

**MARIA MICHAELS ARTIST STATEMENT:**

*Mapping Narratives* is a series of installations that tell the story of two cross-border communities connected by a railway line. The transporting of crude oil from Estevan, Saskatchewan to Albany, New York, is not the only product connecting these two, very different, communities. From the rural, sparsely populated canola fields of southeastern Saskatchewan to the industrial zones of the poor neighborhoods of South End Albany, the air poses threats to the well-being of residents in both places. Working co-creatively with the artist, multi-generational participants in Estevan and Albany, lend their stories and their creativity to this exhibition, inviting the visitor to reflect on and join the dialogue about the fraught issues of fossil fuels (who wants them, who doesn't) and the multi-layered consequences (and benefits) associated with extraction, transport, and combustion of crude oil.

**MARIA MICHAELS BIOGRAPHY:**

Maria Michails is a Canadian artist and new media writer works across the arts, science and technology to create projects that re-imagine civic engagement with environmental issues. For the past 15 years Michails's practice has explored the connections between energy, environmental pollution and resources in crisis specific to place. Her human-powered mechanisms at the core of her large-scale installations entrust visitors to activate the artwork while gaining insight into the issues addressed through an embodied experience. Her more recent community-based projects are a co-creative effort to engage more deeply with communities on such topics. Michails's artwork has been exhibited in solo and group shows throughout North America and Europe, and her writing has been published in journals and edited volumes about media arts and environmental public engagement. Her work has been featured in *Scientific American*, *The Alt*, the *Albany Times Union*, as well as books and catalogues. She is currently a PhD Candidate and doctoral fellow in Electronic Arts at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, NY.

**Front Cover:** *Mapping Narratives*, installation shot, 2019

This publication accompanies the exhibition ***Mapping Narratives*** presented at the Estevan Art Gallery & Museum, from **June 25 – September 06, 2019.**



*Mapping Narratives*  
 Maria Michails | June 25 – Sept. 06, 2019  
 Estevan Art Gallery & Museum

## MARIA MICHAELS: AN INTERVIEW

The following is an e-mail interview I conducted with Maria Michaels regarding *Mapping Narratives*. This interview took place on June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

[Amber Andersen](#)) Walk me through the exhibition and give a brief description of each section/piece.

**MARIA MICHAELS**) Each piece is described in the list of works so I will give a brief overall sense of exhibition and what to expect as you move through the space. Mapping Narratives was to be exactly that – a mapping of human story through linear time from the past to the present in a three-dimensional space. Starting with Bud's story, an indigenous man from the Pheasant Rump lineage to European settlement, I wanted a 'documentary' approach where one story builds upon the previous. So the oral history section lays the groundwork, if you will, for the contemporaneous story that will unfold in subsequent rooms. From there we move to the Ag/Oil room where the derrick is situated. Here I wanted different aspects of agriculture and oil to come together, including the problems associated with this relationship, which comes through in Mile's second interview as farmer and former president of the Southeastern Surface Rights Association and Amanda's experience of a woman working in the oil field. Both have 'insider' information of the oil industry. Their stories point out the problems and pragmatics.

Then we move 'down the rail' to the AQ (air quality section) displayed with many of the Albany (the capital of New York State) projects, and the environmental justice community made up of primarily of poor African-American and Hispanic families living adjacent to the port. The impact of crude oil trains and trucks transporting product to the Port (along with a plethora of other industrial activity) is a repetitive narrative. Why are poor people of color always situated near the most polluting industrial places? The people here became active at resisting the oil trains from the Bakken when they learned about the Lac Megantic rail disaster. They have fought for decades to get the trucks diverted because it was dangerous for their kids and diesel fumes making them sick. I worked with them to create a series of DIY air monitoring devices, such as the Rovers in the rink. When I first came to Estevan I discovered similar problems with air quality even though this is not a large city. The problem here seems more disbursed and again, from multiple sources. A saw a connecting tissue between the two communities that was more than just the rail line. So I approached the work here through oral history

(elders) and citizen science (kids) and the works evolved from those interactions.

**AA) What inspired this exhibition?**

**MM)** My past work focused on energy and a resource in crisis, like energy and water in the desert and energy and topsoil in the midwest/prairies. I see this new work as an extension of that with the exception that I wanted to work more closely with communities in specific areas of interest rather than making participatory works that the community would interact with in the gallery. I wanted a deeper engagement with pressing topics – such as oil or energy consumption – that gave voice to those impacted – whether positively or negatively – and the tension we face in society at large with these resources. The desire to connect two communities came from the desire to bridge different points of views and, hopefully, encourage an empathic understanding of each others' situation. In this case the people of southeastern Saskatchewan around Estevan and the communities in the South End area of Albany, where I am currently based.

**AA) Tell me about your oral narrative collaborators. Who are they? How did you meet them? How did you decide who to work with?**

**MM)** I don't remember who suggested it first, whether I approached the Souris Valley Museum with the idea of an oral history project with elders or whether it was Mark who mentioned he wanted to build an oral history archive. I have a feeling it was mutually on our minds. It was through the museum that I was able to connect and meet with participants and we met every week that I was here. The first trip in 2017 (September to late November) we met as a group and had lively discussions. The second trip I met with participants individually from that group. I also recorded Bud's story – quite extensively actually – when he came to town for dialysis during the entirety of my two visits. The additional stories from Saskatchewan, Miles and Amanda, were individual interviews. Almost all of my Saskatchewan participants with the exception of Miles and Amanda are retirees and everyone has a long history here. There was no selection, I worked with anyone who was willing to give their story and time and they seemed to all enjoy this as did I. I got a peek into their lives and it was fascinating to me. It helped shape the vision of the show.

The Albany stories were very early in the process of the overall project and so they were not meant to be a complete oral history. I was not collecting their stories to put into an archive as well as this project, which I had to limit to topics

that fit the theme of the overall project. Their responses were to a single question: What has it been like for you to live at Ezra Prentice Homes all these years? I had the great opportunity to work with youth at the last minute. So I taught them how to interview, record and edit audio. It was wonderful to see the engagement unfold with multi-generational participants. I had to keep in mind, with all the works, the topic, which was focused on oil extraction, infrastructure and transport with rail, and pollution as a result of combustion and these activities.

**AA) How did the collaborative process work? Did you approach each individual with questions that applied specifically to individual pieces or was it about having a conversation about a topic?**

**MM)** I let much of the sessions free flow. I had a list of topics I wanted to get at but it often got broader. So we got on on topics as diverse as living in mud houses in the 1920s to social media to spraying of crops...the tapes are very rich with information, thoughts, opinions, observations and me getting on my soap box once in a while! I became very much part of the process. It was hard for me to just be an objective, separate being in the room just listening and just deliver the questions. I'm not an anthropologist or a reporter or an historian. We got emotional at times. I felt a bond happening with many of my participants and although time did not allow for the true co-creative process to occur with the making of the work (except for all the kids' projects which was deeply gratifying to me), I felt they were more than 'participants' but actual collaborators. They fed my imagination and blended with the research I was doing concurrently.

**AA) Some of the oral histories have images associated with them and some do not. How did you decide who was going to have visual representation?**

**MM)** Again, this happened organically. The lantern idea came from something I was reading and immediately struck me as the right approach for the oral history group. So, I asked if they would be willing to bring photos that I could make a collage for each of their jars. When I went home, I went about experimenting how to add audio to the lids as well as LED lights. The mason preserve jar is metaphoric for preservation of history. It did not escape us that digitally technology was supplanting the physical objects. Will this new generation be interested in preserving history and historical artifacts once the elders are gone?

With Bud's Buffalo skin I had to focus on one part of his story. And so, few photos made it into this piece. There is a second

piece to his that maps out his genealogy which I hope to continue working on. The Albany stories never intended to have a visual because these stories were originally meant for a website and then I decided I wanted to include them in the show in a physical object and was planning to add a video component. Unfortunately, I could only reach one of the women so this project will also be continued in the future. The interview with Amanda and Miles were meant to be only interviews but I found the information so relevant and important to convey that I decided to build a derrick to 'house' them. Miles's family history came at a later stage when I learned his farm was over 100 years old and as the only person in my group still farming I wanted to include his perspective.

**AA) What are you hoping your audience will garner from viewing your exhibition?**

There is a lot to take in, certainly. And I would suggest a re-visit because you can't take it all in and be able to reflect on what this entire story is about by one quick visit. I hope that the broader audience who encounter this work can see that things like commodities (like oil) and data (like the pollution data) are merely products but without the stories to situate them historically and experientially they have little meaning. Our biggest crisis at the moment, whether you agree or not, is climate change. I dislike that word for its ambiguity but can't go into it further here other than to say, this is the legacy we are leaving to future generations to solve. It is unfair, unfortunate, and enormously complex. Some would argue that jobs are more important and the world runs on oil. I don't disagree. But if we don't find a way to scale down the maddening pulse of 'progress' we will find that we have destroyed the very ecological systems that sustain life let alone provide jobs. The economy is wholly a subsidiary of the ecology. We need to remember that. This exhibition is underpinned by this philosophy and I hope that by the subtle revealing and unfolding of the stories here people will see this. But it requires durational engagement and reflection and there are questions raised that are difficult and uncomfortable to face and to answer.