

## RICHARD KIRK MILLS

*CONCRETE JUNGLE*, Trailside Caption for Teaneck Creek Conservancy, recycled highway concrete debris, 2004

I always relied upon both the solace and joy offered by my connection to and observation of the natural world. The presence of nature's light and textures, rhythms, and webs of mystery -- and my delight in all her diversity -- have sustained me through the years. I attribute my sensitivity to place -- and in particular "the wet landscape"-- to my first happy years in East Rockaway, on an estuary on the south shore of Long Island where I boated, explored, swam and fished. Bearing witness to the rapid decline of water quality as Nassau County hyper-developed in the 1950's was also part of this experience. For thirty years I made paintings and prints that were representations of landscapes; special places that recalled for me that lost intimacy with nature. With hindsight, my efforts represented more of a personal narrative than formal exploration. As an artist now living in the most densely developed region of the most densely populated state (New Jersey) in the US, where open space and wetlands have historically been targeted for draining, filling, dumping, developing and paving, it's a wonder it took as long as it did for my work to shift into crisis mode and to consider myself an environmental artist. Somehow I had bought the line that art and activism can't mix. I credit my own dawning intuition that indeed they can and should, and the art, writing and activism of a growing legion of committed feminist artists (see <http://www.weadartists.org> for starters) with my hearing this **Call to Action**.

Starting literally in my backyard, my work evolved into an activist aesthetic that attempts to reconnect people to places (and hence, stewardship) through a public art process of responsive interpretation, education and community engagement. I began to research local environmental, topographic and cultural place histories, which formed the basis for my new work. I expanded my printmaking skills into the digital realm with layered, collaged narratives with text. These were sited outdoors in damaged and recovering public places. I assembled digital archives: historic maps and atlases, aerial and satellite images, photos, postcards, oral histories, newspaper articles, essays on local biota, transportation history, early settlement patterns, land use deals, fisheries reports, census records, anything I could find to reveal the drama of unplanned growth's effects on our environment. I included newly found skills as a presenter before regulatory agencies as part of an aesthetic arsenal. I saw the shift from a go-it-alone mentality of the studio/gallery system to an emphasis on a collaborative approach with all segments of the local community-- as well as technical and aesthetic partnerships with artists, design professionals, funders, grant writer, and planning officials -- as a major shift in approach to the landscape. The practical realities of establishing community credibility, of starting at home -- answering Lucy Lippard's call to heed the lure of the local -- were my new direction. For artists this is a model worth considering.

As Teaneck Creek Conservancy artist in residence for 6 years, I have worked with the local education, environmental and arts communities and state and county governments on a team of artists, landscape architects, engineer, grant writer, funders and urban wetlands scientists to reclaim and re-story this 46-acre former NJ landfill. A 1.2 mile trail system, a narrative and place responsive art program are among components we envisioned. *Concrete Jungle* captions one of many piles of highway concrete debris dumped on site. Artists working at the Conservancy continue to recycle this dumped "NJ Rubblestone". Nearly two million dollars has been raised to build trails, outdoor classrooms, interpretive art and wetlands restoration.

### Bio

Born in NYC 1947, Mills graduated from C.C.N.Y. with a MFA in painting. He currently is a professor at Long Island University, C.W. Post campus. He has exhibited in NYC, Seoul, Long Island, New Jersey, England, Sweden, Cuba, and New Jersey. Other related projects include *Hackensack River Stories* (1998-2002), 23 "signworks" for public places along the threatened Hackensack River in Northern New Jersey, which received awards from The Waterfront Center (Jane Holtz Kay, juror) and Hackensack Riverkeeper, *Newark Broad Street Station Stories*, 19 porcelain enamel narrative signworks for Newark, NJ Broad Street train station, *Bass River State Forest Stories* installed at New Gretna, New Jersey, and *Walking Trees/Talking Trees* in Dix Hills Park (Huntington, NY ) and the Teaneck Creek Conservancy (Teaneck, NJ).

