

## *Confluence*

Susan Shantz's art practice is recognized for its immersive, thought-provoking and poetic explorations of the connections between humans and nature. Through intense research and a heightened sensibility towards the materiality of her sculptural forms, Shantz creates both visceral and conceptual spaces that investigate nature as a cultural construct, being "suspicious" of and intrigued by "the versions of nature we continuously invent".<sup>i</sup> "Through her art, Shantz illustrates how our culture removes itself from our origins in nature, in spite of the fact that nature is the source of both our sustenance and well-being."<sup>ii</sup>

*Confluence* presents Shantz's more recent explorations into the water sources that sustain us on the Prairies, the water that ultimately makes up 70% of our bodies. Invited by scientists to participate in field study of water sources through the University of Saskatchewan, Shantz has investigated the flow of water, from the glaciers and snow melt of the Rocky Mountains of Alberta across the prairies in the South and North Saskatchewan rivers, feeding the Qu'Appelle Valley water systems (including Buffalo Pound Lake which provides water to Moose Jaw, Regina and surrounding areas), and joining to create an enormous delta near the Manitoba border. Shantz states, "While I experience the river near my home [in Saskatoon] as a natural phenomenon and place of beauty, after learning more about the river from scientific and environmental perspectives, I have come to realize it is a highly-managed water source. It sustains us, but with a cost for those downstream. Drawing on field trips to sites along the river, I use a variety of media (from textiles to videography) to consider the currents that connect us in this prairie water basin."<sup>iii</sup>

Shantz has been described as a collector, a reference to her practice of gathering or amassing found objects that are modified and arranged to dialogue in the gallery space, presenting an "object-language" that "allows new and re-arranged narratives to emerge".<sup>iv</sup> Her found objects are often modified through acts of 'making', through sewing or embroidery, which domesticate and transform the objects through an intimate act of the artist's hand. *River Wear (for managers)* is a prime example of this in the exhibition, where embroidery depicting three locations (glacial source, prairie meander and delta dispersion) are presented like spines running down the backs of white, collared shirts.

Shantz employs embroidery or sewing as a means of drawing, such as in the work *Confluence*, where a hand-sewn map of waterways on fabric panels of an enlarged bookwork elegantly cascades down the gallery wall and across the floor. The intimate act of pulling thread through fabric here serves as an analogy for water carving the landscape. This form of markmaking through sewing draws connections to the body and domesticated spaces, alluding to the embodiment of place and representing embodied ways of knowing.

Shantz's drawings, whether created with thread or as cut-outs, are a means of disturbance, a form of disorder that breaks up the pristine grids presented within the exhibition space, in the tarps and the pages and fabric panels of the bookworks. These grids reference Shantz's research and artistic sources of maps and books, but they also speak to the colonialist practice of imposing order onto the landscape, a construct of grid systems or

frameworks to map out the land. The installation piece, *Water Basin I (Saskatchewan River)*, presents the waterways that run from Alberta across Saskatchewan to Lake Winnipeg through an enlarged map that is cut out of suspended tarps. The cut-out drawing causes the grid form to collapse, especially where larger bodies of water are located, introducing chaos into the imposed order, which plays out in the wonderful layering of shadows on the floor and walls of the space. This sense of chaos perhaps speaks to the threat of climate change we are currently facing, where natural events are becoming more chaotic and unpredictable.

Shantz's embrace of materiality in her work, in the tarps, fabrics and paper, is informed by Post-Minimalism, giving nods to the work of Robert Morris and Eva Hesse. Much like Hesse's hanging fabrics and, even, Betty Goodwin's tarpaulins, these 'screens' present like skins, metaphorical references to the body, and allude to its embodiment of water. Through the interplay of the exhibition's various installations and works, Shantz invites us to consider our own sense of intimacy with place, how we come to embody place by taking into our own bodies the water sourced from Saskatchewan's rivers and lakes. *Confluence* encourages viewers to consider the interconnectedness and fragility of our water sources, the environmental impacts of human progress on our water systems and how these impacts will ultimately affect us all.

Susan Shantz graduated with a Master of Fine Arts from York University and teaches sculpture and mixed media in the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Saskatchewan. She has been featured in solo and group exhibitions in public and artist-run galleries across Canada and internationally and supported with grants from the Canada Council, Ontario Arts Council, SK Arts and the British Columbia Arts Council. Her work is in public art collections including the Canada Council, SK Arts, Remai Modern (Mendel Collection), MacKenzie Art Gallery, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Art Gallery of Hamilton, Museum London, Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery, Burlington Cultural Centre and in private collections.

Jennifer McRorie, curator

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<sup>i</sup> Susan Shantz, quote from *Canopy* (Saskatoon: Mendel Art Gallery, 2007), p.5.

<sup>ii</sup> John K. Grande, *Susan Shantz - Nature in Parentheses: Between Creation and Manufacture*, *Canopy* (Saskatoon, Mendel Art Gallery, 2007), p.11.

<sup>iii</sup> Susan Shantz, unpublished Artist Statement for *Confluence* exhibition, Moose Jaw Museum & Art Gallery, 2022.

<sup>iv</sup> Alexandra Badzak, *Introduction*, *Canopy* (Saskatoon: Mendel Art Gallery, 2007), p.8.