

Walking Lines/Saskatchewan

January 29 - March 5, 2014

Rodney Konopaki Rhonda Neufeld

ART GALLERY OF REGINA

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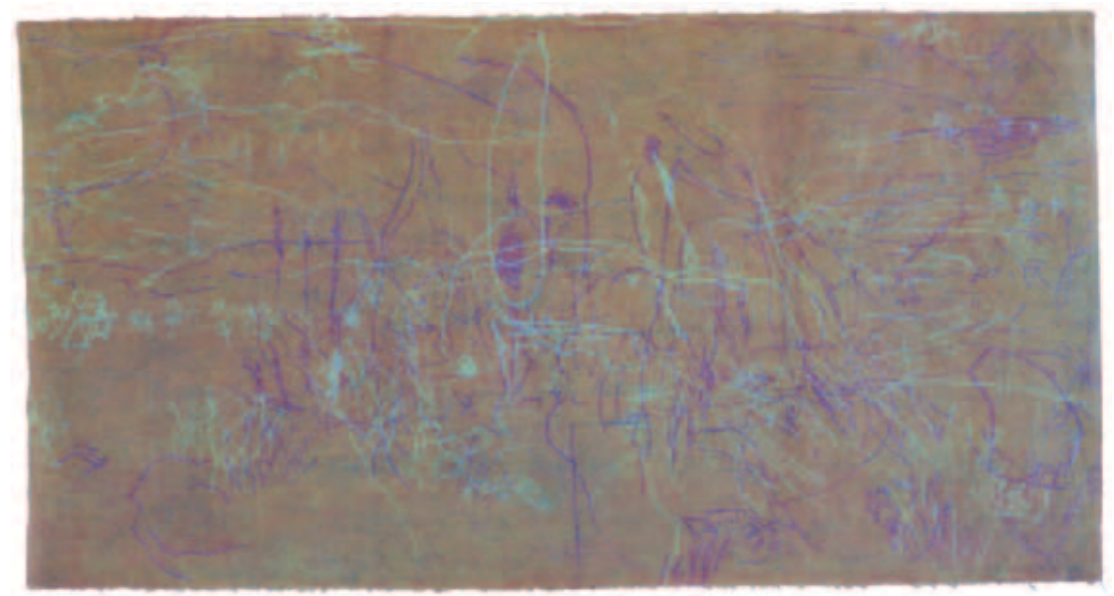
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Castle Butte/Big Muddy Badlands, woodcut, 29½"x55½", edition: 9, 2013 Photo: Rodney Konopaki



Moose Jaw Railyard, felt pen, graphite, pastel, oil paint stick, oilpastel, conté, 29½" x41½", 2012 Photo: Scott Massey

Old Wives Lake, detail, graphite, felt pen, pastel, oil paint stick, oil pastel, 29½"x41½", 2012 Photo: Scott Massey

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Introduction

Walking Lines/Saskatchewan is a collaborative body of work by artists Rodney Konopaki and Rhonda Neufeld. Both artists came to Saskatchewan in the summer of 2012 to visit evocative prairie locations. The drawings and prints in this exhibition are landscapes deciphered through their experiential work process.

With a drawing board and paper or woodblock held between them, they walked abreast over prairie terrain recording, with drawing or engraving tools, what they saw and experienced. These works mapped their tactile and sensory environment, and evolved as they walked together. They recorded marks that were stimulated by what they saw, heard, or felt. Konopaki and Neufeld do not cast their eyes down upon the drawing surface as they walk, but rather, their eyes look out, over and down upon the land. The prairies are anything but long sweeping lines when one is fully engaged in the environment. The crunch of dry prairie grass is felt in a grouping of sharp short markings on the drawing or print surface. A faltering of the foot over a gopher hole is recorded as a mark issued from the jolt of the body, and again echoed by the other artist's expression in this moment of imbalance.

Konopaki and Neufeld invite us into their tactile experience of the prairie where their work records the sensory stimuli and the constant movement of the wind, sun, grass and clouds. These moments. . . these glimpses map their embodied experience of the prairies.

Rodney Konopaki was born in Saskatchewan and regularly returns to visit family and friends. Rhonda Neufeld was in the University of Regina's MFA program in the 1990's. During her studies here, she spent considerable time in the prairie landscape. Rob O'Flanagan is a professional writer who was also born here and lived a considerable part of his life on the prairies. All three are friends and fellow artists with a love for the Saskatchewan landscape.

Konopaki and Neufeld invited O'Flanagan to write about their exhibition because of all of these connections and because they wanted O'Flanagan to be a part of their adventure, to share 'in words' his own insights into the experiential process of Walking Lines/Saskatchewan.

Marsha Kennedy
Curator

Walking Lines/Saskatchewan

Last fall, while making my way from my home in Guelph to my birthplace in Melfort, I meandered through a soggy southern Saskatchewan in search of a few of the drawing sites artists Rodney Konopaki and Rhonda Neufeld visited in preparation for Walking Lines/Saskatchewan.

I had met with and spoke to the artists a few days earlier while they exhibited and worked in Chatham, Ontario, and witnessed with much amazement, and some trepidation, their peculiar and exciting collaborative approach to drawing and print-making.

It was an extraordinary process to behold, as though the two were virtually blindfolded as they made their way, not without some trepidation of their own, down a sidewalk in the city. There was a nervy unsteadiness in their steps that made me fear one or the other might trip and fall. They weren't always watching where they were going.

"It's our own movement, our own steps, the jolt of our own bodies going over the land," said Neufeld, speaking of the marks that are recorded on the drawing surface. "But the shape of the land gets recorded as well, like if we fall in a badger hole. Sometimes it's a sound. Sometimes it's cloud and sun you're responding to. We are aware of where we are, but not so aware of what's on the paper."

The drawings begin when the walk begins, and end when the walk ends - no retouching in the studio, no refining after the fact.

"The whole being is involved," Neufeld said. "We're not just sitting still. It's coming right through our whole being."

When I visited some of their drawing sites I closed my eyes while walking and tried to see and feel what they might have seen and felt as they did their walking drawings or prepared their walking woodblocks.

Monumental Castle Butte in the Big Muddy Badlands of south-central Saskatchewan is an intense visual experience, even with the eyes closed.

While stepping cautiously on the uneven ground that encircles the towering sandstone and clay formation near Willow Bunch, the sounds, scents, and terrain evoke images in the mind. With the eyes gently shut there is seeing through other senses. The sweep of wings loads images of birds rushing by. The distant lowing of cattle in the valley conjures interior snapshots of them lumbering along, just as the imagination pictures blue-green sage plants as a breeze carries their scent to the nostrils. The cool, damp clay walls are felt and visualized behind closed lids as you walk along them.

The two works in Walking Lines/Saskatchewan that were carried out at Castle Butte record in stark tones the jolt of the land as it traveled up the body and vibrated through the hands. In the woodblock print Castle Butte/Big Muddy Badlands the blue-green of sage sweeps and wavers in an unsteady hand across the surface, with the allusion of grass, cave, wind and hill written in spare, ghostly detail.

The superimposition of one artist's marks over another's adds an unearthly double-exposure. Together the markings record as much of a felt experience of the place as a perceived one.

A few kilometers north of the town of Mossbank there is a large and desolate body of water that is home to a bird sanctuary. Old Wives Lake ripples with mucky waves that slosh on a scraggly shoreline. Flocks of white birds bob on carbon-coloured water.

When you close your eyes here you hear and feel the erratic slosh of waves. The air is peppered with birdsong in all directions. A small animal scurries through the high grass. Your foot sinks into a saturated rut, and you brush against a barbwire fence. You open your eyes for fear of harming yourself.

The artists' walking drawing, Old Wives Lake, captures in shades of blue, and blue alone, a teeming environment. Their frantic hands seemed to pluck erratic improvisations of flight from the air, charted an outburst of motion that emulates the feeling of choppy, sweeping waves. It's remarkable just how close they came to representing the feeling of the place.

Konopaki and Neufeld have developed an approach to mark making that courts chance. They invite and welcome random occurrences and accident, holding a drawing board between them as they walk, working simultaneously, switching positions randomly, locking pinky fingers and holding a drawing tool between them, or taking hold of the other's arm and drawing with it.

They blindly grab something from a bag of tools and scrape, push, pull, and glide it over the surface. The wind lifting the drawing board, the bumpy terrain, or obstacles in their path move the hand and record accidental lines.

"We thought that by working together something would appear between us, and we've never been able to put a name to it - a new artist, an energy field, a cosmic mind - something would appear that would make the work happen," Rodney said. "Sometimes I feel that the woodblocks and the drawings just make themselves."

The unity of marks is an objective of their collaboration, and a viewer would be hard-pressed to tell which marks are his, which are hers.

"We had a revelation that in this collaboration we have both disappeared," Rodney added. "There's no ego. I've never felt it was mine, she never felt it was hers. We trusted that this would happen and we both disappeared in the work."

It is not advisable to walk in Claybank's historic brick plant with your eyes closed, especially at dusk. A stream encircles the factory like a mote. A series of round brick kilns the size of small cottages, with mossy roofs and tall chimneys sit in the center of the site, as do several piles of bricks. As the sun sets on the structures, a gripping eeriness takes hold. Shut your eyes here and you have no idea what images or phantoms might present themselves to the imagination.

The woodblock print Claybank Hills - the gouging of the plywood board was done while walking with cordless rotary tools - hints at the series of hills along the southern perimeter of the site, hills mined and scarred decades ago by industry. The ground has a

stark, autumnal tone, monochromatic and barren. The colours don't match the actual landscape, but the mood and energy do. What sparse details there are in the piece again suggest the superimposition of one collaborator's marks over that of the other. In that layering, the haunting character of the place is captured.

The works in Walking Lines/Saskatchewan seem based on senses other than sight. The drawing process is not a sure-footed one, but intentionally precarious as a way to coax a truer line from the artists' bag of drawing tools.

Early on in their artistic friendship Rodney and Rhonda were eager to learn if true collaboration was possible.

"We were curious about whether we could collaborate as equal partners and participate equally in making some work," Rodney said.

Their approach is rooted in chance and risk. There is the possibility of literally tripping and falling. They never know what the outcome will be. But they have come to trust the potential latent in collaboration.

Rob O'Flanagan



Claybank Hills, woodcut, 24" x 39", edition of 11, 2013 Photo: Rodney Konopaki