

Gwen MacGregor: River-Run Recherché

KITCHENER-WATERLOO ART GALLERY JUN 17 TO SEP 5 2010

by IVAN JURAKIC



Gwen MacGregor "Research, Flow Charts and Data Banks" 2010 Installation view
Courtesy the artist and the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery / photo Robert McNair

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Presented as part of the *River Grand Chronicles*, an ongoing series of artist projects commissioned by the [Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery](#), [Gwen MacGregor's](#) exhibition "Research, Flow Charts and Data Banks" took a critical look at the Grand River watershed. Canoeing some 300 kilometres with fellow artist Gordon Hicks from the highlands of Dufferin County south towards Lake Erie, MacGregor's exploration of the river reminded viewers that this historic tributary is central to a range of pertinent issues from urban encroachment to land claims.

Headwaters to Lake Erie featured a split-screen video projection depicting the headwaters of the Grand River juxtaposed alongside the horizon line of Lake Erie, the river's terminus. On an adjoining wall, *Sheds* depicted a series of increasingly detailed diagrams of the river, starting with a simple line drawing of the artist's GPS location during her trip and developing into charts including an overlay of the [Haldimand Tract](#), an area promised to the Six Nations in 1784 that encompasses much of the watershed.

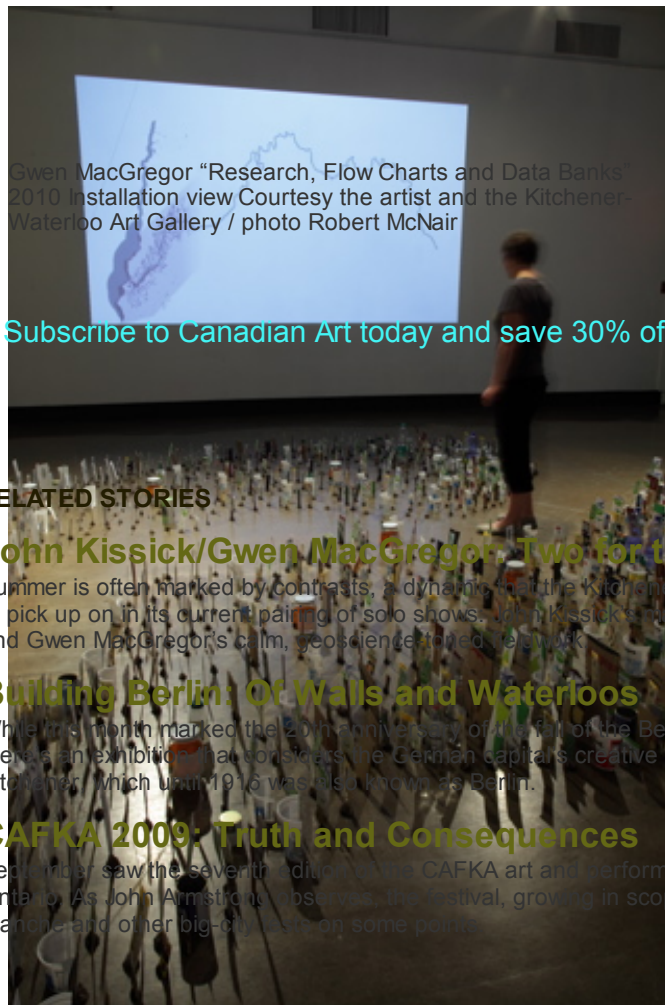
Situated on the floor of the gallery in between the projections, *Banks* offset the documentary aspect of the videos. Constructed entirely out of found, recycled and cut-up packaging ranging from President's Choice Organics to Mill Street Organic Lager, the installation made concrete the contradictory content of the materials. The careful

placement of the objects formed a tidy sculptural silhouette: a bird's eye view of the Grand River basin. The twin stands of empty cardboard, glass and metal containers abstractly suggested a forested area while the empty space in between echoed the meandering river. The artist's clever recycling of "green" debris was a stark reminder of all the litter to be found along the same river's edge; *Banks* played off the double meaning of its title to demonstrate the increasingly convoluted relationship between commerce and the environment.

According to the [Grand River Conservation Authority](#), the length of all the rivers, creeks and streams in the watershed adds up to over 11,000 kilometres and the health of this ecosystem is threatened by increased use, pollution, erosion and flooding exacerbated by the proximity of 38 municipalities occupying the watershed. At the same time, land claims by the Mohawk continue to push the government to honour the unfulfilled pledge of the Haldimand Proclamation of 1784, which promised their peoples the land "six miles deep from each side of the river beginning at Lake Erie and extending in that proportion to the head of the said river, which them and their posterity are to enjoy for ever."

MacGregor's exploration parallels the complexity of this ecosystem with the reality of the historical, political and environmental boundaries that define it. Her project is less about our romanticized notions of exploring the great outdoors than it is an investigation into the river itself as a site of contention. Ultimately, MacGregor laid down a visual report card on the status of the Grand that unfolded a subtle psychogeography.

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