

“**In My Own Back Yard**” is an exhibition by Mary Abma consisting of series of works that are rooted in the study of botany and history. The artworks’ grounding in the artist's property in a typical suburban neighbourhood personalizes the exploration of place, not only for her, but for those who view her works.



# ThisPlace

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Perspectives On Mary Abma's

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**InMyOwnBackYard**



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**InMyOwnBackYard**

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*Podophyllum peltatum*, 2011  
lumen photograph on photographic paper  
16 X 20"

Phil Jenkins

# Earth Matters

We're all in a relationship. It can be a beautiful thing; then again, it is by times abusive, inspiring, exploitative, nourishing, reformatory, even fatal. It's a rocky one at times; at other times it's built on sand. There is no escaping it. It is our singular relationship with this spinning Earth of ours.

Of the Earth's surface, just under a third is land, and spread out upon that solid ground, in a vastly uneven distribution, are seven billion people and counting. For each of them, the land beneath their feet feeds into their lives; as a source of sustenance, both physical and emotional; we might live where others have never lived before, or where many have. We may be born there and stay, or head out to find a place of our own. Perhaps we inherit our piece of it, or settle there in tenancy, or claim legal deed of some acreage, and then, as the Canadian author W.P. Kinsella has written, "the wind never blows so cold again."

The vast majority of those seven billion Earthlings (nomads not included) have an static address, a shorthand way of describing quite where in the world we live. That 'where' can be as small as a cardboard box under an overpass, a back yard in Bright's Grove, a sixteen acre park on the banks of the Grand River, (I'm referring here to the host site of Mary Abma's exhibition, Glenhyrst Gardens, of which Chelsea Carrs, the curator of the Brant Historical Society provides the history within this catalogue) or as big as a prairie farm. And as well as that local residence, we all subscribe to a national address, a national 'where' that is also a sort of communal home. If we

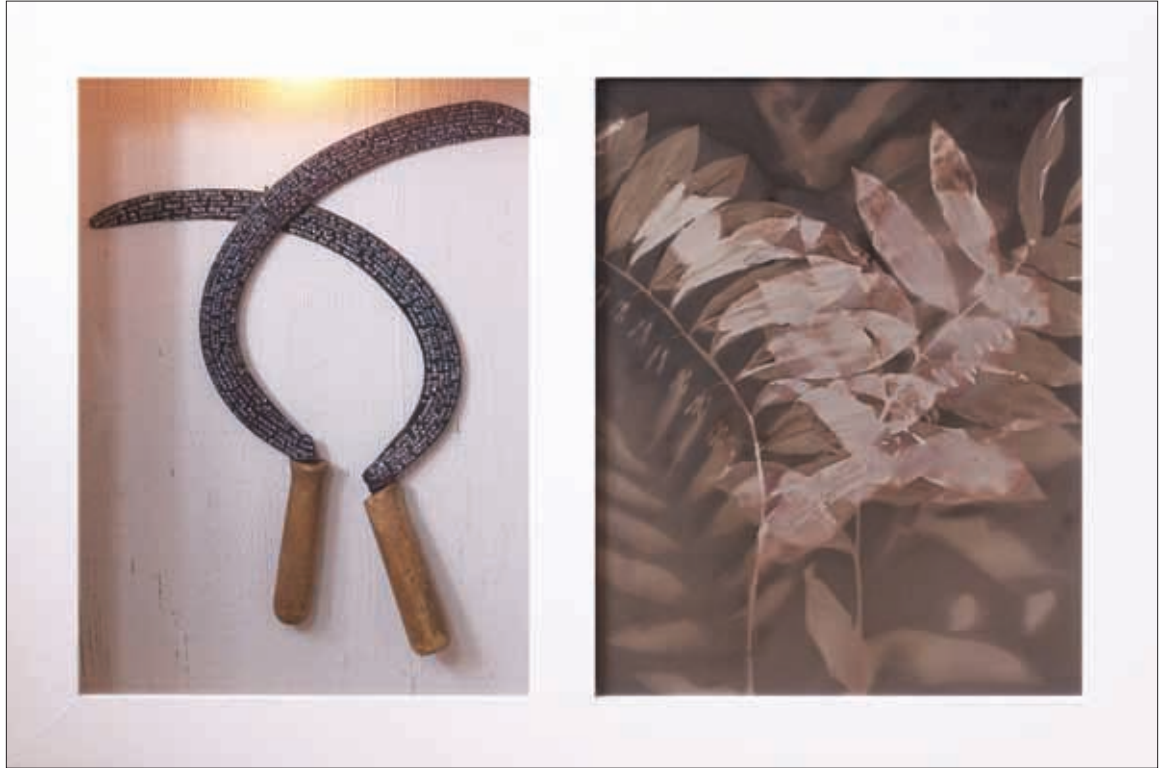
were born Canadian, or chose it as the 'where' we want to be on, our Canadian identity is a placement statement that permits geographical, political, philosophical and artistic assumptions.

Certainly, geographically being a Canadian is a big deal. The country, which lies within a grid of historically evolved borders, all ten million square kilometers of it, is rich in land, in geology and ecology. The second verse of the Canadian national anthem talks not of bellicosely standing on guard, but rather of 'a broad domain.....where pines and maples grow, great prairies spread and lordly rivers flow.' In other words, the sheer landliness of Canada impressed the lyric writer, poet Stanley Weir, enough to want us all to regularly sing its topographical praises.

Taking the long view, the Canadian attitude to and exploitation (benign and damaging) of our topographical inheritance has unfolded in four distinct phases, or perhaps we can call them strata. These strata are land, territory, property and real estate. The Land phase is the pre-human one, before the last ice age and before the populating wave after it. Then came the first wave of human habitation, and the notion of tribe and Territory, and the absence of the conceited notion of land ownership. (You can explore more of the indigenous people's attitude to the environment and their remedial use of native plants in David Plain's catalogue essay.)

Then, with the arrival of the French, the notion of property, from *propre*, to own, arrives. We can imagine the confusion in





*Solomon's Seal With Sickles*, 2010  
lumen photograph and sickles with 17th-century writings  
36 1/2 X 24 1/2 X 5 1/4"

the mind of Samuel de Champlain's Algonquin guide as he explains to him that, as they move upriver through the landscape, everything over their shoulders is now part of France, a country thousands of miles away across an ocean. This is the root of colonization. And, after 1759, the reign of the British and their affection for straight lines, as seen in their military compulsion to survey and allot the land to settlers as a method of garrisoning it. They regarded, then and now, the great land mass with its riches of resources above and below as real estate, capable of being bought and sold. The ever-growing army of real estate agents now continues that legacy. I would contend that if a line is drawn through those four phases of our attitude to land, it is leading away from respect for it, and appreciation of its beauty, and towards its commoditization.

According to the population clock that used to accumulate on the Stats Canada website (it was recently wound down), on the numerologically interesting date the 12th of December, 2012, we passed the thirty-five million mark. In fifty years the Canadian population has doubled, and far from spreading out democratically over those millions of acres (which would supply us a quarter of a square kilometer each) the vast majority of us are urban, living no more than a couple of couch lengths from our neighbour.

Whereas in 1900 ninety percent of Canadians were rurally connected to the land, by the year 2000 that figure had reversed. For the majority of us now, the view from the kitchen window, if we live at ground level, is at best of a bit of grass and scant flowerbed. As the condos rise like dragon's teeth on the cityscape, there is a rising tribe of sky people, those of us who work up in the air in an office tower and commute home to sleep in an above ground condo. Urban greenspace is replaced by greyspace, and we lose connection, again physically and emotionally, with the land. And yet, our reputation as being a down to earth nation is our abiding myth. The myth of Canada as a giant park, with the acne of habitation sprinkled on it persists, though we are well aware of the reality. We are becoming more and more disconnected from the land, as we are becoming more disconnected from how food is made.

It has been said (by me) that there are two lines running through any human endeavor—the bottom line and the melody line. In other words, the financial and the poetic. If we scrutinize the modern Canadian relationship to land, and look for these two lines, the bottom line is thickest in the tar sands of Alberta, whereas the melody line is thickest in the poetic works of artists such as Mary Abma.

During my career as a Canadian author, I traced a path along the melody line, examining the relationship to land of farmers, natural scientists, colonists, landowners, governments. At the beginning of the book about farming, I placed a quote that seemed to encapsulate quite what the book and I were attempting to essay; "Once upon a time all of Canada was land, and the day is coming when it will all be real estate." By charting that progression in the biography of one acre of land (on Le Breton Flats in Ottawa) from its geology to its inhabitation, in a book entitled *An Acre of Time*, I came to realize that respect for the land is at the root of a compassionate society. In the work of Mary Abma, I can see that respect.

When I was made aware of the work of Mary Abma my interest and artistic empathy were, naturally, piqued. A visual artist's progress that had led to an exhibition entitled *In My Own Back Yard* obviously had resonance for a writer who had selected one acre of Canada in his hometown as the platform for an in depth study of the history of Canadian land use. (As the London artist Greg Curnoe once did in *Deeds/Abstracts: The History of a London Lot*). As I had done, Mary has used the particular, the fifth of an acre behind her home designated Lot 161 in Bright's Grove (interestingly, this near the thousand acre site of Canada's first, short-lived commune, founded in 1829) to make a general point, that as she says in her own explanation within this catalogue of her four-year project, "art... has the power to make us reconsider our relationship with the land"—our land, all land.

But instead of braiding the results of her deep, rewarding research into sentences and pages as I had done, Mary had let her curiosity lead her along a quartet of garden paths; through the study of botany to the production of a herbarium (you can learn more about this lovely word in the catalogue article by



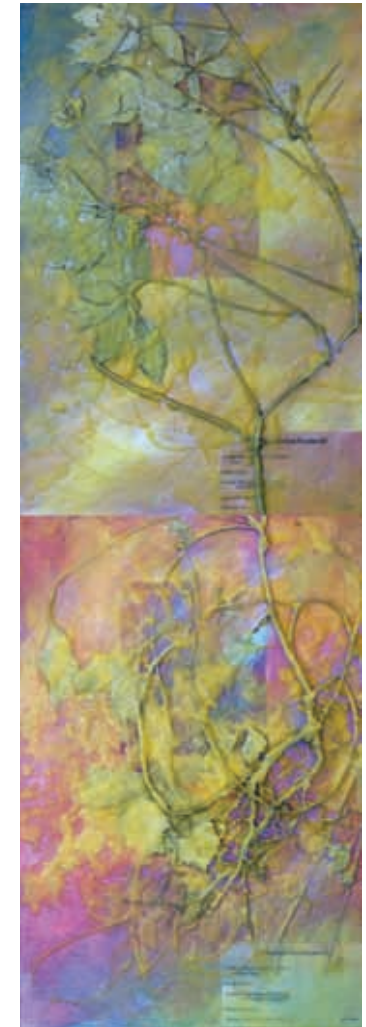
*Crabgrass: detail from Herbarium of Lot 161, Plan 150, 2011*  
masonite with plant specimen, botanical label, acrylic, transfer print, and beeswax

Natalie Iwanycki of the Royal Botanical Gardens); through the artistic simple technique of lumen photography to the production of achingly beautiful portraits of native plants; through her DNA connection to one of the first French colonists, a farmer and apothecary, to the production of shadowboxes; and through the assemblage of samples and records, as many of the great researching natural scientists did, to the creation of an faux-altarpiece, a reminder of the history of land-sacredness within many cultures, now perhaps lapsed in ours. In this fourth aspect of the exhibition Mary has been able to work hand in hand with the Glenhyrst community; many hands making an enlightened work. In all of them we are granted insight.

Thus, for example, in the creation of a localized herbarium and the “tangible connection between myself, my ancestor, and my weeds” (a pejorative nomenclature she wishes to rescue) Mary is able to show that the basic *modus operandi* in the plant kingdom or in the kingdoms of Europe was the same. Spread yourself as wide as possible, always seeking new resources in new territories. In all four facets of her exhibition Mary provides us a window on the ongoing story of our relationship with the land, and an opportunity to renew or reassess it.

For most of human history, the land has shaped us. Now, more than ever, thanks to our relentless ingenuity in satisfying our need for comfort and speed, we are reshaping it. It is therefore vital that, as we sculpt and eviscerate the land in service to the bottom line, there are artists like Mary who can direct us to the melody line and supply us with engaging art that evokes an emotional response, even as we hum along.

As the author Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, who in her novels was much concerned with the enduring value of place and how the land shapes us, wrote, using the universal masculine pronoun of the time, “We cannot live without the earth or part from it. And something is shriveled in man’s heart when he turns away from it and concerns himself only with the affairs of men.” With *In My Own Back Yard*, Mary provides a course correction for those of us who have indeed turned away, by however many degrees, and opens our eyes wide.



*Virginia Creeper: detail from Herbarium of Lot 161, Plan 150, 2011*  
masonite with plant specimen, botanical label, acrylic, transfer print, and beeswax





*Herbarium of Lot 161, Plan 150*  
Center Art Gallery, Calvin College, 2012

Mary Abma

# My Yard, Troubled Muse

Every once in awhile, an artistic endeavour has the power to transport the artist beyond the confines of the studio. *In My Own Back Yard* has been one such project. During the four-year period from its conception to its first exhibition, I travelled into the depths of the soil and down to the water table. I peered into the membranes of plants. I caught a year's worth of water that fell onto my land and brought relics from an ancient lake bed up from their resting place into the sunlight of my present. I read firsthand accounts of a world of exploration, discovery, and conquest. I travelled back in time to the beginnings of the pharmaceutical industry and to a time in which medicine and superstition were intertwined. I was privileged to walk with and learn from dedicated scientists who are working to restore a watershed that, after years of use and abuse, nearly lost its ability to nourish the land. I walked and talked with people in my own community who have devoted their lives to the work of habitat restoration--people who challenged my notions of what a natural area or even a garden should be. This artistic journey required that I learn botany--something about which I had previously had no knowledge or even interest in learning. And perhaps most extraordinarily of all, this journey challenged my worldview by forcing me to reconsider my responsibility to the environment around me.

*In My Own Back Yard* is an exhibition consisting of four

different artistic responses to the question of how our treatment of the land impacts the health of our ecosystems. The depth and scope of this project weaves together the distinct disciplines of history, botany and art. It celebrates the natural world, mourns the loss of biodiversity and habitat, recognizes the powerful hold of history, and embraces the efforts of those who believe that their own actions can make a difference. Early twentieth-century ecologist Aldo Leopold stated that

**one of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds. Much of the damage inflicted on land is quite invisible to laymen. An ecologist must either harden his shell and make believe that the consequences of science are none of his business, or he must be the doctor who sees the marks of death in a community that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise.<sup>1</sup>**

The beauty of art is that the artist can make visible that which is usually invisible. I chose for my muse my own yard, the land that I 'own'. It became the inspirational jumping-off point for this exhibition.

My artistic process indulges my love for engaging in research

<sup>1</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac With Essays on Conservation From Round River*, (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1970), 197.



*Aquilegia canadensis*, 2011  
lumen photograph on photographic paper  
16 X 20"

and scholarship. Not long after I made the decision to commit to working on an exhibition about my yard, I read a variety of wide-ranging texts including UN documents on sustainability, ecology books, history books, and a theology book. Despite the diverse perspectives inherent in these writings, a unified theme began to emerge. Norman Wirzba states it best:

**Urban life makes it likely that many citizens will be entirely oblivious about, and thus unsympathetic to... biological habitats. Our lives increasingly take part in self-constructed (often grandiose) bubbles that make little direct contact with the wide, life-giving universe around us. This loss of practical contact with the natural world has led to the narrowing of our knowledge and sympathy, and from that narrowing has come carelessness and needless destruction.**<sup>2</sup>

*In My Own Back Yard* is a personal response to my own journey towards knowledge of, respect for, and responsibility for the land.

## Herbarium of Lot 161 Plan 150:

As part of my quest for knowledge, I decided to create a herbarium of the plants that grew in my lawn during one growing season (2009). Herbaria are collections of plant specimens from a specific area that are pressed, preserved and documented for scientific study. In order to create the herbarium, I grew each plant to maturity, identified it, pressed it, and mounted it. As I began to work on this project, I felt that in addition to learning rudimentary botany, I needed to explore the historical influences on the plants in my yard. Where did

they originate? How did they get here? What were the political and social factors that influenced our current attitudes about plants and land use--particularly land ownership and agriculture? How did our universal knowledge about the natural world evolve over time and then devolve as computers became depositories for the kinds of knowledge that people used to hold in their memories? When I was doing this research, I was particularly struck by a visual image conveyed by Harold J. Cook, who speaks about the practices of early botanists in the colonies:

**They share the quality of conveying matters of fact as if newly discovered, although careful examination reveals that their accounts were written on top of erasures, as in a palimpsest. While European authors often represented their observations as unique, personal experiences garnered independently of any help by agents of other knowledge systems, it seems that the most important means for acquiring new information actually involved contact with other people and familiarity with their experiences and accounts. In their various publications these European authors all similarly reinscribed conversations with local people in the language of commensurable matters of fact.**<sup>3</sup>

I incorporated the notion of palimpsests into my work; my herbarium panels are palimpsests containing not only the plants themselves, but old and new writings and wisdom, botanical drawings, etc. These writings are covered, faded, and partially erased so that only small portions remain visible to the viewer.

*Herbarium of Lot 161 Plan 150* consists of 122 panels representing the 82 plant species that grew in my lawn in 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Norman Wirzba, *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age*, (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2003), 2-3

<sup>3</sup> Harold J. Cook, "Global Economies and Local Knowledge in the East Indies: Jacobus Bontius Learns the Facts of Nature," *Colonial Botany: Science, Commerce, and Politics in the Early Modern World*, ed. Londa Schiebinger and Claudia Swan (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 102.





*Cultivation and Conquest*  
Glenhyrst Art Gallery of Brant, 2013

Displayed as though the plants within them are sprouting up all over the walls of the gallery, it invites the viewer to see, perhaps for the first time, an almost magical view of the unique character and tenacity of what we usually refer to as “weeds”. That which is usually beneath our feet is brought into view.

**Lumen Photographs:**

One of my treasured possessions is a Herbarium that was put together as a school project by my grandmother’s aunt at the age of 15 in 1895. I received this folio when I was first working on this project and not only was I immediately taken with the fact that I was looking at plants that had been pressed 114 years ago, but I was also struck by the beautiful effect created by the ghostly reverse photographic images that the plants had left imprinted on the opposing pages. These ghostly images inspired me to capture ethereal images of plants that should be in my yard--those that are native to the Carolinian Forest, by using a Lumen printing process in which the light of the sun exposes photographic images of plants laid out on photo-sensitive paper.

**Cultivation and Conquest:**

I am descended from Louis Hébert, an apothecary who travelled with Champlain and became the first European farmer who settled in what is now Canada. The carrying of seed from one ecosystem to another was common practice in Hébert's time. We are only recently recognizing the impact that such disregard for natural habitats has had on the current state of our planet. The fact that I could trace my line directly to one of the few people who was known to have done this at the beginnings of European settlement in Canada was a poignant realization for me. As I walked around my property, I considered several of my "weeds" and wondered if Hébert himself was responsible for their presence in my yard. Once I recognized this tangible connection between myself, my ancestor, and my weeds, I began an exploration of the relationship between the colonialist ideals and practices of the first European settlers and the degradation of the land in our time. I read a number of primary source texts; namely, the

writings of the first French colonial explorers themselves. What struck me was that the language they used to describe the land in the "New World" was the language of conquest. Land was a possession to be taken and shaped to the needs and desires of the conquerors. The language of cultivation was the language of the colonialists. This language extended to their philosophy of conquest of the Indigenous populations. The people were crops, or weeds, or seeds to be harvested or in some cases, exterminated.

In order to explore the relationship between the ideals and ideologies of the past and the state of our land and of our relationship with our Indigenous brothers and sisters in the present, I printed excerpts from the colonialists’ writings on antique cultivation blades and then paired them up with lumen prints of the plants that should be growing naturally on my property. The twelve resulting shadowboxes face the viewer, revealing themselves to be both witness and confessional.

**Terra Dulcis:**

**Triptych Altarpiece of Glenhyrst** is an installation containing soil, seeds, and water--the bounty given to a parcel of land. This installation brings into view those parts of our landscape that we tend to ignore on a day-to-day basis. By placing them along with fragments of images, text, and historical documents, into an ‘altarpiece’ made from antique printer drawers, and arranged as the elements of the Christian eucharist (“wafers” of soil and communion glasses of rainfall), I address the idea that in this era of easy access to information, we have collectively lost knowledge about the natural world and have also lost a sense of the sacredness of our land and what it produces--that we feel neither properly thankful for nor nurturing of the interconnected systems that sustain us. I originally produced this altarpiece as an exploration of the land on which I live. Since that time, I have made it a site-specific installation in Grand-Rapids, Michigan, and now at Glenhyrst Art Gallery, in Brantford.

Through the preparations for *Terra Dulcis* (Sweet Land), I learned the history of the land on which Glenhyrst Gallery and Gardens now stand. I met people who love the land and who



*Triptych Altarpiece of Calvin College*  
Center Art Gallery, Calvin College, 2012

are passionate about it and I have worked with a group of teens who left their own imprints on the artwork.

When I first made the decision to limit my artistic output to works inspired only by my property, I had no idea how far-reaching and expansive this project would be. Having spent four years paying attention to the land, I have become convinced that part of our collective blindness about environmental issues is that all of us can see that the world is a little less natural--a little more disturbed than it was when we were young, but accept the changes that we have experienced as falling within a kind of acceptable tolerance. The changes don't really seem all that big. Sure, there is a

subdivision where there used to be a field, but in the big scheme of things, this doesn't seem to be an earth-shattering development. The problem with seeing the world based only on one's own lifetime experience is that each generation is born into an increasingly damaged world and each generation adopts a new standard by which to judge the health of our environment. We can never see the extent of the damage we have caused over the course of a single lifetime. It is my hope that where words fail, where science is ignored by those who do not wish to pay attention, art will have the power to inspire more of us to open our eyes and to have the courage to reconsider our relationship with the land.



*Detail from Antique Herbarium School Project, 1895*



*Ramps With Hedge Trimmers*, 2011  
lumen photograph and hedge trimmers with 17th-century writings  
36 1/2 X 24 1/2 X 5 1/4”

Marcia Lea

# Site-Specific Global-Art

Discussing the ever-evolving relationship between humankind and nature would be like be like tackling the history of the entire species. When considered in depth and locally, the concepts become conceivable and this is the strategic approach that Mary Abma has taken with her artwork. For March and April of 2013, the exhibition, *In My Own Backyard*, is on display at the Glenhyrst Art Gallery of Brant, in Brantford, Ontario, Canada. For the past year Abma has been preparing an installation piece that is composed of the very earth and water from the land that surrounds the gallery on the Grand River in Southern Ontario. The piece is a complex installation work entitled, *Terra Dulcis: Triptych Altarpiece of Glenhyrst. Herbarium of Lot 161 Plan 150*, is composed of 82 plants that Abma discovered growing in her own suburban backyard. The series of *Lumen Photographs* and *Cultivation and Conquest*, deal with the history of colonization and indigenous plants. All four of these bodies of work delve into the nature of the interactions that humans have taken with the landscape around them. These interactions are determined by the cultural attitudes that have been constructed by each individual society. The artworks in this exhibition bring these attitudes to the foreground for discussion with a strong awareness of temporality, leaving a viewer to consider a vastness of natural history, far beyond the passage of time in one lifetime.

The title of Abma’s work, *Herbarium of lot 161 Plan 150*, is revealing of a particular approach to land in its impersonal plotting of site. The artist has chosen the language of the Ontario Government, the former colony of Upper Canada settled in the 19th century, when the poor of Great Britain came to the New Land in the hopes of becoming land-owners, something that would have been almost impossible for them in England at that time. It speaks of a planned settlement that divides the landscape into geometric rectangles for possession. This was not the language of the indigenous people who lived here before the European colonization.

The attitude that a culture develops toward the land is one of the most critical aspects of a society, because it is this that governs human interaction with the environment. As Michael Lailach writes, in his monograph *Land Art*, “Cartographic surveys, military conflicts, new trade and travel routes, and technological innovations in agriculture have lastingly changed the face of the landscape.”<sup>1</sup> In the contemporary world of globalization and environmental crisis this relationship becomes even more critical. As John Beardsley comments in his book, *Earthworks and Beyond: Contemporary Art in the Landscape*, “people’s relationship to landscape is one of the most significant expressions of culture, in many respects equal in importance to the relationship to the sacred.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Michael Lailach. *Land Art*. (Cologne: Taschen, 2007), p. 7.  
<sup>2</sup> John Beardsley. *Earthworks and Beyond: Contemporary Art in the Landscape*, (New York: Abbeyville Press Publishers, 2006), p. 8.





*Helenium autumnale*, 2010  
lumen photograph on photographic paper  
16 X 20

Throughout human history, art has often reflected the human attitude to landscape and this is what Abma’s work does with great poignancy in the world of the early 21st century.

*Herbarium of lot 161 Plan 150* is composed of plants that the artist found growing in her suburban backyard, then nurtured to full growth, and finally preserved in a format based on the tradition of a botanist’s herbarium. Some are indigenous plants to the Carolinian Forest, many are new plants introduced since European settlement and many might be considered weeds. *The Lumen Photographs* is a body of work composed of images that reveal the ghostly beauty of indigenous plants that should be found in the Carolinian Forest. These delicate images were created by exposing light-sensitive paper to actual plants. The pictures resulting from this process have a ghost-like appearance that emphasizes the fragility of these plants in an environment that has been overgrown with flora from foreign environments. The technique that the artist has selected also serves to accentuate how society and technology have continued to evolve since these plants thrived in this environment. The use of silver-based light sensitive paper is becoming an old fashioned technique almost completely dominated by the new technology of digital electronic files and printing. Abma’s pieces raise subtle questions of how nature will fare in a world where the virtual can appear to be replacing the natural world.

In the body of work entitled, *Cultivation and Conquest*, Abma has taken other lumen photography and juxtaposed them with objects. These works reference the conquest of New France in the 17th century. This makes a personal connection for the artist who is descended from one of the first European farmers in New France, Louis Hébert. The gallery visitor in the 21st century is given the opportunity to read some of the words of the early settlers and the words are shocking. They are words of conquest, words of possession and words of extermination. Twyfene Moyer describes the power of art to communicate critical concepts because of art’s ability to “produce interruptions in the everyday that jar us out of rote

complacency and open our minds to new ways of feeling, perceiving, and conceiving.”<sup>3</sup> This jarring out of complacency is present in this group of artworks and it is effective, because it creates a distance between the mind-set of the 17th century and the viewpoint of the 21st. It is in the liminal space that a viewer can contemplate the changes that are possible; the past, the distance and the present are linked together.

The installation piece, *Terra Dulcis: Triptych Altarpiece of Glenhyrst*, is another compelling component in the exhibition. For one year the artist and many other participants have been collecting seeds from the grounds surrounding the gallery. The seeds were identified and sorted by species to be combined with soil samples, water, and printer drawers. The soil samples are the result of Abma’s work with a soil engineer who took a bore sample two metres deep and eight inches wide to delve into the physical history of the land. This sample turned up a brick from a structure that used to exist on the land, giving the project an archaeological character. The artist researched the history of land to discover as much as possible about human interactions with the land. Finally the artist took numerous photographs of the site at different times of year. All of these elements are combined in the final installation. These fragments of plants and earth, fragments of text and fragments of photographs create a whole that can only be completed with the imagination of the viewer.

Abma’s work is situated in the contemporary art of the 21st century with ecological, land or earth art and this in itself indicates that there is a long history of art that brings us to this point. From prehistory to the present, art and architecture bear witness to our awareness of nature, be it in fear, awe or domination. In prehistory many things compelled humans to shape nature and leave lasting marks. During the renaissance, the landscape came to be depicted as an illusion with clever perspective as a backdrop in paintings with other subjects and themes.

<sup>3</sup> Moyer, Twyfene. “Foreword.” *The New Earthwork: Art, Action Agency*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011) p. 7

**The landscape is rich with man-made forms that have been offered in tribute. Prehistoric remains are merely the best known: Stonehenge for example, whose purpose we imagine to be a pagan decoding of terrestrial and astronomical mysteries. In seventeenth century France, the imposition of Cartesian geometry on the landscape – as a Vaux-le-Vicomte or Versailles – expressed all the bravura of an age that believed that in simple geometric shapes lay the key to the intelligible order of the universe.**<sup>4</sup>

The 17th century Europe that created the shaped trees of Versailles is also the Europe that sent settlers to conquer the wild nature of the New World. During the 18th and 19th centuries the Romantics developed an art that depicted the lone human passionately contemplating the vast power of nature. As Lailach writes, “a view of incomprehensibly distant mountains served to describe the feeling of the sublime.”<sup>5</sup> The English, in particular, developed a tradition of landscape painting in both oil and watercolour. In Canada, in the early 20th century, the Group of Seven was inspired to use the Canadian landscape as a symbol of the Canadian national spirit.

By the 20th century, artistic experimentation and the continued development of photography were among factors that lead to less focus upon illusionistic painting and new materials began to appear in art. Both George Braque and André Masson began to mix sand with their paints in the first few decades of the century.<sup>6</sup> While Marcel Duchamp created the piece, Dust

Breeding that used natural processes as the very subject of the artwork.<sup>7</sup> And in 1938, at an exhibition of surrealism in Paris the ground of one of rooms was covered with natural materials such as leaves and earth.<sup>8</sup> Following in the tradition of Duchamp by using natural processes in artwork, Robert Rauschenberg created, in the 1950s, what he referred to as paintings, by making boxes that contained growing grass or moss.<sup>9</sup> Earth and plants were no longer being imitated by paint, they were being used as the material of art itself.

In the late 1960s, first generation of what would be called land artists or earth artists, took this development further. The materials of nature were now being used or exploited for artistic expression. As John Beardsley writes, “landscape was reappearing as one of the most consequential subjects in art.”<sup>10</sup> Artists such as Robert Smithson, Walter De Maria and Michael Heizer created ground-breaking work in the United States, while others such as Richard Long worked in England.

The early land artists attacked landscapes with passion and heavy machinery. Many selected isolated locations that had a profound effect on the final works. Michael Heizer is a land artist who created *Displaced Replaced Mass*, 1969, in Silver Springs, Nevada which required the moving of three rocks ranging in weight from 30 to 70 tons into specially designed pits.<sup>11</sup> Walter De Maria’s early works included the filling of a German gallery with damp black earth in 1968.<sup>12</sup> His later works included the *The Lightning Field*, 1974-77. Robert Smithson, creator of the *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, located on Great Salt Lake in Utah, is another early land artist who has changed the portrayal of nature in art. This monumental artwork was

comprised of many tons of rock, mud, and salt crystals. In England, the artwork of Richard Long, is an example of land art that leaves a more discrete mark on the landscape. In 1967, Long exhibited a photograph entitled, *A Line Made By Walking England*. In some unnamed field in Somerset he walked repeatedly back and forth until he had created the effect that he wanted.<sup>13</sup> The mark may have been gentler than that of the American artists, but it still revealed a determination to make a visible human mark on the landscape.

Changes in culture taking place over the 1960s were creating new attitudes towards nature. Many writers viewed dislocation as a cause for the creation of the early land art of the 1960s. Jane McFadden commented that De Maria “produced works that acknowledged a growing sense of dislocation from place itself, in culture and art.”<sup>14</sup> Another noted motivation of these early works was the reaction to the purified presentation of the gallery art world. As Amanda Boetzkes comments, “the idea of siting artworks in deserted landscapes was a means of breaking out of the spaces and economy of the gallery system.”<sup>15</sup> It was not until 1976 when the term, “White Cube” was coined by Irish writer, Brian O’Doherty, but it was at this time that he put forward his theory that much of land art was a reaction against the antiseptically clean gallery room.<sup>16</sup> The money driven art market was yet another reason that many artists chose to locate their work in a remote area far from the city. Suzaan Boettger writes that:

**The artists were heralded as subverting the art world’s mercantile system of merchandising portable works of art that could be wrapped**

**and shipped, yet the creation of their massive environmental works depended on funding by art dealer, businesspeople, and art collectors, and documentation of these works was exhibited and for sale in commercial galleries.**<sup>17</sup>

As Boettger points out, these artists may have been rebelling against the dollar-driven art world and the formal gallery presentation of artwork, but they still created photographs, maps, videos, texts and installations related to their isolated art works. Many of these artefacts sold very well in the gallery and the large earthworks required the funding of many art collectors and gallerists, so this was not the perfect rebellion. The artwork, however, was very effective, both the works outside the gallery and the works in the gallery. Smithson developed terms for these two groups of art: the site and the nonsite. Martin Hogue writes that:

**Located in a gallery or museum, each nonsite is an installation intended to represent, through a number of constituent parts (maps, extracted soil samples contained in manufactured bins, photographs, written narratives), an actual ‘site’ located outside the gallery and visited by the artist.**<sup>18</sup>

As earthworks have continued to develop, the use of photography, fragments of nature and text have continued playing a key role. In 1979 Craig Owens wrote about earthworks and the new proliferation of text in contemporary art.<sup>19</sup> This documentary aspect of earthwork is an element

<sup>4</sup> Beardsley, pp. 8-9.

<sup>5</sup> Lailach, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Suzaan Boettger. *Earthworks: art and the landscape of the sixties*. (Berkley: University of California Press, 2002) p. 34

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.35

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.35.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.35.

<sup>10</sup> Beardsley, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Lailach, p. 52.

<sup>12</sup> Lailach, p. 53.

<sup>13</sup> Roelstraete, Dieter. “Richard Long’s Line: Dissolving Aesthetics Into Ethics.” *In The New Earthwork: Art, Action Agency*, ed. Twyfene Moyer, (Seattle: University of Washington Press 2011), p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> McFadden, Jane, “Toward Site”, *Grey Room*, The MIT Press, No. 27 (spring, 2007). p. 37.

<sup>15</sup> Amanda Boetzkes. *The Ethics of Earth*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p.6.

<sup>16</sup> Lailach, p. 24.

<sup>17</sup> Boettger, p. 34.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Hogue. “The Site as Project: Lessons from Land Art and Conceptual Art,” *Journal of Architectural Education*, No. 3 (Feb., 2004), p. 54.

<sup>19</sup> Boetzkes, p. 58





*Soil Extraction*, Glenhyrst Gardens, 2012  
Photos courtesy of Norm Moore and Mary Abma

that has continued to develop as land art developed into art more influenced by concepts of ecology.

During the 1960s and 1970s, when land or earth art was developing, western society was also becoming more aware of ecological concerns. In 1970, the first Earth Day was celebrated and Greenpeace was formed in Canada. The growing concerns for the ecology brought criticisms for the way that some land artists sought to make monumental marks in the landscape. Their projects were perceived to be another method of dominating nature.<sup>20</sup> At the same time as these works were produced, other artists were trying to develop more ecologically conscious art. In 1965 Alan Sonfist began the *Time Landscape* where he attempted to grow a pre-colonial forest in a small plot of land on Manhattan. He worked with many scientists and urban planners to develop this project and the trend of partnering with many specialists can be seen as a growing trend in earth art.<sup>21</sup>

The land, earth and ecological art have continued to develop with new generations of artist as the twentieth century ended and the twenty-first has begun. As Boetzkes writes, “It is impossible to ignore the fact that environmental crisis has become a central concern in contemporary art.”<sup>22</sup> She also adds that, “the aesthetic and ethical concerns of the early earthworks movement of the late 1960s have come to fruition in the multimedia strategies of contemporary practices.”<sup>23</sup> The artwork of Basia Irland and Rebecca Belmore are two examples of contemporary artwork revealing the contemporary trends in ecological art.

In 1992, the National Gallery of Canada displayed an important exhibition of First Nations artists, *Land, Spirit, Power*. As part

of the exhibit Rebecca Belmore created a performance piece where she invited many leading writers, artists and other professionals to participate in speaking to the earth using a gigantic constructed wooden megaphone. The work was called *Ayumee-aawach Oomama-Mowan: Speaking to Their Mother*.<sup>24</sup> The performance could move to many different locations and megaphone has been displayed in galleries since. Basia Irland developed a performance piece entitled, *Gathering of Waters: Rio Grande, Source to Sea*, 1995-2000, that involved a vast number of people collecting water samples over the 1,885 miles of the river and writing their personal experiences in a book. This became her methodology that she could transport to other places; each one was site-specific, yet the method could be repeated in different locations. The local can be translated as universal. Boetzkes gives the following interpretation of these projects, “Essentially, Irland remaps social relations as ecological ties, a concept that becomes evident in the ‘river repository,’ the artist’s archive of the project.”<sup>25</sup> In 2000, she created a similar project on the Don River in Ontario, Canada.

In the contemporary ecologically conscious artwork of the contemporary art world, there is some continuity between the first generation earth artists and those of today in the use of documentary materials. Boetzke makes note that Smithson, “was one of the first generation of artists to demonstrate the correlation between an artwork’s incorporation in the earth and its consequent reliance on ‘displaced’ or discursive media, such as textual narratives, maps, photographs, and film.”<sup>26</sup> Works such as the river projects of Basia Irland clearly reveal that this archival collection of material is still a method used by contemporary artists and that it can become a collaborative project that involves many people for the collection.

<sup>20</sup> Malpas, p. 70.

<sup>21</sup> Lippard, Lucy R. “Introduction: Down and Dirty.” *The New Earthwork: Art, Action Agency*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011) p. 13.

<sup>22</sup> Boetzkes, p. 23.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>25</sup> Boetzkes. p. 42.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 12.



Hal Foster has noted what he calls an “The Archival Impulse” at work in contemporary art. Foster concludes that the archival artists, “seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present. To this end they elaborate on the found image, object, and text, and favor the installation format as they do so.”<sup>27</sup> He explains that the archive that he refers to is similar to a digital database. This form of archive requires the human minds to connect the separated fragments and that it illuminates the fact that all archival matter is “found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private. Further, it often arranges these materials according to a quasi-archival logic, a matrix of citation and juxtaposition, and presents them in a quasi-archival architecture, a complex of texts and objects.”<sup>28</sup> The juxtaposition of objects, texts, maps, photographs and natural material have become an effective form of artistic exploration and communication, particularly in the areas of land art and ecological art.

Foster’s theories can be useful to inform interpretations of Abma’s work. Her art is constructed from fragments of images, pieces of texts, and found objects arranged in manner that references museums and archives. She delves into scraps of lost history that viewers can individually combine with the present. She has constructed an installation that in its incompleteness refers to another place. It is a nonsite in the tradition of Smithson.

The exhibition, *In My Own Yard*, by Mary Abma can be seen as a 21st century development of earth and ecological artwork. This area of art owes a great deal to the experimentations with natural materials and ready-made objects of the early 20th century as well as the bold use of earth by the land artists of the 1960s. Like Smithson and De Maria, Abma has used the matters of the earth as the material of art, but her work does not seek to dominate the landscape. Like Richard Long, Abma treads much lighter on the ground leaving very few marks. The only lasting impression, the slight depression where the

soil engineer probed the ground for lost clues to the ancient and recent history of this particular place. Abma’s work owes more to the rising awareness of ecological concerns and development of environmentally focused art. Like Sonfist’s art project to re-create a pre-colonization forest, Abma’s work reveals a great sensitivity to the indigenous Carolinian Forest that would have been thriving in the Brantford area before the arrival of the Europeans. Both artists are gravely aware of the harsh damage and change that the land has undergone at human hands since European colonization, but Abma’s art speaks of the constant evolution of the land. As Martin Hogue writes:

**Understood in this way, a site is something of a repository of its own history, some of which can be found physically embedded within the site, whereas much else resides more ephemerally in the human history of it. It is a repository that is forever in the process of change.**<sup>29</sup>

There is room in her work, in the distance between the objects, in the space between the gallery installation and the exterior nature, in the time between the ages, to realize a sense of the never-ending change in nature. Like Sonfist, Belmore and Irland, Abma collaborates with numerous scientists, botanists, historians and other specialists that can contribute to the project. The entire project can become a process, even a performance or ritual.

Abma’s work is often site-specific and in this way she brings the art out of the exotic deserts and into the blatant everyday gardens around a gallery and even in her suburban backyard. As Lucy Lippard writes of earth art:

**All of these endeavors demand a sense of place, familiarity with local geography, and a high degree of ecological sensitivity. Walking and looking, becoming ‘a tourist at home,’ encourages**

**a familiarity with topography and geography as well as with changing seasons, changing lights, changing demographics.**<sup>30</sup>

Malpas holds that, “Where people live is both local and universal, both particular to them and particular to everyone.”<sup>31</sup> Mary Abma’s artwork combines text, history, photography, plants, earth, water and seeds in a potent combination that encourages a belonging to nature and a reverence for nature.

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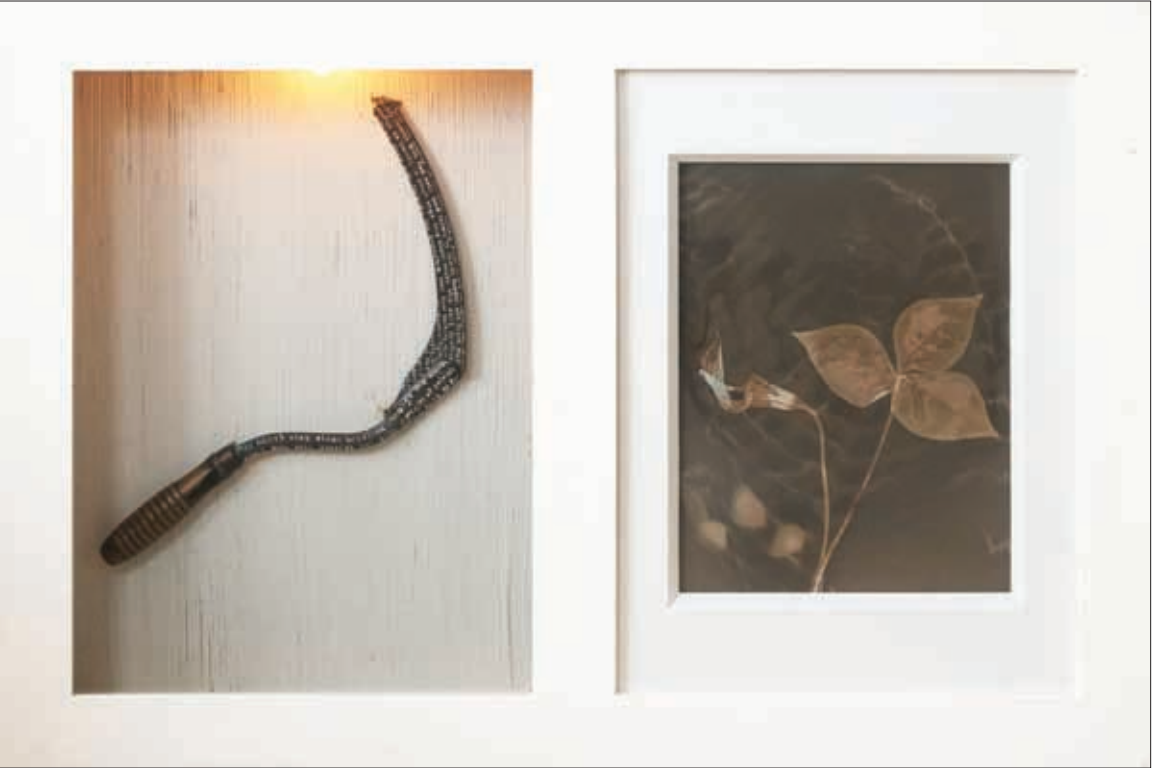
<sup>27</sup> Hal Foster. “An Archival Impulse”, *October*, The MIT Press. Vol. 110 (Autumn, 2004). P. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Foster, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> Martin Hogue. “The Site as Project: Lessons from Land Art and Conceptual Art,” *Journal of Architectural Education*, 57, No. 3 (Feb., 2004), pp. 54-61.

<sup>30</sup> Lippard, p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> Malpas, p. 47.



*Jack-in-the Pulpit With Scythe*, 2011  
lumen photograph and scythe with 17th-century writings  
36 1/2 X 24 1/2 X 5 1/4"

David D Plain

# Cultural Dispositions and Some Practical Uses of Local Plants

## Indigenous People and the Environment

Indigenous people were the first conservationists. This is a statement I have heard many times and a statement I would like to debunk. But first let's look at a premise put forward by Brights Grove artist, Mary Abma, in her statement for the series, *Cultivation and Conquest*. "The carrying of seed from one ecosystem to another was common practice in my ancestor, Louis Hébert's time...The language they used to describe the land in the 'New World' was the language of conquest. Land was a possession to be taken and shaped to the needs and desires of the conquerors. The language of cultivation was the language of the colonialists."

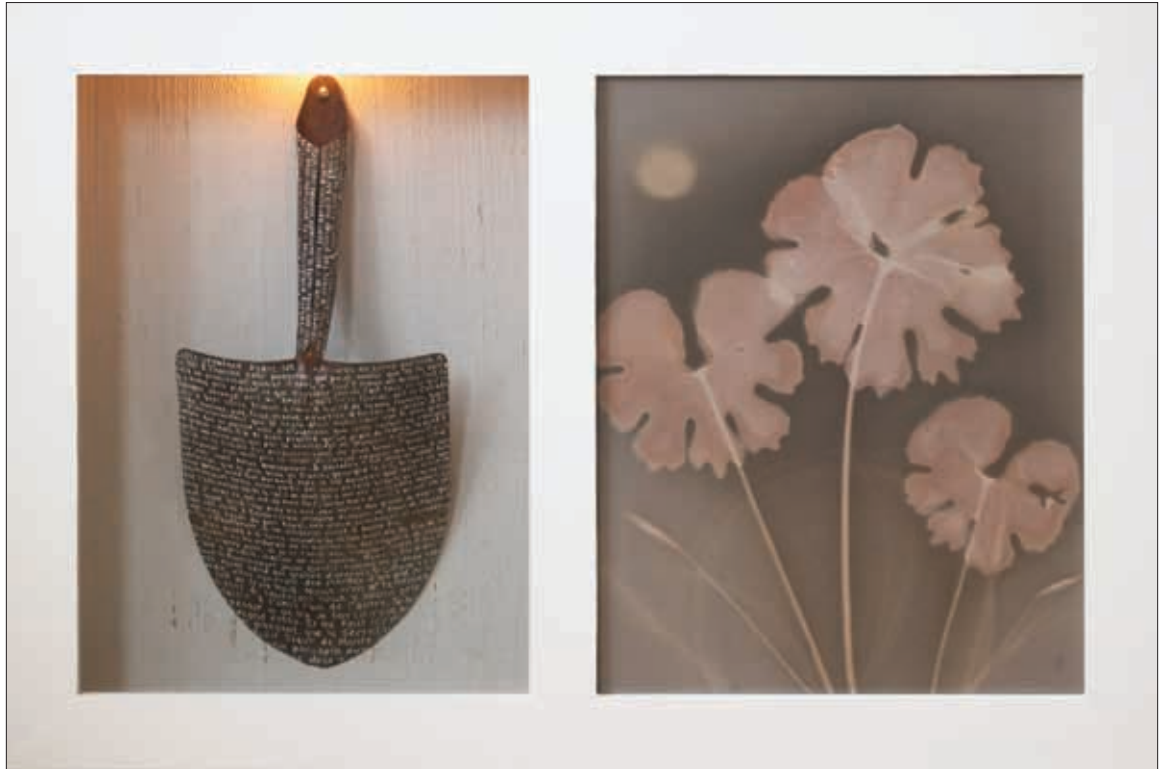
To understand the "language of conquest" one must first understand where the underlying attitudes come from. The worldview of western culture is hierarchical with human beings at the top of their environment. Not only do they see their place in the world as being at the top but as over and above: in charge. After all, this is where their creation story places them and the colonists were only following the instructions laid out in that story to subdue and have dominion over the earth.

On the other hand, indigenous culture places human beings on the bottom of the hierarchy. For example, in the Ojibwa creation story, people were created last, naked and vulnerable. Without help we weren't going to make it. A meeting was called by the Master of Life between all the spirits of the things of the environment and he asked them if they would give themselves to ensure humanity's survival. They agreed, so we indigenous people see ourselves as an integral part of the environment and in charge of nothing. Were we conservationists? No.

But did either culture understand the damage that introducing an invasive species to a delicately balanced natural ecosystem could do? Again, I think the answer is no. For the colonists, the science had not yet developed and the indigenous people lived within their environment, never developing the concept of manipulating it. Instead, they accepted new plant species and worked to discover uses for them. This was particularly true in the field of medicine.

## Some Indigenous Medicinal Uses

Ojibwa holy men were also healers. They used the medicinal properties of the many plant species available to heal the sick.



*Bloodroot with Shovel*, 2011  
lumen photograph and shovel with 17th-century writings  
36 1/2 X 24 1/2 X 5 1/4"

There were four degrees or levels of expertise in the learning process and it took several years to graduate to the fourth degree. Chants and drumming were used to enlist help from the healer’s spirit guide in diagnosing an illness. The healer also had to learn the medicinal qualities of each plant or combination of plants as well as which chant or song to use with which medicine in order to unlock its spiritual power, thus making use of the medicine’s full power. Following are some examples of some of the medicinal uses of some of the plants in this exhibit as well as some personal experiences using natural medicines.

In the series, **Cultivation and Conquest**, one of the Lumen Photographs is that of the jack-in-the-pulpit. This is a perennial plant with a green hood-like flower found in the moist woods of eastern and central Canada. Indigenous peoples dried and aged the root, then used it in a poultice to treat rheumatism.

Bloodroot, a highly toxic perennial found in the rich woods of this area can also be found among the Lumen Photographs. The juice of the root was rubbed on warts and also used decoratively on the skin. Bloodroot was also used as a love charm. A person would rub a piece of the root on the palm of their hand then shake the hand of their love interest. In about a week the love interest would become enamoured with the first person.

I have a real life experience to relate. When I was a young boy, a man came to our house, frantic for his son. The boy had an ulcerated sore on his ankle. He had been to the best doctor in the county and that doctor wanted to amputate the foot. Not only did he not want his son to lose his foot but the boy loved music and his greatest joy was participating in a marching band.

He asked my father if he knew of any “old Indian medicine” that might help. So my father began treating the young boy with a poultice made of earth from our farm and the inner bark of a slippery elm tree. The poultice drew the poison from the sore and it began to heal. In a matter of weeks the foot was completely healed.

About sixty years later, I joined our church choir. On the first practice night I climbed into the choir loft and sat beside an older gentleman in his early seventies. We looked at each other and he asked, “Are you David Plain?” I nodded my head in the affirmative and he said, “Your father saved my foot!”

Another personal experience was with the plant, boneset. Boneset is a plant found in moist grounds and thickets. When the settlers first came into the area they asked us what we used for pain. We showed them the plant and advised them to make a tea from the leaves and flowers. Pioneers claimed it could reduce the most severe pain, even the pain of a broken bone; hence the name, boneset.

My daughter had contracted a severe eye infection and was awaiting a cornea transplant. Her eye surgeon prescribed antibiotic drops to be taken several times a day. She was in quite a bit of pain and despite the drops, the infection would not quite clear up. She asked me if I knew of anything for pain. I told her about boneset.

I collected some leaves and gave them to my daughter. I told her to make a tea and drink a cup in the morning and a cup in the evening no matter how badly it tasted. She followed my instructions and not only did it relieve the pain but the infection cleared up as well!

The preceding article presents just a cursory view of indigenous and western cultures and their differences and a small sampling of medicinal uses of the plants exhibited **In My Own Back Yard**. The artist spent several years documenting the biodiversity of her own backyard and in doing so embarked upon a learning experience cataloguing the variety of both indigenous and invasive species found there. Through various forms of media, Mary’s current exhibition delves into the history of plant migration and its effect on the indigenous biosphere of her own back yard. The exhibition speaks for Mary’s learning experience, calling others to also become aware of the world at their feet and the environmental responsibility to keep it healthy.





*Early Goldenrod: detail from Herbarium of Lot 161, Plan 150, 2011*  
masonite with plant specimen, botanical label, acrylic, transfer print, and beeswax

Natalie Iwanycki

# The Art of Creating Herbaria

## What is a herbarium?

When I was studying botany at McGill University I had my first introduction to a herbarium; as a lover of plants and of natural history, I was instantly awe-struck by the beauty and value of these botanical collections. Unfortunately, outside of botanical academic circles, not many people are aware of what a herbarium is – nor would they understand the value of these important natural history collections.

I was very excited when I first learned about Mary Abma’s project *In My Own Back Yard* – particularly because Mary created a herbarium of her own, and I can’t think of a better way to engage people in learning about herbaria and about the changes in our landscape than through art.

A herbarium (plural: herbaria) is a collection of dried plant specimens carefully preserved, labeled, and arranged for scientific reference. The term herbarium is also used to describe the place where preserved specimens are stored and accessed. Each preserved plant specimen is known as a herbarium specimen or voucher. A traditional herbarium specimen consists of plants and/or plant parts that are needed to accurately identify the species, including leaves, stems, flowers, fruits and/or roots. To make a herbarium voucher, plants are collected fresh and then pressed flat and dried.

The dried plants are then mounted onto archival herbarium paper along with a tag or label that documents information about that particular herbarium specimen.

Each herbarium specimen (often referred to as a “sheet”) is unique and can look quite beautiful – much like a work of art – but their main value is generally regarded as one that is scientific. For example, the specimens in a herbarium collection serve as a vital reference for plant identification, for studying past and current plant distributions, and they provide insight into our history, plant evolution and variation between closely related plants.

If dried and stored properly, herbarium specimens will last for centuries. The practice of collecting and mounting dried plant specimens onto paper dates back to the mid 1500’s – or perhaps even earlier! Luca Ghini (1490?-1556), a Professor of Botany at the University of Bologna, Italy, is thought to have been the first person to dry plants under pressure and mount them on paper to serve as a lasting record<sup>1</sup>.

These early herbaria were bound together to form a scrapbook of specimens and were most likely used as reference by physicians in the study of plant pharmacology and herbals. It wasn’t until the 18th century that the practice of mounting individual specimens on separate sheets began. Having plants

<sup>1</sup> *The Herbarium Handbook*, Revised Edition, Edited by Diane Bridson and Leonard Forman, 1992. Whitstable Litho Printers.



Left: *Dandelion (Taraxacum officinale)*: detail from *Herbarium of Lot 161, Plan 150*  
 Right Top to Bottom: *Taraxacum officinale* (Dandelion), Herbarium specimen, Royal Botanical Gardens; plant presses; pressing plants in the field (Photos courtesy of Royal Botanical Gardens.)

mounted on individual herbarium sheets facilitated the sharing of plant specimens and also facilitated the use of plant specimens in teaching botany and plant nomenclature. Once deposited in a recognized herbarium, vouchers can be kept for centuries where they can be continually accessed for reference and research.

### Why collect plants?

Although the earlier plant collections were made by physicians to learn about and document medicinal plants, the reasons for which botanists have been collecting plant specimens since that time have evolved. Plant specimens display proper botanical names, and the characteristics of a plant that one would need to positively identify it and distinguish it from other closely related species. Because of this, herbarium specimens have been facilitating the study of botany and have been contributing to our understanding of all of the plants on Earth.

Herbarium specimens also provide a historic record of what was growing in a particular spot, and when. Each plant specimen is accompanied by written data that shows location, date of collection, the name of the person who collected it, and other useful information about the plant. This makes voucher specimens valuable because they provide the physical evidence to confirm the presence of a specific plant species, at a specific location, and at a specific time. By creating records or vouchers of the plants that are growing in a specific location and at a specific point in time, we are not only able to build a record of all the plants that have been discovered and named throughout time, but we are able to track changes in our environment over time, including documenting the occurrence of rare plants, or revealing the geographic spread of an introduced species over time.

***“Human-caused modifications to the world’s flora (e.g. habitat destruction leading to extirpation, introduction of weeds, and climate change)***

***increasingly leave the herbarium as the only verifiable record of baseline conditions.”***

(Dr. Brent D. Mishler, Director, University and Jepson Herbarium, University of California, Berkeley. In: *Managing the Modern Herbarium, An Interdisciplinary Approach*. D. A. Metzger and S. C. Byers, Editors. 1999. Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections, Washington, D.C.)

Herbarium specimens have been more recently used for the study of phenology and Global-warming research. Phenology is the study of the timing of natural events (e.g. flowering time, fruiting time etc.) and because herbarium specimens are taken when a plant is in flower, scientists such as Primack *et al.* (2004) have looked at the collection dates of certain species over many years and compared this to climate data. They’ve found that as the climate has warmed over the last 100 years, plants have responded by flowering earlier<sup>2</sup>.

### The Herbarium at Royal Botanical Gardens

Herbaria are most often associated with institutions where botanical and horticultural research take place, including botanical gardens, museums with natural history collections, or universities and colleges – though private collections do exist. The Herbarium at Royal Botanical Gardens (RBG) houses approximately 60, 000 plant specimens, and it is the seventh largest collection in Ontario. RBG’s Herbarium is quite unique as it includes specimens of both wild and cultivated plants. Over 1,500 genera, from 230 families, are represented within the collection.

Specimens of wild and cultivated plants have been collected from RBG’s gardens and nature sanctuaries, and from other gardens and natural areas in Ontario and other Canadian provinces and territories, as well as internationally from the Caribbean, Europe, Australia and Saudi Arabia. Many of the

<sup>2</sup> Primack, D., C. Imbres, R. B. Primack, A. J. Miller-Rushing, and P. Del Tredici. 2004. Herbarium specimens demonstrate earlier flowering in response to warming in Boston. *American Journal of Botany* 91:1260–1264.





Left: *Plantain (Plantago major)*: detail from *Herbarium of Lot 161, Plan 150*  
 Right Top to Bottom: *Plantago major* (Plantain), Herbarium specimen, Royal Botanical Gardens;  
 Herbarium at RBG (Photos courtesy of Royal Botanical Gardens.)

wild plant specimens in RBG’s herbarium collection represent locally, provincially and nationally rare or endangered species. Some of the specimens collected from southern Ontario even date back to the 1880’s!

The Herbarium collection at RBG is a valuable resource for botanists, horticulturists and historians. It serves many of RBG’s departments and programmes such as those in plant taxonomy and identification, horticultural collections, terrestrial and aquatic ecology, and education. Visiting researchers come to access the specimens in RBG’s collection from all over the province, and our specimens are sent out on loan by request (just like a library book) to botanical researchers at other institutions around the world. If you’re interested in using our collection, the Herbarium is open to the public, by appointment only, during office hours.

### The Herbarium of Lot 161 Plot 150

Mary Abma created a herbarium that documents and showcases the number and types of plants that were growing in her lawn. When I finally saw Mary’s work, and when I discovered more about the personal journey she embarked on to learn about botany, the natural landscape and the history and ecology of her area, I was utterly impressed. Not only has her four years of work on this project resulted in a visually stunning and thought-provoking art exhibit, but Mary has become an environmental steward through this process. In this project she brings together the creative fields of art and science and I believe this exhibit has the power to inspire people to engage with their environment – whether they know about scientific processes or not.

In keeping with scientific process, Mary followed all of the conventional techniques for herbarium specimen identification, collection, labeling, mounting and preparation – and then of course she added her artistic expression. She observed and collected vouchers for 82 different plant species from Lot 161 Plan 150 – and none of them were planted!

Mary’s herbarium collection shows the outstanding diversity of plants that could spontaneously occur on someone’s lawn in southwestern Ontario. Displayed on the walls at Glenhyrst Gallery, we can all appreciate the diversity of the plants in Mary’s backyard in a completely different light, and we can reflect upon the changes throughout history that have brought these plants to southern Ontario and allowed them to form a community in Mary’s backyard. By learning about the plants in your area, and about the threats that many of our plants face, you can make better decisions on how best to steward your lawn and garden for the benefit of biodiversity and the environment.

Whether you’re passionate about art or the environment – or both – I know you’ll see nature’s beauty in a whole new way when you experience the Herbarium of Lot 161 Plan 150!





Detail from *Terra Dulcis: Triptych Altarpiece of Glenhyrst*, 2013  
soils of Glenhyrst Gardens in antique printer drawer  
with images of its history from the Ice Age to the present

Chelsea Carss

# Glenhyrst: The History of its People

Since the Brantford city council accepted responsibility of *Glenhyrst* in 1956, it has served as a place for the arts. In the years since Edmund Lister Cockshutt bequeathed his beautiful 15 ½ acre estate to the City of Brantford. The estate has become a well-known and popular arts destination for the citizens of Brantford and the community. Even as the private residence of Mr. Cockshutt, the estate was a place for the community to appreciate art and culture. In 1914 he purchased 16 acres of land overlooking the Grand River in Brantford from the Stratford family. Edmund enjoyed sharing the beauty of his home and gardens with the public. The property was accessible to everyone to view the gardens, attend outdoor plays held on the grounds or view Edmund's private art collection. It was Mr. Cockshutt's wish that the property be developed to the benefit of Brantford residents as a place for artistic and cultural pursuits.

The Glenhyrst property has only been occupied longterm by three different entities prior to its purchase by Cockshutt: the first people including the bands of Algonquians, Iroquoians, Neutrals, Mississauga's before it became the settlement of Six Nations, and as a residence by Judge Stephen J. Jones and Joseph E.H. Stratford. This is an overview of these people and the history of how it became a centre for the arts in Brantford.

## First Peoples

While there is very little information written about the area pre-contact, archaeology is uniquely able to provide a comprehensive view of an area and its people over long periods of time. It is historically understood that in Ontario the currently known tribes emerged during the early 15th Century BCE, most likely due to the population growth which took place over the course of the previous century. Prior to this phenomenon, Ontario was populated by several distinctive cultures or complexes: The Couture complex, spreading through South-western Ontario, Michigan and Ohio; the Saugeen complex found to the East of the Couture complex, the Point Peninsula complex which began around the Grand River and spread East into Southern Québec and finally the Laurel complex which encompassed Northern Ontario, Minnesota and Wisconsin. Little is known about the Saugeen complex, who were present in the Brant area during the Middle Woodland Period which dates from approximately 250 BC to 750 BCE, other than based on excavation of a cemetery, the band was approximately 50 people in size and seemed to have an open membership with no indication of status. Linguists believe that the Great Lakes area was originally populated by Algonquin speaking people and that Iroquoian speaking people migrated into the area sometime in pre-history displacing the



Detail from *Terra Dulcis: Triptych Altarpiece of Glenhyrst*, 2013  
soil, seeds, and precipitation from Glenhyrst Gardens in three antique printer drawers with text and images

Algonquians to the North, East and West. The shift from hunter-gatherer societies to politically organized groups is explained by archaeologists through several related factors. As populations grew during the Late Woodland Period, bands became more reliant on domesticated plants such as corn, squash and beans, villages emerges along river systems like the Grand River. With the increasing population growth during 13th century, smaller villages fused and we begin to see the construction of fortified villages. It is also during this time that we see the creation of political groups larger than individual villages, such as tribes forming<sup>1</sup>.

The earliest tribe belonging to the Brantford area were the Neutrals, an important confederation of tribes including the Aondironon, the Wenrehronon the Ongniaahraronon and the Attiwandaron who were present in the Brantford region. Samuel de Champlain noted in 1616, the “Nation Neutre” had 4 000 warriors.<sup>2</sup> According to Father Brébeuf, who visited the Neutrals, by 1640 40 villages were ascribed to them with a minimal population of 12 000.<sup>3</sup> About 1650, the Iroquois found cause to quarrel with the Neutrals and by 1653 had practically annihilated them. However, the Iroquois did not occupy this country but instead used it simply as a hunting ground. We know that eventually the Mississauga’s acquired occupation of the Brant Country region since it was from that the British government bought the land to provide as settlement for the Six Nation.<sup>4</sup>

### The Haldimand Proclamation and Chief Joseph Brant

On the eve of the American Revolution, Joseph Brant as a

representative of the Mohawk people, travelled to London, England with the purpose of obtaining land to settle members of the Six Nations who were displaced by the war in return for their loyalty and support in the upcoming conflict. By early 1783, Brant had selected the valley of the Grand river as a place of settlement and on March 23, 1784, Captain General and Governor General Frederick Haldimand empowered Colonel John Butler to purchase the land from the Mississauga people. According to the terms of the grant the Six Nations were authorized to “Settle upon the Banks of the River” and were allotted “for that Purpose six miles deep from each side of [it] beginning at Lake Erie & extending in that Proportion to [its] Head.” However, what appeared to be an equivocal document was to be the cause of controversy. Joseph Brant believed that the grant was a freehold land tenure equal to that enjoyed by the colony’s Loyalist settlers and therefore gave the Six Nations the right to lease or sell to the highest bidder. However in direct conflict of this interpretation, government officials held that the grant prohibited Brant or any other Six Nation member from leasing or selling the land to anyone but the government. This stance was held until Peter Russell, administrator of Upper Canada acquiesced to Brant’s demand in the late 18th century.<sup>5</sup>

### Judge Stephen J. Jones and Joseph E. H. Stratford

When Brant County became organized as an independent county in 1852, Stephen James Jones was appointed as County Judge. Born in Stony Creek in 1821 to a family of United Empire Loyalist, Judge Jones was called to the bar in 1846 and was known to be practicing with a Mr. Freeman when the

<sup>1</sup> Ontario Archaeology Society, *The Archaeology of Ontario*, <www.ontarioarchaeology.on.ca>  
<sup>2</sup> James White, ed., *Handbook of Indians of Canada*, Published as an Appendix to the Tenth Report of the Geographic Board of Canada, Ottawa, 1913, pp.34-346.  
<sup>3</sup> ibid  
<sup>4</sup> F. Douglas Reville, *History of the County of Brant*, Brantford: The Hurley Printing Company Limited, 1982, p.20.  
<sup>5</sup> Charles M. Johnson ed., *The valley of Six Nations: a collection of documents on the Indian lands of the Grand River*, Toronto: Champlain Society, 1964.





Clockwise from Top Left: E.L. Cockshutt's home at Glenhyrst (built in 1922), Glenhyrst Art Gallery of Brant 2012, Jones and Stratford Glenhyrst Residence (pre-1922), Detail from Glenhyrst Art Gallery Door. (Photos courtesy of Brant Museums and Archives and Mary Abma.)

opportunity came up for the preferment to the bench.<sup>6</sup> Judge Jones served as member of the Board of County Judges, which consists of five members, Messrs. Gowan, of Barrie; Jones, of Brantford; Hughes, of St. Thomas; McDonald, of Guelph, and Daniell, of L'Orignal. He was known for his temperance both on the bench and in his personal life. Judge Jones always took an active part in the general work of his church, especially in aid of its missionary operations and educational institutions.<sup>7</sup> It is possible that Jones was the presiding judge over a number of land transactions between the Six Nations and settlers in Brant County. In 1847 he married Miss Margaret Williamson and they moved to Glenhyrst in 1857. They raised their two sons there. Judge Jones retired after a forty five year long career in 1897. There was a handsome residence on the property, now known as Glenhyrst, which what was then the outskirts of the city. The home sat very close to, if not on the same spot as the current building. It was built with yellow brick and included a tower on the left side of building with what is believed to be a couch house directly opposite to the tower. He and his wife raised their two sons in the home. Judge Jones retired after a forty-five year long career in 1897.

Joseph Stratford bought the home in the late 19th century for his family which included his wife Mary and their six children. Stratford gave the land its current name: “Glenhyrst”, after a family home in Scotland. Born in 1847, Stratford was the son of Brantford’s leading wholesale merchant, a business he would go on to inherit. In addition to the large whole sale drug business, Mr. Stratford held the position of captain and quartermaster in the 38th Battalion Dufferin Rifles and was a member of the Masonic Lodge. Like Edmund Cockshutt, Joseph Stratford was a patron of the arts, responsible for the construction of a structure known as Stratford’s Opera House.<sup>8</sup>

### Glenhyrst of Today

The building that the gallery occupies today was built by its patron, Edmund Lister Cockshutt. In 1914, he purchased more than fifteen acres of land along the Grand River to build a home for himself with enough land for the beautiful gardens he wanted to create. During the war years, 1914-1918, building materials were in short supply and he had to delay his building plans. The house was designed by Brantford architect F.C. Bodley and built in 1922. It is constructed of rug brick set in a tile pattern with Berea freestone at the windows and front door. The slate roof is laid so that the slates close to the eaves are large and they diminish in size as they go up the ridge of the roof, giving the house a larger appearance. The symmetry of the body of the house, with bay windows at either side of the central entrance is offset by the single storey glassed veranda on one side and the two-storey wing on the other. The leaded glass in the windows and the bevelled glass used throughout the double door entranceway add to the stately elegance of the design. Edmund Cockshutt was a bachelor in his early sixties when he moved into Glenhyrst Gardens and lived there for over thirty years. It was his wish to continue to share his love of art and gardening with others, that after his death, he stated in his will that the named trustees were to give the house and gardens to a charitable organization, municipal corporation or religious society to be used for art and cultural purposes. So, after his death in 1956, the trustees donated the estate to the City of Brantford, with the provision that the main house was to be used as a cultural centre.

<sup>6</sup> Reville, p.152  
<sup>7</sup> *The Canadian Biographical Dictionary and Portrait Gallery of Eminent and Self-Made Men*, Ontario Volume, 1880  
<sup>8</sup> Rev. W. M. Cochrane, *The Canadian Album, Men of Canada; Success by Example in Religion, Patriotism, Business, Law, Medicine, Education and Agriculture*, Brantford: Bradley, Gerretson & Co., 1891, p. 295





*Erythronium americanum*, 2011  
lumen photograph on photographic paper  
16 X 20"

# Biographies



Mary Abma is an artist who lives in Bright's Grove, Ontario. Her artworks, which consist primarily of idea-based works executed in a variety of artistic forms, explore themes that allow her to incorporate her interest in history, her concern for the environment, her passion for science, and her desire to find visual expression for her thoughts about the human condition. "I visit themes that relate to universal experiences that are present in our own life narratives. These layered works examine connections, or bridges that are integral to our stories. I am especially interested in exploring the bridges that bring us into a connection with our past, and those that define our relationship with and our place in the natural world."



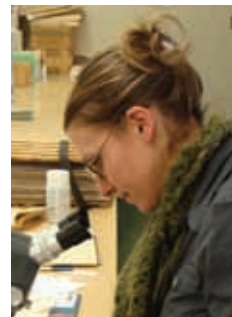
Since returning to Canada from Liverpool, England in 1978, Phil has kept body and mind together selling English and performing songs. He is the author of four non-fiction books, all concerning various aspects of the Canadian landscape and our attitude to it, including the award-winning *An Acre of Time*, which relates the biography of one acre of land in Ottawa. Many of the songs he writes and performs are inspired by the beauty and bounty of the Gatineau Hills, where he lives in a straw bale house and writes a weekly column about Ottawa for the *Citizen*.



Marcia Lea holds a Master of Fine Arts Degree from the University of Ottawa and has worked professionally in the arts since the 1990s. Lea was curator at the artist-run centre, Galerie Intersection, in Ottawa for many years and has worked in commercial galleries as well. She has been active in arts advocacy throughout her career with roles such as Chair for Canadian Artists' Representation Ottawa (CAROttawa), the Ottawa branch of Canadian Artists' Representation (CARFAC) and as spokesperson for Ottawa on the CAROntario board during the early 1990s. Lea is currently Executive Director and Curator of Glenhyrst Art Gallery of Brant in Brantford, Ontario, Canada.



David D Plain is an aboriginal historian and author. His books have received critical acclaim with one winning a prestigious publisher's award. A member of Aamjiwnaang First Nation, David has fully researched his nation's history. Always a lover of history, he has devoted much time and effort to his family's genealogy and how it has affected the history of the Ahnishenahbek of Aamjiwnaang. David has also been privy to the tutelage of the elders of the community. These two sources have produced books on Ahnishenahbek (Ojibwa) history and culture that are of the highest quality. The Plains of Aamjiwnaang won a Golden Scribe Award for excellence in non-fiction in 2008. His fourth book, From Ouisconsin to Caughnawaga, is due out in the spring of 2013.



As Herbarium Curator & Field Botanist at Royal Botanical Gardens (RBG), Natalie oversees the curation of RBG's 60,000 specimen collection, provides plant identification services and training to professionals, and conducts *in situ* and *ex situ* research on Ontario's rare and endangered flora. Natalie has a Masters degree in Forest Conservation for the University of Toronto and a Bachelors degree majoring in Botanical Science from McGill University. She is currently involved developing policies and procedures to ensure that best and consistent practices in naming plants and curating herbarium specimens are applied at RBG.



Chelsea Carss holds a Bachelor of Arts in Classics from Brock University and is a recent graduate of the University of Toronto's Master of Museum Studies program. She completed an internship at the Acropolis Museum in visitor research and development, as well as an internship at the British Museum working on the Naukratis Project. She is currently the Curator at the Brant Museum and Archives.



Community youth assistants look on while soil engineer, Kees Kooy explains Glenhyrst's soil history. From Left, Dmitiri Martsch, Tom Roppel, Amanda Jenkins, Daniel Jenkins, Laura Jenkins.

