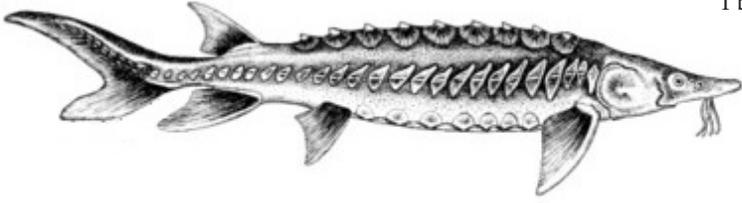


# RETURNING STURGEON TO THE RIVER



"I believe in the power of the imagination  
to remake the world."

—J.G. Ballard

As an artist, continual inspiration comes from exploring local natural and built environments. By documenting buildings and trees, my sculpture and paintings are like three-dimensional portraits that exist as snapshots made during the arc of the subject's temporal existence. When the tree blows over or the house is torn down, people who recognize them in my work remember them, allowing them in this way to live on.

I identify with my subjects and am entirely in their thrall while examining them. Fascination with textures and the decrepit majesty of abandoned buildings in Trenton led to much research and other inquiry about the social, economic and political history of this place. Making art that alludes to entropy and the effects of neglect over time has deepened my ability to nonverbally indicate the evidence of unseen forces. Currently, the ancient and wondrous Acipenseridae calls to me from the river when I paddle my kayak on the tidal waters, watching the endless variety of textures and reflections, wondering what lies beneath.

The Delaware River is home to a genetically distinct population of Atlantic sturgeon, one now seriously compromised by 19th century caviar harvesting and pollution from heavy industry along the river. Once at an aquarium near Portland, Oregon I met a fourteen-foot long sturgeon. This 150 million year old living fossil regarded me with the weight of its own history, armored with rows of bony shields. Hovering in the water at eye level behind the plate glass, it surveyed me with an ancient gaze. I knew then that I would make sculpture to document these creatures. Whether the Sturgeon Sculpture Series will be a testament to a close call with extinction, or a memorial for something not yet gone, remains to be seen.

The New Jersey State Museum has in its Natural History archive a taxidermy mount of a Delaware Bay sturgeon that is estimated by Curator David Parris to be 100 years old. Using this as a model, my sturgeon pattern can be digitally scaled up or down. Castings in iron, stainless steel, plaster and resin have been created at a ten-inch scale. Additional planned sculpture includes a glass casting at two feet long, and a cast iron public art piece for installation within sight of the river at twelve feet long.

The project has begun: of the six sculptures produced at the 2010 Art All Night Abominog International Iron Pour, four are in private collections. Two were given permanent mounting provisions and have been installed on rocks in the river.

—Kate Graves, SEPTEMBER 2010



Design by Sarah Stengle © 2010

# KATE GRAVES STUDIO

*Iron, Steel, Wax and Watercolor*

WWW.KATEGRAVES.NET

GRAVES@SNIP.NET



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“Like a hog rooting for truffles, the sturgeon rowels its snout around in the muck of the ocean floor sometimes twenty-five fathoms down. The sensitive barbells on its chin feel out the succulent marine worms and mollusks buried in the slime and when the sturgeon engulfs its defenseless prey it swallows a good quantity of mud along with it. Occasionally its fare is varied by the addition of sand launces and other small fish.

The sturgeon is formidable in appearance only. No other fish has its helm of bony plates on the head, united by sutures; its skin armored with a row of bony shields, twelve rows on each side along the back. Each of these shields has a spiny outgrowth extending longitudinally. But the mouth of the sturgeon, placed on the underside, is toothless except in the larval stage. Its tail, like a shark’s, has a longer upper lobe along which the spinal column extends.

The long, slender body is colored an olive-green or bluish-gray above, lighter on the sides, and white on the belly. Record specimens in this country have attained eighteen feet in length and one white sturgeon taken at Astoria, Oregon, weighed nineteen hundred pounds; but today a length of more than ten feet is decidedly rare for this almost extinct species. The male usually grows no longer than six or seven feet.

Late in the spring the adult sturgeons begin their journey up the rivers in company with shads, alewives, and salmon to the spawning grounds in the upper reaches. During May, June, and July the fertile females lay as many as 2,400,000 eggs, each of which hatches about a week after fertilization. Two months later the small fry have reached a length of five and a half inches.

After spawning, the older fishes return to the sea. The number of annual spawning trips each fish makes is unknown.

The common sturgeon of the Atlantic coast ranges from the Gulf of St. Lawrence to the Carolinas, occasionally being found in the waters of the Gulf of Mexico. The largest of these fishes, however, comes from the Pacific coast region. Known as the Sacramento, Oregon, or white sturgeon, it once occurred abundantly between Monterey, California, and Alaska and was taken in the Columbia, Yakima, and Fraser Rivers, although now nearly extinct. The green sturgeon, inhabiting the same range, is smaller.”

—*American Wildlife Illustrated, 1944*



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