



Marlene Creates

Precise Moments in Particular Spots

An interview with Caitlin Chaisson



Marlene Creates is an environmental artist and poet living and working in a small patch of boreal forest in Portugal Cove, Newfoundland and Labrador. Her devotion to the natural world is evident in a tireless body of work that has been evolving since the mid-1970s, encompassing photography, video, assemblage, poetry, and multi-disciplinary events. Often using simple and unassuming gestures, Creates' work touches on complex ecosystems that are powerfully sensitive to the ephemeral and the fragile. While Creates' artistic process has been humbly attempting a form of self-erasure in recent artwork — authorship akin to that of a slowly receding tide — she has nevertheless produced a lasting and enduring contribution to the field of contemporary art.

This year, the artist's achievements are being celebrated with a major touring retrospective exhibition: *Marlene Creates: Places, Paths, and Pauses* organized by the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in partnership with Dalhousie Art Gallery.

Marlene Creates. A Hand to Standing Stones, Scotland 1983. 1983. [Excerpt]. Sequence of 22 black & white photographs, selenium-toned silver prints. Image size 8 x 12 inches each (20 x 30 cm). From the collection of Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

Caitlin Chaisson: You describe yourself as an environmental artist and poet. Could you begin by elaborating on what this position means to you, and how you have come to use it to define your art practice?

Marlene Creates: I came to call myself an “environmental artist” simply because I work with the environment. It turned out that I’m not a studio artist, though this is what I had been given to understand an artist does — you get a studio and some art materials, and then you make objects to match something you have imagined. But I work outside and I work in collaboration with the natural world. The reason for this is: the phenomena in the real world are much more interesting than anything I could make up, or anything I could imagine. I don’t think the world needs me to add anything to it from my imagination.

Almost all my work has involved a lot of uncertainty. What I have usually done is set up a situation to see what will happen. It’s an inquiry. This is what I mean by working in collaboration with nature. I like to let things unfold that are beyond my control. And what happens is always surprisingly richer than anything I might have imagined, predicted, or controlled. I’ve become very comfortable with leaving things to chance, and with my work being a question rather than an answer.

When I describe myself as “an environmental artist and poet,” I mean for the adjective “environmental” to apply to both artist and poet. My poetry is also very much about the environment. I don’t particularly use metaphor, and I’ve been described by some as a phenomenologist.

For many years I worked with what I call found text — much of it came from things that other people told me about their own places when I was a visitor to those places. I found what they said, while sitting across from them at their kitchen table, very poetic. Some of my best material has come from talking to strangers.

But since 2002, I’ve been working with my own place — it’s a six-acre patch of boreal forest in Portugal Cove on the island of Newfoundland. So now I have to come up with my own words, because I’m doing work in my own place. I often have experiences in the forest that I can’t photograph — because it was something either too ephemeral, or something involving one of the senses other than the visual. Particularly sounds. So I turned to words and started writing poetry.

CC: Language is present in so many of your works. You have often remarked how land is transformed into place through language, memory, and cultural practices. Conversely, you have also shown how these cultural practices are often derived from the specific landscapes and geographies that surround them. Could you speak a bit more about how you perceive the relationship

between nature and culture?

MC: I think we need a dramatic shift in our culture — and I mean culture in the broadest sense. I don’t just mean the arts; I mean our global consumer culture. As artists, I think it’s important for some of us to work against the grain, to address the radical social and environmental changes that are occurring. And I think we need to look at a broader constituency — older people, for example, and rural people and places.

We need to integrate nature into our culture. I think we need to realize that we actually *are* part of nature. And maybe if we realized that, we would be better members of the Earth.

CC: Your process seems motivated by a deep and rigorous understanding of the world through temporary gestures, or modest interventions, in the landscape. These gestures have been described as slight, light, dematerialized, traces, or impressions. Why has it been important for you to lighten the impact of your presence in the places where you work?

MC: I really like this question a lot. I find the transience of every being and every thing in this world very moving. It arouses a feeling of pathos in me. As an artist I could have tried to defy impermanence by, for example, using bulldozers to rearrange the land on a massive scale or perhaps making bronze monuments. Instead, what I’ve done is face the continuous flux and flow by observing it, yielding to it, honouring it, even celebrating it.

CC: This lightness coincides with a manifestation of change that is palpable in your process. Your experiments in ordering (for instance, in the arrangement of sticks or stones on shorelines or windy hilltops), and the subsequent re-ordering, or disordering, by the natural elements seems to express a reverence for the impermanence of human impacts. Is impermanence the right word here? Or, how are you thinking about these kinds of changes? In what ways can change be transformative?

MC: Impermanence, definitely. Everything is impermanent. I am certainly working in that area, trying to come to terms with that. The loss becomes more poignant when working with nature. Because, well, like you say, everything is constantly changing, and therefore, there is loss. One has to get used to a lot of change and impermanence.

CC: In some of your works, that sense of change is very immediate. For instance, *The High Tide as it acts upon an X England, 1980*...

MC: It is really amazing to me how many people mention that one! It really surprised me to find that central stone with the X again. That was done in England

on a beach. I found this large stone that had these two intersecting seams of white quartz that made the X. Then I just took some other stones I found around it and extended the lines and left. I camped overnight and went back the next day, and — this is a huge pebble beach in England — lo and behold, the high tide had come in and gone again and, by gosh, I came across that stone. I never expected this to be a two part thing, but there was the middle stone half-buried in the beach, even though the tide had re-arranged everything so much. It was like magic, finding it again.

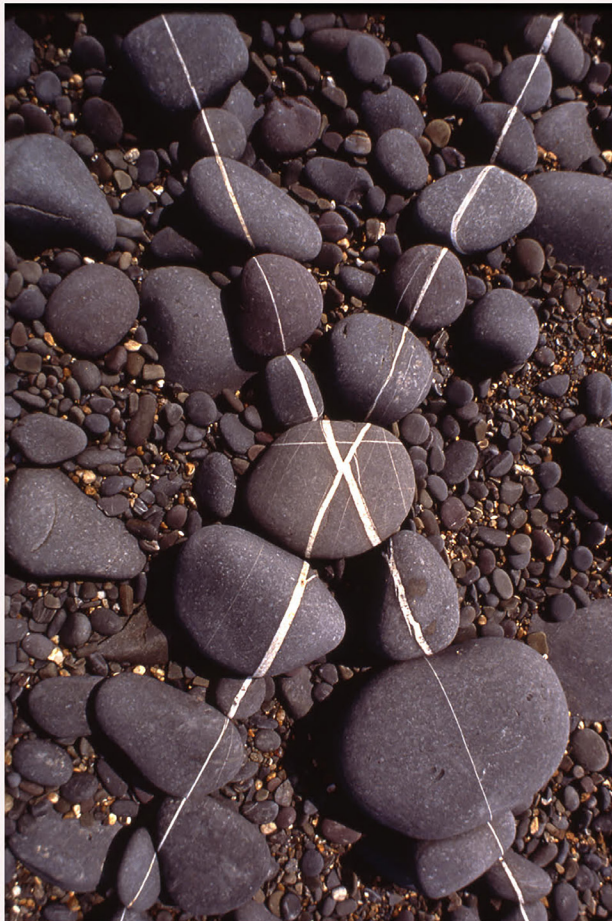
CC: Your work has a remarkable ability to situate a human subject in both time and place. This often happens through simple gestures that open onto a scale that sometimes exceeds comprehension. In *A Hand to Standing Stones, Scotland 1983* this relationship is pictured directly as your hand reaches out to touch an ancient monument. Or, in *About 8½ Minutes from the Sun to the Moon to the River to My Face to the Camera, Blast Hole Pond River, Newfoundland 2012*, the relationship between the light of celestial space and the reflective surface of the river below

you come together to register your portrait. What do you think is important about bridging these expanses? What do you think is important about negotiating the relationship between time and space?

MC: I'm so pleased that you saw the connection to time and space in my work. I often try to express my sense of being present at a precise moment in the deep time of the universe and in a particular spot on this incredible, beautiful planet.

In *A Hand to Standing Stones, Scotland 1983*, my idea was to contrast the moment when I was there to the thousands of years that each megalith has been standing since it was put in place by ancient people. In *About 8½ Minutes...* it has a similar impulse, but situating myself, as you observed, in a larger expanse — our whole galaxy — for just a fleeting moment.

CC: You seem to be thinking about precise times, and specific places, but with an acknowledgement that there are these long spans and expanses of histories. There is this sense of continuity, or enduring presence despite, or



Marlene Creates. *The High Tide as it acts upon an X, England 1980. 1980. From the series Paper, Stones and Water (1979–1985). Diptych of azo dye (Cibachrome) colour photographic prints. 13 1/4 x 8 3/4 inches each (34 x 22 cm). From the collection of Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax. Photo: courtesy of the artist.*



because of, these fleeting moments.

One of the more ordinary ways that we find ourselves located in space is often through public signage. Vernacular signage either directs our attention or regulates our behaviour. Your work has taken up a thoughtful and expansive study of these kinds of signs, and the language used within them. Could you speak a bit more about this?

MC: I think we tend to assume that public signage is fairly generic. But in the decade I spent documenting found signs, I worked in several provinces in Canada and I found that most of them are, just as you say, “vernacular” and very local. They are not generic at all. One of my favourite examples is a roadside sign I came across fairly often as I was driving around Saskatchewan in 1999 that simply says POINT OF INTEREST. I’ve never seen that sign anywhere else, though I think you could put it anywhere and it would be true!

I find the insertion of language into the landscape on these signs a very rich area for thinking about the connection between nature and culture.

CC: Do you think land can speak back to us? And if so, in what ways? So much of your work is responsive, or dialogical. There is a real conversation between yourself, the artist, and these places you care so deeply about. How can we better hear the land and how does that conversation unfold?

Marlene Creates. About 8½ Minutes from the Sun to the Moon to the River to My Face to the Camera, Blast Hole Pond River, Newfoundland 2012. 2012. [Installation view and 2 excerpts]. Pair of pigment based ink-jet photographic prints. 33 x 42 inches each (84 x 107 cm). Photo: courtesy of Paul Petro Contemporary Art.

MC: I think the most significant communication that is going on is not from the natural world to us, but between non-human beings. This is something that science is just beginning to discover. For example, it used to be thought that trees were competing with each other for light and nutrients. It turns out to be just the opposite — the relationships are symbiotic: older trees are communicating messages to younger trees to actually help them. These are voices of wisdom. So, if land “can speak back to us,” maybe these are the kinds of things we can learn from it.

CC: Right, it is actually presumptuous to assume the natural world would want to be speaking with us directly anyways. Maybe it is more important that they are having these non-human conversations with themselves.

MC: There is this whole area called biosemiotics, which I know sounds — well, it sounds like a big thing. But, it is a big thing! It is incredible the communication that is going on between things in the natural world that we are just beginning to have an inkling about.

I have something I’d like to add. A recent study suggests that Earth may be a one-in-700 quintillion planets in the universe. That’s a 7 followed by 20 zeros. In other words, planet Earth is miraculous. And the odds that we humans exist are even more improbable. So I find it very distressing that our species does not value Earth more and take better care of it.

CC: Your recent work has started to incorporate a wider audience than some of your earlier, more solitary actions in the landscape. In both cases, whether by yourself, or with a small audience, there seems to still be an importance attached to the personal and intimate experience of place. What are some of the differences between working alone and working with a small public? And just to go back to this idea that it is nothing short of a miracle that we are on this planet — we inevitably have to find a way to work together to survive. Is this part of your strategy? What kinds of connections are you trying to make?

MC: I don’t think any of us can experience place other than in a personal and intimate way. This became clear to me in the late 1980s when I was working with memory maps that were drawn for me by other people. It often happened that different people drew a map for me of the exact same place — a place they may have lived their whole lives. But each of the maps was remarkably different from the others, even though they were representations of the same place. That’s because everyone has a different experience, therefore perception, of a place.

The events in The Boreal Poetry Garden that involve a small audience (about 25 people at a time) are organized around a different theme every year. I invite different collaborators to participate and they have included



Marlene Creates reading site-specific poetry in The Boreal Poetry Garden for the 2011 UN International Year of Forests. [One of 40 in situ live-art public events since 2008, and ongoing]. Photo: Don McKay.

other nature poets, a wildlife biologist, a boreal ecologist, a geologist, acoustic musicians, contemporary dancers, and even a fire juggler. I think you can see from that list that I'm trying to integrate the arts and the sciences, so that they are not so separate. These are some of the connections I am trying to make.

The ecosystem that I live in is boreal forest, which I don't think is really valued in Newfoundland. I think people here are mostly concerned with the sea. There is a long history and many reasons for that, but I think it's time to appreciate the ecosystem that we actually live in more.

In responding to the land that surrounds me, I like having people come here because the artwork becomes more and more dematerialized. The on-site events are ways for me to move away from relying on gallery exhibitions in order to make my work public. I can do it in this interactive, participatory way.

CC: And it seems like the work, instead of being disseminated through the gallery, is disseminated as an experience of place that is remembered by each visitor in a personal way. How they see this landscape and experience the event, means it becomes a story once again — which is how place is formed.

MC: There is a definite social side to caring for the environment that is a big part of these events.

CC: What are some of the directions or orientations you see your work taking in the future? Where will you go from here?

MC: It's very timely to be doing this interview with you now because of the retrospective exhibition. Last year when I was preparing for it, I saw the arc of my work in a way that I never had before. I saw the early, "solitary actions in the landscape" as work done in the "first person". Then, when I worked with the memory maps that were

drawn for me by people I'd met, I saw that work as having been done in the "second person". The following decade of work with found public signs was a shift to an anonymous "third person". We don't know who made the signs or who put them there. Moving to Blast Hole Pond Road in 2002 and responding to the patch of boreal forest that surrounds the house where I live has brought me back to working in the "first person". You understand that this wasn't a grand plan or a strategy. One thing just led to another.

In 2015, I bought a digital trail camera that is triggered by the movement of wildlife and I installed it beside the Blast Hole Pond River. In my current and ongoing work, I'm not even taking the photographs — I'm leaving everything to the workings of nature. In other words, not in the first, second, or third person, but "no person".

I now have 3 of these trail cameras installed beside the river and so far they've captured mostly moose, but also fox, and snowshoe hares. In the final works, I'm pairing each photograph of wildlife with a celestial event that happened at the same time that the animal was caught by the camera. Because they're digital cameras, they record the moment that the animal passed in front of it. I have some technical astronomy handbooks where I can find information about celestial events that happened at that time. The title of this series is *What Came to Light at Blast Hole Pond River*. It's about everything being in constant flux — the movement of wildlife at ground level and celestial bodies overhead. I'm trying to say that these are two, just two, of the countless natural phenomena that occurred at the same time. I hope that these works convey what you noticed in some of the others — a bridging of the expanse between Heaven and Earth.



Marlene Creates. *From the series What Came to Light at Blast Hole Pond River, Newfoundland 2015–(ongoing). Diptych of colour photograph and text, pigment-based digital print. 24 x 66 inches (59 x 168 cm). Photo: courtesy of Paul Petro Contemporary Art.*

