

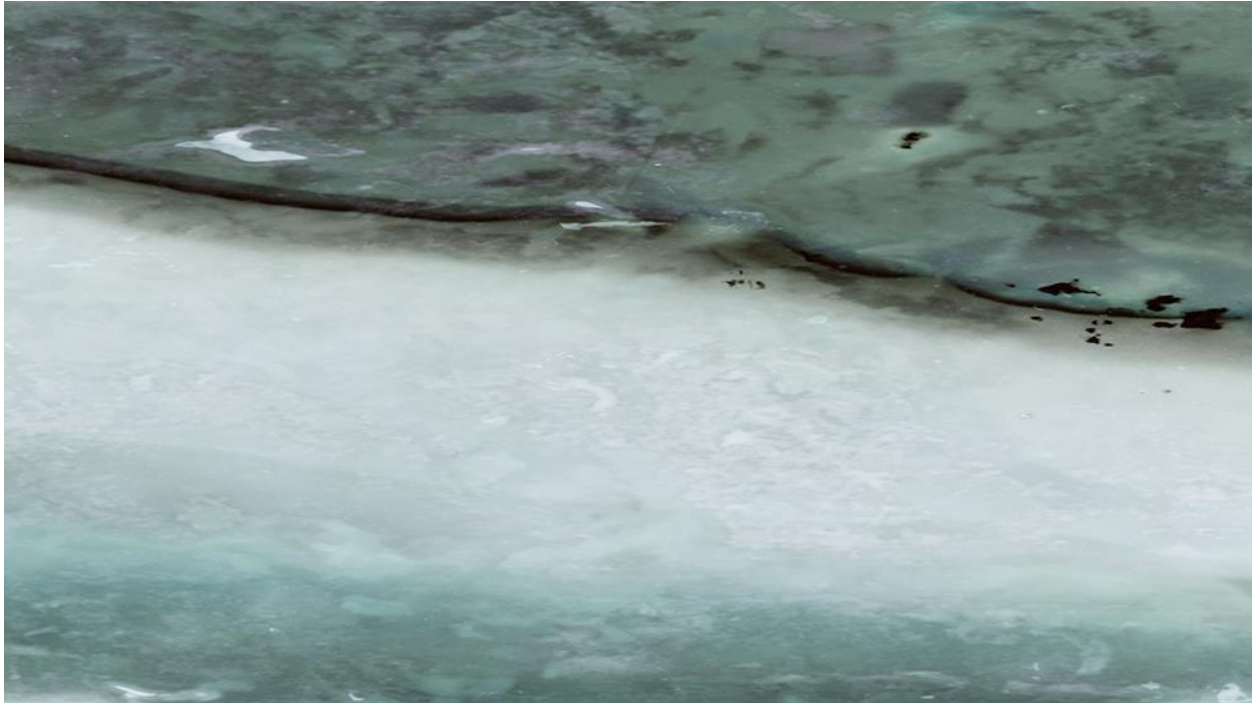
Winnipeg Free Press

Multidisciplinary artist focuses work on sparking conversations about fragile ecosystems

Nature offers fertile ground for artistry

By: [ALISON GILLMOR](#)

March/03/2020



16mm film immersed in blue-green algae has the effect of creating gorgeous 'micro-landscapes'. (photo supplied by artist Tracy Peters)

Multidisciplinary Winnipeg artist Tracy Peters is drawn to threatened habitats, often on the shifting borders between the human-made and natural worlds. She's part of a wave of contemporary artists addressing one of the most pressing issues of our time — the cataclysmic changes brought about by human impact on the Earth.

At this First Fridays' Art Talk/Art Walk, we'll be discussing environmental art, a growing movement that offers, as Peters suggests, lots of "depressing information but also the possibility of hope."

As an artist, Peters is attracted to water, rocks, trees and moss. She also engages with natural processes — light, weather, space and especially time — to record changes in eroding landscapes.

"My biggest influence is nature itself," she explains. "I try to access the voice of the places I spend time in.

"You start to have a better understanding of what's going on when you see the changes going on over time. You can't just go to a place and have things figured out right away."

Some of Peters' early work looked at abandoned structures being reclaimed by nature and at barren construction grounds being overrun by invasive plants. SHED started with an old decaying grain shed in her Charleswood neighbourhood that she observed for over two years. As part of her multimedia installation, Peters used photographic images of a forest floor cut into thin strips to make nests, a reference to the barn swallows that made their homes there.

Peters has also created mixed media works that subtly respond to the shorelines of Lake Winnipeg, raising issues around flooding, erosion and changes in water quality.

She has embedded light-sensitive paper into a stone beach to record the effects of climate, crafted sandbags printed with photographic images of rocks, and soaked 16-mm film in algae to create gorgeous "micro-landscapes."



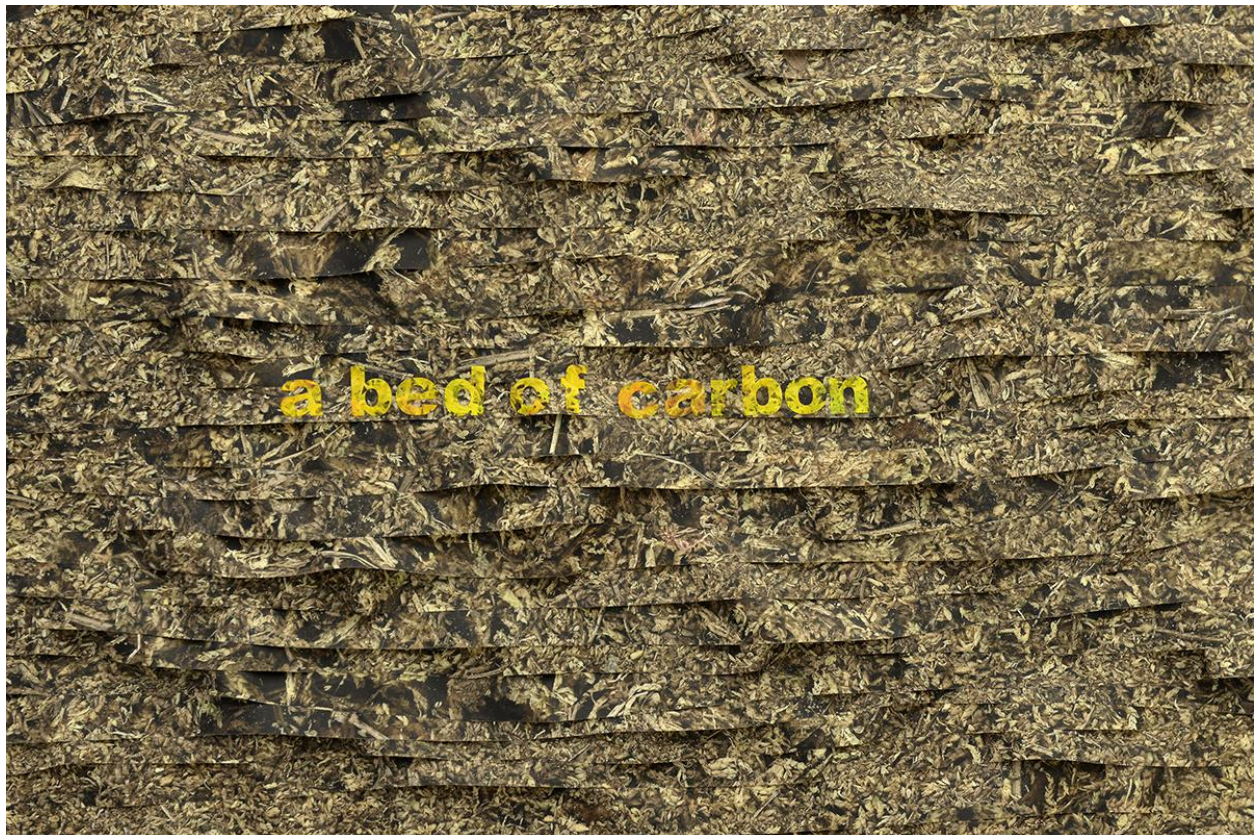
Tracy Peters' "Shoreline" is a video of waves projected onto sandbags printed with digital photographs of stones. (Photo Ernest Mayer)

Currently, Peters is exploring peat bogs and the practice of industrial peat mining here in Manitoba. Though bogs don't get as much media attention as the rainforest, they are complex and ancient ecosystems. Building up at the rate of about a millimetre a year, they take millennia to develop.

"Bogs are sometimes considered wasteland, and they're not wasteland," Peters says. "They are extreme carbon sinks. They can absorb up to 25 times their dry weight in water, so they're flood mitigators. And above all, they're habitats for all kinds of wildlife and plants and insects.

"I feel it's our responsibility to protect them as they protect us," she says.

Peters has created "bog awareness ribbons," partly a gentle jab at politics as fashion accessory, but also a serious message about a crucial local environmental issue that many Manitobans don't know much about.



Tracy Peters' 9'x9' installation displays digital images of peat moss and living moss printing on fabric (detail)

She has also created massive photo-works that show the Sphagnum moss that thrives on the surface of bogs. Environmental groups often use polar bears, pandas and tigers — sometimes called "charismatic megafauna" — to grab the public's attention, but it can be hard to raise awareness about smaller, less sexy elements of threatened ecosystems. "Anything tiny doesn't have significance for people," Peters explains. "Part of my project is to make giant images of moss."

Peters recently participated in Earthed, a five-week residency at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity in the fall of 2019 that brought together environmental artists from across Canada and around the world, as well as visiting lectures by scientists and researchers.

"I came away feeling very emotional," Peters says. She was alarmed but also energized.

"Environmental art is so much about truth, and truth can be depressing. I was learning about things I didn't know about, and it was intense.

"But there was also a lot of positivity going on in our group. And doing something is a good thing."

Discussing art's role within the larger environmental activist movement, Peters says, "I'm not a scientist or a preacher. I make the work, and then people will experience it however they experience it."

What art and artists can do, Peters suggests, "is offer time and space for people to maybe start to think about these issues."