanical Gardens in Hamilton, Ontario, which included artists from South America, Europe, Indonesia, and New Zealand (2014). In 2015 an Artist and Studio Profile showed at the Paris Climate Summit. Future exhibitions in discussion include the Tom Thomson Museum in Ontario, the Canadian Canoe Museum, The Art Gallery of Kelowna, and others.