

INTERVIEW WITH BLANE DE ST. CROIX AT HIS STUDIO

DUMBO, BROOKLYN, DECEMBER 30, 2019

MARTHA SCHWENDENER: We met at Art Omi in the summer of 2008 when I was a critic in residence and you were an artist in residence. At the time, you were making sculptures about landscape and thinking about political borders. How did that come about?

BLANE DE ST. CROIX: I grew up in Boston, but my grandfather was from Connemara, Ireland. He hated the British, for obvious reasons. As a little kid, I was surprised at how much he hated the British. (I wouldn't be surprised if he was a member of the Irish Republican Army [IRA], but I won't even go there.) His wife came over as an indentured servant and he came over as contracted labor to work for the railroad.

MS: So, even as a child you were aware of political borders.

BDSC: Absolutely. I would sit on his lap and he would talk about how he had to grow potatoes in the seaweed and rocks of Connemara. "Angry" would be a polite word for what he thought of the British Empire. Fast forward to the early 1990s and I was invited to Ireland to take part in

a cross-border residency program. The border [between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland] was still up and I could see firsthand the devastation it had caused to families and neighborhoods. My friends' houses were bombed. There were times when I would leave a pub and forty-five minutes later it was machine-gunned by "the other side." Even the residency program in Monaghan County, a gun-running county, was affected. They found a young woman in a field, assassinated because she was a "traitor." That's how close it was. To open your mouth and discuss politics at the residency was very severe. I used to go to Belfast and we'd go into a pub and the bouncers would interrogate you before you entered: What's your family name? Who are your brothers and sisters? What neighborhood did you grow up in? They'd ask a lot of serious questions. Then you'd get out of the bar, a little tipsy, and it'd be nighttime and there would be British soldiers everywhere, fully armed, and the police with armored vehicles. You'd walk down the middle of the street with your friends, singing in an Irish brogue, and the British would be hiding in doorways. It was a war zone; it was bizarre. If you fired a gun, within twenty or thirty seconds the British military would have you pinpointed.

One of the artists at that residency, Eoin McNamee, wrote a book called *Resurrection Man* and he had to go into hiding because it was reviewed in the *Irish Times* and *The Times of London*. In it he wrote about the Troubles—also known as the Northern Irish Conflict—no longer being “political,” but instead functioning as a form of sadism embedded in individuals. At the time, both the IRA and the Orange Order (a Protestant fraternal order in Northern Ireland) wanted to kill him. He was from Northern Ireland and even once asked me to help clean up his mother’s house after a mortar attack on a police car nearby.

So, during the residency, I went to the neighborhood farmer and started dragging out these huge timbers and made a huge kindling pile. The director of the residency said, “What are you doing?” I involved other artists and a group of people from the “other side” (including both Protestant and Catholic artists) and we built an effigy of the Pope. I didn’t discuss my religion, but I was probably labeled as Catholic; I grew up Irish Catholic in Boston.

That is essentially where I learned about borders, separation, and governments. I didn’t meet a single person in Ireland or Northern Ireland whose family wasn’t affected by the Troubles. Some were shot, some were jailed—you couldn’t escape it. Difficult as it was, that time was also really fruitful. The communities there were so passionate about life, which led to some really tough art being made. It had guts.

MS: How long were you there?

BDSC: I kept returning to Ireland over about a four-year period.

MS: What happened after that?

BDSC: I was consistently making work about nature, out of found materials, and not worrying about permanence. After Ireland, I was invited to a program called Hope and Remembrance in Poland and we visited all the concentration camps. We were paired with the last remaining survivors. I was in Auschwitz on my birthday with a man named Saul, and he was describing everything that went on there when he was a teenager and the loss of his family. That program was established to help make the Holocaust real for people, so the narrative could be told again and again.

MS: Did this lead to your increased interest in associating landscape with trauma?

BDSC: Yes. One of the things I remember at Auschwitz was when Saul took me to a beautiful meadow, with wildflowers and birch trees, and then explained that it was where all the ashes and bones of the murdered people were buried. That’s why it was so lush and growing so beautifully.

MS: What were you making around this time?

BDSC: My work has always been about nature and humankind and the resulting, not-very-kind dynamic between the two. I grew up in an extremely dysfunctional household, so I would escape into the woods and draw. As I grew older, I began to focus, in a more dynamic way, around environment and environmental issues.

MS: I came to the Future Arts Research (F.A.R.) Program at Arizona State University when you were there, with curator Bruce Ferguson. I recall discussing things like the different temperatures throughout Phoenix, because of building a city in a desert landscape, and how they did things such as use



Blane De St. Croix, *Broken Landscape IV*, 2009. Wood, plywood, foam, plastic, paint, branches, dirt and other natural materials. Photo: Kaelan Burkett

sewage to irrigate golf courses. It was a similarly surreal landscape to some of the ones you described. I believe you were invited there to think mostly about borders?

BDSC: Bruce was interested in my work *Broken Landscape* (2009), which is a work representing the US/Mexico border. He was interested in placing art in a more cross-disciplinary conversation, with science, journalism, and so on. He thought the arts were too isolated. He wanted to employ art to create a bigger conversation.

MS: I gave a lecture on art and borders and activism.

BDSC: I remember. You were dealing with the artist's role and he was attempting to create a new artist's role. After working with Bruce, I learned that art should not be isolated from the whole. My recent work, for instance, comes from working with journalists and scientists. Bruce wanted to bring together people working with border politics. This is where real conversations can happen. Generally, I'm appalled by politicians: they speak in sound bites, and ultimately say nothing. What Bruce was trying to achieve, and what I strive for in my work, is to look at these complex issues in a more nuanced and collaborative way.

MS: What did you learn about the US/Mexico border during your time there? I know this became important for you.

BDSC: I drove that border from Brownsville, Texas, to the Gulf Coast. Next I landed in Arizona, because I was teaching there for a semester, and then I turned around and drove the border the other way, from around Nogales, Arizona, to Tijuana, Mexico. I intentionally rented a green jeep so people

would think I was a surveying engineer or a park ranger. This helped me traverse all the land that was marked “no trespassing.” My goal was to document the new fence line in contrast to the landscape.

I would talk to anyone who would talk to me. I would talk to people on all sides of the issue. I talked to surveyors, construction crews, etc. I was probably pulled over eight times by the Border Patrol. I was afraid they were going to confiscate my laptop. They surrounded me with dogs. So, I came up with a partial truth to get out of these potentially dangerous situations, telling them I was preparing a lecture on the new Federal fence. (They were putting in new sections of the fence line around 2008.) I always think of the border as a part of the psyche. I’d say, “Could you tell me where the new section of fence is?” Then they would get on the walkie-talkie and come back to the car and say, “Please get out of here.”

MS: How did that translate into your sculptural practice at the time?

BDSC: I feel that my responsibility as an artist is to have a conversation about the landscape. For example, the contrast between the two ends of the border are extreme. Outside Brownsville there is no border wall at all. You drive through an Audubon center, through an estuary, and everyone is fishing on the coast. Then you get to Tijuana and it’s a hardened border. Border guards were screaming at me to leave, there were guns on both sides. I was threatened, and, at the same time, maniacally taking as many photos of the older (repaired) border fence disintegrating into the Pacific Ocean as I could.

MS: How did that experience affect your work on a physical level or with materials? Did this change your mind about how you were working?

BDSC: Every project I do, I change the parameters, otherwise it’s not worth my time. Broken Landscape was the first time I up-scaled the work, creating an eighty-foot “wall” at Smack Mellon in Brooklyn. The work took the viewer into the landscape, so they could actually walk the fence line. It was an architectural intervention: it broke the space in two so the viewer had to commit to one side or the other without knowing which side they were on.

MS: What happens when you recreate a border, something based on a far-away boundary—for instance the US/Mexico border—in New York?

BDSC: What I discovered is that, in some ways, it’s easier to show a piece in a liberal city like New York. You take work like that to San Antonio or Phoenix, places closer to these border politics, and the dialogue changes dramatically.

MS: How so?

BDSC: People yell at you. Everyone wants to have the conversation that our political structure doesn’t allow, doesn’t let breathe. I don’t put a sign on it, but things like borders are the unintentional monuments that we create. I see it as a heavyweight conversation around landscape. I feel a high level of responsibility to have as broad a conversation as I can. So *Broken Landscape* has three landscapes: it has a golf course (man-made landscape); a struggling section of the urban landscape at Eagle Pass, Texas; and the cliffs—the wilds of nature—overlooking the Rio Grande in Texas.

Eagle Pass was an activist border and a test case. They plowed through the poor section of town, but when you hit a golf course, no one goes through a golf course. So, they went around the golf course, building a fence at tax-



Blane De St. Croix, *Broken Landscape IV*, 2009. Wood, plywood, foam, plastic, paint, branches, dirt, and other natural materials

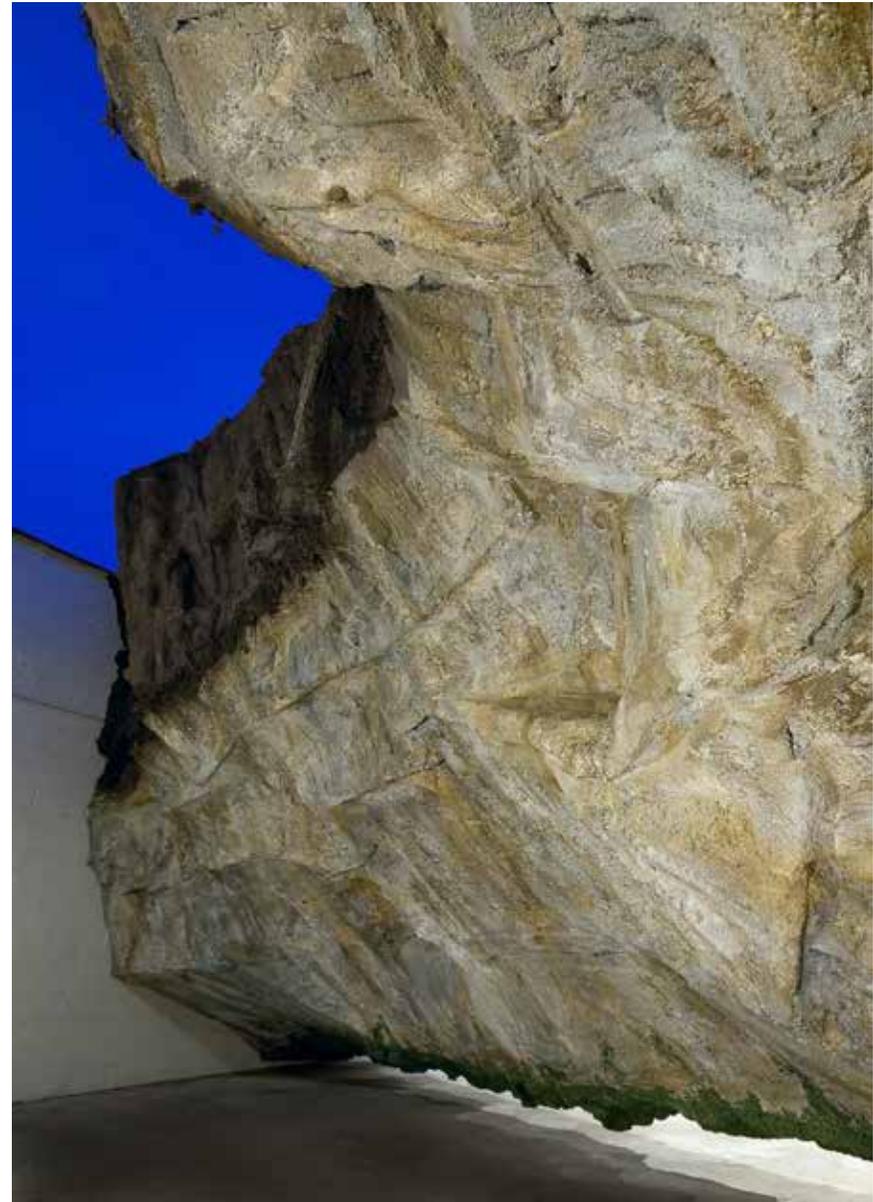
payers' expense. The golfers were so upset that the Federal Agents had to leave a thirty-foot opening in the fence line, so the golfers could drive their carts back and forth. At the end of the fence, it just stopped: there was nothing there, no guard booth, nothing.

So when my work enters the public sphere, people respond in different ways. Someone who wants the fence is upset that it just ends, whereas those opposed want it removed. But it's like the Iraqi War: it's pure graft. That section of fence in Eagle Pass cost \$11.5 million, an uncontested Boeing contract. Here in a poor, struggling town, how can you spend \$11.5 million on a mile of fence?

However, I don't make the assumption that the fence is completely unnecessary. For example, the fence line between El Paso, Texas, and Juarez, Mexico, is really complicated. But I think a lot of what's happening is a security blanket and a belief system: physically and economically, it's not realistic. Ultimately, people living around the border feel very differently from someone living in Michigan.

MS: What, then, do you see as the artist's responsibility in addressing these issues? How much can art accomplish?

BDSC: I'm always asked: Do you think you make a difference? I don't know if I can. I'm just trying to have a conversation. I'm an artist, a sculptor, but I'm driven by content. That motivates my passion to make work. I also try to take on difficult issues, through the landscape and the land, so I have a responsibility as an artist to go there, to research, to understand the complexity. I always have ideas about landscape and sculptures I want to make. And then, when I get on a plane and go there, it totally flips, totally changes. The landscape, the people—all of it affects me dramatically.



Blane De St. Croix, *Mountain Strip*, 2010. Wood, plywood, foam, plastic, paint, branches, dirt, and other natural materials

MS: Can you give an example of this?

BDSC: *Broken Landscape* is a prime example. I knew I had to go on a personal journey along the border. I would never have made the work I made if I hadn't had that experience and the resulting conversations along the way. Similarly, for *Mountain Strip* (2019) I went to West Virginia to research mountaintop removal as a result of mining. I befriended people who could give me entrance to these sites. I made cold calls to activists and construction companies, in order to figure out how to get the access I needed to have the conversation that would lead to the work I would create. When I met Larry Gibson in Kayford Mountain, West Virginia, which is the heart of mountaintop removal, he basically told me, "I don't know who the fuck you are, or if I should be talking to you in the first place." These are very closed communities, and I have to create mutual grounds and mutual trust.

Besides visually seeing what I need to see, I also listen as people say profound things. They're philosophers, indirectly. They don't realize how poetic they are. In describing mountaintop removal, Larry said, "It's like taking a mountain and turning it inside out or upside down." I thought, that's the perfect image. I'll make the mountain upside down.

A lot of these places are very confrontational, too. Border police, people with guns, liquored-up miners. These are precarious situations because they're important subjects that impact people. That's why I want to have the conversation respectfully.

MS: So how did you end up in the Arctic in the summer of 2019?

BDSC: In 2019, it was my second time in the Arctic. The first time was in the Norwegian territory, and this most recent time was in Alaska. It was

mindboggling to be in a place where people might never have stepped—but also heartbreaking to see firsthand the death of the glaciers. You could experience it, physically. You'd see a glacier and know that next year it would have receded. Scientists treat a glacier as a living thing—again, more philosophically than you would imagine. When it recedes, it sheds dead ice.

MS: What came out of your first trip to the Arctic?

BDSC: I did a series of works based on places I'd been. There was a settlement in Svalbard, Norway, called Pyramiden. It's an abandoned Soviet town that was used for mining. When the Soviet Union collapsed, they pulled up several cargo ships and told people they had a few days to pack up and leave. So, you wander the town and see all this stuff—cinema, swimming pool—frozen in time. It's another example of humankind trying to conquer a landscape that couldn't be conquered.

MS: How did this translate into your work?

BDSC: One work I made was called *Dead Ice* (2014). I was struck by the way the scientists used that term. The ice shed from the glacier becomes marbleized and beautiful. I was also influenced by seeing things like cargo vessels frozen in the ice. In the end, I created a two-sided piece: on one side are the guts of the cargo vessel and on the other is the ice. The duality of man and nature together. From that experience, my relationship with scientists and glaciers grew and I got an invitation to return to the Arctic—the American territories—from some key scientists.

MS: Tell me more about the recent trip to the Arctic and your move into filmmaking.



Blane De St. Croix in Svalbard, Norway documenting glacial run off

BDSC: I wanted to find a different way to go back to the Arctic, in particular, to explore hard-to-access areas. I thought that the best way to accomplish this would be through documentary film, to approach the viewer in a different way. My methods were expanding to people in the film world and thinking about how they look at things.

MS: How do people living in this region approach things differently from what you were expecting?

BDSC: You have to get permission from the Indigenous communities to work in their landscape. I was interviewed on the phone by members of the Iñupiat tribe in Utqiagvik, Alaska. They wanted to know who I was, what I was doing, and where I was, politically and philosophically. They said the BBC and NOVA had just left and they didn't particularly appreciate how they had come with a particular narrative, and wanted them to fit into that narrative. I told them, "We're not press. We're not bound by press; we came to have a conversation and an open dialogue." Kaare Erickson interviewed me, but most importantly, he gave me insights into the community's perspective.

MS: How did that initial point of contact affect filming up there?

BDSC: The director, camera crew, and I decided that we'd go up and try to find the story and the connections for a bigger piece for a documentary. We came up with a list of sites and who to talk to. It's difficult and at times frustrating. You're isolated up there—it's cold, it's damp, it's freezing. We were on a boat and waves were splashing the camera equipment. It's different from when you're alone. We were traveling with twenty-four cases of equipment.

MS: What did you leave with?

BDSC: I left with a different perspective on a culture that goes back to 400 CE. The people impacted me as much as the landscape. It's a sustainable culture. When winter comes, there's no way in and no way out. They go out hunting and they share the results—there's no financial incentive. They have a responsibility to the entire community. Also, their relationship to the environment and land is very different. They refer to the ocean as their garden and they sustain themselves by living off caribou, whale, seal, etc. They see things differently from the scientists. They feel they have a strong knowledge base that's different from science about nature and climate change. This is a population on the edge of the world. Some people predict that their world is changing three times faster than ours. If we look at them, we might be able to think about how to sustain the impact of what's coming.

The whole Arctic coastline is melting into the ocean, one or two feet per day. You can see it. They're trying heroically to save the coastline with superbags along the edge. It's a heroic but futile effort. The populace that does whale and/or seal hunting in the deep winter uses the ice as a method for hunting, except the ice is no longer there and the ocean is getting more vicious. Because of the warm temperature, killer whales are closer to the coastline and they are driving bowhead whales eighty miles out, which makes them impossible to hunt.

One thing I did with Craig Tweedie, one of the lead scientists in the Arctic, is climb down an ice wedge, into a cavern of ice. When you do that, you're traveling back in time thirty thousand years.

MS: I feel like you can see some of this in your work.



Blane De St. Croix thirty feet below a giant ice wedge in a cavern of ice 75,000 years old, Utqiagik, Alaska.



Northwestern Teshekpuk, Alaska coastline falling into the ocean. Photo: Ben Jones

BDSC: Visually, it's spectacular. The lights are off, you turn on your helmet and the whole cavern lights up, full of ice crystals lining the walls. As an artist, I'm constantly trying to figure out how to render something as magnificent as what nature can do.

MS: This trip to Utqiagvik was primarily focused on research for your exhibition *How to Move a Landscape* at MASS MoCA. How did your Arctic experience translate to what you are doing for that show?

BDSC: I try to revisit those textures and scenes in nature and recreate them from my memory in the pieces that I'm making. *Hollow Ground* (2020) is a hybrid of a permafrost landscape melting—which is actually what's happening in the Arctic. When I was up there I was told that, for the first time, there's no ice. The ice shelf surrounding the coast has melted. That's fucked up. Two things are happening: the engine of the Arctic Ocean produces waves that erode the coastline; meanwhile, the way the Inupiat built their houses—one home on top of another over a period of hundreds of years—is eroding. The Arctic Ocean eating at the coast has exposed all these layers. It is literally like an archaeological excavation site; visually you travel back hundreds of years.

Over time, I'm affected by this and my collaborations have grown. I have much better conversations with scientists—but also with the people who live in these communities.

MS: What do they think about being contacted by an artist from New York City?

BDSC: You're never part of any community until you've lived there twenty or thirty years. You feel a part of it, but you're not. Plus, in the Arctic, they're so used to being pillaged by the "white man," so there's a high level of

caution. Craig Tweedie is the scientist who graciously gave me access to the Arctic through introductions to the community. Nagruk (Nuk) Harcharek provided me numerous introductions to the community and assisted me in my Arctic field-research logistics. It's not about being an adventure tourist. As an artist, I began my career examining places close to my own family's history; this allowed me to see a larger picture and to further explore interconnecting narratives with other places. I attend art residencies in those sites where I work, and over time I started being invited by different people or programs in places such as the Baltics, Ireland, and England, and I've traveled throughout Western and Eastern Europe, North Africa, Canada, Mexico, and Central and South America. These entry points allow me to build relationships, to reach out to individuals at various sites.

MS: How is your work with borders transformed by climate change?

BDSC: I see border issues in direct relationship with climate change. Climate change in the US and globally will create the largest refugee population we have seen in generations, through drought, famine, and weather disasters. We now have over one hundred twenty new border walls or fences in the world, and that number is growing. All of these are designed to keep populations out, and this will increase dramatically with new conflicts over water.

As a research-based artist, I visit many communities where the extreme results of climate change are immediately evident. Nature ravaging the planet and showing its weight. How do you have a conversation? Is there a way to wrap science and visual art into a truthful conversation, to bring people to what is honestly happening? You're on the edge of the world and all this important science is going on and the scientists feel like they're having a dialogue with themselves and the four hundred other specialists in the field. They feel a moral imperative to find ways to get the truth out.

Perhaps art can do this. When I first approached the scientists in Alaska, it was about collaborating on the catalogue for an exhibition. I said, “I can reach audiences of a few hundred thousand people. Would you like to weave together your data with art to reach such an audience?” What came back was very surprising: they all said yes.

I made a lot of assumptions about scientists. But they’re philosophers, too. They’re living on the edge. It takes a lot to leave your family and commit to twenty-five or thirty years of living in the Arctic. It’s a task that’s not very rewarding. Vladimir Romanovsky, at the University of Fairbanks, Alaska, bucked the international science community a few years ago by saying, “It’s all over. We’ve already tipped. We’re over the top [in terms of global climate change]. The question is how bad it’s going to be.”

MS: If that’s the case, what’s the point of making art and living in this moment? Do you think what you are doing is making public art?

BDSC: I think I am making public art. People say, “Why make art? Why don’t you just go off and be an activist?” But I think artists are activists. Artists tell us what is going on at a given point in time. Artists are impacted by war, but other things, too. They’re the tellers, the visual narrators of what is happening at a given moment. I don’t think Michelangelo loved the pope, but he was trying to walk a fine line between what the government and the religion wanted and what stories he wanted to tell. I have a need to tell this story. We bear witness to things, we have a responsibility to tell the story. That’s the way I see art and the way I see my role as an artist. I deal with aesthetic issues, with formal issues, but I have to be entrenched in the visual narrative to produce it. I don’t think any differently from a scientist or a journalist, turning things upside down and looking closer at them.

I recently read that if the Vikings had contacted the Inuit communities they probably would’ve survived longer. This made me understand we need to be more collaborative and learn how to survive together. I don’t think the public realizes what’s going on in the High Arctic. It’s like the border; people have a right to know. It’s not just the border or the Arctic territories, it’s the world. And if I can make some of this visible, to help foster these conversations, then I have done my job.

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