F or my year long involvement with the ARTservancy project, I explored the ‘loop’ around the Milwaukee River, which is adjacent to the Riverwest neighborhood in Milwaukee. It is made up of four connected parks along the river—namely, Gordon, Turtle, Caesar and Riverside. My initial starting place was in Turtle Park, home of the River Revitalization Foundation. RRF was founded in 1994 as a conservation organization to establish a parkway for public access, walkways, recreation and education, bordering the Milwaukee, Menomonee and Kinnikinnick Rivers; to use the rivers to revitalize surrounding neighborhoods, and to improve water quality, habitat. This will increase biodiversity in the valley.

These urban parks are situated differently than the city parks that populate Milwaukee. To reach this beauty in natural area, you have to walk down the slope on either graded or well-worn paths from the noisy city life above. Once along the river, one feels protected, and encouraged to slow down and look around. It’s a pas-sive-active place because of the dog walkers, kayakers, bicyclists, fishing folk, joggers, walkers and likely many poets and artists all seeking a space to allow the rhythm of the river to change one’s perspective for a while. I visited each of these parks in a random way, avoiding the same starting point, and going there at different times of day. It was important to be as open as possible to every new thing I encountered. It seemed to me that I was attracted to things that were fleeting and had undergone change—something had happened to cause them to appear as they did.

The sounds in nature are powerful. A little bird’s chirp startled me one day when I was lost in the moment of surrounding nature and I didn’t expect this feathered one to land on the path right in front of me. Eeek! Creaking trees reminded me that I might be careful in case the root system was something unnamable and interesting. My eye, I would just accept that there was a large and small as much as what happened there. The large and small aspect of life along the river called me to look closer. Not to look for something in particular though. If something caught my eye, I would just accept that there was something unnamable and interesting, that’s all. These observations, these feelings then found their way into my ceramic work.

We find what we seek. I recently read an article about phenomenology: the science of noticing. It is the most natural part of my art practice. I want to share what I notice, noticing. It is the most important role in establishing and maintaining wetlands. A different habitat than the woods, diversity in the city. Watching videos helped me to see how elusive they are.

Last winter, a member of the RRF staff took me to see a location further up the view, hanging bat and bird boxes, and a kayak launch, and clearing in-coming water engineers. I never walked the river after more than 100 years to digest the bark of trees. Cottonwood trees which have been gnawed by beavers will die from the top but often sprout from the roots. Beavers play an important role in establishing and maintaining wetlands. A different habitat than the woods, diversity in the city. Watching videos helped me to see how elusive they are.

My thought in exploring the trails was to remain open to everything that happened there. The large and small aspects of life along the river called me to look closer. Not to look for something in particular though. If something caught my eye, I would just accept that there was something unnamable and interesting, that’s all. These observations, these feelings then found their way into my ceramic work.

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