

# Land, Language and Mountain Biking

on Greg A. Hill's

*kahyónha\_kárha\_atenoseràke\_karònyake*

(streamforestlawnsky)



Greg A. Hill, composite image (lawn, forest, GPS tracks), 2025. Courtesy of the artist.

By Amish Morrell  
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**D**uring one of our first studio visits, the artist Greg A. Hill, a member of Six Nations of the Grand River, told me a story from when he was a young mountain bike racer, and was training in Vermont, a place that was among the territory used by his ancestors. He described feeling an incredible sense of power, able to climb steep mountains with tremendous ease, and that the landscape felt deeply familiar. Preparing for a race, he far outpaced his teammates, who were astonished by his strength and speed. And then, while racing, he hit a large berm at speed and flew into the air, landing on his shoulder and breaking his collarbone. For him, this anecdote was about the power of this deeply familiar place, about how the land moves through us, and some of the ways it can act upon us. But the story was also about a young

mountain bike racer learning different ways of being aware of and respecting the power of the land.

Hill now lives on the edge of Gatineau Park in Quebec, in a wooded lot with a yard, surrounded by cedars and tall pines, where a stream flows from the hillside across the road, and joins another in a small wetland behind his house. He has lived in the Ottawa/Gatineau region — unceded Algonquin Anishnaabe territory— for more than thirty years, and in this spot in Chelsea, since 2008. The commonly used names for this place reflect colonial histories and resource extraction - timber, farming, and mining - obscuring Indigenous relations to the land. Chelsea is named after a place in England, where many early 19<sup>th</sup> century settlers arrived from, and the road he lives on, Chemin de la Mine, is named after the mica

mines that existed throughout the Gatineau Hills during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Here, like elsewhere across so-called Canada, relations to land are shaped by colonial systems of property ownership and resource extraction, as well as by language.

While he no longer competes in mountain bike races, over the past three decades he has traveled the Gatineau Hills by bicycle, foot, ski and snowshoes. He has commuted to work in Ottawa through the trails in Gatineau Park on his mountain bike, exploring the park throughout the seasons and at different times of the day and night. He also recorded his movement with a GPS device, learned some Kanyen'kéha (Mohawk language) words relating to places he visited, took photographs, video, and audio recordings, studied the plants and fungi, and made artworks that explore his relationship to this Land.

## The Words Before All Else

Hill's study of Kanyen'kéha provides him with a cultural view that influences his perception of the places he visits, and also offers a way of relating back to them. Words in Kanyen'kéha span the gallery spaces, in large vinyl text that sits in dialogue with the artworks. The artist describes these words as functioning like an incantation, one that acknowledges the land as having power that is to be acknowledged and respected. In his own writing, Hill discusses the Ohèn:ton Karihwatéhkwen (The Thanksgiving Address), a ceremony of gratitude used by Rotinonhsyonni (Iroquoian people). In the Thanksgiving Address, the speaker gives thanks to the natural world, addressing the water, the animals, and other beings and animate forces.<sup>1</sup> Hill's installations are an actualization of the Ohèn:ton Karihwatéhkwen, where he references a knowledge system within which land is expressed as "a series of reciprocal relationships"<sup>2</sup> where it has agency and power.

## *kahyónhatatye*

Kinship and animacy are an intrinsic part of Kanyen'kéha. *kahyónhatatye*, the title of one installation translates to "the stream flows" and evokes the stream as animate and in relation with the artist, and with other beings. This installation presents four artworks he made by travelling the watershed of the small stream that flows out of the Gatineau hills and around his house. The video, *A Walk Up a Stream* traces the stream to its source, capturing birdsong, footsteps, the flow of water

One of the outcomes of this practice is *kahyónha\_kárha\_atenoseráke\_karònyake*, which translates in English to "stream, forest, lawn, sky." This is the title of his exhibition that reflects these decades of observation and learning, presenting works that use movement, language, and abstraction to help us understand ways of embodying and practicing Land-based knowledge. These works also reflect the artist's effort to reclaim his own relationship to Land as an Indigenous person living outside of his traditional territory, and the role of language in shaping our relationship to the Land. By travelling through these places, observing them, learning to relate to them through language and story, and through making artworks about them, he is shaped by these places too.

To converse with the Land, to listen and speak to it, is to acknowledge its power. The words in this exhibition, like those of the Ohèn:ton Karihwatéhkwen, present nature not as an object but perform what Potawatomi scientist and writer Robin Wall Kimmerer calls "a grammar of animacy," expressing kinship, and inviting viewers to experience compassion and responsibility towards the natural world.<sup>3</sup> They reflect a language system and culture that sees nature as our relatives. Each word in Kanyen'kéha expresses kinship with the stream, the lawn, the woods, the winter, and how the artist has developed a relationship to each of these places. Used in this way, language emphasizes relations to land that are not based on ownership and possession, but are grounded in knowledge and responsibility.

and cars on the road that crosses the stream. An installation of water samples, each containing a photograph taken when the sample was collected, with dates and details recorded on the back of each literally brings the stream into the gallery, along with pine needles, microbes, twigs and other material inadvertently captured in each jar.

<sup>1</sup> Greg A. Hill, "It's all about the land: Towards the visual expression of a Rotinonhsyonni relational doing/being with Land." (unpublished paper).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>3</sup> Kimmerer, Robin Wall. "Speaking of Nature: Finding Language That Affirms Our Kinship with the Natural World." *Orion*, March/April 2017. <https://orionmagazine.org/article/speaking-of-nature/>.

Other works in this installation are more abstract: *GPS Sculpture 2* presents a 3D print of this journey. The video installation, *Tree/Stream* superimposes the stream in the wintertime onto a photograph of the forest against the night sky. In this work, the foreground and the horizon overlay one another, challenging the position of the viewer and the distinction between water and Land.

Together, these pieces confront colonial epistemologies that conceive land as object or resource, rather than as a relation that we must care for. Water finds its way into the plants and trees and into the air around Hill's house, becoming clouds and snow that in turn becomes the water that he drinks. The stream is movement and relationship: *kahyónhatatye*, it flows.



Greg A. Hill, *A Walk Up a Stream*, 2024, Production still. Courtesy of the artist.

## ***karhakta***

Translating to “beside the woods,” the word *karhakta* works in a similar fashion. The title of an installation of works made on the artist's lawn, it shows that it's possible to develop a relationship to Land just outside one's door. The collage work, *Lawn Indexing*, includes photographs of plants he found in his yard, many of which can be used for food, medicine or have cultural and spiritual meaning. These photographs depict woodsorel, appearing in the spring, providing much needed vitamin C and having medicinal uses. There are wild strawberries, plants that have culinary, medicinal and ceremonial importance. There is cedar, which can be used for tea; saprophytic ghost pipes which can be used for their anesthetic properties; and a great white pine, a symbol of the Rotinohsyonni (Iroquoian confederacy). Looking closely, there are names of plants in Latin and in Kanyen'kéha, and drawings, showing close observation and language learning as part of this work. Like in other parts of the gallery, this installation also explores abstraction. An inkjet print, *Lawn Abstraction 2*, was made by dragging a scanner across

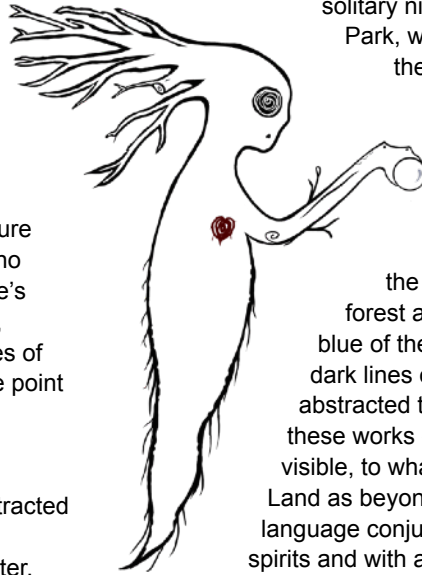
his yard, presenting an intimate, kaleidoscopic realm of plantain, strawberry leaves and blades of grass, that is both detailed and distorted. These are some of the plants that Hill lives among, beside the woods.



Greg A. Hill, *Karhakta series*, 2025, Production documentation. Courtesy of the artist.

## akohsera'kène

During one of our studio visits, Hill told me a story about a Kanyen'kéha word used for the cold. The word "Hato" is a name that personifies the crisp cold that causes trees to crack loudly, as someone moving through the forest, banging the trees with a club, making the sound trees make as the temperature drops or the wind blows. As anyone who travels in the forest at night knows, one's mind becomes more attuned to sound, memory and abstract forms, the shapes of trees and the contours of the land. The point of the story was that it expressed a personification of nature—nature as a relation. *akohsera'kène* translates to "wintertime" and presents digitally abstracted images of the forest and sky at night, creating a language specific to the winter.



The artist made these images with his iPhone on solitary nighttime snowshoe hikes in Gatineau Park, when the air is cold and the outlines of the trees stand out against the snow and sky. In the studio, he digitally distorted these photographs. In *StarNightForestInversion*, a 10' long inkjet print, images of trees silhouetted against a starry sky are repeated and inverted so that the viewer is at once enveloped by the forest and the cosmos. In *Star Blanket 1*, the blue of the sky, the white of the snow and the dark lines of dormant trees in winter are abstracted to resemble a blanket pattern. Together, these works express a relationship to the non-visible, to what lays in shadows and in memory, Land as beyond the present. In wintertime, story and language conjure a sense that one is travelling with spirits and with ancestors.

Illustration: Ginnifer Menominee. Courtesy of the artist.

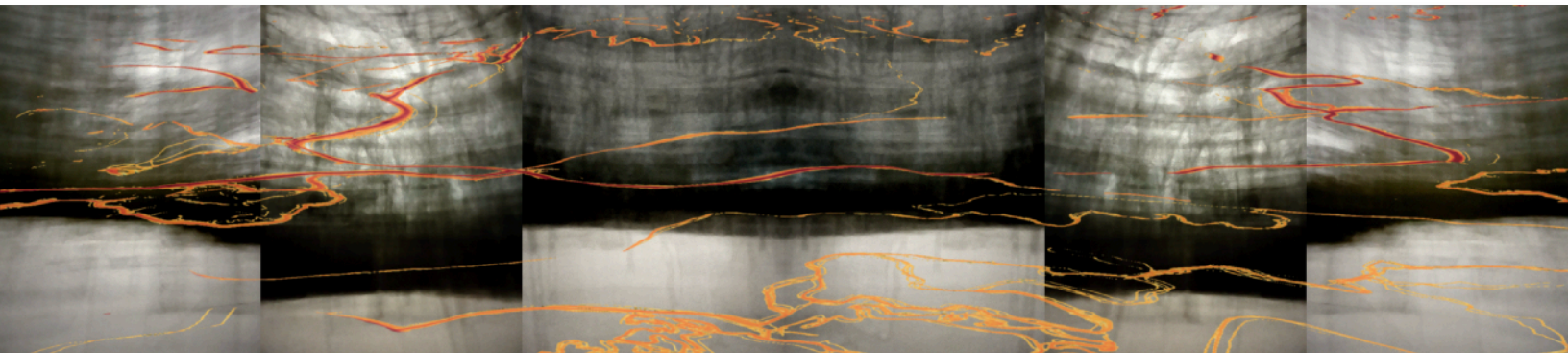
## The land within us

This exhibition also reveals how Land is not just out in the forest, along streams, and out of doors, but is also entwined with the domestic, with what happens inside our homes, in our gardens, on our lawns, in our bodies. For the piece, *Fungi/Compost Composition 3*, the artist made photographs of his food leftovers and spoils destined for his compost, capturing an array of moldy raspberries, cucumber and orange peels, coffee grounds and other leftovers, sometimes already blooming with mold.

This collage challenges the artificial distinction between the wild and the domestic, combining images of his compost with mushrooms he photographed along his bike rides and hikes: white angel's wings, clusters of puffballs on a rotted log, waxy caps, a deadly Amanita, sometimes a reishi mushroom or edible chanterelles, all slowly turning wood and other organic matter into nutrients for plants and other species. Land itself is also decay and transformation, a dead animal becoming nutrients for plants and trees, our compost becoming soil that can be added to the garden.



Greg A. Hill, compost images, 2022-ongoing, Production documentation.  
Courtesy of the artist.



Greg A. Hill, *Forest Movements*, 2025, Courtesy of the artist.

## Remapping Places

For Greg A. Hill, physical activities like walking and mountain biking are part of a practice of reconciliation. They constitute an almost daily practice; thousands of kilometres of observing and moving in relation to the Land: trees, and rocks and plants, learning the names of his non-human relations and their stories, tracing its contours against the night sky. It is a way he experiences the power of the places he inhabits, while subverting colonial systems of meaning.

His use of technologies of mapping also emphasizes the role of movement and repetition in developing relations with Land. For *GPS Sculpture 1* and *GPS Sculpture 1 (2)*, the two works that bookend this show, Greg A. Hill captured GPS data from many years of activities moving over the land and on the trails in Gatineau Park. Recorded using Strava, a fitness tracking app widely used by athletes, he 3D printed the GPS data, recreating the paths and contours of his movements. Looking closely, it's possible to discern climbs and descents, junctions and turns; where he left his house and crossed the road to the start of a trail; the walks he took up the stream by his house with a video camera to record his journey, collect water samples and take photographs.

Placed in the entrance to the show, Hill's personal heat map from Strava, shows a video flyover of his cumulative movement archived on the Strava website. The lines are most densely rendered in the hills around his house and on his commute to work, and from there expand outwards, resulting in a drawing that is now tens of thousands of kilometres long, made by an artist on bicycle, by foot, and on skis and snowshoes. While GPS mapping technologies like Strava have a built-in colonial logic, of measurement, performance and competition, the artist uses this data to track and highlight his movement in a specific place, putting it in conversation with observations, photographs and Kanyen'kéha words. Rendered as sculpture, it subverts

and decolonizes this technology, using it to reflect on how movement and repetition deepen our relations to the places we inhabit.

In the spring, after the snow had melted and the first plants were starting to appear, I visited Greg in Chelsea, and he took me on a mountain bike ride to see some of the places that inspired the works in this show. At the top of one climb in Gatineau Park, he pointed to the ground where I could see hundreds of glittering panes of reflective, amber-tinted mica. Mined there in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it gives the road he lives beside its name. This large vein of mica fragments on the surface of the trail also appears to be alive, mediating between earth and sky. These reflective qualities are mirrored in the metallic surface of his photographic prints, where earth and sky are entwined in its shimmering layers.

Mountain biking, along with other outdoor activities, can help us to think more deeply and critically about our relationship to the Land. It has been an important part of Greg A. Hill's process in developing *kahyónha\_kárha\_atenoseràke\_karònyake*, combining movement, observation, and language-learning to explore his relationship to Land. Over and over, the works in this show assert the ways that we become part of the places we move through, how the land has power, and how we might be changed by them. *kahyónha\_kárha\_atenoseràke\_karònyake* gives us an intimate perspective of the water, the plants, the fungi, the trees, the wintertime, the moon and so much more, and above all, it invites us to express gratitude to all our relations.

### References

Hill, Greg A. "It's all about the Land: Towards the visual expression of a Rotinonhsyonni relational doing/being with Land." (unpublished paper, 2025).

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. "Speaking of Nature: Finding Language That Affirms Our Kinship with the Natural World." *Orion*, March/April 2017. <https://orionmagazine.org/article/speaking-of-nature/>.