

Janusz Wrobel



An  
**Aqueous Mind**

I have always been very interested in photography. I have looked at far more photographs than I have paintings. Because their reality is stronger than reality itself.

*Francis Bacon, British painter*

The painter constructs, the photographer discloses.

*Susan Sontag, American author*

# *An Aqueous Mind*

When we see something, it is actually our brain's interpretation of patterns of light reaching our eyes. How we perceive those patterns depends on our own experiences, or on what we can draw from our culture's vast pool of related experiences and interpretations. When facing something new to which no available interpretations seem to apply, we strive to create new ones.

I grew to adulthood exposed primarily to European "humanized nature"—i.e., environments shaped by many generations of people to serve their needs. When I settled in North America and began travelling through a variety of its environments, my prior understanding of natural processes was inadequate for interpreting what I saw. The Great Canadian Shield became my open book and a giant Petri dish, offering clarity and transparency for my observations. My grasp of fundamentals in physics and chemistry became invaluable, and the scope of my interest gradually expanded.

Soon it became evident that everything I perceived there was dependent on two properties of water: the polarity of the water molecule and its thermal storage capacity. These properties define and make possible all life as we know it. What I saw was the result of working processes developed across an enormous timeframe which formed and maintained living conditions for all species within each environment. Everything happens there for a reason, including the accelerated momentum of current environmental changes.

An Aqueous Mind is both an exhibition and the conclusion of an extended process of redefining my relationship with the natural world. Several exhibitions of my work during the last ten years focused on selective aspects of this changing relationship. Above all, continuous lifelong use of the photographic medium has allowed the accumulation of visual evidence essential to how I objectify changes to my perception of reality.







# *An Aqueous Mind*

## Exhibition Statement

What appears important to me today may not be important tomorrow. The camera has allowed me to accumulate evidence of how my brain interprets the world as I proceed with my life.

For the most part, I have lived immersed in urban environments. Naturally, I developed skills that allow me to navigate densely populated urban areas and to function in rational ways. Frequently, though, I seek solace through prolonged solitary escapes into wilderness areas. Consequently, I developed a new set of skills suited to the natural world. A contemporary anthropologist would say that I now have two different kinds of life skills, each appropriate to the environment in which it developed. Attuning my mind to navigate these seemingly incompatible conditions requires ever longer periods of adaptation. What interests me is why this should be so, and what the implications are.

Over its evolutionary history the human mind developed many different traits. Eventually the drive to exercise control over what is around us became dominant. However, my attempts at control in solitary interactions with the natural world become blinding impediments rather than bearing any advantage. At some point I became aware that I often find myself feeling much more of what is around me than I can see.

This experience has changed the way I perceive all ecosystems, both around and within me. After all, my body is an ecosystem in itself and has only limited capability, like all other systems, to maintain stable conditions for the myriad of co-dependent life forms it must sustain.

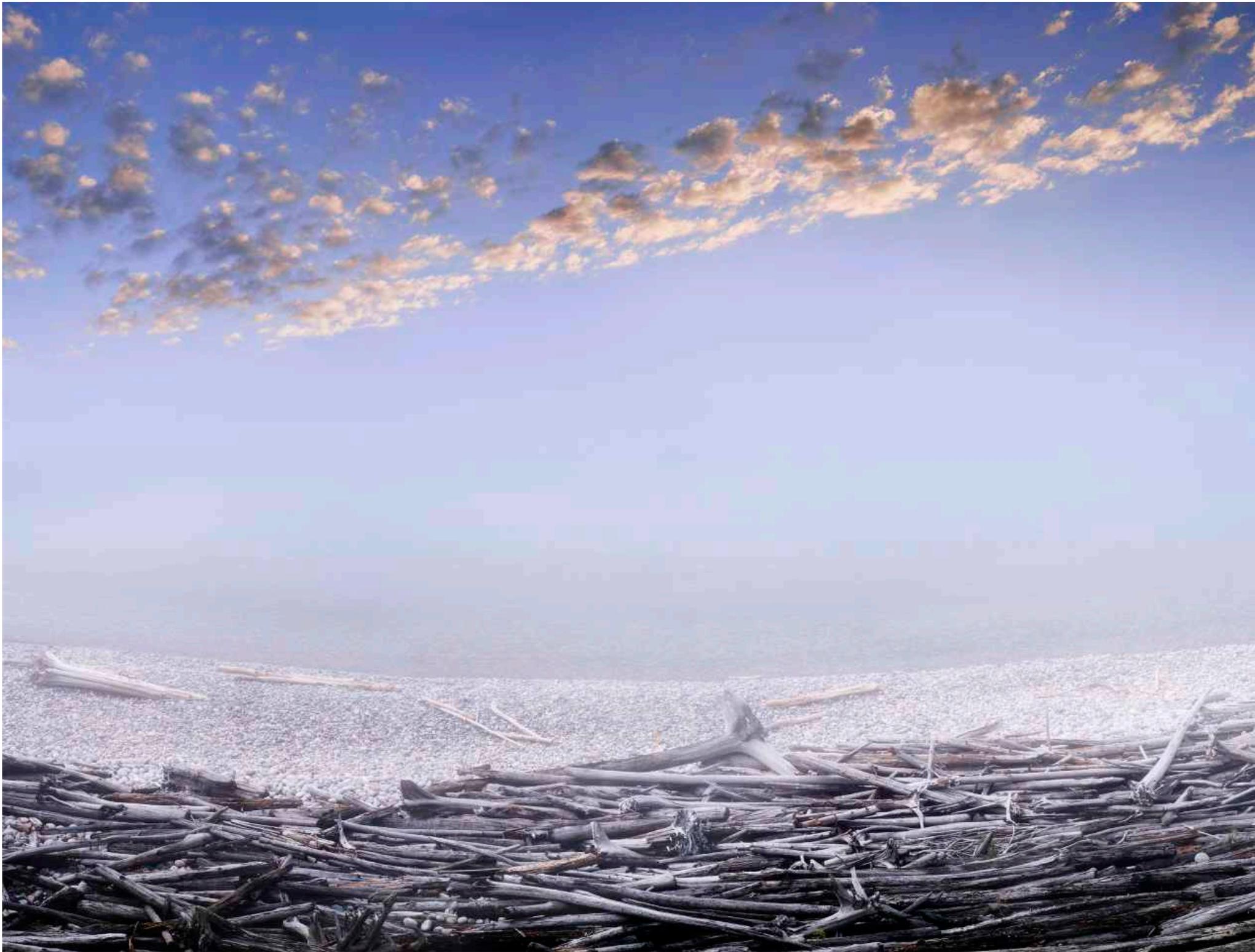
The collection of images for this exhibition can be seen as testimony to the process of my mind's evolution. The images may also serve as an invitation to pause for reflection. A reflection, after all, is that nebulous space where factual data and the mind's interpretation of the world meet.

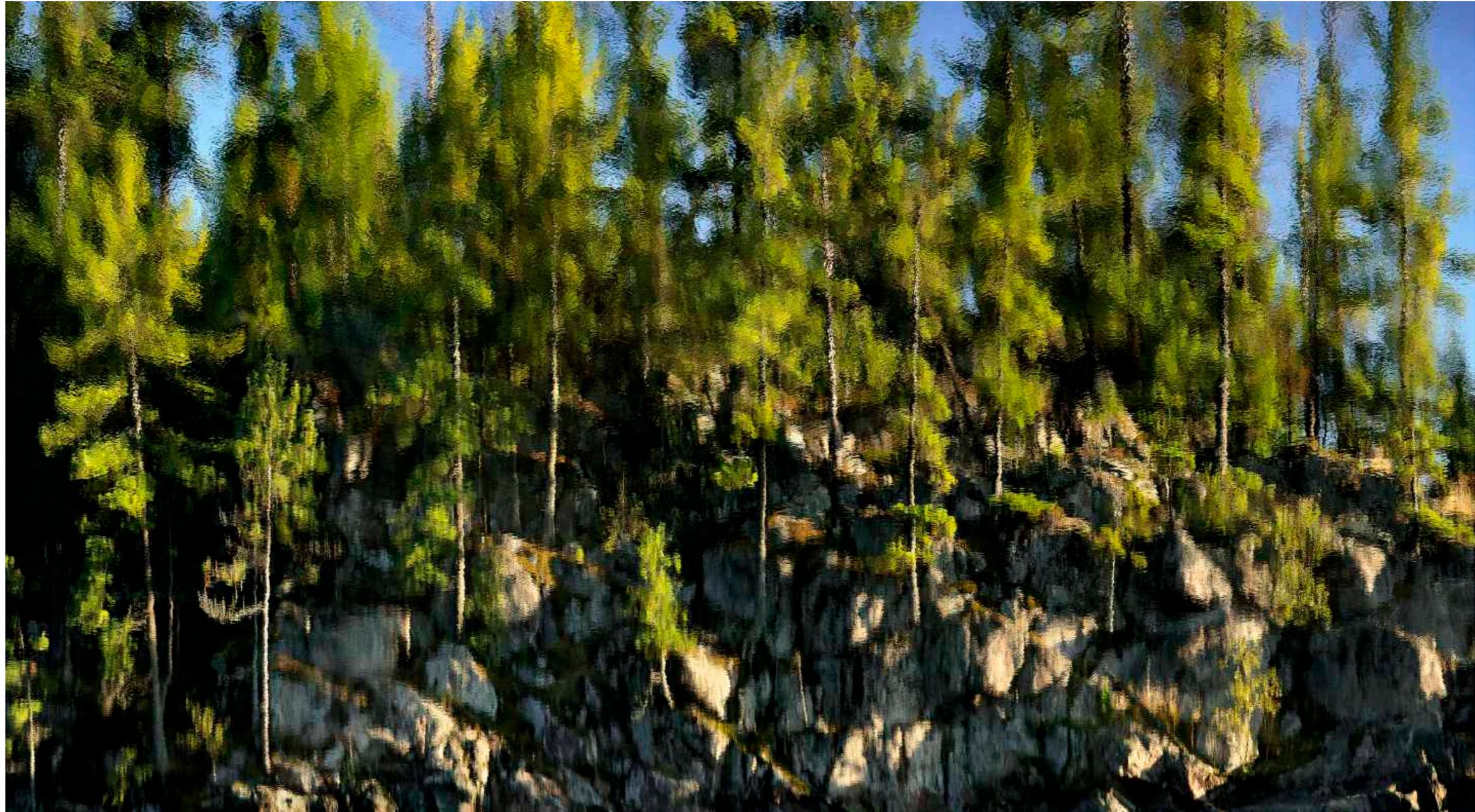


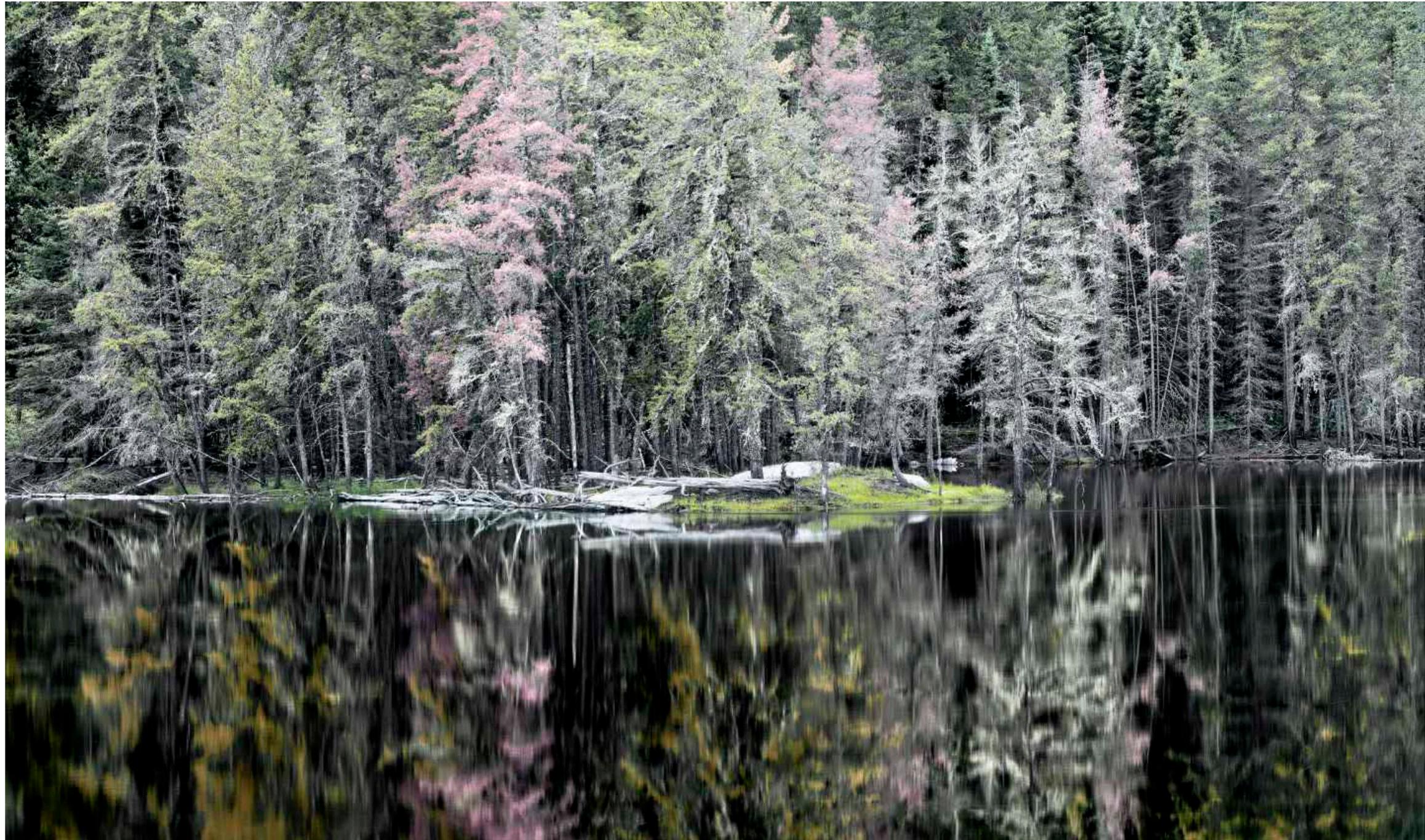












Over the years I have developed an annual ritual — a long, solitary evening swim.

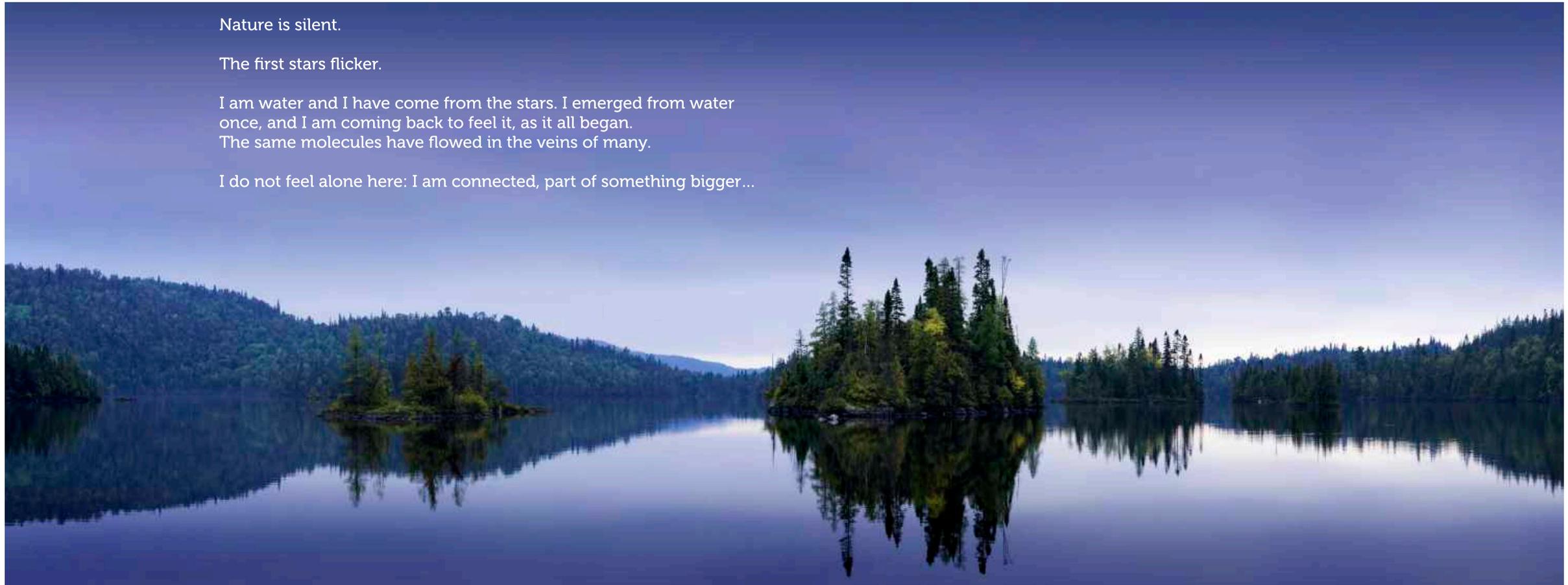
At dusk, I shove off from the outer islands on Georgian Bay, the north shores of Lake Superior, or from the edge of a northern lake. As I make long and slow strokes, stretching my body, I tune in to the cool flow over my skin and the warm flow in my veins.

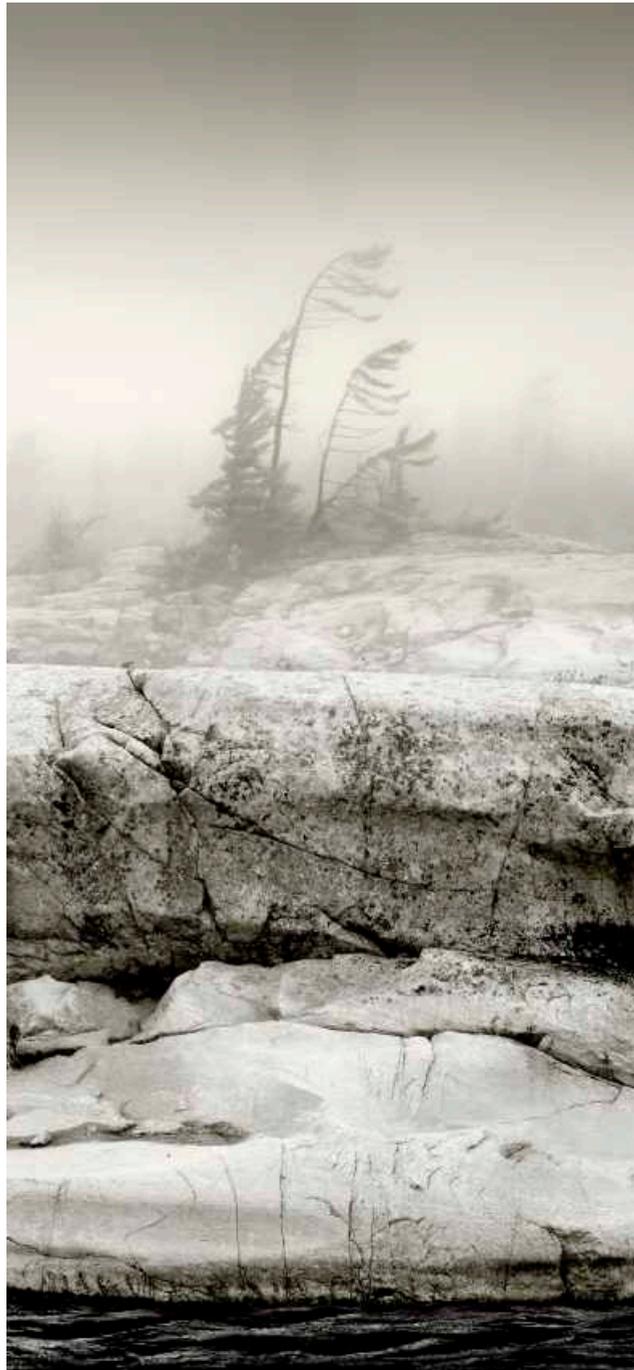
Nature is silent.

The first stars flicker.

I am water and I have come from the stars. I emerged from water once, and I am coming back to feel it, as it all began. The same molecules have flowed in the veins of many.

I do not feel alone here: I am connected, part of something bigger...





# *An Aqueous Mind*

## **The Path**

My first "Water Series" exhibition opened ten years ago at the Carnegie Gallery in my hometown of Dundas, Ontario. Closing the series in the same gallery seemed a fitting choice. I never intended to go afar to show the intervening projects, and all were exhibited in venues less than one hour's drive from home. This approach ensured an audience that had no problem identifying with the subjects of my work.

An exhibition, providing public exposure of an artist's ideas expressed in his or her chosen medium, is an opportunity for the artist to gauge the workings of an elusive space between an artwork and viewers' minds. This is where art actually happens. I scrutinize audience response carefully as an essential part of the artistic process. In this way, I register the vast range of interpretation as seen through their eyes.

The following summaries of my previous exhibitions illustrate the path that has led me toward An Aqueous Mind.

# Flow

*Exhibition Project 2008*

Life is defined by motion: flow of energy, blood, oxygen, nutrients, neuronal signal, ideas, etc. History is a flow of current subjective interpretations of recorded events in our past. My interest (by no means a scientific one) in these themes has drawn me to focus on interesting parallels between them which are quite relevant today.

Take the beaver, for instance. The beaver became Canada's official emblem in part because trade in beaver pelts accelerated the colonization of a large part of this continent and the formation of our country. It was the backbone of the colonial economy for over 250 years. It exemplifies the flow of different values from early missionary goals to new ones codified by the charter and operations of the Hudson Bay Corporation, the precursor of our modern economy's framework.

Only a change in European head cover fashion spared the beaver from total extinction. As the population of beavers rebounded, effective controls of water flow were restored. So were the processes of plant life re-colonizing the Canadian Shield's massive rock surface, the most effective mechanism of carbon capture and sequestration on the surface of our planet.





Spring at Ontario's Everglades Ed 8/9 2008



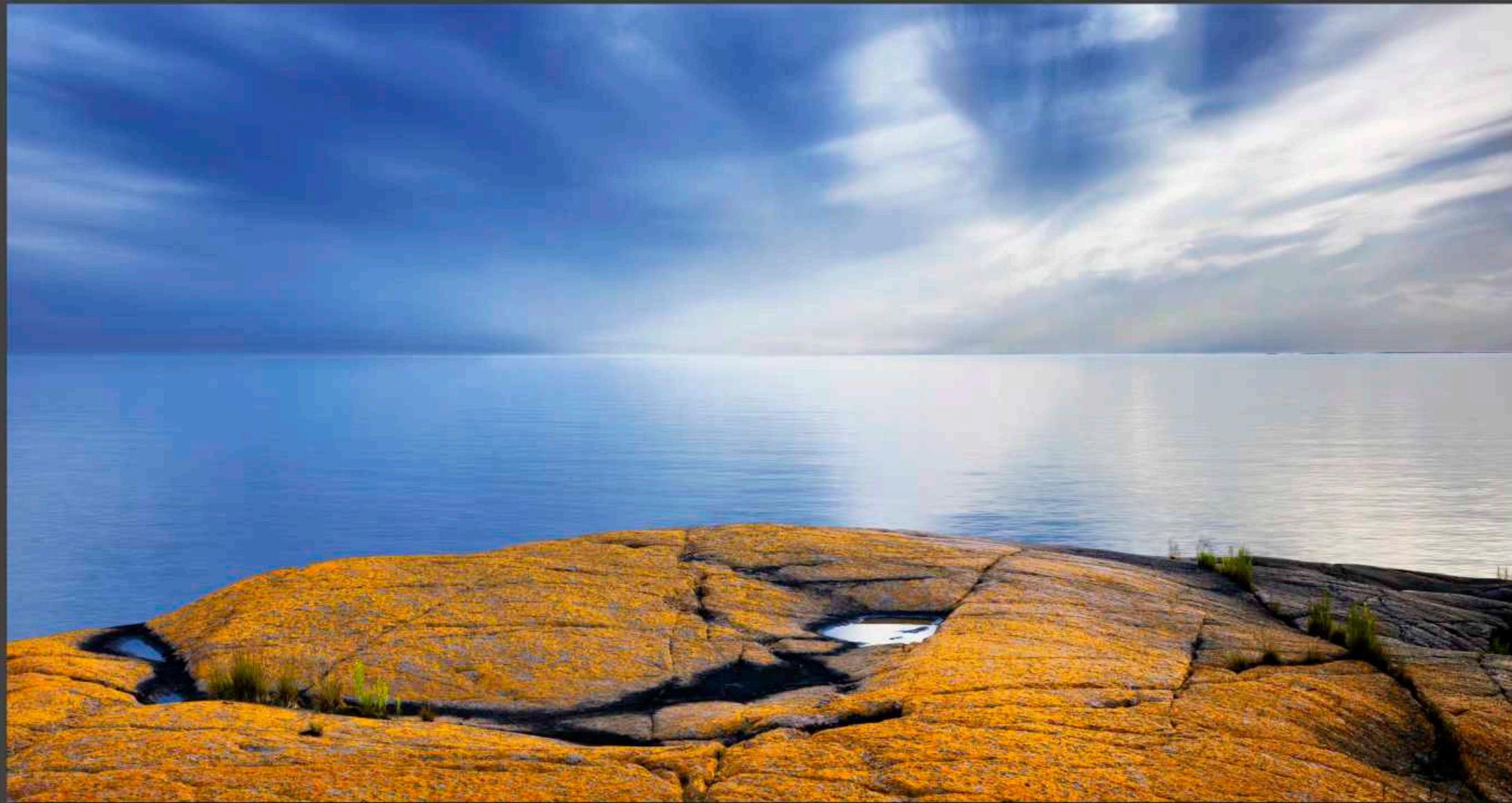
## Continuum

*Exhibition Project 2011*

I have indulged for a few years in occasional periods of cottage life, a favorite pastime for so many Canadians. Sitting at the water's edge, we allow our minds to drift into areas of transcendence, placing ourselves into contexts that elude us in our daily lives.

While there, I often think about time. Not in the sense that brainy scientists compile on the pages of wise books; nor the beginning and end of time viewed from my own life perspective. It is more about presence. About how I perceive things happening around me now, with the barrage of daily news and other reports competing for space in my brain, and about how I define my views about the future.

In these rare moments on a cottage deck we might possibly contribute something to global human consciousness at a time when our way of being has become humanity's profound ethical question.





Continuum Ed 9 2011



## In Full View

*Exhibition Project 2013*

Landscape is a term associated with visual and emotional perceptions of a people's land. Therefore it reflects the current disposition of a particular culture.

Paddling down the French River or along the shores of Lake Superior, I often try to imagine the anxiety experienced by generations of European settlers traveling the same routes, looking at the surrounding land and anticipating their destinations. Wherever they settled — Manitoba's forests or prairies, or the foothills of Alberta — they tried to preserve their distinct ethno-cultural heritage. Yet all had to develop an entirely new relationship with the land on which they settled. A new culture was forged through blood, sweat, and ownership of this new land.

I often pass through numerous abandoned vacation sites in northern Ontario: lodges, motels, campsites and summer camps. These make me think not only about my first family adventures decades ago. I wonder, now that more than half of Toronto's population is born abroad, what the odds are that Canadians can comprehend the full scale of the Canadian landmass, and its impact on the rest of the world, through our collective consciousness.

Can we sustain this awareness with everything it would entail?





Shield Study #4 Ed 6 2013



## Ebb & Flow

*Exhibition Project*  
2013

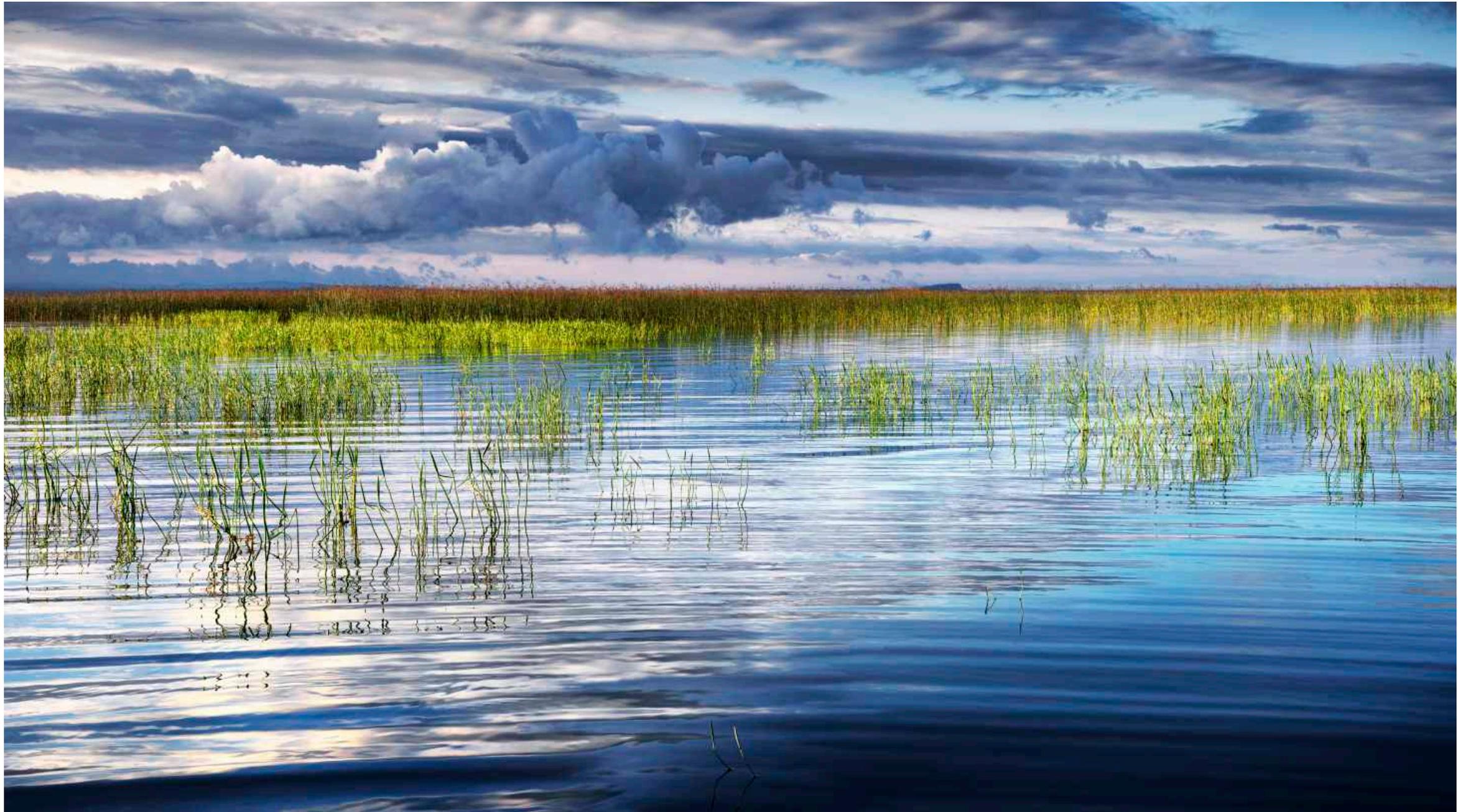
Most of us check the weather report every morning - temperature, wind, cloud cover, etc. Although we most likely don't think about it in such terms, we are in fact assessing the physicality of the world around us each day. This flow, equalization, conversion and redistribution of energy happens within the framework of knowledge we acquire or encounter in the course of our basic education. At a higher level, it might be argued that things we perceive as real are nothing more than a visual representation of basic elements we cannot directly perceive, and that all our surroundings are merely composed of different forms of energy. Still, all of that would be within the framework of our current store of knowledge.

I believe our most pressing difficulty is with understanding the living world. At present, what defines life for me is the self-sustaining process of converting one form of energy into another. Yet this does not explain the nature of life for me. The living world escapes definition not only because of its immense complexity, it does so as I try to apply the singularity of one being to a continuous process defined by a massive multitude of beings.

Yet the myriad symbiotic relationships I observe in nature seem to have one thing in common: a harnessing of solar radiation for the living. Simultaneously, forces act to reduce the damaging effects of radiation on the living world. Environments of the Canadian Shield reveal that this process has taken place and developed over a vast expanse of space and time. Periodically every glacial advance scraped volumes of carbon-rich biomass from the Shield's surface and deposited it in other areas of the continent. This not only "cleared the air" but improved the condition of top soil and enriched the below-ground biospheres.

Is there some hidden script for all of this? Is it possible to glimpse the formula, or a way of tapping into the natural world's collective consciousness? Am I missing something entirely?





Grassy Shallows Ed 9 2012



# An Aqueous State

*Exhibition Project 2015*

At times I don't think about water at all. For instance, I automatically open a tap when I'm thirsty.

Sitting at the water's edge, however, does something to my brain. It lifts it to some level of abstraction, allows it to connect otherwise scattered dots on different wave lengths. Perhaps this happens because the human brain is comprised mostly of water. Throughout human history, the mightiest and the most enduring civilizations have been built around sources of equitable water distribution for food production. Any ruler deviating from this principle was soon replaced by another who adhered to it. In this manner we moved to the top of the food chain, and prayed for water.

The commoditization of water during the industrial revolution wrought a fundamental change. The true cost of water and its pollutants was largely hidden from public view and the compounded environmental damage was never outright assessed or communicated. Only in the last few decades have the state of our water supply and the scale of its pollution been brought to public awareness. Does it mean we've smartened up? Ask people around you where the oxygen we need for every breath is actually coming from.

Water, in its three states of matter, is the fundamental medium for absorbing solar energy, then redistributing it and radiating it back into space. The concentration of a few gases at trace levels in our atmosphere is the ultimate tap controlling the balance of energy trapped on our planet. A number 24 digits long describes the units of energy additionally stored in our planet's water since the onset of the Industrial Revolution. This string of zeros is so long, our brains instantly relegate it to absolute abstraction.



An Aqueous State exhibition at Art Gallery of Burlington, ON

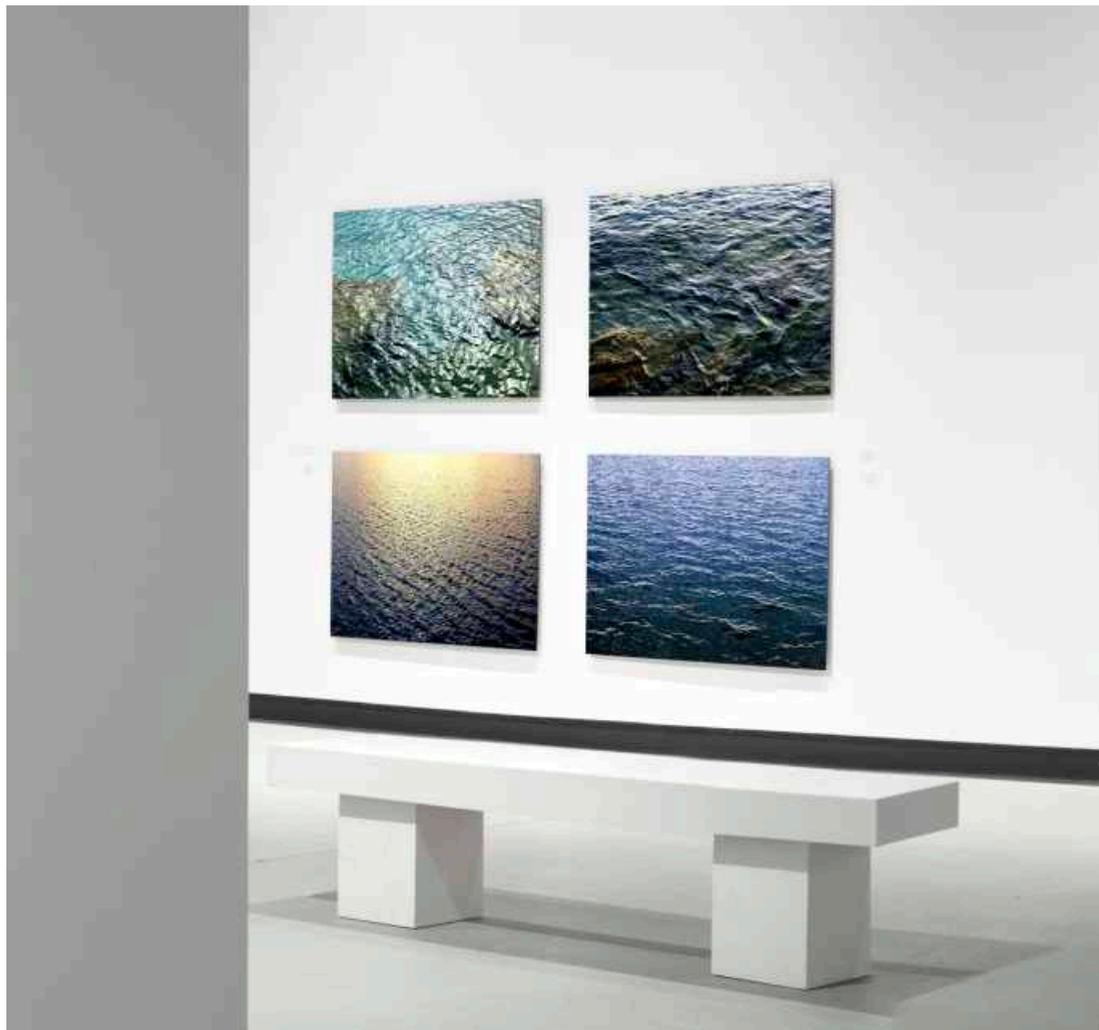


Vapor Flow Ed 6 2016



# *An Aqueous Mind*

Looking Back



I have reached an age when retrospective thinking could easily become a full time occupation. Although I can't expand my brain's storage or processing capacity, I can certainly reinterpret my data. Growing older and presumably wiser doesn't imply entitlement, but rather, obligation.

We don't choose the time or place we are born. My own formative years were dominated by sincere attempts to deal with the moral aftermath of massive social experiments that went dramatically wrong. Both Nazism and Communism emerged from noble ideas of social humanism, yet what they left behind are arguably the darkest pages in human history. A gradual adaptation of liberal humanism by progressive societies of the Western world made most of our lives better than ever before. However with this development we've assumed the right to be right, and as a result we have trouble finding consensus regarding mounting challenges to our civilization. It is pulling us apart more than ever, in the span of the last two generations. Our culture has yet to find a way to deal with these challenges as we enter times of great uncertainty.

The pliable human brain is shaped by one's life experiences, and is susceptible to what lies buried in the subconscious. It also has the ability to filter and evaluate what arises from these depths. To comprehend the world we live in and reconcile what is unfolding around us, time and space are needed for reflection, away from everyday noise.

I find my own on the water's edge.



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