

CANADIANART

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Phil Irish: Emotional Landscapes

GLENHYRST ART GALLERY OF BRANT, BRANTFORD AUG 28 TO OCT 31 2010

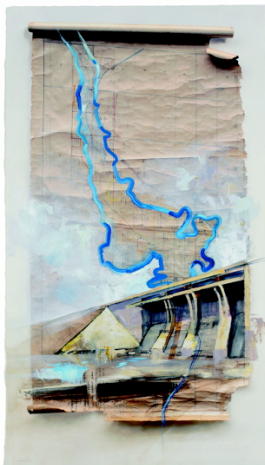
by SCOTT SAWTELL



Phil Irish *Contain and Release* 2009 Courtesy the artist / photo Robert McNair

Maps not only bring you to places you've never been, but also reveal the experiences of people who have come before. In *Watershed*—a series of works begun as part of the [Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery's River Grand Chronicles](#) in 2009 and since expanded upon—Phil Irish draws upon transformative place-based experiences that people have shared with him. These participants have sketched and annotated maps, tying their personal experiences to specific sites along the Grand River watershed. Currently, the results are on view as part of a group exhibition at the [Glenhyrst Art Gallery of Brant](#).

While the resident-provided maps and stories that Irish uses centre on the Grand, Irish is not interested in mere cartography, nor in a kind of simple journalism of events. He has taken the original maps and travelled to the sites, taking pictures, notes and sketches along the way.



Phil Irish *Annotated Reservoir* 2009 Courtesy the artist / photo Robert McNair.

At its core, the series is about nothing less than empathy. The tension and strength behind the work is that—despite the limits of entering another person's experience—these paintings embody the struggle to understand another, marking the path of how meaningful connections arise.

When one looks at the original, hand-drawn maps that have been digitally scanned and integrated into the paintings, it becomes clear that emotion and memory are emphasized over mathematical precision. The lyrical handwritten letter embedded in *The Pier* tells the tale of two lovers as one of them recalls a dream of meeting on a pier and it crumbling into the water as the couple escapes. It is a carefully composed painting that avoids excess sentimentality.

The amalgamation of art historical references, intricate editing of imagery and interest in complex storytelling in these works reminds one of the late [David Bierk](#). As with Bierk, the seductiveness of Irish's painting technique draws you into layers of meaning. It is refreshing to view work that rewards you with so many enriching subtexts.

www.glenhyrst.ca



Phil Irish *The Pier* 2009 Courtesy the artist / photo Robert McNair.