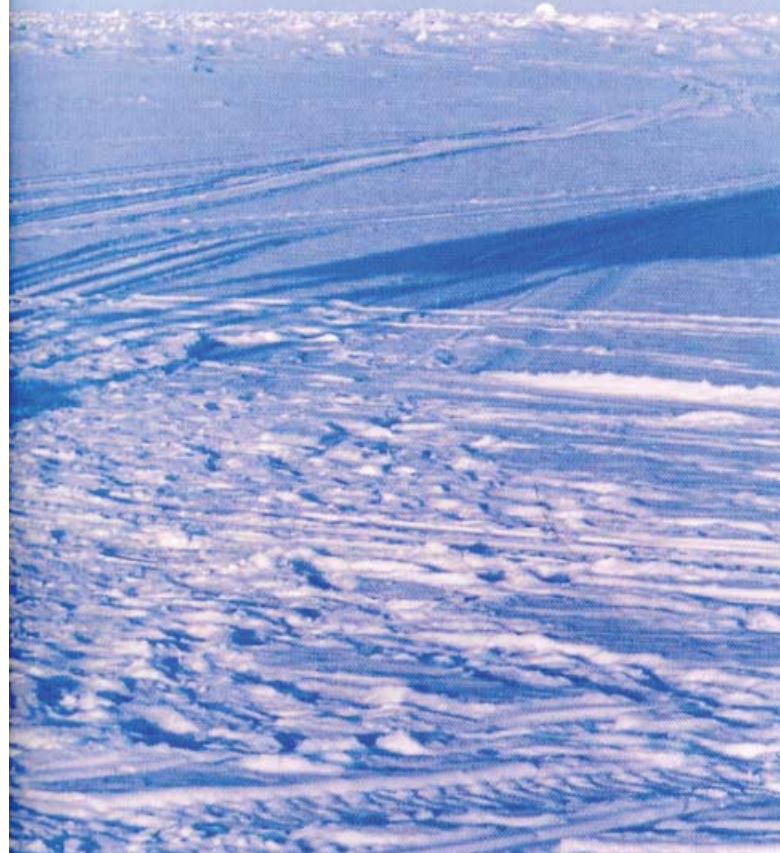


# SITElines

Curator Candice Hopkins and  
SITE Santa Fe's "Unsettled Landscapes"

BY SARAH MILROY



We were sitting on a rock, two hours by boat north of Igloodik—me and an Inuit man who had been given the task of taking me from Igloodik to a location a few hours away across the water, out on the land. We were heading to a summer camp set up by Inuit filmmaker Zacharias Kunuk and his colleague Norman Cohn, who were making a video about fish trapping, recording the ancient technology that had allowed for survival in this austere environment for millennia. I would be joining them.

We had stopped to make tea, and the silence was deafening, but once my companion had set up his Coleman stove to heat the water, he turned on his radio, which was tuned to the CBC. As fate would have it, the story that day was on land claims in what is now Nunavut. As we sat together and sipped our tea, we shared a laugh about this—the abstraction of ownership being battled out in Ottawa, contesting the human custody of this vast expanse. Notwithstanding the urgency of the debate, the broadcast struck us both as faintly ridiculous. These silent rocks and tundra seemed like a rebuke to the very notion of ownership. Who could presume to claim all of this magnificence as a mere administrative entity, particularly some political body headquartered 2,600 kilometres to the south? The gap between human machination and the physical beauty and solemnity of the land was humbling and somehow unforgettable.

This moment took place more than 20 years ago, but I found myself thinking about it when I was looking at the exhibition "Unsettled Landscapes," the latest instalment in the series of biennial exhibitions mounted by SITE Santa Fe, in New Mexico. Exhibitions about landscape have become something of a staple for three decades now, but rare is the exhibition that makes you feel the earth beneath your feet.

"It's funny you should mention that," said the show's Canadian co-curator, Candice Hopkins, when I shared with her my strangely geological experience of her exhibition. "We started out from a position that we didn't want to make an exhibition about traditions of landscape art, and the art

*Kevin Schmidt's A Sign in the Northwest Passage installed on the seasonal ice of the Beaufort Sea, 20 kilometres north of Tuktoyaktuk, the Northwest Territories, March 2010. PHOTO TYTUS HARDY*



historical and critical discourse around that. We wanted to make a show about the land."

The land in question is the vast and sweeping geography of the Americas from Nunavut to Tierra del Fuego. Here, and in the next two instalments of SITElines, the SITE Santa Fe team will be exploring the Americas only, forsaking, for a while, the institution's former internationalist inclinations. In pursuing this path, Hopkins and her co-curators—Janet Dees, Irene Hofmann and Lucia Sanromán—are entering a history.

The institutional roots of SITE Santa Fe were settled in issues of place from the outset, and their project in the desert has long been infused with Canadian talent. The first exhibition, back in 1995, was organized by Canadian curator Bruce Ferguson, and bore the title "Longing and Belonging: From the Faraway Nearby," the latter phrase a reference to Georgia O'Keeffe, who often signed off her letters to her East Coast colleagues with that evocative flourish. Memory and identity were major themes. Canadian artists Gerald McMaster (who is now also a curator and professor) and Rebecca Belmore were included, as were Marina Abramović, Felix Gonzales-Torres, Jenny Holzer, Anish Kapoor, Bruce Nauman and a host of other artists from around the world (31 in total).

That same year also saw the staging of "About Place: Recent Art of the Americas," curated by Madeleine Grynsztejn for the Art Institute of Chicago, and including Canadians Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham and Barbara Steinman among its chosen 16. Here, new media and communications were acknowledged as the shapers of contemporary experience, with Grynsztejn writing presciently on how digital hyperconnectivity, travel, trade accords, global capitalism and the international production and consumption of goods were creating an emergent "commonality of experience and outlook." A seismic shift was occurring in human experience, with the cultural nomadism that began in 19th-century modernity accelerating in the crisscrossing vapour trails and cross-pollinating time zones of contemporary life. Where do we belong? What is won, lost, altered or threatened for human beings in that global transformation?

"Insight 97," in San Diego, continued this conversation. Curated by a four-person pan-American team—including Canadian curator Jessica Bradley—the exhibition attended to gritty geopolitical frictions, particularly those pertaining to the US/Mexican border, which demarcates such dramatically contrasting zones of prosperity and poverty, and included Canadians Liz Magor, Rebecca Belmore, Spring Hurlbut and Ken Lum.

Into this curatorial conversation, though—and particularly in Canada—another factor was increasingly making itself felt: the enduring presence of North America's Indigenous peoples, notably embodied in the concurrent exhibitions "Land, Spirit, Power" (at the National Gallery of Canada) and "Indigena" (at the Canadian Museum of Civilization), both mounted in 1992. In these shows, the politics of colonial displacement, forced assimilation and resistance took centre stage, with Canada redefined as a hybrid, bloodstained crash site between Native and settler cultures. What was at stake in the erasure of Indigenous, ancestral rootedness? What would be the cost should dominant settler culture continue to lose sight of those perspectives?

Hopkins, who was on the curatorial team for the National Gallery of Canada's epic 2013 exhibition "Sakahàn: International Indigenous Art," remembers how those shows influenced her own formation, during her years as an art student. "I can remember giving a paper on those shows,

and my fellow students were quite baffled," she recalls. (Hopkins was in the UK at the time.) "I went on to study all those artists in depth. It made me realize that exhibitions produce platforms for looking at objects, but they also produce knowledge and can create change."

"Unsettled Landscapes" seems to inherit all of these histories, wearing its footnotes gracefully. Today, Indigenous art is unequivocally emergent as a global movement, says Hopkins, who is particularly attuned to such matters given her mixed Tlingit, British and Japanese ancestry (her Japanese great-grandfather was a cook during the Klondike gold rush) and her immersion in the thinking of writers such as Lucy Lippard, W.J.T. Mitchell and artist Jimmie Durham. (His book *A Certain Lack of Coherence* is one of her favourites.)

"It's not about inserting Indigenous art into the narrative," she says, "but about introducing it like a catalyst that changes the game," bringing its older wisdoms to bear on the contemporary world. Instead of the identity politics of yesteryear, this show feels different, setting the shifting vanities, vagaries and vulgarities of humankind against the simplicity and dignity of the hemisphere.

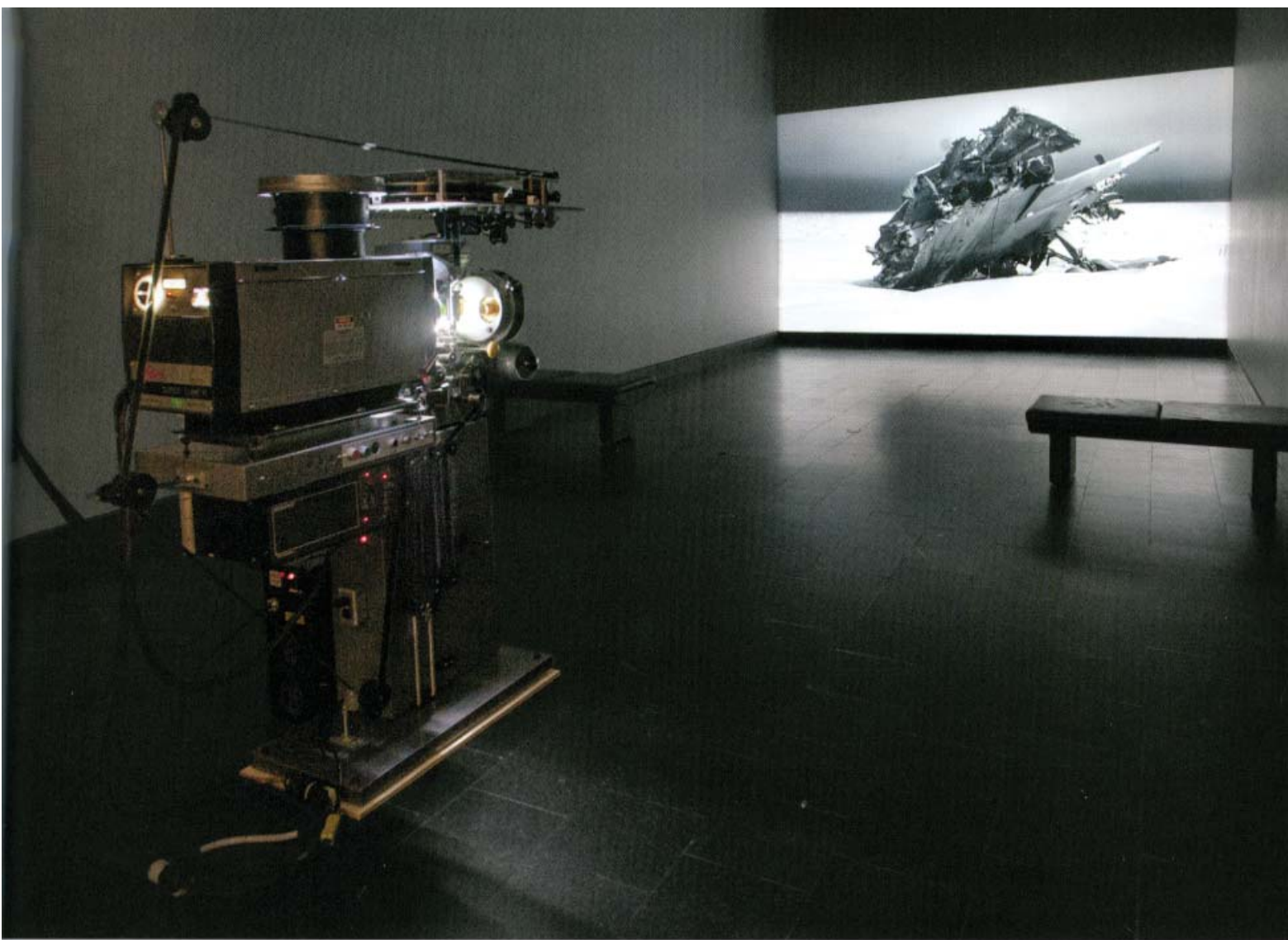
One senses this, for example, in Matthew Buckingham's work, *The Six Grandfathers, Paḥa Sapa, in the Year 502,002 C.E.* (2002), which consists of a series of photographs and historical texts documenting the craggy bluffs of the Black Hills of South Dakota, the site of the Mount Rushmore National Memorial. The sequence begins deep in geological time and unfolds through history, with the artist revealing its evolution as a charged site for both Indigenous and settler cultures. The last panel of the work imagines its future in the year 502,002 CE, the presidents' faces eroded away to rubble. Documentation alongside the photographs recounts the legal battles of the Lakota Sioux people to maintain claim to their own lands, which had been defaced in this supremely arrogant gesture. This is a piece to instill humility.

Melanie Smith offers similar insight with her 2014 video installation exploring the abandoned town of Fordlândia, deep in the Amazon jungle. Here in the 1920s, the Ford Motor Company established a plant to extract rubber from trees for the production of tires—in one shot we see the milky substance oozing freely from the bark of a rubber tree, so fecund is this place—but the economics of production and distribution have moved on and now nature reclaims what was once hers alone, stealthily, luxuriantly. In this lush, vegetative utopia, the rusting carcass of US capitalism has been subsumed.

Canadian artist Kevin Schmidt also records the human gesture overwhelmed by unbridled (and unbridleable) nature in his homage to the fabled Northwest Passage, the Arctic Ocean waterway where remains of Franklin's polar expedition have recently been discovered. Schmidt's *A Sign in the Northwest Passage* (2010), which he made in the western Arctic, near Tuktoyaktuk, recalls the legendary contest to discover the possible trade route from Europe to Asia, the objective of successive European expeditions that happened over centuries. Later, after the demise of Franklin's endeavour, another spate of exploration took place, this time aiming to find the lost relics of his journey. The zone became a kind of ice-bound Bermuda Triangle, sucking many into its vortex.

Today, with global warming, this ocean passage is becoming increasingly navigable, and thus geopolitically charged. Schmidt's rough-hewn wooden sign, which he presents here in a large-format photograph, was carved with





suitably apocalyptic phrases from the Book of Revelation, reflecting our collective dread of this environmental change. (THE SEA TURNED INTO BLOOD, MEN GNAWED AT THEIR TONGUES IN AGONY, EVERY MOUNTAIN + ISLAND REMOVED FROM ITS PLACE.) Schmidt abandoned his sign on a shelf of ice to winter over, intending that it would float free when the warm weather came. Now, via his wall-mounted video, we can travel with him by light plane as he searches in vain for his lost marker, adrift and unrecoverable in the vastness.

Such expanses have long attracted wanderers seeking the tabula rasa for a kind of existential performance of self—including artists such as Daniel Joseph Martinez, from Los Angeles. Following a pipeline route through the landscape of Alaska, its course the tangible inscription of industry on the landscape, Martinez makes this conduit the organizing principle of his travels, gathering postcards from his remote destinations en route, and inscribing them with the field notes and random ravings inspired by his encounters. One card notes the whereabouts of Timothy Treadwell—the oddball loner presumed to be dead in Herzog’s documentary masterpiece *Grizzly Man*, who, Martinez tells us, is rumoured to be hiding out in Dead Horse, Alaska, working on an oil field. “MOON BEAMS POINT THE WAY,” reads a fragment from another, or, more enigmatically: “IN GLORY UNDIMMED BEFORE THE BREAKING OF THE WORLD, WE WILL LINGER IN DARKNESS AND DOUBT.” Not just geography is traversed here, but the landscape of the soul.

A number of the works in the exhibition attend to the local context of New Mexico, with its complex colonial history—its Indigenous Navajo and Pueblo cultures, its Spanish and then Mexican periods of rule, and

finally its secondment into the United States—all layers that are clearly visible to the eye of even the most casual visitor. Marcos Ramírez ERRE and David Taylor bring this layered history to life in their work *De/LIMITations* (2014), a project that takes both physical and digital form in marking the historic border between Mexico and the United States as it stood in 1821, when Mexico achieved independence from Spain. (That border, which originally consigned parts of Kansas and Wyoming to Mexico, would be redrawn again in 1848, when California, New Mexico and Arizona were incorporated into the US following the Mexican-American War.) Over the course of two months, the artists and their filmmaker travelled that 1821 line, erecting a series of galvanized sheet-metal obelisks marking those historic contours. This laborious project was recorded in digital documentation available for view in the gallery—a lucid comment on the vagaries of geopolitics versus geography.

Other projects, like that of Spanish-born artist Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, address the issue of land and water use in the contemporary moment, whether these resources are impacted by real-estate development, industry or interracial cultural politics. Drawing attention to the issues of water rights in the American Southwest—where, as in Canada, Indigenous communities often seek access to a safe water supply—the artist intervened by installing a well with a hand-operated water pump on the Santa Clara Pueblo, Native-held land close to Santa Fe. Appropriately, the artist did not make the site open for visitation by the general public. It is present in the exhibition only as a documentary photograph of the drilling rig that dug the well, a sculpture



**Agnes Denes** *Wheatfield—A Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan—With Agnes Denes Standing in the Field* 1982. COMMISSIONED BY PUBLIC ART FUND, NEW YORK. COURTESY LESLIE TONKINOW ARTWORKS + PROJECTS, NEW YORK. PHOTO JOHN MCGRAIL.

OPPOSITE PAGE: **Inigo Manglano-Ovalle** *Location Study for Well 35° 58' 16" N 106° 5' 21" W* 2014. COMMISSIONED BY SITE SANTA FE.



of a non-functioning well and bottled samples of the water; ownership of the well has been legally transferred to the community. Thinking through the issues of social activism in the context of an art exhibition, Manglano-Ovalle sidestepped conventional art making altogether in favour of direct intervention in this social-justice issue.

Of course, New Mexico also has a distinctive place in the history of warfare, as the site for the original test explosions in the development of the atomic bomb. San Francisco collective Futurefarmers remembers that moment in a work titled *Forging a Nail* (2014), a kind of oblique homage to Robert Oppenheimer, the chief creator of the atomic bomb. The work was inspired by a random memo that the artists discovered in the archives at Los Alamos: in October, 1943, Oppenheimer had ordered a nail to be driven into his office wall, a place to hang his hat. While the office manager had swiftly provided a coat rack for this purpose, Oppenheimer persisted in requesting a nail. Futurefarmers have obliged him in posterity, crafting three nails (could we call it a trinity?): one forged from a melted-down fragment of a meteorite, one cast from 1943 steel pennies (copper was being redirected to the manufacture of munitions at that time), and one fused from Trinitite, the glassy material residue left on the desert floor after the infamous test blast of 1945. The extreme modesty of the work is set against the epic and horrifying scale of the scientist's legacy, with the artists turning our gaze earthward in contemplation of a *terroir* that is both primeval and futuristic.

The Canadian Arctic assumes a special presence in this show, in part through the inclusion of works by Inuit artists. Ohotaq Mikkigak, a longtime member of the famous Kinngait Studios artist collective in Cape Dorset, has contributed his landscape drawing of a dark inland hillside—massive and inscrutable beneath a rose-tinted sky. His younger colleague, Shuvina Ashoona, who is known for her increasingly fantastic drawings of observed

and imaginary realities in the North, is exhibiting a delicately drawn aerial view of her community, rendered in tender detail, right down to the COOP store, the summer tents and the Anglican church. One earthbound, the other out-of-body, they emanate together a deep sense of attachment to home.

Alongside these two artists, the curators have positioned Canadian artist Charles Stankievec, with his radically contrasting experience of the North and its meanings. While teaching at the Yukon School of Visual Art in Dawson City, which he co-founded, and later living in Berlin (this fall, he started teaching at the University of Toronto's faculty of architecture), Stankievec has developed a body of work centred on the phenomena of militarization and surveillance in the far North. His work in Santa Fe, *The Soniferous Aether of the Land Beyond the Land Beyond* (2013), is a kind of summarizing statement of those interests.

The title refers to the Inuktitut term for the territory where he found himself: Alert, Nunavut, a place set in a landscape that even the Inuit deemed too austere to support nomadic hunting and habitation. Here, a remote Canadian intelligence surveillance station—a Cold War relic—is still manned and operational despite its age. Stankievec's camera roves the seemingly abandoned interior and exterior of the site, taking in (for example) a view of the splintered fragments of a crashed airplane, its ruined wing taking on the heroic mien of a Caspar David Friedrich shipwreck, illuminated only by starlight. Long exposure times were required to capture enough light to make these landscapes discernible, and to ghostly effect. Clouds make jittery, swift progress across the dark sky accompanied by a score composed by the artist, which incorporates coded communications captured at random from the dark, star-strewn firmament. This is our species' curious and revealing gesture to the cosmos, infused with our dread and fear. In this way, Stankievec offers an unforgettable vision of both the North and of human nature, and his most accomplished work to date.

If many works in this show attune us to the essential oddness of our way of being on the planet, Hungarian-born artist Agnes Denes suggests that there are ways in which we might redeem ourselves, honouring, perhaps even regenerating, what has been displaced. Her work *Wheatfield—A Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan* (1982) does just that. Prepping a large area with 225 truckloads of topsoil, Denes planted 1,000 pounds of grain. The resultant crop, when it came in, was used to feed the NYPD horses stabled nearby. Photographs and slides of the project, exhibited in this exhibition for the first time, are particularly charged in historical hindsight: amber waves of grain outspread (and foreshortened by the camera) beneath the rising Twin Towers of the downtown business district.

Converging these realities in this striking way, Denes provokes a kind of ruminative longing for the lost frontier, a chance to think about the systems of value to which we subscribe, and a meditation on what America, with its vaunted prosperity, has become. That these architectural emblems of American ascendancy would themselves be scythed away in one of history's most notorious acts of terrorism sharpens the sting of Denes's critique. Only the wind and the grass remain. ■