



Markham, Ontario. Real Estate Billboards. Approx. 43°54'7.53"N 79°14'27.90"W, facing south, circa May 5, 2005. © Peter Sibbald, 2005. Image courtesy of Artist. Real Estate Billboards pertaining to a development of roughly 2,500 homes on and adjacent to the pioneer family farms of James and Adam Clendenen.



Welcome, Hope Township, Ontario. Tombstones, Walker Family Cemetery, 43°58'11.34"N 78°21'40.14"W, facing north, circa November 3, 2005. © Peter Sibbald, 2005. Image courtesy of Artist. Pioneer cemetery of the Walker family, in the unprotected countryside immediately outside the Ontario Greenbelt near the eastern edge of the Greater Golden Horseshoe, west of Port Hope.

Ontario-based documentary photographer Peter Sibbald was invited to exhibit a selection from his photographic series *Elegy for a Stolen Land* as part of *Building on History*. Using Southern Ontario as a personal ancestral starting point, this selection shows evidence of the dramatic shifts throughout history of how humans have constituted the meaning of land. This component of the exhibition of architecture and building on history is presented as part of an ongoing interdisciplinary focus by Visual Arts at Harbourfront Centre.

Elegy for a Stolen Land

Peter Sibbald

Finally we just filled it with our will, so that the land came to look tired in its heart: almost empty but crammed with human intention, sick with a sameness that came from us.

– Tim Lilburn *Going Home*, (Anansi, 2008)

Forced by food shortages to emigrate, six generations ago my Scottish ancestors settled in Southern Ontario, an area that for millennia, and until not long before, had been homeland to successive waves of First Peoples. That land would become part of what is officially called the “Greater Golden Horseshoe,” source of 20 per cent of Canada’s wealth, including, until

recently, over one-third of our country’s class 1 farmland. On a thousand square kilometres of what remains – double Toronto’s current footprint – the government’s 2005 plan, *Places to Grow*, would add 3.7 million people by 2031.

When I moved home after years of city life to raise a seventh generation of my family in that place, the sheer rapaciousness of human activity in Ontario’s countryside – the naked erasures of both heritage and our capacity for a secure, local food supply – compelled me to investigate.

My approach to documentary eschews the notion of objectivity, which is but a cultural value, a conceit. Intrinsicly I document what is there, but the act of documenting can only be a reaction mediated through filters. My title for this work, born of settler guilt, sets out my bias concerning North American history as a frame.

For a while I focused on “land use,” which so circumscribes the modern Euro-American philosophy of land-human relationships that one could easily assume it was always the only meaning of land: distinct and separate from humans, implicitly to be used or planned. Here, land that had been cultivated by people like my ancestors was to feed us no longer. But in 2005, the accidental exposure of a pre-Columbian Huron-Wendat ossuary

on a construction site in Vaughan vaulted me beyond the limits of that meaning. In this same place, people had lived undivided from their earth, as indeed had earlier peoples in the Old World of my ancestors’ ancestors. What was the journey from “earth mother” to “real estate”?

Eventually that ossuary was left in situ, fortified and protected. Meanwhile, with Ipperwash and Caledonia, politics began rising from the ground. I learned that contemporary archeologists characterize their excavations as “controlled destruction,” that they have mapped this region extensively, and that their maps are so dense with findings, it is as if one had repeatedly fired a 12-gauge shotgun loaded with red dots – each an archeological site – into those areas most actively planned and developed. I am not permitted to photograph those maps: proprietary information: wounds. The interests who commission such work don’t want the public thinking about what or whose village, farmstead or gravesite was disturbed or destroyed, or lies still beneath our houses, malls and industrial parks. Such questions, however, have become instrumental to my practice. Innocent sounding terms like “land use” and even “landscape” become suspect as subtle instruments of dissociation of humans from land.

Retracing routes across decades, one’s mind and memory play tricks. Time and space warp as forests, fields and creeks – which seemingly were there only last week – give way to suburbs, malls, and highways. In an apparent afternoon, 11,000 years’ accumulation of topsoil is scraped and bagged for sale at supermarkets, while the secrets it has long concealed are boxed, catalogued and deposited in remote basements, merely pocketed, or disappeared through wood chippers. GPS coordinates are the best way I can keep track of the places I’ve been; yet they convey falsity, both in solace and in their implication of accuracy. For place is a thing of the senses – the foot and the eye – and landmarks on the heart. Returning to a coordinate, the place is gone. And while chasing light and shadow – whose conjunctions sometimes feel like rips in a metaphysical plane hovering near the wind – drums beat, campfire smoke rises, and the growl of a prehistoric bulldozer drowns out the husky ringing of drying corn.

– Peter Sibbald, Jackson’s Point, 2008

For over 20 years photo documentarian Peter Sibbald (petersibbald.com) has photographed for many of the world’s most prestigious magazines.

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