

An abstract painting with soft, blended colors of beige, light blue, and grey. A white grid is overlaid on the painting, with a vertical line on the right and horizontal lines intersecting the text. The text is in a clean, white, sans-serif font.

NOWHERE
IS A PLACE

JULIE COSGROVE

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THUNDER BAY
ART GALLERY

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FOREWORD

Sharon Godwin

Julie Cosgrove melds two seemingly disparate parts of her life – her employment as a wilderness canoe and kayak guide and experiences as a global traveler, and her work as an artist – in her solo exhibition *Nowhere is a place*.

About this relationship, Cosgrove says “I incorporate the data of coordinates from expedition and navigational equipment, such as the GPS or SPOT tracker into my artworks, merging the paradigm of my experience of nature within my painting process.” The result is a series of physically imposing abstract paintings that examine and incorporate the concepts of mapping as it most often occurs today, with the aid of new navigational technologies.

Curator Nadia Kurd, in her catalogue essay, and art historian Andrea Terry through her interview with the artist included in this publication, provide context to the work in the exhibition and to the artist’s development. I thank them for their important contribution.

Their work was made easier, I know, by Julie Cosgrove’s openness and willingness to discuss her work. On behalf of everyone at the Thunder Bay Art Gallery I want to thank Julie for that and for working with us to present this important exhibition.

This is not Julie Cosgrove’s first appearance at the Thunder Bay Art Gallery. Ten years ago her work was exhibited as part of her graduating ‘Major Studio’ exhibition as she completed her BFA at Lakehead University. Even then it was evident that in the future she would exhibit at the Gallery in a solo capacity. Her exhibition *Nowhere is a place* is an example of the commitment of the Thunder Bay Art Gallery to the development and exhibition of artists who live and work in Thunder Bay and Northwestern Ontario, and contribute so much to our dynamic community.

Sharon Godwin
Director

FINDING A WAY

Nadia Kurd

Some of the earliest maps in Western history illustrated spatial and geographic concepts that were heavily grounded in cultural and religious worldviews. In addition to illustrations of geographic contours between land and water, places that had yet to be explored were depicted in estimations alongside colourful cartouches— from their regional approximations to their imagined landscapes, such expanses presented viewers with a great sense of the unknown.¹ Described by cultural theorist Lucy Lippard as a “tantalizing symbol of time and space”, these early maps have powerfully shaped subsequent views on the land and have informed our imaginations of place (which also stretches to encompass its flora and fauna as well as people) by the very demarcation of lines on the page.²

As mapping became more reliant on measuring devices— particularly in our current digital era where we have become almost exclusively accustomed to using computer-based tools such as the Global Positioning System (GPS) in our everyday lives— unknown places have become numerically gridded on a screen, providing a visual representation that is often far removed from the actualities of the location. While once

full of imaginative illustrations, these detailed digital maps become abstracted markings on a screen, which are regularly composed of lines, dots, and shapes. In Canada, a country known for its vast terrain, these devices have become necessary tools for navigation. Long gone are the romanticized images of voyageurs mightily traversing through the Canadian wilderness, these technologies have forever changed how we move through and experience the wooded environment.

In *Nowhere is a place*, Julie Cosgrove explores the very technically mediated world of wayfinding. Using various methods to map and measure distances, both geographic and spatial, Cosgrove’s exploration in colour and balance begin with a study of time and space. As the paintings evolve, these marks and shapes used to indicate proportions are abstracted and overlaid with paint, leaving faint traces behind. In a sense, these traces represent the blurred, yet perceptible presence of technology in our contemporary, globalized age.

Julie’s examination of mapping began organically over a decade ago. In her reflection on working as a guide into the most remote locations, Julie writes,

¹ Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 77.

² Ibid.

I have had the opportunity, as a canoe and kayak guide, to travel to some of the most remote wilderness areas of Northern Ontario, forming a very personal appreciation and connection to the natural world. This has not only deeply informed my work as a landscape painter, it has also inspired an examination of the Canadian wilderness and how it changes physically and within our collective identity. More and more I have witnessed and contemplated on the contribution of increasingly sophisticated communication and navigational technology to a shift in notions of wilderness and the land. These technologies are changing perceptions and understanding of place by their capacity to reduce the land into grids, codes, images, and messages. They are also changing how instantaneous and interconnected the experience of the landscape and wilderness can become ensuring that we are continuously connected to information systems within a broader world context.³

³ Julie Cosgrove, *Artist Statement*, 2013.

Fig 1. **One Sided Story**, 2014.

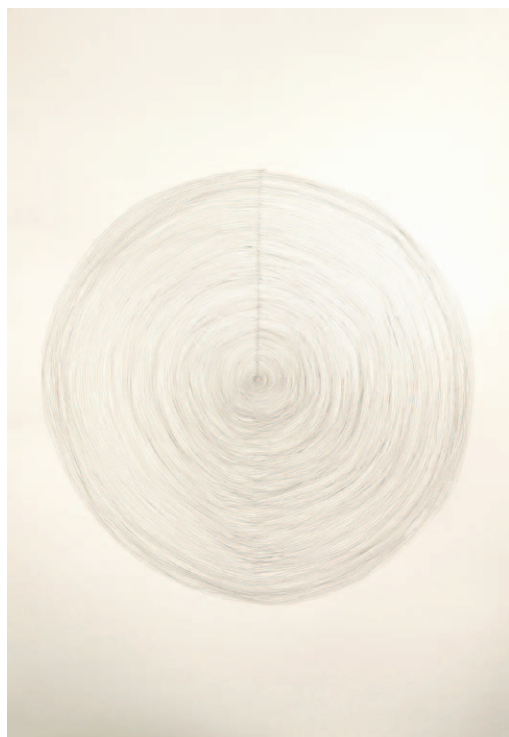




Above: Fig 2. **Hidden Reflections**, 2014.

Left: Fig 4. **Meeting Without Touching**, 2013.

Next page: Fig 3. **Mapping People (digital file)**, 2014.



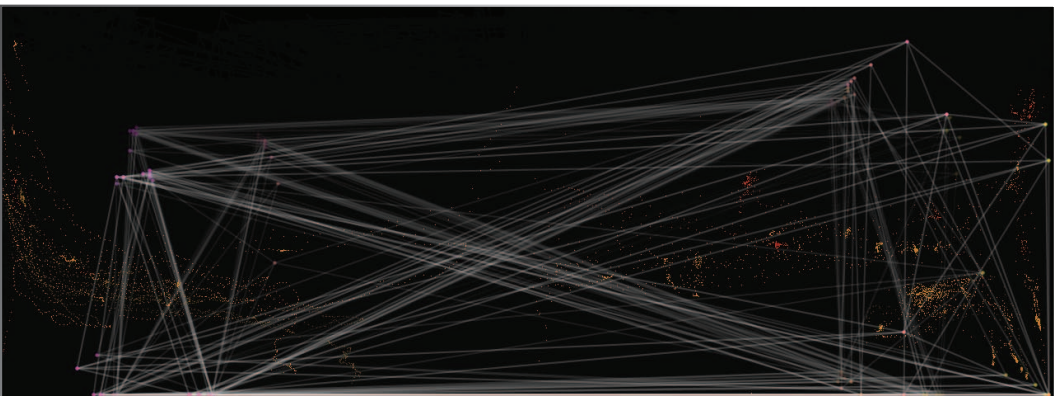
Though they are heavily conceptualized, Julie's painted maps are not without narratives. They tell a story of the rapidly changing ways in which we perceive and experience the wilderness – one where "our perception of the planet is becoming so encompassed with these technologies that the novelty of isolation in the Canadian wilderness is changing, if not deteriorating."⁴ This is perhaps the strongest story that this work tells. In amidst the fields of yellow ochre, cerulean blue and raw umber, the traces of Julie's pathways and journeys also tell of the inward reflection on her own painting practice and mapping methodology. In works such as *One Sided Story* (Fig. 1) and *Hidden Reflections*, (Fig. 2) Julie records her own presence and process in the studio. Using her laptop to record video of her actions, Julie reviews the footage with a plastic overlay on the screen in order to pinpoint her most frequent locations with a marker. Once her movements are tracked, the transparency drawing is projected and painted onto the canvas. It is this tracking process that serves as the foundations of these paintings.

However, the move towards a much more introspective examination of space is nowhere more evident than in the interactive work *Mapping People* (Fig. 3). Besides her mapping explorations on canvas, *Mapping People* marks a significant departure from Julie's painting practice and delves into the very type of tracking technologies

used. Collaborating with artist and programmer Riaz Mehmood, the work uses kinect cameras to detect and map the human motions in the gallery space. As individuals pass by the motion cameras, their presence is marked, projected and triangulated. Much like airplane smoke paths in the atmosphere, the relationships between individuals are transient and eventually fade away. However the traces of movement linger. The data that is captured through the kinect cameras is date stamped and printed for the walls of the gallery (Fig.4). The central function of *Mapping People* is to document and draw while using human movement and interaction as its source material.

Nowhere is a place presents an expansive body of work that provides a sensorial experience of mapping and our evolving understanding of the natural landscape. Though navigational technologies have come to shape our experiences of the land at the most basic level –specifically the ways in which we move through it and engage with it– this exhibition reminds us of how far we have come in the distancing and displacement of this landscape. It also reveals how much the Canadian landscape has been visually canonized and the underlying historical tensions within this visualization. Julie Cosgrove navigates through this terrain with stunning results and brings us back to appreciating the lands that surround us.

4 Ibid.



TREKS, TRACES, AND TECHNOLOGIES

An Interview with Julie Cosgrove

Andrea Terry

One of the intense pleasures of travels is the opportunity to live amongst peoples who have not forgotten the old ways, who still feel their past in the wind, touch it in stones polished by rain, taste it in the bitter leaves of plants. Just to know that, in the Amazon, Jaguar Shaman still journey beyond the Milky Way, that the myths of the Inuit Elders still resonate with meaning, that the Buddhists in Tibet still pursue the breadth of the Dharma is to remember the central revelation of anthropology: the idea that the social world in which we live does not exist in some absolute sense, but rather is simply one model of reality, the consequence of one set of intellectual and spiritual choices that our particular cultural lineage made, however successfully, many generations ago.

Wade Davis, *The Wayfinders*, 2009

The multisensory aspects of travel inform Julie Cosgrove's artistic practice and production. Her work, oftentimes characterized as "abstract landscape paintings", reflect her journeys around the world, from pursuing a seven-month nomadic "yurt-to-yurt" horse trek in Mongolia and trekking in the Himalaya to working as a wilderness canoe guide in Northwestern Ontario. Having grown up in Gatineau, Quebec, Cosgrove came to Thunder Bay initially to work as a tree-planter. She went on to pursue her Honours Bachelor of Fine Arts at Lakehead University, graduating in 2004, and then completed her MFA at University of Calgary in 2010.

Cosgrove's art challenges romantic, nationalist and patriarchal paradigms that typically govern conceptions of landscape art (particularly in Canada) and Abstract Expressionism.

While historical landscape art conventionally depicts pristine, un-peopled landscapes and contemporary ones that privilege the scenery, Cosgrove recognizes the traces she makes in her journeys. She infuses her paintings with her physical, mental and digital presence, using tracking technologies both in and outside the studio. I sat down with Cosgrove in her downtown Fort William studio and asked her how her journeys have shaped her art, journeys demonstrating that *Nowhere is a place*.



Gambling With Time, 2014.

Andrea Terry: Your journeys around the world, more specifically your experiences as a wilderness canoe guide, have brought you to some of the most remote wilderness areas in Canada. How did these travels affect your art practice?

Julie Cosgrove: I have come to appreciate landscape through its waterways. My paintings find their relationship to landscape when I transfer my experience of canoeing to negotiating the fluidity of paint. The paintings then develop into large-scale abstract compositions that examine my connections to the land and the world.

I got started as a wilderness canoe guide by doing it voluntarily for pleasure. My partner and I first bought a canoe from an outfitter and to pay off the cost of the canoe and the gear we received, we worked for the outfitter. Through a chain of events, we eventually ended up working for

another outfitter in Pickle Lake, northwest of Thunder Bay. On a map, Pickle Lake is located at the end of the paved road as you drive north in Ontario and is considered to be “the last frontier” in the province.

Guiding people through these remote areas and terrains is a pretty hefty responsibility – taking total strangers out into the middle of nowhere – and in some cases, we were not on any flight path. In order to become canoe guides, we went through training in the wilderness – first aid, and various canoe and white water canoeing certifications, which is paramount. If someone wrecks their canoe, and we’re in the middle of nowhere, we have satellite phones, but those sometimes do not work because of random factors, like weather, for example. If someone is seriously injured, we might need to call for a floatplane or helicopter pick-up, and we need to be somewhere that is accessible. It’s really an issue of safety. That’s why people hire guides – to



Level Ground, 2014.

look after that – and avoid awkward and difficult situations.

AT: One might suggest that your guide work reinforces a “wilderness ethos” – the belief that people can experience physical, mental, emotional and spiritual rejuvenation by escaping into the wild. How would you respond to this?

JC: Peoples’ travels depend upon their individual experience of place, and that’s part of the responsibility of the guide – deciding. It requires bearing in mind the big picture – making minor and major decisions, such as where and when to camp for the night. You have to judge whether the group is overtired or whether they might just need a sweet snack to get through the next part of the journey – I don’t think people realize what goes into being a guide – making those judgement calls.

Guiding functions as a constant progress of events. It’s similar to how I approach my painting practice. It’s a constant conversation, a constant progression of events. I internalize place and those experiences of place, and it comes out in this abstracted mode of expression. The changing nature of light, colour line, as well as that of space in my paintings corresponds to shifts in perceptions of land – environmentally, socially and culturally. The strata viewed beneath the surface parallels my painting process. I add layers and washes of paint as well as remove segments of previous layers. This additive and subtractive quality is reflected in nature with the constantly changing surface of the land over time.

AT: Your use of abstraction includes gesture, mark-making and traces – all elements of yourself – imprinted onto the canvas. What kinds of marks do you include and why?

JC: I incorporate the data of coordinates from expedition and navigational equipment, such as the GPS or SPOT tracker into my artworks, merging the paradigm of my experience of nature within my painting process. Digital drawings generated by travels, GPS routes, or the coordinates produced by intervals created by the

SPOT signal or other technologies, intrigue me. Their linear qualities produce new kinds of visual maps, maps that reveal the remnants of traces I leave on the landscape while simultaneously acknowledging that the landscape leaves a trace on us. It's a dialogue, an interaction, an exchange. This exchange mirrors my artistic practice.

When I begin a work, I can't predict what's going to appear because, when I move through my studio space, a dialogue occurs – an exchange between my state, my studio space, my movements and my tracks left on the canvas. I leave a trace on the canvas surface, which, in turn, leaves a trace on me. The trace we leave is inevitable, and that's integral – not just to our perception of place but also to how we access and understand it. Travelling has had a profound impact on my work, travelling throughout the world, and my aesthetic sensibilities. I have images, photographs, of my nights spent in Calcutta, a large urban centre, replete with masses of colour and smell that are part of my memory of that place. And then I have memories of this pristine waterfall in northern Ontario and those different sounds, sights, and smells. Both are super intense. You can't appreciate one without the other, and it's the other way around also. In my studio, I operate in between. I can't separate those two experiential landscapes.

AT: You incorporate gesture and action into your art practice –recording of different modes of tracking – thereby physically inscribing yourself onto your canvases. Abstract Expressionists – artist working in New York in the 1940s and 50s – popularized that practice. Take Jackson Pollock – art historians point out that his “ordinary gestures” – his physical interactions captured and represented on the canvas – speak to a decisively patriarchal trope. Concepts of space, the scale of the paintings, action, and traces all seem to collectively operate in the production and reception of mid-20th century art as signs or signifiers of sexual difference, making it difficult for women to engage with the Abstract Expressionist style.

JC: Exactly, and so it's a very difficult terrain to navigate. In a sense, I'm dealing with these two very different movements – landscape art and Abstract Expressionism. I don't want to just paint the landscape even though I could. It's what happens in that other realm that is more interesting to me.

My practice acts as a translation, a filtration of my journey, an internalization of travel – of action. My works speak to a continuous journey, rather than a particular place. They represent – for me – a never ending cyclical process where there is no time, no specific place, works bound up in multiple perceptions and travels through space. Given my direct experiences in the wild – intense outdoor time – I recognize that the environment is constantly changing. There's never going to be any constant concrete factual recording of place.

Initially, I approached landscape as an entity through which we navigate. But then I started thinking about how the landscape navigates around us. The landscape is in motion, and I'm in motion and so there's constant movement between. I like this idea of depicting motion, movement and change – all in one image. That's why I use abstraction – it's my first language. It's the way I can take all of those ideas and translate them. Otherwise, it's too specific. So, in terms of the connections between navigation and movement, abstraction is the perfect fit.

In preparation for her first Thunder Bay Art Gallery solo exhibition, Cosgrove expands on her conceptions of journey, developing new technologies in conjunction with Riaz Mehmood to analyze how different people travel through the terrain of the art gallery. These innovative investigative techniques, she anticipates, will reveal different factors that motivate peoples' movement – what draws people in particular directions, be it visually, physically, emotionally or mentally. The gallery – in this sense – operates as an interior experiential landscape, one rife with possibilities.



ARTIST STATEMENT

Julie Cosgrove

Lived experience and reasoned understanding have always played an integral role in my development as a person and as an artist. The importance of landscapes, and the specific landscape I inhabit, has increasingly shaped my research and art practice. It has become the central inspiration in my painting, extending into a broader concern for changing understandings of place in the age of intensifying technological inventions and dwindling natural spaces.

As a canoe guide for more than a decade, I have had the opportunity to travel to some of the most remote wilderness areas of Northern Ontario, forming a very personal appreciation of the “land” and feeling a deep connection to the natural world. This has not only greatly informed my work as a landscape painter, it has also inspired an examination of the Canadian wilderness and the changes, often human-induced, of the physical geography and the shifting notion of wilderness within our collective identity. Traditional modes

of travel, such as the canoe, combined with the multitude of technologies and comforts that we seem to require, has created a dichotomy that I consider in my practice as well.

I have approached landscape in my painting through varying perspectives, manifested in the process of layering. The paintings have developed into abstract compositions that examine my connections to the world. Recently I have been combining technological navigational tools in my practice, and am currently integrating mapping as another layer both physically and metaphorically. ‘Journeying’ has become a focus of my current work, treating painting itself as a journey by recording and transferring the path made while creating a painting. The work created for this exhibition, *Nowhere is a place*, has evolved from this concept of tracking, and the traces that we inevitably leave behind.

BIOGRAPHIES

Julie Cosgrove is a visual artist whose work is informed by her experiences as a professional wilderness canoe guide, as well as extensive travels throughout the Canadian North, Europe and Asia. Her work visits themes of navigation, concepts of place, wilderness, geographies and cartographies, technologies, and processes. Originally from Québec, Julie began her art training at Dawson College in Montréal. She moved to Thunder Bay and completed the HBFA at Lakehead University in 2004, followed by an MFA at the University of Calgary in 2010. She has been the recipient of numerous awards, grants, and scholarships. Julie has exhibited her work across Canada and most recently, in Athens, Greece and is currently an instructor at Lakehead University.

Nadia Kurd is a curator and art historian with a PhD in art history from McGill University (2014). Her dissertation examined the making and meaning of mosque architecture in North America. She has written for a number of artist catalogs and publications such as FUSE Magazine, the International Journal of Islamic Architecture, Journal of Canadian Art History and Proteus: A Journal of Ideas. In addition to working at arts organizations such as the South Asian Visual Arts Centre, Ontario Association of Art Galleries and the Prison Arts Foundation, Nadia is currently the Curator of the Thunder Bay Art Gallery, where her focus is on community engagement and emerging artists in Northwestern Ontario. In recognition of her work, she was awarded the Northwestern Ontario Visionary Award in 2014.

Andrea Terry is an art historian specializing in Canadian material and visual culture, with a particular interest in critical museum studies. Teaching and working with students of all ages is her foremost passion, and she has taught art history classes at universities across Canada, including Queen's University in Kingston, ON, Carleton University in Ottawa, ON, Mount Allison University in Sackville, NB, and most recently Lakehead University. She received her PhD in art history from Queen's University (2010) and earned a Social Sciences and Humanities Postdoctoral Research Fellowship, which she completed at the School of Canadian Studies in Carleton University (2010-2). She is currently working on completing her first book manuscript, entitled *Family Ties: "Living History" in Canadian House Museums*.

LIST OF WORKS

1. **Mapping People**, Installation /Projection, digital file, 2014
In collaboration with Riaz Mehmood.
2. **Fair Warning**, acrylic on canvas, 2014,
208.3 x 127 cm.
3. **Unannounced Arrival, Remembering to Remember**, acrylic on canvas,
2014, 208.3 x 127 cm.
4. **Level Ground**, acrylic on canvas, 2014, 208.3 x 127 cm.
5. **Draw Near**, acrylic on canvas, 2013,
150 x 200 cm.
6. **Hidden Reflections**, acrylic on canvas, 2014,
150 x 200 cm.
7. **One Sided Story**, acrylic on canvas, 2014,
150 x 200 cm.
8. **Gambling with Time**, acrylic on canvas, 2014,
150 x 200 cm.
9. **Intended Gesture I**, acrylic on canvas, 2014,
106 x 137.5 cm.
10. **Intended Gesture II**, acrylic on canvas, 2014,
106 x 137.5 cm.
11. **Intended Gesture III**, acrylic on canvas, 2014,
106 x 137.5 cm.
12. **Here Yesterday, There Tomorrow**, acrylic on canvas, 2014,
152.4 x 243.8 cm.
13. **The Spaces Between**, ink on paper,
2013, 111.8 x 76.2 cm.
14. **Meeting Without Touching**, ink on paper,
2013, 111.8 x 76.2 cm.
15. **One Line, Many Times**, ink on paper,
2013, 111.8 x 76.2 cm.



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