5-2018

Eighteen Mile Creek

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Eighteen Mile Creek

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Photography and Related Media

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
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Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, New York
May, 2018

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Abstract

Eighteen Mile Creek

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Eighteen Mile Creek is a body of work consisting of cyanotype chemigrams that explores the space of a Superfund site located in Lockport, New York. The works installed in the gallery are large in scale and abstract. They are created solely through the interactions between photographic chemistry, contaminated water collected from Eighteen Mile Creek, and light. The cyanotypes are bound in contradictions, engaged in a push and pull with the viewer. Ranging in tone from deep blue to harsh yellow, they make visual gestures towards landscapes and topography, but also towards toxicity and warning. Further contradictions exist. While the prints themselves are abstract and non-representational, the work itself is inseparable from the Eighteen Mile Creek Superfund site, as they are made with water and earth from that location. A physical link from the creek down to the molecular level is created.

The prints installed in the gallery are suspended from the ceiling in front of a wall of windows that illuminate the prints from behind, giving the viewer an appreciation of the fragility and sculptural nature of each print. Each print is a unique, one-of-a-kind and delicate object, in a constant state of change and decay. This speaks to the fragility of an ecosystem and the destruction of the environment. Within the gallery installation is a small book, *A Field Guide to Eighteen Mile Creek*, which the viewer may hold in their hands and read as they move through the exhibition. The field guide serves as the container of my research into the industrial history of Eighteen Mile Creek and the town of Lockport. It speaks to the testing and research conducted

by the Environmental Protection Agency who determine the risks to human health, the environment, and the impact of industry on the community as a whole.

Eighteen Mile Creek, Installation View

Eighteen Mile Creek

Lockport was once a vibrant town, brimming with various industries centered around a body of water known as Eighteen Mile Creek. Like many Western New York towns, Lockport was built by industry and decimated by decades of industrial pollution and environmental neglect. My thesis work is an investigation and exploration of this place and through a body of artwork I try to make sense of what happened to Eighteen Mile Creek and the surrounding community.

A *Superfund* site is an area in the United States that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has determined to be polluted to such a level that it is hazardous to human health and the environment, necessitating long-term cleanup efforts.[1] As of February 26, 2018, there were 1,343 Superfund sites across the United States.[2] Eighteen Mile Creek is one of those sites. Added to the list in 2012, the remediation efforts have resulted in the relocation of five families when it was discovered that they had been living on properties containing dangerous levels of contaminants.[3] Testing in this area is still being conducted and the full effects on human health and the environment remain unknown.

So often in today's discourse, issues surrounding the environment seem to lack a tangible connection to the real world. Therefore, I chose to title this work *Eighteen Mile Creek,* to create

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1. Environmental Protection Agency, "What is Superfund?", accessed February 26, 2018, https://www.epa.gov/superfund/what-superfund.

2. Environmental Protection Agency, "Superfund: National Priorities List (NPL)", accessed February 26, 2018, https://www.epa.gov/superfund/superfund-national-priorities-list-npl.

3. Michael Basile. "PCBs and Lead to be removed from Eighteen Mile Creek Superfund Site in Lockport, N.Y.," news release, January 17, 2017, accessed April 29, 2018, https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/pcbs-and-lead-be-removed-eighteen-mile-creek-superfund-site-lockport-ny.

an unambiguous and direct connection between the work and the location. The contamination found in this area cannot be experienced directly through the body's senses. Therefore, these artworks serve as both a visual representation analogous to the contamination of the water and soil as well as a literal manifestation of it.

My process was as follows: I collected water, soil, and plant- matter from the creek and processed my images with it. The work created is ironically a product of contamination itself. Aesthetically the prints are abstract and mysterious in appearance, representing a metaphor for the toxicity of the site. Since the works are created with materials from the site itself, they too are toxic and dangerous to handle, creating a toxic poetry, a push and pull between beauty and horror. A beautiful image draws the viewer in closer, but the toxicity of the physical print pushes them away, a reminder that they are born out of a toxic place.

Eighteen Mile Creek is comprised of two bodies of work that interact with and inform the other. The main body of work is a series of chemigrams made with water collected from Eighteen Mile Creek. These chemigrams are made by using a cyanotype process. The powdered chemicals are mixed with water collected from the creek so that the resulting prints are embedded with the elements of the site down to the molecular level. Therefore, the prints can never be fully separated from the site.

My decision to use this process is significant for several reasons. Firstly, there is a historical connection back to the very beginning of photographic history. Anna Atkins's book, *British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions,* which Atkins self-published from 1843-53, is the first book to ever be illustrated with photographs. Atkins was a botanist who used photographs as a

scientific tool, a method of investigating the natural world.[4] Her cyanotypes abstract algae and other natural plant materials into beautiful, mysterious forms, floating on a blue groundless surface.

Secondly, there is an intimacy with the handmade print. As each print is one-of-a-kind, the irreplaceability of an ecosystem is referenced. Lastly, there is the color blue, reminiscent of water and sky. Blue is one of the rarest colors found in nature, and throughout history, blue pigments were so difficult to obtain and expensive to use that they were saved for the most precious of subjects. In her book, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Rebecca Solnit says of the color blue, "Blue is the color of longing for the distances you never arrive in."[5] She goes on to say that she originally thought cyanotypes were named for the cyanide from which the prints are made, stating "in the cyanotypes you arrive in this world where darkness and light are blue and white, where bridges and people and apples are blue as lakes, as though everything were seen through the melancholy atmosphere that here is cyanide."[6]

This concept of the melancholy atmosphere of toxins is carried throughout this series. The artworks in *Eighteen Mile Creek* range in tones from deep to blue to harsh acidic greens and yellows. Rather than combine the different components of cyanotype chemistry together as is typically done when creating a cyanotype, I applied the individual chemicals to the paper, controlling where the chemical interactions occurred. Thus, I created imagery that is reminiscent of water, topography, and landscape. These images become a visual metaphor for the toxicity of the site itself. Aside from chain-link fences and EPA posted signs warning potential visitors to

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4. Carol Armstrong and Catherine De Zegher, eds., *Ocean Flowers: Impressions from Nature* (New York: Princeton University Press, 2004), 113.

5. Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, (n.p.: Penguin Books, 2006), 34.

6. Solnit, A Field, 34.

stay away, it is not otherwise possible to see the contamination of the site. These artworks are a method for visualizing this contamination. They are seductive, but they serve as a warning.

The prints themselves are fragile, delicate, and full of small details that draw the viewer closer to them. Yet, because of their toxicity, they cannot be safely touched or held, further reinforcing the push and pull between beauty and horror. The second component of this work, *A Field Guide to Eighteen Mile Creek*, is a notebook placed within the gallery space. The field guide contains material sourced from the town archives on the industrial history of Eighteen Mile Creek, the local newspapers, and the EPA's Superfund site profile. These are combined with a series of documentary photographs taken at the site and within the surrounding community.

A field guide is a book designed to help a reader identify wildlife, plants, minerals, or other things found in nature. They are designed to be carried by the reader out into nature, making the knowledge of specialists and experts readily available to the general public. By creating *The Field Guide to Eighteen Mile* Creek, I made the summation of my research on the history and current Superfund site status available to the viewer, within the environment of the gallery. The field guide is intended to provide a grounding force to the poetic chemigrams, reminding the viewer that they are connected to a real space, where people continue to deal with the effects of contamination.

This work deals intimately with water, the essential element of all life on earth. Eighteen Mile Creek was once a body of water capable of sustaining life, water for drinking, growing crops, bathing, and supporting an ecosystem. Now, because of humankind's carelessness and negligence, the creek water is poisoned. The creek is now evidence of water's ability to simultaneously sustain and destroy life. This is what curator Linda Weintraub refers to as water's "split personality." She writes,

> [t]hus, on the one hand, water serves as an agent for cleansing, purifying, protecting, synthesizing, nourishing, combusting, and delighting. It is the unique liquid that enables life and is essential for health and vitality. However, water also transmits death, disease, and deformity…The massive scale of squandering and abuse by humans has stripped water of its powers to heal and nourish.[7]

Eighteen Mile Creek is just one site among many where water has been stripped of its power to heal and nourish. While the chemical prints may be appreciated without the documentary and archival aspects of my thesis work, they nonetheless provide an opportunity for the viewer to gain a deeper understanding of the history of this place, and hopefully, to inspire the viewer to act. This site is just one of the hundreds across the country, and *Eighteen Mile Creek* is an examination of only one of them.

7. Linda Weintraub, "Art as Indictments of Global Water Abuses," in "Dirty Water, No. 6," special issue, *Women Eco Artists Dialog*, accessed October 22, 2017, https://directory.weadartists.org/tragedy-of-wild-waters.

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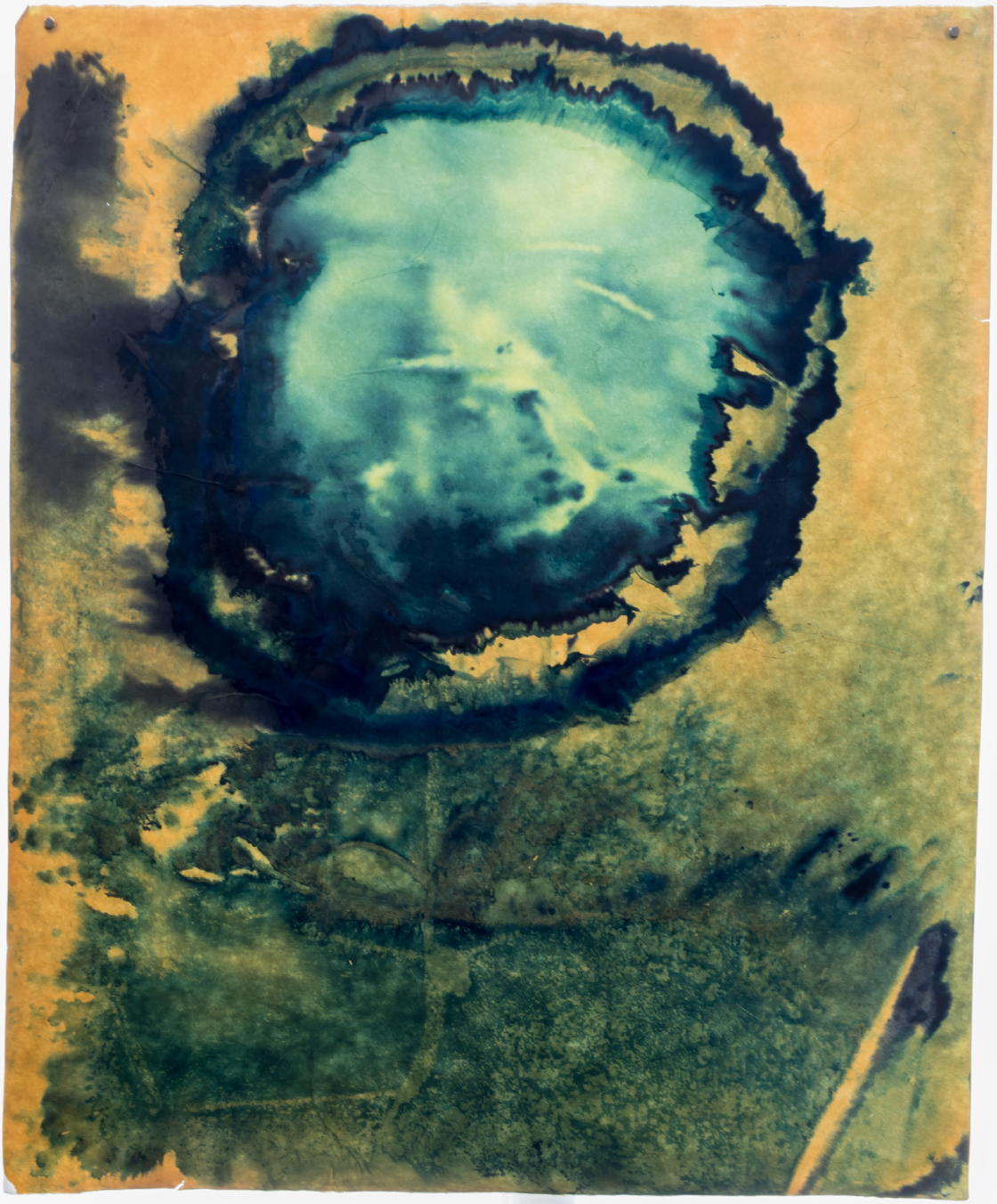
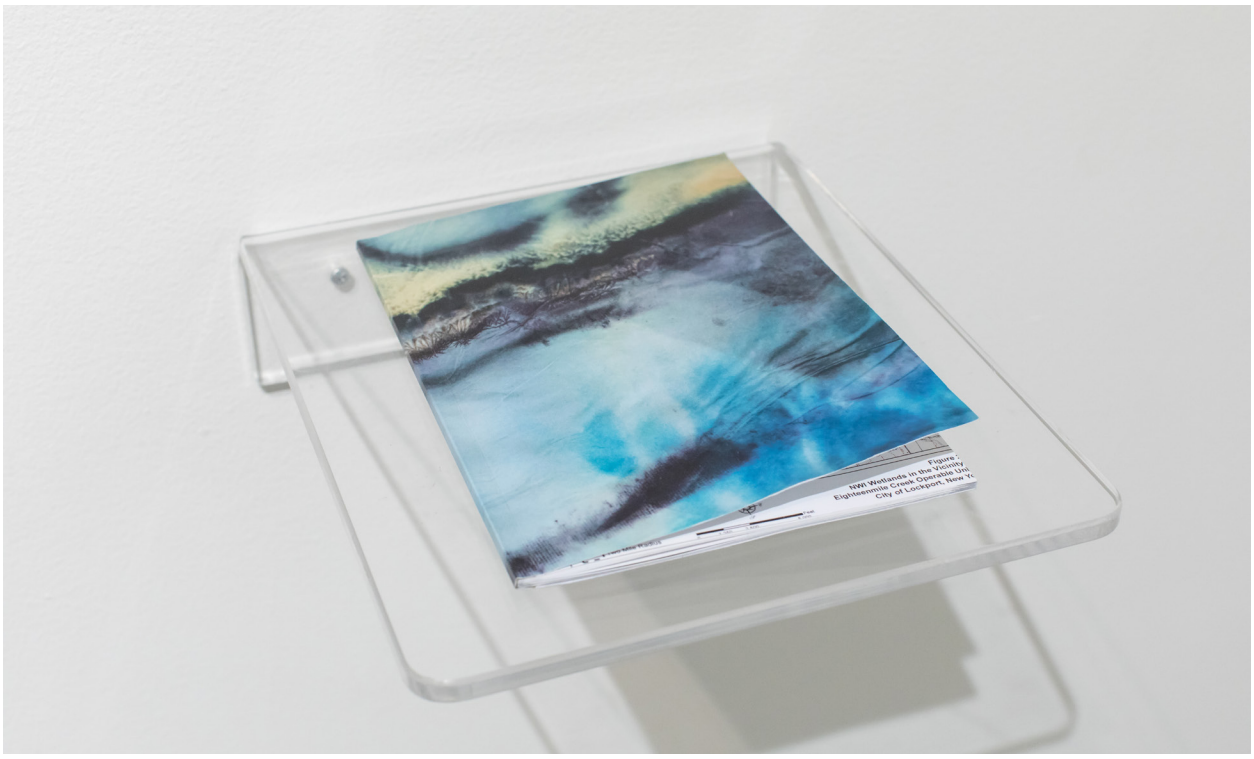


A Field Guide to Eighteen Mile Creek, page spread



A Field Guide to Eighteen Mile Creek, installation view

Eighteen Mile Creek, installation view