



WESTERN GALLERY  
WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

## SUMMER EXHIBITION

MAY 11 TO JULY 31 1992



TOUCH LINES  
BY  
HAROLD SPENCE - SALES

### TOUCH LINES

Exhibition portraying common lands along the border between the United States and Canada, from the Lake of the Woods to the Pacific Ocean, through which people pass from one country to the other.

## TOUCHLINES

This art was conceived by Harold Spence-Sales. But it was brought to life by the friendships and mutual respect that reach across the borderlands joining America and Canada, and that are shared between Simon Fraser and Western Washington Universities. It was nurtured by the care and dedication of Dr. Robert Monahan, Director of Canadian and American Studies at the Western Washington University presented by Harold Spence-Sales on his borderlands project; and it was shaped into an exhibition by the stimulating visit of Harold to the Western Gallery and Outdoor Sculpture Collection.

As directors of our respective university galleries we are excited and proud to co-operate in presenting these stunning photographs and rich metaphors of our common landscapes. And more, we welcome the promise of future joint-ventures that this exhibition holds for our galleries.

Simon Fraser and Western Galleries owe a debt of gratitude to the energy, generosity and creativity of Harold Spence-Sales who made this event possible and to the support of both our universities, the Western Foundation, the Canadian Consulate in Seattle and the United States Consulate in Vancouver.

Dr. Sarah Clark-Langager, Director, Western Gallery and  
Dr. Edward Gibson, Director, Simon Fraser Gallery.

27 April, 1992

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## ARTIST'S STATEMENT

The boundary between our two countries creates oddly contradictory metaphors in the minds of many Canadians and Americans. For Canadians, their southern boundary marks the limits of the most salubrious stretches of their country — "the sunbelt" — warm, liveable, sociable. For Americans, their northern boundary represents the frontier across which arctic winds blow — "the frostbelt" — cold, uninhabitable, repelling.

Nevertheless, at border crossings along this enigmatic boundary, stretching 5,000 kilometers from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, millions of vehicles carrying perhaps as many as 92 million people crisscrossed from one country to the other in 1990. The landscapes through which they travelled can well be imagined as pockets of common land, because the physical entities of landscape flow over abstract boundaries, and because the inhabitants of such pockets have so much in

common. Together, the land rather than national differences. In each of these pockets of common land then by far the greatest number of border crossings in each of these pockets are made by their inhabitants — visiting, working, trading — as they move through landscapes to which they belong.

The purpose of the exhibition is to portray particular features of the elemental nature of the landscapes through which people pass in crossing from one country to the other, along routes which are not merely highways but "Touch Lines" of visual experience, suffused with memories. The portraits conveyed here through metaphorical compositions of drawings and photographs.

As the poet Conrad Aiken reveals,

The landscape and the language  
are the same  
For we ourselves are landscape  
and are land.

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## TOUCH LINES

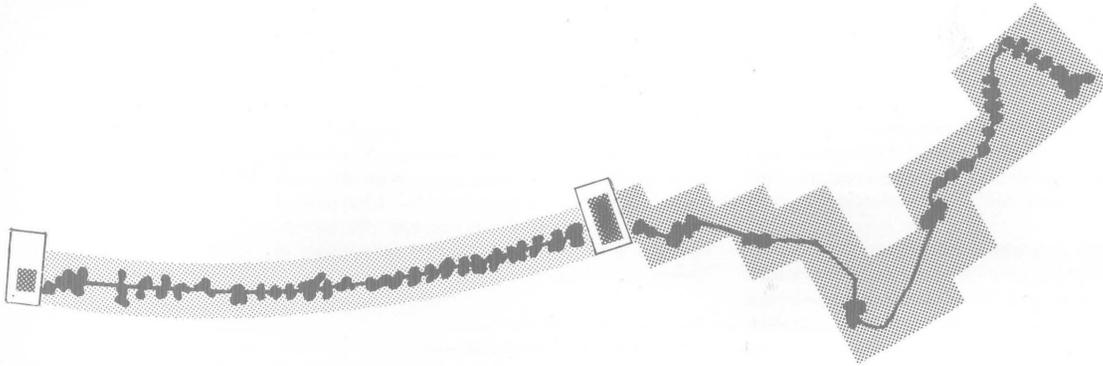
The border between the United States and Canada is divisible into two parts.

The easterly part, extending from the Atlantic coast to the Lake of the Woods is a natural frontier which follows particular physical features of land along which the boundary was established.

The western part stretching from the Lake of the Woods to the Rocky Mountains and from there to the Pacific Coast, was defined as a line drawn along the forty-ninth parallel of north latitude, forming thereby an astronomical frontier.

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This exhibition deals with the landscape of the astronomical frontier along the forty-ninth parallel.



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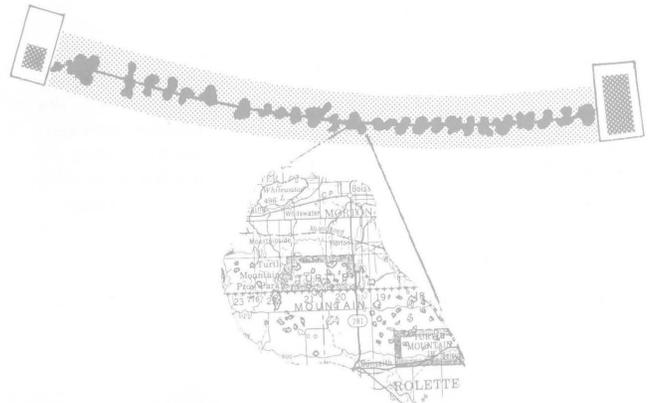
The border along the forty-ninth parallel is a mathematically determined abstraction imposed upon the organic structures of three vast regional landscapes that stretch about 1,300 miles from the Canadian Shield to the Strait of Georgia—the Prairies and Grasslands, the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Coast Ranges.

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The actual landscapes experienced by people crossing the border belong to relatively small natural areas which contain networks of roads leading to border crossings. These natural areas are geographic cameos possessing physical characteristics of the wider regional landscapes in which they lie.

This chain of cameos along the forty-ninth parallel

suggests the notion that these related units of land spanning the border constitute a pattern of common lands shared between two countries.



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The form of the gallery enabled the exhibition to be arranged regionally and sequentially. The smaller and lower part contains works relating to the Pacific and Rocky Mountain regions; the larger and loftier part accommodates those relating to the Prairies and the Grasslands.

The segments of landscape through which people pass in regions are small, sinuous, and enclosed and distant from each other.

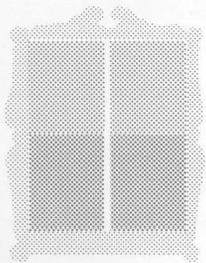
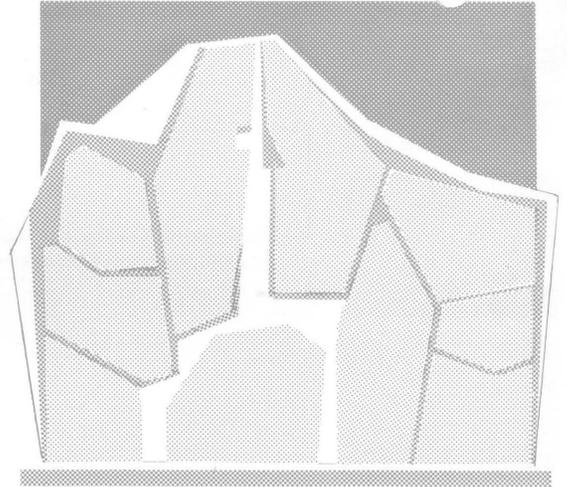


Those in the Prairies and Grasslands are spacious, open, and linked together.

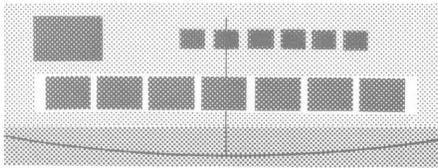
### Mount Baker

Dominant. Dangerous. Elusive. Shrouded behind a veil of mystic tranquility.

Mount Baker is expressed symbolically as a dormant volcano, its structural elements held in precarious balance, its potential explosive might encased in fumaroles.



The bewitching presence of Mount Baker, constantly changing, disappearing, reappearing sometimes ostentatiously, belies its latent power to break apart and shatter its own domain.

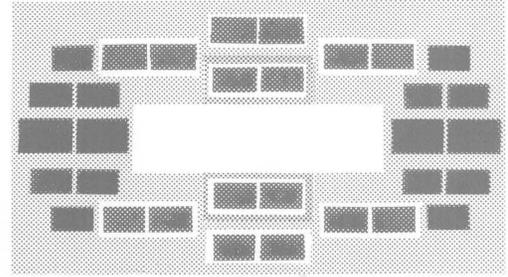


**Boundary Bay**

Land Sea and Sky seem to combine close to the very end of the boundary along the forty-ninth parallel, 1,300 miles away from its starting point.

Mud Bay, as the endless tide-washed estuarine deposits are named, conjures up a vision of the illusory edge of the unknown—the finite and infinite to be found in its myriad pools and rippled surfaces.

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**Gulf Islands**

The summits and brows of submerged coastal mountains protrude above the stilled inland seas of Georgia Straight and Puget Sound.

The lie and the rhythms of their floating forms suggests the presence of pods of languid leviathans.

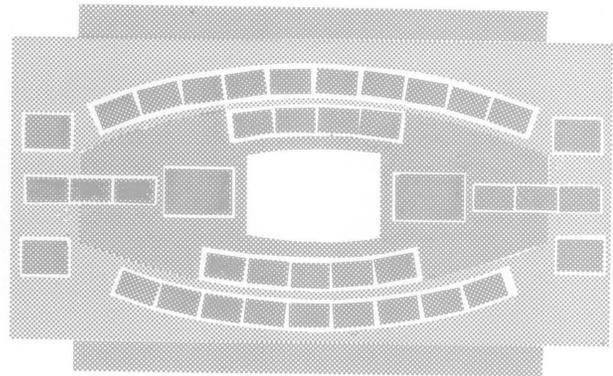
Remote, secluded, blissful they evoke through the mystery of their coves and inlets the notion of withdrawal from life and indulgence in paradisiacal yearnings!

**Mount Baker's Domain**

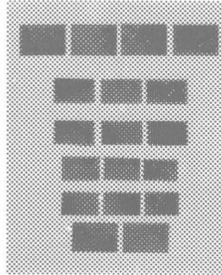
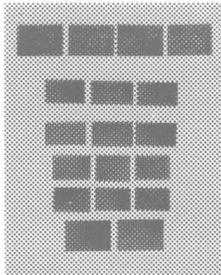
Mount Baker —majestic, monumental, mythical —presides over an endangered domain.

Contained within forbidding frontiers, subject to the collision of continental plates, prone to flooding by sea and river, and threatened, perhaps, by the eruption of Baker itself.

But all these threats are concealed within the region's serenities —restful mountain chains, tranquil pastoral terrains, placid rivers and calm seas. A humanized landscape, occupied by two nations and dominated by an elusive, quiescent and enchanting Mount Baker.



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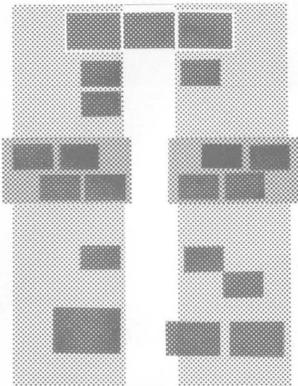


### Delta

The silt carried by rivers to their estuaries and then deposited in submission to the sea by waters returning to their primeval origins.

The process of re-creation —land submerged then surfacing, then solidifying—threatened with inundation by sea and river.

Impelling the notion of irresistible generative processes forming a fragile terrain while evolving patterns of organic life, threatened continuously with obliteration.

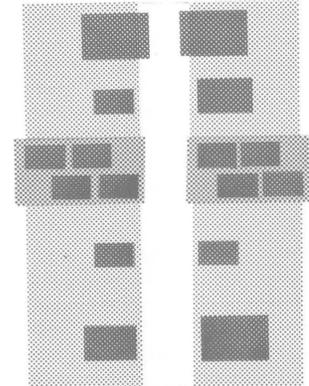


### Mountain Troughs

The lands in the Selkirk Mountains through which people pass to cross the border are short narrow valleys confined between massive mountain slopes and drained by rivers flowing between elongated lakes.

In the Okanagan valley the landscape evokes the notion of a new and bounteous fecundity contained within an older and harsh bulwark of massive mountainous forms relieved by a glistening lake extending beyond reach.

In contrast the Kootenay valley conjures up the impression of a remote, stilled and mystifying terrain containing saturated marsh lands riddled by sluggish invisible streams hemmed in by dark ominous mountain masses.



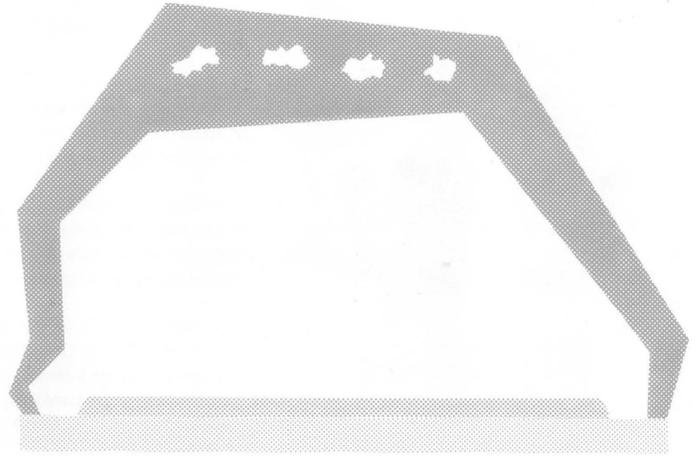
## The Separation of Sky from Earth

The spectacle of the sky itself dominates the Prairie landscape, testifying to the universal and age-old concept of the separation of Sky from Earth.

"The composition is based on an ancient Egyptian myths of creation in which the sky goddess Nut and her brother Geb the earth god, were originally locked in a close embrace: their separation by shu the personification of air, gave the universe its shape."

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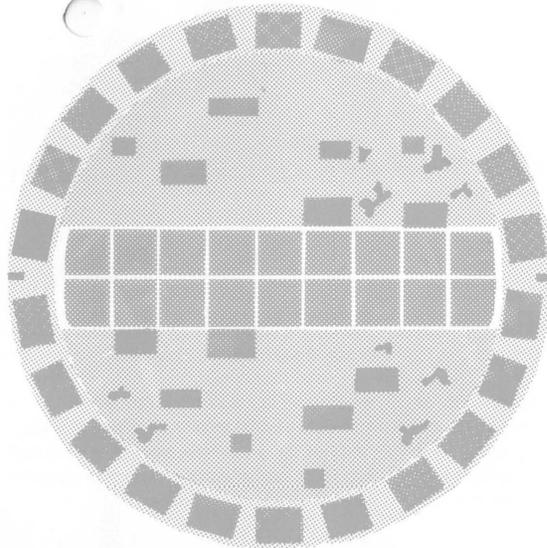
A similar notion stems from a legend of the Snohomish Indians embodied in a totem pole carved for the city of Everett, Washington. In the beginning, the sky was so low and so closely attached to the earth that tall people bumped their heads against it. On an appointed day, the people came with poles that touched the sky and, as the wise men shouted "Yahoh", everyone pushed up the sky until it reached its present position of separation from the earth.

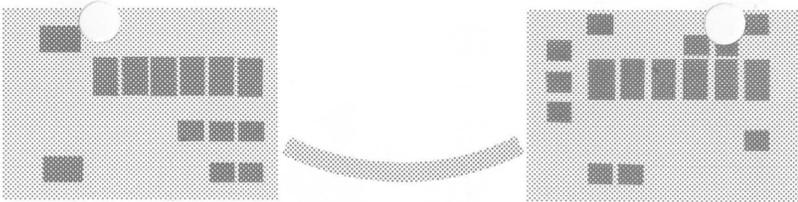


The vertical form in the composition represents Sky observing Earth; the horizontal form represents Earth thus observed.

Sky's view of Earth is made up of a central band of Landsat transmissions from orbiting spacecraft. The images portray Prairie land forms and usages. These are surrounded by a diagrammatic representation of the pattern of the never-ending, rectilinearly textured land.

The form and movements of Sky as seen from Earth are conveyed through photographs arranged around the border of the composition.





### Between Two Landmarks

The convention entered into between the United States and Great Britain in 1818 asserts

"It was agreed that a line drawn from the northwesterly point of the Lake of the Woods due west along the forty-ninth parallel of north latitude . . . shall be the line of demarcation between the territories of the United States and

those of His Britannic Majesty . . . from the Lake of the Woods to Stony Mountains."

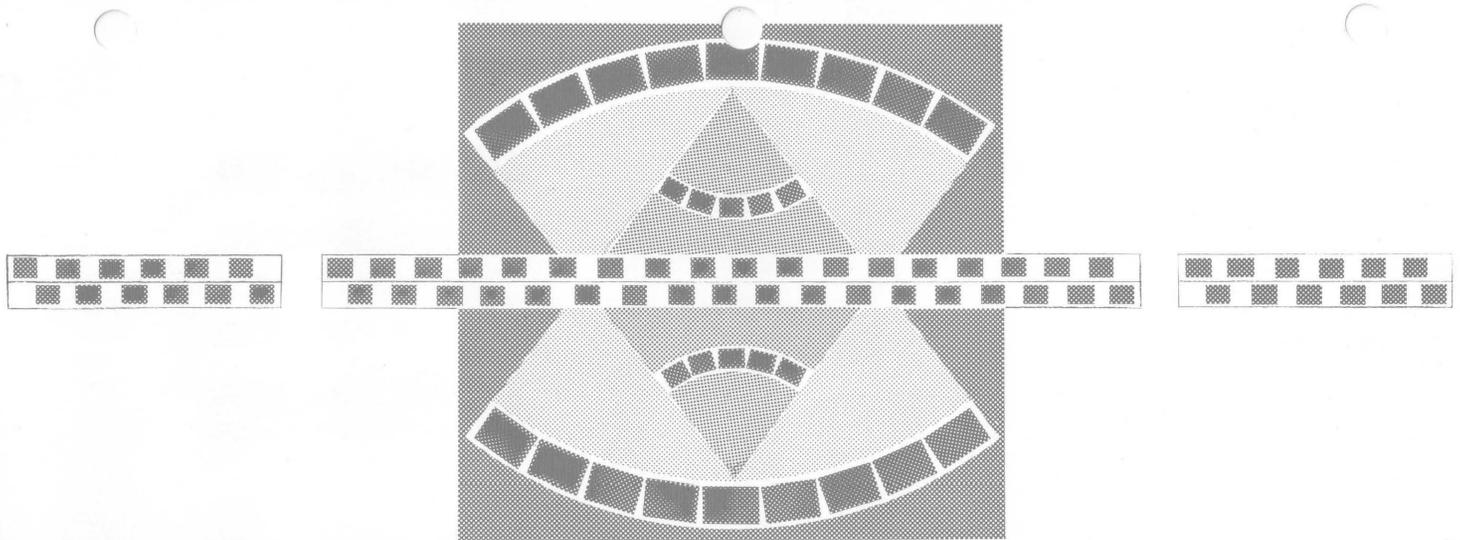
An abstract line 860 miles long, which at first traversed a brutal and repelling land, now rests on a vast, humanized landscape. And along that line there now exists a sequence of common lands shared by two nations.

### Prairie Infinities

Primordial vastness of the Prairie land and the magnitude of its enveloping sky —immense, immeasurable, infinite —evoke perceptions of the elemental tensions between sky and earth —dominance, subordination, separation.

Two segments of a circle are juxtaposed, the upper segment asserting the dominance of sky over earth, the lower segment declaring the subordination of sky to earth.

The still limitless horizon, ever extending and never changing, with its endless microscopic ingredients, marks the threshold between sky and earth.



### Prairie Forms

A world shaped in the aftermaths of an ice age: the land, unburdened of ice, unified and articulated by the movements of the massive meltwaters and winds combined.

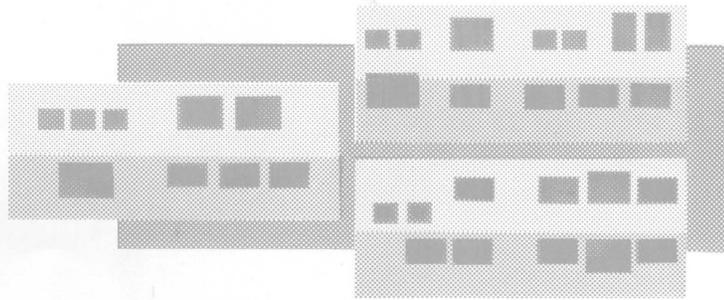
The ebb and flow of shifting sheets of water that leveled the land and left it with barely perceptible undulations.

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The torrents of meltwaters that gouged huge channels and the flow of waters draining a saturated land, engraving the beds of rivers, coulees and myriads of water courses.

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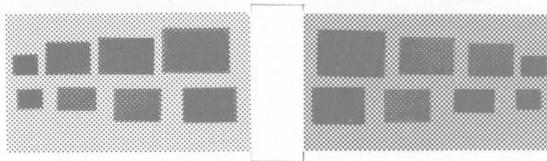
Protrusions of geological forms that become the only landmarks in the endless Prairie plain.

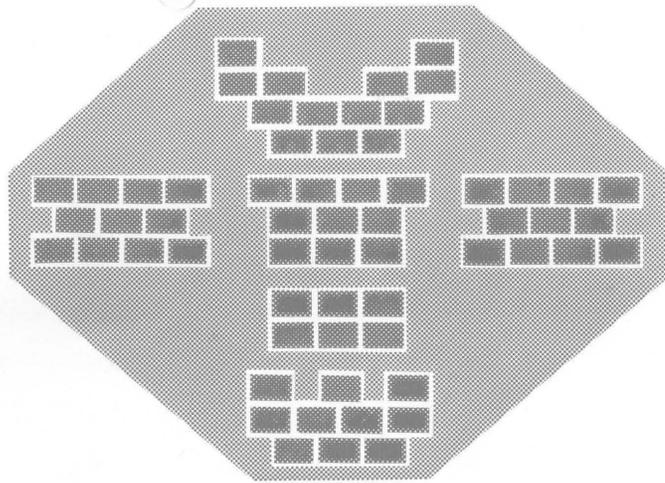


### Prairie Shadows

The sky in motion, clouds running before the wind, pursuing and shadowing the land, promising to cool, to quench, to fructify and to satisfy earth's yearnings. Guardian of a consecrated place.

The theme of this composition was evoked by Robert Motherwell's painting, *Reconciliation Elegy*.





### The Land Is One Robe

"The land is one robe" was an Indian saying, heard in the days of the buffalo when people's needs—food, clothing, shelter and warmth—were met by the presence of the buffalo on the land. Thus, the landscape of the Prairies and the Grasslands is portrayed symbolically by a buffalo skin, ornamented and treated heraldically.

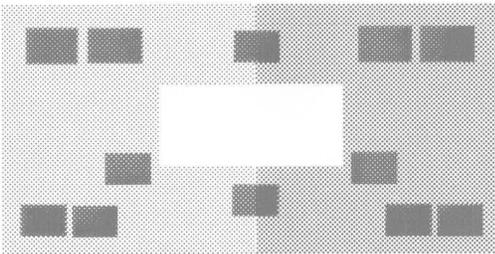
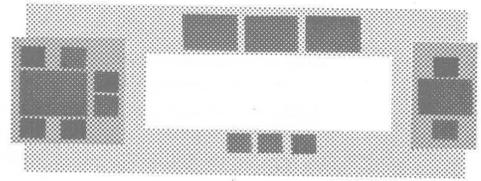
The central horizontal arrangements of photographs illustrate the vast and singular uniformity of the Prairie landscape.

The vertical pattern establishes the links between sky and earth, and plain and mountain which together confirm the totality and oneness of the Prairies.

### Prairie Life Lines

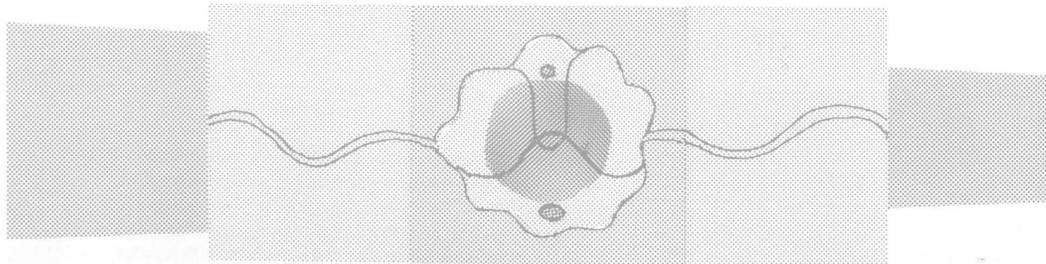
Each river has its tributaries, each tributary its streams, each stream its rivulets, each rivulet its springs, each spring its hidden sources. The labyrinth of water courses within catchment areas.

Forming between two countries a network of the arteries, veins and capillaries, of a corporal organism carrying out through its metabolic, sensory and generative abilities the universal processes of destruction and re-creation in time and space.



### Cross Reference

In the landscapes through which people pass to cross the border along the forty-ninth parallel between longitudes  $112^{\circ}$  and  $109^{\circ}$ , the Cypress Hills and the Sweet Grass Hills resemble Mt. St. Hilaire, Mt. Bruno, Rougemont and Mt. Johnson in landscapes along the forty-fifth parallel between longitudes  $74^{\circ}$  and  $73^{\circ}$ . The distance separating them is about 3,200 miles.



### Teton Whirlpool in Milk River

Born through torrents of Ice Age meltwaters, tearing northwards in its infancy, then choking its flow with its own silt, the Teton turned southwards to join great rivers—first the Missouri, then the Mississippi—and ultimately to mingle with the oceanic waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

A legend of the Blackfoot Indians of Montana describes the Old Man travelling about, making people, arranging things, and fixing up the world as we see it today. He made the Teton (or Milk River) and built the Sweet Grass Hills. After creating a woman and a child, he told them to walk with him to the river.

As they were standing by the river, the woman said to him, 'How is it? will we always live, will there be no end to it?' He said: 'I have never thought of that. We will have to decide it. I will take this buffalo chip and throw it in the river. If it floats, when people die, in four days they will become alive

again; they will die for only four days. But if it sinks, there will be an end to them.' He threw the chip in the river, and it floated. The woman turned and picked up a stone, and said: 'No, I will throw this stone in the river; if it floats, we will always live, if it sinks, people must die, that they may always be sorry for each other.' The woman threw the stone into the water, and it sank. 'There,' said Old Man, 'you have chosen. There will be an end to them.'

\*

Mary Filer has evolved a particular interpretation of this legend of creation. It expresses the crisis in the myth by way of a whirlpool which the Teton enters. The enigma of death is supplanted by the joys of fecundity!

Teton's yearnings to join great rivers and mingle with oceanic waters is expressed through lineal passages of neon light.

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