

Artist expresses city's spirit in 3 short films

By Allison Mayes

VISITORS to the City of Winnipeg website can now click on a homepage button that is just as prominent as the ones for safe roads or the Disraeli Bridges project.

The button leads to a work of art: *Souvenirs*, a trio of streaming short films about local history by Winnipeg filmmaker Paula Kelly.

Launched last week, it's the first "online premiere" for the city website. Kelly is delighted that her public art project is now as accessible to all Winnipeggers as other city-funded artworks, such as Cliff Eysland's installation in the Millennium Library lobby or Gordon Reeve's *Agassiz Ice* sculpture near the Assiniboine Park footbridge.

"I think this is a kind of landmark," she says. "It's an expression of the spirit of the city."

Kelly, 48, made the shorts as the successful applicant for a six-month residency at the City of Winnipeg Archives. She was paid \$15,000 by the Winnipeg Arts Council to dig through the archives and produce an artwork based on materials there. She had an additional \$18,000 to spend on the project, which ended up taking about a year.

"The idea of running loose in the archives was pretty exciting," she recalls. "I was given total freedom to look at what I wanted. I could have spent six years."

Kelly, who grew up primarily in

Wolseley and majored in history and English at the University of Manitoba, is a veteran historical researcher and a huge believer in Winnipeg stories. She's been making films for nearly 20 years, including documentaries about local labour leader Helen Armstrong and local composer Sonia Eckhardt-Gramatté.

As Kelly rooted through thousands of photos — many never seen by the public — and unearthed rare, forgotten footage of 1920s, '30s and '40s Winnipeg, three themes struck her: the construction of the city, its recurring history of floods, and the ongoing tension Winnipeggers feel between proudly dreaming of what the city could be, and despairing over its drawbacks.

Kelly put out a call for city workers, current and retired, to tell her stories about their labour on roads and other infrastructure projects. Their voices form the soundtrack of the six-minute *Sand & Stone*. "A lot of sweat equity went into creating this urban construct we all take for granted," Kelly says.

It turned out that one of the retired city workers she interviewed had shot movies of the 1950 flood. Kelly was able to incorporate some of his footage, along with a wealth of flood images from the archives and black-and-white footage she had shot herself of the 1997 flood, into the 11-minute *Watermarks*.

Its soundtrack uses a tapestry of citizens' voices, reminiscing about flood survival and our tradition of coming together in times of crisis.

"We've been shaped by this experience of flooding and pushing back water," the filmmaker says. "That's why it's called *Watermarks*. This continual push-pull with nature has left a very deep impression on us as a community."

One of Kelly's current projects is a dramatic short called *The Crest*, set in a southern Manitoba farmhouse during "the flood of 2059."

The third component of *Souvenirs*, she says, has the most ephemeral theme — the city's struggle to define itself. She discovered colour footage of a grand downtown parade that was held to celebrate Winnipeg's 75th anniversary in 1948. Struck by the optimism of the civic leaders and the vibrant throng of onlookers, she interwove the parade footage with contemporary voices and images from various periods.

She called the seven-minute short *Waiting for the Parade*, a title that suggests we are forever waiting for our potential greatness and prosperity to arrive.

Kelly is certain of one thing: Winnipeggers are deeply interested in their roots.

"People here have this amazing affection for where we came from," she says. "History really speaks to people here."

Souvenirs can be viewed at www.winnipeg.ca

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Above, a scene from Paula Kelly's *Watermarks*; top, an image from *Waiting for the Parade*, which uses archival footage of Winnipeg's 75th anniversary celebration.


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