



Pictou Island Seekers

Eryn Foster +
the Art Of Carrying

JOURNAL BY MARY MACDONALD

Mary MacDonald journeyed across the Northumberland Strait to explore Pictou Island with a group of Canadian artists for the fourth incarnation of Eryn Foster's *New Canadian Pilgrimages* series. Here's a condensed excerpt of this archival text, printed in memory of MacDonald—the well-loved former director of Eastern

Edge Gallery, who worked for recognition of Atlantic-based artists before her passing in July 2017. MacDonald was raised in Nova Scotia, a graduate of Mount Allison University and Ontario College of Art and Design, and a relentless supporter and promoter of the Atlantic arts scene, particularly in Newfoundland where she lived. The newly formed Mary MacDonald Foundation plans to publish the full text in consultation with Eryn Foster in print in 2019, along with other writings by MacDonald.

What does it mean to carry? In the most basic sense, the idea of the portage strikes up a familiar image of two hikers with a canoe atop their shoulders trampling through the bush. As they circumnavigate perilous obstacles, watch how their line is meandering but decisive, exploratory yet informed. Remove the canoe and what else is carried? Experience, perspective, language. Notice how their paths change according to each obstacle, the land responding to their feet, their feet responding to the land. The journey of the portage is not unlike a drawing in real time, a collaborative artwork amongst artists. In



Sarah Burwash, Drawings of artists conducted during *New Canadian Pilgrimages #4, Pictou Island Portage*, Curated and organized by Eryn Foster.

early summer 2014, Halifax-based artist and project curator Eryn Foster invited six contemporary artists from across the country to Pictou Island, a small island located just four nautical miles off the north shore of Nova Scotia. There, artists Aimée Henry Brown, Ursula Johnson, Barbara Lounder, Douglas Raymond Smarch, Jr., Michael Waterman and Sheilah Wilson portaged an item of significance across the island for one week in a walking-based artist residency— along with expedition photographer Katherine Knight, expedition artist Sarah Burwash and a student intern, Elizabeth Johnson. Strong throughout Pictou Island Portage was a genuine experience of community, the presence of labour in artistic process, and the question of contemporary art's relationship to nature, to rural communities and to audience.

FERRY | RADIO

We climb on board the Pictou Island ferry early in the morning at the Caribou wharf across from the island. For five dollars you can buy a return voyage. Everyone helps to load on groceries, bikes and

hiking bags. In some way this feels like our last point of contact with the world. In the old days, there was a mail boat that traversed the space between Pictou Island and the mainland providing communications by way of exhaustive manual, labour for in the winter months, a handful of men would portage the boat up and over the ice, zigzagging their way to the shore.

For his part in Pictou Island Portage, Michael Waterman brought his Mobile Pirate Radio (MPR) station to the island. In the same spirit of the laborious Pictou Island Mail Service, Waterman pushed the station across the 9.5 kilometer island each day. The station was capable of transmitting pre-recorded material (often a pirate or walking mix tape) as well as live interviews with passersby, fellow artists or the artist himself. Neatly secured atop a bike trailer, the station's antenna stretched up into the blue sky complete with pirate flag. The crunching of the gravel under its wheels—radio static—the music playing from its speakers at times the artists' only encouragement to keep walking.

Apparent in Waterman's work was an interest in mapping the



island through sonic representation. Fellow artists were encouraged to take a portable radio with them should they veer off the main road and away from the station to explore on their own. At other times the station's only audience may have been the wild roses and the rabbits. *We are playing to the plants.* Listeners were encouraged to spread the word of the radio's activity and report back should they pick up a signal. Transporting and transmitting, Waterman's Mobile Pirate Radio operated for as long as its daily solar powered batteries would allow. What was produced was a sonic sense of place and a very different spatial experience of the island.

ROAD | DRAWING

Pictou Island is far from what one might consider a hub of contemporary art production. Its main road (and at times airport) stretches from the remains of one lighthouse to an unmanned signal light on the island's east end. Today, few residents live year round on the island, which is mostly powered by solar, generators, and wind power. *We are off the grid.* In the summer cottagers, day-hikers, and fishermen visit the island. Residents take to offering visitors a ride in their dilapidated pick-up trucks down the dusty road where they visit the island's public sites: a church, a community centre, a dance hall and a public park.

For *Pictou Island Portage*, Sheilagh Wilson transformed a long staff of driftwood into a drawing tool. Pushing and dragging the mark-making device along the road, the artist left only temporary marks on the road, soon to be washed away by cars, other walkers, wind and rain. At places of rest Wilson encircled the area with white chalk. In this way, *Walk: Pause* became as much about rest and recovery as it did about active marking. The linear experience of time gave way to spaces for reflection or mediation, disrupting the

overly logical experience of the road. These circles pointed to other possible experiences and knowledges about place, something that is perhaps still hidden and waiting to be discovered.

WOODS | PATH-MAKING

A mixed forest of spruce, fir, birch and maple dominate the north side of Pictou Island. With many of the residents' properties keeping to the main road, the properties on the north side of the road back onto the forest.

Douglas Raymond Smarch, Jr. arrived on Pictou Island with a bright green metal rake. Portaging this everyday tool, the artist met with local residents who might wish to have a foot path uncovered on their property. Once alone in the woods he set to freeing the trail from the woods, feeling it before him one step at a time. Pulling at deadfall with hands and rake, this kind of walking, specific to trail-making, is hard labour and hot and messy work. At the same time, its tactility offers instant gratification, and a meditative view about an engagement with material. In the end, the trail looped right back to where it began.

Back at camp, Smarch pulls at some green twine and muses about the potentiality of materials. *Everything can be an art activity.* If this is true, then it is the economy of exchange, the spirit of generosity, and an openness to potentiality that allowed the path to be revealed, and for art to appear. ■

All proceeds of Mary MacDonald Foundation's publication of this text in full will go towards furthering the foundation's mandate to support curatorial and artistic projects in rural areas of Atlantic Canada. For more information on how to support the foundation visit: easternedge.ca/support/the-mary-macdonald-foundation