

# Greg Staats

## Onenh dwa' den' dya

### —Now Let us Proceed



MARCH 29, - APRIL 27, 2019

**G44**

Centre for  
Contemporary  
Photography

# Onenh dwa' den' dya—Now Let us Proceed

Curated by Leila Timmins

As a teenager in the late 1970s, Greg Staats took a summer work placement at the Woodland Indian Cultural and Educational Centre in Brantford, Ontario. Located in the former Mohawk Institute Residential School (1885–1970), the centre had opened with few changes to the original interior and little done to address the school's long and traumatic history. It was here that Staats first learned photography, working in the darkroom that had been setup in one of the classrooms, and photographing the areas around his family home in Six Nations of the Grand River. When Staats moved to Toronto in the 80s, he brought these negatives with him and joined the collective of photographers working in the darkroom at Gallery 44. The constellation of new and archival images that make up this exhibition continue to document the areas around his family home, which in many ways can be understood as a return, not only to the place where Staats grew up but also to the places which shaped him as a photographer. Importantly, it was in these spaces that Staats was able to develop a practice outside of formal education, carefully and intentionally working from his on-reserve lived experience to embody and make visible a Hodiñhsq:ni worldview. For Staats, his image-making practice is defined by what he describes as a "restorative aesthetic", building on the universal concepts and philosophical ideals of the Great Law of Peace, the binding agreement of the Iroquois Confederacy.

The title of this exhibition *Onenh dwa' den' dya—Now Let us Proceed* can be read as both an invitation to move forward and reminder of what should be left behind. It conjures a future that is predicated on the *us*, and calls the viewer to join in its imagining. Taken from a headline of a local newspaper at the end of the second World War, the article describes the history of Six Nations settlement along the Grand River. It is one of hundreds of documents from Staats' family archive that bear witness to Hodiñhsq:ni-Kanien'kehá:ka history. The small image of the cable ferry you first encounter entering the exhibition, originally printed in a spring 1969 issue of the Brantford Expositor is also from this archive. The image shows the new steel two-car cable ferry purchased by the Band Council which crossed the Grand River at Chiefswood. Years later, the ferry was capsized and sank by a water truck bringing fresh water to areas of the reserve without adequate utilities. In this way the image of the ferry becomes a repository for the layers of history and social relations that accumulate on the site. Here place is neither timeless nor fixed, it has been formed through geography and histories, and most importantly its understanding has been shaped by Staats' relationships and in turn has shaped him. For Staats, the ferry marks a transition,



Greg Staats, *Place 3*, 2019

with the liminal space at the threshold of the reserve, holding the potential for healing and renewal.

Many of the images appear deceptively simple at first—a bundle of sticks, white pine roots, the burnt remains of a house, budding sumac flowers—often a single object or building shot from a few steps back, but close enough to feel the encounter. It is not a dispassionate documentary eye, but one that is embodied and captures the trace of human activity. In the series *Place* (2019), the coterie of images form an intimate cartography of the areas where Staats grew up. The large black and white photographs, hung butted up together and split across facing walls can be read like strings of wampum. Made from small white and purple quahog shells, wampum structures a codified series of relations between the bearer of wampum and the observer. Signifying this bond, wampum is used in ceremony to relieve the sorrow of someone grieving, to affirm the truthfulness of a speaker, to solemnize a treaty or as a mnemonic device to remember ceremonies and important events. In much the same way, Staats' images are both a reminder of significant moments from his past and an invitation for dialogue to support a process of transformation and healing.

The first image shows light cutting through the soft bows of a white pine tree, shot from within the dark undergrowth and looking out towards the clearing. Mohawk artist and writer Elizabeth Doxtater describes a similar image from the Great Law of Peace: "The new chiefs were met at the 'Edge of the Woods.' This was marking a new beginning for everyone... [where] we can emerge into a healthier world, striving to uplift each other."<sup>1</sup> This movement from darkness to light is recurring in Staats' imagery, marking the processes of renewal. Within the safety of the undergrowth you can both see the security of the light and also the heavy darkness behind you. According to Staats: "At the edge of condolence and within the liminal space prior to renewal, lies a hesitancy to move forward and while external/internal barriers must be overcome the process has to be completed with the help of others as witnesses. This ceremonial movement is compared to moving from the darkness of the forest into the clearing where the light illuminates the breath and one's footing becomes clearer."<sup>2</sup> Many of Staats' images picture states of transition as a way of

making manifest the process of healing. A tall grove of white pines appear in an image taken outside Staats' adolescent home, which were planted by Staats in his youth and now stand at full height. In another, pine branches have been bent into rafters for an original longhouse structure, and in a third, the knotted base of a tree shows evidence of being cut or slashed but has grown around the past wounds. Taken together, the transformation of these trees is a testament to resilience and collective growth. However, beyond a narrative of placemaking, the histories these images evince are complex.

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The photograph of a single oak tree in front of the Grand River marks a place just downstream from the mansion at Ruthven Park. Built by David Thompson, an entrepreneur and legislative representative for Haldimand from 1841–1851, the 1500 acre plot was purchased largely from wealth accumulated from his investments in canal building projects. When the Grand River Navigation Company was founded by British businessmen to expand the river's capacity for transport, the crown expropriated land from Six Nations and squandered the assets it was holding in trust. As a major shareholder in the Grand River Navigation Company and government official, Thompson's legacy is implicated in the impoverishment of the Six Nations trust, and his large estate, a reminder of this colonial misappropriation.

Adjacent to these images is a large translucent curtain, printed with an image of piled wood and metal that fills the frame. The stacks of water-worn logs, once used as pilings for piers by the Grand River Navigation Company, now sit along the banks. Here the shallow depth of field and spectral quality of the image further suggest the veiling of the trauma and destruction caused these by profiteering ventures. However, in returning to this site, Staats learned that the wood is being reclaimed and sold by an Indigenous-owned salvage company, further embodying a process of renewal and repair.

The diptych *NGC\_Vera's House* (2018) is perhaps the most direct criticism of the negligent government policies and spending. On the left, the empty corner of a room at the National Gallery and on the right, the outside of the house owned by Vera, a neighbour and close family friend who often looked after Staats as a child. The visible mould and decay on the outside of the house, which is made from insufficient materials, is contrasted against the pristine white walls of the gallery, highlighting the disparity created through spending priorities which ignore fiduciary obligations and further entrench injustice.

The long term and structural effects of this injustice are made evident again throughout the exhibition in the images of burned buildings. In each photograph, all that remain of the homes are the charred wooden stud frames and small pieces of metal siding. For Staats, these arsons are a physical manifestation of the pain and generational trauma experienced



Greg Staats, *Untitled*, 2019

by youth living on the reserve, but while the images witness this suffering, they are not melancholic.

Instead, Staats describes his method of taking photographs as a process of *errance* or wandering with purpose, where through chance and intuition, he is able to find depth in the seemingly mundane. In the careful attention to a pile of wood or bent tree bow, these objects, which hold traces of human activity, begin to seem animate, becoming proxies for the spectrum of emotion and creating a visual language for what cannot be spoken.

Importantly, this visual language is buoyed by a rigorous technical precision. Staats is a masterful image-maker and the density of rich tones creates a visual weight to match the heavy visual symbolism. Although much of the work in the exhibition is produced digitally, there are nods to analog processes. In some images the whites are muted, creating the deeper grey tones that would appear when fibre paper is fogged, and in *NGC\_Vera's House* (2018) the pink overlay mirrors the colour of unprocessed paper when it is exposed to light. The effect of these treatments creates a small schism and acts as a reminder that documentary photographs do not provide truth but rather mediate it. Photography theorist Ariella Azoulay asserts that every photograph bears the trace of encounter between the photographer and the photographed, but does not belong to any one person or narrative: "The photograph is out there, an object in the world, and anyone (at least in principle), can pull at one of its threads and trace it in such a way as to reopen the image and renegotiate what it shows, possibly even overturning completely what was seen in it before."<sup>3</sup> Taken this way, truth is no longer the responsibility of the photographer but instead, the image imposes an obligation on the viewer to address what it reveals about the shared conditions of our life.

If we take this obligation seriously, Staats' images offer a generous process for renewal and healing. Implicating the viewer as witness, they invite us to readdress how we live together and marks a path for how we can proceed.

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Doxtater, *Art of Peace, Spirit & Intent*, 2016. Pg. 48.

<sup>2</sup> Greg Staats, Personal Interview, May 20, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Zone Books, 2008. Pg. 13

## Cover image

Greg Staats, *What have you seen along the road*, 2019

**Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography** is a charitable, non-profit, artist-run centre committed to supporting multi-faceted approaches to photography and lens-based media. Founded in 1979 to establish a supportive environment for the development of artistic practice, Gallery 44's mandate is to provide a context for meaningful reflection and dialogue on contemporary photography. Gallery 44 is committed to programs that reflect the continuously changing definition of photography by presenting a wide range of practices that engage timely and critical explorations of the medium. Through exhibitions, public engagement, education programs and production facilities our objective is to explore the artistic, cultural, historic, social and political implications of the image in our ever-expanding visual world.

**Greg Staats** Kanien'kehá:ka (b. Ohsweken, Six Nations of the Grand River Territory) is a Toronto-based artist whose lens based and sculptural works combine language, mnemonics and the natural world as an ongoing process of conceptualising a Haudenosaunee restorative aesthetic that defines the multiplicity of relationships with trauma and renewal, performative burdens and the phenomena of condolence/renewal. Staats' solo exhibitions include: McMaster Museum of Art, the Kitchener-Waterloo Arts Gallery, Walter Philips Gallery, Banff, Mercer Union, Gallery TPW, Trinity Square Video/Images festival. Group exhibitions: AGSM and and AGYU. Staats has been Faculty for 2 Aboriginal Residencies: *Archive Restored* (2009) and *Towards Language* (2010) at the Banff Centre.

**Leila Timmins** is a curator based in Toronto. She is currently the Curator and Manager, Exhibitions and Collections at the Robert McLaughlin Gallery and is a founding member of the EMILIA-AMALIA feminist working group.



Greg Staats, *Place 2*, 2019

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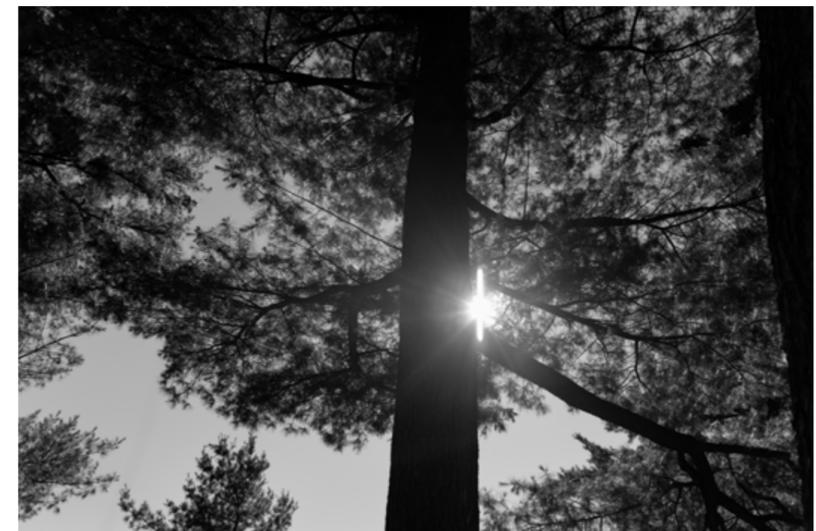
Greg Staats, *Place 5*, 2019



Greg Staats, *Place 8*, 2019



Greg Staats, *Place 4*, 2019



Greg Staats, *Place 1*, 2019