



Peter von Tiesenhausen  
Passages

# Earth, Water, Fire, Community

The strength of community was clearly present in *Passages*. This project by Alberta artist Peter von Tiesenhausen culminated on a June Saturday on the banks of the Bow River in southeast Calgary. There, one hundred people launched one hundred hand-sized boats that the artist carved, charred, printed and painted, and filled with organic matter collected from one hundred spots along the Bow. The project exemplified von Tiesenhausen's dynamic and respectful relationship with nature, which permeates his work. The elements are his materials, his subject matter and his collaborators. His art, like nature, holds the possibility of countless interpretations. People are inseparable from von Tiesenhausen's understanding of the environment and they also collaborate — individually and collectively — as viewers and as participants. Community is an element in von Tiesenhausen's art as intrinsic as earth, air, water and fire.

On that Saturday, the artist explained that “a year's worth of work is going down the river.” Then he carefully instructed participants about how to release their boats into the Bow as a ritual of river contemplation. To create a lasting vestige of this ephemeral process, an edition of three print impressions of each boat was made in advance. One set of prints was kept by the artist and the second was accessioned by The City of Calgary. The third print was given to the individual who launched that particular boat.

Thorough preparation enabled that moment of surrender. The artist planned and worked with key organizers throughout the process, especially in the days leading up to the launch of the boats. But every step was tempered by the artist's trust in the interconnected nature of the world we live in.

Von Tiesenhausen grew up near Demmitt in resource-rich northern Alberta. He lives there still with his wife and sons on his family's original homestead. The 325 hectare property is also home to an ever-evolving installation of his sculptures and site specific artwork. Von Tiesenhausen has copyrighted the land itself as a work of art. The oil and gas industry knows that this designation significantly increases the cost of doing business on his property and stays away. The artist's proactive stance demonstrates his commitment to the land — above and below the surface. His art is a testament to the belief that the earth's resources do not have to be extracted to serve a purpose.

In this remote environment, von Tiesenhausen read a story as a child that had great impact. *Paddle to the Sea* is a tale familiar to many Canadians.<sup>1</sup> It describes an imaginary three-year journey that begins when a boy carves a model of a man in a canoe. Melting snow carries the carving to the river; it continues on to the Great Lakes, eventually reaching the sea. “You will go with the water and you will have adventures that I would like to have,” says the boy to his wooden paddler.<sup>2</sup> Von Tiesenhausen relates, “Growing up here in rural northern Alberta, that story and film were very significant to me. I could feel a connection to the whole world from this place through its waterways — even the spring run off. *Paddle to the Sea* captured the connectedness of things in a myth we can all relate to.”<sup>3</sup>

That story echoes throughout *Passages*. Von Tiesenhausen's wooden boats feature a human figure carved in relief on each top horizontal surface. Rough hewn and with minimal



▲ Von Tiesenhausen carves one of his hundred boats.



▲ A rough figure is carved into each boat's upper surface.



▲ The relief surface is charred with a propane torch.



▲ The figure develops like a photograph under the flame.





▲ Water protects the crevice around the figure from burning.



▲ For a moment, fire infuses the figure with life.



▲ The torch leaves behind charred, accentuated wood grain.



▲ The wood's charred patina will be printed on paper.



▲ Each boat is branded with the artist's handmade iron.



▲ Boats are soaked briefly before they are printed.



▲ A hand-turned press is used to print the charcoal impressions.



detail, the figures recall the ambiguous outlines that populate von Tiesenhausen's oeuvre. But these boat figures are not the stationary observers we see in previous works such as *The Watchers*.<sup>4</sup> Although they recline, they are also made to be on the move; figure and vessel are one, able to navigate waves and currents self-sufficiently. Their shapes remind us of the ship burial traditions of Norse and Anglo-Saxon cultures, and of seed pods about to sprout new life. Von Tiesenhausen enjoys the multiplicity of meanings his forms suggest and the diverse ways they resonate with others. But the artist admits that the figures might also be self-portraits. As an extension of him they enable extra reach. "We get one life as far as we know. These vessels allow me to have more because now I am able to interact with the people who encounter the boats long after I've let go of them."<sup>5</sup> Like the boy in the book, von Tiesenhausen hopes at least one of his boats will reach the sea. He marked each with a handmade brand bearing the URL *pvt-passages.ca* so that those who encounter boats can learn about the project and report their finds.

Philosophically and physically, *Passages* stretches the length of the Bow and beyond. Starting at Bow Glacier — the river's source — and continuing to Ghost Lake just west of Calgary, the artist gathered samples of silt, sediment, rock and soil from the river basin. Friends and adventurers Leanne Allison and Karsten Heuer<sup>6</sup> joined the collecting expedition and the trio travelled in car and canoe to gather one hundred samples — one for each hand-carved boat. They sought interesting colours and formations; they numbered and recorded the GPS location of each selection; they collected memories and experiences along with bits of earth. These fragments of sediment and memory from the upper Bow will travel downstream as far as the boats will carry them.

Each of the project's many facets came together as a cohesive whole over two intensive days at the Calgary home of printmaker Eveline Kolijn. With fellow printmaker Romy Straathof, Kolijn organized a makeshift studio that was a lively and purposeful place. Here, each boat was sequentially impressed with a number punch. Paper was torn to size and similarly numbered. To prepare the boats for printing, von Tiesenhausen added Bow River water to the negative space around the figure. The relief surface was then charred with a propane torch, with the water acting as a resist against burning. For the moment or two it was under the torch, the figure seemed to breathe as the yellow wood glowed red then died to black. The shape 'developed' under the flame like a photograph, exposing a blackened figure surrounded by the oval outline of the boat. Water shimmered against dry char. Through torching, the figure gained visual emphasis, the wood grain was heightened, and the surface acquired a charcoal patina. Symbolically, the figure was purified, like the phoenix reborn through fire.

Using a hand-turned book press, each charred boat was printed three times on dry, numbered sheets. The charcoal left a fragile, ghostly impression. Von Tiesenhausen then prepared the sediment samples for use and was reminded of the diverse history and geology of the upper Bow landscape. Distinctive yellow stones were crushed into a mustard-coloured pigment that made a beautiful paint. A fine black dust was instantly recognizable as coal from the abandoned mining community of Bankhead. The artist 'painted a meditation' on each of the three hundred prints using the correspondingly numbered sediment mixed with gum arabic. His fluid line encircled the boat's oval shape and grounded the floating figure in an earthy halo. The prints were hung to dry, to be signed later. The sediments were then mixed into slurries with wheat paste and loaded into the crevice around the figure in each boat. Numbered paper, boat



▲ Prints are individually number stamped.



▲ Von Tiesenhausen loads his brush with colour from the Bow.



▲ A hundred pigments are made from Bow River basin sediment.



▲ The artist encircles each print with a meditative brushstroke.



▲ Each pigment contains distinctive beauty.





and sediment were systematically processed in an organized hive of creative production. But all this order would soon be surrendered to the public and the beautiful, unpredictable flow of the river. Carried as cargo downstream, the hues of the upper Bow River would be mixed into the swirling palette of an extensive water system.

"The spirit of the thing transcends its worldly form," von Tiesenhausen reflected on the project. "A boat may be caught in an eddy or a weir, but its intention gets through. Silt can be carried through a weir and the spirit of the project is carried with it, even if the wooden boat is stalled."<sup>7</sup>

For von Tiesenhausen, art-making thrives on this same sense of surrender and belief. The original proposal for *Passages* was described in broad strokes with room for each stage to be treated with spontaneity and respect. The project became more profound as the embedded story played itself out through the chosen materials and processes. Von Tiesenhausen loves the fact that so much can evolve independent of his direct control. Chance brings richness to the work which he extends like an offering to viewers. "I now see a hundred different dimensions that I could not have imagined. I have a hundred new colours that I can pull out of my memory and I am conscious of a hundred different places these boats could be."<sup>8</sup>

In keeping, the artist encourages as diverse a reading of the work as possible. The name *Passages*, for example, is a journey, a place, a handing over, and the transition from one stage of life to another — among other interpretations. Its many associations are felt consciously and unconsciously across communities. Von Tiesenhausen acknowledges that his work holds symbolism but instead of explanation he offers possibilities for adventurous viewers to explore.

The river ran high and fast on the day the boats were launched. The lush greens of Fish Creek and Douglasbank Parks obscured the surrounding suburb. The sun was warm and bright. Gulls and pelicans drifted overhead. It was easy to imagine that the scene was set in some remote wilderness and that the tumbling river's ocean destination was within easy reach.

Participants from all walks of life gathered and found connection with each other through the artist, their involvement in the arts, the river or the city. People chose their boats and chatted. Author and curator Mary-Beth Laviolette commented on the long history of art about the Bow and how *Passages* is a contemporary extension of that legacy.<sup>9</sup> For those familiar with art history, von Tiesenhausen's small figures might bring to mind Romantic Picturesque landscape paintings of the 19th century. Art created for the Canadian Pacific Railway for instance, characteristically emphasized nature's grandeur by including a diminutive figure or manmade structure as contrast. *Passages* portrayed a more balanced vision — its small figures belonged in the landscape as integral elements, not mere devices. The work radiated a sense of unity that was felt by everyone who cradled the tiny forms.

"Rituals like this bring spiritual awareness. For these few hours our focus is on the river . . . We celebrate the elements, not just ourselves,"<sup>10</sup> said participant Lynn Chazotsang, a Tibetan Buddhist and advocate for cultural equity and diversity.

In spontaneous procession, after brief introductions and instruction, participants stepped onto a footbridge spanning the river to launch their boats. Shoulder to shoulder, with backs to the upstream railing, they held their boats in cupped hands and quietly contemplated the journey their boats were about to take. June Hills, a participant who makes art about trees, reflected,

◀ Peter von Tiesenhausen surveys the drying prints.



▲ Sediment mixed with wheat paste fills each boat's hold.



▲ Upper Bow River sediments are ready for the downstream journey.



▲ Numbered sediments and boats are systematically ordered.



"As I prepared to drop my little boat into the river, I thought about how important our natural resources are . . . it was a nice complementary meditation to think about the waterways that feed the trees that inspire me."<sup>11</sup>

In family groups, sometimes three or more sets of hands supported a single boat. Even restless children regained their focus as the moment of release drew near. Participants stepped forward on cue and looked down upon the rushing water. When signaled, over one hundred pairs of hands simultaneously parted and allowed boats to find the river. Eddies and currents became evident as some boats were swept quickly downstream while others remained momentarily still. The day's brightness made it difficult to discern reflected sunlight from yellow wood. Many people kept watch until their boats rounded the bend and rode the river out of sight. They were reminded of potential hazards, natural and not, as fishermen drifted by in skiffs and cast lines from shore. Bikers, runners and walkers on the riverside pathway observed the bobbing flotilla with curiosity. Participants, made buoyant by the morning's activities, similarly became caught up in currents of conversation and eventually dispersed. As children playfully tossed sticks in the water, a new recognition of the river's power seemed evident in their carefree game.

Participants collected their prints, compared images and related them to the boats just launched. These works on paper are impressions in more than one sense; made by the application of pressure, they also embody the feeling and memories of this shared event. But there is revelation in them, too. In the print, the figure takes prominence while the boat is visible only as a thin outline. The encircling painted meditation presents the possibility of a portal within which the figure seems to hover. There is a sense of other-worldly transition, of momentary

flux captured in static form. When the print is turned on its side, the figure suggests a shadow within an eye. As in all of von Tiesenhausen's art there is no definitive reading of these prints, nor any pre-determined symbolism. There is simply the certainty of possibility.



▲ A hundred pairs of hands surrender boats to the river.



▲ A hundred wooden boats begin their journey toward the sea.





#### Endnotes:

- 1 American author / illustrator H.C. Holling's 1941 children's book was the inspiration for a 1966 film by the National Film Board of Canada, directed by Bill Mason.
- 2 Holling Clancy Holling, *Paddle to the Sea* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1941) 2.
- 3 Von Tiesenhausen, email correspondence with the author, June 18, 2010.
- 4 *The Watchers* is a series of larger than life carved wooden figures by von Tiesenhausen that he has transported across Canada. In conversation with the author on June 9, he indicated that they bear witness to the landscape and the natural and man-made changes it undergoes. See the artist's website for further information: [www.tiesenhausen.net](http://www.tiesenhausen.net).
- 5 Von Tiesenhausen, conversation with the author, Calgary, June 9, 2010.
- 6 This is the same couple who, with their toddler, Zev, crossed Canada by canoe, sailboat and on foot to visit author Farley Mowat at his home in Cape Breton. The NFB film *Finding Farley* documents their journey through territory Mowat had made famous in his books.
- 7 Von Tiesenhausen conversation, June 9, 2010.
- 8 Von Tiesenhausen, conversation, June 9, 2010.
- 9 Mary-Beth Laviolette, collectors Lauren Raymore and Dell Pohlman, conversation with the author at the *Passages* launch event, Calgary, June 12, 2010.
- 10 Lynn Chazotsang, conversation with the author at the *Passages* launch event, Calgary, June 12, 2010.
- 11 June Hills, email correspondence with the author, June 19, 2010.

◀ Careful hands cradle a boat moments before its release.