

*Make the River Present* is organized for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis by Michelle Dezember, CAM's Director of Learning & Engagement and Allena Brazier, independent curator. Exhibition design by Tiana Berry-Jones.

The exhibition and programming are presented in partnership with the Missouri Humanities and with support from the Missouri Humanities Trust Fund.



### Learn More

Visit our website for more about *Make the River Present*, including an **audio guide** from the contributors and **registration information** about the gatherings.



### Gallery Guide

Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis

March 7–August 10, 2025



# Make the River Present

### Related Programs

For a complete list of programs, please visit [camstl.org](http://camstl.org).

#### Native Women's Care Circle Water Blessing

Sun, Mar 23, 10:00–11:00 am

#### Downstream Discourse: An Ongoing Conversation about Watershed and Human Health

Sat, May 31, 10:00 AM–1:00 PM

#### Water Ceremony and *Make the River Present* Conversations

Fri, Jun 20, 5:30–9:00 pm

#### River Excursion

Sat, Jun 21, 10:00 AM–12:00 PM

#### First Friday: Season Wrap Party

Fri, Aug 1, 5:00–9:00 pm

#### Eads Bridge Gathering

Sat, Aug 2, 10:30 am–12:00 pm



Photo: Terry Bergeron.



**Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis**  
3750 Washington Blvd  
St. Louis, MO 63108  
314.535.4660

Wed–Sun 10:00 am–5:00 pm  
Open until 8:00 pm Fri

Visit [camstl.org](http://camstl.org)  
**Facebook** [contemporaryartmuseumstl](https://www.facebook.com/contemporaryartmuseumstl)  
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*Make the River Present* is an exhibition and program series that encourages creative engagement with the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. Although St. Louis is physically bordered by these rivers—the two longest in the US—their presence is often obscured. Works by Black Heritage Water Trail, Allena Brazier, Dail Chambers, Galen Gritts (Cherokee), Native Women's Care Circle, Monique Verdin (Houma), and other contributors help us reconnect to these waters.

This confluence area is the ancestral lands of the ᎠᏪᏪᏪ/Wahzhazhe/Osage Nation, Jíwere-Nút'achi/Otoe-Missouria, Illinois Confederacy, Ogáxpá/Quapaw, Hochaꞯ Wazijacira/Ho-Chunk, Myaamia/Miami, and other tribes. Their sovereignty was never ceded after colonial removal and genocide.

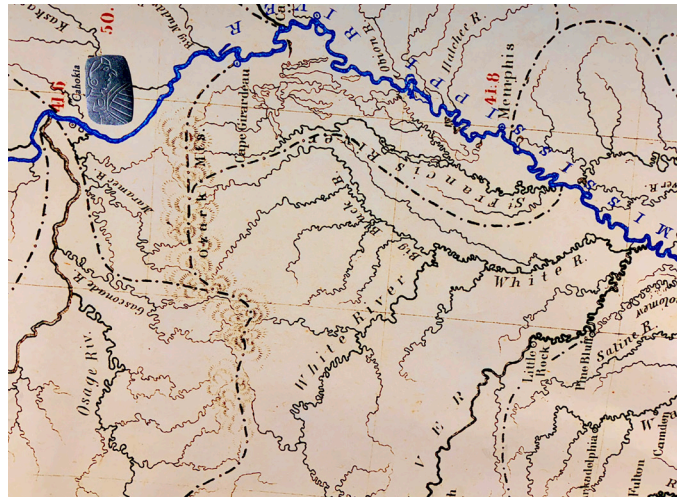
Despite generations of erasure, Indigenous connections to the rivers persist through language:

- / **Mihcisiipiwi:** Name for the Mississippi river by the Myaamia/Miami-Illinoi.
- / **Misi-ziibi:** Ojibwe word meaning “long river,” “great river,” or “gathering of waters.”
- / **Missouria:** The Algonquin word for the tribe, whose name for themselves is Nút'achi, “people of the river's mouth.”
- / **Mní wičóni:** Lakota for “water is life,” adopted by Standing Rock protests.
- / **Ni-u-kon-ska:** The Osage people's own name for themselves, meaning “Children of the Middle Waters.”
- / **Ny-tonks:** Name for the Mississippi River by the Ogáxpá/Quapaw, meaning “great river.”



These rivers also have a significant role in the histories and experiences of African Americans. Facilitating journeys of liberation, they have provided freedom from the vastness and brutality of slavery and segregation.

While these histories of erasure continue to shape our existence, so too does the flow of life, culture, and collaboration with the rivers.



Monique Verdin, *ReIndigenized 1861 Mississippi Watershed Map* (detail), 2022. Inkjet on canvas, 186 × 46 inches. Courtesy the artist.

### Monique Verdin

Monique Verdin, a citizen of the Houma Nation, is a transdisciplinary artist and storyteller who documents the complex relationship between environment, culture, and climate in southeast Louisiana. Her artwork *ReIndigenized 1861 Mississippi Watershed Map* (2022), intervenes on a U.S. Geological Survey map of the Mississippi River to incorporate Indigenous names and material culture. The work was created out of an artistic conversation with Minnesota-based artist Karen Goulet (Ojibwe). “As two Indigenous women at opposite ends of the same river,” says Verdin, “we investigated silenced stories and invisible connections that flow from the northwoods to the bottomlands of the Mississippi River.”

One such example are the commonly-named headwaters of the Mississippi. The Ojibwe name given to the lake that serves as a source to the river is Omashkoozo-zaaga’igan (“Elk Lake”), although it is now known as Lake Itasca. This name originates from the Latin phrase *veritas caput* (“true head”), and was given by Henry Schoolcraft during a 1831–32 expedition by the US Government. Schoolcraft was also joined by his wife, Jane Johnston Schoolcraft, a woman of Ojibwe and Scots-Irish ancestry whose Ojibwe name, Bamewawagezhikaquay, can mean “Woman of

the Sound [that the stars make] Rushing Through the Sky.” As Verdin and Goulet considered her story and name, they wondered what the stars might see as they look down at the Mississippi.

### Dail Chambers

St. Louis-based artist Dail Chambers maintains a nuanced social and public art practice that focuses on public health, the environment, and collective memory. She keeps an archive practice, found object exploration, and ecological and food production that honors migration, culture, and folklore.

Her installation *A River Journey* (2024–25) entwines a wide variety of materials—from natural fibers and materials to manmade items and found objects. These materials have symbolic meaning to ecological, ancestral, and social narratives that are important to her personal experience as well as collective African American histories of migration along the Mississippi River—in particular shared experiences and aesthetics between St. Louis, Memphis, and New Orleans.

Chambers uses an inquiry-based engagement model as a land steward. “Being a descendant of generations of migratory people informs my practice,” she says. *A River Journey* braids together materials that embody the complicated relationships of people and environment here for thousands of years. “The Midwest has been shaped by the intersections of Mississippian culture, French colonialism, the Trail of Tears, and the Black American Migration,” Chambers continues. “Present day, we live through redlining, food disparity, and the lack of access to clean air, land, and water.”



Dail Chambers, *A River Journey* (detail), 2024–25. Handspun wool and cotton, gourds, acrylic paint, decorative tassels and trim, corn husks; synthetic, human and horse hair; wooden pegs, lace; plastic, glass and wooden beads; jute, cowrie shells, bells, costume jewelry, feathers, sweet grass, seed pods, copper wire, florist’s wire, maracas, ribbon, dried flora. 186 × 63 inches. Courtesy the artist.

### Galen Gritts

*River is a verb*

*Surprise! It is both action*

*and state of being*

This haiku was created by Galen Gritts, a registered member of the Cherokee Nation born and raised in St. Louis. A prolific writer and speaker, Gritts has presented at prestigious events and contributed to numerous publications that promote Native American culture and history.

As a young man, Gritts was inspired by the book *I Seem to Be a Verb* by Buckminster Fuller. “I was taught by the dominant culture when I was in K–12 that people are grouped with things and are stationary, immutable,” he says. In the exhibition audio guide, Gritts reflects on the Cherokee framing of cardinal directions, in which he reminds us that “All of life is a verb. Life is a sandbox in which we get to play every day. To know this is wisdom and allows respect and joy. The river and all water predates us. It is larger than us. Respect it, and have joy.”

### Allena Brazier

In addition to being the exhibition’s co-organizer, Allena Brazier is also an artist and writer. While recently working with the Middle Waters Field School group, Brazier developed a series of writings about her hometown of East St. Louis, including her poem, *River*, featured in the exhibition.

She describes her inspiration to write *River* stemming from a deep appreciation of waterways, around her birthplace and up and down the river in trips with the group. “It felt active and alive; it transcended boundaries and seemed to breathe outside of my immediate location of East St. Louis - to cross water - land - air - time.”

There are many poems, lyrical essays, plays, and other forms of literary expressions about the rivers. You are encouraged to explore texts in the Creative Writing section and write your own poem to share with visitors.

### Black Heritage Water Trail of St. Louis

This interactive digital map, available in CAM’s Library, explores and commemorates African American community stories through the rivers of greater St. Louis. Through remembrance and preservation of these connections we engage the natural and social world, including the arts, issues of migration, environmental justice, the wakes of slavery and

colonialism, and stories of community resistance, resilience, place-making, and well-being. This resource is an initiative of the WashU & Slavery Project.

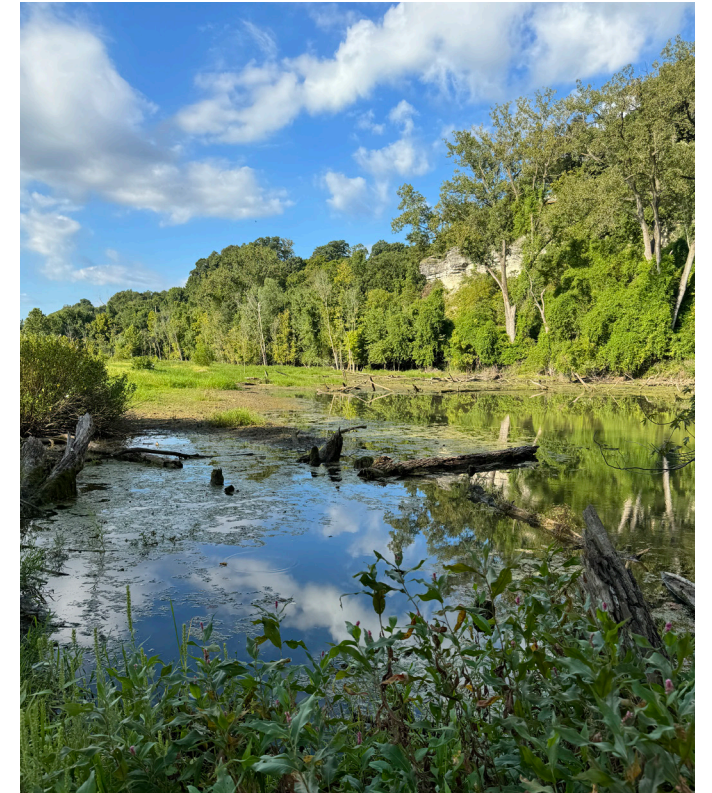


Photo: Terry Bergeron.

### Native Women’s Care Circle

*Make the River Present* includes fruits of a collaboration with Native Women’s Care Circle (NWCC), a grassroots, matriarchal, inclusive, and Indigenous-led prayer group. It supports the health and welfare of Native American families and communities and practices stewardship of the lands and waters. Members contributing to NWCC’s collaboration with *Make the River Present* are: Terry Bergeron (Bekaaniba and Sinnissippi rivers), Juleta Burrell (Mississippi and Missouri rivers), Andi Gaither (Running Water Creek and Black River), Saundi McClain-Kloeckener (Gichi Ziibi and Biiganakii Ziibi), Jane Neidhardt (Michigami), Rafael Sousa-Sommo (Lake Wallenpaupack and Delaware River), and Basmin Red Deer (child of the Confluence of the Middle Waters and performance artist of diverse experience and versatile expression).

In addition to developing associated programs and resources, the exhibition includes the video *Witness the Water* (2025) created by NWCC member Terry Bergeron. This work invites you to witness the life of the rivers through photographs taken over time and across seasons on publicly accessible land within a thirty-mile radius of St. Louis.