

This text accompanies the exhibition

Hannah Claus

tsi iotnekahtentíonhatie (Tiohtià:ke)

November 19, 2025 — February 7, 2026

Curator: Nicole Burisch

Between Ground and Sky

Nicole Burisch

We are part of an ecology of interactions that extends beyond those we share with human beings to every animate and inanimate form that can be seen or imagined. These relationships are reciprocal in nature and embrace us just as we embrace them, opening us to a deeper sense of self.¹
—Danielle Printup

There is a Kanien'kehá:ka protocol that Hannah Claus recites when she opens a public event in Tiohtià:ke: the Ohenton Karihwaterhkwen, or Words Before All Else.² Also known as the Thanksgiving Address, these words are spoken by the Haudenosaunee to open a gathering, express gratitude, and bring everyone's minds together. The words acknowledge and give thanks to all aspects of the world around us, including:

All the People
Our Mother the Earth
All the waters
All that lives in the waters
All the roots
All the grass and flowers
All the insects
All the medicines
All the fruits
The sustenance foods
All the trees and bushes
All the animals

¹ Danielle Printup, "Inaabiwin," curatorial essay for the exhibition *Inaabiwin*, featuring artists Scott Benesiinaabandan, Hannah Claus, Tanya Lukin Linklater, Meryl McMaster, and Greg Staats. Oshawa: Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 2019, 19.

² I am grateful to Hannah for sharing the version that she uses with me, which she learned from Karahkwinehtha Brant from Kenhtè:ke (Tyendinaga). Multiple versions and translations of the Ohenton Karihwaterhkwen exist, more information can be found on the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte (MBQ) website: <https://mbq-tmt.org/ohenton-karihwaterhkwen/>.

All the birds
The Four Winds
Our Grandfathers the Thunders
Our Elder Brother the Sun
Our Grandmother the Moon
The stars
The Great natural power

After naming each element, the phrase “And now our minds are one” is repeated. At daphne (an artist-run centre in Tiohtià:ke that she helped co-found), Claus invites others to read with her, including each person in turn, in the process of slowly and carefully naming and giving thanks. The reading takes time—more time, more gratitude, and more attention than we are usually used to giving. This slow process calls attention to parts of the world that we may not always think about, especially in urban, academic or gallery spaces.

The invitation to pay closer attention to all aspects of the world around us, and specifically the natural world, is at the centre of Claus’ artistic practice. In artworks that span photography, installation, and video, she takes the time to focus on the smallest details, to situate these as parts of a larger whole, and to include audiences in these same embodied experiences of perception. Moving from still imagery, to images brought alive through video and sculpture, to exploded constellations of photographic fragments, her decades-long practice offers an attentive meditation on ways of being that are shaped by Kanien’kehá:ka worldview. The exhibition *tsi iotnekahtentionhatie* (*Tiohtià:ke*) brings together a selection of works spanning over two decades of practice, all centred on the lands and waters of Tiohtià:ke, now known as Montréal. Claus, who is Kanien’kehá:ka and English, has made the island her home since 2001. Through these works, she expresses gratitude to this place, while also calling attention to its overlooked histories.

Claus’ approach is intertwined with Haudenosaunee cosmology—which situates the skyworld above, the surface world in between, and the underworld below.³ Many of the works in this exhibition prompt a way of looking that emphasizes this conception of space and relationality: a world in which humans are firmly situated within the realm of all living things; or as Claus prefaces the Ohenton Karihwaterhkwen: “...a part of creation, neither above or below.”⁴ As we are prompted to look up, look down, and become aware of our position through engagement with these works, it is with an understanding that we are not only observing, but also a part of all that surrounds us. This is the “expansive

³ Hannah Claus, conversation with the author.

⁴ Hannah Claus, personal notes on the Ohenton Karihwaterhkwen. These reflections are drawn from a workshop she did with Brant.

relationality”⁵ of Indigenous peoples’ worldviews that curator Danielle Printup articulates in the quote that opens this text.

The exhibition opens with *watersong* [*Kaniatarowanen - othorè:ke nonkwá:ti*] (2025), an installation that replicates the trajectory of the waterway that runs along the north shore of the island of Tiohtià:ke. To create the work, Claus began with a recording of Ionhiarò:roks McComber, a Kahnawakerò:non singer who composed a song to thank and acknowledge the river now called the Saint Lawrence. Claus used the recorded audio to create a digital depiction of the sound wave of McComber’s voice. She then translated this shape into clusters of suspended acetate discs that give form both to the song and to the path of the river. This gesture of translation, from sound to shape, is one that Claus has used in other works, including the recent public art installation, *between the waters and the stars* (2025) at the Centre Sanaaq just a few blocks away, as well as the 2024 companion work *watersong* [*éntie nonkwá:ti ne Kaniatarowá:nen*], which traces the path of the south shore of the island.⁶ Hung on threads that run from the floor to the ceiling, the shimmering, colourful acetate discs in *watersong* appear like notes on a staff or beads on a thread. The discs are printed with photographic imagery taken from sites along the river, each depicting small parts of this massive body of water which connects the Atlantic Ocean to the Great Lakes. By walking alongside the installation, visitors trace the winding path of the river, embodying a physical and sonic trajectory as they move through the space. *watersong* underlines multiple ways of relating to the land and water—not only as spaces to be traversed, but as multi-faceted, complex entities to be addressed, acknowledged, and cohabited.

To generate the imagery for her suspended installations, Claus begins with digital photographs: duplicating, flipping and mirroring these to create repeated patterns that are then cut into circles to make the discs. In the past few years, she has transformed this source imagery into 2D works of their own, that offer new ways of looking at the world. In the series *flatrocks* (2024), kaleidoscopic patterns amplify and distort details of rocks, water, and plants on the shores of the Saint Lawrence. In *the language of the land* (2024), the constructed landscape echoes motifs found in Haudenosaunee beadwork. Their repeated patterning suggests the potential of these compositions to continuously expand out past the frame, existing as an infinitely multiplying network of life, from a micro to macro level.

Zooming out to encompass broader views of the land, the installation *skystrip* (2006) consists of a repeating suite of photographs, taken of clouds in the sky above Mont Royal Park. This filmic ‘sky’ is pulled slightly out from the wall by a

⁵ Printup, op. cit., 19.

⁶ The exhibition *tsi iotnekahtentióhatie éntie nonkwá:ti – Where the Waters Flow – south shore*, curated by Lori Beavis and organized by daphne, is presented from September 12, 2025, to January 24, 2026, at the Canada Gallery, an exhibition space within Canada House in London, England.

series of threads, each attached to a rock that sits on the floor of the gallery. Like the threads that run vertically through Claus' suspended installations, this criss-crossing field of connections tethers a direct link from ground to sky, while giving form and presence to the realm of everything that exists between. Like *watersong's* rendering of a massive body of water, *skystrip* takes elements of the natural world that are almost incomprehensibly large—the sky, the ground—and brings them into human-scaled relationship with the space.

As anyone who lives in Tiohtià:ke will tell you, it is easy to forget that the city is actually an island, and equally possible to lose sight of the longer history of this place. Claus describes how the island has long been a place of gathering for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, whose stories “lie largely buried under the city’s buildings, roads and sidewalks.”⁷ The video installation *reflection on river rock [Blue Nordic]* (2003) hints at the overlooked infrastructure of urban spaces and how these are intimately connected to natural forces. Projected down onto a bed of river rocks sourced from a commercial landscaping store, a looped video shows a blue and white dish collecting water that drips rhythmically from above. Inspired by a leaky faucet in her first Montréal apartment, Claus captures the quiet, yet persistent power of water, flowing through the network of pipes and tunnels beneath the city. The dripping, living water contrasts with the static, clean-lined depictions of plants and flowers on the dish. For Claus, the work encapsulates the western world’s desire to reproduce or assimilate nature; an effort at control that cannot contain the force of the dripping water, which distorts the blue and white pattern and spills over the edges of the bowl.

In *iakoròn:ien's [the sky falls around her]* (2020), Claus again calls attention to the space between what is above and what is below. Filmed on a quiet path on the back side of Mont Royal, this deceptively simple video work features a single static shot, looking up into a canopy of tree leaves. The grey-white sky that peeks through the leaves slowly begins to fall away in pieces, leaving behind irregular sections of black. At first appearing like gently rustling leaves or softly drifting snow, the falling pieces ultimately leave behind an entirely blacked out sky. Created during the COVID-19 pandemic, *iakoròn:ien's* is a meditation on grief and loss—where the structure of the world literally falls apart above us. While inspired by personal experiences of grief, the work also evokes the very real possibility of impending climate collapse, a world slowly eroded by pollution and extractivism.

Finally, *dish* (2025) emphasizes a collective responsibility to care for all parts of the world. Like *watersong*, this installation is composed of hundreds of suspended circular discs. Printed with images of edible and medicinal plants native to Tiohtià:ke, the discs form a giant bowl shape, a reference to the Dish with One Spoon wampum belt, an agreement between the Haudenosaunee and the

⁷ Hannah Claus, unpublished exhibition proposal, June 2025.

Anishinaabeg nations which articulates principles for shared use of the land.⁸ As curator Lisa Myers describes: “The conceptualization of land as a bowl, compared to the ownership of property, signifies a marked difference in the use and value of lands today.”⁹ *dish* is a companion piece to the 2014 work *our minds are one*, a dome of discs suspended from the ceiling—suggesting the possibility that if the two works were ever united, they would form a whole world. Where visitors to *our minds are one* can walk under a protective canopy of sky-coloured discs, here they remain on the outside, looking in. This arrangement instead proposes a relationship where they become protectors or caretakers of the land and all it holds.

The artworks in *tsi iotnekahtentionhatie* each offer a specific way of relating to the lands and waters that are part of Tiohtià:ke, grounded in Kanien’kehá:ka worldview and ways of knowing and being in relation with this place. From within the context of a busy urban space, Claus reminds us that there is time to pay attention to singular details, to remember the histories of this island, and to centre embodied relationships and responsibilities to the natural world.

⁸ Lisa Myers, “Land Use,” in *Reading the Talk*, catalogue for an exhibition featuring works by Michael Belmore, Hannah Claus, Patricia Deadman, Vanessa Dion Fletcher, Keesic Douglas, and Melissa General, curated by Rachelle Dickinson and Lisa Myers, Robert McLaughlin Gallery/ABC Art Books Canada, 2014, p.15. See also Rachelle Dickinson’s text in this same catalogue.

⁹ Myers, *Ibid.*, 15.