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I'm Here Now

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by David McGregor



About the Artist

David McGregor (davidmcgregor.ca) is an artist and filmmaker living in Treaty 8 territory, in the rural community of Goodfare. His work and research focus on projects that unfold through multiple seasons and span many different mediums that include print-making, sculpture, installation, text, and lens-based image making. In recent projects, his practice is increasingly focused on a collaborative approach with materials, other artists, and more-than-human entities. He holds an MFA from Emily Carr University and is currently the co-curator (with Lara Felsing) of *Wildfire*, an ongoing series of exhibitions exploring life in the time of fire.

I'm Here Now

David McGregor

A book which does not contain its counterbook is considered incomplete.
—Jorge Luis Borges

When I was 7 or 8 years old, I remember hearing a story from other kids about a haunting. They were talking about visiting a relative, and when it was quiet in the house, they heard a voice repeating the phrase, “I’m here now.” Even as I type this story, I feel chills on my neck, and I worry that retelling it will somehow make it true or open a connection with some troubled spirit.

One of the reasons this memory sticks with me is the paralyzing fear it evokes. In her book, *A Mushroom at the End of the World* (2021), Anna Tsing states: “Freedom is the negotiation of ghosts on a haunted landscape; it does not exorcise the haunting but works to survive and negotiate it with flair” (76). Reflecting on the time I heard this ghost story, there was no negotiating or navigating possible. If a spirit could resist the constraints of space and time, then the assumed order of reality (and my belief system) is under threat. I could also be “got” no matter where or when I was in time. The paralysis that I felt makes me wonder what Tsing means when she describes “freedom” in relation to ghosts and haunting. My interpretation is that freedom is a learned way of being that requires flexibility and openness. Surviving and negotiating haunting with flair is something that can be learned, but it must be continually learned. The sense of freedom is partially defined by its relationship with captivity and haunting. This example raises complex ideas about more-than-human liberation across time and ultimately leads me to think about fossil fuels and how they are similarly disconnected from their temporal context. The decomposed bodies of ancient beings and plants are being harvested and consumed as our primary form of energy. The ancient ones are here now . . . haunting my gas tank and my water heater. Although this haunting does not happen by their choice, and consequently it is not a type of liberation.



Figure 1. McGregor, David. 2025. *Water Lines for Hydraulic Fracking*. Goodfare, Alberta.

In early February of this year, I noticed oil and gas activity in my home community of Goodfare, Alberta, and I began to experience a similar sense of fearful paralysis. Oil and gas companies use long water lines to transport water to well sites for the purpose of hydraulic fracking. This process involves injecting huge quantities of sand (approximately 300 truckloads per well, according to one company) as well as pressurized water (Beims and Cookson 2017). The fracking process is used to “stimulate” subterranean bodies with controlled tremors that release desired gases that are extracted through the gas well. Through this process, the water pumped from the well becomes permanently polluted.

I began working on a small carving, which at the time did not feel like a direct response to what was going on. I took the wood for the piece from a section of rotten heartwood in a broken stump of an ant-eaten spruce tree a few hundred meters from our house. The wood is extremely fragile and crumbly, but I carefully carved it into the shape of an hourglass. Almost immediately after I put down the chisel, a pickup truck from one of the oil and gas companies pulled into the driveway to let us know that they would be flaring within 3 kilometers of our house starting in a few days.

The hoses in the ditches became round as they filled with water. Then the temperature outside dropped to about -39°C . They ran heating stations every few kilometers on the water lines to keep the water liquid and moving. I saw that there was a leak in one of the hoses and the water that had escaped the line was immediately frozen onto the branches of trees near the ditch. This moment made me consider liberation and how it often exists in our minds only in relation to captivity. The water was back in the ecosystem but suspended beside the vehicle of its captivity and death journey. This water is just as free in this moment and proximity as it will be when it eventually evaporates back into the atmosphere.

I gathered some of these pieces of ice for the purpose of including water from them in a later show. Though it might seem counterintuitive to recapture these pieces of water, I thought about memorializing this moment somehow. I want to find a way to re-show this escape in another context, to convey how this water survived as a way of navigating the haunting that is going on in the landscape.



Figure 2. McGregor, David. 2025. *Heartwood*. Goodfare, Alberta.

The flare was monstrously loud and bright, like living next to an airport for about a week. I went to the site to record the sound as well as take some images. For a few minutes I turned my back on the fire to record video of my bouncing shadow on the gravel road. The immensity of the noise behind me was like a constant shrieking exhale, a hybrid banshee, demon, ghost, and divine spirit (see Figures 4–5).



Figure 3. McGregor, David. 2025. *Water Escaped from the Frack Line*. Goodfare, Alberta.

In Reza Negarastani's *Cyclonopedia* (2008), they explore theories and belief systems about substrata, voids, space, and spirituality, seeing them all converge in oil extraction: "Whenever the solid messes with the void in order to keep itself dynamic and solidly 'constructive' or 'consolidated', the void only becomes more contaminative, its worm-functions become more furious, excited to the point of frenzy; they begin to rise from compositional depths to engineer the vermicular space of the Old Ones, an intricate traffic zone" (56–57).



Figures 4–5. McGregor, David. 2025. *Flaring and Flare Shadow*. Goodfare, Alberta.

Negarastani's unravelling and re-weaving of these theories is itself an apt metaphor for the way that the frack lines feed underground and trigger, tickle, disrupt, and destabilize subterranean forms. His writing, as it ultimately relates oil as a sentient demon-being that possesses the whole world, is consistent with the dread that I experienced as I turned my back to the pillar of fire and noise.

The fire from the flare felt intensely like a being or spirit that had been wrenched out of the earth. It was “here now” too, but it was the subject of consumption through

fire, an ongoing scream as it burned. In a way, it is being transformed from a physical form back into spirit and gas. And this new iteration will also go on haunting.

Eventually, I attended an open house held by this particular oil and gas company. One of the maps they had on display showed where they had directionally drilled wells from the site of this flare. The line travelled a couple of kilometers and ended below our area of land; It terminated at nearly the exact spot where I made my first experiment with carving an hourglass form earlier this winter. This was also the same rotten tree that I extracted the core from to carve the small rotten hourglass.

The here and now, or present moment, is like the aperture of an hourglass. I like this image of measuring time because it succeeds in measuring in the way that clock time works, but the aperture allows many grains of sand to travel through its present moment simultaneously. The molecules of passing time are moving in a sequence, but it is a shifting media that complicates the definition of order. The hourglass hosts a flow of time that is unpredictable in terms of which grains of sand will cross the aperture at which moment. In other words, it is difficult to say with certainty which molecules are present at a given moment.

The work that I was making felt loosely connected to the oil and gas activity, but in the case of the initial carved tree, I did not know what kind of marker I was in the process of making until many weeks later. This puzzling disorganization of sequence related to meaning feels consistent with the hourglass model of time-flow, just as it feels related to the activity of haunting or being haunted through and across time.

I'm here now, experiencing this devastation, responding to it and in some ways, I feel drawn to it. Here as a witness and making myself available to what needs to be observed and related. I am here to be haunted, just as I am here to haunt. My freedom comes from interacting with the details, but especially in observing how they unfold. The nuances that are there to be documented and explored are the way out of paralyzing fear.



Figures 6–7. McGregor, David. 2025. *Marker*. Goodfare, Alberta.

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