

# Becoming Water





A photograph of three people wading in a river. They are wearing waders and gloves, and appear to be engaged in a field activity, possibly water sampling or environmental study. The background shows a line of bare trees under a clear sky.

# Becoming Water: *Art and Science in Conversation*

**Instructors: Susan Shantz • Graham Strickert**

**Course Participants: Ali Ahmed • Jenelle Dreaver • Kelsey Ford • Hillary Kirk • William Lee  
Linda Muižniece • Qiming Sun • Zoë Schneider • Negar Tajgardan • Marie Webster • Emily Zdunich**

## ***Becoming Water: Art and Science in Conversation***

Susan Shantz, Department of Art and Art History

Graham Strickert, School of the Environment and Sustainability

In May 2017, eleven studio art students embarked on the adventure of learning about water with us, their co-professors in art and science. This unique, collaborative course built on the possibilities of involving art with science to deepen awareness and understanding of key issues related to water infrastructures, ecosystems, and livelihoods. In the context of this studio-based course, we wanted to explore water as subject matter for producing responsive artwork. Students worked in a variety of media -- photography, drawing, sculpture and digital media -- both individually and collaboratively, experimenting to combine materials into new and innovative artworks. The thematic focus of the course was a consideration of water in its physical, as well as social and political aspects, with input from professional artists and water scientists.

Water is both external and internal to us -- water is in the river that flows through our city and also flows through our bodies. In Saskatoon, we literally drink the river and this was made vividly clear during our tour of the city's water treatment plant. Field trips to the dams that created both Tobin Lake and Lake Diefenbaker revealed the impact of human intervention on the river -- both beneficial and detrimental. The latter was especially evident during our four-day residency downstream on the Saskatchewan River delta at Cumberland House. Our guides and hosts, Gary, Karen, Sunnyboy and Bianca Carriere, showed us the delta from their perspectives as life-long residents whose livelihoods, and that of their ancestors, depended on the river and the delta. From them, we saw and heard first-hand about the changes to the delta over their life time; upstream development - water withdrawals, dam and reservoir construction, and alteration of flows.

Throughout the course, a series of "conversation cafes" with art and water-experts (guest eco-artist, Basia Irland from New Mexico; local artists, Terry Billings, Lori Blondeau, Graham Fowler and Barb Reimer, and scientists, Lori Bradford, Tim Jardine, Megan Hinthier, Andrew Ireson and Colin Whitfield) provided students with on-going response to their artwork in an interdisciplinary context. Film maker, Ian Toews, created a short documentary, *Becoming Water*, of the students working at the delta.

In response to all of this, the students created a series of evocative artworks that were exhibited on campus in the Gordon Snelgrove Gallery and which are documented in this publication. As revealed in their thoughtful comments included here, it is clear we all had our minds and hearts changed in terms of how we think about water and understand the complex issues it raises. The students grappled with this change in very concrete ways, selecting materials and images that point towards how water affects us in so many ways. Learning about water had a strong impact on these artists, shaping what they felt into new forms, and moving them in new directions. Many ecosystems, cultures and livelihoods depend on freshwater systems; to protect them, we need to connect with people's hearts as well as their minds. While science can change people's minds, only art can move people's hearts. We invite you to consider this as you view the artwork and read the comments included in this beautiful publication.





Left- EB Campbell Dam  
Right- South Saskatchewan River Weir





*If we knew the journey of  
water we would have far  
greater respect for it.*

Marie Webster

*Dams present a danger to places like the delta so that once water-rich places are suffering and the landscape is transformed drastically. Humans have colonized the water.*

Linda Muižniece







Left- Gardiner Dam  
Right- EB Campbell Dam



Left- Ice Books with native seeds at the Saskatchewan River Delta, Cumberland House  
Right- Releasing the Ice Books

*The Delta forced us to think about something that was greater than just ourselves: that feeling of being part of something larger ...*

Ali Ahmed





Left- Site specific art making at Mistik Lodge, Saskatchewan River Delta  
Right- Air boat tours of the Delta

*Being in the river delta at Cumberland House made me think about the man-made structures that affect the river. I cause change to the river and delta by my use of power and electricity. What is the impact of this?*

Negar Tajgardan





Water systems, like rivers, run through the earth like veins in our bodies. We need water to survive and so does the environment.

Kelsey Ford



Left- Mapping the course at Mistik Lodge

Right- Course participants, instructors, guests and hosts at Mistik Lodge

# Ali Ahmed

## *Highlights*

44" x 2" x 30"

Wood, paper

I wanted to recreate a part of the journey that we had at the Saskatchewan River Delta and represent it in a visual way. Using the processes of line tracing, carving into plywood and embossing paper, I created two maps of the Saskatchewan River Delta where we stayed and had boat tours during our residency.









# Jenelle Dreaver

## *Couture of Two Cultures*

24" x 24" x 52"

mixed media

I chose to contrast the values of my Aboriginal culture using materials that change and decay over time (twigs, cut flowers) with European cultural values of aesthetics and permanence (lilacs, burlap, wire frame). My Aboriginal values are more in harmony with the environmental values we learned about at the Saskatchewan River Delta.





# Kelsey Ford

## *Life Line*

92" x 49' x 96"

mixed media and screen print

I took water from the Saskatchewan River in the delta and in Saskatoon and injected it into intravenous drips. Behind the intravenous drips are screen prints of phragmites, an invasive species located in the delta which damages the ecosystem and kills off biodiversity. The river water brings life to wherever it flows. We often forget just how critical a life source these waters are for us and everything that lives along the river.



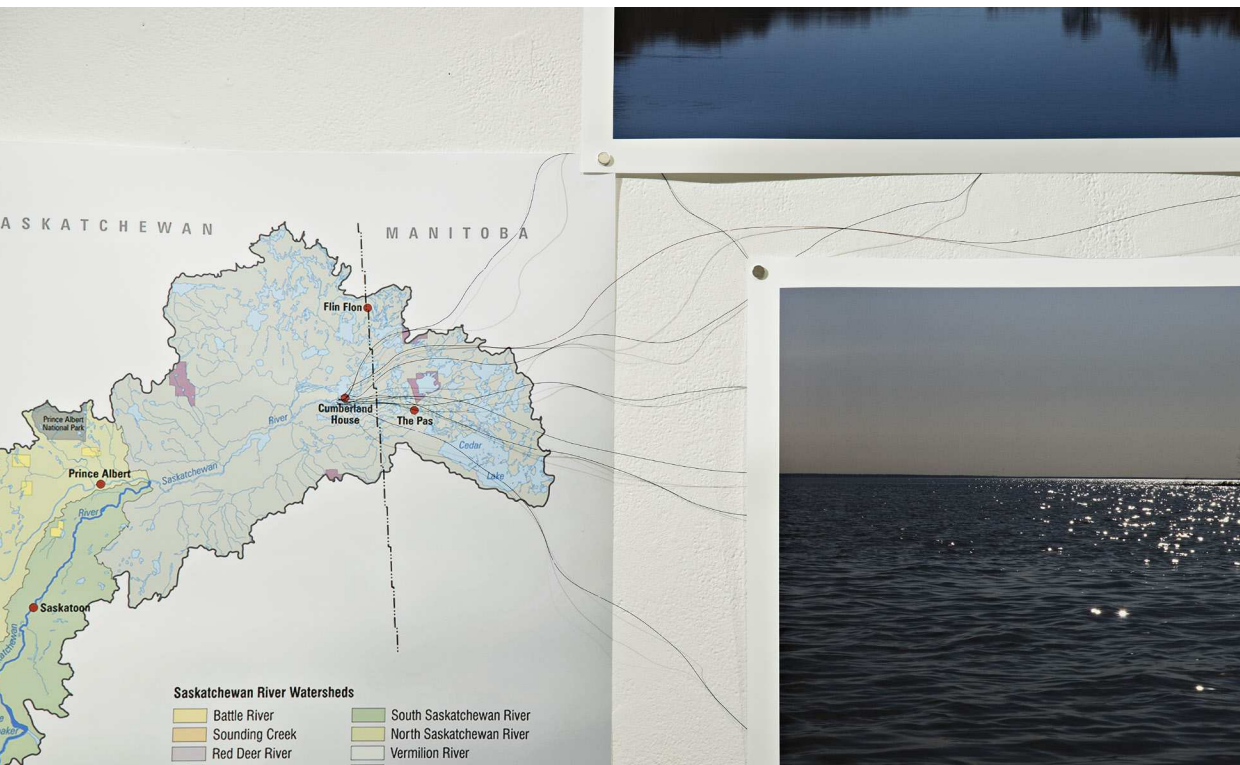
# Hillary Kirk

## *In Focus*

120" x 60"

Map, photographic images

My group of photographs represents the Saskatchewan River Delta, its diverse landscapes and its tiniest details. The delta provides life for its many plants and animals but also the communities that live within it. I show the delta in its natural form, free from human involvement and disturbance. For the delta to remain a healthy and vital part of the Saskatchewan River Basin we need to work to protect and preserve it.









# William Lee

***South Saskatchewan River, Saskatoon; Saskatchewan River Delta, Cumberland House; Northeast Swale, Saskatoon; Martin Lake, north of Saskatoon; Water Treatment Plant, Saskatoon***  
each approx. 3” diameter  
river/lake mud; water treatment plant “waste cake”

## ***Moss Circle***

21” x 21” x 3”

Saskatchewan River Delta mosses

I collected mud from various water locations in Saskatchewan and used a meditative process to form these into polished spheres by removing the water. My moss circle reveals the difficulty of maintaining nature when it is brought into a gallery or home environment.



# Linda Muižniece

## *Colonizing the River*

Installation video, size variable; floor sculpture 48" x 48"  
video projection, clay + water treatment plant "waste cake"

My work considers how people interact with water over generations and in different cultures. The current, dominant way of thinking and controlling water will lead to a point where it will be too late to change our relationship with nature and we will be left with just a memory of water, the life giver.









# Qiming Sun

## **Spirit Wood**

20" x 20" x 84"

diamond willow, red willow, clay, stones, quartz crystal, bird bones, sweet grass, pheasant feather, wax thread, Saskatoon river soil, phragmites, forest lichen, fish bone powder, walnut oil, black tea, willow charcoal, pine sap

I understand water in its symbolic form as a vessel that holds memories. My elaborate, ceremonial staff is in memory of the life that has been lost in the delta, a *mememto mori*.



# Zoë Schneider

## *Gary's Sediment Solution Boat*

30"x13"x23"

aquarium, toy plastic boat, cordless mix master, water, coloured sand

Having an understanding of the precarious situation in the river delta, I am thinking about how to make work that will draw attention to the ecological issues and illustrate imaginative possibilities which might provide remedy or relief. I aim to honour the perspectives of the people who inhabit the areas most affected by these issues.

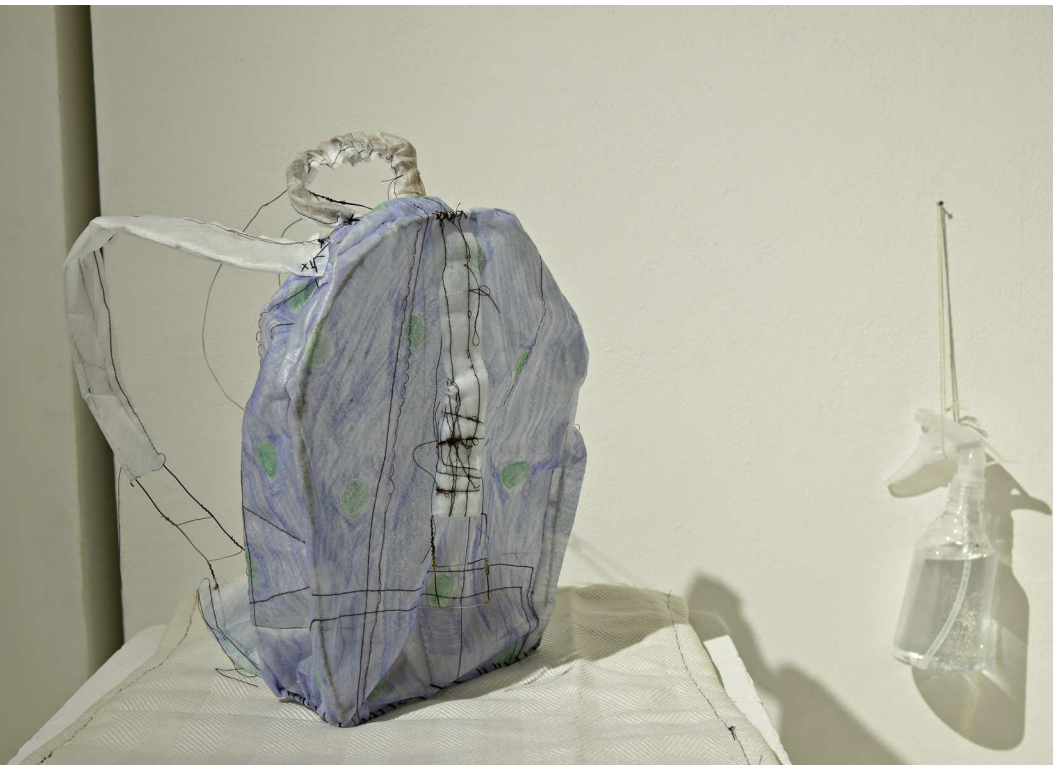


# Negar Tajgardan

## *Untitled*

19 x 17 x 25", 17 x 19 x 17", 13 x 19 x 17"  
water treatment plant waste, Solvy paper, wire,  
fabric, thread, water

The backpack and boots represent what I took to the delta. They are man-made things that allowed me to live there for a few days. They made me think of the larger man-made structures like dams that change the river and delta so I have dissolved the material of my objects with water to symbolize this change.









# Marie Webster

## *Sacred*

100" x 48" x 12"

moose vertebra and sacrum, red willow

Our vertebral column protects our central nervous system which is divided into the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems controlling our fight or flight response and the homeostasis and balance within our bodies. The sacrum, where the nerves split, also represents the sacral chakra which is characterized by flow and flexibility and represented by the element of water, the power house of natural rhythm. Like the river delta: a body, blocked and desperate for healing.



# Emily Zdunich

## *Journey*

Installation size variable

plaster, Saskatoon water treatment plant “waste cake,” Saskatchewan River Delta sediment and water

I wanted to emphasize my experience of actually being present in particular spaces and the lessons I have learned. I took several casts of my feet and incorporated different materials from the locations that had the most impact on me. This piece symbolizes my personal journey as well as the journey we all take every day with water.







Susan Shantz

**South Saskatchewan River  
Wear (for managers)**

54" x 14" x 37"

found objects with embroidery

I experience the river near my home in Saskatoon as a natural phenomenon, a place of beauty and respite. After learning more about the river from scientific and environmental perspectives, I have come to realize it is a highly-managed water source. It sustains us, but with a cost for those downstream. For this piece, I embroidered a section of the river's topography like a spine along the back of a white business shirt.





## Basia Irland

Qiming Sun • Negar Tajgardan • Marie Webster

**Saskatchewan River Delta Repository**, 26" x 26" x 48". red willow; canvas; buck skin; ox skin; river sediment, seeds and water

The Saskatchewan River Delta backpack/repository is specific to this river and made of local materials by three MFA graduate students. Like the repositories for other rivers I have been invited to work with for my global *Gathering of Waters* projects, this backpack connects diverse cultures along the entire length of the river emphasizing that we all live downstream.





# Artist Biographies

**Ali Ahmed** works in sculpture and printmaking and is interested in how these two media can connect. His artworks are process-based and draw on geometric and scientific sources for inspiration. He is currently completing his BFA at the University of Saskatchewan.

**Jenelle Dreaver** works in sculpture, drawing, painting and printmaking. Her artworks, inspired by her Aboriginal heritage, respond to ideas of change, impermanence and her desire to give back to her community. She is completing her BFA at the University of Saskatchewan.

**Kelsey Ford** works in sculpture, painting and printmaking with a special interest in silk-screen printing. Her works usually include references to the not-so-distant past and retro-culture. She is in the BFA program at the University of Saskatchewan.

**Hillary Kirk** works in photography and sculpture on both a large and small scale. Her artwork explores positive and negative environmental concepts including the relationships between humans, plants and animals. She is completing her BFA at the University of Saskatchewan.

**William Lee** works mainly in sculpture and installation art with an interest in intuitive processes and material transformations. As a sculptor, he constantly pushes his work to change and evolve as he experiments with new materials and ideas. He is the first year of the MFA program at the University of Saskatchewan.

**Linda Muižniece** works in photography, sculpture, painting and installation. Her work explores human rights issues and testimonies of trauma, particularly paying close attention to the historical human rights abuses in the 20th century in her home country, Latvia. Muižniece completed her BFA at the University of Saskatchewan (2017).

**Zoë Schneider** is a sculptor, curator, and arts administrator who transforms found and fabricated materials into artworks that investigate corporeality within social systems. Schneider's works explore various phenomenon and experience, invoking responses ranging from quiet contemplation to interactive engagement. Schneider is the final year of the MFA program at the University of Saskatchewan.





Small informational label on the left wall.

Small informational label on the wall near the door.

EXIT

Vertical text on a wall display.

Vertical text on a wall display.

Vertical text on a wall display.

Map or large informational poster on the wall.

Small informational labels on the right wall.

Small informational labels on the right wall.



**Qiming Sun** is a painter, sculptor, and printmaker with a special interest in oil painting and ceramics. Sun's works explore occult paganism as well as other traditions and philosophies related to the cultural systems of his home region in southern China where Sichuanese, Yunnanese and Tibetan influences intersect. Sun is the second year of the MFA program at the University of Saskatchewan.

**Negar Tajgardan** is a visual artist with a special interest in sculpture and installation art. Tajgardan's works are based on ideas of displacement related to her experience of coming from Iran, a developing country with a high rate of emigration. She is completing her MFA degree at the University of Saskatchewan.

**Marie Webster** is a visual artist located in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Her work is engaged in matters of identity, sexuality, and connection to the natural world. She is drawn to the ephemerality of human experience and expresses this through performance, sculpture, and painting. She is currently completing an MFA degree at the University of Saskatchewan.

**Emily Zdunich** works as an interdisciplinary artist with a focus on painting and sculpture. She is interested in the human condition and exploring connections between the physical body and emotional body in her artwork. She completed her BFA at the University of Saskatchewan (2017).

Studio professor, **Susan Shantz**, works in multi-media sculpture and installation and has exhibited her work across Canada and internationally. She is interested in embodied ways of knowing and questioning the dualities of nature and culture. She has received Canada Council and Arts Board grants to support her work which is in numerous public and private collections. Shantz teaches sculpture and extended media in the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Saskatchewan.

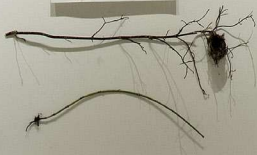
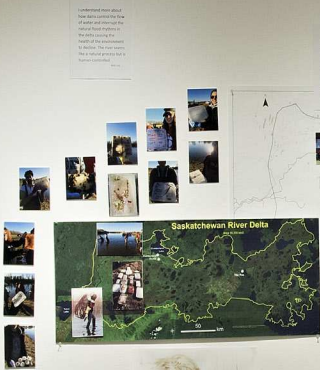
Guest Artist, **Basia Irland** is an author, poet, sculptor, installation artist, and activist who creates international water projects. Through her work, Irland offers a creative understanding of water while examining how communities of people, plants, and animals rely on this vital element. She is a Fulbright Scholar, National Geographic writer and Professor Emerita, Department of Art and Art History, University of New Mexico, where she established the Arts and Ecology Program.

Environmental science professor, **Dr. Graham Strickert**, is a community-engaged researcher who seeks to better understand how different people think about, manage and govern environmental change with a particular focus on water security and natural hazards. He is interested in multiple ways of knowing (science, arts, and traditional knowledge) and collaborative communication. He is Assistant Professor in the School of Environment and Sustainability and a founding member of the Global Institute for Water Security at the University of Saskatchewan.





Two specimens of  
Columbian ground  
squirrel (Sciurus harrisi)  
skull in a bag.  
Skull in a bag.  
Skull in a bag.  
Skull in a bag.  
Skull in a bag.  
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*In the beginning of the class I had a superficial idea of water. Now, I really try to think of water as a living thing and treat it with more respect and understanding.*

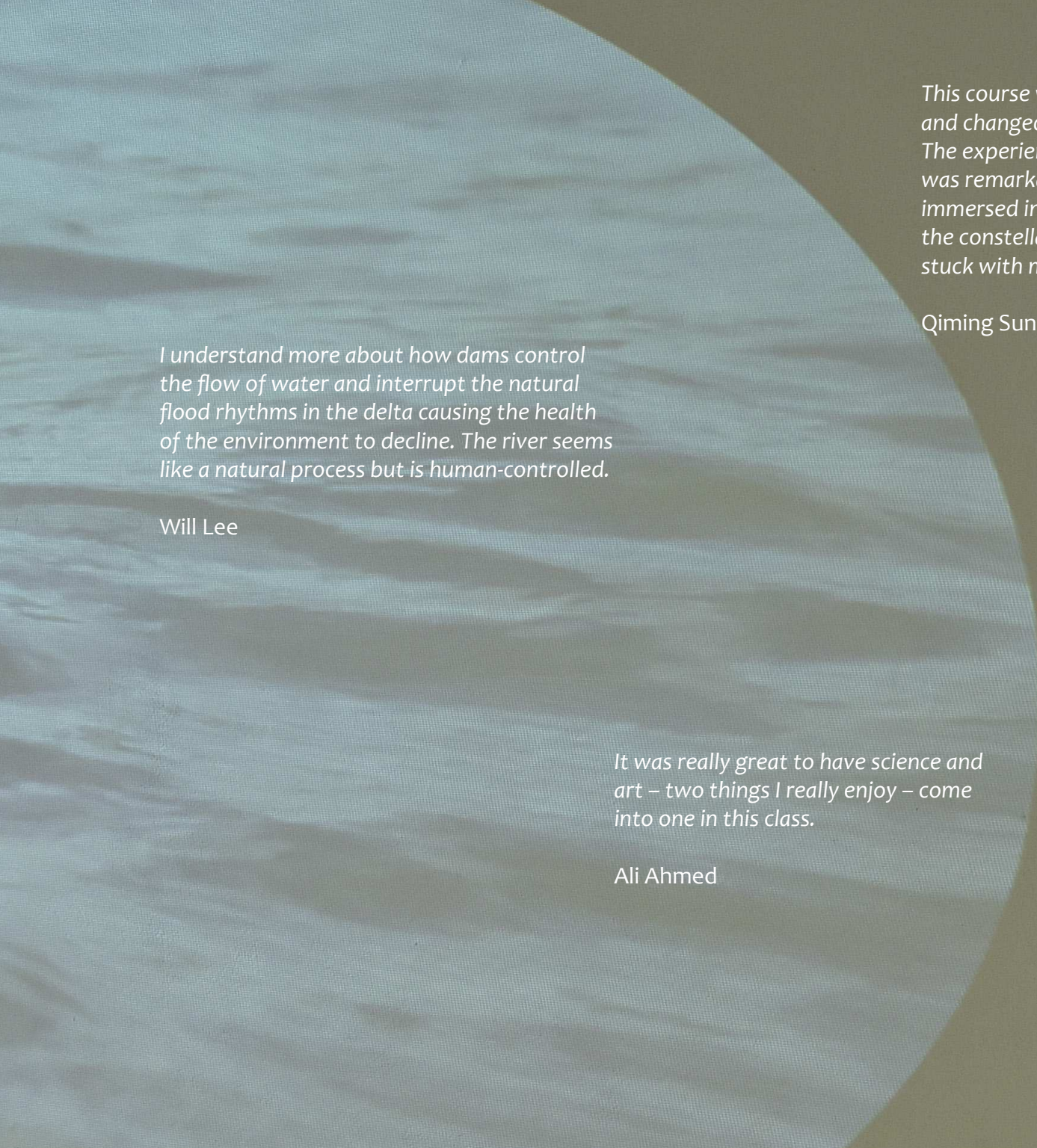
Jenelle Dreaver

*I now have a better understanding of the impact that humans have on our water systems and how vital they are to our survival.*

Hillary Kirk

*This course helped us focus on the research aspect before creating something ... trying to incorporate all the experiences into something other people can really feel.*

Emily Zdunich



*I understand more about how dams control the flow of water and interrupt the natural flood rhythms in the delta causing the health of the environment to decline. The river seems like a natural process but is human-controlled.*

Will Lee

*This course was absolutely amazing and changed my way of working. The experience at Cumberland House was remarkable ... to be completely immersed into nature ... the sounds ... the constellations and aurora. It really stuck with me.*

Qiming Sun

*It was really great to have science and art – two things I really enjoy – come into one in this class.*

Ali Ahmed

## Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the University of Saskatchewan for such strong support for this unique learning experience: The Gwenna Moss Centre for Teaching and Learning provided a *Provost's Project Grant for Innovative Practice in Collaborative Teaching and Learning* and an *Experiential Learning Fund* that assisted with the field trips and residency at Mistik Lodge, Cumberland House. The visit of international, guest eco-artist, Basia Irland, was funded by a Linking Fellowship from the Centre for Culture and Creativity (ICCC) with additional support for her public lecture provided by the School of the Environment and Sustainability (SENS) and the Broadway Theatre. We thank the Office of the Vice-President, Research, for funds to assist with the creation of the documentary film, *Becoming Water*, by 291FilmCo.

Special thanks to Gary and Karen Carriere of Mistik Lodge, for so generously sharing the delta with all of us! And infinite gratitude to Cumberland House Delta Stewardship Committee members: Renee Carriere, Beverly Cheechoo, Gerald Favel, Veronica Favel, Dennis Fossneuve, Denise McKenzie, Ricky Ratzlaf and to Kelvin McKay, Mayor Northern Village of Cumberland House who helped us access the delta despite logistical challenges. Thanks as well to Chris Matzke and Elizabeth Babyn who provided extra sets of eyes for safety, logistics and art-making assistance during our trip to the Delta.

Photography by: Ali Ahmed (pg. 37 right) Hillary Kirk (pgs. 7, 10, 12-13), William Lee (pgs. 1, 4-6, 8-9, 11), Barbara Reimer (pgs. 3, 14-28, 30-45), and Zoë Schneider (pg. 29).







