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2010

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Thompson, Kelly, "Traversing Locality/Navigating Borders" (2010). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 52.

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TRAVERSING LOCALITY - NAVIGATING BORDERS

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In this era of debates around globalization and the local reality, I question what it is to be located? What are the markers of comfort or communication that travel with us, or that we seek locally?

I speak from a personal position of mobility: in the last 6 years I have moved from New Zealand, to London England, and two years ago to Montreal, Québec changing jobs from Goldsmiths to Concordia University and relocating my home along the way.

This is not that unusual for younger academics or artists, but I am on the edge of the mobile demographic. While immensely stimulating and challenging, I am now interested in being settled, exploring ways in which experience intermingles in the poetics of visual translation of 'real world' imagery into textile-based responses.



Figure 1. Kelly Thompson *Peninsula Strips* 2005 35 cm high x various lengths Digital collage of images, translated into structures using Pointcarré software, then hand woven on jacquard loom, in cotton, linen, synthetic.

Peninsula Strips (Fig. 1) is a work based on my everyday environment living in Dunedin, New Zealand. It collages and intersects the realities of living by the sea, being a weaver, a gardener and interested in questions of genetic manipulation of plants and politics of control. These were woven on the hand-jacquard loom at the Montreal Centre for Contemporary Textiles, a place I have visited regularly since my first workshop with Louise Lemieux Berubé in 2000. The need to travel along the length to take in different perspectives, close and distant views is an important element in this work

Mobility of artists is one of the hallmarks of recent practices – the increase in the number and location of artist residencies, artist-run-spaces, festivals, art biennales, growth in public galleries and museums all attest that the Creative Industries, in the broadest sense are dynamic contributors to the economy.

In 2004 I had the good fortune to be supported by the New Zealand Arts Council for a residency at the Sanskriti Foundation in New Delhi, an experience that influenced a number of works, including this translation of the light qualities of the amazing carved marble screens. I became interested in the representation of one type of surface (stone, marble), and ancient crafts produced by hand, translated into soft fabric, mediated by computer-assisted technologies. (Fig. 2)



Figure 2. Kelly Thompson *Broken Paradise* 2007, right, detail, 133 x 104 cm Cotton, linen, synthetic

Organizations which are set up to support the movement of people and culture are numerous, with online presences. Res Artis is one example – it began in 1993 “.... to represent and support the needs of residential arts centers and programs internationally through dynamic exchange of information and face-to-face meetings. Within a decade it has grown to provide a critical forum for residency programs, convening meetings and conferences internationally where the exchange of ideas and creative models test cultural assumptions and broaden the world-view of its participants”. (<http://www.resartis.org/> accessed 4 Oct 2010)

Mobility:

Independent travel is frequently my source material, another way to be an explorer...

While many of us enjoy the freedom of crossing International borders, the concept of Borders is an increasingly theorized zone. There is growth in border studies from diverse disciplines – geographers, political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, historians, literary scholars, legal experts, and those

involved in border demarcation and management.¹ Also there are many artists and activists who draw attention to the politics of borders, the flow or restriction of people and trade goods. The politics of these debates are important, however, my own practice tends to look at borders from a more prosaic, personal stance, not overtly political.

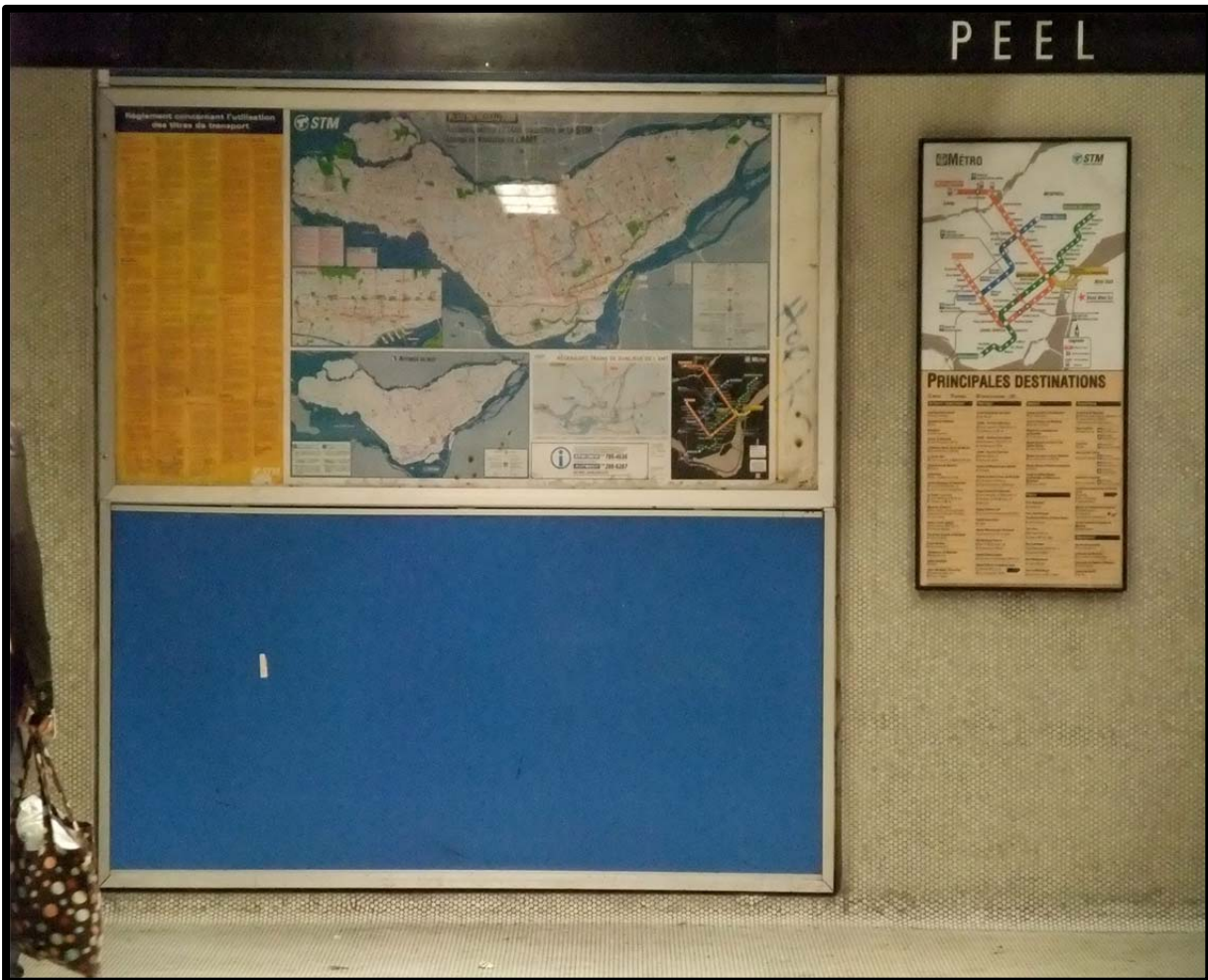


Figure 3. Montreal Metro – Peel Station

Arrival: (Fig. 3)

My first instinct is to find a map. In this case the Montreal public transport system of the underground Metro and bus routes. I feel a great sense of freedom when I have a map in a new place – I can go anywhere and feel safe as I can find my way back. Seeing this map every day started me thinking about geography in a different way – not only did I arrive in a Canadian winter, I kept seeing this representation of an island, which differed so much from my sense of “island-ness” of New Zealand and the Pacific, and the experience of living in England, another island, part of the European Union, but also not. The Island of Montreal is an island on a river, a large river on a continent, as opposed to an island nation in an ocean. (New Zealand or England).

¹ Newman, David. *Borders and Bordering: Towards an Interdisciplinary Dialogue* In *European Journal of Social Theory* 9(2) 171-186 accessed from Sage Publications on April 27, 2009

Maps are a form of orientation - “People make maps to discover their minds and to connect themselves” (Wood, p19). As graphic artifacts, most maps have been made since the 1400’s, with the vast majority in the last 100 years and escalating in scope in the past few decades. In the first Spring I was here, I drove completely around the edges of the island, finding all the small roads, traversing suburbs and industrial areas, viewing the St Lawrence and the northern Rivière des Prairies, trying to understand this island-ness, and testing this map.

While comforting, maps can also be contentious; naming is contentious, central to empire building and colonial domination. In this age through Google Earth an enormous accumulated effort of humans is brought to our fingertips. We can virtually zoom along a new street on the other side of the world to which a friend has moved to, find a movie theatre at a single click, or most recently travel on ‘street view’ in Antarctica! I’m interested in the spatial representation notion of “tactical cartography” as posited by the Institute for Applied Autonomy, (2008:29-30) which refers to the “creation, distribution and use of spatial data to intervene in systems of control affecting spatial meaning and practice”. The face-paced development and role of *locactive media* such as GIS (Geographic Information System) in future artistic and activist practices will be worth watching out for.

The cartographic historian Denis Wood says. “Defining the map as a representation of part of the earth’s surface *naturalizes* the map. Naturalizing the map has the effect of *universalizing* it, and this helps obscured the map’s origins in the rise of the state. Naturalizing the map helps... *pass over*... the map’s role in the establishment and maintenance of social relations in societies where maps are common.”²

Although no student of philosophy, I am drawn to Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of rhizomatic thinking in thinking about form and space.

“A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb “to be” but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, “and...and...and....”

“Where are you going? Where are you coming from? What are you heading for? These are totally useless questions” according to Deleuze and Guattari. “Making a clean slate, starting or beginning again from ground zero, seeking a beginning or foundations – all imply a false conception of voyage and movement..... a conception that is methodical, pedagogical, initiatory, symbolic...”³

To continue the Deleuze and Guattari poetics “*Between* things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to another and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one *and* the other away, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle”⁴

Mapping, like artwork, is a fiction, an attempt to order or create a private atlas of experiences or places we call home, a site from which the unknown can be explored. Rhizomatic concepts extend the false comfort of maps, as always open, extending, the and, and, and....

If you are interested in mapping, art and politics, the collective volume *An Atlas of Radical Cartography is worth engaging with* (Mogel, L & Bhagat, A, 2008). It delves into new territories of possibilities, scrutinizing contemporary capitalism and the contradictions of information opacity.

² Wood, Denis *Rethinking the Power of Maps* The Guilford Press, NY & London 2010 p.18. 19

³ Deleuze, Giles and Guattari, Felix *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota press, 1987 p.25

⁴ *ibid.*

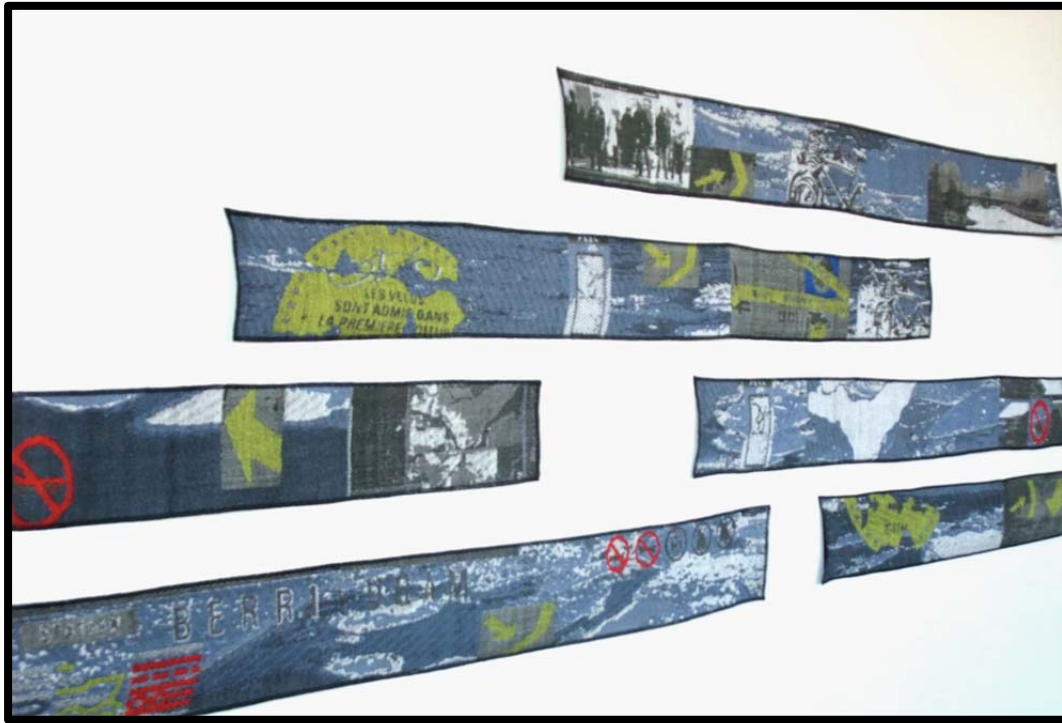


Figure 4. Kelly Thompson Orientation One 2010

Orientation (Fig. 4)

Stephen S Hall has written of the outdoor map reading activity of orienteering, as ““Orientating,” or crashing through the larger landscapes of memory and experience and knowledge, trying to get a fix on where we are in a multitude of landscapes that together compose the grander scheme of things. Orientation begins with geography, but it reflects a need of the conscious, self-aware organism for a kind of transcendent orientation that asks not just where am I, but where do I fit in this landscape? Where have I been?”⁵

Where am I, again?

Orientation One was my first ‘Montreal’ work, one which drew on the form of the earlier Peninsula Strips, but with imagery of a new site. Concerned with observations and translation, climate and differences, edges of water and land, it weaves together collected patterns, signs and symbols of what I noticed as points of difference. Hall continues: “To orientate is to hop back and forth between landscape and time, geography and emotion, knowledge and behavior”.⁶

Not all in the city is pretty or easy to manage. The Metro is both a space and a “non-place” as defined by Mark Augé, in his book *Non Places*⁷. To quote Augé ‘If **place** can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a **space** which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a **non-place**.’ These ‘non-places’ include airports or train terminals, the underground or other places that involve waiting and a giving over of control. While in non-place, the brain switches to

⁵ Hall, Stephen S, in ‘I, Mercator’ in *You are here: Personal Geographies and Other Maps of the Imagination*. Katharine Harmon, Princeton Architectural press, New York, 2004 p. 15

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Augé, Mark *Non Places Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity*, (first published in 1995)

neutral, limbo, waiting mode, unless brought up to reality when noticing with these kinds of things.
(Fig. 5)



Figure 5, left. Guy-Concordia Metro signage

I'm now going to show a few case studies of students who locate their work in Montreal in some way. A teaching space in the sky is a new experience for me.



Figure 6. Barbara Mendoza Metro Interventions 2010

Barbara Mendoza has tackled this non-space through inserting the comforting but unexpected into the overly familiar, quilts into the metro car panels which normally hold advertising. Relational aesthetics in contemporary art is a strong influence in Montreal. (Fig 6)

Johanna Autin is a current MFA student, originally from France. One of her projects involves obtaining donations of fabric and working with a community centre in which the participants learn sewing, through making hammocks. This summer she organized a trial “Siesta day” complete with map for bicycles and pinpointing the park for an afternoon collective napping session. Johanna’s goal is to have 200 hammocks on Mount Royal, the central city park next summer. Please come and join us if you can! (Fig. 7)

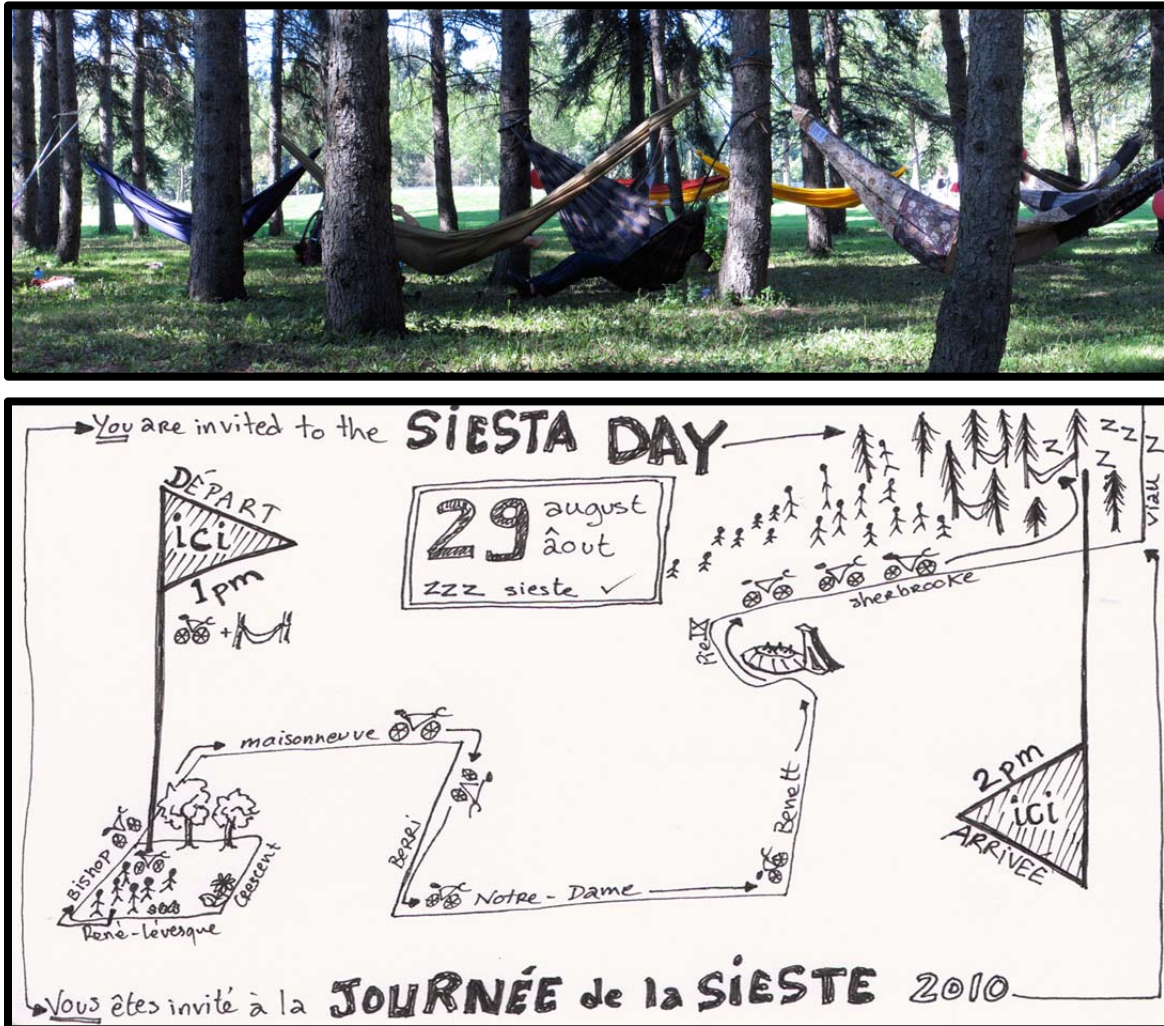


Figure 7. Johanna Autin Siesta Day 2010

Hammocks suggest a space of singular contemplation, sleep or resting, yet also with potential as a social community activity.

A senior undergraduate student, Madeleine Bartlett took to the streets with a different intention, quoting Emile Francois Zola. "The artist is nothing without the gift, but the gift is nothing without work." She says: "I've been wrapping things. It started with wrapping my precious handmade books, but since then I've been wrapping benches, wrapping fire hydrants and wrapping garbage cans. These brown paper packages tied with colorful string bear such strong sentimental value for so many people. A brown paper

package is warmth, it's intrigue, it's anonymous, and it's pleasurable. Art is no longer dependant on its makers touch. An Artist can get a craftsman to do all their work then put their own name on it once they get to the gallery. So much of contemporary art is based on ideas and concept rather than finished objects and skill of one's craft. Who is to say I cannot claim these public outdoor objects as my own! Yes, I did not craft these things myself; I have used them as a vehicle for this performance. I made them into this art experience for you to enjoy. I made them for you to question the authenticity and ability of the artist. I made them into this these items of intrigue and pleasure, and I made them for you.”⁸ (Fig 8)



Madeleine Bartlett 2010

Figure 8. Madeleine Bartlett I MADE THIS FOR YOU

⁸ via personal email

Many students explore the reality of urban life; more specifically how closely we share space with strangers and the lack of direct communication when negotiating such space. Alexis Boyle has produced a series of wearable works she calls ‘emotional prosthetics’. She says “At the very root of my work is the need to engage with people. Using color, form, and texture I create seductive surfaces with fabric in order to attract the attention of people in public spaces much like a flower attracts insects to facilitate pollination.”⁹ (Fig. 9)



Figure 9. Alexis Boyle Emotional Prosthetics 2010

Now back to the island of Montreal and its waterways:

In Jeanette Winterson’s *Art and Lies*, Handel confesses “... I am frightened of the sea. There is the sailor sea and the commercial sea, the oil-well sea and the fishy sea. The sea that tests the land through sub-lunary power. The rise and fall of the harbour sea and the sea that exists to make maps look prettier. But the functional sea is not the final sea. There is that other sea simply itself. A list of all the things the sea does is not what the sea is.... Those that know it well will admit that they hardly know it at all.”¹⁰

I feel much like Handel, except now the sea is replaced by the river - bodies of water which move in unexpected ways, flow and freeze – it is hard to know it. My process has been to collect images and observations of my ‘everyday geography’ to use as creative sources in these works. Images from the Redpath building, canal, parks, rivers are collaged, and translated as a ‘map’ of multiple entry points, linear, yet not sequential in time or space.

The sites I’m now working with have strong historical connections with social, economic and technological changes, shipping and the movement of people, trade and sailing vessels. The St Lawrence

⁹ via personal email

¹⁰ Winterson, Jeanette *Art and Lies*. Published by Vintage 1995, p. 31-32

and Lachine Canal helped shape Quebec and early Canada and are places that continue to experience ongoing cultural re-imaginings, with recreational or environmental changes. This area is also my local, the terrain that has become most familiar.

My new experiments, still in development stage, are exploring the projection potential of a jacquard surface, transience and materiality. Art and life in Montreal is still a pilot project for me, in an ever-changing city, an ever-challenging language and culture. It is a great place to be located. (Fig. 10)

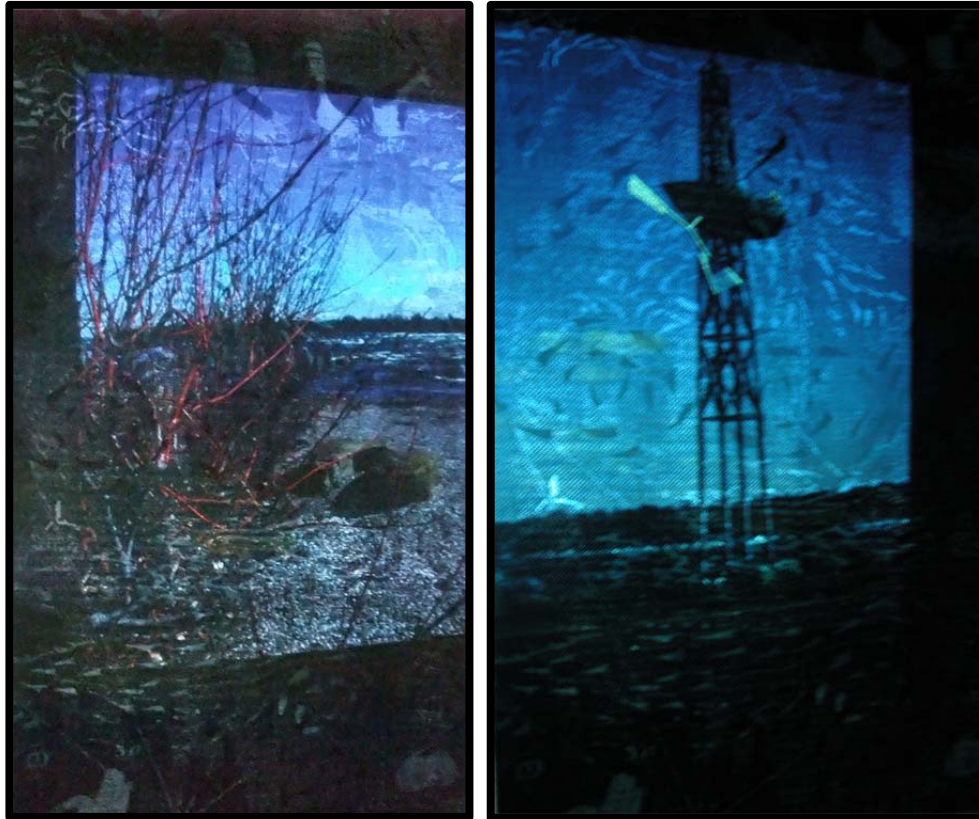


Fig. Kelly Thompson. Same jacquard cloth, different image projections.
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I hope you can visit.

For an archive of past work see www.kellythompson.org

With thanks to Concordia University, SSHRC Faculty Travel award which enabled me to come to Lincoln, Nebraska for the textile Society of America Symposium.