

January 17, 2024

Re: 2024 Eldon + Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize

Dear Selection Committee,

It is with great pleasure that the Art Gallery of St. Albert nominates *Currents* by Kelsey Stephenson for the 2024 Eldon + Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize.

Currents was exhibited at the Art Gallery of St. Albert from March 16 to April 27, 2023, as part of Stephenson's immersive solo exhibition *Connected Currents*. In this exhibition Stephenson presented three related bodies of work that explore Alberta's watershed. They trace the flow of water from the glacial headwaters in the Rocky Mountains out across the province through rivers and streams, bearing witness to the degradation of this natural, life supporting system over the last century.

A monumental printmaking installation, *Currents* stretches 90" tall by 720" wide. The work presents a single continuous landscape, created by digitally collaging together Stephenson's photographs of iconic locations from along the North Saskatchewan River. Hues of brilliant blue merge with icy white and teals, capturing a scene that is at once familiar and otherworldly. The work is created through a blend of cyanotype and digital printing, with 150 individual pieces hung in a grid to form the whole. The expansive scene inspires wonder and awe, creating the sensation that one can step right into the landscape in the artwork. Walking along *Currents*, viewers are met by the beauty and fragility of our province's watershed. Stephenson forges a powerful connection between the viewer and the land, pulling on the audience's shared sense of place and identity.

Stephenson has been working with ideas of memory and identity for over a decade, finding connection to those concepts through land and water. Her earlier work *Divining* explored water as a metaphor for the fluidity of memory and identity. The movement of water over land leaves a trace, eroding soil and carving into rock, much in the same way that our past marks and defines our present. After *Divining*, Stephenson's work shifted, no longer working with water as a metaphor, but as the subject. Water, and how it flows across the land, defines that place, its presence or absence dictating the life of that region.

In 2020, Stephenson created her first work that dealt directly with the passage of water throughout Alberta - *Flux*. She wanted to understand the watershed, following its passage from the headwaters of the province's largest rivers, which flows out of the glaciers in the Rocky Mountains, out across the province. Also exhibited in *Connected Currents*, *Flux* surrounds viewers with a series of 27 suspended silk panels, enveloping them in what appears to be a continuous landscape, a seemingly pristine wilderness. To create *Flux*, Stephenson photographed iconic locations across the province, documenting the flow of water to three of the province's largest rivers – the Bow, Athabasca, and North Saskatchewan. She ventured onto

glaciers to photograph their crags and crevasses. She hiked along rivers and streams, documenting waterfalls and creek beds. Through digital collage, Stephenson combined her photographs into a single, constructed landscape, void of all visual references to human activity. Wanting to envelop and surround viewers, Stephenson screen printed the final landscape onto the 27 silk panels, each 48" wide by 108" tall (an effort that took over a year to complete). Suspended in the Gallery, *Flux* envelops the viewer in a gauzy and ethereal wilderness. Images of Alberta's waterways flow from one panel to the next, emphasizing the interconnectedness of our province's waters despite vast distances.

Currents followed the creation of *Flux*, with the two works functioning in tandem. When navigating *Connected Currents*, viewers had to pass through *Flux* before discovering *Currents* at the far side of the gallery. Through *Flux* Stephenson welcomed viewers with beauty and grandeur, establishing a sense of love and pride in the landscape. Emerging out of *Flux*, viewers were met with the wide vista of *Currents*, which spanned the gallery's longest wall, and engages in a more complex conversation of land and water use.

For *Currents*, Stephenson wanted to ground the work in her own sense of place. The piece specifically traces the path of water along the North Saskatchewan River - from its origins in mountain glaciers to the riverbanks of Edmonton, where she lives and works. In contrast to *Flux*, *Currents* includes human activity along the river - sites of industry, agriculture, and urbanization, emphasising the ever-present threats to the stability and health of the watershed.

Stephenson was very intentional in the creation of the landscape, choosing familiar and iconic locations from along the North Saskatchewan and the Edmonton River Valley. Sites of beauty sit alongside Edmonton's Refinery Row, an area of heavy industry, as well as Edmonton's downtown core and the Provincial Legislature buildings. Stephenson seamlessly merges locations that inspire a sense of pride with locations that are emblematic of environmental degradation and pollution. It is in this familiarity that Stephenson's work holds its power. She establishes our love for this landscape, while presenting the ever-growing threats to its stability.

It is not an exaggeration to say that *Currents* is monumental. Stephenson's goal was to create a work that felt as majestic and vast as the Alberta landscape itself. The composition of *Currents* is circular, with the edges of the image lining up to fold back in on itself. If it were presented in a circular room, Stephenson's landscape would be as a single continuous scene, existing without a beginning or ending. To tackle this monumental piece, she divided the image into a grid, five rows tall by thirty columns wide. This allows the work to be hung in sections, knowing with its scale it would be rare that a gallery would have the space to hang the entire work. We exhibited columns 17 to 4, as this section of the work held the bulk of the references to industry and urbanization. *Currents* serves as poignant reminder that there are no areas of wilderness left that are untouched by human consumption.

Stephenson chose to print the landscape through a blend of cyanotype and digital printing. Cyanotype is a method of early photography (first described in 1842) that uses light and

chemistry to produce an image. Generally, cyanotype printing requires negatives on plastic acetate sheets to expose the image. With the work grounded in a deep care for the environment, Stephenson developed a new method to produce this work. With 150 individual pieces (each 18x24") needed to produce the final work, it would require 150 negatives which would only be used once. That amount of plastics waste was unsustainable. Stephenson experimented, developing a new method to create a paper negative, coating the paper in baby oil to make it transparent. After much trial and error, her method resulted in beautifully detailed prints, and ensured that the emotional core of the project was respected throughout the creative process.

It can be hard to understand the magnitude of humanity's impact on our water systems. The last series of works that Stephenson shared in *Connected Currents* focused on the damage that Alberta's watershed has experienced. While *Flux* and *Currents* connect locations along the watershed separated by distance, *Glacial Echoes* reconnects locations separated by time. Stephenson layers etchings of historic photographs of glaciers on top of a photograph of the same view today. The glaciers have all receded dramatically or vanished all together. Delicate and ghostly, *Glacial Echoes* drive home the dramatic changes our watershed has endured over the last century.

Through Stephenson's work we can not only come to understand the scale of the natural systems that support our daily lives but forge emotional connections to that system. Stephenson says of the work: *"It reinforces how those actions taken now, earlier, or later and in different locations all tie back into one another."* *Currents* is meant to spark conversation on land and water use, in the past, present and into the future. We see industrial spaces pushing into natural spaces, presented at a scale that feels as if the viewer could walk right in. *Currents* brings back memories of wandering the river valley, hiking in the mountains, activities that we hold dear to our identities as Albertans and Canadians.

Regardless of where we live, we are all connected to and reliant on water. Stephenson deftly utilizes familiarity, scale and awe to draw in the viewer. She has created a moment of the sublime, an intense wonder and love for the landscape that cradles and cares for us. *Currents* leaves us with only one logical path – a call that that we must extend that same care and love back to our watershed it before it is too late.

Sincerely,



Emily Baker
Curator
Art Gallery of St. Albert