

Cora Li-Leger
SUBURBAN SONGLINES

A Legacy of Marks

BY CHARLENE BACK



A Legacy of Marks: Suburban Songlines by Cora Li-Leger

By Charlene Back, 2024

Cora Li-Leger
Suburban Songlines (Marking the Earth: a South Surrey Subdivision) 1, 2018

concertina fold artist book
(15 cm x 12.7 cm folded)
SAG 2022.09.01

Photograph by Dennis Ha

After building a long and meaningful career out of helping others make marks, visual artist Cora Li-Leger is now focusing on her own marks. In her three pocket-sized artist books titled *Suburban Songlines* (2021), her marks are precise—an attempt to capture local topography from a bird’s eye view. However, she is well aware that “the map is not the territory.”¹ In other words, the model is not reality. Li-Leger has an uneasy relationship with maps that *Suburban Songlines* highlights. “We all have ways that we mark the

earth, and it becomes our reality, but it isn't," she says.

Li-Leger's mark-making has taken many forms throughout her career. During her BFA from the University of Minnesota in 1975 and then at the Banff Centre School of Fine Arts in Alberta, she mainly produced acrylic and chalk pastel paintings. Cora met her husband, the late Don Li-Leger, in Banff. They were a dynamic duo, supporting each other in their respective art practices but taking very different paths. Whereas Don persistently

showed and sold his artworks, Cora says, "I wasn't comfortable with people paying attention to me and my art."

After living off the grid on Burke Mountain in Coquitlam in the early years of their marriage, they moved to South Surrey in 1987, where Cora continues to live and create knitted sculptures, deconstructed books, and ephemeral art in parks. Her art career changed course in the mid 1990s when she chose to pursue graduate studies in art therapy. "I was fascinated by the art other people



Cora Li-Leger, *Suburban Songlines (Marking the Earth: a South Surrey Subdivision) 2*, 2018, concertina fold artist book, acrylic on paper (14 cm x 8.3 cm folded) SAG 2022.09.02. Photograph by Dennis Ha.

made, especially because clients weren't artists. It really connected me to the fundamental need of people to express themselves—our need to tell stories and make marks. I believe everybody is an artist—it's not for the elite."

When she fell and broke her sacrum in 2015, she considered it a sign that she should retire. "It was hard for me to do my own work when I was in the thick of working as a therapist," she recounts. Her mentor gave a workshop that Li-Leger attended and afterwards, she went off and started drawing. That was the beginnings of her many artist books. A lover of nature, Li-Leger made a book of drawings in response to the sounds of grackles she heard in Texas. She often experiences synaesthesia, meaning "to feel together" or when senses cross. This is the phenomenon of experiencing a colour as a sound, for example, or a certain taste when you hear a word.

One book contains gold moons and another, silver moons, both created after observing a supermoon in China. This same trip inspired Li-Leger's artist book *Quietude is found in the Middle Kingdom*. Black ink drawings of a neolithic vase, modern apartment towers, ancient taiko-style drums, and a maze of streets—all seen in a museum in Chongqing—convey a sense of peace and meditation amidst an overpopulated metropolis.

Indeed, meditation is a theme in Li-Leger's practice. Whether she's creating an installation out of pine needles or drawing line after line on a sheet of paper, she engages with the world. The movement and patterns of humans and animals (birds, insects, etc.) frequently inspire her, but the subject doesn't matter as much as the process—

making marks is the meditation, with the aim that the whole is bigger than the sum of its parts. "I am really interested in distilling marks to their simplest components," she says. Her mother did this too, making intricate lace-like tablecloths from tiny, repetitive stitches.

Unlike Li-Leger's artist books of monochrome ink drawings, *Suburban Songlines* pop with vibrant colours.² The one with a sculptural Turkish fold literally pops out, while the other three open in an accordion fashion, also known as a concertina fold. The books transform into maps that reveal a bird's eye view of different South Surrey subdivisions snaking with cul-de-sacs and dotted with houses, green space, and yards.

For an artist who often experiences synaesthesia of sound and image, it's not surprising that Li-Leger was attracted to the concept of "songlines" vital to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia. Margo Ngawa Neale, senior Indigenous art and history curator at the National Museum of Australia, defines the term as follows:

Songlines can be visualised as corridors or pathways of knowledge that crisscross the entire continent, sky and water. Songlines, sometimes referred to as dreaming tracks, link sites and hold stories, known as story places, which are read into the natural features of the land. These sites of significance, formed by ancestral beings, are like libraries, storing critical knowledge for survival. The stories at significant sites contain knowledge that instruct on social behaviour, gender relations or where water or food can be sourced.³

Songlines are passed down via large song cycles, but they can “appear” in visual form too, which Li-Leger experienced at The Margaret Levi and Robert Kaplan Collection at Western Gallery in Bellingham in 2014. This collection is ranked as the preeminent collection of Australian Aboriginal art in the United States. The highly patterned, colourful paintings suffused with storytelling and sites of significance left a strong impression on her. “We in the West have lost a way of navigating by ‘the rock is here, the tree is there,’” Li-Leger laments. She was also inspired by aerial views of subdivisions in the

desert. Procuring a map of South Surrey, Li-Leger mined it for subdivisions that had some aesthetic virtue, using the ends of disposable chopsticks lying around her house to stamp the dots.

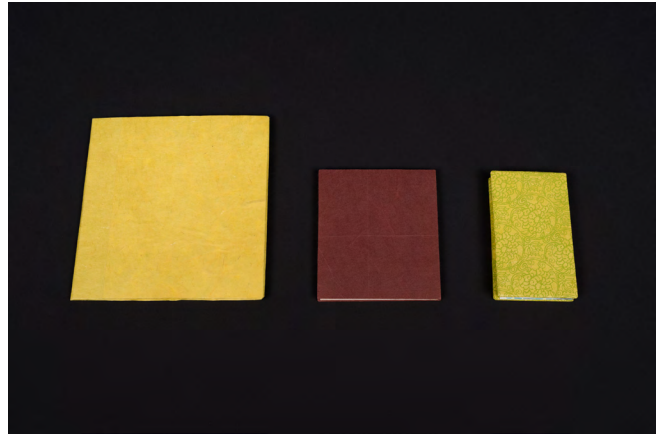
The intuitive, generational, and embodied way of navigating via songlines is a world away from Google maps, GPS, and colonial mapping of Indigenous lands. How can one connect to the land in respectful, non-extractive ways? As the artist marks the page, she thinks about the ways we mark the earth and what we leave behind. Li-Leger



Cora Li-Leger, *Suburban Songlines (Marking the Earth: a South Surrey Subdivision) 4*, 2018, Turkish fold artist book, acrylic on paper (22 cm x 20 cm folded) SAG 2022.09.03. Photograph by Dennis Ha.

says, “This artwork is a response to how I feel like our impulse is to pin everything down and make it something that we can control that helps us feel better.”

She chose to put her maps into a compressed book form to lessen her own footprint but to also imply the passage of time. After all, as soon as a map is printed, it is obsolete. Hence the appeal of songlines—stories that are sung, shared, remembered—stories that can adapt to changing places and needs. In a rapidly growing city like Surrey whose slogan is “the future lives here,” what will the map of this territory look like in ten or fifty years, and who gets to draw it? Whose future hands will open *Suburban Songlines* and add their marks to the story?



Suburban Songlines folded. From left to right: 4, 2, 1.
Photograph by Dennis Ha.

Notes

1 “A map is not the territory it represents, but, if correct, it has a similar structure to the territory, which accounts for its usefulness.” Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics* (International Non-Aristotelian Library Publishing Company, 1933), <https://archive.org/details/sciencesanityint00korz/page/782/mode/2up>.

2 It should be noted, however, that the use of colour, and even maps, are not unusual in Li-Leger’s earlier paintings and mixed media artworks.

3 Stephanie Boltje, “In Aboriginal culture, Songlines are like libraries—and they store knowledge that’s critical to survival,” ABC News, October 3, 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-10-04/significance-connection-to-country-songlines-indigenous-culture/102925228>

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