

Underappreciated Beauty; The Work of Tracy Peters by KC Adams

Before I was asked to write a response to Tracy Peters' newest exhibition *Subconscious Terrain* at Martha Street Studio, I followed her on Instagram [@tracy_a_peters](https://www.instagram.com/tracy_a_peters). I was attracted to her aesthetically beautiful and compelling observations of landscapes; she uses composition and light to draw the viewer into her sensitive understandings of the natural world. In her exhibition, she impresses the beauty, benefits and complex characteristics of peatlands/bogs using the Canadian Sphagnum moss as her muse. The visitors to the gallery embark on a visual, physical and auditory journey to better understand why we should care about peatlands.

Walking into the gallery, you are faced with the piece called *Greenhouse*. Peters constructed a dome-shaped structure reminiscent of a miniature greenhouse, but it is a symbolic bog, a place of life and death. To understand this work, you need to know what makes up a peatland. It consists of the build-up of organic matter several meters thick, formed over thousands of years. With the lack of oxygen and the acidity of the stagnant surrounding water, plants such as Canadian Sphagnum are suspended in decomposition, like a 'pickled state.'^[1] Peters uses photographs of decomposing sphagnum moss, dull in colour, printed on a manipulated rock-impressed vellum surface to frame the outside structure. You are invited to crawl inside and lay down^[2] on a lumpy buckwheat-filled cushion meant to mimic the fluctuating layers of a bog with images of live sphagnum moss printed on its fabric surface. The inside lining of the structure is lively, with bright colours of the moss. Peters is metaphorically placing you under the surface of the bog in a restorative state, preventing the decomposition of our bodies and, in a way, protecting us from the outside world of commodity-driven realities.

The following piece is *Pressed For Time*, a video installation placed above one's head, that animates the scans of living sphagnum moss. Nearby, the negatives of the moss used to animate the video are displayed. They are laid out on a plexiglass shelf like specimens to be studied in a lab. In the video, Peters presents the scans in layers, like moving through a bog to highlight the undulating layers that make up this remarkable plant community. The animation starts silent but the audio eventually builds, like a distant blaze getting closer until the roaring flames mark our potential doom. The placement of the projection forces you to look up, physically situating you under the bog again. The imagery looks like flames licking amongst the frame; it reminds us how dangerous it is to drain a peatland. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN),

“peat extraction contributes to greenhouse gas emissions, annually releasing almost 6% of global anthropogenic CO2 emissions.”^[1] Manitoba has the second-largest distribution of peatlands in the country, and as of 2011, twelve companies have a lease to drain a portion of this land for extraction.^[4] This has devastating effects on the wildlife that relies on this habitat and on our own clean water. Drained peatlands can potentially burn underground undetected for years, and can contribute to fires and drought. As Peters says, “We need to protect these important spaces for the health of our planet.”^[5]

Lastly, you come face-to-face with *Bog Breathers*. You are physically confronted with these six feet tall, airy fabric panels; enlarged photographic prints of living sphagnum moss, hung so you can weave in and out as you move through them. These ethereal prints hang like heavenly creatures dangling to mirror our own bodies. What you experience is a floating community coming together to create an environment that supports life. Bogs are a lifeline to so many creatures such as migratory birds, frogs and moose. They act as a filter and provide a source of clean water. By enlarging these plants, Peters reminds us of their enormous positive ecological impact on the environment and our bodies.

With *Subconscious Terrain*, Peters introduces us to the intricate elegance of the Canadian Sphagnum moss. She is creating this work to encourage dialogue about the destruction of the peatland and presents us with a potential future: without intervention, our bodies and our world will be negatively impacted. Peters delicately proposes nurturing and caring for this ecological space—actions that are not valued enough within our capitalist world. What we do to these spaces directly impacts our own bodies—we must remember that the environment connects us all to one another.

^[1] RE-PEAT, “Peat 101”, accessed April 21, 2021, <https://www.re-peat.earth/peat-101>.

^[2] At the time of this exhibition, visitors cannot enter the *Greenhouse* due to pandemic safety measures.

^[3] IUCN, “Peatlands and climate change”, accessed April 21, 2021, <https://www.iucn.org/resources/issues-briefs/peatlands-and-climate-change>

^[4] James D. Bamburak, “Manitoba Peatlands”, Province of Manitoba website, Manitoba

Geological Survey, published June 13, 2011, Banburak, J. D., (2011). Manitoba Peatlands, Manitoba Geological Survey. <http://www.manitoba.ca>
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^[5] Tracy Peters in conversation with the author, April 18, 2021.

About the author:

My nêhiyaw name is Flying Overhead in Circles Eagle Woman, my artist name is KC Adams. I am an artist, educator, activist and mentor, specializing in social activist art. My focus is on the dynamic relationship between nature (the living) and technology (progress). I create work that explores technology and how it relates to identity and knowledge.