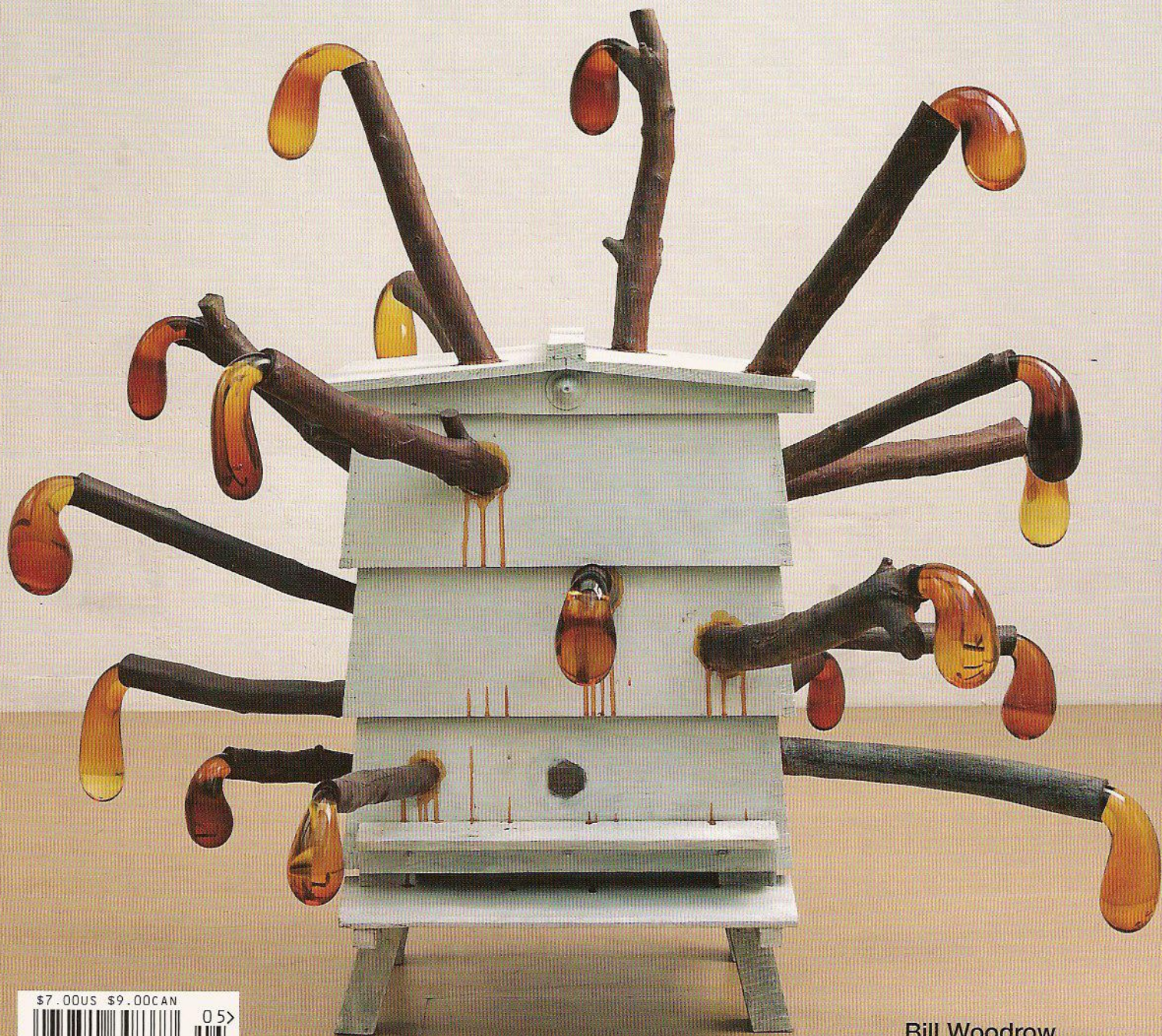


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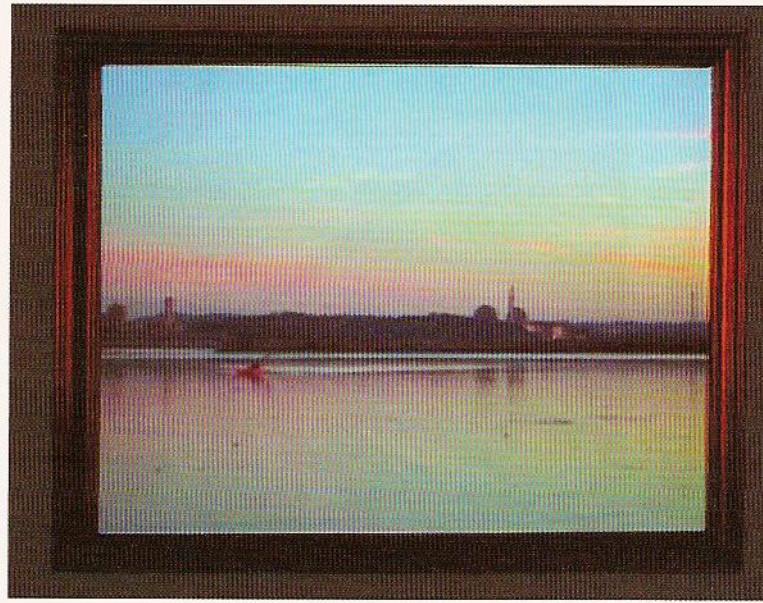


Bill Woodrow
Jan van Munster
TOTD





Light on Shadowed Ground



Alan Michelson

BY DEBORAH EVERETT

Opposite: *Ganohonyohk*, 1999. Corn husks, string, light fixtures, and sound, dimensions variable. This page: *Twilight, Indian Point*, 2003. Video projection on framed “canvas,” 56 x 71 in.

Sifting through layered realities, Alan Michelson locates critical junctures in the life of occupied sites. His visual enigmas, both substance and illusion, probe the most elemental of relationships—the link between human beings and place. Encompassing a range of media, Michelson’s work has evolved from his beginnings as a painter grounded in the pristine panoramas of the Hudson River School. At a certain point, he began to consider landscape in terms of socialized perspectives, especially territory and domain. At the same time, he discovered his Mohawk ancestry and began to deal with viewpoints in which ground and habitat are inseparable. He became interested in perceptions of

land—from imagined landscapes in art to land as a stage for human activity and a dynamic site undergoing both natural and manmade changes. When Michelson encountered Robert Smithson’s “non-sites,” his investigations became focused on intersections of the temporal and the spatial—and ways of bringing previous states of a locale into the here and now.

Among Michelson’s most sculptural works, *Earth’s Eye* marks his shift from painting to installation. Created in 1990 for the Public Art Fund, it is a site-specific memorial to Collect Pond, a 55-acre freshwater complex once located in downtown Manhattan. The pond system was home to a spectrum of life, yielding bountiful



Left and detail: *Earth's Eye*, 1990. Cast concrete, 40 markers, 22 x 14 x 6 in. each.



oyster harvests for centuries (its huge middens, or shell refuse heaps, dated from indigenous times). The complex later provided fresh water for Europeans in an area surrounded by salty tidal bays. During the 1700s, however, tanneries quickly polluted the pond, turning it into a breeding ground for typhus; by the 1800s, the middens were shoveled into the water to seal off the health hazard. At present, the only surviving feature of the pond is a natural spring beneath the city's Criminal Court that drives the building's cooling system.

Named for Thoreau's characterization of a pond as "earth's eye," Michelson's work consists of 40 wedges of cast concrete arranged to re-create the shape of the pond, based on historical maps. Each cast has a rich surface of bas-relief displaying aspects of the local flora and fauna, ranging from husked corn to animal tracks to herons. These flat monuments recall the organic vitality of the original site, while their edges contain passages evoking the harmony of this rare and now lost ecosystem. Michelson added a note of irony by inserting broken bottles and litter among the other cast forms to strengthen the engagement between past and present.

Permanence, or the lack of it, is a major theme for Michelson. His is a political statement of the first order, challenging the throw-away culture of the present. Focusing on territory as the axis of American history, he unpacks generations of habitation, layers beneath the surface, and comminglings of the ground with human lives. Repeatedly he asks us to consider how we use land, how we think of it, and what that relationship says about us.

Permanent Title (1993) examines our lack of concern with our own past, as traces of it fall prey to aggressive progress. For this work, Michelson located dozens of former cemeteries in Manhattan and took rubbings on muslin from present-day structures on the sites. The muslin was then sewn into life-sized burial shrouds, coated with beeswax, and mounted, empty, on the wall of an alcove. One of the rubbings revealed inscriptions from a surviving gravestone, while another advised that the interred had been moved to a different cemetery. The remaining impressions reflected corporate logos, utility company markers, and signs from fast-food chains—emblems of the frantic consumerism that now overrides history, personal and cultural roots, even the inviolability of burial. A poignant display of gaping shells, the sacks asked the question: What, if not origins, has lasting meaning in our culture?

Michelson created a related work, *Cult of Memory* (1993), as a site-specific installation for New York University's Grey Art Gallery. Roughly two dozen pairs of sleeves were attached to two large panels of dyed yellow muslin. The carefully detailed sleeves, gathered into self-lacing cuffs,

transformed the cloth into a communal set of grave clothes, referencing the potter's field outside the gallery, under Washington Square. The fabric arms seemed to flail or dangle in limp resignation, with the exception of an odd pair crossed in painful distaste. The color signified that many of the dead were yellow fever victims, increasing the mood of forced isolation and rejection. Filling two large windows facing the square, the work glowed eerily at night, like an apparitional gathering of witnesses, mourners at their own fall from memory.

Toward the other end of the cultural spectrum, *Ganohonyohk* (1999), an unusual installation of small figures made from cornhusks at Art in General, was inspired by traditional Iroquois dolls. The 200 or so tiny models were individually hung from the ceiling at varying heights in semi-darkness. Four bare light bulbs were suspended among the figures, multiplying their presence through cast shadows. With each figure differing from the rest—distinguished by age, gender, and a wide range of postures and dress—the group presented a society in miniature. The plant matter used to form the figures evinced a self-image tied to their source of sustenance. Like apples hanging from a tree, they were arrayed in buoyant profusion. Adrift in the aural atmosphere of the installation (a resonant Mohawk blessing), the figures exuded a gracious recognition of abundance. In this very different kind of non-site, land became an invisible element of the work, obliquely referenced as the underpinning of humanity and its nourishment, the connection that binds them in an interdependent web of life.

In other pieces, Michelson has moved away from the concept of non-site to address the current (and much changed) condition of a site. The haunting and dream-like *Mespat* (an indigenous word for "bad water place") draws attention to the urban blight of Newtown Creek between Brooklyn and Queens. First shown in 2006 at SUNY Stony Brook's University Gallery, the work revolves around a poignant, sun-



lit video of the devastation along the banks, shot from a boat traveling up the waterway. The video was projected on a panel of white turkey feathers (referencing garments of Manhattan's Lenape Indians) and immersed in the other-worldly score of an electronic soundtrack. Seductively calm, *Mespat* has a drifting, somnambulant quality that results from its steady, slow, and relentless pace. The compromised creek setting, however, has the uneasy familiarity of a recurring bad dream. As with all commercial infrastructure, it is something we know too well, and habitually avoid. Here, paradoxically, we become riveted by the imagery, as it ripples across the overlapping feathers, undulating like water. The lushness of the surface—along with a radiant sky and sprinkling of pleasing forms (including a cupola-like storehouse)—imbues the illusory panorama with a sensuality that holds the viewer like a magnet.

The work's double nature generates maximum tension, playing beauty against disfigurement. In a seemingly endless trail of

eyesores and decay, we pass brownish warehouse yards, towering peaks of broken cement, and cheap elevated signage. At times the viewer encounters the almost violent swaying of wind-blown trees and grasses, but without hearing the rustling of leaves. The alternately plaintive and bubbling soundtrack—devoid of the ambient sounds that one would expect from the passing scenery—drives home the isolation of our world. The effect promotes a sense of helpless witnessing that at times is almost intolerable. Larger stretches of water appear, finally, as the stream branches out and the camera pans backward for a last glimpse of the wasteland we've just escaped. The imagery's overriding sense of soullessness, set against a framework of elegance, results in a dazzled breathlessness by the end. The viewer has emerged from an oppressive environment, where bleakness and the economics of scarcity triumph over quality of life.

Twilight, Indian Point also addresses dual natures and concern for life. Featuring a

Left and detail: *Permanent Title*, 1993. Sewn and waxed muslin with charcoal rubbings, 144 x 144 x 9 in.

gleaming landscape along the Hudson River, the stationary video is displayed object-like within a plain, gilt frame. Added elements of time and motion counterpoint the pun on painting. The sequence opens on a vista of classic proportions, balancing a silky expanse of water with open sky. Immediately two kayaks enter and score the river's surface, releasing slow wavelets toward the viewer. Buildings on shore begin to darken and stand out against the failing light, including the site's twin nuclear reactors. As darkness covers the scene, the power plant fades and grows more sinister, a hidden but lurking threat. Suddenly a night train flashes across the horizon, offering a last chance to leave as daylight disappears completely. In this work, Michelson has captured the extreme nature of our conflicted relationship with land—where spots of stunning natural



Above: *Cult of Memory*, 1993. Sewn and dyed muslin, 2 panels, 133 x 144 in. each.

beauty are compromised by commercial sites that occasion more than ugliness, imposing alarming risks as well.

TwoRow II, a luminous video installation of immense proportions and stunning visual effect, turns to a different kind of disregard for life. Recently acquired by the National Gallery of Canada, the piece straddles four mammoth screens and envelops the viewer in a hypnotic flow of color and form. Unlike the journey in *Mespat*, this trek involves two vistas, one row of images above the other; moving in opposite directions, they are cast in jewel-like purple and bordered by solid white. The installation's doubled tracks were filmed while traveling down the Grand River in Ontario, and they document both shorelines—with the Six Nations Iroquois Reserve on one bank and non-Reserve land on the other. The arrangement is based on a historic,

two-row wampum belt—a richly beaded embodiment of a 17th-century treaty between the Iroquois and their European neighbors. The paired bars of purple in the actual belt represent co-existence between two cultures, an agreement to live side by side, without disturbing each other's way of life. The installation's rendering of the belt displays the actualities that have overruled the original agreement.

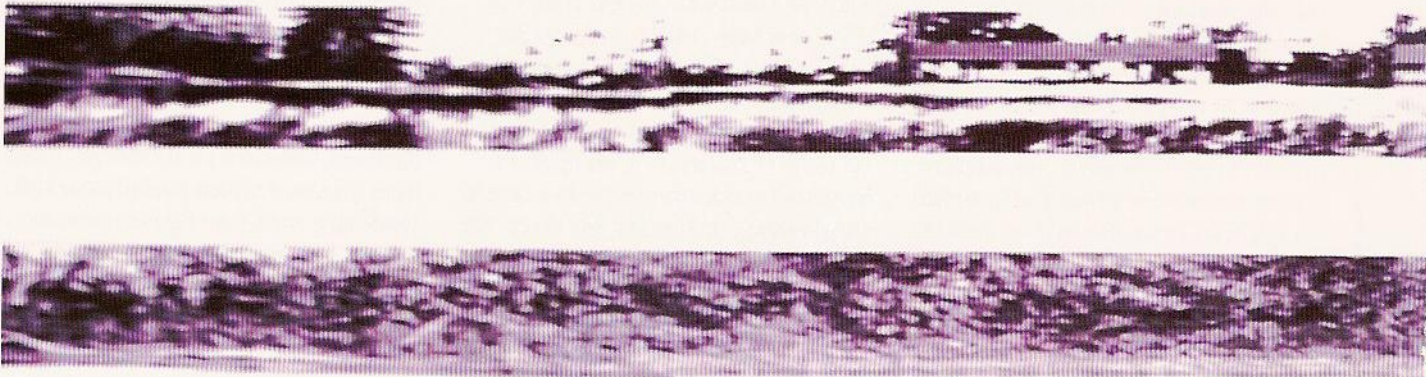
As the work begins, landscape images materialize, linking together in continuous movement over the four screens. The voice of an older Native man floats sonorously above the chugging sounds of a boat's motor, recounting memories of the river from his youth. As in *Mespat*, the movement is even and dreamy, but the idyllic atmosphere is soon disrupted, as multiple elements begin to compete. The blaring tones of a tour guide intrude from the right side of the room, making it hard to grasp the Native narratives coming from the left. Meanwhile the steady streams of

images reveal differences as well as similarities. The top band (the non-Reserve side) stands out for its real estate consciousness, displaying large river-front homes and manicured lawns. While both sides possess lush, wooded areas, the Reserve side has kept its housing recessed from the shore, leaving that habitat entirely intact.

As the films continue, fluctuations occur in the formal qualities of the imagery; the video's grainy texture often intensifies to the point that shapes dissolve into pixelated swaths of color. At times, the work has the feel of a painting, with light taking on the function of pigment. There is a constant undercurrent of the metaphysical, along with implications of the cyclical nature of being: tree trunks and branches glow white-hot, like bones in an x-ray, injecting a sense of the spectral and transient nature of life.

Perhaps the most striking effect in this journey is the unexpected feeling of displacement. The panoramic images in both rows are composites, shot successively by four different cameras. Overlaps occur between screens, so that specific details may become mysteriously doubled. In addition, slight differences in the angles and distances of the cameras cause forms to shift dramatically. At one point, a gracefully tapered teepee appears in the yard of a non-Reserve home (apparently appropriated from the Reserve). Advancing steadily through the first three screens, it abruptly becomes broad and chunky in the fourth. This unforeseen switch jolts the audience with its transposed viewpoint, and the ride suddenly becomes Einsteinian, with multiple realities relative to the observer.

GWENDOLEN CATES, © ALAN MICHELSON





Left: *Mespat*, 2001. Video with sound and turkey feather screen, 132 x 168 x 12 in. Below: Two views of *TwoRow II*, 2005. Four video projections with sound, 108 x 576 in.

These changing frames of reference are the capstone to the work's fluctuating perceptions, melding with and underscoring the tension of the vying audio tracks.

As the tour conductor winds down, he describes friendly relations between the two communities. The indigenous accounts, however, unveil increasingly blatant injustices, including the reduction of the original land grant by over 90 percent. At this point, the guide claims that, without his presentation, listeners would have understood little about the area, and he cuts off any discussion by his audience. At this lost opportunity for openness—as if tolling the point of no return—the boat's horn sounds three times. And, one by one, the images disappear.

Throughout Michelson's world, one finds more than first meets the eye. The surface may present a deceptive calm, with hypnotic stretches of water or essential forms.

The viewer initially relaxes, only to realize that there's an unsettling urgency in the mix. Time, along with place, is out of joint—as Michelson reveals our disdain for sustainable futures.

Michelson has presented his powerful work in a number of important spaces, including the New Museum, the Whitney Museum, Bard College, the Banff Centre, the National Museum of the American Indian (which acquired his *Permanent Title* installation), and Artists Space. He continues to offer pointed challenges to an entrenched system of thought that rejects painful truths. His current project is an Art-in-Architecture Commission for a new Land Port of Entry along the St. Lawrence River. Among the location's most striking features is its abutment of cultures: the U.S. and Canada flank each other, with the Akwasasne Mohawk Nation between them. The social and geographic

dynamics are ripe with possibilities for Michelson's line of inquiry.

As Michelson turns back the pages of our collective history, he reveals our present condition as one of cross purposes and compound dislocations. He elucidates the pitfalls of America's "youthful" perspective—constantly deserting familiar territory (and its anchoring histories) for the next frontier, the latest trend, the newest technology. He reminds the viewer that to isolate oneself from one's beginnings is to be rootless, and therefore unstable. We are an "amnesiac culture," he says, one that discards the past in our rush to overtake the future. Eloquent and deeply affecting, Michelson's work offers a timely call for balance in a polarized world.

Deborah Everett is a writer living in New York.

GWENDOLEN CARTES. © ALAN MICHELSON

