

# SALT WATER SKIN BOATS

ERICA GRIMM

in collaboration with  
Sheinagh Anderson and Tracie Stewart





# CURATOR'S INTRODUCTION

*Salt Water Skin Boats* was presented at The Reach Gallery Museum from January to May 2018. For this ambitious project, Erica Grimm collaborated with artist/arborist Tracie Stewart and sound artist Sheinagh Anderson to produce a visceral, embodied experience. The exhibition proposes an analogy between our bodies and the vast ecology of the global ocean, calling attention to the connection between the life-sustaining, yet precariously balanced chemistry of the oceans and our own well-being.

Illuminated from within, six evocative forms take the shape of coracles: ancient vessels used to traverse global waterways long before human activity began to dramatically alter the natural balance of the planet. The fleshy, boat-like objects float overhead, submerging us in an imagined aqueous environment: a briny sea, a deep ocean channel, or perhaps something more elemental, like a womb.

Circuitous branches of willow, dogwood, fig, hazel, and cedar form delicate armatures resembling rivers and tributaries, and prefigure the vascular patterns echoed in the hog gut, animal skins, and bathymetric maps used to create their hulls. A haunting, labyrinthine soundscape weaves together gentle seaside sounds, urgent whispers, eerie sonar pings, and the clicks, whistles, and moans of whales and dolphins communicating. The sensorial experiences in this exhibition offer us a profound connection to our bodies.

Despite a compelling body of evidence from the scientific community that demonstrates the magnitude of the climate change problems we face, many are slow to adopt new behaviours to alter the course of the Anthropocene. The experience of *Salt Water Skin Boats* distills information drawn from scientists, mathematicians, poets, activists, and fellow artists, to foster environmental empathy and urge collective action in response to the most critical problem of our time.

The interview that follows weaves together the voices of the artists as they reflect on their individual and collective research/creation processes, the value of interdisciplinarity and collaboration to their work, and their shared interest in and concern for our current environmental circumstances.

- Laura Schneider







# IN CONVERSATION WITH THE ARTISTS

**LAURA SCHNEIDER:** This project is part of a broader line of inquiry for you. Can you describe how *Salt Water Skin Boats* fits into a larger body of research and exhibitions?

**ERICA GRIMM:** This project started in 2011 simply by being drawn to the ocean. I was fascinated to learn ocean water, tears, amniotic fluid, and blood plasma share nearly identical saturations of salt. Soon I woke up to how profoundly sick the ocean is. I was curious how this mythic symbol for healing could be in crisis. How could the source of life on the planet be changed by human actions? I launched into research, ideation, and grant writing.

The initial research-creation process tested the research-praxis balance. I created large wall and floor pieces, worked with sheepskin, and collected water samples to process the research. As the implications of ocean change sunk in, I painted through layers of denial and paralysis. On large encaustic mixed-media panels I imagined textual dialogues, layering mathematical formula with poetry. How might Lao Tsu respond to reading *Laudato Si*? What would Rachel Carson say to Tielhard de Chardin? I toured an exhibition titled *Prelude: Salt Water Skin Boats* and delivered numerous conference papers, all trying to make sense of waking up in the Anthropocene. The research-creation process for the current exhibition invited collaboration in the making as well as the research. After hosting two interdisciplinary colloquia, I invited Tracie to collaborate with me to build the boats, and Sheinagh to collaborate in creating an ambient, immersive, long-form soundscape. We developed socially engaged interdisciplinary knowledge exchanges, and throughout the various stages of research and production a team of collaborators, research assistants, and volunteers formed to manifest new work.

**LAURA SCHNEIDER:** How would you describe your creative process?

**SHEINAGH ANDERSON:** I spend a lot of time walking and listening into soundscapes. I explore immersive aesthetic experience and am curious how sound could be composed and applied towards creating such immersive experiences in a physical space. When working in a sound studio I work with samples of sounds recorded from various isolated soundscapes and with my imagination. My compositions come from a kind of aural envisioning or an aural dreaming and is created in my inner ear first before its physical manifestation. I dream in the virtual and then I figure out how to manifest in the actual.

**TRACIE STEWART:** I watch and listen, observing reactions and relationships, especially symbiotic ones. Dream, make a plan to start, take first steps, then respond viscerally. It's about the relationship. This process is the same for drawing or sculpting with living elements. When I engage the public the introvert in me takes a back seat. These moments are high energy and lead to spontaneous action with a mindful approach.

**ERICA GRIMM:** The research phase entailed gathering information, journaling, drawing, listening to the forest behind my house, paying attention in the border zone between perennial bed and wild zone, walking beside the ocean.

I spent my sabbatical in the forest with Tracie, harvesting material, experimenting with creating sculptural boats. Eshewing colonialist boat building traditions, saturated with Descartes' dreams of domination, or Bacon's illusions of mastery, our humble coracles drew on earlier world traditions, learned through listening to the forest. The materials, and our bodily limitations, led our efforts. We built six seventeen-foot coracle hulls, with simple materials and no specialized tools. We skinned the hulls with bathymetric maps of the ocean, cheesecloth, hog gut, elk hide, and beeswax. Of course, nothing happened as we expected. Ultimately, processing the implications of ocean change, engaging in a trans-disciplinary conversation, and working collaboratively led me on a journey that manifested in a body of work unlike anything I have ever made.





**LAURA SCHNEIDER:** Why was collaboration important for this project?

**ERICA GRIMM:** First of all, collaboration was necessary due to the sheer size of the project. One person could not physically do it alone—bending twenty-foot branches in the forest is impossible unless there is someone at the other end. Secondly, with immersive, experiential, complex projects of this scale, a single person never has sufficient expertise, so collaboration was also necessary to accomplish certain goals. I invited artists who had complementary skill sets to mine, who had knowledge and expertise that the project needed, and who were equally passionate about the work. Sheinagh brought exquisite sound sensitivity, Tracie brought arborist and building knowledge, and all of us were filled with environmental urgency.

**SHEINAGH ANDERSON:** The work would not have happened without collaboration. Certainly not in the way that it did. Collaboration, when executed well, is a co-creative encounter and an enactive process whereby one act inspires or catalyzes another.

**ERICA GRIMM:** Collaborating with one another, bouncing ideas around, processing out-loud, responding to a new surface or to a new sound iteration, produced a synergy and fueled the project through each technical challenge and into new territory.

**TRACIE STEWART:** As individuals we all have unique perspectives, skills, weaknesses, and strengths. Together we support or question those perspectives to clarify our voice. By combining our energy and skills, we overcome weaknesses to achieve a stronger outcome. Weaving our ideas together enables the work to be received by a broader audience with an outcome that supersedes the original concept.

**ERICA GRIMM:** Also, each of us are committed to a methodology of following the project as it unfolds. Meaning that we did not know what the project would look/sound like from the outset. We learned from the materials, from the research, from each other, following the project as it unfolded. It was a living process of inquiry.



**LAURA SCHNEIDER:** This project is characterized by its interdisciplinarity. What are the main sources of inspiration or influence for your work?

**SHEINAGH ANDERSON:** Real life is interdisciplinary. We do not exist as separate parts or mediums of matter and spirit, thought or action. The inquiry moves through all disciplines and mediums settling into a texture or a sound or a quality of resonance that best reflects and provokes questioning. The unheard voice inspires me.

**TRACIE STEWART:** To be interdisciplinary means to be creative in most aspects of life. Being this way influences how I see and how I work. This method supports inquiry-based exploration. Questions lead to answers. What inspires me are the elements and the seasons, the tidal pulls, and how these influence life on Earth; their/our interconnectedness and how they show themselves in repeated patterns. The repeated patterns become evident when comparing waterways, tree branches, and our nerve or circulatory systems. This particular project also helped me to connect with my ancestry. As a Stewart of Argyle we were water people as well as stewards of the land. Weaving coracles, like working with trees, became second nature like breathing.

**ERICA GRIMM:** Yes, interdisciplinarity was woven through every stage of this research-creation project because it was inquiry based. We were, and still are, asking questions regarding how the ocean is changing, and what that means for our lives. No one discipline has all the answers. To follow the curiosities that arose, we consulted widely in the sciences—with oceanographers, environmentalists, biologists, chemists, physicists, geologists, mathematicians; and also in the humanities—with poets, historians, elders, artists, cultural theorists, and geologists to combine our collective knowing. Knowledge comes from many sources—Indigenous and settler, mythic and spiritual, qualitative and quantitative. Some of the most important knowledge is what we know in our bones, from lived experiences of being beside, in, on, or under the ocean. We know a great deal through our senses, through sound, through touch.

In terms of influence, two voices were particularly powerful for me. Alanna Mitchell woke me up to how profound is the climate tragedy we face. Her book *Seasick* allowed me access to a wide range of ocean research. The geologist Thomas Berry restored hope that a sustainable future is possible, despite how profoundly human actions have damaged the biosystems of the planet. His interdisciplinary collaboration with physicist Brian Swimme calls us to recover intimacy with the earth. Rather than being didactic, we crystalized knowledge into an acoustomatic, somaesthetic experience.

**LAURA SCHNEIDER:** You each deal with environmental issues in various ways in your individual artistic practices. Why is this subject matter so compelling for you?

**TRACIE STEWART:** In my daily practices I work to achieve sustainable installations with the landscape. I'm sensitive to organic practices, food security, integrated pest management, and best practices as an arborist. Being aware of the natural order of life raises questions in relation to society. I hope my work inspires social change.

**SHEINAGH ANDERSON:** I am compelled to find ways of awakening those who come into my art form. My art form is an invitation into sound and vibration, listening and resonance. I am compelled to create ever nuanced ways of entering into the ear and psyche to awaken the listener from the inside out.

**ERICA GRIMM:** Environmental issues are so compelling because of their magnitude. In the 200 years since the Industrial Revolution, human activity has changed the chemistry of the global ocean, changing our atmospheric systems and consequently the planet. The biodiversity, geological stability, and planetary flourishing of the Cenozoic Era took 65 million years to develop. By disrupting the carbon cycle we are launching the sixth mass extinction. The catastrophic changes ahead eclipse anything the global community has ever had to face, changes we are ill prepared to navigate; changes that, as poet Tim Lilburn suggests, lie outside our current imaginative

capacity. Learning these things traumatizes us, renders other issues trivial, and invites a profound stop. Using embodiment metaphors to render ocean-change intelligible seemed the only way to process what Lilburn calls a “new sadness.” The work also invites an integral ecology, hints at the subjectivity of the more-than-human world, and gestures towards the universe as a communion of subjects.

**LAURA SCHNEIDER:** What do you hope visitors to the exhibition will take away from the experience?

**SHEINAGH ANDERSON:** A renewed interest in listening into the natural world, an active concern for the plight of the ocean, and an awakened voice to speak to the problems that the human system has created.

**TRACIE STEWART:** A deeper understanding of our connectedness to the ocean and all water; to life. A feeling of hope.

**ERICA GRIMM:** I hope that visitors have an experience that ignites their curiosity regarding the global ocean, how it is changing and what the relationship is with our own flesh. I hope the exhibition invites curiosity, and a kind of wonder regarding these creepily fleshy and oddly beautiful material/sonic/semiotic entanglements made from ordinary materials. I hope visitors might take away new energy to pay attention to what is happening in our world, consider the invitation to recover intimacy with the earth, listen closely and more closely still.







# ARTIST BIOS

## ERICA GRIMM

Erica Grimm is Professor in the School of the Arts, Media + Culture at Trinity Western University. A Canada Council and SSHRC Grant holder, Erica's practice is rooted in embodiment and she is curious about liminal, saturated (inexplicable but ordinary) phenomenological experiences. Fueled by environmental urgency, she creates material semiotic entanglements, sculptural installations that layer materials with scientific texts, maps, medical imagery, drawings, projected video, and soundscapes. She was the University of Regina 2002 Distinguished Nash Lecturer, the recipient of the Imago National Juried Art Prize, and named University of Regina Distinguished Alumnae. Widely exhibited, her work is included in private and public collections such as the Vatican, Canada Council Art Bank, and the Richmond Art Gallery.

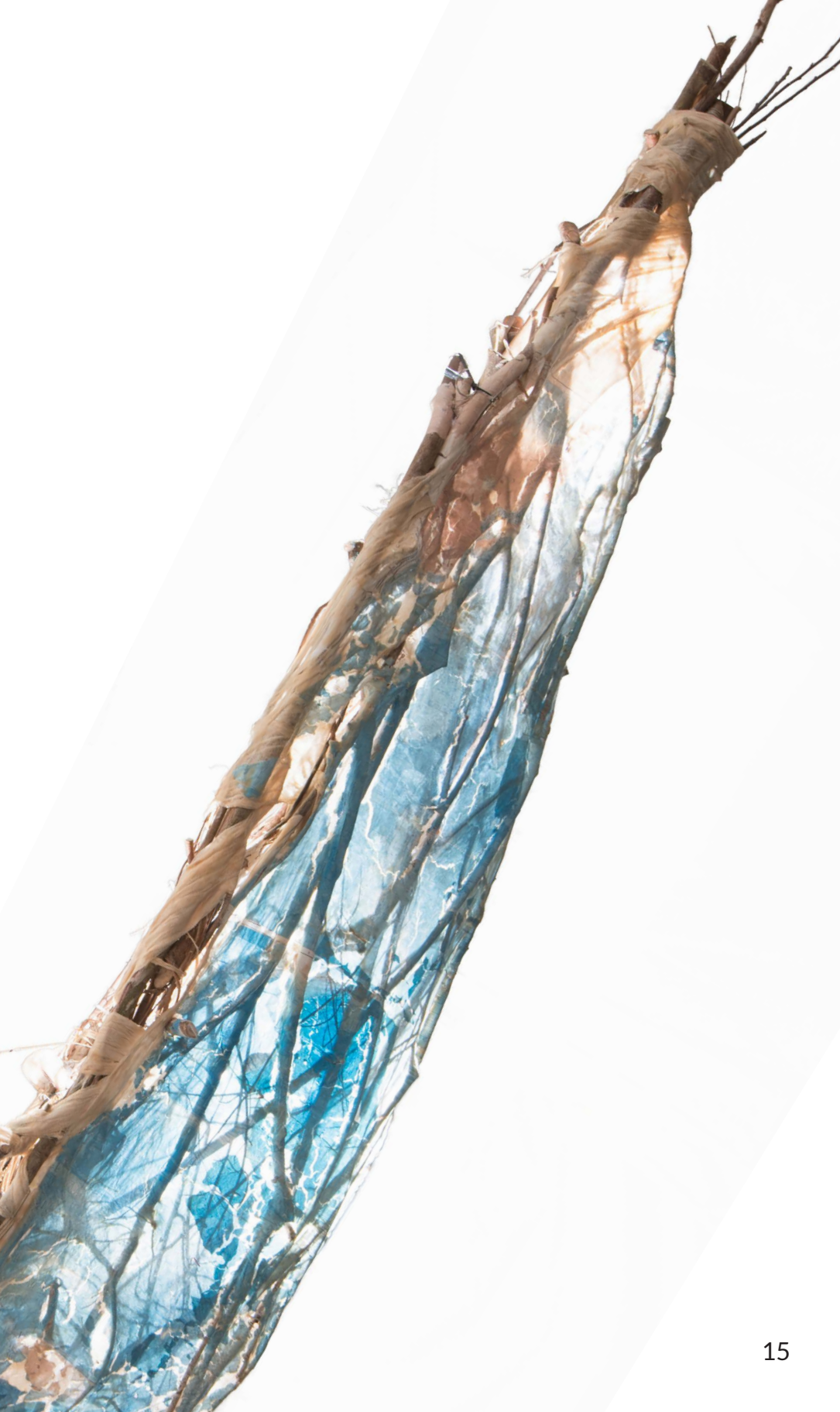
## TRACIE STEWART

Tracie Stewart is an interdisciplinary artist working across media in collaborative installation and public engagement. She is a problem-solver, an artist, a master gardener, and an arborist. Originally from Terrace, B.C. Tracie resides in the Fraser Valley with her family. Tracie's training as an artist and arborist has informed her work and she is fueled by questions of integrated pest management, pollinator collapse, food security and ocean/climate change. She has created work for the Surrey Art Gallery's *Views of the Southbank* project, engaged the public to create a sculpture for Coquitlam's 125th Anniversary, and facilitated many educational programs with DARE Arts and Art Starts. Currently Tracie is an artist in residence for Richmond's Britannia Shipyards with Artist Rendering Tales Collective Inc (ARTCi).

## SHEINAGH ANDERSON

Sheinagh Anderson is a transdisciplinary artist specializing in Sound Art—intrigued by voice, and the transformation of space and place through sound design, soundscape production, and voice. Her sound art compositions are atmospheric, inductive, ambient, intent on affecting and shaping aural space into transformative listening places. Her background is theatre, Cirque du Soleil, performing arts, performance installation, ritual, voice, and contemplative arts. She is currently a PhD candidate at Simon Fraser University researching Listening and Sounding as Awareness Practices of Yogic Sadhana.







# WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

**Dimensions are given in centimeters as follows:**

**length x width x depth**

\*Extended titles are drawn from the poem *The Parable Boat*  
courtesy of Hannah Main-van der Kamp

Erica L. Grimm in collaboration with Tracie Stewart

***Lifeboat 1 (Newborn and salted, airy basket)***, 2018

***Peel the stems of coppiced willow and tie them  
into a hull. Rope strips of veined, bleached cow gut  
side by side and lash those to the frame.\****

Hazel, willow, and dogwood branches, bathymetric maps of the  
ocean, hog gut, salt, prayer ritual, cheesecloth, beeswax, binder  
twine, LED lights

500 x 100 x 48

Erica L. Grimm in collaboration with Tracie Stewart

***Lifeboat 2 (Salted with fire)***, 2018

***Tattoo with emblems.***

***This vessel can sail to the Poles but not to marinas.***

***This vessel does not do apologetics. It is  
the idea of a boat but don't get that into your head.\****

Fig branches, figs, wild sourced elk hide, cheesecloth,  
bathymetric maps of the ocean, beeswax, salt, ash ritual, sinew,  
binder twine, LED lights

472 x 132 x 65

Erica L. Grimm in collaboration with Tracie Stewart

***Lifeboat 3 (Lifeblood, parable boat)***, 2017

***It will sail with certainty only by the light of comets.***

***When you step in, you forget your destination.\****

Dogwood and willow branches, cheesecloth, bathymetric maps  
of the ocean, prayer ritual, beeswax, binder twine, LED lights

422 x 137 x 107



Erica L. Grimm in collaboration with Tracie Stewart  
***Lifeboat 4 (Perishable boat, skin ship, transport me)***, 2017  
***Do you want stability? You'll have to look for something linear.  
Perhaps those who expect a logical way to travel  
had better rig up an explicator.\****

Dogwood and willow branches, cheesecloth, bathymetric maps of the ocean, prayer ritual, beeswax, binder twine, LED lights  
570 x 85 x 60

Erica L. Grimm in collaboration with Tracie Stewart  
***Lifeboat 5 (Strong bones of the earth, ashes to ashes)***, 2018  
***Copper talismans rattle on the staves.  
Perishable boat. Lie down in the stern for sleep  
and gaze through rips wide enough  
to view the Pleiades.\****

Cedar branches, wild sourced elk hide, earbuds, cheesecloth, bathymetric map of the ocean, beeswax, salt, ash ritual, sinew, binder twine, LED lights  
386 x 119 x 50

Erica L. Grimm in collaboration with Tracie Stewart  
***Lifeboat 6 (Listening in, ocean oracle)***, 2017  
***Dolphin mares in the bow waves.  
Skin ship, airy basket,  
transport me.\****

Dogwood and willow branches, cheesecloth, bathymetric maps of the ocean, red yarn, beeswax, binder twine, LED lights, woven in part during a socially engaged workshop at City Centre Library, Surrey, May 17, 2017, text gathered during knowledge-sharing workshop  
315 x 120 x 147

Sheinagh Anderson in dialogue with Erica Grimm  
***Ocean Constellation I***, 2018

Multi-channel spatial sound composition

Duration: 3.5 hours

Online access to abbreviated stereo mix:

[soundcloud.com/sheinaghanderson/coraclesoundscape\\_remix](https://soundcloud.com/sheinaghanderson/coraclesoundscape_remix)

An extended-duration, ambient ocean soundscape composed as an ever-transforming constellation of voices—water, wind, creature, human, breath, and heartbeat—woven together in time, a seemingly sentient ecosystem, intermittently interrupted by the voices of technology and science, sonar, submarine, ship, and plane. The voicescape is brought to life within a multi-channelled spatial design—four soundscapes coming through six speakers—that invites varying degrees of aesthetic immersive experience.

For the majority of us humans, our location in relation to the ocean is at a far distance. At most we observe the ocean's majesty from its shoreline or through the lens of a camera. We know what it is to float or cruise on its surface, frolic in its shallows or ride its waves. Yet, it is a rare human indeed who ventures into the ocean's depths to experience for themselves the living world within the sea. With the exception of the lives we take from the ocean, we know very little of the life within its depths. Out of sight, out of mind, or so it seems. But what if life could be heard? What if the voice of the ocean were to be listened to?

The *Ocean Constellation* soundscape is created as a living, breathing, sounding entity, intended to bring the life of the ocean into the listener's awareness. The ocean is full of life. The ocean is alive.

Sounds sourced from B.C.'s West Coast shoreline and rainforests, Jim and Mary Borrowman of Telegraph Cove, Stubbs Island, naturalist Dr. Richard Nelson and Glacier Bay National Park, Dr. Ben Halpern Marine Science Institute UCSB, Dr. Shalin Busch research ecologist at NOAA's Northwest Fisheries Science Centre (NWFSC), Dr. Simon Donner of UBC, Karen Wristen of Living Oceans Society, and Archive.org.









W. I. D.

SEA  
LAKES

AMERICA

ABYSSINIA

PLAIN





# SALT WATER SKIN BOATS

January 18–May 6, 2018

The Reach Gallery Museum Abbotsford  
32388 Veterans Way  
Abbotsford, BC V2T 0B3, Canada  
604.864.8087 | thereach.ca

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Grimm, Erica, artist

Salt water skin boats / Erica Grimm in collaboration with  
Sheinagh Anderson and Tracie Stewart.

Catalogue of an exhibition held at The Reach Gallery Museum from  
January 18 to May 6, 2018.  
ISBN 978-1-988311-20-3 (softcover)

1. Grimm, Erica--Exhibitions. 2. Anderson, Sheinagh--Exhibitions.  
3. Stewart, Tracie--Exhibitions. 4. Installations (Art)--Exhibitions.  
5. Exhibition catalogs. I. Anderson, Sheinagh, artist II. Stewart, Tracie, artist  
III. Schneider, Laura, 1978-, writer of added commentary IV. Reach Gallery  
Museum Abbotsford, issuing body, host institution V. Title.

N6545.65.I56G75 2018

709.2

C2018-903561-7

Produced by The Reach Gallery Museum Abbotsford

Printed by Globe Printers, Abbotsford, BC

Graphic Design: Francesca Moore

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Photo Credits:

SITE Photography: Page 5, 14, 18-19

Sharon Huget: Front Cover, Page 2, 10-11, 20-21

Danny Hsaio: Page 13