

Article

Glacier, Plaza, and Garden: Ecological Collaboration and Didacticism in Three Canadian Landscapes

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Abstract: The emphasis in landscape studies on human agency and needs can obscure the complex relationships between non-human living things and their animate and inanimate contexts. Diverse authors have pointed out that this anthropocentric outlook is problematic, destructive, and neo-colonial. How might it be possible to approach a landscape, i.e., land itself, and all that lives on it, in a way that foregrounds the realities and risks of that site, without falling back on familiar humanistic and anthropocentric tropes? In this essay, I explore three recent artworks that each engage with a different landscape: *Requiem for a Glacier* by artist and composer Paul Walde (2013); the *Urban Prairie* designed by landscape architects Claude Cormier + Associés (2012); and *The Boreal Poetry Garden* by visual artist Marlene Creates (born 2005-). By analyzing these artists' and designers' creative strategies in relation to these landscapes, I delve into the question of ecological collaboration in each project, and explore the ways in which the non-human aspects of the landscape do, or do not, take centre stage. In so doing, this essay has a second aim: to explore the extent to which, in performing a didactic relationship with their sites, these three projects contribute to an activist and pedagogical ethos around climate change, habitat, and ecology.

Keywords: landscapes; art; landscape design; didacticism; anthropocentrism; ecology; eco-didacticism



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1. Introduction

“Landscape” is a broad and slippery term, with strong connections to the history of art, the history of territorial possession, and the cultural artifacts of human occupation in specific places. The ambiguity of the term stems, landscape historian Marina Moskowitz explains, from the very derivation of the word ... an amalgam of the Dutch *landshcap*, the German *landschaft* and the Old English *landskipe*: the first connoted a scene, often in a painting or other framed image; the second referred to a bounded area and the visible physical elements of which it was composed; and the third had a more social meaning, encompassing the community associated with a given place [1].

Landscape historians and cultural landscape theorists agree that “landscape” is not synonymous with “nature” [2]. Rather, it is the close entwining of human and biological life that is at the centre of most landscape histories [3,4]. Thus, human concerns—priorities, budgets, design decisions, preservation battles, perceived needs and benefits—tend to obscure the actual, non-human lives that also comprise landscapes. At times, the emphasis in landscape studies on human agency and needs can obscure the complex relationships between non-human living things and their animate and inanimate contexts [5–9]. Landscapes such as public parks, gardens, and conservation areas continue to prioritize an anthropocentric outlook. Diverse authors have pointed out that this anthropocentric outlook is problematic, destructive, and neo-colonial [10–13]. Climate change activists, environmentally-minded artists, and ecologically-sensitive landscape designers are thus in a tricky position. How might it be possible to approach a landscape, i.e., land itself, and all that lives on it, in a way that foregrounds the realities and risks of that site, without falling back on familiar humanistic and anthropocentric tropes? This is a problem for

the art historian as well, especially as very little has been published on the eco-didactic phenomenon in the arts and design [14].

Landscapes designed or preserved for the benefit, continuance, or recognition of specific ecologies might offer some insights. In this essay, I explore three recent Canadian artworks that each engage with a different landscape: *Requiem for a Glacier*, a score, performance and installation by composer Paul Walde (and volunteers) on the Farnham Glacier in British Columbia (2013); the *Urban Prairie* at the Canadian Museum of Civilization Plaza in Ottawa, designed by landscape architects Claude Cormier + Associés (2012); and *The Boreal Poetry Garden*, an ongoing, site-responsive project by visual artist Marlene Creates, based in a small corner of Newfoundland's boreal forest, where the artist has lived and worked since 2005. Choosing contemporary Canadian works of art allows me to engage with the landscape tradition in the arts in Canada, which was dominated in the previous century by the Group of Seven. By analyzing more recent creative strategies in relation to this legacy, I delve into the question of ecological collaboration in each project, and explore the ways in which the non-human aspects of the landscape do, or do not, take centre stage. In so doing, this essay has a second aim: to explore the extent to which, in performing a didactic relationship with their sites, these three projects contribute to an activist and pedagogical ethos around climate change, habitat, and ecology.

2. Didacticism

"Didactic" is a term that sits uncomfortably in relation to the history of art. For some, didacticism seems even antithetical to artistic pursuits. In his essay, "What's Wrong with Didacticism?", literary historian Charles Repp notes that "besides 'overt', 'unsubtle', and the like, most of the terms most closely associated with 'didactic', including 'propagandistic', 'sermonizing', 'preachy', 'condescending', 'arrogant', 'self-righteous', 'sanctimonious', 'simple-minded', 'dogmatic', 'doctrinaire', and 'moralizing', carry no hint of the aesthetic" [15]. Didacticism already sounds pretty bad. But what does the word actually mean? The Oxford English Dictionary defines the noun "didactic" as "a writer or piece of writing having instruction as a primary or ulterior purpose" and "instruction as a primary element or tendency." That which is didactic is marked by its "instructive purpose." As an adjective, the term also infers an instructional or pedagogical approach, again with "ulterior purpose" [16]. This ulterior purpose is partly why didacticism makes people in the arts cringe, in addition to the battery of unappealing terms above. But it was not always so. In the Western canon, artists such as Gustave Courbet (1819–1877) and Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945) were known for the social themes that they tackled in their work, directly depicting poverty, injustice, and the horrors of war with the intent to raise awareness and inspire moral outrage. Didacticism, however, faltered when social realism as an aesthetic strategy became aligned with major political movements, notably the mobilization of socialist realism by the Soviet Union (but one could think of the moralizing and intentionally manipulative realism in the visual campaigns of many countries during wartime, and much advertising, as well). Over time, artists' use of didactic methods of representation to convey political conviction lost favour.

Didacticism had some proponents. Critic John Berger, for example, exhorted curators and other staff to return to the didactic purpose of museums and galleries. But even here, there was no suggestion that the art itself should be didactic; on the contrary, it was precisely because of modern art's opacity that Berger felt the traditional role of the museum was more important than ever [17]. The strength of negative opinion around didacticism in art may be discerned in the following example. Writing in 1960 for *The Burlington Magazine*, Robert L. Herbert and Eugenia W. Herbert suggest that once social realism gave way, "artists were afraid of sacrificing art to didacticism" [18], as if the two could never truly be compatible. The authors find the apex of this sensibility in the career development of Pablo Picasso, arguably modern art's greatest hero. Ignoring Picasso's most didactic work, his anti-war mural, *Guernica* (1937), they assert, "Picasso only becomes a truly twentieth-century artist with his development of Cubism, an art lacking clear

social consciousness. This change ... marks the severance of art from overt political expression" [18]. A positive severance it would seem; in their closing statement, Herbert and Herbert assert that artists who broke from politics were engaged in nothing short of a "heroic fight against materialism, tawdriness, and facile acceptance of observable reality" [18].

If the commitment to and representation of "observable reality" automatically render artists unheroic, and their art a facile acceptance of tawdry materialism, then didacticism in art has a tough road. But the reason why remains foggy. If the hallmark of didacticism is that its users employ it with the aim of instructing others, then perhaps didactic art creates discomfort because it chafes against the now commonplace idea that when it comes to art, one person's interpretation is as valid as another's. Perhaps didactic art amplifies this discomfort because, in having a clear message with a moral stance attached, it seems to refuse cultural and other forms of relativism, as well as the recognition of different subject positions. Writing about didacticism and literature, Charles Repp debates quite a few ways in which didacticism is "wrong". Two such are that, first, didactic art exhibits "qualities such as intellectual arrogance, prejudice, and closed-mindedness that undermine [the work's] epistemic reliability" [15]. Second, didactic works "scold" and leave readers "cross" due to their "self-righteousness, dogmatism, and simple-mindedness" [15]. Overall, the issue with didacticism seems to be how it makes the—in this case, reader—feel about the author. The overt instruction, the heavy-handedness, and the moralizing message backfire; readers and critics skip the message itself and judge the author to be guilty of what Repp calls "intellectual vice". In short, didacticism makes bad artists.

Why is this a matter of concern? At the risk of being didactic, it is important to remember the link between didacticism and "observable reality". For much of the past century, art that has grappled with the social, the material, and the political manifestations of injustice has tended to be dismissed as "propaganda". In her impressive study of the art and politics of the British suffrage movement, Lisa Tickner observes, "The art/propaganda divide is itself a kind of propaganda for art: it secures the category of art as something complex, humane, and ideologically pure, through the operation of an alternative category of propaganda as that which is crude, institutional, and partisan" [19].

Tickner makes the crucial point that art which seems to claim ideological purity—art for art's sake—is often implicated in and supports the very systems of power that "propaganda" seeks to disturb or dismantle. Thus, we have to ask who stands to gain from a view of culture that insists that artists should never dirty their hands—or viewers' sensibilities—with the gritty realities of racism, sexism, capitalism, and corrupt governments. It is a luxury, a privilege to be able to ignore "observable realities" and embrace art for art's sake. It is of course true that not all propaganda is didactic and, further, that not all didacticism is propaganda. But the connections between, on one hand, the will to instruct, the possession of a motive in such instruction, and the moral imperative behind such motive and, on the other hand, the distaste for didacticism in art should be weighed carefully against the towering twentieth-century legacy of rejecting art with a political purpose. This legacy is anything but neutral. As Chantal Mouffe has noted, "every form of art has a political dimension" [20].

3. The Requiem on the Glacier

With these thoughts in mind, I turn here to the first of three case studies. *Requiem for a Glacier* is a multi-part project undertaken by composer Paul Walde and approximately fifty volunteers, mostly musicians. Curator Kiara Lynch commissioned the work for an exhibition at the Langham Cultural Centre in Kaslo, British Columbia in 2013. Noémie Fortin describes the project's initial form, a site-specific sound performance, as it took place on 27 July 2013.

On this occasion, fifty amateur and professional musicians played and sang a four-movement oratorio solely for the Farnham Glacier, with no audience beyond the production team. This glacier is part of the Jumbo Valley in British

Columbia, known as Qat'muk to the Ktunaxa First Nation, an area under threat from global warming and touristic development. Performed as a memorial for the glacial range, the score composed by Walde converts scientific data such as local temperature records to illustrate the effects of climate change, while the libretto is a Latin translation of the press release issued by British Columbia's government, announcing their approval for a year-round ski resort to be built on this Indigenous sacred land [21].

Subsequent iterations of the project have manifested as a two-channel, panoramic video installation shown in multiple gallery settings, and an indoor concert in which musicians reinterpreted the requiem score. The two-channel video installation can be seen in full in gallery settings only. There are however five video extracts on the artist's Vimeo channel. These brief excerpts from the installation do not do justice to the full scope of the installation, which immerses the viewer in symphonic sound and dramatic images of the glacier and the performers [22].

Describing his motivations for the work (and acknowledging curator Kiara Lynch as the one to have the initial idea to perform on and for the glacier), Walde suggests that, "The score references elements of classical music as a way to reframe the landscape with the orchestra and instruments themselves as cultural signifiers, suggesting a cultural value to the landscape, which is otherwise absent from the debate surrounding the development of wild spaces in the non-indigenous [sic] community" [23]. In the video installation, the listener/viewer encounters ominous musical passages that are reminiscent, in mood, of the work of German composer Richard Wagner, especially his *Ring* cycle. Yet the musical score drew directly from climate change data in the region that had tracked an overall warming trend. Walde explains that the score is based on "the climactic data from Environment Canada records dating back as far as I could go. Each note is held for 12 beats, and each beat represents a month, and each note represents the average temperature of that area. And what happens is that [the music] goes up and down, but the trend is going up. And when you hear something going up, it creates anxiety or a sense of tension . . . so you're hearing climate change" [24]. The heavy music tells us that, despite the sunshine and bright skies, all is not well. Performers move slowly across the snowy foothills of the glacier, pausing here and there to gaze at a sparkling stream or to navigate the crumbling ice. They play their instruments, alone and together, against the brilliant white of the glacier and a luminous cobalt sky (Figure 1). A soloist makes her way through the irregular terrain, lifting her knees high like a deer. Another shot shows her framed only by textured, faintly pink snow—a serious sign of climate change—and the long cord of her microphone trailing behind her, a slender black line marking the ice like charcoal on paper.

For art critic Patricia Aubé, these views of solo musicians walking, singing, performing, and conducting against the dramatic landscape recall German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich's best-known work, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818) (Figure 2) [25]. Walde too had this painting in mind while preparing parts of the work [26].



Figure 1. Paul Walde, *Requiem for a Glacier* (site-specific performance), July 2013. Photo: Douglas Noblet. © Paul Walde.



Figure 2. Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, 1818. Oil on canvas. Image in the public domain.

But while the wanderer in Friedrich's painting stops in awe at the sight of sublime nature, the musicians in *Requiem for a Glacier* instead take action, as performers. They create music as a way of mourning a piece of sublime nature whose death warrant humanity has just signed. A still from the video installation shows conductor Ajtony Csaba standing on a low ridge of rock, in a wide-format, strongly horizontal shot that shows no sky or horizon (Figure 3). A tympanum sounds as Csaba's arms begin to move, facing away from the audience, towards the striated blue, white, and grey ice before him, his black tails flipping in the wind. Walde notes that "when the BC government announced the approval of the development for this site they also appointed an unelected mayor and council made up primarily of real estate developers (whom the taxpayers of BC were paying for). The conductor conducting no one is simultaneously referring to this mayor with no citizens, but who has been granted dominion over this land, whilst referencing these earlier works" [26]. Bracketing this sequence, Aubé notes, is the forbidding presence of a black rectangle that, imposed over the shots and moving relentlessly towards the observer, slowly obliterates the view, echoing the proposed development and the anticipated loss of the already-fragile glacier. This loss is delicately emphasized as the video ends, when, over the credits, we hear what sound like the distinctive qualities of snowmelt water rushing away. But where Friedrich's wanderer retains his visual mastery by looking down over the landscape, his head almost on par with the peaks of the horizon, Walde's performers are engulfed in, dwarfed by, and respond to the glacier through their individual and collective creative effort.

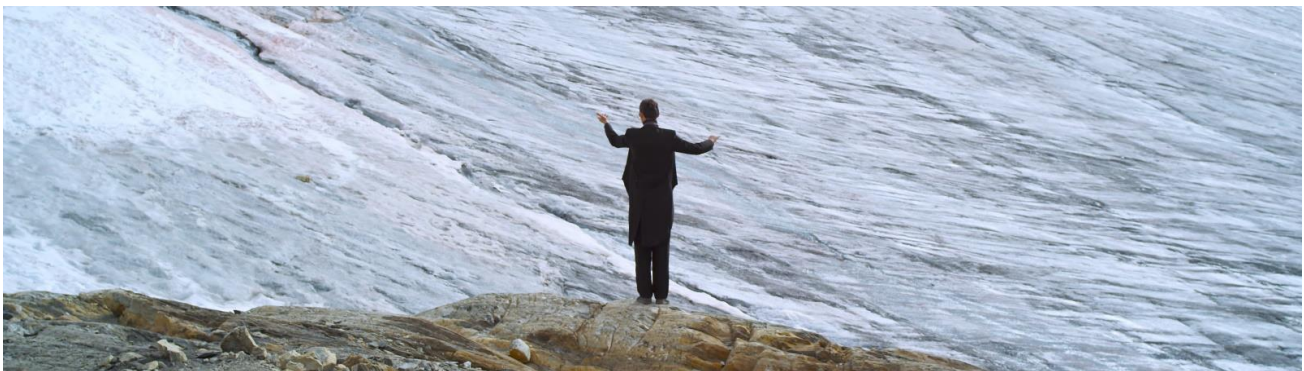


Figure 3. Paul Walde, *Requiem for a Glacier* (still from video installation), 2013. © Paul Walde.

A requiem is an act of remembrance in the Western, Christian tradition. A mass for the repose of the souls of the dead, a requiem facilitates grieving and the ritual acceptance of death. This affect was in play for some of the musicians during the performance of the work. One violinist remarked of the experience, "I felt it, as I was playing. It is farewell to a glacier, feeling sadness it will happen. We cannot stop it any more" [27]. This feeling of inevitability may have been underscored by the decision to translate the press release, the source of the libretto, into Latin, a language that few today understand. Perhaps akin to a tragic opera in which the outcome is known from the start, it does not matter whether the audience understands the language used or even what is being sung. Either way, in combination with the mournful music, the inaccessible meaning of the libretto and the form of the requiem could be said to have affirmed rather than opposed the glacier's impending death. It is certainly not in keeping with the aliveness of the glacier, which is what drove the Ktunaxa First Nation and the Jumbo Creek Conservation Society to fight for its survival, likewise the survival of the many species who depend upon the Purcell Mountain range, where the Farnham Glacier is located.

Walde recognizes that the requiem was an imposition of Western cultural forms on the glacier. He explains, "I was thinking about . . . what a requiem could represent, but . . . also thinking about ways to reach different audiences." Walde knew it would be inappropriate, as a settler artist, to perform Indigenous music on the site [24]. He felt that the requiem

would be a cultural form that would speak to people, especially those at a remove from the site, and those who might otherwise not be interested in the fortunes of this landscape. He also believed that such an artwork could attract different media attention than blockades and picketing. “I believe in that kind of activism too, I take part in it myself,” he says. But “I also think that art can do something differently” [24]. For *Requiem for a Glacier*, the artist deliberately chose Western musical forms to help a settler audience “understand that this site has religious significance” for the Ktunaxa First Nation. “I also wanted them to understand,” Walde continues, “that this site has cultural significance. So these ‘high’ forms of art [were] a way to point [to this]” [24].

What do these choices suggest about the use of didactic strategies in the work? Walde notes, “With my art, I never tell people what to think, I just present the information, because, as an educator, I believe that if you can get people to think about something for themselves, that kind of transformative learning is more powerful” [24]. The piece’s multiple forms of exposure, in galleries, in the news, and online (the work was seized upon by right-wing bloggers hoping to pour scorn on “glacier-hugging” artists) helped to build a bigger audience for the central issues facing this landscape. These included the developer’s successful application for an environmental certificate for the proposed ski resort, the evidence of climate change that is already damaging this ecosystem, and the tragic future of this irreplaceable landscape. In drawing media attention to the glacier, the work indirectly helped to publicize the consortium of groups (Wildsight, Jumbo Creek Conservation Society, and the local Eco-Society) opposed to the resort, especially the Ktunaxa First Nation, underscoring their insistence on the land as sacred [24]. It likewise indirectly drew attention to the developer’s environmental certificate, to which were attached 195 legally binding conditions. Going beyond the work, the curious would have discovered that these conditions compelled Jumbo Glacier Resorts Ltd. to address environmental and social issues prior to construction. In the end, meeting these conditions proved impossible. In 2015, the Environmental Assessment Office of British Columbia refused to renew the certificate, without which construction could not continue [28]. In August 2019, the British Columbia Court of Appeal upheld this decision [29]. And in 2020, the glacier was preserved for good. The nonprofit organization, Wildsight reported in January 2020 that “the Ktunaxa Nation, with the support of Federal and Provincial governments, declared the Qat’muk Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area, protecting the Jumbo Valley and 700 square kilometres around it—forever” [30].

Requiem for a Glacier had an ulterior motive in its form, content, siting, and diffusion: in every respect, this artwork sought to make the Farnham Glacier visible as a precious entity in grave danger. The artwork contributed indirectly to the movement to preserve this precious landscape, using didactic strategies to this end. The artist is aware of the scale of his contribution to this happy outcome: “Those activists, they were on the front lines for 25 years before I got there . . . there were so many people involved at such a high level and at so many different levels, from grassroots to people lobbying politicians . . . I don’t want to overstate the position of one art piece in changing people’s minds. But I think every little bit helps when you’re trying to initiate a change” [24]. *Requiem for a Glacier* suggests a method for working with official texts and environmental data. It is exciting to consider how future projects might, for instance, focus on the Qat’muk Declaration, written by the Ktunaxa Nation and presented to the BC Legislature on 15 December 2010—three years prior to the performance of the requiem on the glacier. In this declaration, the Ktunaxa Nation presented the living spirit of the Qat’muk as a collective treasure that requires protection, insisting upon the value of the animals and plants that make up Farnham Glacier’s ecosystem, and demanded direct political action in response [31].

The powerful combination of Indigenous-led activism, anti-development mobilization, and a settler-led didactic artwork is, as Walde notes, only the first step in a much larger quest to fight the climate change and species depletion that continues in this site, as elsewhere. “The area is still under threat,” he says. “The consideration of wild spaces and the value of wild spaces, that hasn’t changed. They are still undervalued” [24]. *Requiem for*

a Glacier supported, indirectly, the decades-long struggle to preserve the glacier, and the lively, Indigenous-led discourse on the Farnham Glacier, the Qat'muk territory, and the landscape where “the Grizzly Bear Spirit was born, goes to heal itself, and returns to the spirit world” [24]. Prioritizing didactic, Western cultural forms and aimed at a non-local, settler audiences, the work consciously deploys its own humanist antecedents, but in a way that was intended, strategically, to speak to the very individuals who might themselves, had the ski resort been built, have bought into what Walde calls a “climate-change inspired development” [24]. In this way, *Requiem for a Glacier* keeps the non-human aspects of the landscape in the background of the work. But it does so deliberately, to contribute to an activist and pedagogical ethos around climate change, habitat, and ecology.

4. The Prairie on the Plaza

I turn now to the *Urban Prairie* at the (then) Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC), today the Canadian Museum of History, in Gatineau, Québec (Figure 4). This human-designed landscape project is tiny compared to the vast landscape of the Farnham Glacier, and it has no dramatic public narrative in the way that the glacier did. Designed by landscape architects Claude Cormier + Associés in Gatineau in 2005 and opened to the public in 2010, the *Urban Prairie* is a human-made miniature landscape that aims to evoke the undulating topography and grassy flora of the Canadian prairie. This small landscape responds to the two major architectural features found on this important site: the curatorial and the exhibition wings of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, designed in 1989 by Indigenous architect Douglas Cardinal [32].



Figure 4. Claude Cormier et Associés, Canadian Museum of Civilization Plaza/Esplanade du Musée canadien de l’histoire, Gatineau (Quebec), Canada. Landscape design, 2011. Photo: Michel Boulianne.

Much has been written about Cardinal’s design, both positive and negative. Joan Acland argues that, at the time it opened, the CMC was at both the forefront of computer-assisted design practices in Canada, and that it was developed and marketed as a symbol of Canadian unity. From the choice of Indigenous architect to the location—within view of, but across the river from the Canadian buildings of Parliament, in the province of Quebec—the CMC was a major investment in the museological landscape of the Canadian

capital [33]. Such was its importance that Cardinal had a private meeting with then-prime minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau, who questioned the architect for an hour about his choice of materials, siting, structure, and the formal qualities of his design. Trevor Boddy says that it was Cardinal's vision of "architecture in dialogue with landscape and river" that convinced the prime minister to give Cardinal the job [34].

Because of the size, complexity, and uniqueness of the design, and the awarding of the project to an Indigenous architect, the CMC represents a key moment in the history of Canadian architecture. But the project was also a complex statement about unity within difference in the striated nation-building enterprise that is Canada. The division of the institution into two pavilions effectively splits the volume of the CMC into two distinct masses: the curatorial/research wing and the public/display wing. In between, a large plaza permits a dramatic view of the Canadian buildings of Parliament across the Ottawa River. If this physical separation echoes divisions that could, then, and still today be found in Canada (settler/Indigenous, English/French), then the prospect of the nation's capital from the CMC site perhaps may have served as a unifying visual rhetoric. As the site from which this nation-building spatial and visual discourse is effected, the Laurier Street plaza would thus be essential to this visual strategy. But the plaza, according to some accounts [35], was instead a windswept, sun-beaten, and uncomfortable terrain, at best underwhelming from an aesthetic point of view, and at worst discouraging to visitors who might have otherwise been the consumers of that nation-building visual discourse.

There were several attempts to improve the appeal of the plaza after the building opened in 1989. As a means to extend the thematics of the exhibitions on display, the CMC introduced planters that changed with the season and the content of shows. Then the CMC launched the "Canada Garden", which incorporated eleven miniature landscapes arranged around the perimeter of the plaza, each showcasing native species of special importance in Canada, including their value for and use by different Indigenous nations [36]. Eleven artworks formed part of these living displays. Yet the issues of heat, cold, and wind at the centre of the plaza persisted, and the majority of the plaza remained much as Cardinal had designed it for fifteen years. Given the long continuance of a purportedly unwelcoming space, it is worth considering what the original aims of the plaza were.

The year before work began on the *Urban Prairie*, the CMC launched a virtual exhibition titled, "Written in the Stone: An Architectural Tour of the Canadian Museum of Civilization." The online brochure describes the plaza in detail, explaining that it was intended as "a gathering-place and a welcoming 'people place', offering a transition from the urban ceremonial route to the museum proper and a first orientation to the museum facilities" [37]. The description goes on to note how the plaza offers a "direct sight-line to Parliament's Peace Tower, with the view framed by the two wings of the museum" suggesting some kinship in this arrangement with "the two wings of the Palais de Chaillot in Paris, home of the Musée de l'Homme and the Musée de la Marine, which commands a marvelous view of the Eiffel Tower." But overall it is the publicness of the plaza that is important in this account: "The features of the Plaza define spaces where entertainers can perform before small audiences, and electrical and communications services are available for equipment for larger performances." In a lukewarm statement about the plaza's attributes, the authors write:

Visual interest and expression is added to the Plaza by swirling patterns in the walking surfaces (echoing the lines of the building) and varying textures and colour gradations in the poured concrete, by the changing levels framed by long, sinuous seating walls, and by the Canada Garden. The main lobby area of the museum and the curatorial wing, with its sheltering, cantilevered steps, define, partially enclose, and thereby reduce the scale, of the Plaza [37].

Less than a year after this text was published, the CMC would choose the *Urban Prairie* design and start the process of far more emphatically reducing the scale of the plaza and adding substantially more visual interest and expression.

Claude Cormier + Associés' design incorporated five raised and planted "earthwork insertions" in the hard-paved surface of the plaza [38]. The earthwork forms echo the contours of Cardinal's designs for curved bench seating, and create a pattern of undulating pathways through the plaza that correspond to the setting's existing aesthetics (Figure 5). The show-stopper of the design is, however, the plants themselves. The designers selected plants that would appear at different moments throughout the region's growing season: Pasque Flower (spring), Western Red Lily, Blanketflower, Smooth Blue Aster, Wild Bergamot, Prairie Sage (summer and fall). Several trees anchor the landscape as well: pines and Serviceberry trees. Many but not all of these plants have important roles in Indigenous cultural and medicinal traditions. Prairie Sage (known as Kaksamiss in Blackfoot language and Mostosowehkuskwa in Cree language) is for example "very important ceremonially, as it is used in sweat lodges and for the Sun Dance" and is "considered to be highly medicinal" [39]. The low-growing, brilliant reds and yellows of the Blanketflower contrast gratifyingly with the taller, silver-blue-green sage. The latter also lends itself beautifully to the windswept plaza, establishing a gorgeous, dynamic texture to the site. The low-growing planting also offers, as some commenters note, practical and social gains in that it "creates microclimates, increases urban biodiversity, reduces [the] heat island effect, contributes to air quality improvement, [and] alters the scale of the Plaza towards one that is *more human*" [39]. It is this latter idea that I want to now explore in relation to the central goals of this essay.

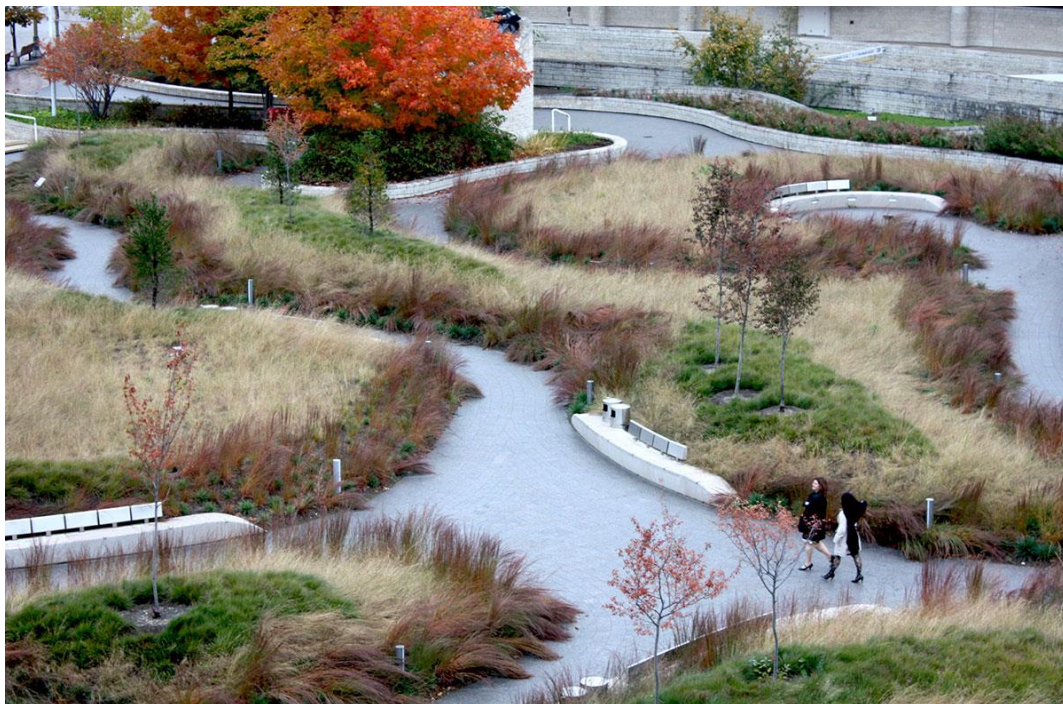


Figure 5. Claude Cormier et Associés, Canadian Museum of Civilization Plaza/Esplanade du Musée canadien de l'histoire, Gatineau (Quebec), Canada. Landscape design, 2011. Photo: Claude Cormier and Associés.

In her book, *On the Plaza*, Setha Low argues that "plazas are politically motivated artistic expressions designed to represent the donors' and contributors' objectives and social ideals. At the same time, they are commodities given in exchange for political or economic power and support" [40]. Low suggests that changes to plazas over time should be examined with care not just for their design intentions, that is, what they hope to achieve for the future, but also for what they may have erased or denied in the design process. In the case of the *Urban Prairie*, it is important to note the context in which this landscape came to be. The Canadian Museum of Civilization underwent a public and controversial change in name and mandate in 2012. At that time, former prime minister Stephen Harper's

Conservative government was in power. This government offered substantial funding to the CMC while insisting that the museum now be called the Canadian Museum of History. In addition, the government forced the institution to reorient its 1990 mandate away from fostering “interest in, knowledge and critical understanding of and appreciation and respect for human cultural achievements and human behaviour” to enhancing “Canadians’ knowledge, understanding and appreciation of events, experiences, people and objects that reflect and have shaped Canada’s history and identity” [41]. Thus, as many news editorials, historians, and politicians pointed out, the CMC was to elide its former focus on research and public diffusion about cultural difference within the nation-state of Canada, and instead focus its resources towards an uncritical, singular view of Canadian identity and history. For historian Ian McKay, this move was part of a “radical right-wing cultural transformation of Canada” to which “Canadian history has been conscripted” [42].

In one way, it is possible to view Claude Cormier + Associés’ *Urban Prairie* as the CMC’s last major gesture before it was forced to become the CMH. The project’s references to the “Great Plains” certainly underscore the ongoing landscape metaphor found in the institution’s “Canadian Shield” (curatorial wing) and “Glacier” (museum or public wing), which the designers describe as “a startling embodiment of the country’s distinguishing geographical features” [36]. The ecological and pedagogical values of this landscape are also entwined with the CMC’s former aim, to foster knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of the many entities that constitute the place now called Canada. It is thus possible to see the new and richly biological life of the refurbished plaza as a kind of triumph of the ethos that views all cultures as part of “civilization”, not just the cultures that produce European-derived ideas of “history”. And yet I hesitate over the idea, mentioned above, that these attributes have made the plaza “more human”, and also the idea that, by extension, the previous plaza was less valuable because it was, somehow, *less human*.

Joan Acland’s substantial study of the history, architecture, and symbolism of the CMC argues that the design of the institution’s plaza was integral to the arrival, entrance, and journey through the museum. Specifically, she explores the mounding and serpentine shapes of the original plaza in relation to the history and practice of shamanism (which Cardinal practises to this day). For Acland, the sinuous forms of the plaza were not only aesthetic choices. Rather, they were an important vehicle by which Cardinal’s design offered the visitor an experience akin to the shaman’s journey. Snakes, Acland points out, function as a “vehicle of transition for the soul’s journey to the netherworld . . . Encounters with deceased ancestors and animal guides [are] part of the voyage” [34] (p. 203). The plaza in this view was an essential, symbolic preface to the visitor’s physical entrance to the museum through the mask-like entry portal, which, in resembling an enormous turtle, makes direct visual reference to the Indigenous name for North America, Turtle Island. Acland notes that the shaman enters the body of the animal through the portal of the mouth and indeed, this is what the visitor did when they passed through the entrance of the public wing of the CMC. Once within, the shaman/visitor was in the realm of transformation and new knowledge that could, once the journey ended, be shared with others [34] (pp. 200–232). Understood thus, the windswept plaza was less a failed public space than it was an intentional prelude to the main act: the content of the museum itself, its spaces, program, ornamentation, collection, and curation. The original plaza encouraged people to enter the space of the museum precisely because it was not comfortable. Thus, it enabled the visitor’s transformation and their acquisition of new knowledge through the encounter with the spaces and content of the museum.

The creators of the *Urban Prairie* had a challenging task: to design for a context with an important architectural pedigree in a way that would respect the existing buildings while creating a more affable public space. In this and in terms of its ecological dimension, the work is profoundly successful. Species were chosen that would withstand the climactic realities of the site and contribute to local biodiversity. The visual and sensorial effects of the project are also, from the perspective of human enjoyment, important. And symbolically, the planting and layout of the *Urban Prairie* evokes an important if distant Canadian ecology

that makes narrative sense within this museum's spatial drama. In these ways, the *Urban Prairie* performs a didactic relationship with its context, and contributes meaningfully to the ethos around climate change, habitat, and ecology. There is much to be celebrated in this re-envisioned landscape. Yet the intervention here is ultimately for the museum visitor's benefit, their comfort and enjoyment rather than their transformation. The beautiful new plaza, enlivened by the buzzing of bees and plants that will never grow so high that they will block the view, encourages visitors to linger and gaze out over the Ottawa River. On the far shore sits the Canadian Parliament, perfectly framed between the two wings of the Canadian Museum of History.

5. The Garden in the Forest

There is a long history, in Canada, of artists mobilizing "wilderness" within the landscape tradition to convey a sense of what unites Canadians, symbolically and nationalistically. The work of Tom Thompson and the Group of Seven would be best known within this history. Their most cherished paintings are synonymous with virile individualism, yet these iconic landscapes are bereft of people, notably the many Indigenous nations who inhabited this continent before colonization [3]. John O'Brian and Peter White note that, in Canada, "wilderness was a source of power" and "landscape has functioned as a powerful political unifier. It has helped to consolidate the drive toward national sovereignty as well as to contain prior aboriginal claims to the land" [43].

In contrast to this tradition, artist Marlene Creates's work has been one of subtle intervention in and documentation of existing places, her outcomes often shaped or inspired by the stories of older, rural inhabitants—both settler and Indigenous. Caitlin Chaisson describes Creates's work as "slight, light, dematerialized, traces, or impressions" [44]. Her best-known projects include *The Distance Between Two Points is Measured in Memories, Labrador 1988*. This work incorporates interview excerpts with older residents of northern Labrador, including "Inuit and Naskapi Innu, and the Euro-Canadians who are called Settlers in Labrador" [45]. Creates asked these collaborators to tell her about a special place in Labrador and to draw a map of it. She writes, "I follow these maps to see the places they have described, and then photograph one of the landmarks on the map and collect, where appropriate, an object from the landscape" [45]. In addition to an excerpt from her interlocutor's description of the place, the final work includes the memory map, a photograph of the place when Creates visited, and the found natural object. At the time that Creates made this work, visiting NATO forces in Labrador were conducting low-level flyovers as military training. The severe environmental and human costs of these flights included terrifying, sudden sound that disoriented and frightened the human listener, and which forced birds and animals to abandon or even kill their young. The exhaust fumes created a poisonous slick over wetlands, damaging plant life and killing fish. Journalist Marie Wadden published a book about the impact of these flyovers in 1991 [46]. In this context, Creates's work exhibits a poetic and gentle form of didacticism: viewing the series, the message is clear that this vast landscape is anything but uninhabited and, further, that the land is replete with a heritage of memories.

Born in Montreal in 1952, Creates moved to Newfoundland in 1985 in part because her maternal ancestors were born on Fogo Island and in Lewisporte [47]. Creates feels a profound connection to Newfoundland and Labrador, a connection that has become focused in recent years upon a "patch of boreal forest" about fifteen kilometres west of St John's. In 2002, Creates purchased a six-acre terrain near Portugal Cove, and from that point forward made it her primary creative collaborator. Her kinship with this terrain is ecological as well as aesthetic. In addition to her art practice, Creates is actively involved in forest conservation. She co-founded the local Advisory Committee on the Environment. "This ecosystem," she says, "the scale of the trees, the kind of plants that are here, the shape, the textures of this particular ecosystem, I just find it beautiful. I love it so much. This has become the basis and the focus of all my work" [48]. Creates has a long history of working outdoors. In a recent interview she says,

I came to call myself an “environmental artist” simply because I work with the environment. It turned out that I’m not a studio artist, though this is what I had been given to understand an artist does—you get a studio and some art materials, and then you make objects to match something you have imagined. But I work outside and I work in collaboration with the natural world. The reason for this is: the phenomena in the real world are much more interesting than anything I could make up, or anything I could imagine [44].

I now turn to *The Boreal Poetry Garden* (2005-), Creates’s ongoing interdisciplinary, sometimes pedagogical, and site-responsive project.

Photographs have often been the only trace of where Creates has been and what she has done, her gestures so subtle that they vanish with the next strong wind or tidal cycle. As an ongoing work of site-specific poetry, *The Boreal Poetry Garden* is ostensibly a change in media but not a change in spirit. Like Creates’s other work, it operates through attentiveness, the specifics of place, and the question of how an artist can respond to a living ecosystem without taking anything away from that ecosystem. After reorienting her practice to the forest near Portugal Cove, Creates started to include poetry and other word-work in her art (Creates has, however, continued her work as a photographer. *What Came to Light at Blast Hole Pond River, Newfoundland* 2015- (ongoing) and *About 8½ Minutes from the Sun to the Moon to the River to My Face to the Camera, Blast Hole Pond River, Newfoundland* 2012 are, like *The Boreal Poetry Garden*, a direct response to the six acres in question, their flora, fauna, waterways, landforms, and the artist’s own presence as part of this ecosystem [49]). Creates began by noticing or, as she puts it, “individuating” the attributes of specific trees, plants, and landforms. She wrote short poems about these entities, then copied the poems out by hand onto cardstock, placing them in immediate proximity to that which had inspired them—a rockface, a flower—and photographed them. The cards are small glowing rectangles within the larger, vertically-oriented compositions, suggesting through their format that these are portraits as well as landscapes. The images are darkly verdant and beautiful. But over time, as Susan Gibson Garvey notes, “the poems grew longer and, being specific to a particular place, did not lend themselves to presentation elsewhere. Now they are only spoken in situ, during seasonal public poetry walks and other on-site events” [49] (p. 20). Thus, the site is both the source of the project and the main venue for the work, although it also has a second life in a growing number of publications, and a virtual life on the artist’s website [50–53]. The site is also the focus of a number of sister projects by Creates, including her book, *Brickle, Nish, and Knobbly: A Newfoundland Treasury of Terms for Ice and Snow*, which documents how local vernacular language manifests a multi-sensory awareness of seasonal and climactic change within the Newfoundland winter. Then of course there is Creates’s ongoing work as a photographer: *Works from Blast Hole Pond Road* is “a multi-year ‘slow’ engagement with the six-acre patch of boreal forest where I live” [49] (p. 129) (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Marlene Creates, *15 September 2015* from the series *What Came to Light at Blast Hole Pond River, Newfoundland 2015 (and ongoing)*. Colour photograph and text, digital pigment print, 24 × 66 inches/61 × 168 cm. Courtesy of Paul Petro Contemporary Art.

As a means to make the project accessible beyond Portugal Cove, Creates built an interactive online project in 2010 (in collaboration with videographer Elizabeth Zetlin and web designer Jedediah Baker) that invites the virtual visitor to tour the forest and listen to Creates recite fifteen poems. Derek Gladwin describes the virtual interface in a recent essay:

The website opens with a high-resolution aerial photograph of the site with a list of video-poems that the viewer can select from. Once a specific video-poem is selected, a dot appears on the aerial photograph, indicating the poem's location, and then a video window opens and features Creates reading a site-specific poem in that particular place. Creates' environmental and spatial project aims to document a bioregion, which integrates ecological and cultural understanding through a "place-based sensibility" . . . through photo-landworks, live-art events, and web-based virtual interactions that help to connect viewers across the world with the biodiversity of Portugal Cove [50] (p. 38).

The videos incorporate other visual and auditory details, including the texture of tree bark, birdsong, and small actions, such as an up-close view of Creates's hand striking a wooden match. There are also moments in which the virtual visitor can see how Creates has shared her poems with a larger audience, in person.

In *The Rattling Brook Path*, for example, we see Creates in the forest at night, holding a flashlight. She is telling a rustling, murmuring but otherwise invisible group of people that she wants to take them on a walk to the "spots where the poems belong" [54]. The group moves through the forest, wiggling flashlights and illuminating brown leaves on the path. We hear people giggle, worry aloud about not being able to see, and telling each other to go first. Then, we hear the group's attentive silence as Creates recites her poem about what can and cannot be seen in this place. She speaks to the forest's non-human life and presence, its "knees of tree roots and knuckles of rocks, hundreds of millions of years old" [54]. The poem ends; there is hushed silence, then the group makes a few appreciative noises. Suddenly, Creates cries out in joyful surprise, "Oh and there's stars!" The flashlights spin wildly for a moment then another voice calls, "Turn out your lights, turn out your lights," reminding the audience that they can better apprehend the night sky without them. Peppered with additional images and sounds taken from the site, the video coaxes forth sensorial memories of the crunch and scent of dry leaves underfoot and the bracing coldness of fresh, rushing water. Throughout, however, the poem insists upon the fact, as Derek Gladwin has pointed out, that what can be perceived through the senses

is only the thin outer skin of the site, which has a history dating back to the ice age [50] (pp. 47–51). Overall, this and the other videos in the series bespeak an impressionistic and loving encounter with place, one that foregrounds the many entities, human and non-human, that constitute its manifold presence. It also foregrounds the artist's respect where she lives. Creates has said, "I'm trying to integrate my life and my artwork in these six acres of boreal forest, and this has resulted in the slowness of my artistic gesture" [55].

Creates invites collaborators to work with her in this landscape, including "nature poets, a wildlife biologist, a boreal ecologist, a geologist, acoustic musicians, contemporary dancers, and even a fire juggler" [48]. The resulting engagement is also shared with the public, who come to see the poetry performed in situ (Figure 7). "For practical reasons," explains Susan Gibson Garvey, "the participant-audiences are limited in number and are, as a result, privileged; but in terms of the ethics of her practice, which has little to do with populism and everything with specificity, this can suffice" [49] (p. 20). Gladwin agrees and goes further, suggesting that by "generating multisensorial experiences [Creates] engages an audience more effectively, and ultimately provokes environmental awareness through personal experiences of place" [50] (p. 47). He finds that the virtual manifestation of the project to be effective in terms of how it "expands possible participants by creating an entire global network (anyone with Internet) as an audience member, [thus fulfilling] the ecocritical aim to provoke action through wide awareness" [50] (p. 51). Between 2005 and 2019 Creates held over forty events in *The Boreal Poetry Garden*, which have been attended by over 900 people. [56] In this way, *The Boreal Poetry Garden* can be understood to be didactic in that it instructs the visitor in how to pay attention to the site, with the primary or ulterior purpose of this instruction being the visitor's increased understanding of the value and uniqueness of the ecology of this place.



Figure 7. Marlene Creates reading site-specific poetry in *The Boreal Poetry Garden* for the UN International Year of Forests, 4 September 2011. Photo: Don McKay.

With this ulterior purpose in mind, I want now to explore how *The Boreal Poetry Garden* is, as its title suggests, a garden. A garden is “a piece of ground, usually enclosed, where flowers, fruit, or vegetables are cultivated” [57]. It is also understood as “a piece of ground adjoining a building [especially] a private property, often with grass, flowers, trees, etc., and generally used for recreation.” This definition seems to hold little in common with a boreal forest. Nevertheless, Creates has described her engagement with the site as a *gardener*. She has explained that,

My gardening principles in *The Boreal Poetry Garden* are: plant nothing; “weed” nothing; no digging; no fertilizing; no watering; harvest only blowdowns (for firewood); walk; sit; skinny-dip in the river; watch; listen; smell; feel; wait. My art is a way to respond to the world’s beauty and worth as it comes to my attention, or—I should say—my attention comes to it [58].

It is notable that Creates describes her gardening principles not on “her” terrain or even in the forest, but rather as integral to the *production of the artwork itself* [58]. “Garden” is, of course, also a verb, which the OED likens to the idea of tending, cultivating, and growing things to consume. Perhaps we can understand that through *The Boreal Poetry Garden* Creates is cultivating not only poems but also experiences, then the work’s title is resonant with another meaning of “garden”, as “a region of great fertility.” Clearly the forest near Portugal Cove has offered Creates a landscape that is an inexhaustible source of creative possibility. She has said, “I’m always an artist-in-residence now—in my own place . . . I’ll never live long enough to take in everything that’s here” [58]. And while one can “consume” the poems, by virtue of the artist’s creative choices it is not possible to do so without also encountering her respect for this terrain and all that is here, whether visible to the human eye or not. Creates is cultivating witnesses to the intimate, respectful, and fundamentally non-interventionist relationship that she has with the forest. Her pact with the forest is that she will not ask it to be anything other than what it is, and she will not take anything from it that it does not discard [59]. Her didactic “lesson” to those who visit the garden, whether in person or online, is that it is possible to collaborate with the non-human world in a way that extracts nothing, yet makes intensely palpable its richness, complexity, and interconnectedness [60]. In this, I argue that *The Boreal Poetry Garden* makes a powerful contribution to activist and pedagogical efforts in response to fighting climate change, understanding habitat, and preserving ecologies.

6. Conclusions

Didacticism in art has had a rough road over the last fifty to one hundred years. Negatively associated with an annoying, moralizing, and finger-wagging self-righteousness, didacticism has been all but banned from the realm of art, both on the grounds of epistemic vice and on the grounds that art that engages with the material realities and injustices of the world is intrinsically lacking. This attitude is, however, one that only the most privileged can afford to hold. As climate change intensifies, the number of species plummets, and calls for action increase, is it still—was it ever?—valuable to insist that art, in order to be “true” art, should turn away from injustice and avoidable tragedy? The three creative projects presented in this essay range dramatically in scope, form, and intention. Yet the engine driving all three is concern for a specific landscape. In the case of *Requiem for a Glacier*, through a dramatic creative gesture, the artwork aims to draw attention to the vulnerability of a vast, sacred, and ecologically irreplaceable landscape in western Canada. In the tiny *Urban Prairie*, landscape architects learned from the biodiversity of Canadian prairie lands, making space for this flora in the context of a major museum setting. By summoning the minute details and hidden, entwined histories of plants, animals, birds, rocks, water, and humans in *The Boreal Poetry Garden*, the artist foregrounds the multifaceted aliveness of this patch of boreal forest.

In all three cases, in addition to the creative and design strategies that were particular to their project and its site, the artists and designers used didactic means in order to communicate their priorities and concerns. To return to the definition of didacticism that

I presented earlier in this essay, there was an *ulterior motive* at work. In *Requiem for a Glacier*, even if the artwork seemed to lament an inevitable death, its intention was to protest the fate of a landscape whose future was then in the hands of Canadian courts. And even if the *Urban Prairie* underscores a visual discourse on a unified and thus fictional Canada, it nonetheless also makes a didactic intervention in a windswept and unwelcoming plaza, bringing plant life and essential insect life into a terrain that had previously been unwelcoming to both. *The Boreal Poetry Garden* is both the most subtle and, I argue, the most powerful of all three works in terms of eco-didacticism, in that it brings the audience for the art into the actual and virtual heart of the forest that is the artist's concern, teaching them by example how to love and respect a landscape without extracting any element of its complex ecosystem. In this way, Creates's project summons a second meaning of the term, "ulterior": beyond what is immediate or present, or coming in the future. For while Creates's poems, walks, photographs, and daily attentiveness to this small corner of Newfoundland forest are fully responsive to the past and the present, they are also committed to the future of this landscape as one that will not succumb to human consumption and ignorance. It is perhaps not possible to create works of art about landscapes that are free of the anthropocentrism that infuses virtually all of the landscape tradition. But Creates's work suggests that there is a way to make art about landscape that shares the space of representation with the vitality of the landscape itself, placing the landscape first. In order to do that, as Creates explains, "I think we need to realize that we actually *are* part of nature. And maybe if we realized that, we would be better members of the Earth" [48].

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