

MARKING TIME WITH(IN) THE WATER¹

This exercise offers an opportunity to produce unique, camera-less photographic prints exposed and developed by the existing light of the sun over a prolonged moment corresponding with simultaneous aquatic insect observation and analysis within and along what is currently known as the Red Cedar River. Participants will produce photo-based visuals mapping the characteristics of vegetation, sediment, rocks, and wood debris comprising important habitat elements for fish and other aquatic species – more-than-human beings whose living conditions suggest both the promise and peril of ecological longevity. Prints will be created by placing objects and materials collected during the related macroinvertebrate sampling process (using low to no-impact methods) in direct contact with photosensitized gelatin silver paper (i.e., standard darkroom paper). Ideally, each print will directly interact with the river itself by being fully or partially submerged within its waters during exposure.

This photographic technique is inherently durational, requiring mindful observation and patience. The amount of time necessary for UV light to visibly imprint a trace of the material(s) onto the paper depends upon the conditions of exposure including time of day and amount of available light, but in most instances an acceptable print can be made within 20 minutes (though longer times can yield very different results). This type of photography differs from traditional, documentary style work as the resulting images are abstract and not always easily decipherable. This exercise asks us to consider what alternate modes of photographic visualization reveal, and how these techniques might benefit ecological studies and creative projects that center watersheds and their inhabitants as integral members of the community.

PROCESS | PRE-PLANNING

Both before and during our engagement with the water, take time to consider how to be in respectful relation with the space(s) we will be working as guests within.

Michigan State University occupies the ancestral, traditional, and contemporary Lands of the Anishinaabeg – the Three Fires Confederacy of Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi peoples. The University resides on Land ceded in the 1819 Treaty of Saginaw. We recognize that settler and Indigenous signatories understood the terms of the treaties in starkly different terms. According to a map within the University archive, Anishinaabeg maintained an 'Indian Encampment' south of the Red Cedar River when classes were first held at the University (then known as Michigan Agricultural College) on May 13, 1857.²

As you plan your approach and decide upon materials to incorporate and how they might visually correspond, consider the span of deep time and the many histories held within these lands and the waters that have and continue to run throughout the river, providing home and sustenance for multi-species beings. Consider the web of entanglements shaping this land and its watershed – effects of climate change in the distant and recent past on water levels and overall stream health; the forced displacement of the original caretakers of the land, Indigenous peoples whose descendants may continue to live nearby; impacts of modern and contemporary agricultural and industrial use and mis-use initiated by the founding of MSU as a settler-colonial Land Grant college. How might your prints address the many disturbances the territory holding this water has endured, both ecologically and culturally, as well as the importance of river ecosystems as nourishers of many Beings (both terrestrial and aquatic, observable and invisible)?

¹ This project is intended to function in relation to a teaching exercise designed by Métis scholar, Dr. Zoe S. Todd, for their Indigenous Ecological Ways of Knowing course at Carleton College, as well as its expanded form produced as the 2021 exhibition, *Alluvium*, organized by Allis Conley and Coron Androski along with Sarah Rowe at the Amplify Arts Generator Space in Omaha, Nebraska.

² Poitra, C., Kolonich, A., Mitchell, A. E., Proctor, E., Shirley, A., Baier, A. & LaPensée, E. (2021). Reciprocal Research: A Guidebook to Centering Community in Partnerships with Indigenous Nations. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Native American Institute.

PROCESS | EXECUTION

Once you are ready to begin, gather your selected objects/materials and think about the physical properties of the items you will place in contact with your sheet of paper. How translucent or opaque are they? Do they have sharp edges or soft? Will you arrange and/or overlap multiple objects, or work with a singular item? How thick or thin are the materials and will it be physically possible to keep them in place for a prolonged period? Will you entirely submerge the print in the water of the river only partially, or not at all? You will need to work quickly once you set up your print for exposure, so be sure to sketch out your compositions by placing materials on sample sheets of copy paper to explore formal possibilities.

Determine where you will make your print and have all materials ready. Take the paper out of its light tight bag and place it emulsion side up (the side that immediately starts to turn color). Arrange objects/materials on paper and position for exposure. Depending on your choice of material/location you may need to use a sheet of glass or plexiglass pressed against the material/paper and clipped or held down. Heavier objects will generally function as a weight, with no need for glass on top (though, be mindful of water movement shifting objects). Leave materials to develop for at least 20-minutes before checking exposure by very slightly moving one part of an object.

PROCESS | FIXING & DRYING IMAGES

Once you determine your print has been exposed to sunlight long enough to produce a visible imprint on the paper, carefully remove the materials and quickly turn the paper over to keep any more UV rays from fogging the paper. Place the print emulsion (image) side down in the black plastic box full of water, replace the lid. Prints will be processed with fixer, rinsed, and set out to dry.

OVERVIEW OF PRODUCTION STEPS

1. Retrieve a sheet of paper and lightly (and legibly) write your name on the backside in ballpoint pen. Place the paper in a black, light tight bag until ready to expose.
2. Complete a Photo Release/Consent form.
3. Review Process | Pre-Planning section. Spend some time observing the water in relation to materials collected during the macroinvertebrate sampling as you consider your approach.
4. Review Process | Execution section. Retrieve a piece of paper from the materials table to use as a surface to sketch out composition ideas with your materials.
5. Retrieve any desired tools from the materials table such as trays, sheets of glass, or clips.
6. Decide upon your site for exposure. Remove your photographic paper from the light tight bag and quickly position your materials on top of the paper either in or with the river water. Cover with glass or clip down, if necessary, or place paper in tray along with water and materials.
7. Note the time and allow the print to expose for 20 minutes (or longer, if possible). When the time is up, remove objects/materials from the print and quickly turn over so UV-rays no longer touch the image side (lightly cover with light tight plastic bag, if necessary, but do not place wet paper inside plastic bag as it will harm the surface of the print). Bring print to materials table and place image side down in black plastic bin (take lid off and put back on quickly).