

Sugar 25 amon. 7 Soap 5 peas 10  
soda 5.

---

J. Farmer moved to the bush  
on Thu Jan. 6 1938

---

Thu. Jan. 6/38 visit by  
Mr. + Mrs. C. Jamieson

---

wed. Sept 28/38 finished  
husking corn 144 bu  
Hiawatha Sun berry dug 26 bu  
potatoes 75¢  
Joe Silversmith 14 bu. corn 70¢  
Susan Lewis 9 bu 45¢

Greg Staats

Reciprocity





along the



river Road





# Greg Staats Reciprocity

July 6 - September 9, 2007  
Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery



kw|ag

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# Introduction

I am pleased to introduce this publication which documents an exhibition of the work of artist Greg Staats. This project is the fourth iteration in the *River Grand Chronicles*, a series of projects which reference the facts, metaphors and continuing history of the Grand River – which like time, flows quietly through the lives of people in this Region – linking, defining, refreshing and sometimes separating us all. Like the water of a river, the series provides many reflections and perspectives which help us to understand the things that we hold in common and wonder of those things which occupy a distant and receding shore.

Originally from Ohsweken, Ontario, Greg currently lives and works in Toronto. He is an artist with a unique worldview informed by his cultural history and contemporary experience of his Mohawk heritage. His work in this exhibition is a meditation, or perhaps mediation, on the theme of memory – of things lost and gained in the forced convergence of cultures.

I would like to thank the artist for his wonderful work, and his collaboration in its presentation. Curator Allan MacKay, supported by Assistant Curator Crystal Mowry, conceived and delivered the project and publication. I should also highlight Preparator Ian Newton and Curatorial Assistant / Registrar Cindy Wayvon for installation expertise

and assistance with project planning. Thanks also to Jennifer Bedford for capturing the elegance and economy of these works in the installation photography. Thanks must also go to the contributing writers, Sheila Staats and Robert Houle, whose revealing essays provide a studied context for the works in the exhibition.

We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of our many funders, namely the Ontario Arts Council, and the Canada Council for the Arts. Special thanks must also be extended to the Region of Waterloo Arts Fund (Exhibition Sponsor) and Tula Foundation (Presentation Sponsor) who continue to recognize such important projects as this. Finally I must acknowledge our members, visitors, and supporters – we appreciate your contribution to the ongoing stories that are creatively told in our region every day.

**Alf Bogusky, Director General**



when I left, 2007

# Poetic Portals of Memory

Well known and respected for his legendary portraits, beautiful in their honesty and technical precision; and his sculpture installations of long wampums of stitched oak branches, an embodiment of some of the iconic images of found objects he has photographed, Greg Staats, a Mohawk from the Grand River, a territory of the Six Nations near Brantford, Ontario, celebrates his bicultural heritage in his recently completed suite of four short videos. They are vignettes combining image, voice, text and time. Together, *red oak condolence*, *when I left*, *wave* and *what remains* are a quartet of poetic portals through which memory has coded the verification of our existence. They open into prosaic territories of remembrance and condolence, spiritual spatial dominions of prayer and oratory.

Poetic and vulnerable, the videos, based on personal letters, notes, dairies and hymns create an entrance to a new space where the viewer can experience his discovery of loneliness, pain and rejection through his personal narratives of reciprocity, each a powerful empathic affirmation of belonging, isolation and acceptance. As doorways to a creative space, I recall an inspiring Walt Whitman poem, "Eidolons":

I met a seer,  
Passing the hues and objects of the world,  
The fields of art and learning, pleasure, sense,  
To glean idolons.

Put in thy chants, said he,  
No more the puzzling hour nor day, nor segments, parts, put in,  
Put first before the rest as light for all and entrance-song of all,  
That of idolons.<sup>11</sup>

These new videos have intricately laced elements of sensory experiences that approach beauty as a “restorative aesthetic”, to use one of Greg’s expressions. In a way, it is his investigation, his mining of the concepts and philosophical ideals of the *Kaianeren:kowa* of the Haudenosaunee, the Great Law of Peace of the Iroquois. As metaphors for portals, they lead to a place where our recollections can become moments intersected with personal experience in viewing *red oak condolence* and *wave*; both have images of leaves and the sound of singing creating a verification of our human existence. When I first viewed the former, silently, without warning my memory for an instant opened into an empty space where time intersects and our relation with things is reversed: rather than remembering the past, the past remembered me.

His Kanien’kehaka, Mohawk, hymn sung a cappella transported me to when my family would also sing in our mother tongue of Ojibwa at funerals. It is a time when family seeks comfort in the knowledge that life continues as death fades to memory. Octavio Paz in “Convergences” writes about the importance of the tree of life:



red oak condolence, 2006

When the 'mystery of life' disappeared, our pretension to divinity and immortality disappeared with it: the word *death* is written into the genetic program, Jacob says. One of the conditions for the reduplication of cells - the sine qua non - is that they be mortal; therefore the series of physicochemical combinations that we call life necessarily includes the combination we call death.<sup>2</sup>

The triangular form of the red-oxide leaves being windswept against a monochromatic, light grey autumn sky is simple yet symbolic of an ascender. And together with the consonantal

# along the river Road



what remains, 2007

Kanien'kehaka hymn, Staats uses the cultural memory encoded in the Mohawk language with its constructed meaningful parts, to create a condolence, "an offering far too small" to quote from the found text used in the last of the four videos. There is an inescapable humility and fragility when hearing harmonious lamenting, even in a language other than one's own. The longhouse people had "speakers" who were respected for their stylistic skills and verbal wit in all settings, from formal oratory to animated conversation, recounting the founding of the Haudenosaunee league through the recital of the Kaianeren:kowa, a long repetitious and poetic evocation of a living constitution.



With impressionistic imagery splashing on a mylar membrane caused by the sunlight escaping between the moving leaves and branches, Staats creates a video whose power and relevance stems from its unparalleled capacity to utilize all forms of advancing digital telecommunications: high-resolution, real-time video streaming, with synchronic, spatially rich digital audio. His found text dealing with the approaching and crossing of barriers and forests in *when I left* and *what remains* looks back to a personal history and the cruel distances in cultural dominance. But it is the rhythmic emitting of light on the window and on the opaque surface of the mylar sheet that reminds me of an early evening train ride in Europe, and is best retold by Gerald Vizenor in "Choir of Memory":

antwerp  
to amsterdam

ceremony  
and memory  
tormented  
by the stations  
break of light

my shouts  
slight tributes  
sentiments  
of resistance  
almost lost  
on the cloudy  
cold coasts  
of the second  
world war<sup>3</sup>

Together these new works by Greg Staats impart multi-sensory information like a liquid, shimmering and ubiquitous, absorbing. "Images of earthly reality were translated into signals..."<sup>4</sup> emanating light, delivering live and recorded events in real time, the wind playing hide and seek with the sun on the mylar, the black and white pronouncing a photographic past. In *what remains*, one reads the text overlay while gazing at majestic poplars being swayed by the strong wind creating that particular rustling sound of its oval leaves as if the grandfathers were speaking through Pauline Johnson's opening stanza in "Dawendine":

There's a spirit on the river, there's a ghost upon  
the shore  
They are chanting, they are singing through the  
starlight evermore,  
As they steal amid the silence,  
And the shadows of the shore.

You can hear them when the Northern candles light  
The Northern sky,  
Those pale, uncertain candle flames, that shiver,  
dart and die,  
Those dead men's icy finger tips,  
Athwart the Northern sky.<sup>5</sup>

Staats' work is erudite and equivocal, narrative and abstract, poetic and quotidian. These videos may be better understood by this quote by Tom Sherman who writes in *Canadian Art*:

...making video is like talking. In its essence it occurs in real time, permitting our minds to run ahead of the moment. Video is intimate and immediate (quick as light), and it is positively inclusive. Video will be at the heart of all forms of digital telecom in the near future. Video (intermedia) fills all the spaces between the arts.<sup>6</sup>

To complete the creative cycle made by these four new videos, I would like to conclude by mentioning the painterly *wave* which echoes the same plaintive hymn as in *red oak*

wave, 2006



*condolence*, only this time we hear his paternal grandmother Angeline Wright-Staats singing with the Porter brothers. Her voice, the matriarchal confederacy of political alliance and cultural entity and the chorus, patriarchal band council enforced by government, is ironic: the bicultural heritage of clan mothers and parliament, longhouse and church, Mohawk and English. Despite these disparate cultural backgrounds, Greg Staats has created a place where intimacy and public space have reciprocity.

Robert Houle

#### Notes

- 1 Walt Whitman, "Eidolons," *Leaves of Grass* (New York, 1921), p. 4.
- 2 Octavio Paz, "The Tree of Life," *Octavio Paz: Convergences, Essays on Art and Literature* translated from the Spanish by Helen Lane (San Diego, New York, London, 1987), p. 300.
- 3 Gerald Vizenor, "Choir of Memory," *Almost Ashore, Selected Poems* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 52.
- 4 Tom Sherman, "Video (Intermedia)," *Canadian Art*, Vol.22, No.1 (Spring 2005), p. 58.
- 5 E. Pauline Johnson, "Dawendine," *Flint and Feather* (Toronto, London, 1914), p. 20.
- 6 Tom Sherman, "Video (Intermedia)," *Canadian Art*, Vol.22, No.1 (Spring 2005), p. 58.



Leonard Staats (1903-1967) and Angeline Wright Thomas Staats (1908-1974). Photograph taken in 1950.





(spread and overleaf) when I left, 2007

Approaching, moving



across barriers



St. Pauls Anglican Church Kanyengeh, circa 1913.  
LS in ink identifies Leonard Staats.

# Cultural Remembrance

What comes to mind as an immediate response to Greg Staats' *Reciprocity* video program is the interweaving of cultural history within community and family. Aspects of leaving and returning, grief and loss mingle with joy and celebration. I consider the heartache of distant Mohawk family members leaving the security of the Mohawk Valley and resettling along the banks of the Grand River after the turmoil of the American Revolutionary War. Their meager possessions and the Queen Anne Communion Silver<sup>1</sup> were among the limited material goods making the perilous journey. No doubt their Christian faith gave them solace in the same way the Condolence Ceremony<sup>2</sup> of Longhouse believers elevates the mind after the death of loved ones.

When the Haldimand Proclamation of 1784 set the six miles deep boundaries of the Six Nations' new homeland, our ancestors took the Crown's assurances as truth. They did not realize that sixty years later their defined territory along the Grand River would shrink to a mere fraction of the original grant. Resettling a second time in Tuscarora Township after 1841 meant rebuilding homes, farms, churches, and longhouses. This reduced homeland and subsequent refuge is the setting for the music and images within Greg's four videos.

Settlement in Tuscarora Township proceeded according to religious affiliation. Along the eastern and northern regions of the township boundary were the families and kin groups of the Longhouse followers. At the western boundary, the Mohawk families, originally from the upper village in Mohawk Valley, established family homesteads around the Mohawk church, St. Paul's' Anglican (Kanyengeh). The Staats family built their home along Sour Springs Road. Our great-grandfather found employment as the constable for the Confederacy Chiefs' Council, the traditional form of Six Nations governance. One of his sons enlisted with the 114<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force during World War 1. He was one of more than three hundred Six Nation men who served the King as loyal allies during this conflict.

The returning soldiers had tasted a new kind of freedom away from the influence of church and home. In fact, many of these warriors began to earnestly petition for a change to the community's official government. In 1924 these hopes were realized when the Canadian government issued an Order-in-Council to replace the traditional hereditary system with an elected model based on one man, one vote. The Six Nations of the Grand River was irrevocably fractured along political and religious lines.

This action is still felt today as community members deal with larger issues such as land rights. As power and control were transferred to the elected Six Nations Band Council, the moral authority remains with the Confederacy Chiefs. Families were conflicted over what system to support. Others remained steadfastly aligned with one system or the other.



Staats family artifacts featured in the *Reciprocity* exhibition.

The cultural integrity of the community was further eroded and changed through the educational system. Students whose first language was an Iroquoian language were forced to speak English in on-reserve schools. The residential school, known as the Mohawk Institute or Mush Hole, compelled students to worship at the Mohawk Chapel and speak English. These institutions were major factors in the loss of our traditional languages. Despite the fact that most of our family relatives did not attend the Mohawk Institute, our grandparents and parents insisted that we would benefit from speaking only English. Our generation has lost a major component of our heritage.

Even though we did not speak Mohawk or Tuscarora, our grandparents often sang Indian hymns and prayed in the language in church and at home. These Indian hymns, translated from English hymns by community members, were passed on through hand-written hymnals. Choirs and quartets often sang hymns during church services at the Anglican, Baptist, and Methodist churches on Six Nations. Funerals were frequently a time for Mohawk hymn singing because grieving family members would specifically request a favourite hymn to be sung. These moving, *a capella* hymns brought recollections of loved ones' voices in song, and acted as soothing and uplifting release for the bereaved. In many ways a Mohawk hymn and its practitioners performed a small condolence through prayer and song. Mohawk Christians and their hymns firmly extended these funeral rites along a continuum by uplifting the mourners from a position of grief to one where they are clear-minded.

Despite having only an elementary education, record keeping was a frequent pastime for our paternal grandfather. He recorded weather conditions, significant family and community events, visits by relatives and friends, and even detailed the price of items purchased from local stores. "Spirit level purchased" appears in his handwriting during the playing of *what remains*. All these activities of daily living were written in small, black notebooks. Probably his most significant act of record keeping was preserving the Mohawk hymns sung by the Wright Family Quartet and the Porter Brothers with his reel-to-reel tape recorder. In a way he acted as one of the many linguists and ethnologists

1964

Mr Albert Wright  
 passed away  
 Sun 6:05 PM Nov 15/64  
 at the S. W. Hospital Chawchen  
 S. Sr

Mon AM. Nov. 16/64  
 1 truck load of stone dust  
 delivered here by Natwin Truck  
 S. Sr

Funeral at Medina Church  
 for Albert Wright  
 Wed. Nov 18/64. at 2 PM  
 Rather cool day Temperature about  
 36 or 38 deg.  
 Rev Melch Henry  
 Pall Bearers  
 Tree man Sowden Gs. Williams  
 Simon & Milton Wright S. Staats Sr.  
 John Curley

First snow fall. Ground  
 Covered white  
 Thu. Nov. 19. /64  
 S. Sr

Sun PM. Nov 22 /64  
 Went to Burlington  
 Rev. M. Henry had service  
 m Mrs Norman Wright  
 m Mrs Ted Wright & Daughter. Ber.  
 Chaney John  
 m Mrs Kenneth McNaughton  
 & Son. Mrs. M. Henry  
 m Mrs Simon Wright  
 m Mrs Bob Williams  
 m Mrs S. Staats Sr  
 Min & her husband

Eddy Hall brother of the late  
 Tom & Elizabeth Hill died sudden  
 in Brantford Thu Dec 3/64

Leonard Staats' Journal, 1964

who have studied the people and culture at Six Nations.<sup>3</sup> The major difference was the control of the information and its subsequent use, which rested firmly within the family. I often wonder what he wanted to preserve with the recordings. My belief is that he knew the inherent value of these Mohawk hymns. The lyrics held a truly Mohawk interpretation of the Christian message. Combined with the emotion of the singers these hymns connect my present reality with our ancestors.

The works transmit the richness of the Mohawk tradition of hymn singing from my past. The clear message I take from *red oak condolence* and *wave* is an admonishment to focus on Mohawk Christians who expressed their mix of linguistic continuity within a twentieth-century context.

In the true spirit of Iroquois *reciprocity*,<sup>4</sup> my grandfather took the sharing of Mohawk hymns singers, recorded their voices, and preserved the integrity of the our family's link with the Mohawk language. In turn, Greg Staats brings forward the sound recordings, melded with the personal mnemonic visuals of trees and found text, as a gift to all who witness.

Sheila Staats

#### Notes

1 The Queen Anne Communion Silver was presented to the Mohawks in 1711 and was used in the first Chapel of the Mohawks built at Fort Hunter, New York, in 1712. The Communion Silver was divided between the Six Nations and Tyendinaga Mohawks following their resettlement in Ontario after 1784.

2 Jose Barreiro, "Chief Jacob Thomas and the Condolence Cane," *Northeast Indian Quarterly* (Winter 1990): 77-85.

3 Sally Weaver and Annemarie Shimony are just two of the anthropologists who studied the people and cultural practices at Six Nations of the Grand River.

4 My recollections of a first-year anthropology course, Trent University, 1972.



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red oak condolence, 2006

First snow fall. Ground  
Covered white

Thu. Nov. 19. /64

L. Sr.

Sun PM. Nov 22 /64

Went to Burlington

Rev. M. Henry had service

Mr Mrs Norman Wright

Mr Mrs Ted Wright & Daughter Be  
Chancey John.

Mr. Mrs Kenneth McNaughton  
& Son. Mrs. M. Henry

Mr Mrs Simon Wright

Mr Mrs. Bob Williams

Mr Mrs. I. Staats Sr.

Miss & her husband

# List of Works

*red oak condolence, 2006* 3:11;20

The movement of the leaves allows an entrance into the “Indian hymn” singing cultural interpretation of spirit, a place where 2 overlap and create a third space. This specific song was written anonymously in Mohawk as opposed to others which were translated from existing English Hymns. Audio track - Indian Hymn sung in Mohawk perfect harmony, recorded in 1965 by Leonard Staats Sr. Singers: Hardy Porter, Jesse Porter and Clarence Porter; Six Nations Reserve.

*when I left, 2007* 5:53

The intermittent text serves as a public private entrance into my own personal memories and is a response to “At the Edge of the Woods” ceremonial speech, which condoles fears and loss both communal and personal. Juxtaposed with the audio of a Christian hymn sung in Mohawk, with the circular rhythmic visual of the tree roots as the intermedia.

*wave, 2006* 3:23

Shadows flutter upon a mylar membrane with voices of Indian hymns, six nations home services recorded by grandfather. Paternal grandmother Angeline Wright-Staats sings with Porter Brothers.

*what remains, 2007* 4:46

Found text works from letters, personal notes, and my grandfathers diaries make up this contemplation that serves as a mnemonic that reads on many layers of relationships and meanings.



## About the Writers

**Robert Houle** was born in St. Boniface, Manitoba in 1947. His artwork has been featured in numerous international exhibitions. Houle's work is in the collections of major institutions such as the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; McGill University, Montreal; and the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. He currently lives and works in Toronto.

**Sheila Staats** is Mohawk from the Six Nations of the Grand River and currently works as the Native Information Specialist for GoodMinds.com located on Reserve land in the City of Brantford, Ontario. She has worked in cultural education for more than 20 years, first at the Woodland Cultural Centre and now with GoodMinds.com, an internet-based distributor of educational and resource material about First Nations, Inuit and Metis to schools, libraries, and the general public. Sheila participated as historical writer and project researcher by providing most of the necessary historical and photographic research for the multi-media publication, *The Great Peace...the gathering of good minds* CD-ROM. She holds a B.A. in history from Huron College University in London.



animose (details), 2002

25 toned silver prints, each 16 in. x 20 in.



# Artist Statement and Bio

I continue to investigate the restorative aesthetics of a mnemonic continuum of cultural remembrance with the complexity of my own contemporary Mohawk cultural experience. With intuitive visual influences gleaned from the landscape of the Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, my birthplace, and the found audiotapes from my grandfather's collection, these works evoke not only private loss but to the collective memory that is held within the landscape itself. While redefining the parts of self via visual documentation of people and place, I discovered that the convergence of ceremonies, both traditional and christian, creates an in between place that allows remembrance to appear from various places of identity. Carrying over certain core beliefs from one system to another then creates an interchangeable space for personal re/creation.

**Greg Staats**

Greg Staats is the recipient of the Duke and Duchess of York Prize in Photography (1999). Since 1991, he has exhibited widely throughout Canada including the Walter Philips Gallery (Banff, AB 1995); Mercer Union (Toronto, ON 2000); Museum of Civilization (Hull, QC, 1999); the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography (Ottawa, ON 2000); the London Regional Art & Historical Museum (London, ON 2000); the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (Toronto, ON 2002); Gallery TPW (Toronto, ON 2002); Galerie 101 (Ottawa, ON 2002); and Galerie Séquence (Chicoutimi, QC 2003). New works will be included in an inaugural group exhibition at the Royal Ontario Museum in 2007. He lives and works in Toronto.

# Artist's Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Toronto Arts Council and the Ontario Arts Council, as well as the writers Robert Houle and Sheila Staats for their authentic perspectives and generous support. Thanks to Curatorial and Collections Consultant, Allan MacKay for selecting my works in progress, and to the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery. Special thanks to Assistant Curator, Crystal Mowry for her talent and sensitivity to design and detail. And finally thanks to Maureen Morris for her love and kindness.



The River Grand Chronicles series presents projects with a strong connection to the Grand River and the regions it winds through.

The series frontispiece exhibition, *River: Grand!*, featured contemporary and historical works created from the embrace of the Grand River's past and present influences. Historic paintings, drawings, prints, and photographs were brought together from significant collections and placed in the context of works by contemporary artists.

The *River Grand Chronicles* will focus on contemporary projects that cast the Grand River as either a conceptual or literal figure in visual storytelling. Major themes such as romanticized visions, traditional depictions of the landscape, and the First Nations perspective on the complex and often neglected cultural history of the region, will surface in these important projects.

As with other KW|AG programming series, the *River Grand Chronicles* remind our viewers to consider how stories, be they fictional or true, have resonance beyond geographic boundaries.

Cover: Leonard Staats' Journal, 1964. Inside back cover: Six Nations Chiefs, circa 1865. Standing, left to right: John Hill, Josiah Hill, Wm Wedge, Nicodemus Porter. Sitting, left to right David Thomas, Jasper Gilkison, David Hill. All archival images and video stills are courtesy of the artist.

Exhibition installation photography: K.J. Bedford. Images are courtesy of the artist and KW|AG.

July 6 – September 9, 2007

Reciprocity was organized by the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery and presented as the fourth part of our River Grand Chronicles series.

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Wm. Henry Died Fri. Jan 22/43

Hiram Bumbery Died  
Mon. Feb. 8/43

Jno. F Hill Died Tue Feb. 16/43

Mrs. Frank Davis. Died Oct. 26/42  
Buried Thu. Oct 29/42

Alex Hill 69 corner Died Oct 30  
Buried Sun. Nov. 1 1942