



Precambria

Cole Swanson

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For many cottagers, Ontario Highway 28 and its network of adjacent roadways simply connect the cities of Peterborough and Bancroft. It may surprise the average driver to know that the rocky outcrops lining their ditches are some of the oldest earth deposits on the planet. Over a billion years in the making, this section of the Canadian Shield is a Precambrian geological formation pushed to the surface over eons by volcanic, tectonic, and glacial movements. Incurring on the traditional territory of the Michi Saagiig and Chippewa Nations, collectively known as the Williams Treaties First Nations, these roads cut through the planet's most ancient crust. Incredibly rich in minerals, the region is pock-marked with mining operations that bore for rare deposits of sodalite, zircon, and uranium, among others. Many times, throughout the year, I drive along this stretch of highway to visit my family. The rocks beckon me, their faces split open and exposed to traffic; they entice my careful attention.

I am partnering with the Art Gallery of Peterborough to explore the geological fabric of Peterborough County, to better understand the legacies of deep time and the region's emergent ecologies that flourish and perish amidst a condition of perpetual extraction.

Methods and Outputs:

Over the past twenty years, I have studied the material, ecological, and aesthetic dimensions of minerals. These exploits include rare methods of pigment-making, illuminated miniatures, fresco, and eco-artworks. Drawing from this practice, I will centre my project on a single roadside rockface. By collecting minerals lost to the outcrop during its blasting, I will produce a palette of earth colours for a large-scale, earth mural. Combining mineral-rich pigments with sustainable binders and experimenting with organic pigments from nearby plants and fungi, I will make paints that aid biological growth in the same way that ancient mineral systems do. The resulting mural will safely command our attention toward the scars upon the stone while assisting multiple species – lichens, microbes, fungi, plants, and others – to flourish. Exposed to the elements, the artwork will eventually be returned to the earth to enrich the soils below. A video installation of the artwork will be presented in my solo exhibition at the Art Gallery of Peterborough in January 2026.

Public Engagement:

The techniques I use for foraging, rendering, and applying natural pigments are ancient and rarely practiced in contemporary contexts. Foraging is often imagined as a simple pastime or an anti-capitalist exercise. But foraging must be approached with sensitivity and understanding to the delicate needs of ecosystems. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, public interest in foraging techniques has grown significantly; yet ethical and safe approaches to foraging are still relatively unknown to the hobbyist. The Art Gallery of Peterborough will organize foraging and pigment-making workshops during the exhibition and will provide me with an in-gallery residency to bring my fieldwork and process into direct view of the public.

The focus on specific rural histories and communities will attract a wider audience to the project beyond the urban gallery-goer. This project will draw from my family networks and lived experience to engage with a rural public who have a vested interest in the environmental health of the land and its inhabitants.

Indigenous Consultation:

Given its land-based orientation, I am working with the Art Gallery of Peterborough and William Kingfisher (*Chippewas of Rama First Nation, Rama*) – a local knowledge keeper, artist, and educator on Indigenous petroglyphs/rock drawings – for consultation and engagement. As a settler committed to decolonization, I am keen to learn from and respond to guidance provided by Indigenous community members. Broadly speaking, I regard the principles of the Honorable Harvest (Kimmerer 2015) as a guideline for ethical foraging, and while not seeking to appropriate this knowledge, have been affirmed in my readings and relations with Indigenous scholars of their universal appeal toward more generative futures for the land.

On Materials:

It is imperative that any land artwork is measured against its potential ecological impacts, particularly with respect to the materials used. For this reason, I create earth-based pigments and binders that have demonstrated positive environmental effects. The paints will consist mainly of iron oxides found commonly throughout the Precambrian shield. Iron oxides (commonly called ‘ochres’) include a range of colours as the iron interacts with other minerals.

The binders that make pigments into paint will consist of non-toxic, organic materials. Gum Arabic – a type of tree sap – will be combined with honey and clove oil, which provide gentle adhesion to rock surfaces while nourishing local microflora.

These paints are temporary in nature and are responsive to weather events. As such, they may last anywhere from days to months. For more information on my practice with earth murals and foraged mineral pigments, see the accompanying essay.

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References:

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2015.