



two rivers
gallery

prince george and region

Emilie & Karl Mattson

Sweetwater

Emilie Mattson lives with her family on a ranch in Northern BC. She has spent her adult life there and feels that it is as much a part of her as she is of it. *Sweetwater* reflects that mind frame and experience. It is as much a metaphor for her life as it is an artifact of it.

The title of this exhibition, *Sweetwater*, is also the name of the road where the Mattsons live. With this in mind, it is meaningful that the central component of this installation is a boat. Boats can be seen as a model of self-sufficiency, necessarily so on long voyages where adequate food, water and amenities need to be available to support its passengers. They require considerable teamwork to operate successfully and, invariably, relationships develop into a community. In giving this installation the same name as the road on which she lives, Mattson draws a comparison between the two, and establishes herself as captain and her life on Sweetwater Road as the subject of her focus.

Sweetwater is comprised of the form of a boat borne up by waves and angled skyward. At the time of writing, the mast is without sails and the boat is tethered to a steel and stained glass chest that, when opened, reveals various 'treasures'. In front of the boat is a human figure pointing into the distance. A closer inspection of the figure reveals that it has been constructed from a number of different materials including bones and steel, found or salvaged from the Mattson farm.

On 12 June, Mattson will add a sail made from treated cow placenta to the boat. This sail raising marks the casting-off of the boat on a symbolic journey. The chest will be locked and the chain that appears to anchor the boat will be released. This performative element has been an ongoing component of the work from its inception.

Initially invited to install a particular sculpture, Mattson proposed a significant alteration that not only made more effective use of the space, but that also spoke more to her. Enlisting her son, artist Karl Mattson, they fashioned the current installation, drove it to Prince George, and with family and friends, carried the work and installed it in its current location. Since then, they have made a number of subtle changes, that will conclude with the sail raising and cast off that coincides with a reception, talk and performances. These kinds of changes are uncommon in exhibitions where, after installation, the work typically remains static. Here, however, they emphasize the sense of journey that *Sweetwater* embodies, as a community of people work to realize the artists' vision. In this sense, this work is an extension of the Sweetwater community into the exhibition space, as both its product and its metaphor.

Sculpture Court

However representative of the ranch community Emilie Mattson inhabits, *Sweetwater* is also very personal. The contents of the treasure chest – books, journals, mementos, glass and other material, – are deeply personal and speak of her past. They bear witness to her interests and the life she has lived, distinguishing her identity as an individual within that community. The incorporation of a cow placenta sail is especially meaningful. Common on the farm during calving season, this material represents the farm's driving force. It also represents motherhood. As she is the mother of a number of children, this intersection of meanings is relevant to Mattson and has been as much a driving force in her life as a sail is for a boat.

For a number of years, Emilie Mattson explored her role as a woman on a rural farm, weighing that against her identity as a mother and an artist. Having seriously considered abandoning her farm work in order to focus on her art, she determined that it is integral to her sense of self and that she should instead seek a balance. Initially working through some of these issues through painting, Mattson's sense of inquiry led her to experiment with placenta. Hanging them from fences, she discovered that when dried, placenta had a transparent quality reminiscent of stained glass. She has learned to preserve this quality with advice from taxidermists and it has become an intriguing and particularly pertinent medium to her.

Sail and mast are anchored to an imperfect boat. Rusted, with a hull full of holes, it is tossed by the waves underneath it and promises an uncertain and possibly perilous journey. While this is linked to Mattson's resolution of her own physical and creative issues, it resonates with our own life experiences. Just as this boat rides the metal waves that bear it up we are all subject to external forces outside of our control. Mattson's boat embodies struggles, anxieties and challenges that speak to her own particular experience, but that are inherent to the human condition.

The final component in this installation, Karl Mattson's *Forth*, was conceived as a stand-alone figure. The figure appears helmeted, a reference to the family's Scandinavian heritage, a reference not lost on the boat. With his arm thrust forward in a pointing gesture, the figure adopts a pose that suggests someone about to launch themselves forward. Incorporated into this installation, however, the figure takes on another meaning. Manifesting such drive and energy, the figure seems to urge the good ship *Sweetwater* on, in spite of its leaky rusted hull.

It is unimportant to know where the figure is gesturing, only to know that it is towards a point ahead that has not yet been reached. Whether that is a physical or spiritual place for Karl, Emilie or whoever else sees this installation, for all of us, it is something different to strive towards.

As the "captain" of this installation, Emilie Mattson, along with her son Karl have produced a work that physically and conceptually stems from their ranch on Sweetwater Road. Although the work is personal on one level, it explores themes that are familiar to us all. Whether we share the issues with which this work engages, or if it is simply the spirit of the work that resonates with us, *Sweetwater* offers a compelling truth: sometimes it is more important to be on the way to your goal than it is to attain it.

George Harris
Curator