



MICHAEL BELMORE
embankment

Michael Belmore: Embankment
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Station Gallery
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Outside Cover Image: Michael Belmore, *North Shore*, 2007

Inside Cover Image: Michael Belmore, *Landing I*, 2008

Director's Foreword

Station Gallery has an enthusiastic and enduring commitment to presentation of work by First Nations and early career artists. We are very pleased to showcase the most recent work of Michael Belmore, whose work was introduced to Durham Region in the context of a 2005 group exhibition at The Robert McLaughlin Gallery. *Embankment*, Belmore's latest sculptural production, provides an opportunity for our community to become better acquainted with his work, offering an in-depth view of the meditative quality of his practice.

Belmore describes memories of growing up as often linked to a place or landmark. For many of us who grew up in Whitby, Station Gallery is just such a landmark, stirring reflection and nostalgic musings. As the Gallery approaches its 40th anniversary, we continue to witness a significant change to the cultural and surrounding physical landscape. *Embankment* amplifies the issues, bringing these discussions to the forefront through the artist's experience.

We are grateful to Olex Wlasenko, who upon assuming the role of Curator at Station Gallery, immediately proposed working with this artist and began an insightful exploration of Belmore's work.

Station Gallery is immensely grateful for our partnership with The Town of Whitby and the vital assistance of both the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council.

Donna Raetsen-Kemp
Executive Director

Tales from Topographic Notions

The trek from Superior's lake head to the Manitoba border is more than a road trip—it's a state of mind. I realized this when I travelled the Trans-Canada before the snow fell in late 2008. At the time, this stretch of road seemed monotonous and uneventful—and yet looking back at the experience it remains most memorable for the reverie it inspired. The journey across this part of the Canadian Shield was a complete immersion into the northern landscape. What initially seemed like an endurance race became an introspective and meditative journey into the heart of vastness. In many ways, I return to the thought of this voyage when looking at Michael Belmore's work. The landscape, the simplicity and grace, the contemplative nature of the artist's sculptures is rooted in Ontario's northlands. Taking the north of Superior route was perhaps the most valuable research in gaining deeper insight into Belmore's practice.



Michael Belmore, *Landing I*, 2008



Michael Belmore, *Landing I*, 2008 (detail)

Belmore's working method is tightly woven with an innate understanding of materials. For instance, the artist's rock pieces are an articulate and graceful conversation with the elemental forces of nature. The polished, irregularly rounded rocks Belmore selects for his sculptures were formed by an array of geological, meteorological and hydrological phenomena. The common gneiss and feldspar boulders tell the story of geological epochs, glacial forces and the burnish of lake and river waters over time. With each distinct rock formation, the sculptor employs a reductive process of chipping, knapping and grinding. This inward hollowing is the artist's intuitive response to the convex forms shaped by nature. The area where the two arches meet is gilded, as in the case of *North Shore*, with gold leaf. As with the experience of panning for gold, intrinsic value has its elusive appeal as something ensconced between the cracks. In the end, Belmore's stone works interlock to form a cohesive, snugly-fitted arrangement in which positive and negative, convex and concave shapes coalesce. The complementary opposites form a greater whole, a kind of lapidary yin and yang.

This idea of congruence is an on-going interest for Belmore and it can be seen reoccurring in different forms through his sculptural output. During a studio visit with the artist, Belmore cogently summarized: "much of my work deals with where the water meets the land."¹ The largest piece in the exhibition is an impressive six-by-seven foot map of North America, titled *Shorelines*. With this work, our continent is defined by the interstitial spaces of coastline and bodies of water. The interface between land masses and oceans, lakes and rivers is defined by the artist using different sculpting tools.

Belmore's coppersmithing technique is a multifarious process. By hammering copper, this pure element hardens and becomes brittle. In order for the copper to become malleable and workable the material must be annealed, or significantly heated. For this process, Belmore uses a specialized, high-output propane torch. Once the surface is annealed the copper molecules are relaxed and the material can be stamped, shaped and formed. Following the intense heating process the metal is cooled with water in a procedure called quenching. This results in a random marbled effect atop of the topographic relief of the metal sheets. Belmore's working method is alchemic; vacillating between determination and serendipity. Human intervention into the landscape comes with and without consequence. Belmore personalizes this conundrum in his work. As the artist puts it: "I like working with copper—it's like the landscape—it's something that can be informed through calculated and miscalculated blows."²

French thinker and writer, Maurice Blanchot contends that the past is necessary in setting the conditions for literary and artistic embarkation. It could be said that Belmore's praxis originates from these very conditions, in that which is "very ancient, terrifyingly ancient, lost in the night of time. It is the origin that always precedes us and is always given before us, for it is the approach of what allows us to depart—a thing of the past."³ In effect, Belmore extends the ancient trajectory of his materials, infusing new life and understanding to them in a contemporary context. Whether it is copper, iron ore, stone or wood, Belmore's mercurial handling of a raw material forms a vital link to a past. By preserving the inherent qualities and purity of a given material, he invokes a venerable antiquity.

Michael Belmore, *Shorelines*, 2007





Michael Belmore, *North Shore*, 2007



Michael Belmore, *Landing I*, 2008

Not only does the artist enter into a dialogue with nature, but he also communes with anthropological precedents. His stone carvings remind one of the prehistoric cultures which developed independently around the world during the Paleolithic and Neolithic ages. Belmore's fascination with lithic analysis, commonly known as the study of stone tools, has led him to research repositories at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian to develop some of the works in this exhibition. Belmore also aligns with an ancient heritage with which he is connected. His use of copper brings to mind the indigenous copper mining prior to European contact with North America. In prehistoric times, large quantities of native copper were mined on Isle Royale situated in the north-west of Lake Superior. The British, then Americans took control of Isle Royale and although the land mass is just off the Canadian coastline, today it is in US waters. Since time immemorial, this island was Ojibwa territory utilized for its rich natural resources and continues to be a symbol of indigenous metalworking.

In recent years, the artist has returned to his ancestral lands north of Lake Superior and reconnected with Anishinaabe-speaking relatives and friends. Now based in Minden, Ontario, Belmore was raised in a remote community in northern Ontario located on a former CN line between Thunder Bay and Sioux Lookout. This community is now a ghost town. Several of the pieces on display deal with a strong sense of place. The narratives Belmore sets-up are as much autobiographical as they are universal. *Ember* is a personal and poetically ambiguous piece. Once again the artist has carved stone, arranged the rocks in a circle, reminiscent of a fire pit. A scintillating glow is emitted by the copper leaf which lines the spaces between the rocks. *Ember* simultaneously alludes to an extinguished flame and the promise of fire. Has this pit been abandoned or will it once again emit warmth?

In the artist's own words: "In looking at Umferville, so much has changed—the houses are gone, so too are the fields and roads, all replaced with a growing forest. The one lasting landmark is the railway's embankment. While the rails and even the ties have long since been removed it is this embankment, rising well above the lakes and muskeg that is a lasting witness to our intrusion into the landscape." This idea of human intervention into the landscape becomes a leitmotif in Belmore's work. His work in this exhibition is neither pictorial, nor is it figurative—it does however bear witness to an evacuated human presence.

The erosion of former locomotive routes has a particular resonance—connected both to the history of Station Gallery and the artist's own autobiographic sculptures. The artist's work, fabricated from the raw materials of the rail-line such as hammered copper, cast iron ore (collected from rail-lines) and carved river rock will have particular conceptual reverberations within the historical rail station building in Whitby. Historically, Whitby has developed as a community located on several transportation routes. Here, we can think of the early days when the Port of Whitby was important for local trade. The Town was later connected to locomotive transportation lines and trains stopped at Whitby Junction (now Station Gallery). Most recently, the 401 is an important transportation artery. Michael Belmore's sculptural offerings provide an opportunity for viewers to consider how we relate to the environment and world around us.

Olexander Wlasenko
Curator



Michael Belmore, *Landing I*, 2008 (detail)

Endnotes

¹ In conversation with the artist during a studio visit in Minden, Ontario. December 12, 2008.

² Ibid.

³ Blanchot, Maurice. *The Space of Literature*. Trans. A.Smock. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1982), p. 229.



Michael Belmore, *Shorelines*, 2007 (detail)

Artist Biography

Following his graduation from the Ontario College of Art (OCA) in 1994, Belmore has exhibited his sculptural works nationally and internationally. Notable solo exhibitions include *Downstream* at London, Ontario's Forest City Gallery and *Grotesques of the Eastern Woodlands* at Gallery 101 in Ottawa. The artist has regularly received federal and provincial arts council funding since 1990. While at OCA, Belmore was awarded several sculpture awards such as the Emanuel Hahn Award, H.L. Rous Award and the Louis Odette Award, as well as the Canadian Native Arts Foundation Scholarship. Belmore's works are represented in numerous private and public collections, including the Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Indian Art Collection of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, the McMichael Canadian Art Collection and the Agnes Etherington Art Centre. Further to this, the artist has been commissioned by the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre in Guelph and the University of Western Ontario, London, both in Ontario. Belmore's outdoor sculptural work, *Upstream*, was featured at The Tree Museum in 2008. Michael was recently invited by the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian to interpret collections of artefacts from the Americas. This research is carried through his most recent works in *Embankment*.

List of works

Embankment

2009

carved wood, iron ore

152 x 71 x 30 cm

Ember

2009

carved stone, copper leaf

61 x 61 x 8 cm

Gather

2005

copper

91 x 152 x 25 cm

Island

2009

carved stone, copper leaf

20 x 20 x 13 cm (each)

Landing I

2008

copper, carved stone, copper leaf

30 x 91 x 20 cm

North Shore

2007

carved stone, gold leaf

61 x 91 x 20 cm

Shorelines

2007

copper, wood

216 x 183 x 30 cm

Untitled

2009

pencil on paper

56 x 76 cm (each)



