

Viewers interacting with the *Stillwater* exhibition. Photo: Jon Stuart



Stillwater stuns viewers with vivid questioning of the land through immersive photography

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Who threw the warning sign in the stream? Why is there oil in the water? The plants have only just started growing—how will this look five years from now? These are only a few of the questions raised by photographer Jon Stuart in his new exhibition *Stillwater*.



Viewers interacting with the *Stillwater* exhibition. Photo: Jon Stuart

Stillwater is a wetlands restoration project with several government and NGO partners that seeks to highlight the peculiar features of the Ottawa Greenbelt.

The exhibition features large-scale photographs printed on vinyl that engulf viewers in the scenery and draw them into Stuart's frame of thinking about the environment. The photographs are stretched horizontally and as you walk past them, it feels as though you are walking through the wetlands.

Restlessness brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic propelled Stuart, a former accident investigator, into the trails of Ottawa, stumbling on one he had commuted past for five years.

“What I wanted to do with the Shenkman [Arts Centre] this month is bring the wetland into the gallery and give people the experience of being out on a walk,” Stuart said in a talkback event held on Oct. 17.

The images provide a great level of detail, such as the fluid-like grass and fallen tree trunks that end up becoming homes to amphibian wildlife.

Stillwater spans several years, observing the wetlands’ purpose throughout the seasons.

“This was a three-year project. For me, it wasn’t about capturing the seasons, but more looking to see how things changed as the seasons went,” Stuart said.

The experience highlights how the human footprint affects the makeup of these environments, and what the effects are. Throughout the gallery space, Stuart addresses the human relationship with the land and the imprints we leave behind—from mowing down the grass to a lone elm tree growing in the middle of the wetlands, an unusual sight that piqued his interest.

“[The purpose was] to show the mysteries that I found in the place, that I think led to the greater engagement...to the wetlands... It’s also [about]...providing the description of what was carried out in this project and why it’s important.”

The exhibition also offers a unique scientific perspective, discussing the importance of wetlands to both Ottawa’s infrastructure and the endangered species that find a home within the environment.

Rideau Valley Conservation Authority (RVCA) aquatic biologist Jennifer Lamoureux guided Stuart through the area and helped him learn more about the human presence on the land and the damages it may cause, whether through large pipe drainages or a farming border.

“She brings to life all the things you probably can’t see very well; the changes of hydrology, the changes to the species...” Stuart said.

He discusses a long, man-made ditch, where again, a cherry tree blooms each year—an unlikely pairing. The tree is enlarged toward the back of the exhibition to allow its viewers to see every detail of the bloom.

Ironically, with the help of the RVCA, expeditions into these areas helped rejuvenate the land and allowed it to function the way it was meant to. Wetlands act as flood storage and are vital to draining the Ottawa River during the height of flood seasons.



"Moodie and Stillwater," by Jon Stuart. Photo: Sadeen Mohsen.

"My initial driving force was understanding the mystery, what the changes were and what they meant," Stuart said. After talking with Lamoureux, Stuart was fascinated and sought to address the changes it had undergone by capturing its oddities.

The exhibition prompts its viewers to explore their relationship and impact on the land around them. I found the exhibition engulfed me, wrapping me into the scene. It truly felt like I was in the middle of a trail walk, stopping every so often to look at the view before me.

Stuart and Lamoureux encourage people to venture out to these trails to take it in for themselves and think about the work that went into preserving this land.

Despite his exploration of wetlands, Stuart still has the same questions, if not more. What are those massive earthworks? Why is a mature elm tree growing in a wetland? Why is this area flooding so early into the season? As you walk these trails, you'll find your own questions to ask.

Stillwater is on display at the Shenkman Arts Centre, 245 Centrum Blvd in Orléans until Oct. 31st. The centre is open Mondays to Fridays 8:30am to 10pm and Sundays and Saturdays from 8:30am to 8pm.

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