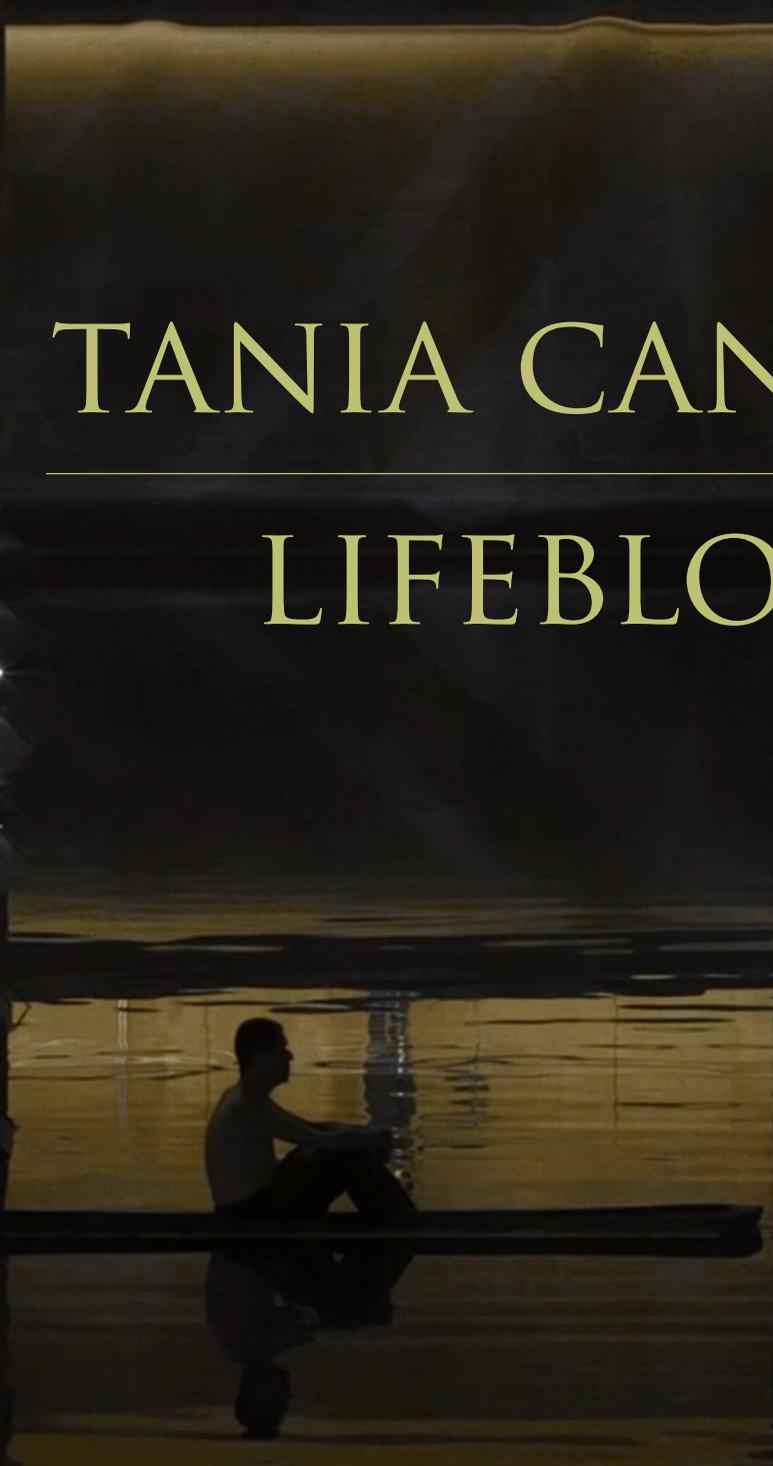


Exhibition Brochure



TANIA CANDIANI

LIFEBLOOD

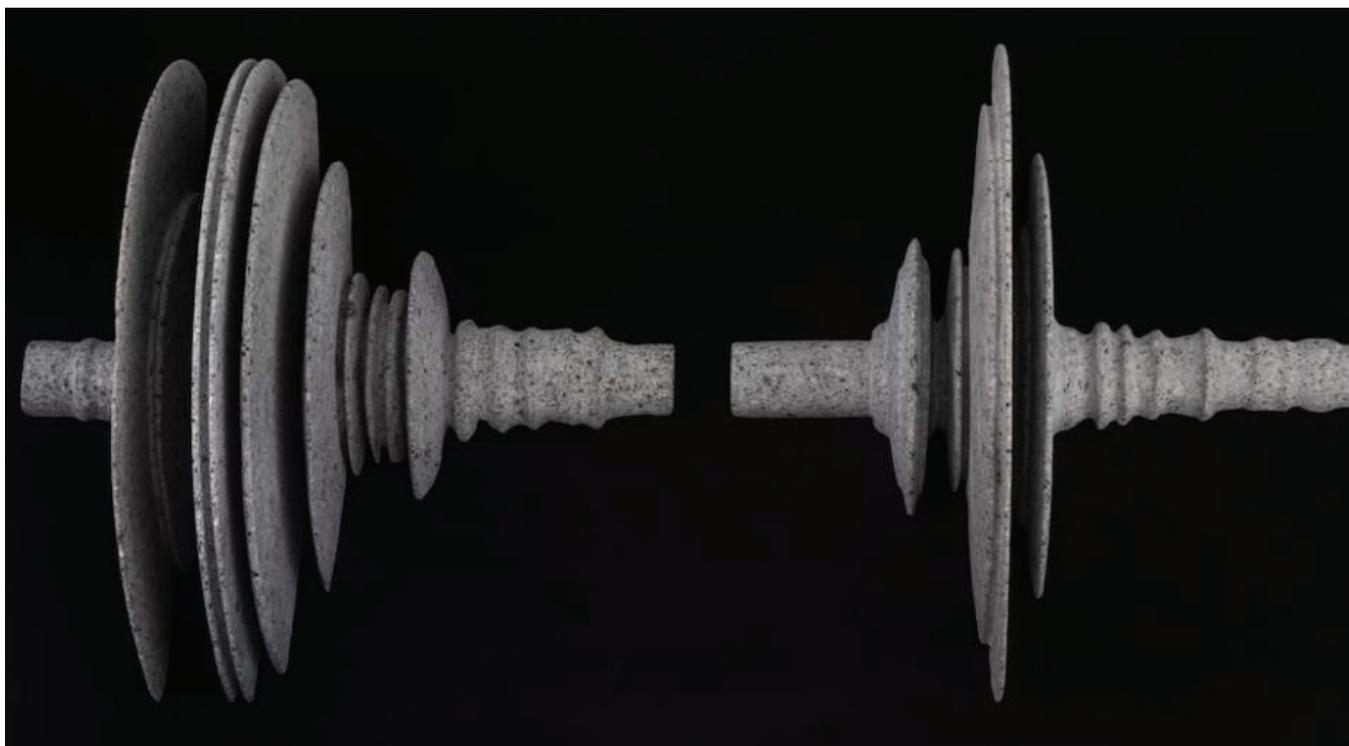


Blaffer Art Museum

September 22—November 19, 2023



Walking the River detail, 2019. A representation of the Potomac River assembled with stones. ©Tania Candiani 2019.



Los nombres del agua (The Names of Water) detail, 2022. Single-channel video, twenty-two circular canvases with embroidered words, twenty-two sandstone sculptures. ©Tania Candiani 2022.

When affirming one's place in the present via records of the past, we would presumably desire stability and fixity. Said archives should be entrenched and unchanging, providing the proverbial foundation upon which to build both identity and legacy. This is as much the case for individuals as it is for cities, regions, and countries – and is often the reason why official histories are as guarded as they are fraught, especially for those on the margins. In this catalog of record-keeping, the environment is a provocative, if no less amorphous repository to consider as our natural surroundings bear witness to the activities of humankind. Amongst mountains, trees, the skies above, and the land below, the water is an especially compelling sentinel, from lakes and rivers to oceans and seas. Proximity to water has often been the pre-requisite for human settlement, from ancient colonies to contemporary industry – and humanity looks habitually to liquid for life, being, and passage. Over multiple eras water has become both archetype and utility, symbol and commodity, with the unparalleled capacity to grow and nurture as well as kill and destroy. But can water, in its many forms and perpetual flux, record our history?

Over the past number of years, artist Tania Candiani has employed this question as both a proposal and platform as she probes the many latent chronicles that water collects. And while she draws first and often from the traditions and topography of her native Mexico, Candiani is a relentlessly transnational artist who continually looks to waterways when engaging cultures and cities around the world. A formative work in this ongoing endeavor is *The Name of Water* (2019), which evokes the tradition of a community in the Sierra Huasteca of eastern Mexico who spend one sacred night per year naming all the things that exist, so that they continue to exist at dawn. As she records this aspirational oral catalogue, video footage of water is interspersed with the voices of native speakers naming waterways in their respective languages. By recording and repeating both water and voice, Candiani positions the act of naming as a form of simultaneous resistance and preservation. She amplifies this gesture in sister translations of said naming, manifesting the plea for water's continued existence by way of embroidered textiles as well as stone sculptures. *The Names of Water* (2022) extends this action into an elemental

mantra, turning the soundwaves for bodies of water in a variety of Indigenous languages into stone sequences that resemble heartbeat monitors. In so doing, Candiani congregates the longevity of stone with the flight of sound and the fluidity of water to forge a symbiotic archive, where each element speaks one another to persist.

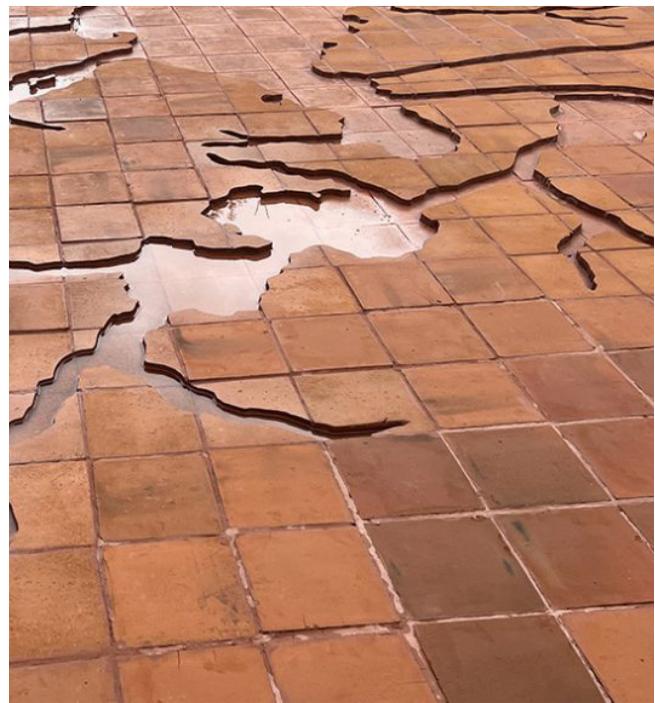
Sadly, not every name survives, and Candiani revisits the relationship between water, sound and historical technologies to commemorate waterways that have been lost to human development and ecological change. *Ríos antiguos, ríos entubados, ríos muertos (Ancient rivers, piped rivers, dead rivers)* (2018) is a sound installation that recalls the trajectory and memory of 21 rivers that once criss-crossed Mexico City by way of custom music boxes. As both ode and archive, Candiani carves cylinders out of wood with relief and grooves that translate the hydrographic course of each river into a musical “composition.” Audiences are then invited to play these elegiac music boxes in an otherwise empty and unadorned room, traveling their extinct path

by way of auditory resonance. A few years later, Candiani makes this passage increasingly material in *Cuenca (Basin)* (2022), which draws upon a 16th century map of the Valley of Mexico and its rivers, to mark tributaries that have since disappeared. Said rivers were once broad and abundant until they were systematically starved during the Spanish Conquest as part of a strategy of desiccation and territorial control. To remember and symbolically “re-fill” this river system, *Cuenca (Basin)* presents an outdoor ceramic tile mapping of the network and allows each inset to collect rain, which once more fills these channels with water. Audiences may walk on and across this solemn cartography, contributing to a ritualized form of remembrance that can only activate with the rainfall of nature, and our mournful steps.

Tracing the history and evolution of waterways with one’s steps has become a powerful and very personal gesture of agency for Candiani, who is not content to simply catalog. In her multi-faceted 2019 project *The Water Office*, she presents a platform for dissenting



Ríos antiguos, ríos entubados, ríos muertos (Ancient rivers, piped rivers, dead rivers) detail, 2018. Sound Installation. ©Tania Candiani 2018.



Cuenca (Basin) detail, 2022. Rustic Acatic clay, water jet cut. ©Tania Candiani 2022.

voices to function as “trenches” in the global competition for clean water which was predicted at the end of the 20th century. Inspired by geographer and naturalist Alexander van Humboldt (1769-1859), who was one of the first scientists to speak about climate change, she performed (and recorded) a literary, visual, and sound experience while walking along the Potomac River, in Washington DC. More specifically, Candiani chose excerpts from Humboldt’s “Personal Narrative” book, where the botanist narrates the world as an interconnected system of three-dimensional times as an ecological system. She then expanded this course to a public workshop titled *Walking the River* and gathered texts, recordings, frottage drawings, and found objects from the participants into a dual-pronged display and audiovisual essay. A humble rendering of the Potomac

assembled with stones from the river punctuated the installation and once again let rock and water meet. With a similar spirit, Candiani’s collection of fallen tree branches from a riverbank in Mexico ultimately led to the dazzling 2022 multimedia installation *Waterbirds (Migratory Sound Flow)* for the 23rd Sydney Biennale. The artist assembled said branches into a hanging river network whose shape resembles an aerial view of the Murray River basin in Australia. In this context, the waterways are further connected by the migrations of local waterfowl, which Candiani likens to “a large blood system.” Recordings of the migratory bird calls, in concert with the added music of clay ocarinas, shells and wooden flutes, evokes a complex, yet primordial ecosystem whose lifeblood is carried via water and sound.



Waterbirds. Migratory Sound Flow, 2022. The 23rd Sydney Biennale. Wooden structure with branches collected on the banks of the rivers of Veracruz, Mexico (red mangrove, Mexican maple, juniper and uvero); 40-channel electro-pneumatic system, 12 audio channels with software for generative composition; hoses, gourds, speakers, 40 clay ocarinas. ©Tania Candiani 2022.



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Tidal Choreography (still), 2023. Two channel video with sound, 24 minutes. ©Tania Candiani 2023.

We are now more cognizant than ever of the Anthropocene and humanity’s indelible – and mutational – imprint upon waterways and the environment. Urban, rural and so-called “untouched” nature are porous and interconnected, and Candiani is especially interested in the way human behaviors and cultural development align with evolving rhythms of the environment. In a work completed just months prior to her arrival in Houston, she spent a residency in the coastal village of Glin (Ireland) to analyze and amplify the symbiotic relationship of the townspeople with a nearby river. *Tidal Choreography* observes local residents swimming as the tides change, in concert with video above and below the waterline, field recordings, local music, and a recital of Irish words relating to water. Nature and culture are thusly interwoven, speaking to the fundamental exchange between human biology and surrounding geography.

And it is in this spirit that Candiani tells a story of Houston by way of the many bayous that weave their way across terrain that has poured concrete over swamp, widened and narrowed waterways, and endured storms, surges and floods too numerous to count. Her

exhibition *Lifeblood* speaks to the existential importance of water to this city and region, as well as the blood and violence it has spurred and seen spilled, from colonization and slavery to industrialization and contamination. The centerpiece of the show is the cinematic video work *Echoing Landscape* (2023), which marries footage of undeveloped bayou waters with the city’s cavernous, and now decommissioned cistern, which was built in 1926 as Houston’s primary reservoir for drinking water. By collapsing this course of the way water once flowed from nature into city, past into present, she creates a provocative palimpsest in which to sing, reflect, and listen. Within the reverberatory arena of the 87,500 square foot cistern and its renowned 17-second echo, Candiani collaborates with a group of musicians and vocalists to propel fragments of songs and sounds that once populated Houston into this storied bastion. Layer upon layer of aural history and performance intermingle here, weaving a dense tapestry through which a solitary figure on canoe moves. This open avatar floats stoically but unrelentingly though the cistern – a museum of water that once was, and a womb to that which will be – and stewards the stories of all those lives carried by the bayou.



Echoing Landscape (still), 2023. 4K video with sound, 20 minutes. ©Tania Candiani 2023.

Tania Candiani: Lifeblood

September 23—November 19, 2023

The presentation of Tania Candiani's work and artist residency in Houston was generously supported by the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts.

Tania Candiani: Lifeblood is organized by Steven Matijcio, Jane Dale Owen Director & Chief Curator, with assistance from Melissa Noble, Managing Director of the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts; Sarah Jentsch, Program Coordinator for the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts; and Erika Mei Chua Holum, Cynthia Woods Mitchell Assistant Curator at the Blaffer Art Museum. Text & brochure design by Tony Evans, Design and Digital Resources Manager; Spanish translations for exhibition text by Blanca Wilson, Executive Administrator. Public Programs in conjunction with the exhibition are organized by Katherine Veneman, Curator of Education. This exhibition will be on display until November 19, 2023.

This exhibition is co-presented with the Buffalo Bayou Partnership, and a portion of the video was filmed in the Houston Cistern. Special thanks go to Karen Farber and Kelly O'Brien (Fenris LLC) for their generous support in this collaboration. We are grateful as well for the work of SubSuelo Productions for their expert work in producing the video, and Input/Output for contributing important projection mapping. We also wish to thank Christian

Kelleher and UH Special Collections for their assistance in lending and locating archival materials for *Lifeblood*.

Major annual funding for the Blaffer Art Museum's 50th Anniversary programming is provided by the John R. Eckel Jr. Foundation, the Stolbun Family Foundation, the Brown Foundation, the John P. McGovern Foundation, and Leslie & Brad Bucher. Generous annual support is provided by the Houston Arts Alliance, Texas Commission on the Arts, Sarah C. Morian & Michael Clark, and Blaffer Art Museum Advisory Board members.

The following donors sustain Blaffer Art Museum in perpetuity by giving through endowments: Cecil Amelia Blaffer von Furstenberg Endowment for Exhibitions and Programs, Jane Dale Owen Endowment in the Blaffer Art Museum, Jo & Jim Furr Exhibition Endowment in the Blaffer Art Museum, Sarah C. Morian Endowment, and the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation Blaffer Gallery Endowment.

This exhibition is dedicated to the life and memory of Vinod Hopson (1975-2023) who inspired us to think about history more thoroughly, radically, and vividly.

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**Blaffer Art Museum
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Sat —> Sun, 12pm-5pm

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Front Cover & Centerfold: *Echoing Landscape* (still), 2023. 4K video with sound, 20 minutes. ©Tania Candiani 2023.

Back Cover: *Tidal Choreography* (still), 2023. Two channel video with sound, 24 minutes. ©Tania Candiani 2023.

