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i am the river



CELEBRATION OF THE RIVER 2010
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PATTISON



Derek Besant

I Am the River

Personal Geographies

Twelve photographic portraits are at the heart of *I Am the River*. For this project, Calgary artist Derek Besant recruited local individuals as models and drew support from his frequent corporate partner Pattison Outdoor Advertising.¹ These equally essential contributors served the project's needs while symbolizing its inclusive and accessible nature. *I Am the River*, with its highly personal images and their wide dissemination across the city, coaxed private truths to reflect universal ones. It echoed how the Bow River permeates Calgarians' lives — individually and collectively, physically and metaphorically, consciously and unconsciously. The Bow touches us all.

To create his portraits, Besant sought models from all walks of life who agreed to be photographed in water. They are your librarian, your real estate agent, your brother, your aunt. The photo sessions took place in March and April when it was too cold to shoot on location in the Bow River. Instead, Besant squeezed his photographic equipment into his models' own bathrooms while his subjects immersed themselves in the comfort of their home bathtubs. The artist established a level of trust in these usually private settings, making his models his collaborators. The artist was intent on capturing the mediation between water and air, two realms that sustain human life. After encouraging them to explore different postures and stages of submersion, Besant asked his collaborators to imagine their bodies were geographical features found in rivers such as rocks, islands and peninsulas. He wanted to portray his model-collaborators as themselves, being part of nature. Besant asked his models to mentally let go of the approximately 60 per cent



▲ Derek Besant studio proofs images.
Photos by Alexandra Haeseker (supplied by Besant)



▲ Pattison Outdoor Advertising donated display space across the city.



▲ Street level placement reaches people on foot and in vehicles.

of their bodies that is comprised of water and to consider what remains. The push and pull between flesh and water in the resulting photographs is palpable. Closed eyes and euphoric smiles divulge a sense of release. As heads, shoulders and arms interact with the liquid surface, ripples in the surrounding water make visible an energy we don't usually see.

Besant took approximately a hundred photographs of each model; each series demonstrates a progression of increased relaxation, confidence and control. Inevitably it was the latter images of each shoot that Besant selected. These captured the sense of empowerment confirmed verbally by his collaborators after the fact. The portraits revealed surprises even to their subjects — the models sensed something more than themselves in the images.² Besant's project extended this fresh perspective into the public realm so that the universal relationship between people and water might be recognized in the faces of fellow Calgarians.

When weather conditions allowed, Besant photographed the Bow River and digitally integrated the two sets of images. He selected calm and energetic water states to complement the facial expressions and body language of each subject. In this way his collaborators became virtually immersed in the Bow and a series of composite psychological portraits was created.

From mid-July to mid-September these poetic images flowed through every neighbourhood of the city on the interiors and exteriors of Calgary Transit buses and light rail transit (LRT) cars. The black and white photographs were accompanied by the project title printed in lower case, as if a casual hand was extending an open-ended invitation for reflection and personal connection. The images were also posted on billboards and four-sided pillar ads throughout the city. The combination of



▲ Besant's models imagine themselves as the river's geography.

stationary and mobile placement enabled pedestrians, drivers and commuters of all sorts to encounter these images daily. The support of Pattison Outdoor turned the entire city into *I Am the River's* gallery — the advertising company generously doubled the project's production budget and provided the display space at no charge. It is estimated that one million visual hits were achieved in two months.³

In an eloquent metaphor, the crisscrossing of transit routes and traffic arteries at street level mimicked the aquifer that lies beneath Calgary: all transit routes converge on the downtown core as does the network of groundwater tributaries that underlies our city. As Besant's images coursed through Calgary's diverse neighbourhoods they provided a visible reminder that the river is a source of connection for all citizens.

Appearing in spaces where advertisements normally do, *I Am the River* became an art experience ruled by chance. As with outdoor advertising, the public caught glimpses of imagery. Perhaps people perceived an emotion or recognized a classical pose as a photograph rushed by on a bus, or a billboard presented itself during a lull in traffic. Very different from the quiet, white-walled spaces often associated with viewing art, this context raised questions about the intersection of art and advertising and the role of each in urban life. Besant's extensive work in the realm of public art and unconventional installation situations suggests that he is interested in such questions. But he avoids providing answers, preferring that viewers consider the juxtaposition on their own terms and reach their own conclusions.⁴

A broad spectrum of the transit-riding public saw the images and a few shared their interpretations. "They look so relaxed!" said one regular bus rider with a hint of envy. An image

suggested the soothing murmurs of rippling water to a woman who invokes the sound when trying to sleep. The sun dappled waters reminded many passengers that the Bow is our responsibility as citizens to maintain and keep clean. At least one viewer reflected that "we are part of the cycle" of nature. Another elaborated: "... we are meant to be connected [to the river.] Many of us don't ever touch the river ... This picture reminds us that we can connect personally." One man perceived a sense of joy which he understood as a metaphor for that which unites everyone.⁵ Like the transit system that links people to points all across the city, the river represents a network of shared experiences that connects us in unseen ways.

A selection of *I Am the River* images was given an extended run in Calgary's East Village in the autumn following *Celebration of the Bow River 2010*. Ten of Besant's portraits were installed along the RiverWalk, a newly revitalized pathway system that borders the Bow just east of the city centre. Four immense black and white portraits were adhered directly to concrete bridge abutments. Two of them face the river and adjacent walking paths; two others look out onto Riverfront Avenue and its passing traffic. At four metres high by six metres wide, the images boldly claim their spaces. Much larger than life-size, the figures confront viewers with closed eyes and a commanding presence. They seem to emerge from the concrete as if they are an intrinsic part of the built environment, even as they suggest a natural one. A cluster of service buildings further east on the walking path support six other portraits. Free of text and commuter distractions, the mural-sized works of art offer an opportunity for viewers to revel in nuances that may have been overlooked in the project's original form. We observe river details such as submerged rocks, see ripples in the water that look like road maps, and enjoy the poetic transition between skin and liquid surfaces writ large. Image size and the viewer's

proximity allow us to notice abstract fragments that encourage individual associations. This iteration of *I Am the River* is an initiative of the Calgary Municipal Land Corporation⁶ and will be in place for one to two years.

The installation adds to the diverse range of public artworks by Besant that are already part of Calgary's visual landscape. *Songlines* (2003), a series of fibre optic linear drawings on six buildings surrounding Calgary's Olympic Plaza, lights up nightly in electric, changing colours. His work in diverse media including etched glass, metal sculpture and sculptural text has created defining landmarks around our city.⁷ In Toronto, Besant's *Waterfall* (1988) places a life-size representation of Johnston Canyon's upper falls in the heart of that city's financial district at Scotiabank Plaza. The mural, depicting one of Banff National Park's most popular spots, is painted on 69 panels that stretch 15 storeys high. Pattison Outdoor provided space for the artist to create the massive painting. Like the East Village installation, viewers are confronted with nature on a grand scale. It is a further example of Besant's ambitious approach, his dedication to exploring water and his desire to intrigue observers with images that are simultaneously surprising and familiar.

Besant himself is a respected figure in Calgary. A long-time faculty member at the Alberta College of Art and Design, he was involved in the beginnings of the Calgary school's drawing program in the late 1970s and served as its head for 15 years. Over the last 20 years Besant has established a career as an international interdisciplinary artist. The materials, themes, sites and activities of the exhibitions and installation projects that take him around the world are remarkably varied.

I Am the River places him firmly at home. In this project he delved into the Bow River and made a gift of his refreshed perspective to Calgarians. In return he asks us to imagine how

we — as a community and as individuals — are the river: Are we the water that comprises more than half of our physical beings; are we the thoughts the river inspires; are we the places the river takes us? Besant has presented us not only with a new way to experience the Bow, but with a new context in which to consider ourselves.



▲ I AM THE RIVER images become semi-permanent murals



▲ They enliven buildings and bridges along the East Village river path.



▲ Larger-than-life, the figures invite a closer look.

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▲ Images capture personal and universal relationships with water.

◀ Images move through the city, echoing the underlying aquifer.

Endnotes:

- 1 Pattison Outdoor Advertising is Canada's largest out-of-home advertiser. Besant began a partnership with the company 25 years ago.
- 2 Derek Besant in conversation with the author, Calgary, December 14, 2010.
- 3 Besant conversation, December 14, 2010.
- 4 Besant conversation, December 14, 2010.
- 5 All comments are from anonymous transit riders in conversation with the author, Calgary, September 1, 2010.
- 6 Calgary Municipal Land Corporation (CMLC) is a City of Calgary subsidiary established in 2007 to implement the Rivers District Revitalization Plan. www.calgarymlc.ca.
- 7 *Daydream* (1989) on the +15 pedestrian walkway system; *Homage* (1989) on The Mount Royal University Campus; and *Stroll* at various pedestrian sign poles, respectively. www.derekbasant.com.