

MUSÉE du  
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MUSEUM of  
JEWISH MONTREAL

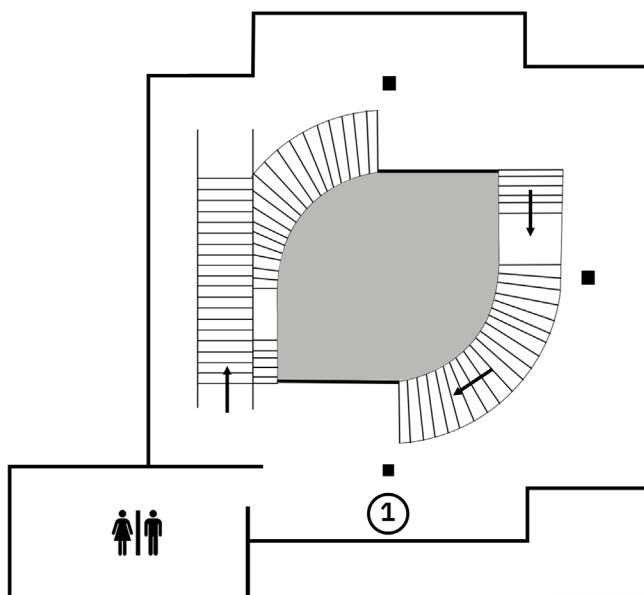
**BACK RIVER**

**SONIA BAZAR**

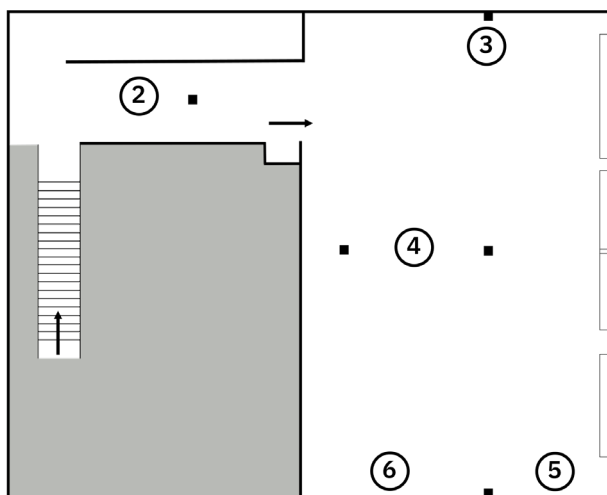
**11.23.2023 – 03.03.2024**

**EXHIBITION GUIDE**

## LEVEL TWO



## LEVEL THREE



ST. LAURENT BLVD

**How to use this guide:** The circled numbers on the maps above correspond to objects within the exhibition. Refer to the circled number at the top of the following pages for explanations on the artworks in each exhibition area.

Weaving together themes of loss, memory, community, and urban landscapes, BACK RIVER contemplates what is forgotten, and how it can be remembered.

Sonia Bazar's body of work presented in BACK RIVER is named for Montreal's oldest standalone Jewish burial site: the Back River Cemetery. Established in the 1880s in the Montreal neighbourhood of Ahuntsic, the cemetery is one of the earliest resting places for first-generation Jewish migrants to Canada. Built upon swampland and founded for a growing immigrant community, the cemetery today holds a peculiar and enigmatic place in the city's landscape.

Following the peak of its use in the 1920s and 1930s, Back River came close to abandonment in the late 20th century, followed by renewed interest to restore the historic site in the 1990s by the Jewish community. Still in use today for community burials, many of which are indigent, Back River's flood-prone terrain combined with climate change make maintenance and conservation an ongoing struggle. Montreal's urban growth has also been shaped by the cemetery. Its two sections – the old and the new – are bisected by rue Sauvé, with the Sauvé Metro station at the centre of the intersection that cuts through the site; the Metro line itself was built directly beneath the Back River in the 1960s.

The cemetery's physical fragmentation and mired landscape mirrors its story, which remains relatively unknown by the local Jewish community or by Ahuntsic's majority French-Canadian and newly-arrived immigrant residents. Bazar's work ruminates on the challenges of solving the puzzle surrounding the cemetery's founding, evolution, and near-abandonment. With the artist's own family members buried at the Back River, piecing together knowledge of this space becomes an act of personal archiving and placemaking. However, absence and scarcity of information about the Back River Cemetery remain a core part of its story and the memory of its occupants.

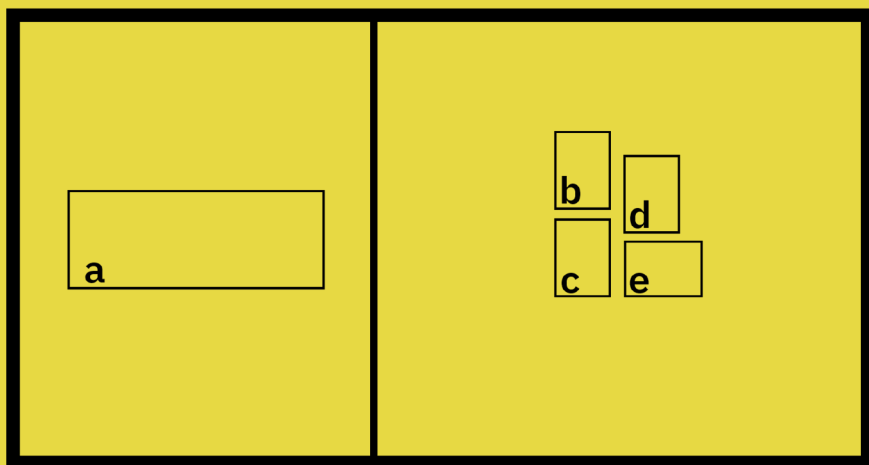
Through research-creation using archival sources and oral histories, Bazar invites us to become part of the cemetery's contemporary archive as she reimagines its 140-year history through photography, installation, and sculpture.

To visit the exhibition webpage, scan the QR code:



Bazar has been collecting oral histories of the cemetery in collaboration with Concordia University's School of Community and Public Affairs as part of their research-creation process. Those who have shared their memories or interactions with the cemetery are often asked by Sonia to pose for a portrait, while their story is added to the growing archive of BACK RIVER.

If you are interested in contributing an interview or have a story of the Back River Cemetery, we encourage you to get in touch with the artist by filling out the online form available at [www.backriver.rip](http://www.backriver.rip) or by scanning this QR code:



**a. *Aerial View of Old Cemetery*, 2021**

Drone photography on vinyl. 72" x 42.5"

**b. *Ken*, 2023**

Digital print from 35mm film negative. 30" x 20"

**c. *Lois*, 2023**

Digital print from 35mm film negative. 30" x 20"

**d. *Bronwen*, 2022**

Digital print from 35mm film negative. 30" x 20"

**e. *Jack*, 2023**

Digital print from 35mm film negative. 20" x 30"

**Ken:** Sonia first started working with the Back River in 2021 when they were contracted to update the cemetery's maps. Around that time she met Ken who has worked at the Back River as a groundskeeper on and off for the last 60 years. He began cutting the grass at 8 years old, and was born in the house next door to the cemetery's old section. Sonia met with Ken at the cemetery the day after his sister died and asked him why he came to work. "Because," he said, "they need me here."

**Lois:** Lois discovered her Jewish heritage a few years ago – a discovery which led her to the Back River. Sonia, along with her collaborators at Concordia, joined Lois at the cemetery to visit her great-grandparents for the first time. Lois' portrait was taken standing beside their headstone. Sonia shared with Lois that, if she wanted to, she could place a small stone on their headstone to honour them, as is Jewish tradition.

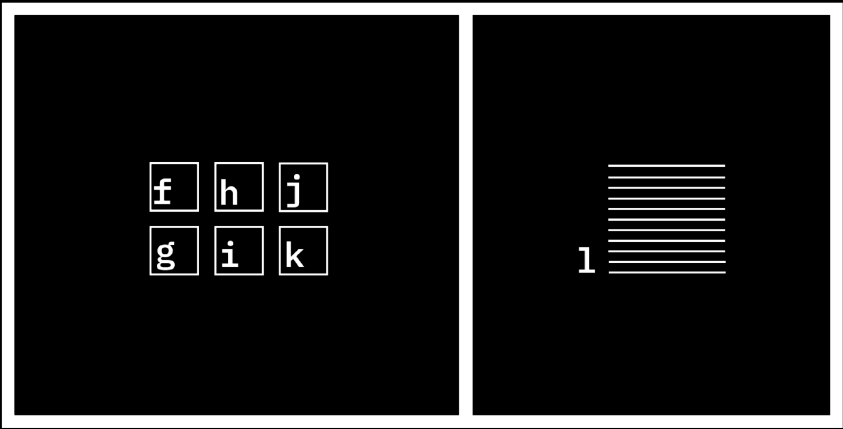
**Bronwen:** Bronwen works as a midwife at the birthing centre located across from the Back River. During her interview, she spoke of walking to work and passing the cemetery. She often thinks about the history of the city, and what it means to be buried in some place you're not from. She wonders at the strangeness of people being born and being buried so close to one another. This photo was taken in front of the large children's section at the cemetery.

**To hear Bronwen's interview, scan this QR code:**



**Jack:** Jack and Sonia met to speak about Back River at his home in the Laurentians. Sonia asked him about the cemetery and his grandfather Hirsch Wolofsky – the founder of Canada's first Yiddish newspaper *Keneder Adler* – who is buried there. When asked where he wanted to be buried, he told Sonia they already had plots in the West Island. He had thought about being buried near his family, but preferred to be close to his congregation and rabbi.

The portraits of the Back River's headstones provide us with an idea of the cemetery's variety of monument iconography, as well as document the ongoing conservation efforts. Cracked or broken headstones are carefully stacked aside, and signs of vandalism and erosion appear frequently in Bazar's photographs. This series also serves as documentation and inquiry. If damaged tombstones are replaced with contemporary versions as a means of restoration and preservation, what might be lost?



***f. Broken Stone in Pile, 2021***

Digital print from 120 film negative. 20" x 20"

***g. Mother Mother, 2021***

Digital print from 120 film negative. 20" x 20"

***h. Children's Section, 2021***

Digital print from 120 film negative. 20" x 20"

***i. Nadler Children, 2021***

Digital print from 120 film negative. 20" x 20"

***j. Aged 1 yr, 7 mos, 2021***

Digital print from 120 film negative. 20" x 20"

***k. Hammer and Sickle, 2021***

Digital print from 120 film negative. 20" x 20"

***l. Terrain marécageux, 2021***

Poem printed on vinyl

**Broken trees**

Sonia Bazar

swallowed by the mouth of the tree.

a double stone is half immersed.

brother, sister side by side in swampy earth.

in the dark centre: each ring, broken by stone.

so many now want what they have,

a sapling to make a meal of them

And when you die so very young

they place a monument of a tree on your grave

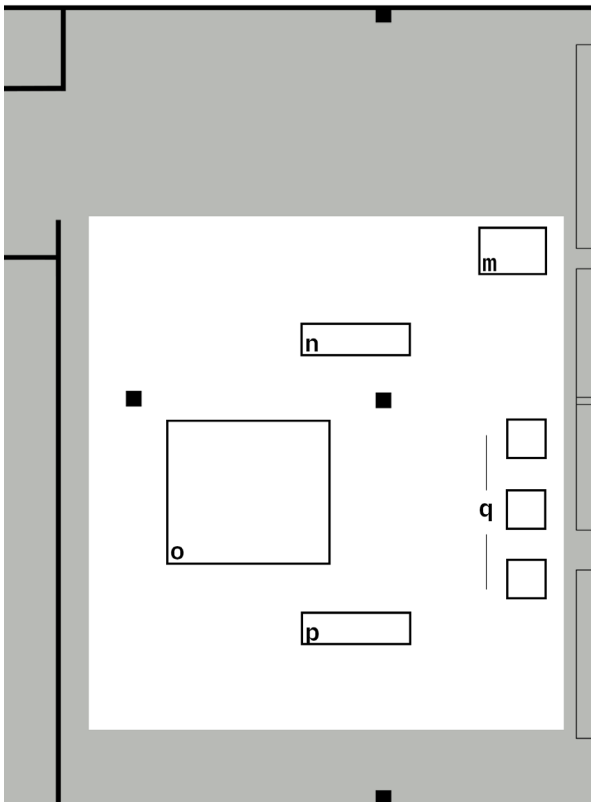
its trunk and branches cut.

some stack the wood.

But stones are cold: their words fade with the years.

Perhaps it is more beautiful to let them be swallowed by something growing and alive.

Bazar's sculptural work draws upon the unexpected ephemerality of the Back River as a site of memory in slow erosion. The materiality and creation process of her work is deeply symbolic. Canvas felted with pantyhose and strung through with copper wire, or stretched over copper tubes, comes to signify skin, bone, and blood. The landscape of the cemetery itself is central. Tangles of copper string and bird's-eye views of its terrain call to mind networks of roots, organic cells, or city blocks. The wetness of the Back River is omnipresent. Bazar's work has often drawn upon water as an agent of connection, dissolution, and transition. Here, the swampy and often flooded landscape of the cemetery is mirrored in the creation process. The soaking agent which leads to the crystallization of her pieces combines water with the common cleaning agent borax. The domestic and the natural are brought together, and as her works soak (*Forgetting Hannah, Old Section*), they undergo metamorphosis; crystallizing and hardening, yet becoming brittle and more vulnerable to damage.



### **m. Forgetting Hannah, 2023-2024**

Canvas, black wool, blue crayon, stripped Internet cable (copper) in-process in water and borax solution. 32" x 32"

*This piece is about my great-aunt Hannah who died in childhood. This is the only picture that remains of her. She is buried in the children's section at the Back River Cemetery. On **The Artist's Desk** you will see a transparency of a film negative I found while going through my grandfather's belongings after he passed away. That was the first time I saw her face. It looked just like mine. My grandfather would never have met Hannah. He was born a year after her death. The story goes that Hannah had cancer that was not curable at the time, and her father spent a lot of money bringing her from specialist to specialist. She died at the age of five. Three years later, her father died by suicide and was also buried in the Back River Cemetery not so far from his daughter.*

### **n. Old Section, 2023**

Canvas, pantyhose, stripped Internet cable (copper), copper oxide crystal, borax crystal. 48" x 72"

*The first time I saw the cemetery, I only saw the old section. It was Yom Kippur and I was intentionally lost. I did not expect to find anything. Its location and existence confused me. I called my dad and he told me that a few of our family members were buried there. I found that this land had always been swampy, had always been difficult to bury people in. I thought about water and rivers that flow underground in the city and all the information that was lost and buried with these people. Things that have not been written down. I stripped and cut some Internet cables and wove them into the fabric so they stuck out and became jumbled like the roots of a tree. A friend helped me take aerial photos and I traced the image to try to get a sense of it. Then, I felted pantyhose into the canvas where the graves would be, and wool where the earth would be. I wanted to show how time would pass and how things would fall apart through time, so I let the fabric soak in a borax-and-copper sulphate solution to crystallize. The crystals are falling off. They can never be put back the same way.*

### **o. Pathways, 2023-2024**

Canvas, pantyhose, stripped Internet cable (copper). In-process. 96" x 144"

*Over the course of the exhibition, Bazar will be creating this piece as part performance, part research-creation. To see the performance schedule, refer to the inside of the back page.*

### **p. New Section, 2023**

Canvas, copper-coloured thread, blue crayon. 48" x 84"

*We forget, somehow, how incredibly close the cemetery is to the Chabanel fashion district – an area once predominately made up of Jewish-owned clothing and textile factories. An interviewee called it the "psychic geography" of the place, so close but so mentally far away. Copper threads echo the copper wire in Old Section, but speak to the area's Jewish history.*

### **q. Body 1, Body 2, Body 3, 2023**

Pantyhose, copper tubing, copper bracing, copper oxide crystal, borax crystal, bronze MIG Wire. Dimensions variable

***The Artist's Desk, 2022-2023***

Light box with photo on transparency, photography, binders with archival document reproduction, manila file folders, list of occupants, reproduction, lamp, fan

The public is invited to sit at the artist's desk. Please stay as long as you would like. To ensure the next visitor is able to discover the research behind BACK RIVER, we ask that no documents be taken from the desk.

***Grave Rubbings, 2022-2023***

Black crayon on newsprint. Dimensions variable

A wavering wall of paper grave rubbings acts as an archive of headstones found at the Back River. A mere fraction from thousands more, some headstones belong to family members of the artist, while others mark the lives of individuals who have no living relatives, whose legacies may only be shown through their stone memorial.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Montreal-born artist **Sonia Bazar** works out of their studio in Ahuntsic-Cartierville. Sonia earned a MFA in Photography from Concordia University. Through sculpture, photography and poetry, her practice often examines the notion of alien landscapes and how the body belongs to space. Their practice has always had a heavy research component which informs their materials and process.

They have recently begun to explore research as art, finding ways to incorporate it into installations.

## PERFORMANCE SCHEDULE

Throughout the exhibition, Bazar will be in-gallery as part of their research-creation for BACK RIVER, creating a new sculpture and speaking with members of the public.

**Performances will be from 12pm – 2pm on the following Sundays:**

**November 26, 2023**

**December 3, 2023**

**December 10, 2023**

**January 7, 2024**

**January 14, 2024**

**January 28, 2024**

**February 4, 2024**

**February 11, 2024**

**February 25, 2024**

**March 3, 2024**

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**The Museum of Jewish Montreal**  
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Sonia Bazar, *Nadler Children*. 2021