

Through an act of material contact (the meeting of flesh and the tracing of lines) a stone, in all its immutable weight, is enabled to take flight. If at times the artists' methods appear intentionally absurd or naïve, it merits noting that such strategies encourage us to discover without the burden of assumption, to query through a framework of playful curiosity. When we decentre the self and approach the world through the lens of collaboration, we open ourselves to novel ways of knowing, experiencing, and connecting.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 138.
- 2 Suzanne Nacha and Meghan Price, *Land Line* exhibition statement, YYZ Gallery, 2020.
- 3 Christopher Tilley and Kate Cameron-Daum, *An Anthropology of Landscape: The Extraordinary in the Ordinary* (London: University College London Press, 2017), 5.
- 4 Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1997), 198.

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Built on a shared interest in human-Earth relationships, the indexical nature of rock materials and the cognitive challenge of geologic time, the collaborative practice of **MEGHAN PRICE** and **SUZANNE NACHA** develops methodologies for engaging geologic sites. Employing their combined expertise in textiles, sculpture, painting and geology, they mine the earth sciences for 'signs' that hold the potential to connect human experience to the physical earth. Nacha and Price live in Toronto. They are individually represented by United Contemporary.

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TRACING A LINE

BY JENN LAW

“Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh?” ~Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 1964¹

In many places, a rock with an unbroken line running through it is called a wishing stone. Wishing stones are not uncommon. There are entire shorelines filled with them, and yet, they capture our attention. Legend has it that when you find one, you must close your eyes and trace your finger around the line while making a wish. But in order for the wish to come true, you must give the stone away—or, better still, make a wish on behalf of another. Setting aside sentimentality, the practice speaks to our wonderment at such natural phenomena, as well as our desire to create connection by tracing a line in stone.

Following the motif of the line as a connective act, *Land Line* represents the material outcome of the collaborative fieldwork investigations of artists Suzanne Nacha and Meghan Price. Brought together by a shared interest in geology and drawn to the iconic scenery of Killarney, Ontario, the artists set out in search of “an embodied experience of landscape”². Central to this endeavour is the understanding that knowledge is actively and collaboratively bound and produced with the world. Landscape is not outside us, it is *of us*, as we are of it.

As site, ideology, and genre, ‘landscape’ indicates a complex signifying system of knowing and representing the world, spanning a vast field of cross-disciplinary scholarship and competing historical, theoretical, and methodological perspectives. Eschewing traditional conventions of representation, which often frame landscape as separate from the self, Nacha and Price pursue a material approach in which the human body is “a primary research tool”³ with which to collaboratively engage the Earth as body. To borrow the language of Merleau-Ponty, landscape here enacts the ontological continuity between sensing subject and sensed object, the intertwining of the flesh of the body with the flesh of the world. In this sense, ‘flesh’ is not matter *per se*, but rather

the condition for embodiment that makes communication possible between human and non-human entities.

A landscape deeply incised in the nation’s imaginary, Nacha and Price engage Killarney as a site of historical, geological, and artistic significance. The ancestral home of the Anishinaabe peoples, this unceded territory was originally known as Shebahonaning, which translates as ‘safe passage’ in Anishinaabemowin (the language of the Ojibwe). The region is renowned for its clear lakes and ancient pink granite outcrops of rock and white quartzite mountain ridges. Geologically, these features date to the Precambrian Era (1.75-2.5 billion years old) and form part of the Canadian Shield, the country’s oldest landform. Long sought out by artists as an inspirational retreat, its sweeping vistas and wind-swept trees were famously captured by the Group of Seven artists in the 1920s and 30s, becoming synonymous with Canadian landscape painting, as defined by Western art historical traditions of representation.

Such traditions have a long history of privileging mastery and the myth of individual genius, while downplaying alternative narratives and the inherently collaborative nature of investigative research, knowledge production, and material making. It is within this context that Nacha and Price set out to connect with the field in a way that does not strive for mastery or possession, but rather exchange. Collaboration is central to their approach, both practically and conceptually—not only with each other, but with the environment itself. In this, the artists experimented with open-ended modes of inquiry, embracing humour, chance, and improvisation in their investigations. This is reflected in their material strategies as well as the gear they packed for their excursion. The selection of tools featured ‘in action’ in the main video and displayed as artifactual evidence along a sloping shelf in the gallery, includes instruments of measurement and documentation intuitively gathered from their shared studio—rulers, tape, string, netting, and paper—as well as found natural and cultural objects encountered in the field. In the

unfolding of their research, Nacha and Price hint at the limitations of our knowledge and the futility of the tools at our disposal. How does one measure eternity with a string?

But things are not always as they seem. In the hands of the artists, objects are encouraged to adapt and evolve, often transcending their original purposes. A paintbrush is painted with a graphic black and white grid to become an archaeological metre scale; a brightly striped paper straw is co-opted as an impromptu drawing and erasing implement; hand-sized rocks are enlisted as paper weights. In one corner of the exhibition, a roughly hewn stone slab is adapted as a screen upon which a video of hand-shadows is projected. Recalling ancient Paleolithic handprints on rock faces, these spectral images harken to humanity’s earliest material engagements with the landscape. Indexes of special signification, cast shadows and palm prints may be read “as the marks or traces of a particular cause, and that cause is the thing to which they refer, the object they signify”⁴. Indeed, the projections are shadows in their own right, ephemeral plays of light on surface referencing a history of corporeal interaction and entanglement that is both meaningful and fleeting.

The performance of transparency on opaque surfaces is similarly evinced in the largest of the three videos—water, wind, light, and sound feature as elemental agents engaging rocks, paper, navigational signs, tools, insects, birds, and humans. Throughout, the repetition and intermingling of lines and patterns emphasize the porosity of boundaries between human and non-human bodies. Interweaving the visual, the linguistic, and the lithic, lines represent an expansive approach to drawing and storytelling. As such, they are neither passive nor static, but rather active gestures, creating material connection between points, entities, and destinations in time and space. In the context of landscape, the line offers evidence of deep time in the surface of the Earth itself, bearing witness to geologic processes that extend well beyond human memory. This is literally depicted in the freestanding didactic panel graphically

illustrating the chronological dating of geologic strata as well as in a small video documenting the careful hand-drafting of nomenclature in a geologic timescale.

With a focus on evolving connections, the exhibition’s tongue-in-cheek title—*Land Line*—references geologic processes made manifest in earthly flesh, as well as social lines of communication evident in the landscape. Specifically, ‘land line’ recalls a mode of telephonic technology that radically transformed the global landscape from the late-19th century onwards through a fixed network of hard-wired lines facilitating communication across vast distances. An image of both innovation and obsolescence, these physical networks of crisscrossing wires are fast becoming redundant by cellular and related advances. The visible lines that bind us together are thus made invisible. Yet as we move towards greater interconnectedness through increasingly sophisticated technologies, we ironically find ourselves further isolated from each other and our environment. Our gain is also our loss—of touch, of sensory immersion, of embodied engagement with the flesh of the world.

At the end of the main video, two figures stand on adjacent rocky outcrops surrounded by lapping water flying ‘boulder kites.’ The two-dimensional cut paper ‘boulders’ which comprise the bodies of the kites, were made from rubbing graphite on paper over uneven rocky surfaces, a process captured elsewhere in the video. This automatic ‘frottage’ technique was developed by the Surrealist artist Max Ernst in an effort to free the artist of visual preconceptions and masterful control in the creative act of making. Indeed, as a revolutionary movement, Surrealism was intended as a practice-based approach for being in the world, embracing chance, improvisation, and the uncanny as strategies for change—much in the same spirit as Nacha and Price embarked on their own material investigations.

There is humour and hope in this performance of kite-flying that speaks to the transformative potential of bodies—even rock bodies.