

Writing Landscape

Vanessa Dion Fletcher

This work began in my mouth, with my voice, and moved down to my feet, and then to the earth. My art practice explores themes of communication, identity, and the body. My current trajectory is rooted in language, (mis)communications, and failures to communicate. This work takes the form of parabolas investigating shape, as an interment for communication both formally and conceptually. More recently I have been focussing on ideas of fluency and understanding in the context of my Potawatomi and Lenape ancestry. Having no direct access to my ancestral Aboriginal languages has inspired me to explore the notion of communication without words.

I use intaglio and lithography—both traditional European methods of printmaking—but I adapt these techniques to make them more relevant to my contemporary Indigenous existence. One of these adaptations is the method of marking copper intaglio plates. In this technique, the plate is typically marked through a process of either acid biting or making fine scratches with a metal tool, both producing a detailed line drawing. For my project, *Writing Landscape*, I developed a technique of marking copper plates by wearing them on my feet and walking. It is a kind of writing where my body and the topography of the land over which I walk are both author and subject.

My project took place in three locations: Toronto, Ontario; Thamesville, Ontario; and Pangnirtung, Nunavut. I chose these locations specifically for their historical and contemporary significance to myself. At each location, I began by walking around without the plates on my feet, getting a sense of the topography, and contemplating my connection to that particular place. Conceptually, I considered the place, my relationship to it, and why I wanted to communicate with and record my conversation by creating an image of the land. As part of my technique, I considered the different surfaces, contemplating how various topographies affected the way that I moved. I also examined how weather influenced my movement. In each location, I walked for several kilometres, setting up the shot by walking away from the camera and then returning to it. The result of this pattern of movement away from and towards to the viewer generates a kind of ebb and flow that creates a sense of both coming and going, a cyclical effect where the question remains, “Am I walking away from the viewer, or towards the horizon?” Am I returning to the viewer, or am I leaving where I came from? In these unanswered questions, I am always moving. It is the movement in this work that creates the marks. In *Writing Landscape*, I am taking steps to record and listen to the land that I come from, the land that supports me, and the land that inspires me. I think this work is an affirmation that I am not fixed to the past or the future, but instead am able to adapt

to—and create new relationships and connections with—new landscapes.

Each location in *Writing Landscape* has a different purpose and significance, but they are all about the relationship between myself and the land, and between myself and the water. Although not my original intention, the boundaries that the water created with the land presented me with focal points. Walking along the shorelines not only provided a path for me to follow but an in-between space to occupy as well.

My choice of Toronto as a location for my art practice was related to returning to and renewing an ongoing relationship with the land. It is both the place where I currently live and the place where I have spent my adult life. Walking along the shore of Ashbriges Bay made me feel as though I was renewing an ongoing relationship with this land. It is the land where I now feel at home, and I wanted to reaffirm that relationship.

In the case of Thamesville, the experience was one of establishing a relationship. My grandmother's family left Moravian No. 47 Indian Reserve when she was nine years old. Creating this project was my first time visiting the reserve. I ended up spending most of my visit walking along the Thames River, remembering my grandmother's story of pulling groceries on a sled along that same river. Where does the river begin, and where does it end? What drew grandma away, and what brought me back?

While working on the project, I was fortunate to be able to visit a friend in Pangnirtung, Nunavut, a place I first visited as part of my undergraduate education program in 2009, and have been able to return yearly since then. The current visit, and my project of walking on that land each offered opportunities for a renewal of friendships, as well as for feeling a sense of solidarity with Indigenous people who struggle with their land in ways that that appear different from my own struggles but are actually quite similar. These similarities are manifested in the earth-etched plates. Because the moss and lichen that grow on the tundra are so soft, I once again ended up along the banks of the river, where under the pressure of my feet, the rocks and pebbles would scratch and impress themselves onto the plates.

In each case, the project is about establishing, repeating, or renewing a relationship with the land and the place. The process of the walking was important: It provided the physical experience needed for this art project. During it, I felt the cold or warmth of the land conducted through the copper. Walking along the water's edge, I would immediately feel the chill of wet ground or, just as quickly, the warmth of dry ground created by sun-bathed rocks and sand. It was satisfying hearing the scraping and crunching as I crossed the rocks.

This physicality was revealed in the printing process. Once all the plates had been thoroughly scratched, I began printing the images. The plates themselves are compelling as objects. However, once printed, the images that are produced reveal the intricacies that have been pressed into the plate. Seemingly insignificant tiny stones and grains of sand imprint themselves onto the

plate and become the printed images. Fine scratches, dents, and cracks where the plate splits between the force of my body and the force of the land appear on the paper.

I have been influenced by several senior artists in the development of this project, most significantly by the work of Greg Staats. Staats provided both conceptual and technical guidance. His video and photography (<http://www.ago.net/greg-staats>) have inspired and informed my project. His exploration of recording, language, and memory within the restorative aesthetic of “Condolence” has informed the ways in which I engage with similar themes in my own work. In his (2011) artist talk at Articule in Montréal, Staats discussed the photographs in *Condolence*:

This series represents a friendship with the landscape that I was trying to express, those boreal markers are there, they are still there for me to return to as a place to be welcomed. That was the beginning of my connection to the landscape, my own personal landscape that I could find solace in. (Staats & Langford, 2011)

In *Writing Landscape*, instead of photographing the markers through the creation of the prints, I created my own markers. I made my own personal landscape, and found reassurance in myself and my art practice, and in the process of recording the landscape as a marker.

Writing Landscape is a series of images that were created between my body and the land. As previously stated, I began the project thinking about language. *Writing Landscape* is a project where I would be simultaneously “writing” the land by recording it, and writing a place for myself on the land. I am unsatisfied by my own experience using written and spoken language. This is because I have no direct access to my ancestral languages and also because I have a disability that severely affects my use of written language. As such, I feel I fall short when I attempt to employ them as forms of communication. As Staats observes, the land is a place to find solace, filled with mnemonics and triggers to remember and create who we are.

Video documentation of my process for *Writing Landscape* is available at <https://vimeo.com/57042293>

References

Staats, G., & Langford, M. (2011, Jan 14). *Discussion with Martha Langford and Greg Staats* [Audio podcast]. Retrieved from: <http://www.articule.org/en/audio/podcast-discussion-with-martha-langford-and-greg-staats>

A version of this Statement was published in *West Coast Line* 2012.

Notes on Contributor

Vanessa Dion Fletcher is a Toronto based artist of Potawatomi and Lenape ancestry. She creates art using composite media, primarily working in performance, video, and printmaking. The different physical forms of her work provide a diverse theoretical and aesthetic language with which to investigate the influence of culture and politics on the relationship between our bodies and the land. www.DionFletcher.com