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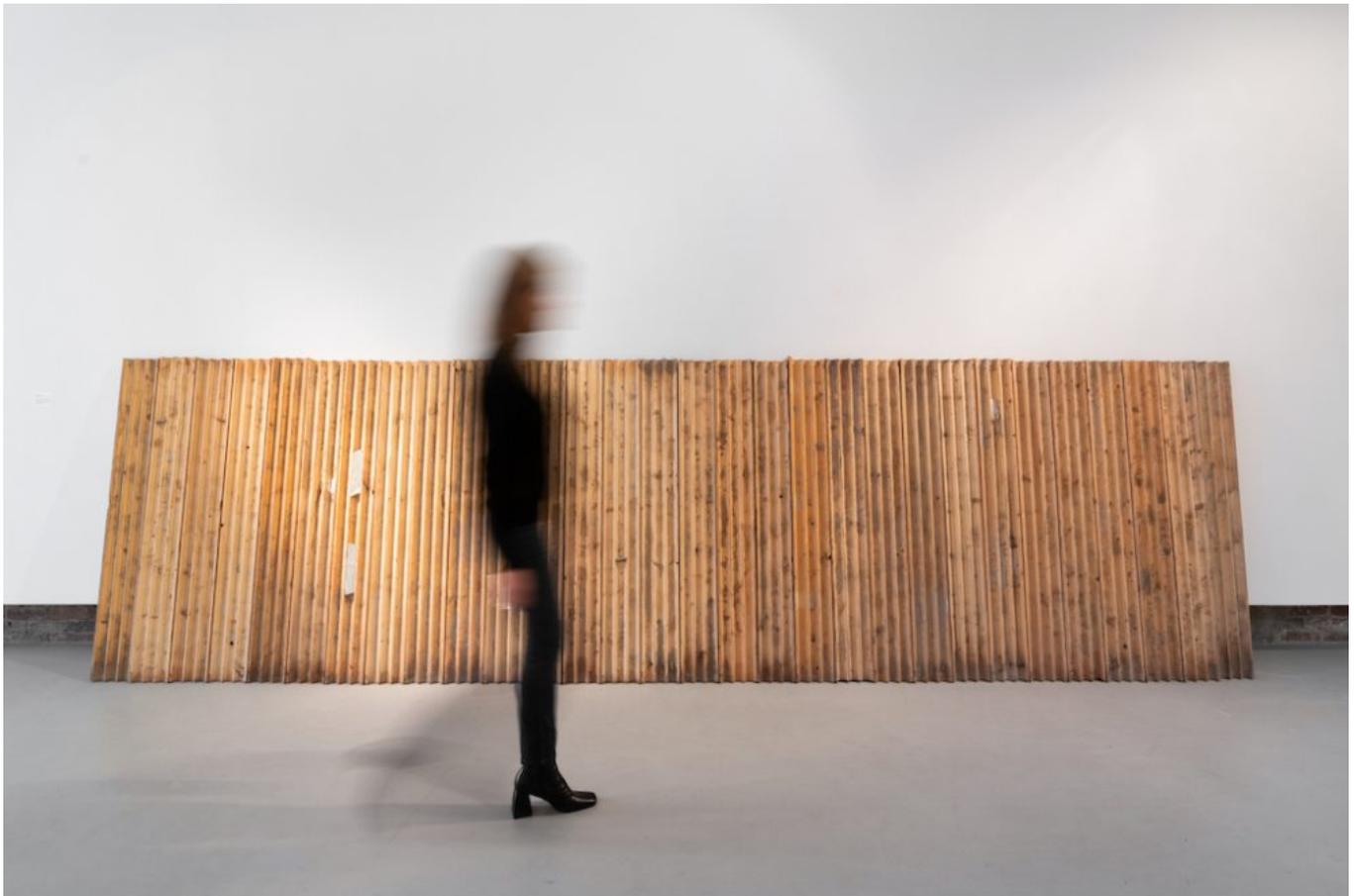
'Gold Rush' Documents the Social and Ecological Impact of Mining on Indigenous Lands (<https://bmoreart.com/2022/11/gold-rush-documents-the-social-and-ecological-impact-of-mining-on-indigenous-lands.html>)

Stephanie Garon uses mine core samples to guide the creation of sculpture, video, sound and photography.

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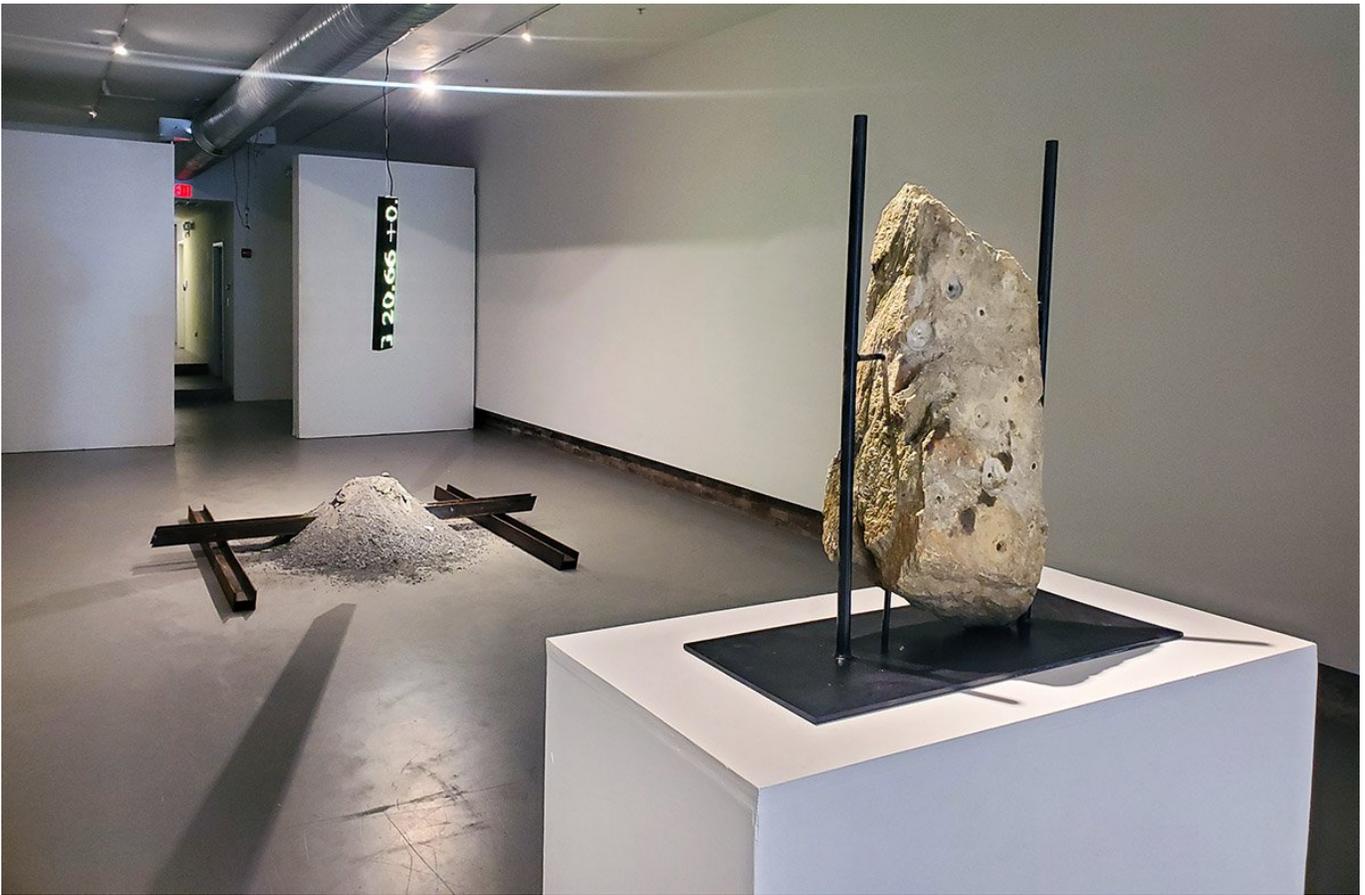
irty minutes from the Canadian border, an organic farm in Pembroke, Maine, harvests blueberries, cranberries, and mushrooms from its

orchards. The Smithereen Farm (<https://smithereenfarm.com/>) cultivates the land, but it also works to replenish its acres to preserve natural ecosystems. Underneath this biodiverse landscape, the cellar of the Smithereen farmhouse stores 20,000 core samples (<https://www.britannica.com/technology/core-sampling>), cylindrical mineral extractions used by miners to assess the presence of precious metals.

“I will never, ever forget the first time I went down there,” recounts artist Stephanie Garon (<http://www.garonstudio.com/about.html>). “It was flickering lights, a deep stairwell, [and] leaking, seeping water coming in.” The core samples stored at Smithereen Farm date as far back as the 19th century, when Pembroke became a prominent mining center. Located two miles away from the farmhouse, a mine known to locals as “Big Hill” (<https://www.resistmainemining.org/mining-in-maine/big-hill-pembroke-maine/>) represents both the remnants, and active pursuits (<https://www.mainepublic.org/environment-and-outdoors/2022-05-05/pembroke-residents-ban-industrial-mineral-mining>), of prospectors’ attempts to acquire natural resources.

Garon is an environmental artist whose paintings, sculptures, and installations explore humanity’s complex relationship with nature. Her new solo exhibition, *Gold Rush*, (<https://www.hamiltonianartists.org/exhibitions2/category/Current>) uses materials previously extracted from Big Hill to examine the ecological, cultural, and social implications of mining land that Indigenous tribes, including the Passamaquoddy (<https://www.wabanaki.com/>), have inhabited for more than 12,000 years (<https://inthesetimes.com/article/pembroke-maine-water-industrial-mining-ban>).

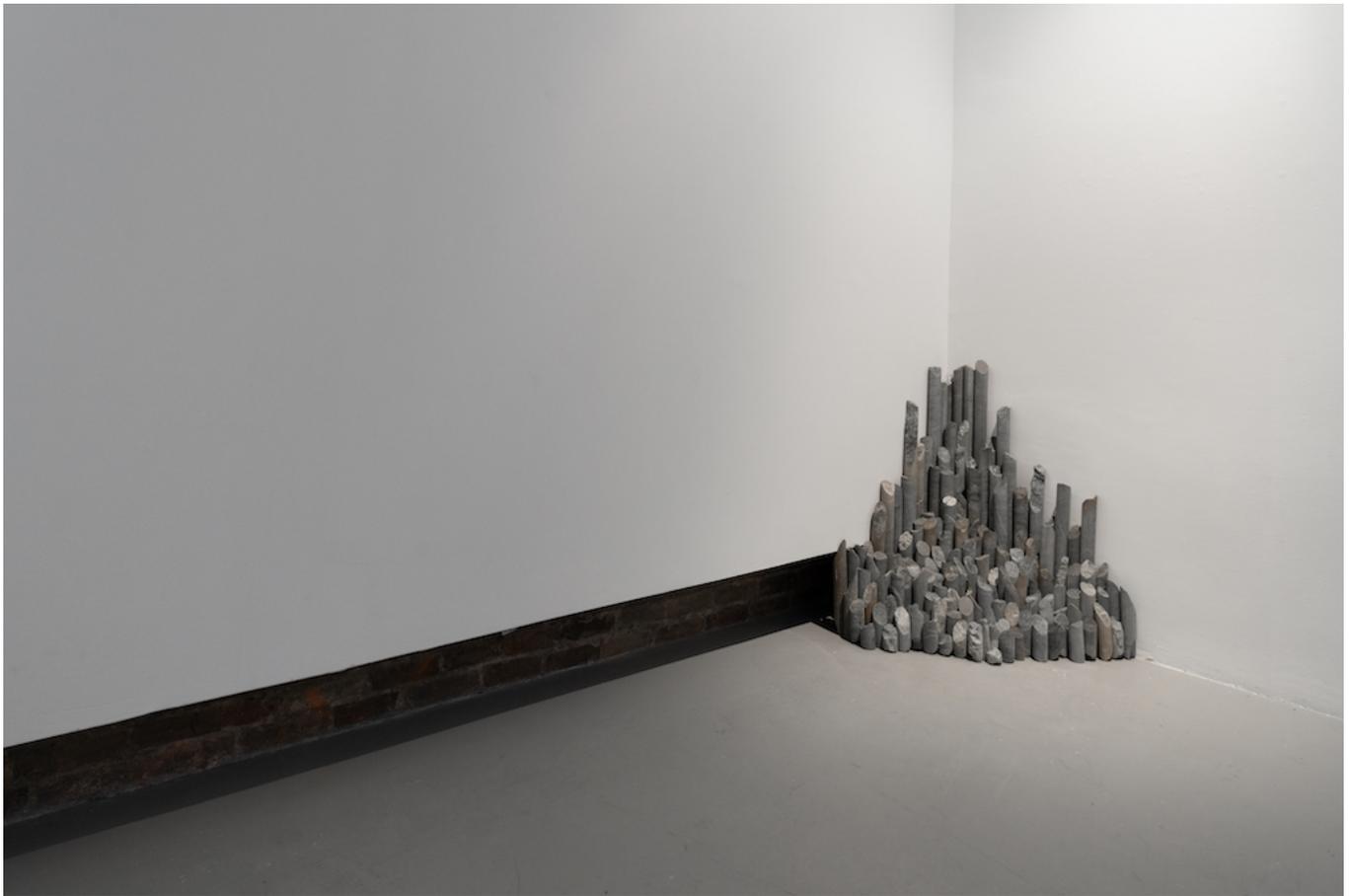
Throughout her career, Garon has experimented with organic materials, often treading the line between art and environmental science. “Being immersed in nature, and being surrounded by metal, were my earliest forms of language,” she says over a Zoom preview tour of the exhibition. The artist is a fellow of Hamiltonian Artists (<https://www.hamiltonianartists.org/historymission>), a nonprofit that advocates for accessibility within the contemporary art community. The organization operates out of Hamiltonian Gallery (<https://www.hamiltoniangallery.com/>) in Washington, DC where *Gold Rush* is displayed.



In *Gold Rush*, the artist uses mine core samples to guide the creation of sculpture, video, sound, and photography. The smooth, curvilinear shape of the samples is the result of drilling with steel tubes. As depicted in “Formation,” one of the exhibition’s installations, the cores typically span three to four feet.

The Big Hill mine has been the center of debate (<https://www.mainepublic.org/environment-and-outdoors/2022-05-05/pembroke-residents-ban-industrial-mineral-mining>) between the Passamaquoddy tribe of the Wabanaki (<https://www.abbemuseum.org/about-the-wabanaki-nations>) Nations, community organizations (<https://friendsofcobscookbay.wordpress.com/real-costs-of-mining/>), and the development corporation Wolfden Resources (<https://www.wolfdenresources.com/company/>), which owns the Pickett Mountain property where the proposed Big Hill mining site is located. Among the stakeholders in this conversation, the Passamaquoddy tribe “have documentation, they have journals, and they have oral history that describes [the] very land where the mine is,” Garon notes.

To infuse these perspectives into *Gold Rush*, Garon's video installation "Scattered Trees of a Storm-Swept Plain" layers visuals of natural scenes with the voices of local historians and experts. The title of the work references a speech (<https://suquamish.nsn.us/home/about-us/chief-seattle-speech/>) from Chief Seattle (https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Chief_Seattle), a Suquamish and Duwamish chief who advocated for Indigenous rights and land claims. The video includes dialogue from Dwayne Tomah, the director and curator of the Sipayik Museum, and music by Mali Obomsawin (<https://www.maliobomsawin.com/>), a Wabanaki composer, bassist, and songwriter.

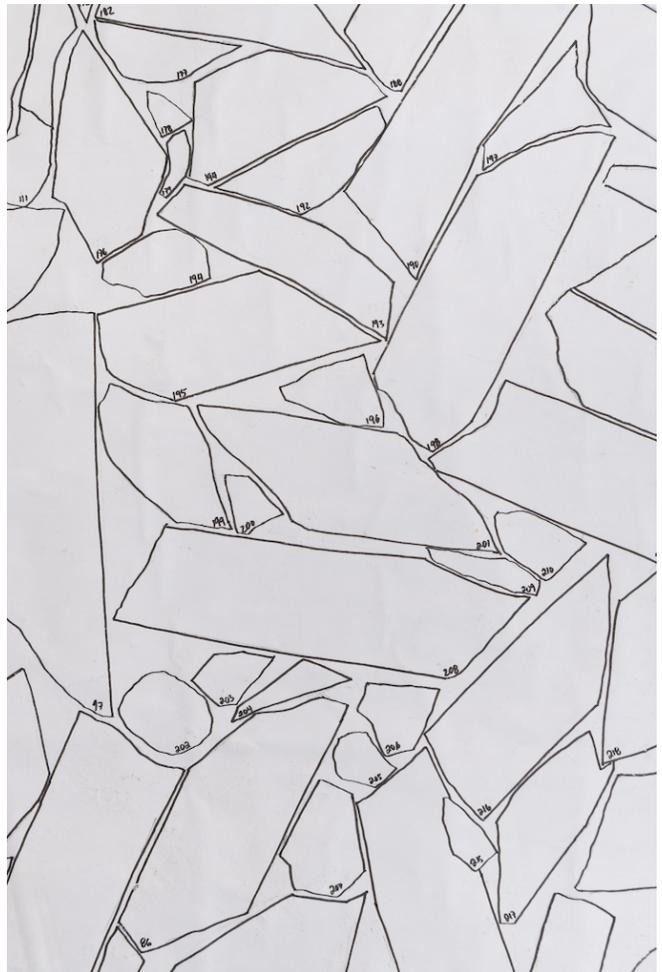




The centerpiece of Garon's exhibition, also named "Gold Rush," is a multi-dimensional installation that considers the ownership of land and the exploitation of resources. The title of the work references the California Gold Rush (<https://www.history.com/topics/westward-expansion/gold-rush-of-1849>) of the 19th century, "that time in history when people dropped everything to try and find gold, to try and find what they [considered] will bring them wealth," she says. In the installation, the artist stacks mine cores into a pile, which rests on top of fashioned steel beams. An LED ticker suspended above the cores flashes the stock price of gold, silver, and copper.

"Gold Rush" showcases the commodification of the natural world, Garon explains. This installation looks "to start [a] dialogue about how we use our natural resources and [to understand] what our own personal connections to them are."

Indigenous tribes with ancestral ties to the land surrounding Big Hill, including the Penobscot and Houlton Band of Maliseet, have struggled to maintain claims to their land since the advent of European colonization. Resist Mining in Maine (<https://www.resistmainemining.org/>) is an organization that advocates against the mining of the Picket Mountain property, defending Indigenous traditions (<https://www.resistmainemining.org/whats-at-stake/>) that rely on the health of the region's ecosystems. Other community action groups, including Friends of Cobscook Bay (<https://friendsofcobscookbay.wordpress.com/>), have exposed the adverse effects (<https://friendsofcobscookbay.wordpress.com/real-costs-of-mining/>) of mineral mining on air, wildlife, and drinking water. The combined efforts of local grassroots campaigns to restrict mining have proved successful. In May, the town of Pembroke passed (<https://www.mainepublic.org/environment-and-outdoors/2022-05-05/pembroke-residents-ban-industrial-mineral-mining>) an ordinance (https://friendsofcobscookbay.files.wordpress.com/2022/02/ordinance-and-summary_pembroke-metallic-mining-regulation.pdf) that halted industrial-scale efforts to extract resources from Big Hill.



Garon also felt it necessary to localize elements of *Gold Rush* to DC to “[create] that connection for the people who live here, right now,” she explains. In abstract paintings “Resonance 1” and “Resonance 2,” she mixes DC tap water with soil and the ground pigment of the rock cores. Then, Garon manipulates the texture and color of the paintings using calcium hydroxide, a chemical often used in mining. The works are accompanied by a sound installation that again features music by Obomsawin.

Beyond her exhibition, the artist’s research and exploration of the historical, ecological, and cultural significance of mining are still ongoing. In Pembroke, Garon continues to partner with a team of earth scientists, geologists, the Wabanaki people, and local politicians to document the impact that mines have on people living on the land. “For the first time in my art career, I have played a more active role as a community artist [and] using art to bring people together,” she says.

In the near future, the artist hopes to expand her research internationally. Garon plans to travel to Australia to work with Indigenous communities impacted by corporate mining projects. Applying the methodology used to develop *Gold Rush*, the artist seeks to understand how “art has been involved and to see how the cores over there have been handled.”

While this project develops, Garon has opened a dialogue with the communities living in the vicinity of Big Hill to plan a repatriation ceremony for the artifacts included in *Gold Rush*. In a few years, the artist visualizes the orchestration of a “formal physical closure” so “the cores get placed where they should be.”

In *Gold Rush*, Garon seeks to “amplify not my voice, but the [voices] of the people directly involved with the mine and with the land,” she says. Juxtaposing the living history of Indigenous peoples residing near Big Hill against the financial stake of mining corporations, the artist sheds light on the pressing conversations surrounding competing claims to land and the commodification of the environment.

Stephanie Garon: Gold Rush
(<https://www.hamiltonianartists.org/exhibitions2/gold-rush>)

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Photos courtesy of the artist and Hamiltonian DC