

Studio Practice within a Research Context



n=navigate

To direct the course of something (1)

In 2003, I began to refer to my art practice as research. In retrospect I see this change in language is indeed a complex shift in method, content and context.

1. Navigate: My Narrative

In this article, I want to tell the story of a continuing body of work that I began in 2001, titled “Navigate.” I see this extended project as a case study of my working habits and ideas bridging the moment when I begin to think my practice as research. Through the story telling and writing this article, I hope to clarify my research methodology, trace how I have responded to the SSHRC pilot program for artist researchers and see if the university based research framework has changed my studio practice.

In 2001, I spent three weeks photographing the St. Lawrence shore as a participant in an artist’s residency at Centre Est Nord Est in St. Jean Port Joli. A yellow dory sporting a pirate’s flag moored close to shore in a beautiful bay focused my imagination on travel by boat. An 18th century coffin repurposed as a floating vessel accentuated the metaphoric flexibility of water voyages. Intuitively I was drawn to the St. Lawrence as a waterway of transition, to boats as narrative objects and to voyages by water as territory for my art practice. These three weeks marked the beginning of a new body of work.



“La Poleon,” BW photograph

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“Le Cercueil,” BW photograph 2001

In 2002, I wrangled an invitation to join a freighter on a three-trip day voyage from Sorel to Harve Saint Pierre on Quebec’s north shore. Throughout, I photographed from the bridge and later edited the results into a finished photo work. The title, “Navigate: Sorel to Harve Saint Pierre,” literally describes the work’s logic. I traveled by boat and I photographed north, south and straight ahead.



(Excerpt) “Navigate: Sorel to Harve Saint Pierre,” 25 BW photographs, 2002

Less obvious is my debt to cognitive scientist, Edwin Hutchins and his book, *Cognition in the Wild* (1995 p.2) which I discovered by chance in a used bookstore soon after my freighter voyage.

Hutchins’ explores communication by observing navigation aboard US navy ships. His detailed account of how navigators determine position in relation to known points of reference made sense to me. He reiterates the importance of communication, accountability, geographic site, narrative and memory in relation to finding one’s way. I saw these layers as proof that boat travel was an excellent and flexible metaphor for all sorts of transitional experience. Through his interviews, anecdotes and observations, I found a way to frame my nascent fascination with maritime coastal sites into a doable and personal photographic project.



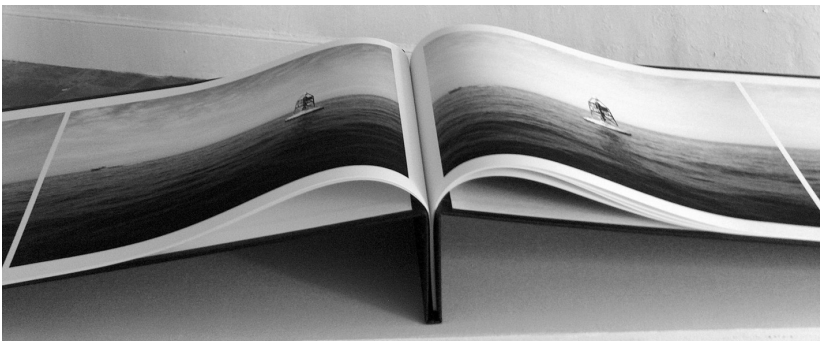
(Excerpt) "Navigate: Sorel to Harve Saint Pierre," 25 BW photographs, 2002

"All systems of navigation answer the question, "Where am I?" in fundamentally the same way." Edwin Hutchins, "Cognition in the Wild", Mass: MIT, 1995 (3)

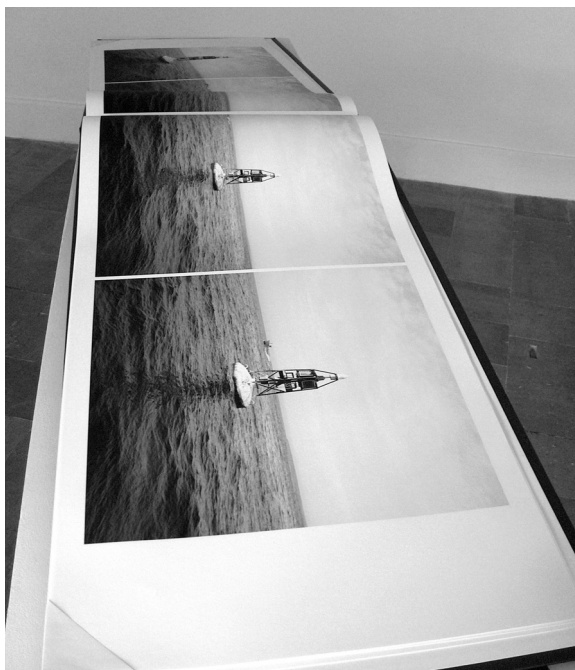
Navigate is a word rich with associative meaning and metaphor. Said aloud, navigate conveys transition, travel, time, risk and action. It's a very adaptive verb that conveys subjective and objective content. Navigate, navigator, navigation were all terms that punctuated Hutchins's text on cognition.

In 2002, I decided to use "Navigate," as an umbrella term for a series of artworks. "Navigate," was a title that could act as an omnibus structure that could also be organized into distinct chapters. In my case, each chapter would be a gallery ready work. The resulting works could stand alone and in relationship. I saw the title itself as permission to pursue an open-ended structure where each finished work could be like a buoy marking progress on a journey.

In 2003 I began three projects documenting what I see on a short boat ride between Caribou Harbour and Pictou Island on the north shore of Nova Scotia. I photographed, made an oversize book and a three-screen video projection work. All of these works document passage between channel buoys that mark the entrance to the harbour.



"Navigate: Caribou Harbour to Pictou Island," Book, 18" x 44", 2005



“Navigate: Caribou Harbour to Pictou Island,” Book, Page 5, 18” x 44”, 2005



“Navigate: Caribou Harbour to Pictou Island,” Book, 18” x 44”, 2005



"Navigate: Caribou Harbour to Pictou Island," Book, Page 9, 18" x 44", 2005



"Navigate: Caribou Harbour to Pictou Island," Book, Page 10, 18" x 44", 2005



"Buoy," DVD and 3 screen installation, 2005

2. Practice: Methods

"*On the water, buddy, on the water,*" is a greeting used by Mississippi tugboat captains. (4) "*Come from away*", is a phrase used in Newfoundland to describe outsiders.

I spend my summers near Pictou Nova Scotia. This is a quiet spot where the demands of teaching and day-to-day life are replaced by a sense of creative readiness, a mindset that is both allusive and tangible.

Creative readiness connects back to my undergraduate experience and to the first works I made. Even then, I adopted a methodology that incorporated awareness of site or place, self-reflexivity, descriptions of phenomena, experiences of transition and an embrace of experiential first hand information. Over time I have come to use my camera as a mimetic apparatus that once in hand, stills the physical, emotional and intellectual world, prioritizing the immediate moment and place. Most important is what is before my camera. Most invisible is the deliberation that leads to subject and site choice. Why that? Why there? Why then?

This creative readiness is primarily a state of awareness, a willingness to notice and then follow through with inventive processes, risk taking, mistakes, accompanied by a mind and body focus and labour in production. These are all fundamental qualities within studio practice and familiar to most artists. I was mentored in this approach in my NSCAD foundation year. I also have vivid childhood memories of my father's dedication to Sunday mystery tours, where our family of eight explored sites such as Ottawa's water filtration plant or a Gatineau lake after a circuitous drive anchored in anticipation and surprise.

I often work in extended bodies of work that evolve over time. I attach titles early in the creation process. The title becomes a wayfinding device. A phrase or word I can repeat to remember a core principle or attribute. I work from a set of guiding parameters, which keep me on track yet also flex to accommodate unexpected discoveries. While parameters change from project to project, I remain surprised by consistently reoccurring ideas related to transition, causality, and temporality and individual experience. I see these as life work characteristics.

3. Research and Practice: Change and Adaptation

I was working on “Navigate,” when SSHRC announced Research/Creation Grants in Fine Arts, as a pilot program to support artist-researchers affiliated with Canadian postsecondary institutions. Program objectives were to:

- Support high-quality research/creation
- Develop the research skills of graduate and undergraduate students
- Facilitate the dissemination and presentation of high quality work to a broad public through a diversity of scholarly and artistic means
- Foster opportunities for collaboration.

I saw the SSHRC program’s emphasis on research/creation as a natural studio fit while it’s expectation for training, broad dissemination and collaboration aligned better with the context and responsibilities of teaching. I read these guidelines as a mandate to involve others and disseminate work beyond the gallery.

I participated in 3 successive competitions with eventual success in 2006/7. Each proposal used navigation as a thematic though almost invisibly in the successful application. The openness of many small voyages joined thematically in process and intent seemed at odds with the dense reasoning required by the SSHRC guidelines. Instead, my focus shifted to the fixed goals, outcomes and things that could be described. Process seemed a liability!

Even when unsuccessful in 2004 and 2005, I found myself living the residue of my applications. I was mindful of the proposed multi year work plans required by SSHRC. Conversations with potential collaborators triggered opportunities and commitments. I initiated complex, ambitious projects that required administrative attention. I began to recognize and act upon a desire to make documentary film. My practice mutated, my established photographic production slowed. I became both busy and diversified. I sought out collaborators for the first time. I made a half hour documentary for television. I established a film company to make documentaries about artists, and their work in relation to landscape. These outreaches come from the process of applying to SSHRC. At some basic level, I interpreted the SSHRC program as a requirement to extend and stretch my studio practice. The process of applying became almost like an intervention in my studio habits. Or perhaps it merely accelerated pending adjustments I wanted to make in my practice!

4. Research: Methods

I am hopeful that a research model may expedite my selection of site and provide an investigative framework. It certainly encourages consultation and collaboration beyond the studio.

My ongoing research connection with architect and McGill Professor, Robert Mellin is a case in point and developed directly from my first SSHRC proposal in 2003. Prompted to seek out collaborators, I contacted Mellin after reading his book, "Tilting: House Launching, Slide Hauling, Potato Trenching, and Other Tales From a Newfoundland Fishing Village." (5) Since 1987, Mellin has conducted field research in Tilting, Fogo Island, Newfoundland. Interested in the community's architectural and material culture, he has interviewed



Navigate: Tilting to Blowing Hole, BW photograph, 2003

inhabitants, photographed and drawn the buildings and catalogued land use. When he draws Tilting's buildings, his, "intent is not to provide a descriptive substitute for real artifacts, but rather to provide opportunities for comparison that place some of the burden of interpretation on the viewer." Mellin's ability to describe in detail while leaving imaginative space for the viewer became a model I wanted to use.

Research emphasizes information. Parameters, process, deliverables, and audience are discussed at the project outset. Work plans and time frames clarify the tasks ahead. I find myself to be interpreting research as a practical skill that helps diversify the knowledge base supporting or leading to creation.

These past years are full of accomplishments. But most of all it has been a time of change. I believe that the very process of applying to SSHRC has diversified my practice. My projects have become much more specific. I have incrementally moved away from the still photograph. I find myself still surrounded by the "chapters" and bits of "Navigate." These remain on the back burner replaced by the thematic of my successful SSHRC funded research/creation project, "Site Story: Caribou Harbour."



Caribou Harbour, home of Maritime Packers Lobster Factory, c. 1950's
from the collection of Gordon Boulter

5. "Site Stories: Caribou Harbour."

The navigation thematic brought me to Caribou Harbour, Nova Scotia. Here I found material that is becoming, "Site Stories: Caribou Harbour."



Letter to Mr. Alexander McDonal, Entrance Little Caribou Harbour, 1873
from the collection of K. Knight

"Site Story: Caribou Harbour," is a project that looks at the relation between a physical place and its material and cultural history. Once again, I am looking at a coastal, maritime site. Geographically it's a landscape of transition. It's a community marked by out-migration and changing

economies. It's a place I know well and have experienced first hand. It's a remarkable and archetypal landscape that adapts well to imaging. The site is named: it has a particular history. Its narrative is present in both living and archival sources.

Caribou Harbour was long the location of Nova Scotia's largest lobster factory. It was an ideal harbour enriched by two entrances until a massive storm in 1979 resculpted the seabed and closed Little Entrance. This physical change, compounded by social and cultural shifts led to the eventual factory closing. In 1992 the factory complex, once home to 600 seasonal workers, was demolished and replaced by 34 condominiums primarily occupied by maritimers retuning east from working careers elsewhere to retire next to the ocean.

I also own property here. My house was once the canteen and store for the factory. My field bordered the complex of cabins housing the summer lobster fisherman.

One of my Caribou Harbour neighbour's has two houses side by side on her vista-rich point of land. The old farmhouse is the one that draws my attention. It's filled with 179 Victorian motto needlepoints. Many highlight the importance of home and hearth "What is home without a father;" "What is home without a mother;" "What is home without a baby;" "Welcome home," "My home." These incantations of home are visceral reminders of what and who has been. For the moment my neighbour, her stories and her house are present and knowable. Yet how long will they be there.

The material traces of the largest lobster factory that once dominated my land and my neighbour's waterfront are gone. Gone too are the majority of the buoys that I photographed in "Navigate: Caribou Harbour to Picotu Island." Small, disposable plastic markers who lack the material pull of the metal, large-scale buoys have replaced many of those.

My task is to represent the complex narratives of this site. I will use the research methodologies of Robert Mellin's, "Tilting" project to collect interviews and visuals to create a portrait that is both archival and living. In the process, I will liaise with the local Northumberland Fisheries Museum, collaborate with research colleagues and produce film and gallery works that can be broadly disseminated.

My project is an interdisciplinary act of remembering, witnessing and documenting.

6. Conclusion

On a very basic level, articulating SSHRC proposals encourages personal and professional reflection. The need to summarize previous and ongoing grant results led me to prepare an illustrated chronology that matched past proposals with outcomes. Conceptualizing a three-year time line forced me to preview the big picture, to prioritize goals and time use. In the writing of each proposal, I workshopped ideas, approaches, and potential outcomes. Most importantly I established new collegial relationships. These experiences are valuable and indeed have marked and changed me.

Yet what remains at the end of the writing and the beginning of grant spending, is the need to make work. I am a practice-based researcher. My ideas are not viable until they have a material form and are interpreted by the viewer. Each work is a layered construction that acts upon the mind, head and heart. I view my works as interdisciplinary, documentary, poetic, intuitive and aesthetically complex. I am also cogent of mortality and recognize that I can only make a finite number of works. I want to work efficiently, maximize my ability. I want to be the best artist I can.

Until I author and create a final original work, my thoughts and experiences remain private. Perhaps the SSHRC model asks that I make this process more public. Perhaps the research/creation model raises awareness of creative labour by encouraging artist researchers to share process through mentoring and teaching.

In my final successful application I focused on one site. In my heart, Caribou Harbour is intimately connected to "Navigate," and shares the fundamental question, "Where am I?" In reality, I was not able to fit the open-ended research of "Navigate," into a SSHRC framework. Instead I focused the project. In this respect, a tension remains between my desire to find answers through doing and the more reasoned approach that suits humanities style granting. Creative practice is exceptionally resilient and deeply rooted in personal commitment. Perhaps a post-mortem in three years will reveal ideas related to "Navigate" present in "Site Story: Caribou Harbour." In the meantime, I have the means to materially sustain a research/creation practice. Such periods of concentrated research creation are life changing.

For additional visuals see:

www.kmknight.com (photography)
www.sitemedia.ca (film)

References

1. www.spaceforspecies.ca/glossary/n_o.htm
2. Edwin Hutchins, "Cognition in the Wild", Mass: MIT, 1995
3. Edwin Hutchins, "Cognition in the Wild", Mass: MIT, 1995
4. Nathaniel Stone, "On the Water," New York: Broadway Books, 2002
5. Robert Mellin, "Tilting: House Launching, Slide Hauling, Potato Trenching, and Other Tales From a Newfoundland Fishing Village," New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2003