GRAND RIVER: GRAND CONVERSATIONS

STEFAN A. ROSE

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Artist's Statement

For my 2010 City of Kitchener Artist In Residence project, *Grand River: Grand Conversations*, I worked with a 1927 Korona Panoramic camera, that uses 8-inch by 20-inch negatives, to create images along the Grand River and its tributaries in the Kitchener area. While making these photographs I had the opportunity to speak with random city residents and ask them about their relationships to the river, the city, and their sense of community.

During the residency, I've read many books about Kitchener, Waterloo Region, and Grand River, to gain a deeper understanding of this area. A few of these books are *Sauerkraut and Enterprise*, a collection of reminiscences by Edna Staebler; *This Unique Heritage*, a history of Waterloo Region by Bill Moyer; *Present Faces of Waterloo Past*, photographs and recollections of local seniors by William Forbes and Maurice Green; *Grand River Reflections*, photographs by John de Visser; *Victoria Park – 100 Years of a Park and Its People*, by local historian rych mills; and *Competing Visions: The Kitchener City Hall Competition*, by Detlef Mertins and Virginia Wright.

Based on this research, my experiences in the landscape, and on those conversations with city inhabitants, I've written poems incorporating quotes from residents to give a multi-layered response to the geography, city, landscape, history, and my photographs. These create a parallel narrative to the visual narrative of the photographs, in thirteen-line poems, each with a one-word title that adds a frank directness to the reading of the text.

The resulting exhibition at the Rotunda Gallery at Kitchener City Hall is comprised of 16 pairings of my photographs and text. The images are of the Grand River in many aspects, in all seasons, in context with the surrounding landscape and built environment. The photographs are 8-inch x 20-inch contact-printed large-format black and white silverprints.

There are also five image/poem combinations displayed inside Grand River Transit buses as interior advertising panels, to provide access to these artworks as a surprise for the riders. The panels are randomly distributed among the GRT fleet, on buses numbered 2413, 2426, 2705, 2707 and 8021, and may be assigned to any of the bus routes daily, until January 30, 2011.

I want to thank City of Kitchener Arts & Culture staff Carrie Kozlowski and Cheryl York, the Public Art Working Group committee, and my wife Laura, for their enthusiastic support for this project. I also want to thank the City of Kitchener for providing such a wonderful and rare opportunity to be Artist In Residence, and I am grateful as well for the interesting conversations with so many people in Kitchener, along the community trails. With appreciation and thanks, I present this book as a document of, and a gift to, Kitchener.

Though this exhibition marks the end of my Artist In Residence appointment, I'm still interested in hearing from Kitchener residents why the Grand River is significant to them. I want to expand the scope of this project over the next few years to encompass more of the river landscape beyond Kitchener's boundaries. I appreciate hearing from more people: you can send e-mail to me at GrandConversations@live.ca.

For Douglas Lochhead,
Poet Laureate of Sackville, N.B.

GRAND RIVER: GRAND CONVERSATIONS

Attawandarons

We are speaking again, above the bluff at Doon.
Here's the scene: fallen lovers and what's left
is legend and a cold spring to feed the Grand.
There's more to be told: history lies between
the cry and the last gasp, we miss the telling
moments – who said what to whom, when did we forget
parts of the storied past?
Some records are written in places, India ink
punctuated: land, space, deeds, comma, titles, semi-colon,
letters, exclamation, wills, period.
Let's find common ground, beside the running
Grand River, pause hushed, so we might hear
people of a slightly different tongue.

Claude Dubrick Park, 2008

Movement

The straightforward motion, to a point, then a sweep of arm:
one day this land will be yours.
One day this place might be bigger than you had ever imagined.
What path takes you to the next?
King Street, beyond the King's Highway No. 8, is straight as an arrow
from East to West, past Queen, and at Union it bends a little,
a concession to accommodate compass points South to North,
while Weber Street wavers, meeting, crossing, King several times.
There's a Grand arc beyond the man-made.
I always get lost in this city
though I've lived here all my life.
Are natural features the basis of these roads? The river says "No."
Which, or whose, tracks are they paved over?

Hwy. 8 construction, near Freeport, 2009

Conservation

We have an elevated view of history as we
stand on soft-shouldered embankments,
earthworks of unnamed labourers, not enterprising giants.
What was built here one generation well knows,
another knows no different, it is as always
it ever was, someone else's old memory.
An Authority recalls: Grand River flow charted
to excess, 1974, and past years' records, river
going high to dry to flood, hipwaders required.
The river takes a lot of work, so it looks natural.
Placid present water levels, from a clamour to action: harness
the Grand, by dam, reservoir, and dyke – restraint is
conservation, preservation, of all the rest we have built.

Flood sluices, Joe Thompson Park, 2010

Fisherfolk

The line is loaded with selected bait –
what suits the season – and expectant hope;
peaceful calm, a repetitive trolling, cast
and reel, rod arcing with the overhead swing.
Determined toil with a slap for mosquitoes, the buzz
a minor sound compared to osprey, raucous
in triumphant cries, celebrating its angling success.
I've come off shift and now
I'll fish all of tonight; I heard they stocked the river.
Dreams in the reflective water, darkening past
sunset; here the factories recede from memory,
a wish for a flash of silver, or brown trout, or black bass,
letting the line pay out, bringing it back, letting go.

Lakeside Park, 2010

Concordia

Shifts in perspective occur from all directions: bridge
footings could look like they're leaning, depending on your angle.
Here is a locus, there is elsewhere, this land was
once waterlogged, a sea, before words and Grand were divulged.
I grew up beside a bigger river; every schoolchild memorized
rivers' names that fed it, knew geography by their place between.
Directness of context is applied by necessity to an expanding site –
Sand Hills, Ebytown, Berlin, Kitchener:
geographical, personal, place, person;
descriptive, familial, historical, memorial.
Look at the horizon – you would be inclined to
think it as endless; it's a trick of this sphere, so wherever
you go, there you are, as always, in landscape and sky.

Victoria St. Hwy. 7 & railway bridges, 2010

Sauerkraut

Grand River Country: billboards advertising a land unto itself, distanced
from Toronto's urban sprawl, yet threatened by filling out the same.
Turn upside down your understanding of a place with a double-barrelled
name, Kitchener-Waterloo, Twin Cities, similarities, contradictions.
Success of a multi-cultural embrace: bilingualism is
German spoken here, yet Deutsch is Dutch of a Pennsylvania variety.
1854: local man Wilhelm Kaiser's beer garden opened; 1914: bronze bust
of foreign royal Kaiser Wilhelm is toppled into weedy Victoria Park lake.

The river becomes shallow in places: sometimes
you have to get out and pull your craft.

Land-locked blue-clad Naval cadets learn fore from aft, stern from bow, port from
starboard, preparing for more navigable waterways, parading
uptown to downtown twice a year, bearing a sign declaring "Warspite."

Upper Canada Park, 2010

Bridgeport

Bowstring bridge: concrete arches, steel inside,
a taut marriage. Freeport's shorter younger relation.
Spans set on solid footings, reaching the other side.
Built for the modern age, for automobiles, no more a ford
or ferry crossing, no longer a toll to be paid.
Charon's out of business here; this is Grand, not Styx,
though the river runs deep, storytellers remind us.

> *I only dared cross on the frozen-over river by foot, once each year, of all the fifteen I lived in Bridgeport.*

It's proven that concrete outlasts lifetimes
with a little care, holding fast, ready for winter
thaw, ice-jams, or spring high water, flow unimpeded.
This mild winter the Grand never froze solid.

Bowstring (or rainbow) truss bridge, Bridgeport, 2010

Waterway

You've heard the babbling brook,
chattering birds,
hiss of rain, murmur of trees;
now slow down, and listen carefully.
As a child I used to
picnic with my family beside the Grand River.
No, you don't have to back-paddle –
find a place to pause,
nudge up against a bank,
and take note of the river voices
each one different: something telling.
It takes time to learn, longer to speak,
the languorous tongues in the Grand conversation.

Willowlake Park, 2010

Fraktur

Illustrating a point in time, lines unlike broken ground;
curving, decorative, fluid, illuminating German script, documents.
The Grand River does the same: splits around drumlins,
sediment, or other immovable block. Only we impose
symmetry of cast concrete channels to direct
the flow, asphalt for autos, and painted road signs
for the heart of Kitchener, a founder's haus.

The river seems like a secret, hidden: a site
full of possibilities.

Schneider's Creek accepts Victoria Park's lake runoff, disappears
below the waterway's museum-preserved original topography.
From homestead to city, the centre required additional chambers,
imagination, and progressively more complex drawings.

Schneider Creek, near Victoria Park, 2010

Doon

Below the swishing sounds of long thin grasses
a rustle of last year's leaves under mouse feet;
a pause, then scurry away from advancing steps.
For each turn in the trails another uncensused
inhabitant; I've lost count of chickadees, chipmunks,
and laboured ripples of brightly coloured caterpillars
moving across closely defined landscapes.

I get a real sense of peace
watching the river go by.

The water's edge draws deer, defends
muskrats and otters, each gone from sight
with a flip of tail; I've got no accounting for coyotes
though I know they're out there, noses to the wind.

Pioneer Memorial Tower Park, 2010

Filsinger

Set the stage for an Ur-story: Abraham may have
originated in Sumeria, but millennia later pious folk
carried his name – plus a dozen or four others from the good book –
from Pennsylvania, a trek for safety, a new Jerusalem.
Two hundred canvas sacks of silver coins, each packed with a hundred
dollars, for the Beasley tract, land on both banks of the Grand River.
Founders' surnames a sing-song play: Erb, Sherk, Eby,
Schneider, Betzner, Bricker, Brubacher, Weber, Filsinger, Meinzinger –
better described as -er-story, where they set down.

The sound of the Grand is calming;
I've always lived by a river.

In days of yore, from German lore, a poet would write
the mythic tales, to be turned to lieder and sung.

Meinzinger Park, 2010

Markt

Taking stock of every situation, what counts as well;
possibilities abound, amounting to something tangible, if
you make the most of opportunity: parlay and leverage.
Sometimes drought, or maybe flood, it could be worse:
it could be raining; keep optimism, hope, in the face of ambiguity.
I've never caught a trout here at all.
Have you had any luck?
Question if there's a better place to be, but know to not
wait too long, arrive too late, and lose advantage.
Ask and ye shall receive; give a helping hand; truisms enough to build
community, yet supply is limited by production and demand: documented
decades ago at the farmer's market, Pennsylvania Dutch-inflected,
"If I hat some I'd gif you any but what I got iss all."*

Doon Heritage Village, 2010

Riverview

We are at odds with nature; harnessing
the river was a pioneering feat, but now
we have energy to waste - hundreds of horsepower
to hurtle headlong into the future, metal skinned.
We know the Grand River mostly through
car windows, as we cross over it.
Over we go, a hurry to get to where
something else is. The Grand was once
an impediment. Trains and cars have designated
crossings: bridges laid out along each path
of least resistance, little regard for landscape.
We might require these straight lines, but equally
need to account for the meandering river.

Temporary bypass bridge removal, Bridgeport, 2009

Trailhead

With careful observation you'll likely find
interstices between everything you survey:
old houses' walls have passageways for mice,
solid surfaces belie electrons' space-taking,
urban inhabitants are unaware of greenbelts.
I hardly see any people; the trails along
the Grand are Kitchener's well-kept secret.
The key to the city's geographic memory
resides in everyday repetition of the obvious:
Grand River Boulevard, River Road, Water Street.
Well-travelled roadways become second nature,
only a stone's throw from river, park, or trail
access points between houses; pause and you'll see.

Pioneer Park, 2010

Reflections

Across millenia stars align, someone imagines
connections: Castor and Pollux holding hands
as constellation Gemini – the Milky Way behind them –
leaning away from their celestial origin.
That time is past: starlight ancient when
it reaches our eyes, interrupted by earthly revolutions,
days and nightfalls; commingling what was then and is now.
The Twin Cities seem to have turned
their backs to the Grand River.
Though we are made of mostly water, with good reason
early settlers placed homesteads well away from the troublesome
annual flood. Better to pass between lintel and threshold
to view the heavens, than reflections around your boots.

Victoria Street bridge, 2010

Industria

Oak and maple branches cradle the municipal
crest's symbolic animal; beaver faces left, as on the nickel
coin, but gold and green predominate, surmounted by a crown.
Fitting, given settlement along local streams and sand hills,
grist and saw mills to supply the building of a community,
furnished with finished woods reflective of the heraldic boughs.

The City of Kitchener motto: Industria Prosperitas –
From Industry Comes Prosperity.

At Lakeside Park, today the civic creature's scarpered:
high water, gnawed trunks, and wood chips are easily seen,
though no *Castor canadiensis*, nor grand lodge from the past
few decades' plantings, but then again it's Sunday and maybe
even beavers take a break from their busy work.

Lakeside Park, 2010

* quoted from *Sauerkraut and Enterprise* by Edna Staebler.

Biography

Born in Leeds, England, Stefan A. Rose immigrated to Canada in 1977. He graduated from Mount Allison University with both a Bachelor of Science and a Bachelor of Fine Arts, and uses a large-format banquet camera among others for his creative work. He has exhibited his photographs in numerous solo and group exhibitions, and has collaborated with other artists across many media. Stefan and his wife, artist Laura De Decker, live in Waterloo.

His collaborative works include *Day Trip/Night Transit*, 2000, with Karl Kessler, exhibited at Rotunda Gallery, contrasting day trips along New York's subway system with Stefan's photographs and poems about night travels in Kitchener Transit buses.

Townsend Retraced, 2004 (with Laura Cunningham and Hilary Martin) addressed the effect of 1970's top-down urban land planning on a rural south-western Ontario community, using photographs of

landscape and built environments juxtaposed with poems, government maps, plans, and other documents. Exhibited at the Rotunda Gallery in 2005, it was selected for the Gallery TPW/Virtual Museums Canada online curated exhibition *Dubious Views: questioning institutional representations in tourism and cartography*.

Death by Chocolate, 2008 (with photographer Andrew Wright, a former Kitchener Artist In Residence), documented eighty volunteers from the general public enacting their imagined movie deaths outside a Waterloo Dairy Queen, using chocolate syrup to represent blood, similar to Alfred Hichcock's use of it in black & white films, and reminiscent of the 1950's crime scene photos by Weegee (Arthur Fellig).

Stefan has created several video works: *The Rope Dancer, Flying Sparks and Heavy Machinery*, *Different Trains*, and *Prayer For Hydrogen*, commissioned by the Penderecki String Quartet, to accompany their performances across Canada and internationally.

In 2008 Stefan's poetry chapbook, *The House That Stands*, was published by Anchorage Press, and was awarded first place in the poetry category of the 2008 Alcuin Society Book Design Awards (designer: Andrew Steeves); earlier this year it

represented Canada in competition at the World Book Design Awards in Leipzig, Germany.

Vernacular Veracity: An Investigation of Dry Cleaner Architecture in South-Western Ontario, all photographed with his 8"x20" camera, premiered in 2009 as part of the Contemporary Art Forum of Kitchener and Area (CAFKA).

The photographs and poems of *Grand River: Grand Conversations* are online at http://grandconversations.spaces.live.com. Original framed prints with poems are available for purchase; please contact Stefan at GrandConversations@live.ca.

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