

FACTORY
MEDIA CENTRE

public works.

Featuring videos by Jordyn Stewart, Amanda White and Brad Isaacs, and Mark Prier online and in the Factory Media Centre window space, Public Works explores modified environments and regional landscapes, asking how these spaces are assigned value and given meaning.

“The more these are and must be closed, the more intensely precious does the common or forest, safe for ever from inclosure (sic), become. It is not only the suburban common, it is the rural also which is of value to us as a people.”

- Octavia Hill, “The Future of Our Commons,” in *Our Common Land (and Other Short Essays)* (London: Macmillan, 1877).

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Featured online and in the Factory Media Centre (FMC) window space, *Public Works* is a video series that explores modified environments and regional landscapes, asking how these spaces are assigned value and given meaning. *Public Works* references both the public nature of these works, viewed by those passing by FMC on James Street, and the municipal *Public Works* Departments that manage civic infrastructure and public parks. These departments are an integral component of the invisible labour that maintains these public spaces, while often contributing to the maintenance of regional spaces resting far outside of city centres.

The works in this series turn to these seemingly distant places, while considering the mediated, modified, and commodified nature of these landscapes. As Eva Hemmungs Wirtton notes in *Terms of Use* (2008), public parkland did not emerge in late-1800s England out of sheer state benevolence, but grew from shifting class relations as aristocracy could no longer afford the upkeep of vast swaths of land. This followed the repeal of legislation that had enforced the enclosure of common lands for centuries. Social groups like the Commons Preservation Society and activists like Octavia Hill (the Jane Jacobs of 19th century England) organized to make green-spaces available for the many, with calls for open spaces expanding the terrain of who counts as the public. Access to forests and the wilderness was not always a given within liberal societies---and continues to be limited by treaties and occupations that are at odds with Indigenous land claims---and state and market forces continue to influence our conception of these so-called natural spaces.

in conversation with jordyn stewart:

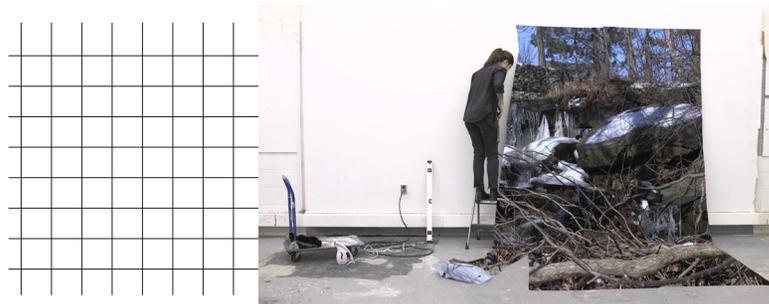
how is the constructed nature of this landscape important within this work, and how does the mediation of the chroma-key reveal or represent this construction?

js: The landscape that becomes revealed, throughout the duration of the video, is important to the piece because of its personal and structural significance. This landscape is located in a ravine between two subdivisions that sit along the Niagara Escarpment in Beamsville, Ontario. The waterfall exists because it's being fed by a flood basin from the subdivision above. In order to steer the water down to the lake the municipality built-up a creek that's designed to be reminiscent of the escarpment that surrounds it. The Town hired landscapers to edge the creek with large rocks and to design the waterfall to have different sections that allow the water to collect, swirl, and drip in a very romanticized way. Throughout the duration of the video, the almost picturesque landscape becomes revealed as the back-drop is installed onto the wall. By the third panel the viewer is introduced to the fact that the natural creek they have been watching unfold is actually fed by a large culvert.

The constructed nature of this landscape speaks to the notion of illusion. The landscape that we are seeing throughout the video is a facade, a replication of nature. Chroma-keying, also known as green screen, is a technique that is commonly used within the film industry to superimpose a different environment behind a subject. Removing the subject from the site they are actually in and placing them in an alternate landscape. Green screen techniques have an inherent use as an illusionistic device which is why I have chosen to utilize this technique in my work.

you mention a personal significance of this landscape; how does your relationship with it influence the work?

js: As a child, I would visit the waterfall quite often, I always found this site to be beautiful, specifically the sound of the water and the way ice forms over the rocks in the winter. Many of my works revisit familiar sites from my childhood and I often question the importance of the sites and how they have informed my understanding of the landscape. For me, the site in *Landscape Technician* was a space that informed my understanding of nature. It wasn't until adulthood that I realized that many of the landscapes I considered natural, the park, the backyard, and the waterfall in the ravine are all maintained by the municipality and manicured to be presented to us in a particular way. Through this work I poke fun at my own naivety, but also aim to bring attention to the fact that maybe others have also fallen victim to this illusion.



there is often a productive tension in your work, where something or someone--often yourself--seems out-of-place in the environment. what is the function of this tension, and what role does your physical manipulation of the landscape play in landscape technician?

js: It's true, something always seems to be a bit out-of-place or out of the ordinary. I really enjoy harnessing that in my work, and while it often comes intuitively, it's an element that creates an awkward humour or a strangeness to the work. I'd say the tension you're experiencing in *Landscape Technician* comes out of the act of me physically handling and installing the landscape onto the wall. This action is something that directly relates to the treatment of the landscape as an object, as something that you can have power or authority over, as something that you can control. And while this tension may be paired with humour through my inability to level the landscape and steam out it's imperfections, the work also aims to bring up more serious ideas around ownership, (in my case, as a Canadian with a settler identity), and our relationship with the landscape that surrounds us.

I appreciate that the artifice of the landscape hints at it being a potentially false sense of power or ownership.

js: It was interesting how the work evolved in that way, some people think we have control and power over nature and are above it, when really we are a part of it. We tend to forget that. But it's hard when Canadiana embodies this ownership through actions like, scenic tourist sites or using the symbol of a maple leaf on the flag or putting elements of nature on our national currency. This portrayal of national identity also impacts my understanding of my own Canadian identity, an identity that is in many ways controlled and fabricated.



Landscape Technician April 17 - May 17, 2020

js: *Landscape Technician* is a performance document that deftly uses Chroma keying technology to juxtapose the artificial and the real embedded within nature, place, and identity. My work takes a self-reflective approach in revisiting familiar sites that have informed my understanding of the regional landscape, revealing their human-made, maintained, and manicured qualities. In grappling with nature as a constructed experience, I acknowledge my skewed understanding of place.

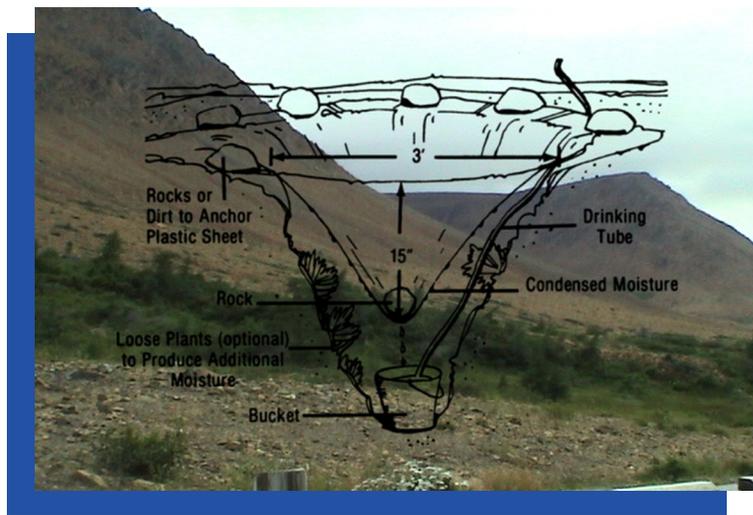
Dressed in everyday studio attire and with tools in tow, I mount three panels of fabric similar to a backdrop in a photography studio. The physicality of the fabric is apparent as the landscape is 'installed' before our eyes, handled like an object that I have complete authority over. Engaging in dialogues around control and commodification, I actively situate myself within this constructed landscape: as the performance concludes, it becomes clear that the 'natural' site is only an illusion.



in conversation with mark prier:

the video has a fairly matter-of-fact tone overall, but is infused with a subtle darkness through many of the images from the survival guide in the dressed or implicit in survival preparations. do you read a darkness here? is that an element that is of interest to you in this work?

mp: Personally, I do read a darkness in the juxtaposition between the survival diagrams and the video footage, but my dark sense of humour may be partly to blame. When I was editing S-U-R-V-I-V-A-L, many of the juxtapositions were chosen for their humorous effect. My clumsiness has made me wary of cliffs, so I paired a cliff face with a broken leg. I've often found poison ivy along the edges of fields, so a rural farm field was paired with toxicodendron species. Some choices were made more satirically — a large cottage in Ontario's Near North overlaid with an A-frame shelter diagram, and a suburban mall overlaid with a diagram for a foot wrap and an improvised shoe. A few of the combinations are metaphorical — mouth-to-mouth combined with a swamp, an emergency carry technique combined with a shot of a rural community — but the vast majority of the associations really are matter-of-fact, helpful even. Spruce trees overlaying a pulp mill. A litter stretcher over a hospital. An improvised float over top of a body of water.



That said, survival as a subject teeter-totter between optimism and pessimism. Survival guides present you with all sorts of information to help you come out the other side of a bad situation alive, but many of the situations they illustrate are so dire that it would be hard to remain hopeful, in my opinion. There's a huge gap between being able to identify basic ocean species and actually implementing that knowledge should you ever find yourself stranded on the ocean. It's one thing to know that you're looking at an octopus or a sea cucumber, and another being able to know how or if you should eat either one.

this tone shifts further as the background footage becomes increasingly urban. what does survival mean in this changing context?

mp: One of the ways I've framed my art practice is by approaching culture as a survival technique. Culture is how we survive. Many survival guides approach the topic of survival as a wilderness exercise, but the human-built environment is just as fraught with peril. Our everyday lives are filled with cultural adaptations to this environment, but it's invisible to us. In a more rural context, much of the information presented in a wilderness survival guide would be considered everyday stuff. How to hunt. Navigating in a forest. Identifying poisonous plants. I made this video while living in Newfoundland. The community I lived in was very urban-suburban, yet I could leave my apartment building and within five minutes find myself in an immense, dense forest criss-crossed with moose tracks. This experience was influencing my thinking at the time.

In a nutshell, though, a brick house in Toronto or Hamilton is just a more complex version of a basic survival shelter. The brick house is more permanent, but the human need for shelter is unchanged. Survival techniques are well-disguised in the human-built environment with layers upon layers of cultural artifacts, but they are still all around us.

survival itself is a funny term, with its origin being supervivere, meaning to outlive or live beyond. this has almost an otherworldly feel, and i wonder if this could resonate with the quiet discord resonating through this work?

mp: It could be — survival is truly about outliving a situation or a crisis. For some people, the situation or crisis could simply be the day-to-day.

It could also have something to do with the mechanical, matter-of-fact way that I am approaching this serious subject (despite my attempts at humour): "Here is a cliff. Here's how to climb a cliff. Here's a river. Here's how to cross a river with a raft and a rope. Here are some camping trailers. Here's one way to stack logs for a fire."

the rapid movement of the survival diagrams being cycled through can invoke the hurried turning of pages, though the mechanical sounds make this feel almost automated. why move through the images in this way, and what does the sound invoke to you?

mp: I believe I was thinking about the randomness of survival. Somehow, I ended up thinking about slot machines. The sound I ended up using is not a slot machine, but some kind of amalgam of mechanical sounds I forced together. I was trying to evoke what I thought a slot machine should sound like. "Here's your situation, pull the lever and see what you're going to try to do to survive."



some of the diagrams, such as the one depicting triangulation to determine the distance across a river, place an abstraction in direct relation to the representation of a river in the background. much of your work appears to express a similar interest in systems and structures, ordered or reordered in relation to "natural" materials or settings.

mp: Absolutely. I like to look at how things work, and I often want to reduce things down to a single unit that can be repeated endlessly to make something new and interesting. The repetitive format I decided to go with for S-U-R-V-I-V-A-L illustrates this tendency of mine quite well. The structure ensures that, despite the fact that the "narrative" changes from the first to last shot, each clip has been given an equal amount of time to be considered. No one of these images is more valuable than the others. As an aside, it strikes me that this is a very musical thing to have done. I'm also a musician, so this may just be how I think in video.

A video I'm currently editing examines beech tree genetics, and I have a feeling it's going to be a more meditative version of this format. The structure is quite similar to do to survive.

S-U-R-V-I-V-A-L

July 1 - 31, 2020

mp: S-U-R-V-I-V-A-L juxtaposes video footage of 'wilderness' (with increasingly visible traces of the human presence) with found diagrams and illustrations. Survival technique is pitted against the outdoors excluding and including humans.

As an artist, I explore the interaction between culture and ecology. Working from diverse sources, such as botany, folklore, geology, and history, I rearticulate these explorations into new artworks. I have collaborated with environmental conservation workers, cast seed for urban birds, started restoring an acre of farmland to the documented pre-colonial forest, and created large-scale sculptures reimagining suburban fenceposts. My current research investigates agriculture, genetics, restoration, invasive species, endangered species, and extirpation/extinction issues.



in conversation with amanda white & brad isaacs:

How did the focus of this work develop? Was the original intention to foreground bones and the mining activities that reveal them?

aw & bi: The project began in a more exploratory way. We developed this relationship with the Yukon Paleontology team in advance of travelling to Whitehorse and Dawson after reading about their work in the placer mines, learning that much of the ice age world lays frozen in the permafrost, and is unearthed during the gold mining process seemed so interesting and poetic and we really wanted to learn more. They were very generous and invited us to visit their lab and then join them on a few collection expeditions. Our original plan was to think more about cryptids, hidden animals, to blur fact and fiction and question knowledge of other species, but I think this work in the mines grounds the project in a way; at its core it is a metaphor for how disruptive humans are when we search for things. This is true for any extractive practice, including species collection and knowledge. The placer mining process, relative to most, is pretty sustainable, consisting of mostly small family operations who use water to dig, it doesn't take long for areas that have been mined in this way to regenerate. That is all to say that we certainly weren't trying to levy a critique of the gold mining that we were encountering, more so that the earth is being disrupted and moved and there are layers of disturbance and extraction happening; from mineral to scientific. There's also an interesting relationship between the gold and animal bones all mixed up together, that is relevant to how we assign value to nature, and what it means that people do that in the first place.



The format seems to move between portraits of bones and wider landscapes. How was the format chosen, and is there a significance to the relation to portraiture here?

aw & bi: It's more or less just the relationship between setting and subject. There's a story to the video, about the process of extraction. We see the environment, the permafrost melting, and then the bones which have been washed downstream from the site. And then it jumps forward to show the beginnings of regeneration. It's a cycle that happens over and over again.

Your interest in the cryptid seems to point to a broader mistrust of classification systems themselves. Is this the case?

aw & bi: The cryptid is something that is said to exist, but has not been documented by "science" if you think about what that means, it essentially describes the way local knowledges are dismissed, and there is some sort of authority on what is "true" when it comes to understanding more than human life. Cryptology fans would cite famous examples of this kind of thing, where some animals were dismissed as folklore, and then one day a scientist sees it, and lo and behold, it is real. The problem with the whole concept though is that, while this argument is made, the project really is to "find" such creatures and prove them real. Like bigfoot for example, so while cryptozoologists may question the authority of the scientist, they don't actually question it as a structure of knowledge. What we are interested in though, is the idea that things might want to or prefer to be cryptids or unknown, to have a more slippery identity and ability to fade from knowledge, we are also aware that the idea of categorizing species itself is problematic, it relies on the idea that there are few variations or individuals, that this is just the dominant way for humans to understand the world, but there are lots of other ways to understand things, and we want to explore those.

What is the role of fiction here, and your interest in representations that move beyond conventional scientific narratives?

aw & bi: I guess blurring fact and fiction also questions authority especially in this kind of documentary style imagery. It involves a denial of scientific truth as complete, but also the idea that the cryptid can use that fiction to hide in, to remain unknown. There are risks for a species to be known, and advantages to remaining hidden. One might be deemed valuable and harvested to extinction, or be classified as a pest, or even worse, "invasive", the lowest of the low.

Fiction also allows for a softening of the boundaries imposed by scientific description. Any scientist will tell you taxonomic systems are imperfect, but it seems more important that those lines are drawn rather than that they be accurate. The fiction allows you to incorporate other elements into thinking about plants or animals that would not normally be allowed.



It is such a beautiful moment when the video turns to the mastodon flower, which has a fascinating story to it. Why conclude with this flower, and what does it represent within the broader work?

aw & bi: We heard many stories of people encountering strange plants growing in the placer mines, appearing for a short time and then disappearing again. This plant, known as a Mastodon Flower in the Yukon, often grows in disturbed spaces, such as sites that have been excavated. It is believed that they grew from seeds preserved in a mastodon's stomach.

On one level the video is the story of the mastodon flower, showing the process by which the bones and other materials are released from the permafrost, and the subsequent regeneration of the land. But the land is still affected by the excavation, and hence regenerates into something different than what it was. It's not so much a scarring as in the case of other mining operations, but a different kind of shift, like with the idea that looking at something changes it. I always come back to this octavia butler quote in a lot of my work, that all that you touch, you change, and all that you change, changes you.

We Dug Through a Mountain of Gold to Find You

August 1 - 31, 2020

aw & bi: *We Dug Through a Mountain of Gold to Find You* was developed during a residency at the Klondike Institute of Art and Culture in Dawson, YK in 2016. It features activity in the placer gold mines that are located throughout the territory, where small crews (sometimes families) dig open pits and use water to melt the permafrost layer and extract gold. A bi-product of the process is the unearthing of ice age mammal bones, also frozen in the permafrost. A particular plant, known as a mastodon flower, often grows in sites that were excavated, and it was believed that they grew from seeds preserved in a mastodon's stomach.



This work is part of a larger collaborative project that looks at representations of plants through both scientific dissemination as well as popular culture, towards imagining alternatives to common modes of species categorization and description. In doing so, we engage with the concept of the cryptid; an animal or plant whose existence has been described but has not been documented by the scientific community. With this in mind we ask; what does it mean for a species to be 'known' to Western science? Is it possible to become unknown? Our guiding narrative is a mixture of fact and fiction based on fiction, science-fiction and vernacular stories as well as research and scientific documents.



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This publication content was produced by interviews between Michael DiRisio and Public Works exhibiting artists:
Jordyn Stewart, Mark Prier, Brad Issacs, Amanda White.

MICHAEL DIRISIO is a writer and visual artist. His recent work explores social histories and the construction of value, through photo, video, and installation-based projects. His writing has appeared in Art Papers, Afterimage, C Magazine, BlackFlash, and Public Journal, among others, with feature essays in upcoming issues of Esse Magazine and Espace Art Actuel. He was previously the Artistic Director of Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre and has participated in exhibitions at Rodman Hall Art Centre, Artcite, Museum London, and the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, with forthcoming exhibitions at Thames Art Gallery and the Workers' Arts and Heritage Centre. He has participated in artist residencies in Castellvi de la Marca, Spain and Reykjavik, Iceland, and recently co-organized the Art & Social Strata conference and artist projects alongside frequent collaborator Teresa Carlesimo.

JORDYN STEWART is an emerging artist from the Niagara Region. Working predominately in video and performance, her most recent work explores nature, place, and identity through the juxtaposition of the artificial and the real. Stewart holds a BA, Specialist in Art and Art History at the University of Toronto, joint program with Sheridan College. She is a recent MFA graduate from the University of Waterloo and was a recipient of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Master's Scholarship. Stewart has exhibited in such galleries as Trinity Square Video, Hamilton Artists Inc., Gallery Stratford and Idea Exchange. She was an artist-in-residence at the University of Windsor's Emerging Artist Research Residency, as well as with Hamilton Artists' Inc.'s Cotton Factory Residency Program. Stewart is currently the co-curator of Art Spin Hamilton and works as the Interim Communications & Marketing Coordinator for Oakville Galleries.

MARK PRIER is an artist who has exhibited in Canada, Mexico, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. He has received grants from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Newfoundland & Labrador Arts Council, and the Ontario Arts Council. In 2008, he travelled to Gotland, Sweden for the Brucebo Summer Residency; and, in 2012, he travelled to Crownsnest Pass, Alberta for Trap/door Artist-Run Centre's Gushul Studio & Collaboration Residency. Prier is a 2004 graduate of University of Toronto's Visual Studies program, and he also took part in HotBox Riverwood's mentorship program with Reinhard Reitzenstein in 2011.

As half of the electronic music duo hellothisisalex, Prier has played the MUTEK Festival in Montreal, done commissions for CBC Radio, and taken part in the National Film Board of Canada's Minus 40 project. Prier splits his time between Hopeville and Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

BRAD ISAACS is an artist and independent curator currently based in Toronto, Ontario. He holds an MFA from the University of Western Ontario and has exhibited at galleries such as the McMaster Museum of Art, the Ottawa Art Gallery, and Hamilton Artists Inc. His work in photography, video and installation investigates the complex relationships between people and nature.

AMANDA WHITE is an interdisciplinary artist working at the intersection of art, environment and culture. She has exhibited and published her work across disciplines with support from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council and the Toronto Arts Council, among others. She holds a PhD in Cultural Studies from Queen's University, MFA from the University of Windsor and BFA from OCADU.

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Page 2, photos 1,2,3: Jordyn Stewart, Landscape Technician, 2019. Still. Image courtesy of the artist.

Page 2, photo 4: Jordyn Stewart, Landscape Technician, 2019. Installation in Public Works Window.

Page 3, 4: Mark Prier, S-U-R-V-I-V-A-L, 2005. Still. Image courtesy of the artist.

Page 4: Mark Prier, S-U-R-V-I-V-A-L, 2005. Still. Installation in Public Works Window.

Back: View of Factory Media Centre at 228 James Street North, Public Works Street-Level Window. Credit: MJ Hwangbo