

Taking shape

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Sibylle Feucht's exhibition *Tales from a River* follows an intensive two-month residency in the Saguenay region in the fall of 2024, in collaboration with the AMV artists' collective (Julien Boily, Cindy Dumais and Mathieu Valade). Sensitive to the territory she surveys and inventories, as well as to the political and social issues it raises, Sibylle Feucht presents us with a reflection on the devastating colonization of the Americas and the ensuing exploitation of nature. Here, the Saguenay River takes shape in the gallery to bear witness to these devastating events. Through a profound voice, invested with dramatic power, the river recalls its origins, its filiations with the whispering sky, the changing forest, and its tributaries - sea and river. From this narrative flow his meditations on the beings it has sheltered, watered and nourished for centuries. Everything seems to follow its own course, until the arrival of a people from afar, whose echoes she knows, upsets the balance of her shores.

On three walls of the gallery, the artist displays his eponymous video work. Immersive in scope, the projections take the audience on an imperceptible journey to the mouth of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Gradually, this contemplative experience of the grandiose maritime panorama is reversed. The evocation of atrocities committed by Europeans against First Peoples since the Conquest makes the journey oppressive. Like the river, we become powerless spectators of this all-too-frequently invisible devastation. The cloudy, pallid sky seems to press us against the fjord's broad, autumn-reddened rock faces. Drawn to the narrow river corridor between the mountains, our eye tries to find its way to a possible escape route. Slowly, the narrative dries up, the voice fades, the silence of the water returns.

Facing the Saguenay River, a succession of monuments sketching the bodies of explorers and politicians once erected but now dismantled. The video work *Glory a (re)construction* presents an inventory of these statues debunked in recent years, mainly on the American continent, from the conquistador Sebastián de Belalcázar, in Colombia, to the memorial to the founders of the Saguenay-Lac-St-Jean region adorned with a *Fuck and Gloire aux colons* banner. Sibylle Feucht retraces the protests and decolonization of public spaces that followed the death of George Floyd and the emergence of the *Black Lives Matter* movement in the United States. Conceived in the form of a split screen and endowed with a documentary character, the work shows the life and death of these monuments, on the one hand, their erection, and on the other, their destruction or alteration since 2020. Gradually, the body of the oppressor disappears?

In addition to the decolonial theme linking Sibylle Feucht's two works, the exhibition raises the question of the body: physical, social, political and even symbolic. Indeed, *Tales from a River* echoes the work of ecofeminist philosopher Astrida Neimanis, who questions the future of our bodies, *our bodies as bodies of water*¹. Neimanis presents water as the

original, constitutive substance of all living beings. An element endowed with fluidity as well as ubiquity, its movements influence, traverse and unite us. For Feucht, this is reflected in the opening statement of the river narrative: I am I and I am many others. The river is thus the sum of its tributaries, but also a part of the beings that inhabit its ecosystem. It is as much the breath of smelts, the tears and blood of humans as the rain and dew that trickle down to it. Harmful and violent actions perpetrated against one of its offshoots affect it by osmosis, just as they affect all the entities that make it up. Astrida Neimanis asks the troubling question: *don't we drink our ghosts water?*²

This circularity is also found in the water cycle, where, as the famous quote by chemist Antoine Lavoisier reminds us, *nothing is lost, nothing is created: everything is transformed*. In *Glory a (re)construction*, we can ask ourselves: have the bodies of the conquerors really disappeared, or have they simply been transformed? To answer this, we can refer to another statement from the story of the imagined river Sibylle Feucht: *We have always been connected, we have melted into each other without borders*. So, to a certain extent, aren't we all embodying oppression and violence. And, ultimately, don't we all bear its traces and repercussions?

¹ Neimanis, A. (2021) *Hydroféminisme. Devenir un corps d'eau*. HAL. Science ouverte. Saisi de <https://hal.science/hal-03527733/document>

² Idem