

**I am here. Irene F. Whittome**

October 9 – December 21, 2025

Curator: Marie J. Jean

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The title of this exhibition, like a performative statement, asserts itself as an imperative. It simultaneously designates a presence, a place, and a moment: the here-and-now where Irene F. Whittome finds herself. But the series of images that also bears this title, showing the artist's diminutive silhouette in the center of a former quarry now overgrown in lush vegetation, complicates this assertion. "I am here" thus becomes a paradoxical statement in which the artist is both anchored and almost erased in the immensity of the landscape. Since 2014, Whittome has permanently settled in this abandoned quarry in Ogden, leaving Montreal, its bustling atmosphere, and its cultural milieu. In contrast to Guido Molinari, who set up his studio in the urban space of a former bank, Whittome chose the isolation of a quarry in a natural setting. Two contrasting visions of the same gesture: inhabiting a place in order to transform it into a space of creation. This choice of isolation led her to anchor herself in this otherworldly realm, essential conditions for her freedom and the renewal of her artistic practice. This radical gesture of withdrawal evokes a Romantic conception of nature: not as a backdrop, but as a refuge and a matrix. Consequently, it is not so much a matter of withdrawal as of a political and existential commitment.

Romantic thought of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in figures such as William Morris, an artist and libertarian, considered nature as a force resisting industrialization, a place of physical, moral, and intellectual regeneration. For Morris, manual labor, art, craftsmanship,

and voluntary simplicity became ways of battling the alienation of the modern world. His critique of progress and his embrace of the organic rhythms of life find a direct resonance in Whittome's gesture, which transforms the quarry into a landscape-studio, a monumental work structured around the cycles of nature. Such a relationship with nature is also philosophical. For Friedrich Schelling, one of German Romanticism's foremost major thinkers, nature is not an object external to the mind, but a manifestation of the absolute, a living and creative force. He states: "Nature is the visible mind; the mind, the invisible nature." This emblematic formula condenses the Romantic conception of a profound unity between the self and the external world, between thought and matter, between artistic creation and nature's forces. Nature in this perspective becomes not only a place of asylum, but also a source of thought, a space of revelation and co-creation. Whittome therefore does not seek to represent nature, but rather to enter into resonance with it. This idea of resonance was updated by the philosopher Hartmut Rosa, who sees it as a non-violent way of inhabiting the world, no longer in a logic of productivity and control, but in an openness to unpredictability, to transformation, to exchange. This is precisely what Whittome achieved in her remarkable quarry: she listened to the place, its temporalities, its vestiges, and its metamorphoses. In this way, her gesture takes up the thread of Romanticism and furthermore connects with contemporary imaginaries of degrowth, where slowing down becomes a political and poetic act.

Growing up adjacent to Indigenous communities in Blue River, Penticton, and then North Burnaby, British Columbia, meant being shaped by a world where nature constituted its essential framework. This initial imprint did not fade, even when, at age 17, Whittome entered the

Vancouver School of Fine Arts, where under the tutelage of Jack Shadbolt she developed a neo-expressionist aesthetic. There, she produced a notable series of drawings reproduced in silkscreen in *A Portfolio of Insects* (1963). Two years later, in Paris, she deepened this formal exploration, this time at Atelier 17, where she devoted herself to printmaking. Her experiments often focus on the motifs of flora and fauna and develop into dense, sinuous, almost organic networks of lines, which reflect a sustained attention to the trace, the imprint, entanglement. Similar sinuous networks reappear in *(Traces)*, a series of photographs taken between 2014 and 2023, in which she captures the grooves drawn by time on the surface of stone. The transition from copper to rock, from engraving to photography, extends the same gesture: that of recording the memory of traces. A similar logic is at work in the series entitled *Histoire naturelle* (2021), composed of iodine imprints on canvas and paper, where fluid forms, reminiscent of the artist's early neo-expressionist explorations, are inspired by the rising liquid and viscous material observed in the quarry. Sixty years later, a circle thus seems to be closing.

For Whittome, the Ogden quarry is not only a matrix for her works; it is a real open-air studio, a space for reflection, creation, and transformation. The artist has indeed frequently questioned and deconstructed the functions of her studios over the years, even using them as supports for her artistic interventions. In this quarry, she does not simply contemplate the landscape or design new works. Rather, she has undertaken to transform it into an amazing site, punctuated by monoliths and burial mounds, thus initiating a reflection on the cycles of impermanence, life, and memory. The quarry has thus become her place of creation where existential quest and artistic experimentation intertwine. As a final chapter in her series of workspaces, Whittome has imagined a studio, this time

mobile, inspired by the figure of the turtle. *Tortue-atelier* (2024–2025) takes the form of a futuristic shell outfitted in a 1974 Airstream caravan with aerodynamic lines, a ready-made object that she gradually transforms. From the outside, the vehicle evokes movement, while inside, emptied of its contents, it becomes a minimalist and introspective space. This studio represents much more than a simple workplace. It embodies an interaction between the artist and her immediate environment, regardless of where it might be moved. The seven studios Whittome occupied over more than sixty years thus appear as allegories, each marking a phase of her life.

Several of Whittome's works also incorporate elements from previous productions, thus extending a reflection on the memory of forms and the recycling of materials. *La charrette et la tortue en ascension* (2025), the centerpiece of the exhibition, is a prime example. The charrette comes from the vast installation *Vancouver* (1980); the turtle's shell appeared in several of her works, including *Illuminati* (1987) and *The Museum of Traces* (1989). As for the six-sided stone that serves as the sculpture's base, it was found in Whittome's quarry. A recurring figure in her work, the ascending turtle embodies a form of allegorical self-portrait. Legend has it that it first appeared in a dream during a vision quest trip to California in 1986, in which the artist climbed onto the turtle's back and flew into the sky upon it. This dreamlike vision resonates with certain Indigenous stories in which a young woman falling from the sky drags down an entire landscape, which lands on the turtle's shell, thus becoming the base of the world. The turtle carrying the universe on its back is a powerful metaphor. If, in this story, it embodies the creation of the world, in Whittome's work it takes the form of a matrix figure, linked to her inner space and creativity.

— Marie J. Jean