



## A Brush of Dissent

With watercolour and cold, hard facts, a new book exposes 23 years of unresolved aquifer contamination.

**L**IKE THE LANDSCAPE it aims to preserve, the inherent power of *This Soil, This Water* comes from returning to and lingering in its open spaces, nourishing colours and stoic wisdom. Environmental issues and controversies are certainly plentiful in 2012, but few books take aim with such subtle effectiveness, leaving room to reflect and revisit.

*This Soil, This Water* presents a rare body of watercolour work by woodcut printmaker, painter and sculptor Ed Schleimer, interwoven mostly with excerpts from a presentation made by seasoned activist and writer Susan Hodges Bryant during a 2001 inquiry into the Walkerton,



Ontario, E. coli water crisis. Their collaboration tackles an ecological controversy that has continued to percolate for more than two decades: a Uniroyal Chemical manufacturing plant's contamination of the land, water and aquifers in Elmira, Ontario.

The book aims to reinvigorate debate – Bryant says most people don't realize that the environmental damage and corporate reticence are unresolved – by recounting the original efforts of a local environmental group to repair the habitat and corral support from "a distant, preoccupied Ministry of the Environment." Unconventionally, hard words are paired with softer images to address this knowledge gap.

"I wanted to offer readers an experience of the resonating contradictions between two different approaches," says the book's publisher, retired literature professor Judith Maclean Miller. "Readers can interpret whether or not we're going to have respect for the natural world in the way Ed observes and records it, or if we're going to have the denigration and disrespect that Susan's text shows. How is one endangered or obliterated by the other? How might one be used to disguise or mask the other? I trust the reader to deal with those kinds of contradictions and go wherever that leads."

Snippets of Bryant's plainspoken arguments relay the disturbing facts: that Elmira's water supply was revealed to contain rising levels of a cancer-causing nitrosamine beginning in 1989, and sediment erosion was found to be depositing high levels of dioxins, furans and DDT in 1995; that "no health study has ever been done in Elmira to determine the effects of drinking the contaminated water"; that no charges were ever laid against Uniroyal, even though their production practices were pinpointed as the source of contamination, which was also found in water supplies nearly 100 kilometres downstream; that "little has been done, other than countless studies," to protect the affected waterways and floodplain, or to address the negligence and pollution.

Set against this harrowing recap, Schleimer's watercolours explore the dynamic natural beauty that Uniroyal's practices have threatened, and a range of emotional responses. Floral shapes are composed of blotches, smears, stains and leakages. Vibrant plants are tinged with decay or darkness; others evoke tributaries; a few enlarged pieces allude to a sense of suffocation. The somewhat abstract, seemingly evolving shapes also tap into the creative process of watercolour painting. Created sporadically between 1975 and 1995, each piece draws from the flora of Schleimer's mother's backyard garden, and each subject serves to honour and radiate the glory of simple outdoor pleasures.

The notion that sparsely written, image-anchored stories can have as much impact as a densely researched tome is what motivated Miller to launch Stonegarden Studios and begin publishing chapbooks in late 2009. She was drawn to Bryant's lack of ornament and bombast, and her indisputable facts that spoke volumes. Her attraction to Schleimer's painting was similar. "Art is vital to our conversations about the world around us," she says. "It can say the things we can't quite articulate, and provide us with vocabularies beyond the usual." 🐾

*Eric Rumble is editor of Alternatives.*

Absorb 40 years of Schleimer's work at [edschleimer.com](http://edschleimer.com).



**This Soil, This Water**, essay by Susan Hodges Bryant, paintings by Ed Schleimer, Kitchener, Ontario: Stonegarden Studios, 2011, 50 pages. Order a copy at [stonegardenstudios.ca](http://stonegardenstudios.ca).