

Tracy Peters: Littoral Landscape



Print on demand publication of the exhibition *Tracy Peters: Littoral Landscape*
presented at Gallery 1C03, The University of Winnipeg
from March 1 – April 7, 2018

Curated by Jennifer Gibson

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Cover image: *Shoreline*

Back cover: *CHOKÉ* (above) *Shallow Deep* (below)



Introduction

Gallery 1C03 is pleased to present this publication to document *Littoral Landscape*, a solo exhibition of new mixed-media installations by Winnipeg artist Tracy Peters that investigates ever-shifting shorelines of Lake Winnipeg.

Originally a photographer working in traditional darkroom methods, Peters has gained recognition for her immersive studio practice in which she carries out multi-sensory experiments in constantly changing environments. These result in site-responsive exhibition installations. Over the last three years, Peters has become particularly interested in time-based exchanges between natural and human occurrences and their effect on littoral landscapes. In 2015 she undertook a residency at Derry, Northern Ireland where she explored the north Atlantic seacoast. For a second residency Peters studied Miami's oceanfront. The past two years have seen her focus closer to home. Between April and August of 2016, she made several trips to a remote shoreline site north of Hecla/Grindstone Provincial Park in Manitoba. While there, she used audio, video and light sensitive photographic paper to record changes at a limestone beach beginning with spring thaw and continuing as weather conditions evolved over the course of the following five months. Last summer, Peters shifted her concentration further south on Lake Winnipeg's western edge to the area of Dunnottar and the seasonal pole piers that cottagers and the municipality insert along the shore.

Littoral Landscape offered gallery visitors an immersive experience with four sculptural and videos installations that use photographic processes as their starting point. Peters' colleague, writer and artist Willow Rector, herself having created photographic works that focus on Lake Winnipeg, is well-positioned to write a response to this exhibition. Rector has crafted a thorough and sensitive interpretation of *Littoral Landscape*, revealing many layers of meaning behind Peters' works.

From the silent sentinels that make up *Pier*, to the intimate viewing experience that characterizes *Shallow Deep* and *CHOKe*, to the sweeping and mesmerizing panoramic *Shoreline* installation that fills the gallery's back wall, Peters weaves a common thread throughout her practice. Her curiosity compels her to study the behavior and emotive power of eroding landscapes, whether they exist at the periphery where urban and rural environments meet or at the boundary of bodies of water and landforms as in *Littoral Landscape*. Her poetic works respond to the poignancy of these environments and urge us to consider our responsibility to protect them.

Jennifer Gibson
Director/Curator, Gallery 1C03

A Land to Light On: The Littoral Landscapes of Tracy Peters

*Nature is not something that can be seen by the eye alone – it lies also within the soul,
its pictures seen in the inner eye.*

Edvard Munch

*The wave paused, and then drew out again, sighing like a sleeper whose breath
comes and goes unconsciously.*

Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*.

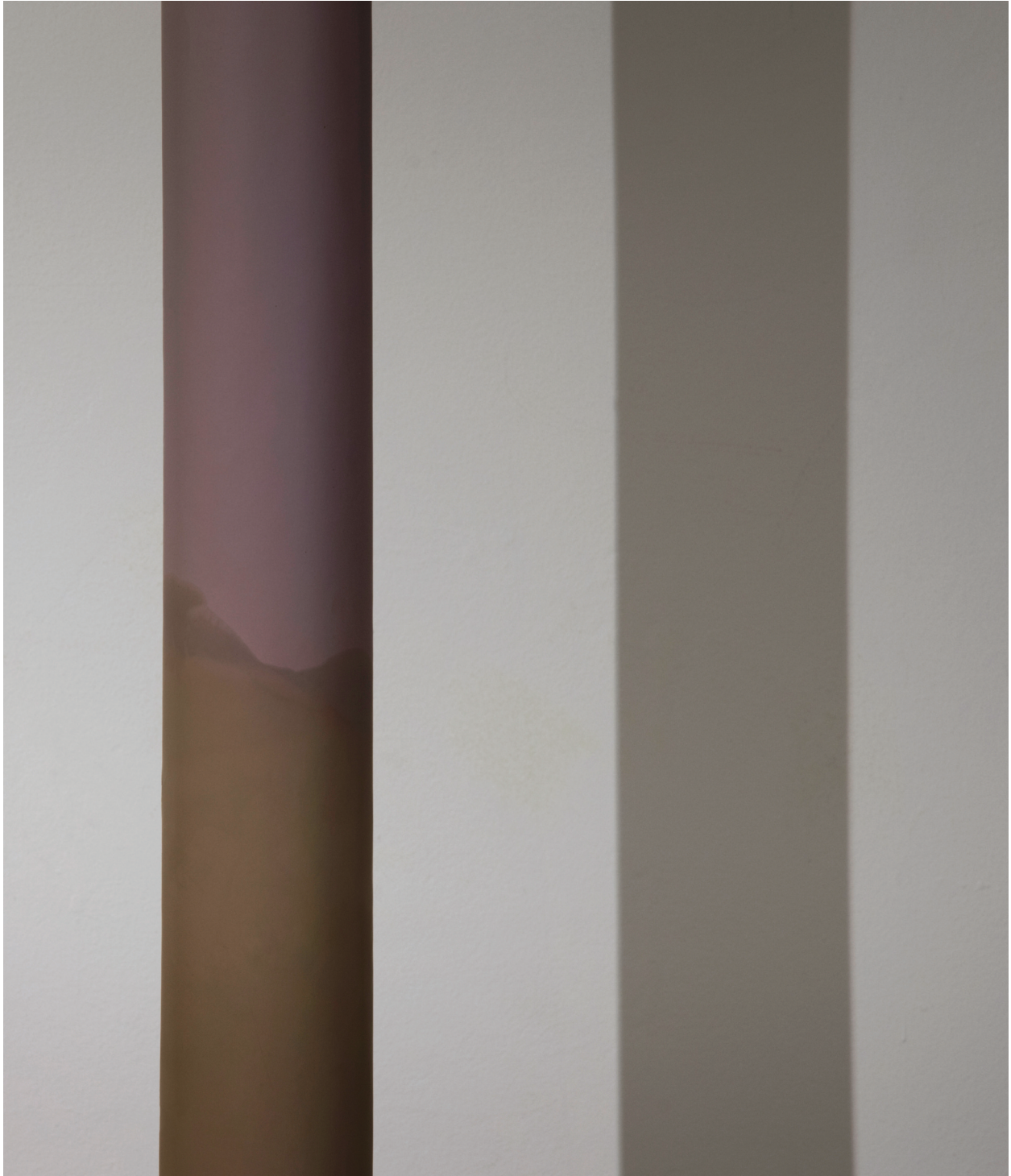


Have you ever wanted to alter time? Do you long to change an event in the past, or simply experience it once again? Have you ever been impatient with life in the present, wishing you could bound ahead and revel in the fulfilled promises of the future? Indeed, much of our daily lives are lived balancing on the thin edge between past and future, the present an ephemeral moment, constantly fleeting, running like water through one's fingers. These moments of transition are not limited to human experience, but also exist in the landscape. Littoral zones, "areas on the edges of a water body where the terrestrial environment transitions to the aquatic environment," embody both confluence and conflict¹. While they are regions productive of heightened biodiversity, this affluence also draws human interest, resulting in conflict between incursive human behaviors and natural ecosystems. In *Littoral Landscape*, Tracy Peters deftly walks the thin line between natural and incursive ecosystems by exploring the littorality of the shores of Lake Winnipeg. The result of a two-year study that incorporates equal portions of art, science, and photography, the exhibition is an eloquent meditation on the multifaceted relationship between humans and the Lake in the early twenty-first century.

This meditation begins with a journey iterative of Peters' numerous trips to a stone beach on Lake Winnipeg. Upon entering the Gallery, the viewer is immediately aware of *Shoreline*, a mixed media video installation depicting waves crashing upon a sculptural stone shoreline which spans the rear wall of the gallery.



The effect is arresting, hypnotic, and one's immediate desire is to reach that shore. *Pier*, a rectangular grouping of twelve, eight foot tall cylinders of fibre-based photographic paper located immediately by the doorway, offers a quiet counterpoint. The installation echoes the myriad of traditional wooden pole piers² that have dotted the southern shores of Lake Winnipeg since the early twentieth century. Peters is intrigued by the ways these piers re-shape the natural littoral zones of the lake, subverting the organic terrain which has adapted to repel incursive species by introducing a human-made littoral zone. How do these two littoral zones coexist?



6 Tracy Peters, *Pier* (detail)

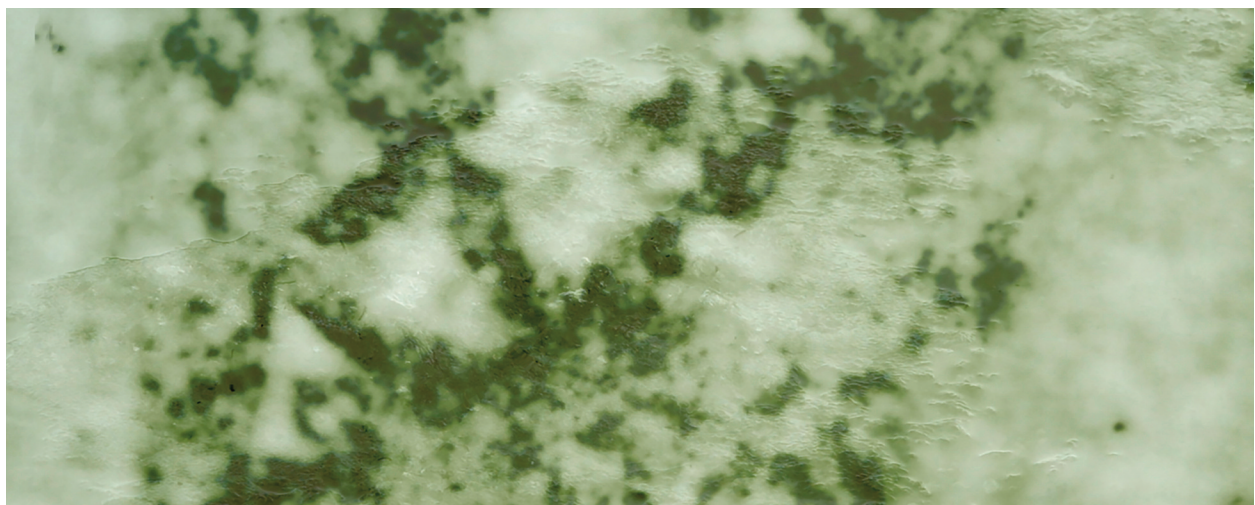
Peters' extensive research of human architectural intervention at Lake Winnipeg illuminates that relationship. In an interview, she reflects on the futility inherent in "transitional architectural systems,"³ like the pier, that erode as their functionality diminishes. *Pier* is a relic, a photographic document chronicling the erosion of memory and material objects. Hung to provide a tantalizingly clear path towards *Shoreline*, the viewer is free to walk and weave between the poles, an experience reminiscent of swimming beneath the original piers. However, it is there that the similarities end.

For an installation of its size, *Pier* is remarkably fragile. Although each pole bears the mark of a tideline acquired when Peters dipped it into the Lake, these records – the memories of wind and wave – are as ephemeral as the forces that engraved them. After obtaining these images, Peters abstained from 'fixing' the paper to permanently preserve them. Thus, the ambient light of the gallery will continue to alter the paper, metaphorically "linking the photographic materials and their watermarks to the forever changing conditions of the Lake itself."⁴

The gradual evaporation of the tidelines alerts one to another significant absence: function. Rather than rooting a strong and vibrant structure, these poles are made of paper and suspended in air. The solid wood of the original pier has been pulverized and pressed, leaving the empty 'skins' of the trees behind. The stones beneath their footings have shifted, the Lake has receded, leaving them sighing in the breeze, longing for the caress of water. Literally, this *Pier* cannot bear weight, cannot cross the expanse of space to reach the *Shoreline* opposite. It reaches out, seeking to penetrate the water once more, and fails.

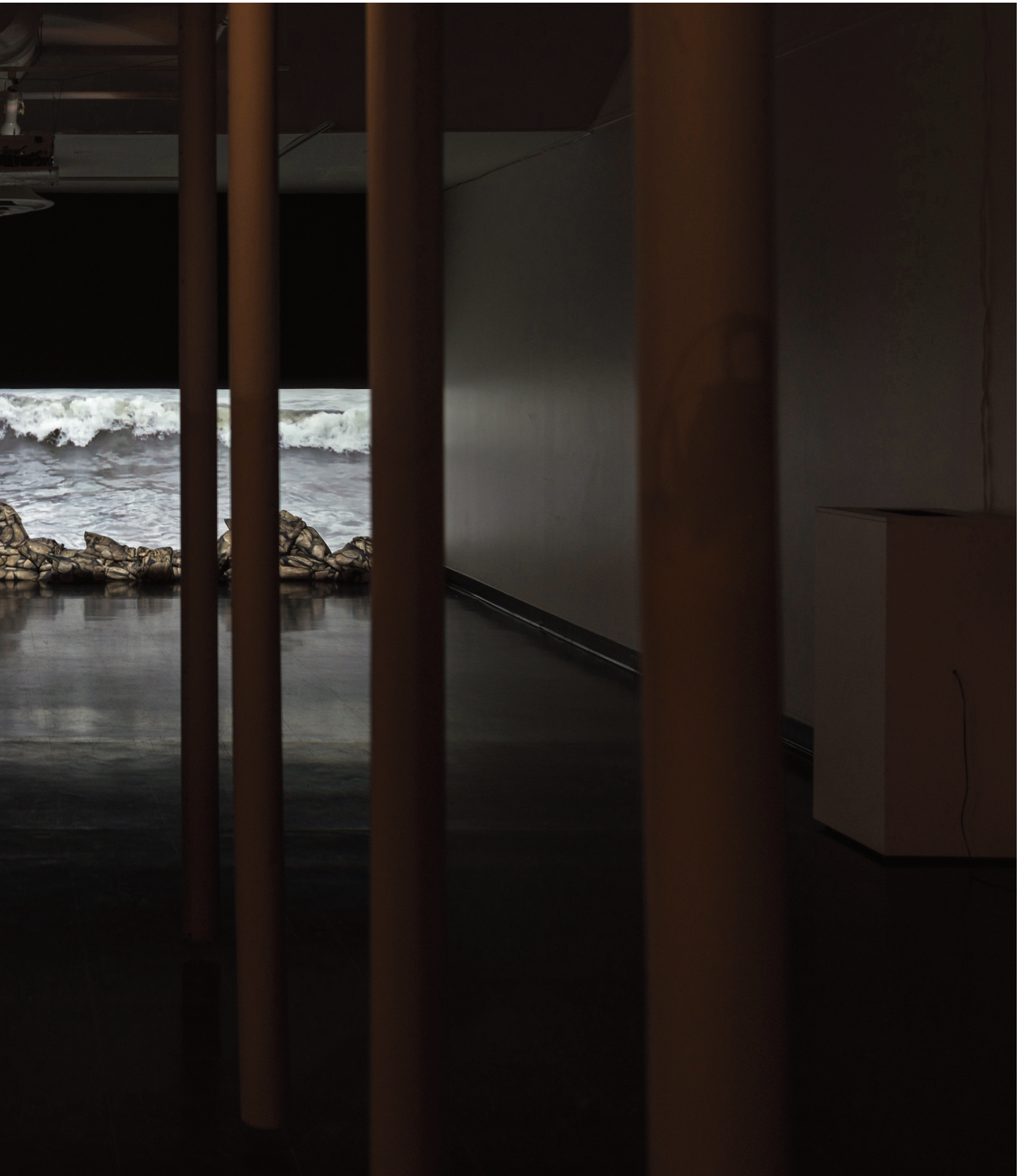
Other forms of incursion are more intimately explored in *CHOKE* and *Shallow Deep*⁵, which act as a littoral zone, spanning the gap between *Pier* and *Shoreline*. These two videos explore the porous relationship between human and geological bodies by documenting disruptions in the very intimate act of breathing. The aesthetic and installation choices informing these works create an oasis of privacy where it is possible to hear yourself breathe, just as your eyes and ears are also registering the "breathing" of ice and stone.

CHOKE is a poetic documentation⁶ of the Lake's suffocation, caused by an infection of its 'skin.' Throughout her artistic career, Peters has been continuously fascinated by the porosity of "architectural skins"⁷ such as walls. *CHOKE* builds upon the metaphor of wall/ boundary as skin by exploring it in the context of the littoral zone that envelopes the Lake in winter: ice. As the skin of ice ominously cracks and groans, beautiful, but deadly, algae blooms reach up from the deep, literally choking the ice, robbing it of all available oxygen, causing it to dehydrate, crumble and decay. The equilibrium of the Lake has been disturbed, its skin of ice gashed and gasping, exposing the invasive ecosystem roiling beneath. The video ends with a snap of black screen. The ice has broken; we are drowning in the fathomless deep.





8 Tracy Peters, *Littoral Landscape* installation view



This sense of immanent physical struggle is nowhere more apparent than in *Shallow Deep*. This continuous loop video displays a close-range image of a stone shoreline as water seeps up and down between the stones in rhythm with a recording of Peters' breathing. Given that one of the ecological functions of a littoral zone — especially one made of limestone — is to act as a filter, the parallel between the stones and anatomy of the human lungs is palpable. As we listen to the air rushing in and out of Peters' lungs, so too does the water. However, this process is far from smooth or serene; the flow of both air and water is ragged, hesitant, and rough. The beach becomes an emotive surface; strong visual and auditory textures elicit complex emotional responses in the viewer, including those of anxiety and fear. Despite the immutability of the stones, this body is not at rest; it is struggling for its very life.

The fight and might, the innate sublimity, of Lake Winnipeg is the backbone of *Shoreline*, a work of such power and strength that it literally propels itself off of the wall. Yet, its power is not comprised of anger or violence, it is the meditative power of a vast, ancient body breathing. As one initially sits in front of the installation⁸, the video and audio components of the work capture most of your attention. As the video loop advances, the waves become more turbulent, crashing through the wall, over the sculptural stone beach, and into the gallery itself. The subject/object division that traditionally characterizes the relationship between viewers and art is dashed upon the stones. The vast ridges of the stone beach carved by the Lake have invaded the gallery floor. The dynamic interaction between the two-dimensional cinematic waves and the sculptural stone ridges pushes and pulls the eye through sand, stone, and surf, rhythmically integrating viewer and art.

On a conceptual level, *Shoreline* is an elegant culmination of many of the core interests that animate Peters' art practice: porosity⁹, emotive surfaces, palimpsests¹⁰, haptic landscapes¹¹, and, of course, littorality. The rich conceptual ethos of this work parallels the nutrient-rich water washing over the stones towards us. Directing the viewer's eye at the precise location where water solidifies and land melts, Peters awakens us to a landscape of alchemical possibilities. The journey begun at the *Pier* culminates at the *Shoreline* with a clear and poetic exposition of the strength of embracing impermanence and change. Just as the stone shorelines of the Lake are crafted by the power of the water, paradoxically, they exist to protect the land against it. By metaphorically rendering this infinite cycle of creation and erosion, Peters finds the poetry in the landscape and in art.



In embracing the “challenge of turning the gallery into a contemplative and threatening shoreline,”¹² Peters has reshaped the contours of contemplative landscape art. While each of the four works in the exhibition “feature empty, or largely undifferentiated, spaces devoid of human presence,” their strength does not simply rely on the viewer to “enter into them, bring[ing] their own feelings, experiences, and imagination to bear in completing the works.”¹³ In *Littoral Landscape*, Peters not only studies the concept of littorality, rolling it over like a stone in her hand. Rather, she creates a landscape where littorality is enacted, is experienced, by the viewer, who is encouraged to bring themselves into the work, but is surprised to find that the old distinctions, the old thresholds, have washed away. The Lake is both subject and object in Peters’ art, as she successfully correlates emotion and motion. Standing at the *Shoreline*, an elusive band of light appears where wave embraces shore; land washes into body, body becomes land.

Willow Rector

1 Nora Casson. “Opening Remarks,” Opening of *Littoral Landscape* by Tracy Peters, Gallery 1C03, University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg, 01 March 2018.

2 The original piers were designed at a height of approximately 15 feet, tall enough to accommodate the fluctuating tides of the lake while safely ferrying swimmers and boaters across the rocky beaches and into deeper water.

3 For Peters, “architecture embodies both a structure and a living system.” She contends that “human built structures...like the pier...are always changing and breaking down in a process that corresponds with an eroding landscape or fragile ecosystem.” (Tracy Peters, email to the author, 19 February 2018.)

4 Peters, email to the author, 19 February 2018.

5 These two continuous loop videos are shown on 10” tablets recessed into 36” tall plinths, accompanied by headphones. The plinths are centered on each of the side walls of the gallery, equidistant between *Pier* and *Shoreline*.

6 This installation is a fictional depiction of algae blooms that occur when the winter ice melts and floods the dormant algae trapped below the surface with fresh oxygen and sunlight. It is the product of the merger of two videos. The first captured the sound of the ice cracking and the movement of the meltwater on the ice. Then Peters placed photographic paper on the ice and filmed it while the sunlight and meltwater made images upon it. The green tones of the film were added during the editing process. No actual algae was present. (Tracy Peters, interview with Willow Rector, Winnipeg, 06 March 2018.)

7 Peters’ interest in ‘architectural skins’ links much of her earlier work to *Littoral Landscape*. Arguably, this interest first became apparent in 2009 in her work entitled *Artifact: Aftermath* in which she explored the ways that burned camera film acted as a metaphor for human skin. She continued to deepen her exploration through *Existence* (2011); *SHED* (2012); *SHED Implant* (2013); *SHED, Unusual Migration* (2014); and *Tide Land* (2015). For Peters, the concept of ‘architectural skin’ highlights the links between “the body, buildings, and the natural environment,” as all of these architectural systems have outer layers of material that serve to both encase and protect inner space. As she discovered in her research for this exhibition, these skins also act as littoral zones, powerful sites of exchange, erosion, and growth.

8 Peters describes *Shoreline* as “a mixed media installation comprised of video, audio, and photo-based sculpture.” The sculpture consists of a series of sandbags, filled with glacial sand, that are stacked in a “disorderly manner” along the entire 18’ width of the gallery’s rear wall. The bags themselves are printed with “digital images of stones photographed on an ancient stone beach.” The overall effect invokes the stone ridges formed by the Lake at the water’s edge. The top half of the rear wall of the gallery is black, “suggesting infinite space.” A “looping video of turbulent waves” recorded by Peters “projects onto the lower half of the back wall, as well as the sandbags, to create a three-dimensional video installation.” (Tracy Peters, email to the author, 22 February 2018.)

9 Peters is very interested by metaphorical richness of the concepts of biological and geological porosity. In short, she describes porosity in regard to “every living entity that breathes,” as the natural process wherein “everything that goes in, comes out,” whether that is in its original form, or some other metabolized form. (Tracy Peters, interview with Willow Rector, Winnipeg, 06 March 2018.)

10 A palimpsest is a manuscript or piece of writing material on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for other writing, but of which traces remain. An excellent study of the influence of this concept on Peters’ *SHED* installation has been written by Mary Reid.

11 A haptic landscape is one in which the experience of geological features occurs through touch and bodily sensations.

12 Tracy Peters, email to the author, 19 February 2018.

13 Lochnan 29.

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List of Works

Measurements are height x length x width.

CHOKÉ, 2018

HD video (1:44 looped) in pedestal

36" x 15" x 15"

Shallow Deep, 2016

HD video (0:53 looped) in pedestal

36" x 15" x 15"

Pier, 2018

12 pier poles made of fibre-based photographic paper, polyethylene foam

each measuring 96" x 3.5" x 3.5"

Shoreline, 2018

digital photographs printed on bags of recycled polyester, sand, cable ties, video projection

approximately 48" x 224" x 12"

About the Artist

Tracy Peters is a Winnipeg-based multidisciplinary artist who examines the interactions between organic and human-built environments. In her site-responsive studio practice, she engages with time, space, light and weather to record changes in eroding landscapes. Many years of darkroom practice initiated her research into fragile materials and the emotive power of surfaces, resulting in immersive installations and videos that are largely based in the photographic process. Peters has been awarded grants from the Manitoba Arts Council and the Winnipeg Arts Council, as well as residencies that include a partnership between Void Gallery and the Social Studios and Gallery in Derry, Northern Ireland, the Deep Bay Residency program in Riding Mountain National Park, Canada, and the ArtCenter/South Florida-MAWA artist exchange program in Miami Beach, FL. Her work has exhibited across Canada and in Europe. Her website is <https://www.tracypeters.ca/>.

About the Essayist

Willow Rector is a Winnipeg-based visual artist, writer, and former university educator, who graduated with degrees in English Literature from the University of Winnipeg and the University of Manitoba. Her visual arts practice encompasses the seemingly disparate mediums of hand embroidery, photography, and installation. Her collection of hand-embroidered animal pelts, *TRAPPED*, has been the subject of solo exhibitions at the Yukon Arts Centre (2017) and Gallery 1C03 (2014), and has also been featured in various group exhibitions across Canada. She has previously written on fine art for MAWA and aceart's *Paperwait*. Her website is <https://www.willowrector.com/>.

