

Sans façon's *Modern Erratics*: Public Art and Civic Conversation

By Michelle Jacques, Curator

On June 26, 2026, I joined a public art bus tour of [Sans façon's](#) newly installed [Modern Erratics](#). Organized by the City of Saskatoon and led by the artists, as we travelled between the three sites where their sculptures are installed, they described the ideas, research, and experiences that shaped the work.

Sans façon, whose name roughly translates as “without fuss,” was founded in 2001 by environmental artist Tristan Surtees and architect Charles Blanc. For more than two decades, the Calgary-based duo has transformed the public realm by working with the materials, systems, and narratives embedded within it. Through sustained engagement with ecology, infrastructure, and collective memory, their projects reveal the often-hidden relationships that shape place.

The approach taken with the City of Saskatoon project is very consistent with the artists' wider practice. In 2009/10, Sans façon led the team that founded WATERSHED+, an artist residency embedded within Calgary's water management systems. As ongoing participants in that residency, they have collaborated with engineers, planners, and environmental specialists to investigate stormwater, watersheds, drinking water, maintenance, and other civic infrastructures. Fascinating projects, including [Fire Hydrant Drinking Fountains](#) (2013) and [Dale Hodges Park](#) (2019), grew from this research.

As the tour moved between the three sites, we learned more about the artists' interest in erratics as forms that hold geological, cultural, and temporal significance. For Indigenous people across Turtle Island, erratics have served as sacred sites, markers of stories and law, navigational landmarks, and teachers of deep time. With the participation of Indigenous advisors, Sans façon worked to translate this geological history into contemporary forms.

The City's call for submissions had asked artists to incorporate reuse and recycling. Sans façon responded by bringing together the deep environmental time of the erratic and the modern history of consumer plastic. The resulting sculptures hold a productive tension between the natural and the manufactured: their forms evoke stones shaped over millennia, while their surfaces reveal the colour, texture, and persistence of contemporary waste. The *Modern Erratic*

at Recovery Park is composed of damaged garbage, organics, and recycling bins collected from Saskatoon households. Its black, green, and blue palette implicates the city itself: these are remnants of a municipal system in which nearly every resident participates. At Diefenbaker Park, a site shaped by recreation which people regularly pass through carrying hydration-to-go, the sculpture is constructed from a material in which whole and shredded bottle caps appear like bright, multicoloured flecks of sediment. The pattern on the surface of the third sculpture, made from black and white grain bags, is reminiscent of granite. This tension between natural reference and manufactured materials resonates with the site's own history as the Sutherland Forest Nursery Station, established in the early twentieth century to cultivate trees that were bred to be used across the Prairies to help protect farmland from the region's harsh climate. In each location, the work draws meaning from its immediate surroundings, connecting recreation, household systems, agricultural histories, and material recovery to broader questions of extraction, consumption, stewardship, and renewal.

Within Sans façon's interest in local infrastructure, plastic is not simply a recyclable material but a record of complicated origins and futures. Plastics trace their beginnings to the late nineteenth century, when materials like celluloid were invented as substitutes for the cruelly harvested ivory and tortoiseshell used in luxury goods. While the earliest plastics were made from plant matter, in 1907, Bakelite, the first wholly synthetic plastic, was introduced. Although it initially appeared to offer a less extractive alternative to animal- and plant-based materials, once Bakelite patents expired in 1927 and other manufacturers entered the market, plastic's entanglement with petrochemical expansion, consumer capitalism, and the disposable age accelerated rapidly, transforming synthetic plastic from a good substitute into one of the most pervasive waste substances of modern life. Erratics stand among the oldest witnesses in the landscape, while plastics, though scarcely more than a century old, now persist so durably that they are increasingly understood as markers of a new geological epoch. Although the sculptures take their form from rocks that represent deep geological time, their material points to one of the most urgent issues of contemporary life.

In devising *Modern Erratics* for Saskatoon, Sans façon allowed collection, sorting, and waste-processing systems to become part of their methodology. The sculptures do not simply point to the city's waste stream; they are made of and within it. Encountering them in their various locations around the city, Saskatoon residents see objects materially connected to their own

cycles of consumption and waste and are asked to recognize themselves within the municipal systems, and the environmental implications, that the project makes visible.

Modern Erratics, like all of Sans façon's work, is rooted in dialogue and inquiry shared with the people who work in and live with the material systems that shape a site. If public art has traditionally been understood as a means of beautifying a location or commemorating its history, Sans façon's practice reveals its much broader role. The sculptures are the visible outcome of research, collaboration, and investigation into materials and processes that bring hidden systems into view. Sans façon's contribution, then, lies not only in the objects placed within the landscape, but in the ways in which they invite us to understand the environment and our own participation in it. The sculptures are not the culmination of the project so much as its invitation into a conversation about how they came to be made and what their making can lead to. They suggest that the value of public art lies not only in the objects it contributes to the city, but in its capacity to generate new forms of civic understanding about the systems that sustain urban life.