

*Both Wild  
and Claimed:*

*Photographing  
“Toronto’s Urban  
Wilderness” at  
Tommy Thompson  
Park*

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I was first introduced to Tommy Thompson Park sometime between spring and the first hint of summer. Little ponds were full of birds just beginning to claim their nesting territory and I was enchanted by a large mud puddle I deemed “Apocalypse Lake” / fig. 1 /, a vast, wet hole in the ground filled with large logs and stumps strewn helter-skelter throughout its murky waters. The place had been designed with the intention to provide an environment for waterfowl to nest, rather than built to please human sensibilities about beauty: it looked like a swamp had exploded, scattering broken trees and soaked earth across the surface of the pond. Its chaotic ugliness was contrasted by glimmers of more conventional aesthetic pleasures, such as a pair of swans roosting on a huge nest of sticks and grasses.

The spit of land that makes up Tommy Thompson Park strikes me as both alien and intimately familiar: strangely human, possessing an unusual quantity of unauthorized public sculpture and intervention, yet formed into a shape we recognize and name *nature*. The land mass was built by humans using the crumbled, demolished remains of local built infrastructure—what we term *human civilization*, which is often held distinct from the natural world—yet locals still like to think of it as a wild place. This so-called “urban wilderness”<sup>1</sup> protrudes from the industrialized Toronto waterfront into Lake Ontario. Here, perhaps more obviously than in most designated wilderness parks, humans actively shape the environment. This complicates the notion of untouched wilderness under which much parkland is bounded and claimed.

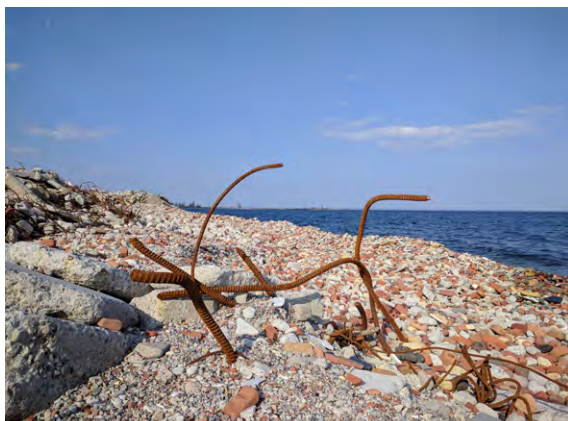
Along the shorelines of the spit—the Endikement, the Toplands, and The Flats—layer upon layer of local urban history can be seen. Waste-matter bricks and stones of cityscape demolitions form the spit’s foundation on the lakebed / fig. 2 /. The lapping waves are infused with a smattering of beach glass—I have wondered if pieces of characteristic green glass I found come from a local brewery’s bottles. Masses of bent, tangled, and rusty rebar are located all over the spit and are especially prominent on the odd beaches. On some of these metal jumbles, which vaguely resemble the native red osier bushes that proliferate here, impromptu artists have hung broken chunks of bricks in little site-specific installations / figs. 3–4 /. Robert Zunke, an artist I met on my most recent visit, takes this creative impulse to an extreme end. He builds vast castles of found stones and bricks, complete with palace-like steps leading down to the beach / fig. 5 /. He designs charming little courtyards, suspended along footpaths and sweeping staircases that help visitors navigate down the small bluff to the water’s edge. His sculptural installations are unsanctioned and have often been demolished by the city when deemed they “pose a risk to visitors.”<sup>2</sup> However, visitors seem fond of these installations. The first time I visited one, I saw that many people had written little messages on stones, each piling their own bit of graffiti into one mass installation at the centre of Zunke’s elaborate courtyard.

When I began to photograph Tommy Thompson Park, along with its plants and its animal communities, an entanglement between humans and non-humans was apparent in the landscape. My photographs visualize how the commonly conceived boundary between human and non-human becomes easily blurred on the spit in ways that can be visually disarming. They *historicize* what I witness of these entanglements and make clear the tensions produced between the obvious manufacture of the spit and the common notion of wilderness. These photographs, then, become a pictorial space to contemplate the manner and meaning of constructing wilderness as a concept and as a place, particularly how we construct the idea of wilderness in a park.

Timothy Morton defines *nature* as an anthropocentric notion that “assert[s] that there is a sharp difference between humans and the non-human.” He likewise defines *normativity* as “something that establishes differences between the normal and the abnormal, often with ethical



/fig. 1/ Nyssa Komorowski, *View of Cell 2 (Apocalypse Lake)*, Sunday, July 28, 2019. Tommy Thompson Park, Toronto. Digital photograph.



/fig. 2/ Nyssa Komorowski, *Endikement*, Thursday, May 24, 2018. Tommy Thompson Park, Toronto. Digital photograph.



/fig. 3/ Nysa Komorowski, *Views from Pipit Point*, Saturday, August 30, 2025. Tommy Thompson Park, Toronto. Digital photograph.



/fig. 4/ Nysa Komorowski, *View from Pipit Point*, detail, Saturday, August 30, 2025. Tommy Thompson Park, Toronto. Digital photograph.

overtones.”<sup>3</sup> In this way of thinking, a wilderness is *normally* imagined to be a “timeless” form of nature, “wholly apart from human influence,” and “in a state of perfect changelessness.”<sup>4</sup> Joe Hermer relates these ideas to *parkland*, “a conception of ‘nature’ that can be constituted and exploited through regulatory practices,” having “embodied a set of moral values,” using metaphors of exhibition and specimen:

As official sites where nature is “preserved,” discourses of park regulation re-enforce the ontological distinction of the exhibition, in the same way that “regulated wilderness” is represented and dramatized as a “preserved” specimen of a larger, “real” wilderness that exists somewhere *outside* of the park.<sup>5</sup>

Although Tommy Thompson Park is commonly termed “wilderness,” it does not fit these notions of preserved wilderness. Instead, it is a landscape blatantly created, co-created, and continually re-created in an ongoing collaboration between humans and plants, animals, and environment. In my photographs, a look at the land catalogued over several years, the environment is temporalized by the juxtaposition of these images. This helps move us beyond sterile, normative concepts of nature, particularly the idea of wilderness as an unchanging, exclusively other-than-human space.

Instead, we can adopt what Tim Ingold terms a “dwelling perspective” towards this place, wherein “the landscape is constituted as an enduring record of—and testimony to—the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left there something of themselves.”<sup>6</sup> In this view, “the landscape tells—or rather is—a story,” and our “histories are woven, along with the life-cycles of plants and animals, into the texture of the surface itself.”<sup>7</sup> The textures and surfaces of the spit continuously change on a scale that humans can well perceive. As the vast urban landscape of Toronto transforms, those changes are reflected in the microcosm of the spit. This entanglement, when confronted, helps to demystify normative concepts of nature and breaks down the notion that we have a separateness from nature, which often forms the basis for our attempts to make relationships with parks.

The material used to build the landmass of Tommy Thompson Park is our urban detritus—the material aftermath of unremitting demolition and redevelopment of the cityscape. Perhaps this is why, despite its contradictory discourse of “urban wilderness,” Torontonians cannot seem to fully regard this so-called wild place as *untouched scenery* and continuously intervene in the landscape in creative and expressive ways. The physical condition of the scenery is ephemeral and fleeting; many of the sights pictured in my photographs no longer exist. By curating a series of visual events that seem related but have significant differences / figs. 6–7 /, these photographs emphasize changes to the spit over time. As years pass, the land becomes unrecognizable. When I look through photographs, I think to myself, “Oh, that doesn’t exist there anymore.” Scenes I documented mere months beforehand can suddenly disappear, reshuffled into the architecture of the park by huge yellow machines that both carve away and build up its surface.

1 “Tommy Thompson Park: Toronto’s Urban Wilderness,” <https://tommythompsonpark.ca>.

2 Julien Gignac, “Meet the Man Behind the Artistic Formations at the Leslie Spit,” *Toronto Star*, August 1, 2017, [https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/meet-the-man-behind-the-artistic-formations-at-the-leslie-spit/article\\_d7f39b56-ef44-57f7-948d-57affdab4c8b.html](https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/meet-the-man-behind-the-artistic-formations-at-the-leslie-spit/article_d7f39b56-ef44-57f7-948d-57affdab4c8b.html).

3 Timothy Morton, “Frankenstein and Ecocriticism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Frankenstein*, ed. Andrew Smith (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 145–46.

4 William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (Hill and Wang, 2003), 11.

5 Joe Hermer, *Regulating Eden: The Nature of Order in North American Parks* (University of Toronto Press, 2002), 103–106.

6 Tim Ingold, “The Temporality of the Landscape,” in *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling, and Skill* (Routledge, 2002), 189.

7 Ingold, “The Temporality of the Landscape,” 189, 198.



/fig. 5/ Nysa Komorowski, *Zunke's palace in progress*, Saturday, August 30, 2025. Tommy Thompson Park, Toronto. Digital photograph.



/fig. 6/ Nysa Komorowski, *Toplands landscape*, Thursday, May 24, 2018.  
Tommy Thompson Park, Toronto. Digital photograph.



/fig. 7/ Nysa Komorowski, *Toplands landscape*, Saturday, August 30, 2025.  
Tommy Thompson Park, Toronto. Digital photograph.

Many views of the spit that people love to photograph are special because they flit from our grasp. For instance, Zunke has built his elaborate, castle-like sculptures no less than twenty-three times, and each has been knocked back into the spit's strata. Another installation I saw in 2019, built long after the destruction of the shoreside castle I visited on my first trip to the spit, is now also long gone / fig. 8 /. The sculptural installation, a basic structure that signifies *house*, has a small window which serves as an explicitly humanized frame of reference from which to view the lake. I do not believe we view the spit itself as typical tourists who monumentalize and commodify a fixed natural landscape full of iconic landmarks. Instead, I think when locals visit the spit, we consciously hope to glimpse a piece of ourselves transmogrified into wilderness, some reflection of our ever-changing humanity that through this reflection, becomes inseparable from the landscape. Indeed, while visiting this parkland, locals often look back at the city from whence we trekked, to monumentalize and memorialize the iconic (yet rapidly changing) skyline of the city—as if we are tourists seeing *ourselves* at a distance for the first time.

At any lookout point in almost any designated wilderness park, the appearance of the scenery we encounter is maintained over years, in the long term; timeless access to a scene fulfills what nature tourists expect to enjoy about a park. The work involved in scenic maintenance can be appreciated, to some extent, when viewing the Toronto skyline as seen in 2017 from Ward's Island / fig.10 /, a Toronto Islands parkland found just east of the spit where Tommy Thompson Park is located. That year, water levels in the lake had risen, causing substantial shoreline erosion and instability in the Islands' environment. The city closed the Islands and shut down most ferry service, which greatly reduced human foot traffic and so, officials reasoned, slowed the degradation of the Islands while in the thick of environmental pressures. The Toronto Islands are a carefully cultivated place, just as with Tommy Thompson Park, but the human intervention at Ward's Island in 2017 is motivated by a desire to *preserve* naturalistic perception of the landmass rather than creatively intervene.

We intervene in Tommy Thompson Park's landscape to produce art and make sculptures that resemble the appearances of human civilization. Perhaps, despite the obvious man-made material origin of the park, at heart we feel Jeff Grignon's redefinition of wilderness more potently here than in other so-called wild places. When Grignon contemplates the idea of wilderness in relation to his Indigenous culture, he says, "The Algonquin languages, to which Menominee belongs, contain the pronoun *Pekuac*, meaning 'growing on its own,' which indicates the freedom of that being to live where it will rather than the state of its landscape."<sup>8</sup> This resonates with Hermer's thought that we should "take parks seriously as regulated sites of freedom,"<sup>9</sup> by which he means moral regulation is governed via the production of "nature" in a park, which then "polices the conduct of the self," leading to a greater sense of security, permission, and freedom when visiting.<sup>10</sup> This emphasis on morality and personal conduct suggests that, as visitors, we must take up a responsibility towards the parkland itself as a specific entity in its own right rather than attempt to form an abstracted "'relationship' with nature... that can be 'healed' through the experience of park visitation."<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Indigenous frameworks such as the one Grignon practices in his forestry occupation emphasize ideas like responsibility, reciprocity, and direct engagement with particular lands.

We Torontonians see something of ourselves entangled with the spit; after all, its man-made origin is easily observed. Perhaps a sense of

8 Jeff Grignon and Robin Wall Kimmerer, "Listening to the Forest," in *Wildness: Relations of People and Place*, ed. Gavin Van Horn and John Hausdoerffer (University of Chicago Press, 2017), 70.

9 Hermer, *Regulating Eden*, 119.

10 Hermer, *Regulating Eden*, 113.

11 Hermer, *Regulating Eden*, 116.



/fig. 8/ Nyssa Komorowski, *Brickhouse on Toplands bluffs*, Sunday, July 28, 2019. Tommy Thompson Park, Toronto. Digital photograph.





/fig. 9/ Nysa Komorowski, *View of Toronto skyline from Embayment C*, Saturday, August 30, 2025. Tommy Thompson Park, Toronto. Digital photograph.



/fig. 10/ Nysa Komorowski, *Toronto Skyline Viewpoint, with sandbags*, Tuesday, September 5, 2017. Ward's Island, Toronto Islands. Digital photograph.

collective responsibility to continually reproduce Tommy Thompson's particular form of nature is keenly felt as security, permission, and freedom when visiting this land. This may enhance or entice our material engagement. Tommy Thompson Park is not a convincing specimen of normative nature; it does not purport to put us in relationship with an idyllic untouched scenery found in a *real wilderness* that exists *out there*, although we may choose to take on the fantasy of this framework as an attractive illusion. Instead, we visitors practice an unusual freedom (albeit unsanctioned) to directly reshape the land. On the crumbling brick beaches and rusted meadows of Tommy Thompson Park, we become artists.