

Lisa Grossman – Artist’s statement

ONE HUNDRED SEVENTY-THREE, at Haw Contemporary Crossroads,
November 2, 2018

I revel in the lyrical sweep of the Kansas River, particularly an oblique, aerial view of the floodplain stretching to the prairie horizon. Certain sections have an abstract asymmetry that it makes it easy to compose a canvas. There’s a rhythm, a cadence of the curvilinear river unfurling across the vast floodplain and bouncing off of ancient bluffs that captivates me. Each section has its own character and the floodplain is written with evidence of ancient meanderings we see today as oxbows, floodplain scrolling, and scars.

The Kaw is the largest prairie-based river system in the world with an enormous watershed that reaches west to Limon, Colorado, and roughly covers the bottom third of Nebraska and top half of Kansas. Sandbars are part of its natural character and I’m impressed by their ongoing transformation and the dramatic differences I see year-to-year, season-to-season, one water event to the next - even minute-to-minute. “You can never step into the same river twice...” the Greek philosopher Heraclitus once said, and we understand that the river is never the same, but neither are we. So it’s a rich subject for me, alive with adventure and discovery.

The installation, “173,” follows the Kansas River from Mile 0 at Kaw Point, the confluence with the Missouri, in Kansas City, until it reaches Junction City, KS at Mile 173, at the confluence of the Republican and the Smoky Hill Rivers. I’ve painted the most visually intriguing stretches for years and the singular pieces allow me to delve deeply into a particular place. However, for “173,” I wanted to investigate areas I often overlook, such as urban/industrial stretches altered by flood controls, dams and weirs, bridges, water and wastewater treatment plants, power plants, flood control infrastructure—the parts that allow humans to survive and thrive here. It was a discovery process of exploring my photos, maps, and satellite imagery, drawing on decades of paddling the Kaw and exploring sandbars. Also, I’ve been greatly influenced by my work as a volunteer and board member of Friends of the Kaw, the only non-profit dedicated to protecting and preserving the Kansas River, and my colleagues in the sciences, education, law, water advocacy, etc.

I’ve had the great opportunity to fly over the Kaw a dozen or so times since 2004 with a couple of pilot friends, gathering thousands of photos in the process. The images in *173* are based largely on flights in 2017 and 2018, but, for some sections, I drew from previous flights. Those dates and locations are recorded on the reverse of each painting. The project is more artistic than scientific, but you can consult a river atlas or Google Earth Pro and easily follow the landmarks and features to navigate along the river in the paintings.

Using small panels in horizontal rows of sequences allowed me to linger over the unfolding bends and slow down the eye. Although they’re sketchy and spontaneous, essentially miniatures, they reveal more details than I typically include. I let the paintings

emerge intuitively, the process dictating how the sequences fell out in a freehand application of paint.

There's nothing like painting to really see and develop affection for places, and, for me, it was a way to honor the river as a whole, one painting at a time. Every day I drink the Kaw from the tap along with 800,000 other Kansans. Paddling and exploring sandbars is one of my favorite things to do. How can I possibly reciprocate? Every painting is an attempt to give something back—to share my affection for this river and put it on the map.