



CHRISTINA BATTLE

connecting thru grasses

OCTOBER 1 – NOVEMBER 21, 2020

EXHIBITION: OCTOBER 1 – NOVEMBER 21, 2020

VIRTUAL LUNCH & LOOK: zoom  OCTOBER 2, 1:00 CT

CURATORIAL STATEMENT:

The prairie habitat is one of the most endangered in Canada and only a small fraction of the original tallgrass prairie remains post-colonization. Despite years of over-cultivation, the grasses continue to hold the land together with their vast root systems.

Looking to tallgrass prairie ecosystems, as well as the technologies that map and reflect the diminishing biome, connecting thru grasses considers how we might both map and define prairie boundaries anew.

Ecologically, prairie landscapes are incredibly diverse; thousands of species coexist without distinct boundaries between communities. These plants with strong roots act as a metaphor for building community between Edmonton and Brandon, and in so doing, open up other possibilities for transcending borders, distance and relation.

Alyssa Fearon, Curator

COVER: Christina Battle, *Untitled*, 2020. Digital art.

OPPOSITE: Christina Battle, *Untitled*, 2020. Digital art.

connecting thru grasses

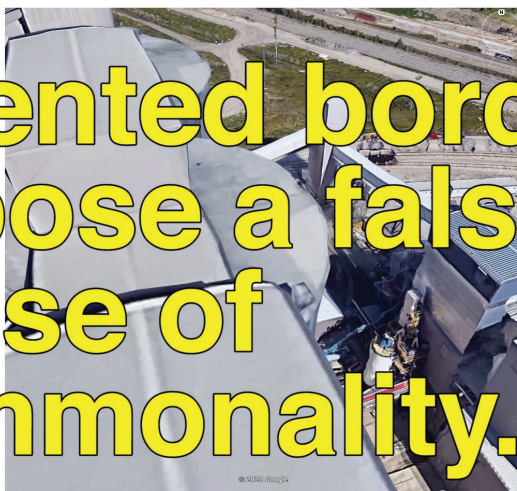
ESSAY BY LILLIAN O'BRIEN DAVIS



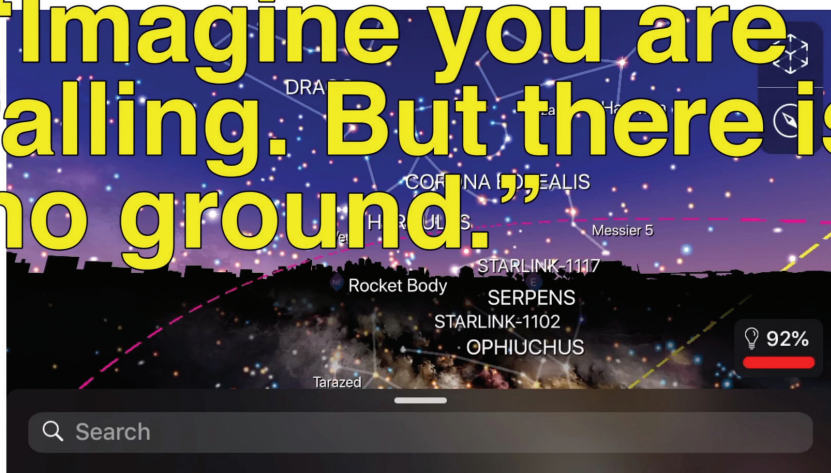
Launched on the cusp of the new millennium, the TERRA is a NASA satellite that has been in circular sun-synchronous orbit¹ since 1999.

Roughly the size of a small school bus, TERRA sees the earth in chunks 640 km wide, capturing data and constructs an image of the earth approximately every 8 minutes, as it passes overhead. However, recognizing the truth of a place isn't easy when shot from such a height.² There is a discrepancy between what the satellite captures and what it misses: images the satellites take of the prairies differ from what the reality of living on the ground, or the actual ecology of a location. While TERRA records a wide array of data including the amount

Invented borders
impose a false
sense of
commonality.



“Imagine you are
falling. But there is
no ground.”



ABOVE: Christina Battle, *connecting thru grasses*, stills from digital video, 2020

of carbon pumped into the atmosphere over an entire region, and the extent to which Earth's surface is covered with clouds and pollution in the troposphere³, it also reflects back to us an image of the earth and thus ourselves, unintentionally shaping our (mis)understanding of this land. In connecting thru grasses, Christina Battle uses images of the Prairies taken by TERRA to ask, what does it fail to capture? TERRA might record the amount of Carbon pumped out, while neglecting to take note of the complexity involved in the creation of those outputs, such as particular populations, communities, or farming areas. The distance from Edmonton to Brandon is 1016 kilometers; what might be happening on the ground across such a huge distance during the 8 minutes/640 kilometer chunks that TERRA may have missed?⁴ While the satellite omits much of the story, it also reflects a particular story back to us, a story told in the gaps.

19th century English landscape paintings are an excellent example in the telling of stories in the gaps. Historically, English commons were a shared pasture for public use, a site of continuous activity where peasants and farmers would pass through in order to feed cattle or hunt but not to reside in or claim private ownership. Beginning in the 16th century and continuing into the

19th century, these common spaces were slowly fenced-off or “enclosed” as parcels of private land.⁵ Paintings by the artist John Constable (1776-1837) depicted chocolate box scenes which conflated the aesthetics of landscape with private property. Famous paintings such as *Golding Constable’s Flower Garden* (1815) and *Boat-Building near Flatford Mill* (1815) depict scenes of English tranquility void of the labouring bodies whose work it was to produce that kind of scene, such as gardeners and boat builders. Indeed, an early study by Constable for his *Boat-Building near Flatford Mill* exists which does depict workers; details Constable did not include in his final work. While the landscapes depicted in Constables paintings depict a seemingly distant historical period, the phenomenon of erasure of marginalized bodies is not a thing of the past. Constable’s work is symbolic of the colonial mindset that originated out of Britain and Europe and radiates here today.

Grasses face extinction at the hand of industrial farming, development and extraction, despite the fact that the grasses are responsible for creating and holding together the soil that makes a lot of the industrial farming activity possible. Activist and scholar Silvia Federici writes, “A mine is opened threatening the air that people breathe



Fig.1.

Constable, John. *Golding Constable's Flower Garden*, 1815, Oil on Canvas, 33.1 x 50.7 cm., Part of the E E Cook collection, grandson of Thomas Cook of Thomas Cook Travel Agency. Died in 1955 and bequeathed the entire contents of his house at Bath to the National Art Collections Fund. Retrieved from: <https://www.artfund.org/supporting-museums/art-weve-helped-buy/artwork/8655/golding-constables-flower-garden-john-constable>. September 1, 2020.



Fig.2.

Constable, John. *Boat Building at Flatford Mill*, 1815, Oil on Canvas, Victoria and Albert Museum, Given by John Sheepshanks, 1857 Retrieved from: <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O17291/boat-building-near-flatford-mill-oil-painting-john-constable/>. September 1, 2020.



Fig.3.

Constable, John. *Study for 'Boat-building'*. Constable Sketchbook, Museum no. Sketchbook 1259-1888, Victoria and Albert Museum Retrieved from: http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/a/constable_sketchbook/. Sept. 1, 2020.



ABOVE: Christina Battle, *connecting thru grasses*, still from digital video, 2020





and the water that everyone drinks; coastal waters are drilled to extract petroleum poisoning the sea, the beaches, and the cropland; an old neighbourhood is razed to the ground to make space for a stadium - immediately new lines are drawn.”⁶ To perform any kind of extraction from the land, communal lands must be commercialized, rendering the perception of a wide open prairie as only a myth. Christina Battle’s body of work seeks not to fill in the blanks, but instead locate them along the periphery and to attend to what is found there. In those spaces, erasure of the variety of prairie grasses echoes the experience of the erasure

ABOVE: Christina Battle, *connecting thru grasses*, still from digital video, 2020

OPPOSITE: Christina Battle, *connecting thru grasses*, still from digital video, 2020



less than 10%
of the natural
habitat in this
region remains
intact.

of Black, Asian⁷ and Indigenous people and their histories from the romanticized prairie landscape. Histories of forced migration onto reserve lands or the effacement of historically Black enclaves on the Prairies like Amber Valley⁸ are pushed aside for the rosy-cheeked colonial narrative of the wide-open west.

In her work, Battle shows us that grass ecosystems function as a way to connect, asking us how we might consider ecosystems as fertile ground for collective action and solidarity, in addition to restoring much needed biodiversity. As with all grasses, their seeds are meant to disperse;



Battle incorporates seeds in her work both literally, as a means to help replant the grasses that are disappearing and metaphorically, as opportunities for transcending borders, distance and relationships. When flourishing, grasses connect us across the lines drawn by extraction and industry, helping to reestablish a kind of common that extends across geography and distance.

OPPOSITE: Christina Battle, *connecting thru grasses*, grass seed packs, 2020

In the background of Golding Constable's Flower Garden (1815), we can see smoke rising in the distance, perhaps from a summer burn or a crofter's fireplace, perhaps evidence of fires set by protesters, pushing back against the government's encroachment on the common land.⁹ Like the grass in the cracks of pavement, another world is determined to grow, one meant to defend the existing commons and rebuild the fabric of communities destroyed by years of assault on the most basic means of our existence.¹⁰ Battle asks us to look at how the development of the West spread across the land and how the remaining fringes of "common" butt up against a rapidly diminishing prairie. Like the smoke in the periphery of Constable's painting, we are encouraged to be mindful of those communities whose actions on the edges protect their existence and resist further displacement, whose actions do not make it into the chocolate box images of the Prairies, or Constable's paintings, but point to deep histories of organized resilience.

Lillian O'Brien Davis is an Assistant Curator at the Mackenzie Art Gallery, currently based in Regina, SK, Treaty 4 Territory.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY:



Christina Battle (Edmonton, Canada) has a B.Sc. with specialization in Environmental Biology from the University of Alberta, a certificate in Film Studies from Ryerson University, an MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute, and a PhD in Art & Visual Culture from the University of Western Ontario. Her research and artistic work consider the parameters of disaster;

looking to it as action, as more than mere event and instead as a framework operating within larger systems of power. Through this research she imagines how disaster could be utilized as a tactic for social change and as a tool for reimagining how dominant systems might radically shift.

LIST OF WORKS:

connecting thru grasses, digital video (variable, 2020)

connecting thru grasses, 3 printed curtains panels (2ft x 9 ft each, 2020)

connecting thru grasses, animated GIF (variable, 2020)

connecting thru grasses, collage images on paper (variable, 2020)

ENDNOTES:

- 1 A Sun-synchronous orbit (SSO, also called a heliosynchronous orbit) is a nearly polar orbit around a planet, in which the satellite passes over any given point of the planet's surface at the same local mean solar time.
- 2 See Christina Battle's work Tracking Sasquatch; <http://cbattle.com/tracking-sasquatch-4/>
- 3 See NASA website for more information: <https://terra.nasa.gov/about>
- 4 From email conversation with the artist.
- 5 Cosgrove, Denis. "Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape" (Madison, 1984), pp. 13-38.
- 6 Federici, Silvia, and Peter Linebaugh. Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons. , 2019. Pp. 3.
- 7 It was primarily Chinese immigrants who were responsible for the building of the railroad and opening the Prairies for settlement. See further overview here: <https://www.history.com/news/transcontinental-railroad-chinese-immigrants>
- 8 See articles referring to "secret Alberta": <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/secret-alberta-new-documentary-brings-amber-valley-back-to-life-1.3968766> , additionally, there are less well known historically Black prairie communities such as Campsie, Alberta or Wildwood (Junkins), Alberta. See some additional historical information here: <https://activehistory.ca/2017/01/black-settlers-of-alberta-and-saskatchewan-historical-society/> and here: <https://www.diversitymag.ca/black-history-discover-another-black-settlement/>
- 9 Mingay, G. E., Parliamentary Enclosure in England. An Introduction to its Causes, Incidence and Impact, 1750-1850. Longon: Longman,1997. Pp. 168.
- 10 Federici, Silvia, and Peter Linebaugh. Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons., 2019. Internet resource.

UP NEXT:

A PRAIRIE VERNACULAR

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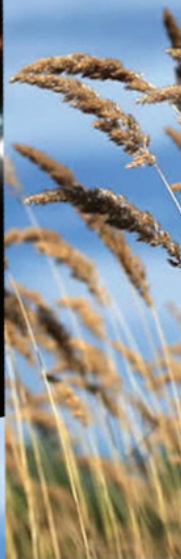


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