Marian Penner Bancroft & Hugh Brody / "within that trace": A Conversation

Hugh Brody: We are sitting in a small sunlit room in a house in Suffolk, England. Outside are the tidal marshes, and wide meadows thick with wild flowers. Large, ancient oak trees show where there are ancient rights of way and long-forgotten gravel pits. The skies are immense. I know this is a landscape we both love. I also know that your work is linked to landscape—even, very recently, to this Suffolk landscape. So this seems a good place to be talking to you about your work, and about the amazing show of your work that has been such a wonderful feature in the Vancouver Art Gallery over the last few months.

The Vancouver show is of work from a particular period in your life, from 1975 to 2000. But your life as a working artist goes back earlier. When you first became a photographer—where did you point the camera?

Marian Penner Bancroft: At my friends at camp, borrowing my sister Judith's camera. Then, with my own first camera I looked at the landscape when our family travelled by car across the US to Minneapolis where my father was teaching for a summer. I photographed along the way through Yellowstone Park, Montana, Wyoming, South Dakota, North Dakota to Minnesota.

HB: How old were you?

MPB: Just turned 13.

HB: Did you have a feeling as you were taking those photographs, as a 13-year-old travelling across the landscape, that you were discovering yourself as well as the place you were looking at? Do you have a memory of that?

MPB: I think I have a memory of being amazed by what I was seeing and wanting to record it. I remember the disappointment of seeing my black-and-white prints after I had photographed some chipmunks; they had disappeared against the gravel. That was one of my first lessons in understanding how limited the camera is in being able to see, realising that a two-dimensional picture depends on a certain kind of light, certain kinds of scale, in order for something to be perceivable.

HB: So then you went to art school . . .

MPB: First of all I went to UBC. I was hungry for anything after high school. I had one remarkable art teacher while in high school, Gordon Adaskin. His openness and inquiring mind were an inspiration. At UBC, I studied everything that I could. They didn't have a studio art program, but I studied art history, theatre, philosophy, biology, German, English. I took as many courses as I could.

HB: When did you then do photography as an adult?

MPB: I started to do photography seriously when I was in my second year at the University, and I started to use my father's camera. My first husband had a darkroom and I made my first prints there. I got very excited about making pictures.

HB: What were you wanting to photograph?

MPB: My first photographs were more of people in their surrounds, which would include the landscape. But I was also interested in photographing that which you couldn't see, which was the space between people, really wanting to conjure up something of the energy that exists amongst people when they are relating to each other, with my camera and me being part of it, not separate from it. I wasn't wanting to remove myself from the process so much as I was wanting to create a set of coordinates that would allow a viewer to think about a mental state. I really wanted the camera's presence to be inside the shared experience, and not simply an onlooker.

HB: Can you talk about the work you did in the first years after university, the years between then and the first work in the recent Vancouver Art Gallery exhibition?

MPB: From 1967 to 1969, I was at the Vancouver School of Art studying with Jim Breukelman. I got my first job as a museum photographer at the Planetarium/Museum in Vancouver, and then moved to Toronto where I worked at the Royal Ontario Museum as a photographer. I then studied at Ryerson Polytechnic where they had a new program that was not oriented towards commercial photography. I did a graduate diploma year at Ryerson, with seven photographers and seven film-

makers in one class, working with Dave Heath and Gail Dexter. So I was studying still and working as a photographer.

HB: Did you exhibit at that time?

MPB: My first solo exhibition was in 1972 at the Baldwin Street Gallery of Photography in Toronto and was called "Vancouver, Toronto and in Between." These were black-and-white photographs that I had made in those cities and while travelling between the two.

HB: So already your first show is about your relationship to the landscape. Were you already thinking about landscape, memory, the relationship to these?

MPB: Absolutely. And place.

HB: Perhaps we should go back to your becoming an artist. Do you have a sense of yourself emerging as an artist and as a photographer as separate personal developments?

MPB: Yes and no. I always wanted to be an artist and started out drawing and painting. And when I became a photographer I was conscious that I was functioning in a slightly parallel world to that of contemporary art, which was a little distressing to me: my concerns were not always consistent with traditional photography even though that was my medium. So it wasn't until the mid-to-late 70s when I realized that I didn't have to be constrained by the conventions and orthodoxies of conventional photography.

HB: What would you say those conventional orthodoxies were?

MPB: Primarily formal considerations, the way one "should" make prints and frame and present them, along with a perceived need for the work to show a certain kind of social consciousness that was rooted in certain traditions, mostly American and European, as seen in the photos of Henri Cartier Bresson, Robert Frank, Diane Arbus: all photographers whose projects were just as much journalistic as they were embedded in an art discourse.

I wanted to be in both arenas and I wasn't quite sure how to negotiate the space in between. I certainly depended on my colleagues to help me orient myself

within my practice. So I spent time with people whose ideas I found interesting, enabling me to expand my practice rather than stay on the straight and narrow path of conventional photography.

HB: Did you always know you were going to be an artist? And did you come from a background that gave value to that choice?

MPB: Yes, absolutely. My mother and father encouraged me and my sisters, always, to be creative, whether it was with music, writing, or with drawing and painting. As a young woman my mother had aspired to being an artist, but was unable to for all those economic reasons of the 1930s. She became a nurse. They paid her to train. But on her summer holidays she would go to Emma Lake in Saskatchewan, which is an artists' colony, and paint. And then she had four daughters. She painted us.

HB: So she was wishing you to be an artist. And did your family have an idea of what art must be, such as my family would have had—what you might call "bourgeois high art"? Paintings in galleries; originals in elegant frames on the drawing room walls?

MPB: I don't remember them being particularly restrictive in what they considered to be art. A couple of my uncles were artists, not well known, but some of my father's colleagues at UBC were better known, like Gordon Smith. There was a sense that this was a possible future. And I don't think the kind of art that my parents had in our home was conservative at all. It was made by their friends, who were their contemporaries.

HB: It was modern, in the general sense of the word.

MPB: Yes, it was.

HB: You come from part-Mennonite and part-Scottish ancestry. Can you say something about the relationship between this background and your art?

MPB: I didn't really grow up as a Mennonite. My father came from a Mennonite family, but he had left the faith, as it were, at 21, so I grew up with cultural references to the Mennonites in terms of music and food. Mennonites and art-

making—I didn't really have a clear sense of that. Nor did I have it in relation to the Scots-Presbyterians. I think it was my parents, as products of their own immigrant and settler backgrounds, with their desire to learn and their love of music, art, and language, who influenced me more.

HB: Something in your work that has always struck me is the complexity of your relationship to landscape. Landscape is something with which you have an intense, multi-level relationship. And landscape for you is something vast. Does that connect to the fact that your family comes from Scotland and Russia?

MPB: It's absolutely central to my project, and I think that I've been involved in the same project as far back as I can remember.

HB: Could you define the project?

MPB: The project, I suppose, is to reconcile the experience of growing up in one place physically, with the phenomenon of an imagination that is culturally occupied territory. An imagination fed by British, Scottish, German, Russian literature, music, art and poetry. Most of what I grew up with had almost nothing to do with British Columbia.

HB: Does that mean you felt alienated in British Columbia?

MPB: Well, I felt both completely at home and yet always puzzled. That puzzlement would be the source of my moving into making pictures and having a very pictorial way of dealing with the world. I love maps. I like to know where north and south and east and west are, to be able to find my way to places I've lived in in the past, to be able to go there again and recognize landmarks. I've done this from a very early age.

HB: That's so significant, isn't it? Your need to orient yourself. Would you say this was linked to being disoriented, or something more positive than that?

MPB: I suppose you could look at a question like that from many perspectives; I wouldn't have been conscious as a child of any disorientation on a large social scale. But there would have been forces at work given my parents' anxieties and discontent in terms of their own dislocations. My father was thousands and thousands of miles from where he lived until he was nine, near the Black Sea. And my mother grew up in Manitoba, a wide, flat, open landscape. I don't think it was easy for either of them,

coming to the coast where they were hemmed in by mountains, rain and darkness, but those anxieties existed beyond my consciousness. Who knows why I've always felt the need to orient myself visually? Maybe the need was always to be able to find my own way home.

HB: For many artists, there's a moment in their lives when they realize that art is not just something that they like doing, or something that they happen to be good at doing, but is something existential that transcends any of those. Realizing it's what they are. When did that moment strike you?

MPB: The only single moment I remember was when looking at an issue of *Creative Camera*, which was a British photography magazine in the 70s. It showed photos that weren't of the camera club variety. They were, to my mind, more serious, more beautiful, more purposeful, more provocative, all of that. And I remember thinking, "Oh, yes, THIS is what I want to be doing." And feeling a certain kind of hunger to be engaged with this medium at a very, very deep level. That was about 1970.

HB: Then you found yourself in a community of artists?

MPB: No, I didn't actually, except when I was at school in Toronto; it was when I came back to Vancouver in 1971 that I became involved with a group of artists. This was also a time when there was money available from the federal government in the form of Local Initiative Project grants and Opportunities for Youth. There were ways that one could actually be involved with others in projects of our own devising and earn a living. $100 a week. It seemed huge at the time. The first group that I was involved with was called "See Site." This was a group of five women and a couple of guys. We taught photography, we had poetry readings—but all of us were involved in photography as artists. The women were the core of the group.

HB: Is this at the moment of feminist consciousness that seemed of such vital importance in the early 1970s?

MPB: Yes, it was. The group included Cheryl Sourkes, amongst others. There was a very lively scene of artists and architects at the time. There were various groups like Intermedia and there were many overlaps. Later on in the 70s, I worked with

a women's media collective called Isis, and also with a group of photographers who produced an artists' book called *13 Cameras*, a project initiated by Michael de Courcy.

HB: Did Vancouver in 1972 seem quite far away from places that thought they were the centres of art?

MPB: Not really. We were far enough away that we also knew what we had was unique.

HB: So you were your own centre.

MPB: That's true. Vancouver was a destination for many people. It was a time when there were a lot of Americans coming to Vancouver.

HB: The Vietnam War.

MPB: Yes, draft dodgers and war resisters added a huge amount to the culture. Plus there were many immigrants coming from all over, but primarily English-speaking countries at that time as well as Toronto, Montreal, and other parts of Canada. The city felt lively, fresh.

HB: . . . and confident . . .

MPB: Right. We didn't have a sense of "Oh, we're just a little village over here on the coast"—which is really what we were.

HB: But you were among a community of people who had found a place they wanted to be, in which they could be very expressive and free. It's a wonderful combination of factors.

MPB: There were many lively conversations going on at the time, with a very spirited contemporary arts scene that is still talked about. Important American artists were spending time in Vancouver—people like Robert Smithson and the art critic Lucy Lippard from New York. So there were conversations going on between New York and Vancouver, Toronto and Vancouver, Halifax and Vancouver that don't exist now in quite the same way. The Western Front was a hub for some of

this, contributing to a sense of confidence among Vancouver artists that enabled them to locate themselves in larger arenas than just this city.

HB: There's also a sense that British Columbia, was—and still is, of course—a well-spring of wonderful and amazing and troubling landscape and history.

MB: True

HB: 1975 marks the beginning of the work in the Vancouver Art Gallery exhibition: twenty-five years of your working life. Would you say the work we see in this exhibition represents the first phase of your mature work? Would you think there's a body of work that precedes this?

MPB: There is a body of work that precedes it. But I would say this marks a certain moment—when my work became part of a larger conversation and when I felt more certain about the shifts that were occurring in it. In 1976, I became associated with the Nova Gallery in Vancouver, run by Claudia Beck and Andrew Gruft. It was one of the first serious photography galleries in the country. Andrew was from South Africa, Claudia was an American. They had both come to UBC, he to teach architecture and she to teach art history. So they came with wide perspectives, and they wanted something to happen in Vancouver. Their gallery was a kind of nexus for a certain kind of serious appreciation of a full range of photographic practices, historical and contemporary. Everyone from Alfred Stieglitz to Ed Ruscha. Jeff Wall showed his first back-lit transparency at Nova, the format for which he's best known. The earliest work in this recent exhibition of mine was first shown at the Nova Gallery in 1977.

HB: Which is that?

MPB: "For Dennis and Susan: Running Arms to a Civil War." Dennis Wheeler, my sister Susan Penner's husband, was a filmmaker and writer and an important person to me especially in terms of the conversations that we had around art and photography. And he was family. He was also very inclusive in his engagement with contemporary art and artists, and valued highly the work of women artists.

HB: So your photographing the circumstances around his illness is full of meaning, and poignancy.

MPB: It was a cooperative effort. He wanted me to make the photos and I wanted to do them. It was a privilege to share that time with him and with Susan.

HB: Did he know he was dying?

MPB: He certainly knew he was possibly terminally ill. But the photographs were not about dying; they were about living with a certain awareness of mortality. At the time I was making the photographs we had every hope that Dennis would survive the leukemia: he was having a bone marrow transplant, in 1977 a new procedure that offered great hope. When we realized that he wasn't going to survive I didn't make any more photographs.

HB: That series of images is an extraordinary encounter with the sense of mortality. It's intensely and powerfully disturbing in wonderful ways. Of course it's about death, but it's also about youth, and it's also about looking back at youth, isn't it? In 2012, you see photographs taken in the 1970s and we are all young and beautiful. There is a sense of extraordinary life and youth, which comes from the photographs being looked at across a large span of time.

MPB: It's one of the things that I love about the medium. Something photographed last week looks pretty normal but twenty-five years later seems completely different. Whether it's the cars or clothing or streetscapes that have changed, or your memories of what has been. For example, when I made "spiritland / Octopus Books," I was thinking about the loss of a particular bookstore, and had no idea that twenty-four years later many bookstores would be gone. Now, one can also look at 4th Avenue and see how completely and utterly it has changed.

HB: The way in which photographs accumulate meaning over time—no other art form does that.

MPB: Not the same way.

HB: It's that accumulation of meaning that makes photography magical, I think. It's especially true of your work, the Dennis Wheeler piece, the bookstore; and then you take another step in your work, don't you? You don't just take photographs that accumulate meaning, you look for the meaning that might be accumulatable, if there is such a word.

MPB: That's true. There also came a certain point when I realized that text was absolutely necessary. With the series of Dennis and Susan I realized that I couldn't stand by these photos all the time to explain them. I would have to write. In the photographs from Ukraine and from Scotland I'm very, very conscious that you may not have much sense at all of all that has taken place in those locations, without the accompanying texts.

HB: You have a very powerful feeling for words and love of words, so writing presumably doesn't feel at all awkward to you.

MPB: It's not easy for me, but it does feel natural. I've never really been of the mind that a photo should be able to exist without any kind of text. I just don't think that photographs can always do all the work themselves.

HB: With text you can make them do another kind of work.

MPB: Yes. You can locate them, you can contextualize them. I think about both Allan Sekula and John Berger, and their writings about photography. They have influenced me greatly in terms of their advocating for—in Berger's term—a "radial system" around the photograph which includes the everyday, the historic, and the economic. And Sekula's idea that photographs are not like words, that there is no dictionary where there are agreed-upon meanings. Each person looking at a photograph will want to create their own meaning. So if you want to be able to communicate something particular then you have to provide tethers.

HB: Perhaps you can talk about the kind of relationship you have to family, and how you think it connects to your work.

MPB: I suppose I see the family as the most intimate unit of the organism of which we are all a part. It's the most recognizable constellation of characters and people that one can comprehend in contemplating the larger sphere in which we exist. I feel that those people, those bonds, are the most understandable aspects of the mystery of what it means to be a human being on planet earth.

HB: Many people might be aware of this concentration of meaning in their family but would not want to immerse themselves in it.

MPB: I suppose not, but I'm curious about it all because it's so infinitely variable and yet patterns do exist.

HB: In your own life, or across other lives?

MPB: Oh, I think they exist across many people's lives. For example, you will find patterns in the stories of migration, the stories of movements of groups of people or individuals from one place to another as a result of wars, or their owning or not owning land. That proprietary relationship to land, I think, is a pivotal one in terms of determining movement of families around the planet. Certainly both of my parents' families came from very far away from where I was born, whether it's the north of Scotland or Holland, or Europe down near the Black Sea. Movement from these places was also driven by religious strife, political upheavals, and economic pressures.

HB: Do you think some of the intensity in your family had to do with the immigrant syndrome, as it's sometimes referred to? The family of the newcomer to a strange land looks very much to itself as the core of protection and economic hope.

MPB: I haven't thought about it that way.

HB: I wanted to explore your relationship to family because it seems so intense. Your sisters, your parents, your ancestors are all present in your work. Your family seems to be embedded deeply in the project.

MPB: I certainly see myself as distinct from them but also of them at the same time. For me to examine the family is to be examining my own psyche, just in a larger way. I'll refer once again to the idea of the organism of which I am a part. There are distinctions, but there are also similarities. I don't know if that makes sense.

HB: I remember I did a group discussion once with a group of psychotherapists, describing the integrity and the nature of the bond in the Inuit family. And a woman there said, "It sounds terrible to me, exactly what I've always wanted to run away from." That's the opposite of you, isn't it?

MPB: Yes, it is. The family sustains me in a certain way and I am interested in its structures. I think we all derive a certain sense of who we are from being able to locate ourselves within a larger group such that we feel at once both connected and independent. My daughter and husband are part of me / not part of me, central and at my edges, as I'm sure I am for them.

HB: Family is also tied to landscape, isn't it?

MPB: Somehow, yes. And I think part of my original impulse to visit places of origin came from my desire to have a physical experience of those places related to my forbears, to know how the air they breathed smelled, how the winds that continually blow felt, what the weather was like, the soil. I wondered what had actually come out of those physical properties of a place, and whether there was anything at all that had persisted in the body, in my body. I did experience something in Scotland of a very intense kind, a sense which I found very moving. One could reduce it to something as simple as the strong winds, which I don't normally experience in a place like Vancouver. But I won't. Time seemed to have a different shape there. In Ukraine it was very, very different. When I think about it, the Mennonites had only been there for 200 years, so it wasn't really their place. They were not indigenous. But in Holland, which is not unlike Suffolk, where I am right now, there is something else. Something I feel drawn to for reasons that I can't quite figure out—the skies, the light. It's all very sustaining.

HB: Perhaps you could describe going to Scotland or Ukraine—what you expected when you went there.

MPB: Along with physically being in those places I also really wanted to make pictures of them and see what they looked like in that flattened form. In Scotland I don't know what I expected other than to actually see the place where my grandfather had come from, and which was very much a part of my mother's culture. To see where my grandfather had been born and lived as a boy. But it was stirring, and I had a sense of humans having been there for a very long time, even though it's quite empty of people now. They were cleared out for sheep farms. And to go there with a camera seemed almost like trying to kill an elephant with a stick. There was a kind of disproportion between the instrument of expression and

the actual experience of the place. Which is why I felt the need to add the text and language to that installation.

HB: The elephant that you are trying to take with a stick is made up of things that are not to be seen?

MPB: In a way, yes. There's so much of it that exists in the imagination and the photograph itself is such a small trace. What I really wanted to be able to do was to create, within that trace, enough coordinates for a viewer to be able to "add water and reconstitute."

HB: When I stood in that extraordinary room of yours, with the photographs of Ukraine on one side and Scotland on the other, I felt quite surprising kinds of grief. I wonder if that comes as a surprise to you, or do you feel able to explain why I might feel grief standing there?

MPB: [Long pause] I think for me those images are mixtures, huge mixtures of beauty and sadness at the same time.

HB: What is the sadness?

MB: I think it's partly in the emptiness. There are hardly any people in the photos. The poetic texts on the wall are the more material references to human life. In both cases the words refer to a young boy's leaving one place and arriving in another: one, my father coming from Ukraine to Saskatchewan and the other, my mother's father coming from Scotland to Manitoba. Both experienced the excitement of leaving one place that was familiar and arriving in another that was unknown. But I think also it might be the image in Kiev of Babi Yar, the site of the massacre—almost two hundred thousand people, including thirty-three thousand Jews. It looks so verdant and dark. I think of the anguish—there was anguish all around—and I know it is embedded in those landscapes.

HB: I think that's what it is to me. Of course, you set the tone with the text about migration. There's something very poignant about the map of Europe that you have, because it's German. The Eastern European place names in German evoke the murderous occupation of those landscapes. Was that all in your mind?

MPB: Yes.

HB: And then Scotland, the Highland Clearances came into my mind.

MPB: Yes, certainly, yes. I included the photos of the faces of ancestors who came over and some descendents, in an attempt to create a possibility of overlaying those faces on those landscapes, inviting you to pull them into each other within the space of the gallery.

HB: I had many thoughts about the similarities between those two sets of ancestors, thoughts about the convergence of type. They look severe and patriarchal on both sides, as though they came from the same stock and yet they came from opposite ends of Europe.

MPB: Well, they were both Protestant groups, so they had that in common. The Scottish-Presbyterians and the German-speaking Russian Mennonites in my family had very, very similar values—they loved music, thriftiness, unfussy living, and education. Both my grandfathers played the violin, were teachers; both my grandmothers were named Catherine/Katherine and their mothers were named Catherine/Katherine too. They all loved poetry. Those seem like small things and yet beyond the names, they indicate a certain capacity for making their own pleasure.

HB: I wanted to move to the other kind of history that your work evokes, perhaps less directly and less often. Under your feet in British Columbia there are two realities. There are the immigrants, people like your family, yet beneath that is something that has been disappeared. Can you speak about how this other history has figured in your projects?

MPB: I'm very conscious that I'm sitting on land that burbles with conflicted histories. I can't ignore that fact. I feel that I have no choice but to examine what it really means that all the non-aboriginal cultures have come and occupied this land as if it were their own.

HB: In your work, where do you acknowledge it?

MPB: "The Lost Streams of Kitsilano" was an attempt to conjure up an image of the city before all the building of houses occurred; "XA: YTEM," the piece about Hatzic Rock, was made at a time when the remains of an 8,000-year-old dwelling had been discovered in the Sto:lo territory of the Fraser Valley. I was so excited about that fact. I thought about the old argument for reserves and residential schools—that the First Nations people moved around and were nomadic and that they didn't really attach themselves to any particular place. And here was proof that they had. Of course they had. It was just expedient for the colonisers to speak and act as if it were not true. So that piece was an attempt to acknowledge the depth of the history that existed before we non-First Nations even got here. And the same with "Transfigured Wood." I did attempt to make photos where you would get a sense of how things looked before contact, and to think about that, and to think about a time longer than our own lives.

HB: When you're working on a piece like that, are you thinking about colonial history, reading about it, or is it more intuitive? Could you say a bit about your process?

MPB: I think about history a lot, I read a lot, I intuit, all of the above. Lots of research. Also, in "Transfigured Wood" I wanted the actual process of photography to be apparent in the physical presentation of the work. The big prints were meant to be something present in the room rather than seamless windows into another world.

HB: This brings us to what seems to be your great joy in and fascination with the actual making of prints.

MPB: Well, it's just one of the aspects of it that I take pleasure in. It's a very contemplative and solitary activity; it allows me to have quite an intimate relationship with the image. I can handle it, smell it, feel it. I'm not sitting in front of a computer moving things around with my finger. I'm not saying I will never take pleasure in that sort of process as well, but right now I still do enjoy making analogue prints. I like looking at them too.

HB: When you think about the Vancouver Art Gallery show, and as you look at it now rather than when you were hanging it, what do you think is the work that

is most important for you in it? Is there any way in which the show has surprised you?

MPB: I think the experience of seeing all of the work within a space where I could experience a kind of arc has been really thrilling for me. To be able to see how certain ideas progressed and changed—with a certain kind of infrastructure of my thinking and my life percolating through them all.

HB: What would you say were the main architectural features of that internal infrastructure?

MPB: It's always been important for me to have a thorough mix of both the formal and the emotional, so that it never falls strictly into one arena where I'm just dealing with formal issues. Looking at the actual material as a place of meaning has been a concern for me in terms of photography; the apparatus of the camera and the film are very much a part of the conversation that I'm having with the world. That mix of registers has always been extremely important—the structure and content of the work overlapping, so one can't really pull them apart.

HB: I am again and again struck by the incredibly intense interplay between history and memory in your work. Does it seem to you, as you embark upon a piece of work, that history and memory are core preoccupations—for the work itself, and of yourself?

MPB: When I'm making the work I'm not always thinking about memory. But after the fact it becomes about memory. Which is one of the curious things about photography—that like all of us it has a life: it is made up of the present, the past and the future, and where they all meet is in the imagination. So I think the work for me is about the construction of the imagination and how we are affected by a range of inputs into our actual experience, our imagined experience, or vaguely-remembered, mis-remembered experiences, that which is told to us that happened to us; that which we read about happening two hundred years ago; that which we might intuit we are experiencing of the past when we are in a particular landscape. And that's one of the things that drives me to particular places—that odd hope that something will have persisted from the past so that I can feel myself to be in this continuum. Does that make sense?

HB: Absolutely. And do you think you're placing yourself in the continuum, placing yourself in a flow from the past into the future? Are the things in your photographs opposed to, or apart from, things in your consciousness?

MPB: I guess I don't separate them so much. While the work will always have a life independent of me, it will never be so independent that there won't be some connection to my history—maybe to who I was, once I'm gone; I don't know.

HB: Where do you think your work belongs?

MPB: So far it belongs in galleries or homes. I have done some work that has been out in the street, public art works which have been quite wonderful to be able to do. Like the permanently installed markers of "Lost Streams." And a series of 11 x 17 foot photographs entitled "Root System," which were installed for six months at a site where the Canada Line was being built. Those were drive-by images that could be seen over a period of time—huge images of the underside of a particular tree that had been felled in Stanley Park by the big storm of 2006. That installation was an anomaly for me in terms of having photographs outside.

The space of the gallery is one that is so loaded and is a relatively privileged place to be. But so far, along with the book form and one's walls and floors, it's the only one that really works for me. I'm only just beginning to understand an online platform as a production space.

HB: Is that a direction in which you think your imagination will go?

MPB: Possibly, but maybe not. I am still attached to film, and the physical experience of the work and the physical experience of the photograph. I have an abiding interest in the life of objects—not just photographs, but also ceramics or carvings or anything that is actually humanly made that you can hold, that you can touch. That to me is still an important experience.

HB: I am very struck by this ability you have to engage with both the old and the new. You are deeply engaged with traditional media, the traditional technology, and yet you are very modern in your relationship to the web, to Facebook, to modern communications.

MPB: Well, I think it's necessary if you want to have some understanding of what most of the people around you are experiencing, especially as a teacher working with students who are usually between 19 and 25. It's so much a part of their world in a way that it simply wasn't when I was that age. I do need to understand how their imaginations are functioning and how much they are living in a world of simultaneous realities. They are much more practiced at it than I am.

HB: What you say is very striking. You're talking about keeping up with your students who live in a creative world where image making is up for grabs. People can create fantastic images on their mobile phones. The making of images has gone into a new dimension, hasn't it?

MPB: Oh, I'm curious about it. I'm certainly not closed to the possibilities that exist in that realm. But it's kind of hard work for me to go there without having a really inspiring reason to do so. The one change that has occurred in my work has been the use of video. Digital cameras have made it possible for me to shoot live footage—moving footage—in a way that's much more accessible than it ever was before when you were limited with a Super 8 camera to four minutes' worth of time. Not that there weren't charms attached to that technology, but I do really love to shoot movement.

HB: And of course having it instantly on screen.

MPB: Well, not quite instantly. There's the work of editing . . .

HB: Not instantly, but without the technical processes, or the uncertainty, that were part of filming in Super 8, for example.

MPB: Yes. You don't have to send it away to a lab. I think you'll find that a lot of photographers are using video in a way that seems kind of a natural progression, and that they would have been making video more if it had been a little easier all along. I have just been at dOCUMENTA (13), where there was an amazing number of video and sound installations, all quite immersive and wondrous, that would have been extremely difficult to produce in the past. The experience of them is so different from sitting in the cinema, with a hundred other people, watching a conventional film. Walking into a space and having the kind of solo experience of

a video that you might have in front of paintings in the gallery is a very different proposition.

HB: Thinking about those 12 years following the span of work represented in the exhibition, what directions do you think your work has taken? What preoccupations emerge in your work since 2000 that would be a major addition to that exhibition?

MPB: The most continuous formal thread has been working in colour, so "By Land and Sea: Prospect and Refuge" was my first venture into printing colour and having it become central. I was very conscious that colour photographs are about the surface in a way that black-and-white ones are not. Conscious that when you look at a black and white photograph you are seeing a reference to something else. Whereas with colour it's easy to stop right at the surface of the image.

HB: It seems you're getting it all with colour.

MPB: Yes, which is why I continue to use language around my photographs to change the way they are received; to direct, to some extent, the response of the viewers—so that they understand that things that aren't visible are as much a part of the work as that which you can see.

HB: So colour's a new dimension—colour with text.

MPB: And sound. I used sound in the 70s and 80s, and left it for a long time and have begun to use it again as a way of activating the space of the gallery. Also, with the two series "Human Nature" and "CHORUS," I've been working with a square format rather than the rectangle, wanting to explore the territory of the square, a kind of flat place that doesn't necessarily privilege up and down and horizons and cinematic views. It is an acknowledgement that I'm dealing with a two-dimensional space. I like the dance that happens between the clearly two-dimensional space of the square and the three-dimensional experience of the work. At the same time I'm wanting to use that structure to look at aspects of the landscape and language that are shot through with a range of information.

HB: Does that take you to new actual landscapes?

MPB: It's taken me from Paris, looking at a very urban mix of people and materials and design in the streets, all the way to the North Saskatchewan River in my series "Human Nature," with views from where the old fur trading forts were. The fur trade was driven by fashion in Great Britain. It was all about providing beaver fur pelts for top hats, and when they fell out of fashion the bottom fell out of that industry. But at the same time, the trade was creating entirely new—dynamic and harmful and exciting and terrible and wonderful—relationships between Europeans and indigenous cultures here. Along with these photographs I presented others from Friesland in the Netherlands, where there was huge work done on the flatlands in order to hold back the sea, reclaim the earth, and farm on a huge scale. That landscape is related to the history of the Mennonites, who originated there about 400 years ago. I combined those with images from Suffolk in England, a place that was connected to the second World War and the supposed dropping of the bombs, excess bombs. So I was thinking about the military, agriculture, oil, the fur trade, religion—and that whole mix of human preoccupations. My concerns were a combination of the historical and personal, the religious with the economic, all of it related to the human activities of the fur trade, resource extraction, agriculture—issues addressed in your writing and films around hunter-gatherer cultures and the agricultural aggressions that have occurred on the planet.

HB: As you're speaking I'm realizing that these are new fields of inquiry and new formats, but the underlying conceptual projects are still very similar—history, memory, and the link between the surface and the hidden historical meaning.

MPB: Absolutely. And each one of those photographs has a text attached to it which is, I hope, illuminating in some way. So when you first see the photo you might see it simply as an image of something quite beautiful. But when you read the text the image is altered and thickened with information.

HB: I absolutely love that. And it resonates so widely, doesn't it? Almost everybody has some connection to this sort of question.

MPB: I think in Canada it's important that as many of us as possible understand the complexity of our history. So much damage has been done as a result of our not paying attention to the ramifications of what's happened in the past.

HB: History and land are always connected. There's no such thing as land without history.

MPB: Exactly. "CHORUS," a photo/video/text/sound installation that followed "Human Nature," came out of a time of realizing that CBC radio was being threatened by the Conservative Government, and was already quite reduced and altered. CBC radio has always been an amazing companion to me. I was thinking about the music that I grew up listening to, not only on the radio, but playing as a child, and realizing that so much of what I listened to came from Europe, be it Britain or Germany or France or Italy, and not so much from Canada. And realizing that those musics were very specifically from their time and from their place. So I decided to visit some of the places that were attached to a number of composers, and to try to evoke something of their time that spanned the period from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth. These were Schubert (Austria); Brahms (Germany); Elgar and Britten (the Malvern Hills and Suffolk in the UK). Alongside these I placed images of some places in Alberta associated with the great Canadian fur trader, surveyor, and map-maker David Thompson, along with a journal entry of his. Thompson lived and worked at the same time as Schubert, Brahms, Elgar and George Crabbe (the writer of the original story for Britten's opera *Peter Grimes*). He produced his own "magnum opus," the "Great Map" of northwestern North America.

HB: Is it ongoing, the composer/landscape link?

MPB: I think I'm moving into a different place with it, just being in Suffolk and thinking more about Benjamin Britten and Peter Grimes. I'm doing a closer read of one location through stills and video of some of that landscape such that it is not so much about that music from the past, but how one receives a landscape visually, when simultaneously experiencing the wind, movement, complex ideas, history, all of that. I am trying to figure out whether there is some way that I will connect it to my life in Vancouver, thousands and thousands of miles away. My body's in one place, my mind

in another. So that has persisted through my work—this idea of being two places at once.

HB: Music is a wonderful exemplifier of that, isn't it?

MPB: It is. In "CHORUS," I included sound recordings that I made which were mostly of the dawn chorus of birds in a number of different locations, sounds that would have been very similar even two hundred years ago, when Schubert was composing, or one hundred fifty years ago for Johannes Brahms, or less than that for Edward Elgar and Benjamin Britten. I also included in that exhibition a video that I edited from footage shot in Europe and the foothills and mountains of Thompson's Alberta and in Vancouver. So there was this kind of mixing of places and registers with a soundtrack of four songs by these composers, sung by women, all in one twenty minute video. The video entitled "In ceaseless motion" includes footage shot from a car, a train, a gondola, and while walking in locations ranging from Vancouver to Paris to Banff to Germany.

HB: Wonderful. Do you have a sense of what is lying beyond this work?

MPB: Beyond is an unknown journey! More travels in British Columbia. But for now I am immersed in working with the recent images and video from Suffolk, a nourishing landscape with no familial ties but one I've been drawn to through you and Juliet and the music of Britten. There's something about the openness here that is similar to Westham Island and the bird sanctuary in Ladner, and to a certain extent Holland and Caithness, up in the north of Scotland.

In Suffolk we are right across the water from Friesland (Holland). They say that about 10,000 years ago they were a single land mass. They call it Doggerland—a place where the Thames and the Rhine were connected! And so I think about the scale of our lives and how we think of the length of our lives as being an important measure. I'm someone who believes that we're actually part of something so huge that we can't actually comprehend how minuscule we are in relation to this larger organism. If I feel resonances that I can't quite explain, I think that they must exist on an atomic level too. I want to be able to pay attention to those things. Suffolk is a place where I think about another concentric ring outside the particulars of, say,

Vancouver, or family. It's where I might have a sense of myself within a string that is much longer and much bigger than my lifetime.

HB: As is contained within the specifics of your work.

MPB: Yes. I suppose I want to create a link that isn't linear, or at least a link to some linearity that is not easily perceptible.

HB: Something to do with the boundlessness of linkage? Or maybe a link to the boundless.

We speak now at a few weeks from the end of the exhibition. Is there a part of you that is dismayed? It's a wonderful representation of twenty-five years of your creative life. One of these days it's going to end. What do you make of that?

MPB: Well, I feel really fortunate that it has happened at all, and that there will be a catalogue, a trace of the exhibition's existence. I guess I'm becoming more and more aware of how things start and finish. I'm about to start my final year of teaching and am reconciled to the positive aspects of that. I only hope I am able to produce and show as much work again. It will be sad when this exhibition is over. It always is.

HB: It may look as if it's over, but it's not over. It lives on, in the catalogue of course, and it also lives on in what comes next in your work.

MPB: The saddest thing is putting work back in crates. Ha! That's the worst!

HB: Yet your new work is so alive. That seems to me to be the great achievement, the ongoing celebration.