ART ON THE

Third Bank of the River, 69" x 489", ceramic glass melting colors on glass, 2009. U.S. port of entry, Massena, N.Y.
ast Spring, Mohawk artist Alan Michelson stood inside the new U.S. Port of Entry at Massena, N.Y., and watched as a crew of Mohawk iron-workers permanently installed his federally commissioned glass artwork *Third Bank of the River* above the passport checkpoint bays. *Third Bank*, nearly six feet tall and more than 40 feet long, is a striking medley of four panoramic views of the St. Lawrence River as it forms the border between the United States and Canada.

The title’s reference to three banks of the river reflects the unique geography of the international border-crossing at Massena. In the middle of the St. Lawrence, between the United States and the Canadian mainland, lies Cornwall Island. It is within the international boundaries of Canada, yet it is also the sovereign territory of the Akwesasne Mohawk Nation. All travelers crossing the border there must traverse Cornwall Island and are for a short time the “guests” of the Akwesasne.
Michelson, 57, is well attuned to the issues of the borders that divide the Haudenosaunee. He is an enrolled member of the Six Nations of the Grand River, in Canada, and has many relatives on the Six Nations Reserve. He was born in Buffalo, New York, raised in Massachusetts and educated in New York City at Columbia College and in Boston at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts.

*Third Bank* is comprised of hundreds of photographs that Michelson shot from a boat and digitally joined into glowing, elegant bands depicting the Ontario and New York banks of the St. Lawrence. Michelson also included the shores of Cornwall Island – the “third bank” of his title – underscoring the presence and participation of the Mohawk Nation at the “Three Nations International Crossing.”

The work can be likened to a stained glass window, but was fabricated by Franz Mayer of Munich using a modern process in which the glass was imprinted with images sandblasted through a dot-matrix screen.

Probing both geographic and political boundaries, *Third Bank* is but one in a series of extraordinary works by Michelson that has featured rivers and charted their cultural landscapes. His first video installation *Mespat* (2001), acquired by the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in 2006, incorporated video of three miles of the industrial shoreline of Newtown Creek, the severely polluted stream that divides Brooklyn from Queens. The video, shot from a boat and then projected onto a screen of white turkey feathers, is a haunting, elegiac meditation on both the present and the past, underscored by the title *Mespat*, which means “bad water place” in the Lenape language.

Today, urban Newtown Creek is part of Michelson’s own “backyard”; he has lived in Manhattan since 1989. His evocation of the Lenape language in *Mespat* pays homage to New York City’s original inhabitants and is indicative of the artist’s approach to North American history, in which Native peoples are not only represented but are central to the narrative. Shot eight years later and 400 miles north, *Third Bank* continues this tradition.

The U.S. Port of Entry at Massena is one of 37 land ports that the Department of Homeland Security has built or significantly renovated since September 2001. Four times the size of their predecessors, and decidedly high-tech, their purposes are paradoxical. They must restrict access, exerting control over people, vehicles and goods; yet, according to the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA), which is responsible for their design and construction, they must also strive to present “a positive federal presence at the border.”
Plans for a modernized border crossing station at Massena progressed through a series of design competitions sponsored by the GSA’s Art and Architecture Program, which in the end awarded the commissions to Manhattan-based Michelson and the architectural firm Smith-Miller + Hawkinson. Third Bank is situated high on the west wall of the main passenger lobby, facing travelers as they wait in line below to clear their documents.

The arresting composition – two horizontal rows of gemlike purple, interspersed with three horizontal rows of luminous white – can be discerned even from a distance. When viewed up close, details emerge, and the purple bands resolve into a pair of rivers, bordered top and bottom by trees and the occasional bridge, building or factory. Prominent among these monuments are local landmarks such as the Alcoa plant at Massena, a brick-making factory and all four anchorages of the Seaway International Bridge. In Michelson’s unique design, adapted from 19th-century panoramic maps, river banks mirror one another across two channels, so that the four shorelines are alternately right-side up or upside-down. The white stripes are expanses of sky – dazzling cloudscapes that digitally merge to conjoin separate, gravity-defying horizons.

Third Bank recalls Michelson’s earlier, four-channel video installation TwoRow II, first exhibited in the New Tribe: New York exhibition at NMAI in 2005 and acquired by the National Gallery of Canada in 2006. For TwoRow II, Michelson filmed the opposing banks of a different river – Ontario’s Grand River – as it flows through the Six Nations Reserve in Ontario. The river holds a dual significance for Michelson, as it defines both his personal ancestral territory – his grandparents were born and raised on the reserve and many of his relatives reside there – as well as the collective territory of the Six Nations, promised to them by a 1784 proclamation.

By the terms of Great Britain’s Haldimand Deed, the Six Nations were awarded a six-mile tract of land on either side of the Grand River from mouth to source; today the river forms a boundary between the reserve and non-Native townships. In addition to the video, Michelson made an audio recording of the non-Native boat captain as he described the history of the river and its people to his passengers. Michelson produced a second soundtrack, recording stories of the river told by Six Nations residents. In the gallery, the two run simultaneously, competing and conflicting as narratives, but never quite canceling one another out. As if to further underscore the degree to which the two cultures – the Native and the non-Native worlds literally run at cross purposes.

TwoRow II is a meditation on the relationship between two nations, Third Bank literally pictures three sovereign entities: the United States, Canada and the Akwesasne Mohawk Nation. The region where these three nations come together has been described as one of the most complex international jurisdictions in the Americas. In order to convey the complexity of this territory, Michelson chose to navigate the river by boat, photographing the shores from that shifting perspective.

In foregrounding the river in Third Bank, and in printing his images on the reflective, highly interactive medium of glass, Michiel-
Mohawk ironworkers “booming out,” crossing a border between home in Canada and work in the United States, truly made the skyline of New York. The right to cross the border freely, established in the Jay Treaty of 1794, not only brought construction workers to New York, it also brought Mohawks on a long trek across their traditional territories that

Kate Morris is assistant professor of art history at Santa Clara University. She writes on topics in contemporary Native art, and is particularly interested in the depiction of landscape in both painting and installation art.
stretch across both sides of the border, the lands in upstate New York from which they had been separated by the Revolutionary War.

Today in film and new media, there is a growing world of Mohawk directors and new works on Mohawk lands that illuminate both the borders being crossed and the life of contemporary Mohawk communities.

Before the dispersal caused by the colonial invasion and wars in the 17th and 18th centuries, the Mohawks were located mainly in what is now New York State along the middle Mohawk River Valley. They also reached north into the Adirondack Mountains and south nearly to Oneonta. Today, the Mohawk people live in communities at Six Nations Reserve near Brantford, Ontario; at Kahnawake (formerly known as Caughnawaga) near Montreal on the St. Lawrence River; at Kanesatake in Quebec; at Tyendinaga in southeastern Ontario and on the Akwesasne land through which the international border runs, separating St. Regis Reservation in upstate New York from Akwesasne Reserve in southern Ontario and Quebec. They have also spread to many urban locations, including a famous community in Brooklyn, N.Y.

In the award-winning film Little Caughnawaga: To Brooklyn and Back, director Reaghan Tarbell documents the life of the ironworkers, focusing on the women of her own family and the communities they sustained in New York City and back on the Kahnawake reserve. Like Tarbell, director Tracey Deer looks inside the Kahnawake community. In Club Native, her latest documentary, Deer makes a lively examination of how Mohawk women are affected by Canadian law and community membership rules that limit them should they decide to marry men from outside the Reserve. She has turned this dilemma into a hilarious short fictional film, Escape Hatch, which follows the attempts of one young woman to find romance when non-Mohawk men are “forbidden” and almost everyone available at home is a cousin. This dilemma is not unique to this reserve but faces many who grow up and wish to raise their families on their own reservation, as shown by the highly animated response of the audience at the film’s world premiere in 2009 at NMAI’s Native American Film + Video Festival. Adroitly hitting the mark, Deer now has been asked to produce a comedy series based on this pilot for Canada’s APTN/Aboriginal Peoples Television Network.

Crossing the borders of time with a fresh Native viewpoint is the concern of another media maker from Kahnawake, digital artist Ska-wennati Tricia Fragnito. Currently co-director of the online community Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace, Fragnito has created an interactive digital art piece on the Internet that purports to be a web site from the future. TimeTraveller™ presents a virtual world in which Hunter Dearhouse, an angry young Mohawk in the 22nd century, teleports himself through time to revisit historical moments and reframe them from a totally indigenous perspective. It invites the visitor to create the possibility of meeting his own ancestor, across the borders of time and space.

Fragnito has been part of a team working at Kahnawake to conduct a year-long interactive media workshop at the Karihwanoron Mohawk Immersion School, a school offering an immersive environment in Mohawk cultural studies. Their goal is to increase young people’s experience of themselves as producers of culture and to help them develop for themselves the relevance of cultural knowledge. Observing the young people’s fascination with video games, the planners of the course encouraged them to adapt traditional Mohawk stories of creativity and heroism into a video world where the unexpected could happen.

The Akwesasne Freedom School, the longest running Mohawk immersion school, was founded in 1979 by parents concerned that their children be educated in an environment that focuses students on their community’s values, practices and language. Producer and director Paul Rickard (Cree) has specialized
in documenting how indigenous languages are being sustained in cultures within Canada and internationally. His recent documentary Kanien’Keha:Ka/Living the Language shows the work of the school and the families whose children attend. It offers a way to “defend the territory” by providing meaningful education grounded in the Mohawk language and in values held by the community.

Seeing that languages are very much endangered, but that there are still many adults fluent in tongues that the educational system does not support, a new generation of Native filmmakers is experimenting with creating films “in the language.” One of the liveliest of Native film organizations, the imagineNATIVE Film & Media Arts Festival in Toronto, launched the Embargo Collective in which topnotch young directors were invited to develop rules for each other to make short films. The one rule they all had in common was that all the films had to be in indigenous languages. Zoe Leigh Hopkins (Heiltsuk/Mohawk) imaginatively turned to her father, who is fluent in Mohawk, and created Tsi tka-hehtayen (The Garden). The plot hinges on the major difference that a slightly misunderstood pronunciation can make when the Gardener, a good humored trickster, comes up with unexpected results when he tries to fulfill people’s wishes with the seeds he plants.

The talented and widely acclaimed Mohawk photographer, painter, media artist and film director Shelley Niro has just completed her feature film debut, Kissed by Lightning. Starring Kateri Walker, Eric Schweig and Michael Greeyes, this love story infused by sadness, focuses on a young Mohawk painter living on the Six Nations Reserve. The painter Mavis Dogblood lives in a state of mourning for her prematurely deceased husband, a composer and performer on the viola, who told her the stories of the Great Peacemaker, the founder of the Haudenosaunee, or the Iroquois Confederacy. The film is about Mavis’ return to a fully lived life, but it also evokes a sense of Mohawk history and the grace offered in a return to the aboriginal territories. When Mavis is invited to show her work in New York, she and “Bug” King drive south together. They recognize that they are in the old Mohawk territories in upstate New York, where as Bug says, when you place your feet on the ground, you are connected to centuries of past generations. In fact this is the land of the 17th century Mohawk girl Kateri Tekakwitha, candidate to be the first indigenous saint in North America, and of the historical events of the Peacemaker and his spokesman, Hiawatha, generations before. In a wonderful reminder of the arbitrary nature of the international separation for the Mohawk, a band of warriors from the past slips through the woods. Perhaps they are searching for their people, moved to places like Six Nations. In the denouement, Mavis finds a sense of place in this expansive Mohawk territory, as well as success in the world of arts, and a confirmation of how to move on to the future.

Niro’s film, which premiered in October 2009 at imagineNATIVE, is being screened at a number of outstanding film festivals, including the American Indian Film Festival in San Francisco and the Santa Fe Film Festival. Niro adds a characteristic touch to her story. In this film, a great-grandmother who knows Mavis’s story and family connections advises Mavis to look forward to her future. For Niro, the elders are not looking backwards to past tradition, but are serving as vital links to ongoing history and the future. Like the Time Traveller, the ironworker, the young women loving their community and struggling with its constraints, the challenge of borders is to cross them.

Elizabeth Weatherford is director of the NMAI Film and Video Center. To comment on this article or for more information about the films and filmmakers mentioned, go to the FVC website www.nativenetworks.si.edu.