

Investigating
the Unexplained:
An Interview with
Christina Battle

by Clint Enns



Christina Battle, *Filing Memory*, mixed media installation at the Foreman Art Gallery, 2010. HD videos, card catalogue, reproduced WWII posters, vinyl text, communication devices (telegraph, camera, radio, telephone) from private and public collections, documents from local archives.
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Christina Battle, *Explorations of an Unexpected Time Traveler*, video still, 2013, mixed media installation.
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Christina Battle is a visual artist working primarily with film, video and installation. Her work embodies a playful DIY methodology while exploring diverse subject matter such as environmental catastrophe, archival politics, the boundaries of scientific knowledge, supernatural phenomena and collective memory. Battle's most recent multi-media installation, *The Twelve Devil's Graveyards Around the World* (2013), recently debuted as part of the 2013 Images Festival under the title *fog vortex* at WARC Gallery invoking *Cinema Scope* critic Michael Sicinski to proclaim the installation as "her strongest work to date."

The Twelve Devil's Graveyards... is an accumulation of both Battle's conceptual and formal concerns. The work took its inspiration from sites plagued by strange magnetic anomalies responsible for missing ships, planes and other unexplained phenomena, namely, the "12 vile vortices," a term coined by Ivan T. Sanderson in his 1972 article "The Twelve Devil's Graveyards Around the World."¹ The work itself consists of an HD monitor displaying a projection map plotting the 12 vile vortices; a 16mm film loop displaying a flickering icosahedron, the Platonic solid formed by joining the 12 vile vortices; a panoramic digital projection of a mysterious fog; and a light projection in the middle of the room tracing out one of the vortices. In this interview, Clint Enns and Christina Battle discuss *The Twelve Devil's Graveyards...* in the context of the artist's previous work.

C E **Clint Enns**

Let's begin with your installation Filing Memory (2010). The installation consists of anachronistic communication devices (telegraph, camera, radio, telephone), documents of community surveillance and a video component. The primary video component within Filing Memory, titled wandering through secret storms (2009), is a triptych consisting of FBI archival records that are almost entirely blacked out, rendering the documents incomprehensible, and women filing records. Through the piece you reveal an absurd relationship between public and private knowledge and challenge the dominant narrative by forcing the viewer to focus on what is missing. Is revealing what is left out as important as what is left in?



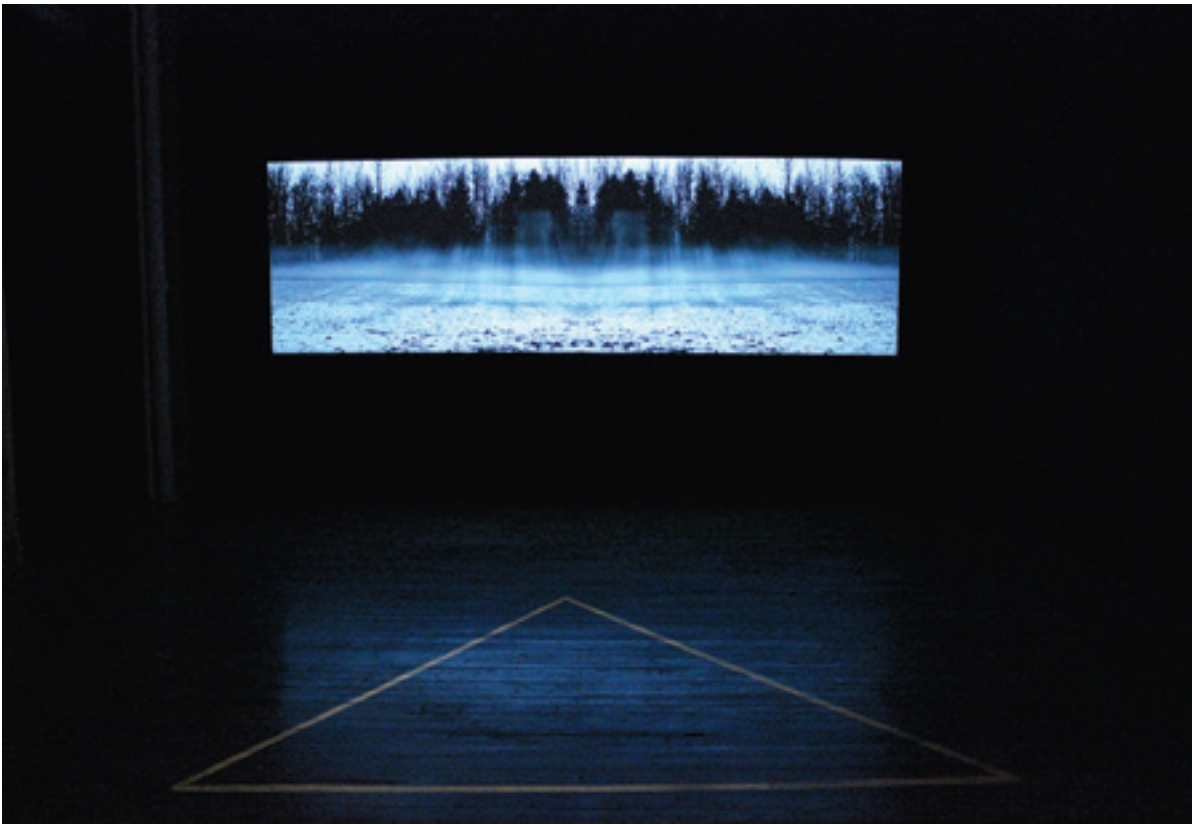
C B **Christina Battle**

Filing Memory was built around the single-channel video *wandering through secret storms* and can be seen as a collaboration with curator Vicky Chainey Gagnon. The installation began with the video and we wanted to fill in some of the gaps you mention as a way to pull out one particular thread that exists in the work—that of surveillance. We included text, an old card catalogue, World War II propaganda posters and old telephones and books to help further this particular reading of the work.

With *wandering through secret storms*, I was thinking about what is left out of archives and “official” historical records. I’m fascinated by the FBI files because they can never tell the whole story and are inherently subjective. Something... some perspective... is always left out of them. I’m interested in thinking about how these records—and, virtually every historical record—shape a one-sided history and, because of this, might in fact be quite meaningless when it comes to seeking out a balanced understanding of historic concerns or events. For example, if one solely accessed Martin Luther King’s FBI file as a way to gather historical context about his role in US history, and had no additional knowledge about him, one would have an entirely skewed idea of his character. I wonder how this act of leaving out shapes our understandings of the past and might affect our shaping of the future. *wandering through secret storms* was interested in exploring this idea of archiving such subjective and questionable historical documents. Since I appropriated the text found within the video from the FBI’s electronic reading room, they have added this disclaimer to their website: “The FBI’s Reading Room contains many files of public interest and historical value. In compliance with the National Archives Record Administration (NARA) requirements, some of these records are no longer in the physical possession of the FBI, eliminating the FBI’s capability to re-review and/or re-process this material. Please note, that the information found in these files may no longer reflect the current beliefs, positions, opinions, or policies currently held by the FBI.”² I think this new disclaimer really summarizes the main issue I was interested in talking about with the work—the idea of responsibility within institutional archives. I wonder about the danger of generating and archiving such subjective information—especially now, when the US government can basically observe any individual without any consequences. I’m horrified by the freedom and power such a statement allows an institution.

right & above:
Christina Battle,
*wandering
through secret
storms*, video
stills from the
Filing Memory
installation, 2009,
HD video.
IMAGE COURTESY
OF THE ARTIST





Christina Battle, *The Twelve Devil's Graveyards Around the World*, 2013, video still, 2013. mixed media installation. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Christina Battle, *The Twelve Devil's Graveyards Around the World*, Installation at WARC Gallery, 2013. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

C^E Explorations of an Unexpected Time Traveler (2013) and traveling thru with eyes closed tight (map #2—january 03 thru january 06) (2006) both attempt to deal with and examine your own personal film and photographic archive. One of the lines in Explorations is: “The spaces are always empty & devoid of people. As if I’ve just missed them, they’ve just passed through.” This theme seems to resonate in many of your works, for instance, in the double projection paradise falls, new mexico (2004) where one screen depicts images of cinematic cowboys rife with all of the tropes of the genre, contrasted by the other screen devoted to documenting the ghost towns left behind by the real Wild West.

C^B *traveling thru* was a literal exploration of the photographic archive I generated during my time spent in San Francisco, before my return to Toronto. I had this archive—from the moment I left Toronto to the moment I returned—and really wanted to make something to document that period. *Explorations* was similar but this time I wanted to explore the idea of travel in more narrative terms. I was interested in how I might be able to make a work that pulled from this unique sense of time I had been experiencing—time that was not very grounded and that felt more fluid. I worked with all of the footage that I had collected from the summer of 2012 when I gave up my house in Denver until my most recent travels. The footage in *Explorations* was treated non-linearly as a way to experiment with a cinematic form of time travel, whereas the footage in *traveling thru* was treated chronologically.

With *paradise falls, new mexico* I was travelling around the southwestern United States in search of ghost towns. I was interested in how our collective ideas of these towns of the Wild West have been shaped by Hollywood and I started researching Western movies in order to obtain a better understanding of the common structures that existed amongst them. I wanted the work to include this representation of the West—which is only slightly based on the real histories of the region—as a way to consider the difference between our contemporary ideas of the places fictionalized by Hollywood and the reality of the spaces that remain.

When conceiving these works that take on issues of landscape and geography, I think about the difference between “place” and “space” and this is why I often shoot places that are empty or seemingly devoid of people. I’m much more interested in situating my work within “spaces”—those geographies that lack specific locational or historical markers, that can’t easily be recognized as belonging to a specific timeline, and can be utilized as stand-ins for whatever narrative I’m working to create. When shooting for a specific work, I often revisit places multiple times to shoot and re-shoot, attempting to photograph it without any traces of human presence as a way to help shape a particular context or narrative that often is only loosely related to the exact locations or places I photograph.

C^E Your most recent installation, The Twelve Devil’s Graveyards Around the World, also focuses on an archival document: Ivan T. Sanderson’s article of the same name. The pseudo-science in the article is quite beautiful. Sanderson’s research suggests the 12 vile vortices form an icosahedron when the vertices are connected. In this work, you include the image of an icosahedron, in addition to an equilateral triangle, the ideal viewing location or the potential site for strange anomalies to occur. The fact that these twelve vile vortices form one of the five Platonic solids, an icosahedron, is almost too perfect; it is like Kepler’s early Platonic solid model of the solar system, which he later discovered was inaccurate despite its beauty.

C^B The shape of the icosahedron was something that initially drew me to Sanderson’s work—it’s so beautiful, too perfect, as you say. The vortices, as described by Sanderson, were actually lozenge-shaped sites noted as being particularly plagued by unexplained ship and plane losses. Sanderson discovered through his research that all 12 of these mysterious sites were distributed equidistant around the globe with five located on a latitude near the Tropic of Capricorn, five near the Tropic of Cancer, and one each at either of the Poles. When linked together they form the vertices of an icosahedron. The 16mm film loop in *The Twelve Devil’s Graveyards* references the vortices and how, when curved and mapped around the globe, they become the vertices of a 20-sided icosahedron. The images of the icosahedron are shot frame-by-frame, inset amongst single, alternating black and clear frames as a way to insert the image within a strobing matrix.

Plato’s planetary grid system is often referenced by those later writing about Sanderson’s research. It seems, though, that where Plato was interested in complex geometric shapes as forming the physical structure of the earth, Sanderson was interested in how the shapes might explain magnetic anomalies.

C^E In *The Twelve Devil’s Graveyards*, you explore the supernatural and the unexplained. Where does your interest in the supernatural stem? Is it related to studying environmental biology in university? Does it stem from your interest in the fringes of scientific knowledge or is it related to living in an era beyond reason—an era of Stephen Colbert’s “truthiness,” that is, knowledge based on intuition without an appeal to evidence, reason or logic?

C^B This work stems from a few different interests. I’m interested in the authentic scientific spirit that lies behind such unknowns—in fact, that was my primary interest in making *The Twelve Devil’s Graveyards*. I had been reading about the Bermuda Triangle and wanted to know more about the history of our belief in the strange happenings associated with the area. I came across the scientific study referenced in the work and was fascinated by how absolutely “scientific” the research seemed despite its contemporary placement within the fringes of science. Sanderson’s research is quite real and, according to the parameters he set out, quite valid. I don’t doubt his discovery that the shipping and plane losses of the time were predominantly situated within these particular locations, and that those locations are strangely equidistant to one another. The research seems content, though, with explaining the vortices as being due to electromagnetic anomalies caused by the sites themselves (perhaps when hot and cold water currents pass over the sites he coined as “vile” vortices). This is where things begin to shift from that traditionally accepted by scientific inquiry.

In my work, I often explore the idea of legitimacy within science and wonder about the boundaries between legitimate science and the unknowns that hover on the fringe, and about how these notions change over time. The *Tracking Sasquatch* (2010–ongoing) series was the start of my exploration into these concerns. I mean, scientists often discover creatures that previously only existed as myth. The mountain gorilla, the coelacanth, the Komodo dragon and many others were all considered to be unknown by scientists until more recent discoveries were made despite local mythologies and stories of their existence.³

C_E *Can you discuss some of your other iconography: the re-occurring use of birds, bats, helicopters, power lines and eyes? Are these intended to act as signs, like the eye as a signifier for surveillance?*

C_B Usually, when people ask me “what’s with all the birds?” I tell them about the strange relationship I have with them—I just really don’t like birds! I mean, I like birds enough, but they really freak me out. It’s something about that space above us that I find particularly scary—out of our line of sight. I’m pretty sure this comes from being such a horror movie fan. In disaster movies the first indicator that something terrible is about to happen is often a flock of birds escaping from the tree line.

Along with this I am preoccupied with thinking about surveillance and these images are all indicators of my ideas and fears associated with the increasing surveillance our culture has moved toward. It’s my worst nightmare. The idea of these weapons of surveillance: police helicopter searchlights; drones; satellites and more flying above us seems, to me, to be utterly frightening—out of sight and completely out of our control.

C_E *The encompassing, mysterious fog in The Twelve Devil’s Graveyards is an allusion to another recurring theme in your work, namely, nature as a powerful and mysterious force or a catastrophic force. This idea is further explored in your Mapping the Prairies Through Disaster (2012–ongoing) series, a well-researched series that explores the effects of historical environmental disaster on communities. Can you discuss some of your research for this project?*

C_B For *Mapping* I visited various archives across the prairies⁴—from my home on the edge of the plains in Denver to where I grew up on the edge of the prairies in Edmonton—in search of first-hand accounts of five natural disasters common to the region (blizzards, drought, wild fires, floods, grasshopper infestations). Overall, the work explores the common experience shared across this region despite the political border that splits it in half and I am intrigued by how much of the language used to describe experience with these disasters seems similar across time. With *dearfield, colorado* (2012), based on accounts of experience with drought and dust storms, it was almost as if the historical accounts could have been written today—here in Denver a stage 2 drought was declared this spring. Talk of recession and foreclosures further exacerbated by the extreme drought of the Great Depression sounded like they were current headline news. I think of all of the works within the series as being science fictions in a way, primarily because of this strange repetition across the language used to describe the disasters. Each work pulls archival text out from the timeline and places it either within a work describing a disaster just about to hit (in the *now*) or one having just hit (within some post-disastrous future).

I think of the works that take on more environmental subjects as being political. I suppose this perspective comes from growing up in a place whose entire economy is dependent on the exploitation of natural resources and was probably further solidified while I was an undergraduate studying environmental biology. It’s still shocking to me how long we have known about the damage we are doing to our environment and how little we have done to change it. Our uncontrollable destruction is pushing the environment to a point of no return and one day nature isn’t going to take it anymore. The repetition of natural disasters—they happen over and over again—forces us to shift our own linear paths through time and across space. These disasters level the playing field in a sense—natural disasters are one of the few things able to strike indiscriminately across economic and political boundaries.

C_E *In the past you’ve used archival material to raise questions about how we make sense of the unknown, whether that be supernatural phenomena or the imminent threat of natural disaster. Do these methods and interests continue to play out in your work?*



Christina Battle, *Tracking Sasquatch* (Field Report #2), 2012, video still. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Christina Battle, *The Twelve Devil’s Graveyards*, 2013, video still, mixed media installation. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

C^B My main interest in working with archival material is to explore notions of evidence and to consider how documenting our experiences might change our understandings of history and, in turn, our contemporary experience. I'm interested not only in how these threads from the past affect our present but also how they alter our future experiences and understandings. The difference between official and non-official archives is something that I have been particularly focused on with recent work. With *Archived Disasters [The Evidence] I. Bridge Collapse II. Unexplained Lights in Skies III. Sightings of Unknown Creature* (2012) and the *Tracking Sasquatch* series, I appropriated public-generated and alternative news archives in order to examine our relationship to paranormal subjects. I am particularly interested in how public archives, like those found on the Internet, might shift our knowledge of obscure and officially unacknowledged histories. Continuing this tangent, I have been researching early scientific studies into UFO phenomena led by the US Air Force. The researchers investigated and documented individual's encounters with UFOs and generated a massive archive of first-hand accounts. Despite the numerous sightings they documented, the Air Force dissolved the study after a second report—*The Condon Report*—was commissioned to investigate the validity of continuing to study such encounters. Although wrought with controversy and considered by some to be scientifically unsound, *The Condon Report* shut down official investigations into UFOs and there have not been any other formal studies into the phenomena since. Despite this official stance on UFOs, public sightings and interest in UFO phenomena have yet to wane and the user-generated archive continues to expand.

Right now, I am finishing the *Mapping the Prairies Through Disaster* series and have almost finished two additional chapters—*Tornado* and *Floods* (both still untitled). *Tornado: Parts 1 and 2* (working title) are based on the devastating tornado that passed through Edmonton in 1987. *Part 1* imagines a science fiction story of disaster and survival while questioning the degree to which people might give up their freedoms in order to feel safe. *Part 2* came out of thinking about our relationship to disastrous images and the conversation that has been developing around “disaster porn”—a term that has gained popularity over the past few years (most significantly since Hurricane Sandy and the Moore Tornado in Oklahoma). *Part 2* digitally manipulates archival images from the 1987 tornado as a way for me to think through a few things: why are we fascinated with images of disasters? Why do we consider such images to be beautiful? What role do these types of archival images later play in shaping our recollection of disastrous events? *

Bios

Originally from Edmonton, AB, **Christina Battle** holds a B.Sc. in Environmental Biology from the University of Alberta and an MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute and is currently based in Denver, Colorado. Her film, video and installation works are often inspired by the role of non-official archives and our notions of evidence. Battle's work explores themes of history and counter-memory, political mythology and environmental catastrophe. Her artworks have been exhibited at festivals and galleries internationally.

Clint Enns is a video artist and filmmaker from Toronto, ON, whose work primarily deals with moving images created with broken and/or outdated technologies. His work has shown both nationally and internationally at festivals, alternative spaces and microcinemas.

He has a Master's degree in Mathematics from the University of Manitoba, and has recently received a Master's degree in Cinema and Media Studies from York University. His writings and interviews have appeared in *Millennium Film Journal*, *INCITE Journal of Experimental Media and Spectacular Optical*.

Endnotes

- 1 “The Twelve Devil's Graveyards Around the World” was written by Ivan T. Sanderson and first published in *Saga* magazine in 1972.
- 2 *The Vault* (Federal Bureau of Investigation's online Reading Room) <http://vault.fbi.gov/reading-room-index>
- 3 The mountain gorilla remained officially unknown until 1902; the coelacanth, previously believed to have gone extinct about 65 million years ago was only discovered in 1938; and the Komodo dragon wasn't recognized by zoological communities until 1910.
- 4 Archival research done at: The Archives at the University of Colorado at Boulder Libraries (Boulder, CO); The Archives & Special Collections of the University of Nebraska—Lincoln Libraries (Lincoln, NE); The Library / Archives of the Nebraska State Historical Society (Lincoln, NE); The Saskatchewan Archives (Regina & Saskatoon, SK); The University of Saskatchewan Archives (Saskatoon, SK); The City of Regina Archives (Regina, SK); the Alberta Provincial Archives (Edmonton, AB); the City of Edmonton Archives (Edmonton, AB); The Blair-Caldwell African-American Research Library of the Denver Public Library (Denver, CO); The Hazel E. Johnson Research Center at the Greeley History Museum (Greeley, CO).