

CONDOLLENCE

Greg Staats: condolence

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Greg Staats

Grenfell Campus Art Gallery, Memorial University of Newfoundland  
McMaster Museum of Art



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# FOREWORD

*Museums can effect change even before there is widespread acceptance within the political mainstream, and in so doing, can influence public debate.* — Des Griffin

*It is the relationships to place, family, and community, combined with the spiritual beliefs of our ancestors, that create the pattern for our own way of being. It is a path that leads us to a journey of creativity as we explore new ways to manifest those old realities.* — Rick Hill

**THE QUOTES ABOVE** are both culled from the publication *The Native Universe and Museums in the Twenty-First Century* (2005) which accompanied the opening of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington, D.C. in 2004.<sup>1</sup> After twenty years of re-thinking native and museum relations, revising histories and museological practices, repatriating cultural artifacts, and empowering indigenous voices in museum work; it was time to review the changes to date and to envision the future. The NMAI took on this task as a goal of the new museum — not just a new facility — but a new philosophical approach. As Elaine Heumann Gurian pointed out on the occasion of the institution’s opening ceremonies, “Indigenous efforts to transform the very foundational notions of the museum — have changed museums forever.”<sup>2</sup> The changes to the museum, circa 1980, were not just with respect to indigeneity — they encompassed broader epistemological concerns related to the shift from a modern to a post-modern frame of reference. Nonetheless, the dialogue between museums and indigenous peoples, globally, during that period, effected significant and far reaching changes in the institution.

What seems so prescient in this context in the work of Greg Staats is the implications it has for the individual and for the larger world, beyond the museum’s walls. Staats’ project — which encompasses the personal and the communal — has a contribution to make beyond the aesthetic as it roots itself in community history, ritual and language. For more than 20 years, Staats has concerned his practice with what he has termed, a

“restorative aesthetic.” Starting from the land and home, Staats addresses loss. Staats has noted with respect to his relationship with the land and its manifestation in his work: “I attempt to achieve the felt presence/sense impression of that phenomena found in land and its language of peace.” From this root, Staats addresses loss — of family, land, culture and language — through family and cultural archives, through mnemonic encounters, and through an intellectual and aesthetic interpretation of traditional ceremony. The loss is recovered through what Staats has researched and incorporated into his works of art; through the voice of the work and what it says to the viewer; and also, as Rick Hill points out in his essay, through the role the work of art can play as a means of condolence.

*liminal disturbance* is framed by two series of photographs: *autumnemonic six nations*, (2007) and *six nations condolence*, (2008/09) and, by an installation work entitled *dark string repeat*, (2010). The photographic works recall life on Six Nations, both personal and communal. The installation, which produces an interactive electrical “pulse,” is the artist’s effort to replicate the event-based nature of the Condolence Ceremony and, as Hill points out, to create a “wordless gesture.”

I would like to thank the artist for his assistance with the production of this exhibition, as both artist and curator. I would like to thank guest essayist Rick Hill (Developer/Coordinator, Indigenous Knowledge Centre, Six Nations Polytechnic, Ohsweken, Ontario) for his essay that

combines his multiple roles as cultural historian, curator and interviewer. I would like to thank Charlotte Jones, Director, Grenfell Campus Art Gallery, Memorial University, Corner Brook, Newfoundland, for generously offering to collaborate with the McMaster Museum of Art to produce, post exhibition, an exhibition catalogue for liminal disturbance. Finally I would like to acknowledge and thank the Ontario Arts Council for its support of the programming at the MMA.

*Carol Podedworny, Director/Chief Curator, McMaster Museum of Art*

#### NOTES

1. Griffin, Des and Hill, Rick. *The Native Universe and Museums in the Twenty-First Century: The Significance of the National Museum of the American Indian*. Washington D.C. and New York: NMAI Editions, 2005: 19 and 105.
2. Ibid. 24.

**2011 WAS A MOMENTOUS YEAR** for indigenous peoples of Newfoundland and Labrador. It marked the formation of the Qalipu Mi'kmaq First Nations Band which currently represents more than 20,000 people mainly in central and western Newfoundland. This establishes it as one of the largest bands in North America. On a more local level, in 2011, Memorial University of Newfoundland appointed its first special advisor for aboriginal affairs. In this context, Greg Staats moving and powerful exhibition, condolence, charting, as it does, the journey from cultural memory and loss to healing, is most fitting.

We would like to thank the artist for this exhibition and for his assistance in its realization. We would also like to thank Rick Hill Sr. (Tuscarora) for his very insightful essay. We also would like to thank the participants of our community forum, Speaking Ourselves: An Exploration of Aboriginal Language and Identity, including: the artist, Jordan Bennett (Visual Artist), Keith Cormier (Elder), Mina Campbell Hibbs (Labrador Interpretation Centre), Angela Robinson (Social/Cultural Studies, Grenfell Campus) and Maura Hanrahan (special advisor for aboriginal affairs, Memorial University of Newfoundland). We are very grateful to Carol Podedworny at McMaster Museum of Art for her willingness to collaborate with us on this publication. And finally, we would like to acknowledge the financial assistance of Canada Council for the Arts for both the exhibition and the production of the catalogue.

*Charlotte Jones, Acting Gallery Director, Grenfell Campus Art Gallery*

# THE RESTORATIVE AESTHETIC OF GREG STAATS

by Richard (Rick) W. Hill Sr., Tuscarora

**LOST DEEP IN THE GRIEF** over the death of his daughters, Hyenwatha sat dejectedly in the dark woods. While his heart dropped to the ground, his mind was trying to ease his consternation. As he stared at the Mother Earth, special word-thoughts came to his mind. As he strung together tiny, tubular shell beads that he had found those word-thoughts began to fall into sequence, creating a rhythm of healing.

“This would I do if I found anyone burdened with grief even as I am. I would take these shell strings in my hand and console them. The strings would become words and lift away the darkness with which they are covered. Holding these in my hand, my words would be true,” Hyenwatha said to himself.

At the edge of darkness, Hyenwatha consoled himself with the thoughts, words and actions he invented. Thus began a long-standing tradition of restoring sanity and sense of belonging among the Haudenosaunee (People of the Longhouse), known today as the Six Nations.

To this very day a man is appointed to speak those same words of healing for the sake of those who have been mourning the loss of a loved one. He metaphorically kneels by their smouldering fire, the embers barely glowing. As he speaks those powerful words, his breath blows on the embers, making the embers glow brighter. The more words he speaks, the brighter the embers become until the fire has been rekindled.

The speaker is helping people recover from their loss, renewing their spirit and lifting the mental anguish they have been burdened with. If he is expert with words and precise with his memory, he paints beautiful pictures in the minds of the mourners, using culturally-rich metaphors and the words that carry sympathy, empathy and hope. I see this kind of word-thought and precision in presentation in the work of Greg Staats.

## **The Requickening**

This restorative process has been called the Requickening. *Quickening* is a medical term for the first fetal movements felt by a pregnant woman, usually after about 18 weeks gestation. It is a sign that the baby is alive and becoming animated.

Tuscarora anthropologist J.N.B. Hewitt defined *requicken* to mean the *prescriptive acts and set forms of words* intended to restore to life the relatives and co-workers of the deceased. The *requickening* is therefore a healing of the wounded body; the soothing of the grief-stricken mind; and the installation of a replacement who will live in the official name and stead of the deceased lawgiver (Chief). It was also intended to *quicken* (to come, or return to life) and preserve the living from the ongoing hostile actions of the Great Destroyer — the spirit of death.

Through the Requickening, the grief of the past is laid to rest, the hearts and minds of the grieving are uplifted, and people can find their



way back to a place of productivity. The art of Greg Staats has to do with the restorative and reflective nature of such a ceremony. He has turned an ancient ceremony into a form of personal healing, and developed a sophisticated restorative aesthetic as a result.

### **The Edge of the Gallery**

This Requickening concept is part of what is called the *Edge of the Woods Ceremony* whereby a new leader is installed with the Confederacy Council of Chiefs. More properly, it is about being near the *thorny bushes* after a difficult journey, in need of restoration, refreshment and uplifting of the spirit.

When I first “saw” the work of Greg Staats in a group exhibition entitled “Alter/Native: Contemporary Photo Compositions,” curated by Lynn A. Hill at the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography in Ottawa in 1996, I experienced a new way to understand this ancient Ceremony of Condolence. For the first time I felt someone had captured the emotion and intelligence of this ceremony in a profound visual way.

Greg’s photographic series *the requickening address* with attached wampum strings had the power to wipe away our tears so we can see how beautiful the world really is, and how much people really care for us; help us to recover our hearing so that we can experience the kind words of healing offered to us, as well as the voices of children as they move around us; and clear our throat so that we can breathe with ease and comfort once again.

Like Hyenwatha, Greg was condoling himself. However, not until the Peacemaker stepped forward to repeat back to him his very words did Hyenwatha become healed. So who stands in for the Peacemaker for people like Greg, the ones with no traditional titles, no Longhouse family, no real experience in how the ceremony of healing works? Perhaps his art is his Peacemaker.

As I walked through the gallery that held his work, the words and images he used became my condolence as well. They accomplished the same thing that the older ceremony did for our leaders. It appears to me that Greg needs to know that despite what may have happened to him, his culture has a time-tested way of helping real people help themselves through their shared experiences.

### **Spirit Capturing**

It became a cliché that Native Warriors of the past did not want to have their photograph taken, fearing it might harm their spirit, and make them restless. Yet, that is exactly what I see when I “read” Greg’s photography. Held within the stark and subtle tones and shapes of his images are the unseen forces that he senses when he looks through the viewfinder. In his decisive moments, he captures the essence of those unseen forces, then masterfully represents them to us, to make of them what we will.

He creates a new landscape for us and uses the mnemonics of memory to help us situate ourselves in the landscape. Greg speaks of the profound power he finds in *wordless gestures*, from both the sacred process of Creation, to the profane process of leaving human marks on that sacred landscape.

In some ways this is the most natural affinity for Indigenous people who were raised to speak the language of their colonizers. Our conscious mind is dazed and confused by the “logic” of English; while our subconscious mind continues to seek the sanity and restfulness of Indigenous thought and philosophy. We seek to comprehend our place in the universe, learn to navigate in that place, and then seek to excel in our navigation — be it as artisan, storyteller, speaker, or philosopher.

“The sadness that is felt from the personal loss of the Mohawk language, and the networks defined by culture motivates the recent works to date,” Greg writes to explain the shared pain carried by the post-residential school generation who had their Mother Tongue severed from their mouths. He has no choice but to make his art a wordless gesture, because he does not know how to say what he really means, not being able to think or speak in Mohawk. The loss of heritage languages can create shame, embarrassment, and anger. It is often replaced by swearing, which you can’t do in the Mohawk language. Yet, Greg exhibits a certain kind of grace in not letting those emotions blind him to his own reality.

Greg views his photographs as windows to the mnemonics of his internal memory. Many of them are still private memories and he does not want to share the details of that inner experience, so we are allowed to respond to his mnemonic devices in our own way. However, the purpose of this kind of restorative aesthetic is to recall our own memories,



connections and consternations, and use the Haudenosaunee model of condolence as a vehicle by which we connect to our sources of resiliency. His art transports us inward in order to rethink what it has meant, or what it could mean, but not to be stuck in the past.

Therefore, we find the avenues to our own mystical place to be offered in the wordless gestures of the landscape, often created by the many people who have also visited that landscape. We can derive great personal meaning from their collective action. We can witness culture in action without getting all tied up in interpretative overlay and contradictory meaning that spoken language can create.

Mary Carruthers wrote that a speaker [artist] uses their art to create memory associations that will outlast the presentation:

“Even what we hear must be attached to a visual image. To help recall something we have heard rather than seen, we should attach to their words the appearance, facial expression, and gestures of the person speaking as well as the appearance of the room. The speaker should therefore create strong visual images, through expression and gesture,

which will fix the impression of his words.” [Carruthers, Mary (1990). *The Book of Memory* (first ed.), Cambridge University Press, pp. 94.]

In looking at the works in this exhibition, I could not help but feel that Greg has attached my personal memories to culturally-defined emotions and actions that we share, coming from the same cultural community. Yet, his experiences are very different from mine. We both carry personal archives that may crisscross and allow for shared experiences at their intersections. But we also stand alone in front of his work, looking into the window of our own internal recall.

### **Ars Memorativa — Art of Memory**

British historian Frances A. Yates wrote *The Art of Memory* in 1966 as a history of mnemonic systems. She did not look at Indigenous mnemonic systems, however, the principles she described are appropriate in looking at visual art that deals with personal archives of memory, such as we see in the work of Greg Staats.

Yates noted that for our natural memory to stay viable, we have to prop it up with “artificial memory,” which is centered in a “place easily grasped by the memory, such as a house, an intercolumnar space, a corner, an arch, or the like. Images are forms, marks or simulacra of what we wish to remember.” This creates an “inner memory” which in turn helps us “see” what it is we are trying to communicate.

Think of this as creating a house within which the knowledge to be remembered is located. It becomes deeply embedded in our minds, made strong by these images with which we adorn the house. For Greg, this internal house is his childhood home **and** the communal longhouse of his ancestors. Two structures and two sets of memories. According to Yates, we chose the internal images based upon their aesthetic appeal to us. Thus, the Art of Memory enables us to bridge the microcosm of our thoughts with the macrocosm of the larger world.

Greg has a set of mentally archived images that he finds beauty in, and has worked at carefully placing those icons in visual landscapes that he encounters. He has looked through the lens to seek evidence of other lives in that shared space. He looked at what was left behind by those who moved on; he examined what they left in a slow state of decay; he

brought forward what was usually ignored; and then he walked on, using what he witnessed to stimulate his own memories. Scenes, images and traces of humanity seemed to fit into his own train of thought at the time he took each image, or the time when he assembled his images into sequences.

While Greg takes an image as a stand alone piece, his fascination with the art of memory allows him to also see each image in relation to the others. Like a family photo album, a sequence of images allows the viewer to add meaning to the sequence. People search for recognizable details, yet each reads the image and its relationship to the next in their own way. Greg seeks clarity for himself in what he sees, feels and thinks. He hopes that this creates a conversation with those who are also seeking clarity in their own lives.

### **Restoring Order**

Order, association, repetition and affect are essential aspects of the Art of Memory. A photographer moves the black frame of the viewfinder around until what is seen falls into a visual and mental order. The viewer of the resulting photograph needs a sense of visual orientation that some say is driven by our human nature. We seek to find the meaning in what we see. It has to make “sense” in order for us to mentally acknowledge it and move on. Maybe it is more precise to say that Greg seeks order out of what appears to be chaotic, and finds harmony between natural patterns and constructed realities. He asks us, the viewer, to place ourselves inside that photographic reality and feel the connections that he feels, without the narrative to explain what we are feeling.

### **Making Associations**

What captures his eye is the possible association we may make to what he is seeing. Not that it has to be a universal truth. Rather, he takes what might be idiosyncratic, and subject to individualized interpretation, and allows our own memory associations to generate a communal feeling that we have all been there before, feeling something about the place he has ordered up for us.

He respects that the viewer will enter his works and derive from them

what they also seek, either intuitively or by his gentle guidance that helps focus their attention on his visual keys of the thoughts. In some ways, Greg sees his work as his way of fending off the loss of self. Despite his own legacy of trauma (which we carry), Greg is looking at the strength he can derive from thinking of tradition, of applying ceremonial words to himself.

When he discusses his work, he mentions the importance of a starting point to initiate a chain of recollection, and the way in which that chain serves to stimulate our deeper memories. We can feel a familiarity to the places he presents because of the associations they create in our own recollections. Thus we retain his places in our mind, affected by the stage he has set.

### **Repetitive Pacing**

In high Haudenosaunee culture, intoning of words — being half way between conversation and singing — elevates the message being delivered. At the core of intoning is a verbal rhythm that paces the flow of the words. This pacing is reflected in the sequencing of images by Staats. When viewing his work in sequence, it is the cumulative pacing that helps the viewer become absorbed in the message of the art.

In many ways the “preciousness” of the photographic print draws us in. We are used to seeing hand-held photos. We are used to examining them for recognizable details. We are used to using them to recall memories from our personal archives of our lives. While Greg increases the scale of his photos so that they are no longer hand-holdable, I find that this actually allows more immediate contact with the memory details.

### **Affecting the Viewer**

From Greg’s point of view, the viewer of his work has to do some work exploring the images. If you understand the cultural context from which his work flows, then you will “read” his images at the intoning level (the ceremonial language level). If you don’t understand the cultural context, he feels that there is still a personal experience in whatever context you bring to the images. Even though cultural meaning is important in his personal explorations, his work also deals with the universal experiences that have become our modern lives.

When he looks through the camera, Greg is drawn to things without obvious explanation. Things left behind, layered with meaning, part of an ever changing landscape. Yet, he might feel both connected to that unknown story, and also connected to the intangible spirit of the natural world that lies beyond that surface story.

What might first look like an unnatural juxtaposition of elements — natural and man-made — becomes a new interplay of old forces. Why is it that we can cherish a prehistoric handprint on a cave wall, but decry modern-day graffiti? Why is one considered art and the other a form of vandalism? What makes a city wall so sacred that it should not be tagged?

### **The Literal Borders**

Greg considers his original home at his father's estate as his "safety zone." Although it was only three acres in size, it held a world of wonder, a place of retreat, and a sense of security that the artist still seeks. This makes him wonder about other people's safety zones, and how a place might be experienced, in real time and in our memories.

Greg left his home community with intention. He relocated himself, seeking a safe, distant place. Moving to Toronto is about as far from Ohsweken as you can get ideologically. Each kilometer puts more emotional distance between home and artist.

The photographs he has taken of his first home are part of his internal recall of his "archive" of memories. He is able to take himself back to those places where he once lived, played and rested. Trees served as both sentinels and places of safety. Bush lines served as borders that connected light and dark spaces, places of security and places of danger.

Even as a youth he would leave the reserve and head into town, keeping a visual log of all the "boundary markers" along the way. Each marker still recalls a sense of being within, or outside, a boundary of his family life.

At the same time, the places where he felt safest, at his first childhood home, keep calling him back for a second, third and fourth look. He is compelled to look at those places in his memory and then seek with his camera, the light and shadows that give him a sense of homecoming.

### **The Psychological Borders**

In discussing these photographs with Greg it becomes apparent that he suffered trauma when he was removed from his backyard sanctuary. It also becomes apparent that his work is seeking reconciliation with his own memories, conflicted emotions within himself, and through the lens of the camera, with the places and images that still captivate his heart and mind.

People don't realize the courage it takes to face one's past in such a way. He is not bearing his broken soul, but he is methodically dissecting his past for the precise memories and feelings it can generate, then reaffirming what he finds through his own visual language. He comes across visual clues as he lives in the city that helps him reflect on what his reserve experiences were like. He calls this his Restorative Aesthetic.

### **Cultural Contortionist**

John J. Valadez and Cristina Ibarra, filmmakers who produced *The Last Conquistador*, describe growing up Mexican-American as akin to being "cultural contortionists straddling the literal and psychological borders all around us."

"In the process we saw that many Mexican-Americans were embracing their Indian roots and were calling themselves Chicanos. Others were struggling to disassociate themselves from that aspect of our heritage and were calling themselves Hispanics. It is a joy to be Mexican-American, and we love who we are. But it can also be confounding," they conclude.

This is a perfect way to describe what I know of Greg Staats and what I have seen in his work. By one definition: *One who contorts, especially an acrobat capable of twisting into extraordinary positions*, Greg skillfully walks a tightrope between perceived cultural reality and his real-life experience as an Ongwehonwe (Original Person). This requires a lot of twisting, squirming and transforming to find a place where he fits in comfortably.

By another definition, *a performer who contorts his body for the entertainment of others*, Greg has had to display his contortions in public, through his art and his curatorial point of view, skillfully showing us some

of the highlights, and more skillfully, keeping some of his experiences (good and bad) private. We are “entertained” by his work, his acute sense of observation, his finesse in printmaking, and the emotional tonality that is the undercurrent in all his work. However, it is a profound amusement in that he digs into our hearts and minds with uneasy questions about loss, grief, trauma and fear of being left behind.

Greg deals with death and dying, decaying and transforming, memories and realities, as well as reflections and contemplations. In this way he can gain enough courage to look back at the places of his past, the places where he felt safe and secure, to gain strength to accept the loss of that security net. Along the way, he asks himself: “What does it mean to be Mohawk?”

He, like most of us, was motivated by the 1990 events that unfolded in Kahnawake and Kahnasatake (Oka). For Greg, his seminal work may be the four piece photo series which he took at Akwesasne. Each was given a title, that capsule that era: *positive*, *distinct*, *forward*, and *movement*. As he sought an aesthetic response to Kahnasatake, he was forced to re-immense himself in the landscape of his personal culture.

That led Greg to a new set of questions: “Why was I born in a place such as Ohsweken? What was it that actually happened to him there? How can his experiences help others understand more about themselves?”

To answer these questions, Greg has had to become a verbal/visual contortionist, *a person who twists or warps meaning or thoughts*. Not in the sense of twisting them out of context. Instead it is the art of twisting within the art, and making the art twist around him, so that they can co-exist comfortably. His life, and therefore his photography, are the literal and psychological borders that Valadez and Ibarra talk about.

In 1995 Greg began to explore the relationships between land, nationhood, community and family. He sought an understanding of the underlying connectedness of these elements. Perhaps in that connectedness is a meaningful existence, something to comfort one’s self, and a way to re-organize one’s life, in harmony with that inner connection. It creates a safety net that is strong enough to help people bounce back from loss, accepting change, and moving forward, affected by, and

hopefully enhanced by, the experience of death/loss/grief.

This is why Mohawk Hymns had a certain resonance with Greg along this journey. The tone, rhythm and perceived meaning of the Mohawk words suspend one inside a healing sphere of sound. Yet, it is the self-realization of the feeling of both loss and recovery that makes one resilient. This self-realization then leads to more questions to stimulate our minds to go further:

How did it start?

How does it work?

How great is it?

How do I get some of that?





*Auto mnemonic six nations* is an installation that, even though set in an urban situation, is easy for me to read. That is because Greg and I have a similar frame of reference. We have been thinking about similar things, contemplating the meaning of similar events. The images are a mnemonic device for me as I can “hear” their message. It might not be as Greg intended, but it feels like home and the ironic contradictions that we grow up with, living as descendants of an ancient society of order within a seemingly lawless era of purposeful neglect.

It also recalls our Condolence in which order is restored to-chaos. The old leaders are like trees. In fact when a chief dies, some will say “Another tree has fallen.” Our Great Law tells us that our leaders are like trees, standing tall, intertwining their roots deep in the ground so as to hold firm the ways of our ancestors.

But every now and then, a seat becomes empty, the leader is gone and we metaphorically see blood on that seat — the stain of loss — that needs to be cleansed through ceremony. This can be seen in the empty

chairs that reoccur in his art as his own intuitive symbol of both the need for cleansing of his losses, and the act of restoration that his work provides.

The temporary coverings of a burnt-out lodge remind me how the “fire” within us diminishes when we suffer loss and grief. We often turn to band-aid fixes rather than get to the root of the problem and fix the passageway. Doors get blocked by door keepers. Cultures die when imprisoned by gatekeepers who won’t let anyone in.

Another tree emerges and we replace the lost one with the hope that peace will continue for one more generation. The tree is our symbol of hope. Trees capture the memory of the land and help define the cultural landscape.

The large monolithic stone in *auto mnemonic six nations* seemed at first to want to have a deeper meaning for me — a *2001: A Space Odyssey*-type message about progress, or the lack of it. However, it turns out that it is simply one of the memory markers of his youth, a standing sign along the ride into town. Seeing it recalls those journeys for him.

### **A Tree in the Forest**

In Greg’s mental archives, a tree stands out. When he was young, this tree was a place of safety that he could climb and get a time out from the world below. The tree was a place of forgiveness.

Greg will readily admit that he has been on a long road of re-discovery and healing for himself. The images he puts forth are visual evidence of his reflective moments along the journey. Since he relies on intuition when he makes images, he does not labor the moment with too much intellectual or emotional baggage. Neither should we.

At the same time, he feels uncomfortable in his own skin, as if the skin holds the memory of the past trauma. Greg therefore wonders: “Who is my body in this world?” He is like a tree growing in the city. It is still a tree with tree functions and tree purposefulness. It might be surrounded by urbanity, but it does not lose its essentialness as a tree.

Natives who self-locate from the reserve to the city are still themselves.

However, there is one thing that is clear from his work and his words.

Greg carries a feeling of solitude, almost a fear, of being left alone, being left behind like many of the objects in his photographs. His search for meaning within his ancestral culture has led him to study the culturally-rich Mohawk language. Like many modern-day Indigenous people who think in English or French, he carries a fear, a horror, of what it would mean to be “language-less.” This also helps to explain his attraction to word-less gestures and deep-seated memory.

It is his hope that the cultural text is a value-added asset for those of the culture. However, he hopes that we seek commonalities rather than differences. Through his art Greg is raising his own voice, not as a representative of a culture, but as an individual who is seeking their own truth and reconciliation within themselves.

As he journeys through his life, be it in the city or back on the reserve, trees therefore hold special memories for him. The tree holds memories. Think of what a 300 year-old tree has witnessed. Think of it passing its memories into the earth through its roots, to intertwine with the memories of other trees and other layers of memory from the people who once held this tree place as he did — a safe zone.

### **The Edge of His World**

The solitary pine at the property line within the image *at the edge of the woods* could be the most overlooked work in the exhibition. You have to know a lot to understand its meaning. The Edge of the Woods is the special cultural space that I discussed earlier. In this image, Greg turns the camera around and now looks back at that space. He is now in the light, open zone of safety and security. We peek back into the darkness of the heavy woods. We cannot see what lies on the other side.

Yet in the middle of this wall of branches are three lighter green boughs hanging out toward us. They appear like the Great Tree of Peace, a tall white pine, with far reaching lower branches that offer us peace, protection and security.

The three “words” of the Great Law are said to be Peace, Strength in Unity, and the Righteousness of the Good Mind. That is what I see in those three branches.

### **New Directions**

Greg’s digital print *tashina general* is a significant change in what he is presenting. Whether you knew her or not, her murder affected the entire Six Nations community which Greg is still part of, despite his residence in Toronto. By taking the press photo of Tashina and digitally manipulating it by inserting into the source code selected phrases from the Condolence Ceremony and from the reports of where she was found, Greg allows the technology to affect the image. In doing so, Greg makes several statements:

The “violence” to the image mimics what happened to her.

Her eyes look at us, rather than us looking at her.

The color shifts resemble chaos replacing order.

The medium is not the message, there is more to her than her murder.

The title, *where submerged bushes tremble* recalls to me the idea that underground there is a whole other world, a world where darkness and danger go hand-in-hand. Intended or not, it fits the image I have of what a spirit of a person must feel when it is first placed in the ground. At a traditional funeral we say that we are placing the body in the living arms of the Mother Earth for safekeeping. Tashina was buried in a shallow grave in a desperate attempt to cover-up her murder. She was the trembling bush that was pushed below the surface.

### **The Message of the Cane**

At first, the silkscreen work *new spaces* seemed so out of character with Greg’s body of work. Not only was the technique quite different from what I had grown to expect, the jumble of images produced a new kind of visual chaos.

However, when I examined the work more closely, the tangle of images began to sort themselves out. In the 1920s, men at Grand River began to make a special wooden cane that was to be used in the Condolence Ceremony. To help them recall the titles bestowed upon our male leaders (Chiefs) the cane is divided into five alternating sections. In each of these sections are a series of small wooden pegs that represent the fifty titles of the Haudenosaunee leaders. Underneath each of these

pegs is a small pictograph that serves as a mnemonic device so that the speaker/singer can remember the titles in order.

In addition, when one chief dies, that peg is removed to represent the vacant seat that must be filled. Thus the Condolence Ceremony is intended to complete the roster of chiefs once more. Greg took those pictographs and overlaid them in order to create a new space of multiple layers of titles. I'm not sure he meant it, but it does remind me of the jumble we have inherited, with duplicate titles that we never intended to be so, borrowed titles from clan to clan, and contested title holders. We are no longer of one mind on who is a "condoled" leader, who holds their proper titles and what the Great Law instructs us to do to resolve these matters. Yet, this work creates new shapes caused by the overlaying, creating new spaces, thereby suggesting new avenues within an older structured format of the permanent Chief's titles. It creates room for the past to recreate itself, as if it is seeking to survive change.

We also are wrestling with conflicting definitions of who is Haudenosaunee and who is not. We have many people within our society who don't have a clan and are often ostracized by proponents of the Great Law of Peace which is premised on equality, fairness and respect. One of



the ironic contradictions I spoke of earlier. But like our real struggle, *new spaces*, has beauty in its randomness. It makes you want to reach in and begin to lay out the symbols in their right order — to restore sanity.

### People of the Longhouse

In 1951, one year after I was born, the National Film Board of Canada made a film titled *Longhouse People*. It was only twenty three minutes long, but it had a lot of scenes about the life of traditional people at Grand River. Despite being staged, the film showed various cultural events that have remained important to the Haudenosaunee.

Greg took stills from that film and created a six-image tableau. He selected images of people with their heads bowed. Are they grieving loss? Are they looking to the earth for healing? No matter what his intent, the act of lowering one's head creates a visual rhythm.

The title helps us understand this work, *six nations condolence*. The first image is of a man walking, recalling the part of the ceremony in which a singer walks to the mourners, singing a special healing song. It is very solemn but strangely uplifting to hear his words. From a time when everything seems scattered, we gather together the thoughts and wishes of our ancestors to restore the Great Law.

The two parties meet at the metaphorical zone called the Edge of the Woods. The speaker talks about being beside the Thorny Bushes and a ceremony takes place whereby those travelling to the mourners are greeted and refreshed from the journey "through the dense woods." Those who are travelling will also clear the tears, ears and throat of the mourners so that they can fully participate and be affected by what is about to take place.

The "edge of the woods" concept becomes a recurring image in Greg's work. He has sought that place in his own life, where we transition from darkness into the light, where we survive the travails of life to arrive at a place of understanding and fulfilment. To Greg, this is a place of completeness, where he will be accepted, welcomed and take his rightful place with others. It is a journey that many Native People have been on ever since the first child was whisked away to residential school.

The third image in this sequence is the uplifting of the mind that takes



place. The burden of grief is uplifted, like a weight off your shoulders. This is where the first three strings of wampum are used to wipe away the tears of grief so that you can see how beautiful the world really is; to remove the blockage in your hearing so that you can hear the loving words shared for your benefit; and the blockages in your throat are removed so that you regain your voice and can nourish yourself again.

The old longhouse is the place of completeness. The house is put back in order through this ceremony. Death that had been stalking the house is chased away and the new day brings a new life.

The image of people harvesting the corn reminds me of the meal that is served at the end of the condolence. The chiefs serve food to the people. At all other times, the chiefs eat first. On this occasion, however, to express their thankfulness, they deliver food to each person in the longhouse. The image also reminds me of how the life cycle continues because of the Condolence.

The last image of the empty bench against the empty wall looks like a classic abstract expressionist painting. In its stillness is movement. There is order, not chaos. There is serenity in the peaceful placement of the elements of the longhouse. If you recall what I mentioned about looking at a space and seeing what people leave behind, this image then speaks of order, discipline and simplicity. The restoration has taken place.

"I assembled these images in sequence very intuitively and obviously unconsciously," states Greg about this work, yet when I saw it, I could not help but see the old logic in what he was doing, as if the film stills had their own memory and were guiding his placement to create new natural spaces for themselves to exist. The inner message of the image was reset by Greg's initial selection of the images as well as the new sequencing that he gave them. He has thought about the Condolence so much that it is now part of his intuition.

### **Healing Journey**

Greg Staats has been on a healing journey during which he uses his art for momentary pauses on that journey. These pauses allow him to reflect on what he has experienced and how he feels about those experiences, and to make art which reaffirms his understanding of himself.

His preoccupation with the Condolence as a time-tested form of healing and regeneration is the spring board that allows him to jump ahead on that healing journey. Knowing that we have such a great tradition of healing and restoration gives Greg the courage to move forward. Honouring that tradition in his work is the way in which he makes the "medicine" of Condolence work for him. He is not a title-holder who would actually participate in the Condolence Ceremony. However, he is the beneficiary of the words, actions and images of the Condolence.

In a world torn by bitter strife, war and murder, the focus on internal healing might seem selfish. However, the Peacemaker told our ancestors that unless we heal ourselves and remove the sources of our burden of grief, we will always turn to violence to solve our problems. Instead, he asked us to use the power of our minds to create, maintain and spread peace.

I draw great strength from Greg and his work to create this zone of healing not just at the edge of the woods, but at the edge of the world where we engage each other. I am enriched to be able to stand in that zone he has created with his work, and can feel the healing capacity of our ancestors.

In the end, Greg Staats appears to be seeking what we all seem to want — some recognition that he matters and an acceptance that what he has to offer could have application to others who are purposefully wandering and intuitively practicing the art of memory.

**Richard (Rick) W. Hill, Sr.** is an independent curator working from his home base at Six Nations Territory along the Grand River. He served as Assistant Director for Public Programs at the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution; Museum Director, Institute of American Indian Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico; and Manager, Indian Art Centre, Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, Ottawa, ON. He studied Fine Art Photography at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and holds a Master's Degree in American Studies from SUNY at Buffalo.

# BEYOND LANGUAGE/TOWARDS LANGUAGE: GREG STAATS' LANGUAGE OF MEMORY, LOSS AND HEALING

Charlotte Jones

**IN HIS ESSAY IN THIS** publication, Rick W. Hill Sr. speaks of Greg Staats' model of restorative aesthetic whose purpose is:

“to recall our own memories, connections and consternations, and use the Haudenosaunee model of condolence as a vehicle by which we connect to our sources of resiliency. His art transports us inward in order to rethink what it has meant, or what it could mean, but not be stuck in the past.”

Greg Staats exhibition, *condolence*, investigates issues of memory, loss — particularly, loss of language and connection — and, just as importantly, healing. At Grenfell Campus Art Gallery the exhibition was comprised of two suites of black and white photos, a series of six film stills from a 1950s National Film Board (NFB) films, two digital prints, a screenprint, a pair of black and white photos, short videos, the artist's family archives (diaries, snapshots, reel to reel tape, etc.) and a video installation. The objects in many of the works are deeply personal to the point of being hermetic: a tree, part of an abandoned bridge, bushes and open space, bundled twigs, a video of the artist's performance struggling with Mohawk phrases from the condolence ceremony. Many of the images are culled from a three-square mile area around his childhood home of Ohsweken on the Six Nations Reserve in Ontario. The five images that

comprise *Presage* explore the vestigial presence of the boreal in the urban environment.

Yet while the items documented seem obscure or even mundane, the works are imbued with meaning felt at a visceral level. The objects depicted mean more than what they actually appear to be. As mundane as the object is — in fact, the more mundane the object — the more the image takes on a meaning that is not read but felt.

My question, then, is this: although, Staats speaks from a very specific experience, frames it within the context of a culturally specific ceremony — the Mohawk condolence ceremony — and roots the imagery firmly in very specific landscapes, why and how does his work resonate with such a wide and varied audience?

During the six weeks that the exhibition was on view here on the west coast of Newfoundland, Corner Brook hosted a nation-wide student leadership conference. We had hundreds of young adults through the exhibition — they understood, they connected with the work.

The Qalipu Mi'kmaq First Nation Band in Newfoundland was formally established the day after the exhibition opened. Several member of the new band visited and were moved by the exhibition — despite very different landscapes and histories.

A group of long-term care facility residents came through. The residents were of a generation when Aboriginal heritage generally was not

acknowledged or appreciated. They connected with the work.

Students, staff and faculty, from various disciplines and backgrounds, got the work.

The simple answer is that that Staats speaks to issues that resonate in all of us: loss of identity — particularly cultural identity — memory and spiritual healing. Obviously, though, it is more complicated than the fact that the artist's honest and personal connection to the subject matter transcends the local to a more universal comprehension.

Staats refers to the imagery in the exhibition as his system of visual mnemonics, his aid to remembering both what has gone before and what helped console him. But what are the mechanisms that Staats employs which allow his own personal mnemonics to be legible and meaningful to so many of us?

First, with respect to the still images, I would suggest it is both the manner in which the artist finds his subjects and the criteria that guide his choice of photographic subject. With regard to the former, Staats uses the term *errance* — to wander with purpose. He may wander with purpose, looking down and ahead at once when he is struck by a situation that has these three elements — “positive, distinct, forward movement — his guiding principles for selection of subjects. The subjects display ‘animose’, that is, they immediately and intuitively strike him as being full of energy. There is no second-guessing — no contrivance; the subjects/situations are not staged. There is nothing contrived about images. The artist states, “Choices are at once visually objective while intuitively subjective — recognition is immediate.”<sup>1</sup>

Essential to Staats' working method is a process of archiving, revisiting and revising. In this process, the artist sifts through the images he has created over the years and which take on new meaning when experience and meaning match. It is a curious mix of intuition, intention and resonance of this intuitive process that enable us to commune so readily with the images.

Second, the artist is very aware of the relationship between the scale of the image and his shooting distance from the object. He describes this as wanting to create a familiar distance for the viewer. Staats puts us in his shoes — we feel as if we are standing beside him — the objects that

he has singled out become objects we single out and respond to. As a result, the still images have an uncanny physicality which, in the case of *autumnemonic six nations*, is compounded by the size of the prints in the series.

Moreover, the compositions of all the works — photographs, prints and videos — are, like Staats' working method, succinct and immediate. They are not wordy but straightforward showing only what is important and as such, the objects portrayed become iconic. The row of trees in bushes of *at the edge of the woods* is not a group of bushes and trees, it is **the** group.

Then there is the subject matter: most of the work — photographs and videos, alike — depicts the land or is boreal. The artist states, “Connection with land is more powerful than language, it surpasses language as a way of conveying non-verbal emotions and ideas.” All of us relate, not to bricks and mortar, but to living things and our own familiar landscapes.<sup>2</sup>

Further, the exhibition exists as both an installation and a collection of individual works which act cumulatively and interactively: that is, each of the still works builds on the one before and, the still works are immersed in the sound and light of the moving images.

Rather than a collection of several discrete works, it is intentionally laid out with its own internal narrative and pacing — it is the story of memory, loss, acceptance, healing and a new ability to console others.

The exhibition sets off with a case of family archival materials, including the artist's grandfather's recorder, tape reels, notebooks and journals. There are snaps of the artist as a child, his sister, his father and the interior of his childhood home. The archives set the tone — we, the viewers, know that Staats is talking about memory.

This leads onto *autumnemonic six nations*, six large silver-toned prints, images taken over the years of meaningful locations around his childhood home. *Presage*, a series five smaller silver prints, depicts Staats' current landscape, Toronto and the boreal presence now takes the back seat to the urban landscape.

*Presage*, in turn moves into the screen print, *new spaces*, a layered image of pictographs — visual mnemonics — culled from the five sections

of the Condolence cane. *new spaces*, is what the artist refers to as his own pictogram, one which suits his new physical, cultural and emotional space, and one which reflects the many sources that feed into his being. Similarly, *referents*, a diptych comprised of two silver gelatin prints, shows the same bundled group of branches photographed at two different times of day. They are a visual symbol of Staats and all the streams — families, Mohawk and Christian worldviews, languages, landscapes — urban and rural-of his background that feed into who he is now. The artist has arrived at a knowledge and acceptance of his contemporary identity.

The digital image, *at the edge of the woods*, echoes the fifth photograph of *autumnemonic six nations*. Both photographs are of a group of bushes near Ohswenken where the artist hid as a child and looked out at his world. The black and white image looks from inside the bushes out to light; the richly-coloured digital image is taken in the sunlight looking back at the dark.

The series of film stills, *six nations condolence*, likewise in colour, as Rick W. Hill points out, details the condolence ceremony from loss to healing to order. The still images culminate with the digital print, *where submerged bushes tremble — tashina general*. Staats created the image by opening the high school photograph of the slain girl as a text file and keyed in phrases from the condolence ceremony, his own attempt at condoling.

*condolence* also exists as a multimedia installation with sound, movement and pulsing light which reinforce the intent of the still images and adding a new layer of communication. As we view the powerful *six nations condolence*, for example, we can hear the artist's voice on the video recording of his performance as he quietly intones (and stumbles over) phrases from the condolence ceremony. Every few minutes the gallery space is inundated with the mournful, resonant voices of three brothers singing a Mohawk hymn which was recorded by Staats' grandfather in the 1950s. All three video installations show images which breathe and pulse. A branch moves in a slow choreography in *red oak condolence*. We can hear the artist breathing deeply with frustration as he stumbles over phrases in the Mohawk language from the condolence ceremony. Out of the corner of one's eye, one can experience the vivid and pulsing colour

of the interactive video installation, *dark string repeat*.

We have seen that gesture and movement are integral to the works — both implicitly in execution and overtly in the recorded performance and the three video works. In his fascinating book, *Next of Kin*, primate researcher, Roger Fouts, makes the case that human language evolved from gesture<sup>3</sup>. Gesture is our original unspoken, unwritten language. Ultimately this may be the core and strength of Staats' visual language or simply, his language and the source of our communal understanding of the work. That we, the viewers, have a visceral connection with the work is because the work is visceral.

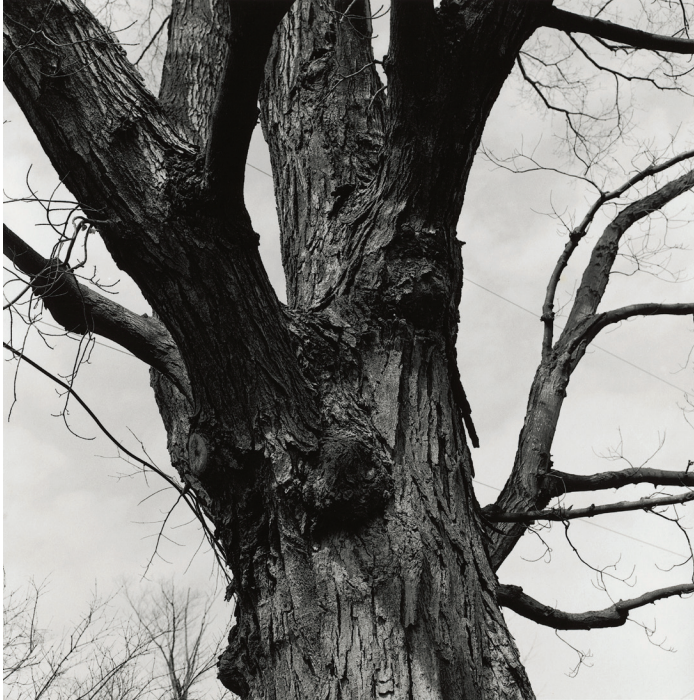
**Charlotte Jones** has worked as an artist, arts writer, arts administrator, educator and independent curator across Canada and in Ireland for over 30 years. Since 1991, as a curator she has initiated several projects which have developed artistic links with Ireland and also links to other disciplines, particularly science, conservation, literature and music. These projects include The Wood Project, The Limestone Barrens Project and Shorelines. She received her master of communication from Simon Fraser University and holds a master of librarianship from the University of British Columbia. She has been acting director of Grenfell Campus Art Gallery since 2008

#### NOTES

1. Greg Staats, personal communication, Sept. 21, 2011.
2. Ibid.
3. Roger Fouts with Stephen Tukul Mills, *Next of Kin*, William Morrow, 1997, ISBN 068814862



## AUTOMNEMONIC SIX NATIONS









## SIX NATIONS CONDOLENCE

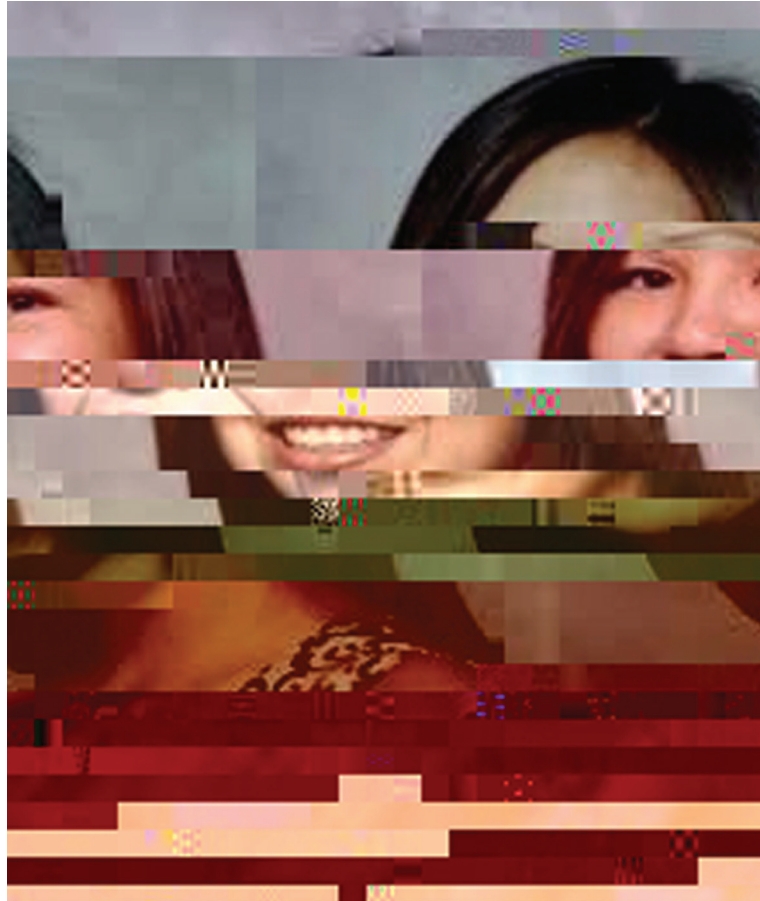








*at the edge of the woods*



*where submerged bushes tremble – tashina general*







*newspaces (detail)*

# PRESAGE









*referants*





*liminal disturbance*, 2010, video, colour, sound, 3:41



*untitled (liminal effort)*, 2011, video, colour, sound, 4:57

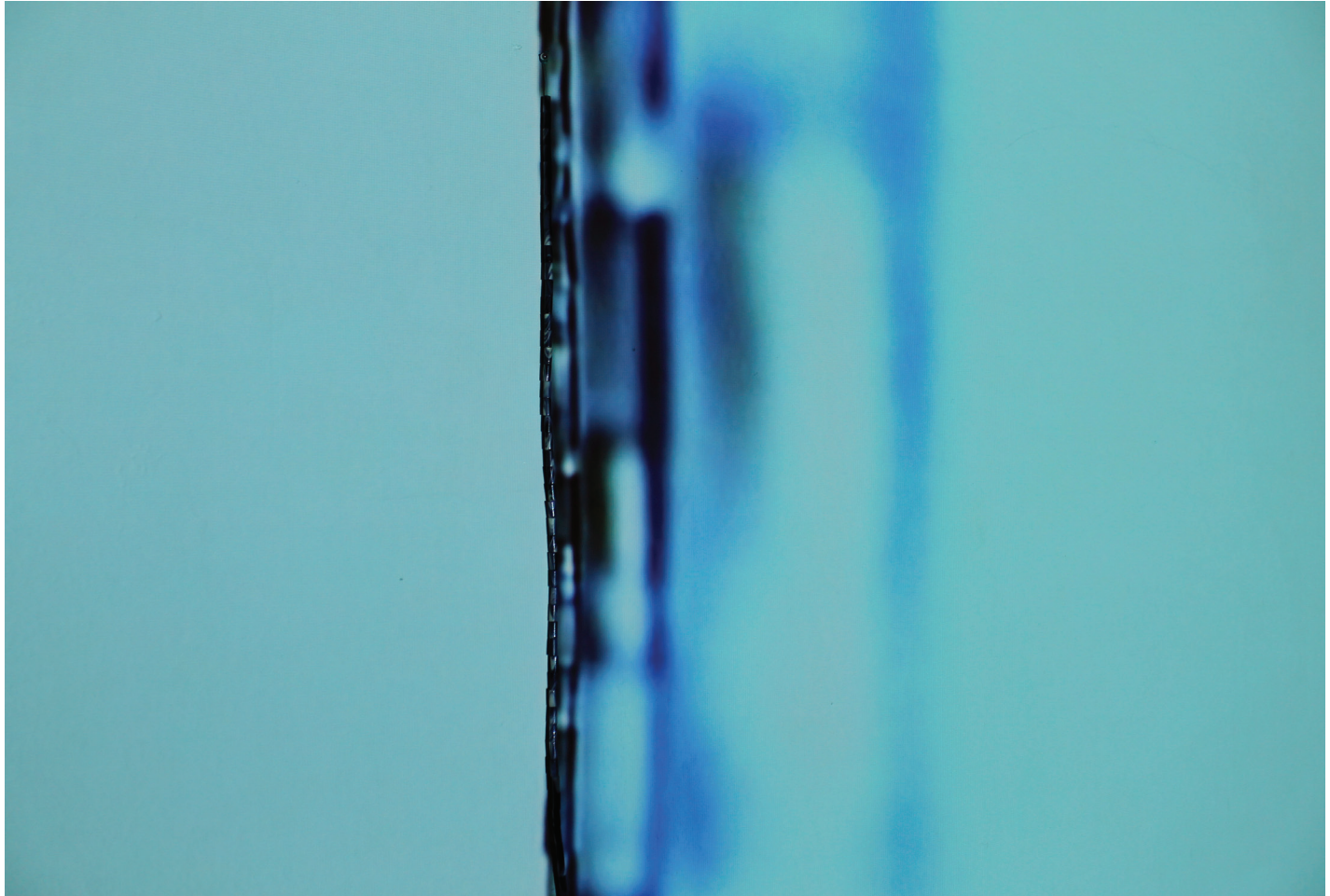




*red oak condolence*, 2005, video, colour, sound, 3:18



*when I left*, 2006, video, colour, sound, 5:53



*dark string repeat*, 2010, live video feedback installation,  
purple wampum string, digital projector, analog DVR and tripod



# LIST OF WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

1. *autmnemonic six nations* 2007  
6 toned silver prints  
30 × 30 inches each
2. *six nations condolence* 2008  
6 archival digital prints on hahnemuhle  
20 × 27 inches each
3. *at the edge of the woods* 2009  
archival digital print on hahnemuhle  
24 × 40 inches
4. *where submerged bushes tremble — tashina general* 2010  
archival digital print on hahnemuhle  
24 × 20 inches
5. *new spaces* 2010  
Serigraph  
28 ½ × 27 ½ inches
6. *presage* 2010  
6 toned silver prints  
24 × 21 ¼ inches each
7. *referants* 2009  
2 silver gelatin prints  
each: 24 × 31 ¼ inches
8. *liminal disturbance, Canada* 2010  
video, colour, sound, 3:41
9. *untitled (liminal effort)* 2011  
video recording of artist performance at Grenfell Campus Art Gallery  
September 22, 2011
10. *red oak condolence, Canada* 2005  
video, colour, sound, 3:18
11. *when I left...*, Canada 2006  
video, colour, sound, 5:53
12. *dark string repeat, Canada* 2010  
live video feedback installation  
purple wampum string, digital projector, analog DVR and tripod
13. *phenomena (one)* 2011  
reclaimed douglas fir  
each of 3, 10 × 12 × 46 inches
14. *Vitrine, Staats Family archives* 1865–1969  
7 – ¼ inch Audiotape reels, archival silver prints, Pentron microphone  
and 13 – Diary notebooks of Leonard Staats Sr., 1937–1967

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

**GREG STAATS** (b. Ohsweken, Ont., Six Nations of the Grand River Territory) has been in the process of reconnecting with a traditional Haudenosaunee [Iroquois] restorative aesthetic that defines the multiplicity of relationships with trauma and renewal. The trauma that is felt from his personal and existential displacement from the Mohawk language and subsequent relational worldview, and the networks defined by culture, motivate Greg Staats' recent video and photographic works within a mnemonic continuum. In place of this systemic deficit, he has also assembled and created an archive of images and documents, both personal and familial. This restitution and the residual visual documents produced by it create and maintain strong connections with the land, nation, community and family. Furthermore, this powerful new resource is an externalization of what is carried within the body, which in itself is a repository in dialogue with places real and imagined, traditional and contemporary. The condolence ceremony is a systemic pattern occurring at the personal, familial, community, confederate and alliance levels when relationships are altered by death. This pattern has formed Greg

Staats' aesthetic, having used relationships as a principle of organization within his artistic practice.

Staats has had solo exhibitions at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, Walter Philips Gallery, Banff, Tom Thomson Memorial Art Gallery, Mercer Union, Gallery TPW, Toronto. Group exhibitions include; Ottawa Art Gallery, the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, the National Gallery of Canada and the Museum of Canadian Contemporary Art. Staats is the recipient of the Duke and Duchess of York Prize in Photography. Recently, Staats has been Faculty for two Aboriginal Visual Arts Thematic Residencies: Archive Restored (2009) and Towards Language (2010) at the Banff Centre for the Arts.

Artist's website: <http://www.re-title.com/artists/greg-staats.asp>

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