

Field Guide: Determined by the river Remai Modern

Remai Modern

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Determined by the river (2017) is the poetic first gesture in the Remai Modern's inaugural exhibition, *Field Guide*, curated by Gregory Burke and Sandra Guimarães. A "first gesture" not only because Duane Linklater and Tanya Lukin Linklater's smart, collections-based installation urges its audiences to think carefully about the history and future of the gallery on the occasion of its unveiling, but also because the work occupies the Connect Gallery, the Remai's free, ground-floor space—making it the initial (and potentially only) encounter for the gallery's attendees.

The duo take the Saskatchewan River as the project's conceptual core, building the skeleton of a boat as an alternative display apparatus, and installing works by Indigenous artists from The Mendel Art Gallery Collection at Remai Modern in conversation with their own sculptural gestures. The river, and its accompanying multiform narratives of connectivity, fertility, trade, sustenance, migration, extraction, settlement and temporality, is not only the project's subject but also its site, with the Remai being on the banks of the River Landing development, which bills itself as "Saskatchewan's premier residen-

tial and destination centre."¹ Configured across the apparatus of the ship's framework, works by William Noah, Irene Avaalaaqiaq Tiktaalaaq, RCA, Eli Tikeayak (1933–1996), Allen Sapp, OC, RCA, Robert Houle, RCA, Ruth Cuthand, Daphne Odjig, CM, OBC, RCA, George Tatanniq (1910–1991), Kenojuak Ashevak, CC, ON,

RCA (1927–2013), Laurent Aksadjuak (1935–2002), and Pudlo Pudlat (1916–1992) are propped across a set of low shelves—a strategy that suggests a precise partialness, as if these works could be reconsidered and reconfigured based on conversations and emergent relations between them. The works are not anchored but ready to move and enliven each other.

Angagok Conjuring Birds (1979), by Jessie Oonark, OC, RCA (1906–1985), feels brightly characteristic of this relationship between works—conversational, enchanting, curious. Lori Blondeau's *Lonely Surfer Squaw* (1997) is particularly familiar as a key work from The Mendel Art Gallery Collection



Irene Avaalaaqiaq Tiktaalaaq (b. 1941 Gimmi/Tuxu) – All Different Thoughts 1978 Stencil 66.8 x 78.5 cm

At Remai Modern and its presence

in *Determined by the river* attests to the contemporary narratives of Indigenous art in Saskatchewan that the Remai Modern is tasked with holding. *Imagio Pietatis— A New Wave for Ozone* (1990), by Robert Boyer, RCA, is positioned at the front of the installation and functions like a pennant, its geometry bold and beacon-like. Other works are less forceful, their configurations more ambivalent. Linklater's *Erratics* (2017) are framed snapshots positioned throughout the installation—found photographs of rock outcroppings, formed through ancient glacial erosion, populated by smiling tourists and families. There's a striking tension in these small works, which contrasts the immensity of geology's timescale with the mundanity and immediacy of strangers' encounters with them. The structure of the installation both invites and resists closer inspection of works like these; there is no opportunity to climb aboard and examine more thoroughly, and the works themselves deny the desire to see or contextualize them. The figures in the photographs, their relationship to these far-transported rocks and the specificity of the landscape in which they appear all remain unavailable.



Tanya Lukin Linklater (b. 1976 *Agw'aneq*) and Duane Linklater — *Determined by the river* 2017 Collaborative installation and discursive event

A similar play between desire, expertise and comfort is at play in the placement of several small steatite sculptures (works by Tikeayak, Ak-sadjuak, Tatanniq and two unknown artists), which are perched delicately on the shelves, near to other works, almost domestically. Read cynically, this placement recalls mantelpieces and curiosity cabinets, referencing the potential hubris of collecting and acknowledging the market for Inuit sculpture as a tourist commodity. Read generously, there is grace to this arrangement, honouring the scale of these works, imagining holding them, recognizing the history of early Inuit carvings as small, portable figures.

Lukin Linklater's *Topographies of dissent* in several parts (2017), a series of sculptural works made from sand, canvas, tarp, rope, horse hair, buckets, stone, plastic and scarves, poetically and carefully tugs at some of the tensions apparent in the other works. These works evoke piling, filling, tying, casting and pulling—their simple materialities emblematic of the entanglements between natural and manufactured, Indigenous and settler, and power and vulnerability.

Determined by the river is an incredible and deeply nuanced work. In describing the discursive events that accompany the installation (featuring Blondeau, Cuthand, Tasha Hubbard, Joi T. Arcand, Erica Violet Lee, Billy-Ray Belcourt and

Elwood Jimmy), the Linklaters ask “What does it mean for Indigenous peoples to be in relation to museums? What does it mean for museums to be in relation to Indigenous peoples?” The elegance with which the duo enfold other artists and the collection into this conversation is impressive. But, I’m skeptical that these questions and propositions are taken seriously within *Field Guide* as a whole. Outside of *Determined by the river*, there’s a distinct lack of contemporary Canadian Indigenous work in the far-reaching show.

Including *Determined by the river* as an artist project within the broader rubric of the exhibition feels opportunistic—a strategic, institutional move that doesn’t fully grapple with Indigenous histories or reckon with the Remai’s longer-term curatorial and organizational responsibilities. The Linklaters offer an extremely nuanced and imaginative set of tools for rethinking and tying together complex entanglements of objects, tactics and communities on the Prairies. But does the Remai have the capacity to effectively communicate the subtleties of the project or the urgencies of the questions raised by it? And perhaps more importantly, how is the Remai equipped (or willing) to engage in the real dialogue with Indigenous peoples that *Determined by the river* demands?

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