



# “Where would you go?”

ANISHINABE SCOUT RELOCATION

*Indian Man from Nepean Point, Samuel de Champlain monument (1992) Ottawa, Ontario*



Jeff Thomas & The L. Project

Through his photo-based practice, Jeff Thomas has addressed the colonial erasure of Indigenous presence, particularly in the urban space. With over three decades of engagement with the Champlain monument as well as with the Anishinabe Scout's relocation site at Major Hill's Park, the figure of Scout has become an avatar for Thomas, a way to move through the urban space while asserting:

**“We are still here.”**





A project reimagining the colonial landscape through the eyes of the Anishinabe Scout



## “Where would you go?”

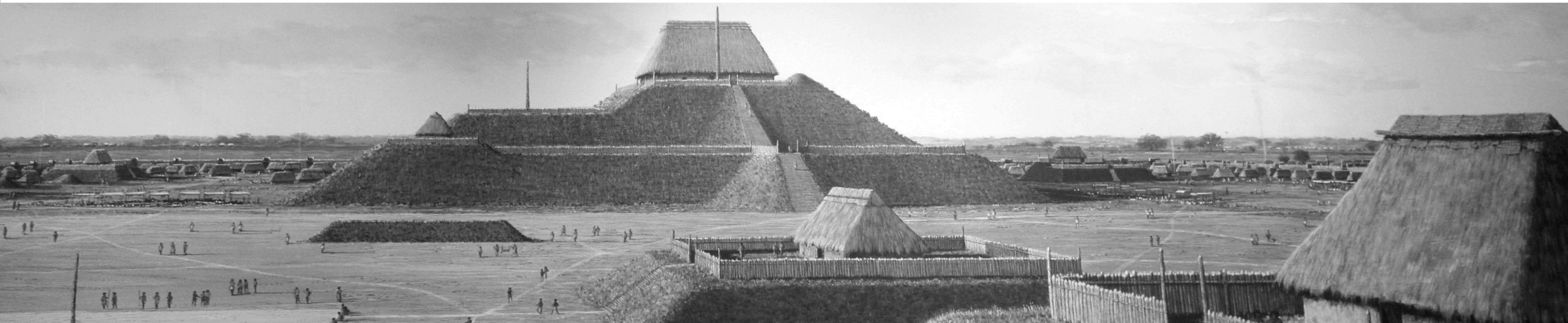
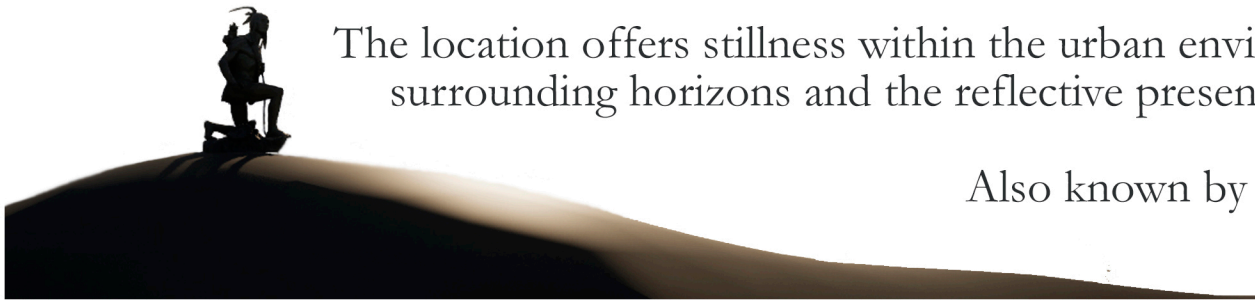
The *Anishinabe Scout Relocation* project proposes a renewed and Indigenous vision for the Anishinabe Scout figure that was once installed at the Champlain Monument, Nepean Point in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.

As a monument he has had an ongoing engagement with since a first encounter in 1992, Ottawa-based Onondaga artist Jeff Thomas has revisioned a new site for the Scout informed by the ancient culture of the Mississippians, an Indigenous civilization known for their complex societal structures, agricultural cultivation, and earth mounds.

Through the perspective of the Birdman of Mississippian cosmology, the landscape is surveyed from above to find a resting spot located between the provincial borders divided by the Kichi Sibi (Ottawa River): Victoria Island.

The location offers stillness within the urban environment, expansive scenery of the surrounding horizons and the reflective presence of water at the shoreline's edge.

Also known by the Algonquin name of *Asinabka*, meaning “place of the bare rock,” the small island is a sacred site.







Mississippian settlement (800 to 1600 CE) with distinctive mound structures



## What is foregrounded?

“How do you counter the absence and keep Indigeneity alive in the city?” is an ongoing question in Jeff Thomas’ practice. The *Anishinabe Scout Relocation* project extends his engagement with the Samuel de Champlain monument and the Scout figure that was first installed below Champlain. With his series, *Seize the Space*, Thomas utilized the vacancy on the monument when, due to pressure from the Assembly of First Nations, Scout was relocated to Major’s Hill Park in 1996. Since that time, he has produced over four hundred portraits on the vacant platform as well as at the Scout’s relocation spot at Major’s Hill. With the consideration of a new site for the Scout he is “committed to keeping the story of the monument in the present.”

Closed in 2018 for environmental remediation to be reopened in 2028, the site of Asinabka (Victoria) Island offers a place for quiet introspection connected to, yet at a distance from, the urban architecture of industry, culture and government. It is in close proximity to the *Akikodjivan* Falls, known by its colonial name of Chaudière Falls, another sacred site for the Algonquin. Downstream is the Rideau Falls and the confluence where the *Pasāpikahigani Sibi* (Rideau River) and *Tenāgādino Sibi* (Gatineau River) enter into the *Kichi Sibi* (Ottawa River).

In the site renderings, the Asinabka Island is depicted as repopulated with Eastern White Pine, a keystone species with ecological importance as well as cultural significance for many First Nations. Native to the region, the White Pine has its own symbolic presence within the landscape. The renderings also depict an earth mound rising up from the island’s eastern point, raising the Scout to more prominence within the horizon. The mound, referencing the historic Mississippian site of Cahokia, echoes the typology of the Museum of History, the only Indigenous-designed building within the region, and the undulating ridge of the Gatineau Hills beyond.

The Scout is positioned towards the figure’s prior locations (Nepean Point under the Champlain Monument, Major’s Hill Park alone) as a way to continue the dialogue between the sites despite physical distance and the river flowing between. The expansive horizon of the Ottawa Valley meets the water of the *Kichi Sibi* forming a skydome that the setting is staged within. Urban infrastructure and the architecture of colonial settlement become the backdrop to the Indigenous presence foregrounded on the site.

The *Anishinabe Scout Relocation* offers a renewed invitation to envision a future where Indigenous knowledge and culture is centred and other stakeholders - the soil, water, air and non-human - are recognized within the design.







Relocation Site: a place for quiet introspection connected to, yet at a distance from, the urban architecture of industry, culture and government.



### A first encounter.

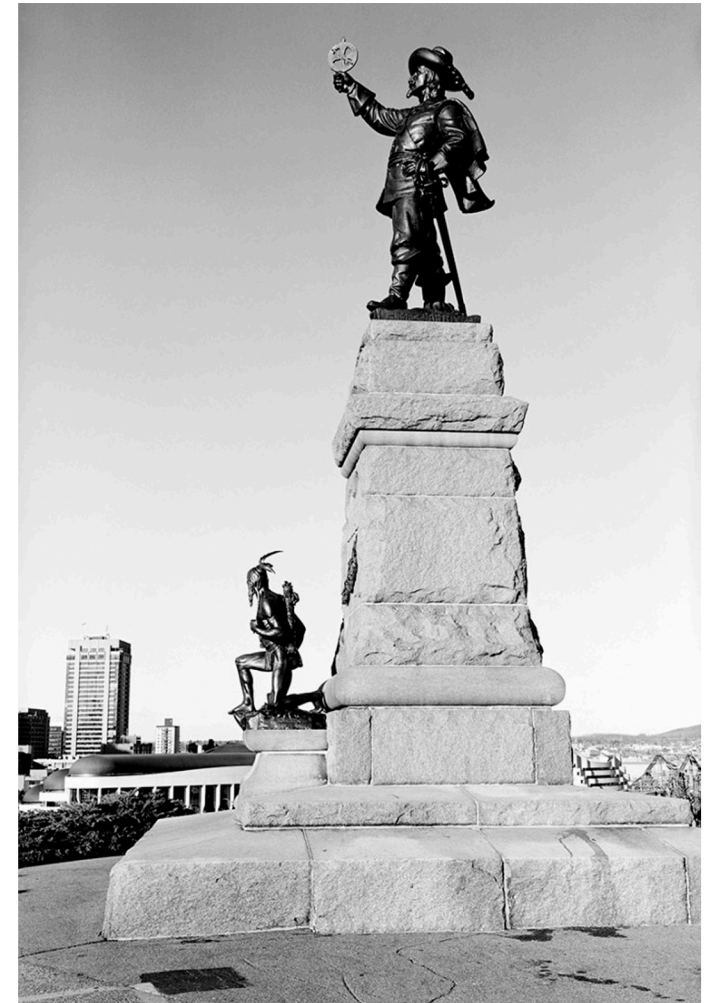
In 1992, Jeff Thomas learned about the Champlain monument in Ottawa, Ontario. It was situated behind the new location of the National Gallery of Canada on Nepean Point, a cliff overlooking the river separating Ontario and Québec. Although the Gallery's current building had only opened four years prior, the monument, by sculptor Hamilton MacCarthy, had been there for some time. First installed in 1915, in 1918 MacCarthy added an additional figure.

Below a standing Champlain, a native scout figure was installed. Champlain's right arm jubilantly pointed to the sky, the figure holding an astrolabe, a navigation tool, incidentally held upside down.

Originally, the Scout was to kneel beside a canoe but in the end there were no funds for its fabrication. The two figures, Colonial and Indigenous - one above and one below - were positioned looking out towards the Ottawa River to an urban landscape of government, industry and museum structures. "I don't think I've ever seen a monument like this, where an Indian has a prominent place."

What began in that moment was a dialogue with the monument.  
Thomas propositioned to the Scout figure:

**"If you could leave this place, where would you go?"**



*Samuel de Champlain Monument (1992)*







“I don’t think I’ve ever seen a monument like this, where an Indian has a prominent place.”



## Where the Rivers Meet.

The question proposed to the Anishinabe Scout figure in 1992 has remained a guiding motive in Jeff Thomas' work as a way to extend his engagement with the colonial monument of Samuel de Champlain. The *Anishinabe Scout Relocation* is part of a larger ongoing project, *Where the Rivers Meet*, that includes digital documentation of other local monuments and digital 3D rendering of the Scout figure. The rendering provides the opportunity to take the Scout off of the monument to place into the landscape. For Thomas, "The 3D version of the Scout is symbolic of my journey, using my camera to study and understand the world around me." *Where the Rivers Meet* also includes a virtual tour of the region (whereheriversmeet.art/tour). The tour highlights the extensive photographic documentation Thomas has produced of the National Capital Region as a way to insert Indigenous presence into a colonial landscape. The proposed relocation at Asinabka (Victoria) Island places the Scout at the centre, surveying the many sites and buildings that Thomas has photographed.

Asinabka is:

- a sacred site;
- includes prominence of water, the Kichi Sibi and Falls;
- has panoramic view of both sides of the river;
- is historically significant (Pre-Contact Indigenous Settlement; European Settlement);
- is centred within a landscape of commemoration and monuments;
- will be publicly accessible (reopening in 2028)







“The 3D version of the Scout is symbolic of my journey, using my camera to study and understand the world around me.”



## More about the site:

Nestled between the municipalities of Ottawa and Gatineau, Asinabka (Victoria) Island has been an ongoing site of Indigenous gathering for ceremony, culture and activism.

It is the centre point between landscapes that include British and French settlement as well as other newcomer migration waves. The history of Indigenous settlement stretches back 9,000 years. Prior to colonial contact the area was already where many culturally diverse First Nations came for trade, the host nation the Algonquin. In 1839, the island was named “Victoria Land” to commemorate Queen Victoria. After colonial settlement, the desire for the Eastern White Pines for the masts of tall navy ships as well as the surrounding forests for pulp and paper resulted in massive deforestation, forever changing the landscape.

With the arrival of the lumber barons, whose surnames are reflected in the urban environment - Booth, Wright, Bronson - the Great River, *Kichi Sibi* (Ottawa River), was utilized for the pulp and paper industry. Remnants remain on the island: the Domtar mill below Portage Bridge and the metal flume of the timber slide once used for the log booms.

More recently, Indigenous engagement and presence on the island has included Aboriginal Experiences (now Madahoki), an initiative that for over twenty years provided Indigenous programming for public audiences. Asinabka was a site for Indigenous activism as Attawapiskat First Nation Chief Theresa Spence held her hunger strike during Idle No More. Up until the closure in 2018, the island was often used for Indigenous ceremonies and other cultural gatherings.

Surveying the landscape from the island's eastern tip, government buildings, such as Parliament Hill, rise up from the cliffs on the Ottawa side while on the more graduated and brush covered shorelines of Gatineau, Québec, the Kruger smokestack shoots a constant plume of smoke into the sky. Located next to the plant is the Canadian Museum of History (CMH). Designed by Indigenous architect Douglas Cardinal and completed in 1989, its form integrates with the rolling slopes of the Gatineau Hills that rise beyond the city limits. Built of limestone, it references earth mounds inserting an Indigenous typology within the otherwise colonial architecture.

Immediately across the river from CMH, back on the Ottawa side, the three-tiered glass cupola of the National Gallery of Canada juts up like an iceberg. The building by Israeli-Canadian Architect Moshe Safdie opened in 1988. Integrated within the scene are the metal steeples of the Notre Dame Basilica, a Neo-gothic style cathedral finished in 1842. Just before the panorama returns to the Parliament buildings, the Rideau Canal divides the depression of land between the cliffs. A man-made military construction project that began after the War of 1812, this UNESCO World Heritage site is another important regional waterway along with the *Kichi Sibi* (Ottawa River), *Pasāpikahigani Sibi* (Rideau River) and *Tenāgādino Sibi* (Gatineau River).

Asinabka is also situated amidst an extensive landscape of commemoration: monuments and public art that speak to local stories, national narratives, and difficult histories. Prior to the early 2000s, if there were representations of Indigeneity they were set within the context of a colonial perspective, such as with the Samuel de Champlain monument. By the 2000s this began to change. In 2001 in Confederation Park, the National Aboriginal Veterans Monument was unveiled, a monument by Cree sculptor Noel Lloyd Pinay. Large in scale, it includes Indigenous figures and various totemic animals (bison, bear, wolf) as well as an eagle, its wings spread out atop the monument as a Thunderbird.

In 2013, Kwakwaka'wakw artist Mary Anne Barkhouse's *'namaxsala (To Travel in a Boat Together)* was installed outside the CMH. Inside a copper canoe a bronze wolf looks out across the river to Parliament Hill, a sculpture reflecting on human relationships with the natural world. Ādisōke, the new location of the Ottawa Public Library and Library and Archives Canada opening in 2026, will include commissioned public art by Barkhouse, various First Nations, Inuit and Métis artists as well as local Algonquin artists Emily Brascoupé, Claire Brascoupé and Mairi Brascoupé.

For the 2028 reopening and ongoing redevelopment of Asinabka Island, the National Capital Commission (NCC) has created the Kabenishinân Minitig Plan in partnership with the nearby Algonquin Anishinabeg communities of Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg (Québec) and Algonquins of Pikwàkanagàn First Nations (Ontario) to, as the NCC mandates, “establish a place of special significance in the Capital for Indigenous peoples and their cultural traditions.”

From Jeff Thomas' initial encounter in 1992 with the Samuel de Champlain monument and the Anishinabe Scout that kneeled below Champlain, much has changed, including the NCC's renaming of the Scout, in consultation with the Algonquin, to *Kichi Zibi Innini* (Great River Man). These types of initiatives that counter colonial monuments demonstrate a paradigmatic shift in the way place, and the accompanying stories, are commemorated in the National Capital Region.

### More About Jeff Thomas.

In 1992, Jeff Thomas went on a road trip across Canada and the United States. The year was significant. It was the Christopher Columbus Quincentenary, 500 years after the 1492 voyage where Columbus came upon lands he has been credited as discovering. Now the Americas, these lands are scattered with monuments to the Italian explorer whose arrival marked what would become a holocaust for Indigenous peoples. In the US alone there are approximately 150 monuments to Columbus.

In Canada, the 'The Father of New France,' Samuel de Champlain, has several monuments commemorating his 1603 arrival to the shores of what is now the province of Québec. Thomas' road trip was a search to find sites that "commemorate the ancient world and the Indigenous people who lived here before Columbus arrived."

Along the way, he documented monuments commemorating colonization.

**"I returned home disillusioned by the erasure of Indigenous culture, not only in the literal sense but also that there were very few monuments on which I could see other Indian people like myself."**

### Countering the monument.

Monuments are layered with the values and histories as well as the contradictions of its situational context within a landscape. Colonial monuments may cloud and conceal differing experiences of the history being commemorated. Yet the overarching narratives, often nationalistic in tone, are not so opaque that they cannot be illuminated with other perspectives. Thomas' road trips also brought him to mounds of Cahokia and other sites where there were traces of Mississippian culture. As a way to counter the colonial monument, the *Anishinabe Scout Relocation* project references the Indigenous forms of the earth mounds Thomas documented.



*Mississippian Homeland, Monk's Mound (2015) Collinsville, Illinois*







“I returned home disillusioned by the erasure of Indigenous culture...”



### Scouting for Indians.

Through the vantage of the Scout, Jeff Thomas, who relocated to Ottawa in 1993, surveyed the urban landscape searching for Indigeneity. In the local municipalities established by French and English settlement, there are representations of the historical relationship with Indigenous peoples but the trope of the 'Noble Savage' is what is most often cast in metal or carved in stone. Indigeneity is contained within architectural friezes or colonial monuments as though existing only in stasis in the past rather than the contemporary present. Yet Thomas arrived in a city that, as with other cities in Canada, has a sizable urban Indigenous population. Using wood or plastic figures inserted into his photographs, he points to the erasure of Indigenous people. As proxies for Indigenous presence, they are positioned in front of government buildings, bridges or waterways; a landscape dominated by architecture in service of the Canadian state, the institutions that obstruct Indigenous sovereignty and cultural continuance.



Chief Red Robe, sunset at Major's Hill Park (20??)

### Seize the Space.

In 1996 the Assembly of First Nations, an advocacy organization for the rights and interests of First Nations, cited the concern that the Scout, installed below Champlain, was in a subservient position calling for its removal. The Scout was relocated across the street to a secluded spot to Major's Hill Park. Now the vacancy became a place where Thomas could activate the monument through a portrait series, *Seize the Space*, reversing the European gaze with his own. The National Capital Commission began redeveloping Nepean Point in 2020. The Champlain figure was removed off the plinth and put in storage. Sometime later, the Scout was also quietly removed. These events prompted Thomas to again reconsider his initial question to Scout, "If you could leave this place, where would you go?"



Greg A. Hill \_\_\_\_\_ (2-??)







“If you could leave this place, where would you go?”