

**RED WOMAN WHITE CUBE:  
FIRST NATIONS ART AND RACIALIZED SPACE**

by

Dana Lee Claxton

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## **Abstract**

This thesis project will locate contemporary aboriginal art produced in Canada and critically situate the works in the gallery space. The premise is to investigate both historically and contemporary race relations as manifested in the works use of the colours red and white. The methods of investigation will be through interviews with the artists, analytical theory regarding exhibition space and the museum, combined with critical race theory and analysis of contemporary aboriginal art.

**Keywords:** contemporary aboriginal artists, gallery space, race relations, critical race theory.

## **Reader's Summary**

This thesis project will present the works of contemporary aboriginal artists Rebecca Belmore, Thirza Cuthand and Nadia Myre and critically situate their works within the discourses of Canadian race relations and critically comment on public gallery space. The premise is to investigate race relations and cultural meanings that are manifested in the works use of the colours red and white. The methods of investigation include interviews with the artists and analytical theory regarding exhibition space, combined with critical race theory and analysis of contemporary aboriginal art.

I am interested in how the settlement of Canada interfered with aboriginal cultural production and further how legislation pertaining to aboriginal communities impinged upon social relations. I am curious to what extent public discourse has been shaped by government sanctioned oppression and I will attempt to unpack structural discrimination pertaining to aboriginal communities. Further, I will comment on how this apparatus has influenced critical discourses regarding the interpretation and production of contemporary aboriginal art.

In addition to contemporary art, I will visit ideas regarding aboriginal art as tourism and the emergence of a contemporary art practice. Each of the three artists use very different materials from video, photo-based, mixed media and traditional materials and I am curious as to how they situate their own practices in the gallery space. Further, we will discuss how their works address frameworks of a race politic and social relations whether through the narrative, the visual and the material.

I will consider the concept of the White Cube and how aboriginal art is less commodity and more pedagogical. I will visit the object and context of the maker and the possibility that the artwork has to shift viewer consciousness and enhance public discourse regarding aboriginal and non-aboriginal social relations.

## Dedication

To the woman in my family who have taught me about the art of life.

Anpetu Wastewin - Good Day Woman

Maternal great great grandmother

Ayuta Najin Ktewin - Killed the Enemy Who Stood Standing Woman

Maternal Great Grandmother

Pearl Goodtrack

Maternal Grandmother

Gladys Reid Claxton

Paternal Grandmother

Ella Soo Goodtrack Claxton

My mother

Wichaxpi Wi - Star Woman - Kim Soo Goodtrack

My sister

Megan Leigh Claxton

My niece

Hinsha Waste Agli Win - Returns Victorious With A Red Horse Woman

Dr. Bea Medicine My beloved Auntie

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## Introduction

*The Great Spirit . . . has made a great difference between his white and red children. We do not wish to destroy your religion or take it from you. We only want to enjoy our own. Red Jacket*<sup>1</sup>

*Cognitive imperialism is a form of cognitive manipulation used to disclaim other knowledge bases and values. Validated through one's knowledge base and empowered through public education, it has been the means by which whole groups of people have been denied existence and have had their wealth confiscated. Cognitive imperialism denies people their language and cultural integrity by maintaining the legitimacy of only one language, one culture, and one frame of reference. Marie Bastiste.*<sup>2</sup>

This project contextualizes the artwork of aboriginal women artists Thirza Cuthand, Nadia Myre and Rebecca Belmore. All three of these artists have made work with the colours red and white to critique historical and contemporary race politics in Canada. Their works comment on positions of power and on how aboriginal/white relationships have been shaped by aboriginal people being relegated to the object position. I will investigate notions of Canadian democracy in terms of legislation and discuss the impact that government sanctioned oppression has had on the cultural development of aboriginal art production. Further I will articulate how these artists create art within frameworks of both historical and contemporary political realities that are unique to the aboriginal

experience in Canada. I am interested in how Canada's colonial history infringed on cultural development and by doing so, led to a response unique to aboriginal socio-political existence. By critiquing this power apparatus through the means of their artistic production, these artists from a historically oppressed culture have identified the contours of that experience and have manifested the complexities of that context with visual and media art. Furthermore, I have taken that analysis into the meanings of public gallery space.

## Unsettling Canada Through Aboriginal Art

*The past and present of Indian situations must be dealt with together because they are inextricably connected... In non-Indian art and history about Indians, the seventeenth and twentieth centuries are rarely connected. Academic studies deal with colonial history of the eighteenth century or with events of the twentieth century, not both. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries are both part of the stream of Indian experience. From Indian perspectives the fact that a value or a practice or an idea comes from the past does not render it irrelevant in the present. (In this way the past can exist in the present.) Emphasis is placed not on the point of division or disruption between time periods but on the continuity between eras. Debroh Doxtator **3***

In order to begin, I have chosen to revisit history to locate and determine why so much of contemporary aboriginal art has been labelled polemic and controversial regarding Canadian-Aboriginal relations. In order to fully appreciate the content of contemporary aboriginal art, one must return to the socio-political historical context of the settlement of Canada. As a settler nation, Canada has a history of colonization and a system of government that legally subjugated aboriginal peoples within their ancient homeland. Canada's complex history of segregation, treaty processes, legislation and jurisprudence pertaining to aboriginal and non-aboriginal social relations, needs to be analyzing if one is to recognize the experience in which contemporary aboriginal art is produced. Accordingly, if we are to articulate the signifiers

and meanings in contemporary aboriginal art, it is of utmost importance that the works be analyzed in both contemporary and historical terms, since so many overt, subtle and unconscious references are imbued in them.

So for example, many aboriginal artists explore the aftermath of early colonial practices imposed by way of forced religious conversion, state criminalization of aboriginal cultural practices, forcible removal of children from their natural families, monumental physical and sexual abuse in church and state run schools, government sanctioned sterilization of aboriginal women, and the demonization aboriginal spirituality.

The structural dehumanization of Indian people within the text, whether in fiction or non-fiction and scholarly research, combined with debasing from the state, church, public and private institutions, created an enormous apparatus that delegitimized Indian people both in public and private life.

Through the process of the colonial mapping of Canada and the deterritorialization of Aboriginal land, exogenous governments were set up and solidified, becoming the systems governing aboriginal people. The claiming of Aboriginal land in the name of the Queen was done, as many historians now concur, without informed aboriginal consent. Any

"consent" that was provided to transferring rights was obtained through coercion and manipulation. British rule and British parliamentary systems in Canada criminalized aboriginal cultural and spiritual practices. This imported system eradicated all elements of aboriginal governance, replacing them with colonial structures of dominance and control through such promulgations as the Indian Act of Canada in 1873. The Indian Act, particularly as it was implemented from 1880 to 1951, outlawed many cultural and spiritual practices such as the Potlatch and the Sundance.

The elaborate and complex practice of the Potlatch on the Westcoast and the Plains equivalent - The Giveaway - - had maintained both value systems and material cultural practices that demonstrated artistic expression. Outlawed, they went underground and never disappeared, though the criminal law was brought to bear on practioneers who were "caught".

On January 1, 1884, the Indian Act was amended to prohibit the Potlatch in British Columbia. Not until 1951 was this provision repealed. As the Chief Joe Mathias and Gary R. Yabsley have written:

The consequences of this legislation in terms of the loss of economic wellbeing, political power, cultural integrity and spiritual strength are immeasurable. We know with certainty that these laws deprived First Nations of their material wealth by denying them access to their traditional lands and resources. Further, we know that these laws prohibited Indian governments from exercising any real power in the political or legal systems. And we know that extensive legislation was

passed for the sole purpose of which was to destroy the Indian identity and Indian values in Canada. : pg/ 35 in cel. **4**

The colonializing state was driven by ideology to "save the man and kill the Indian" through law making. One means to eradicate the "Indian problem" was to outlaw all forms of aboriginal cultural production. No doubt one of the purposes of cultural purgation was to ensure that those Indians who had survived the first colonial onslaughts, and their descendents, would not interfere with western expansion and land development. If the Indian could not be destroyed physically, then marginalization, impoverishment or assimilation would have to suffice; the criminalization of ancient traditional practices, the erosion of time-honoured communal values, the devaluing of family ties and the trivialization of Indian cultural production all were tools to assist in the colonization process.

To ensure that aboriginal people would have the gravest difficulty in reclaiming land, a process vital to resisting the wholesale cultural depredations, the federal government amended the Indian Act, making it illegal for Indians or an Indian Nation to retain a lawyer to work on land claims. Section 141 of the 1927 Indian Act stated:

Every person who, without the consent of the Superintendent General expressed in writing, receives, obtains, solicits, or requests from an Indian any payment or contribution or promise of any payment or contribution for the purpose of raising a fund or providing money for the prosecution of any claim which the tribe or band of Indians to which such an



Indian belongs, or of which his is a member, has or is represented to have for the recovery of any claim or money the benefit of the said tribe or band, shall be guilty of an offence and liable upon summary conviction of each such offence to a penalty not exceeding two hundred dollars and not less than fifty dollars or imprisonment for any term not exceeding two months. **5**

Not only was it against the law for an Indian to hire a lawyer or try to raise monies for legal fees, it was illegal for a Canadian lawyer to be hired by an Indian. This demolition of the rights of both Indians and lawyers only occurred with some complicity by the legal profession itself. Canada's juridical system and legal profession were implicated in breaching rights that were afforded to other Canadians. Is it any wonder that Aboriginal people remain deeply sceptically about Canadian civilization and the purportedly progressive norms of parliamentary democracy.

Legal restrictions were enforced by economic restrictions and the political disenfranchisement of Indians in all of Canada until 1960, and in Quebec until 1970, the imprisonment of disproportionate numbers of aboriginals to ensure their compliance, and the exclusion of Indians from universities and other public institutions. This vast, interlocking and mutually supporting system of discrimination ensured the social and cultural subordination of the First Peoples who were perceived as standing in the way of Canadian nation building. With such "truths" (almost always negative) about aboriginal people filtering down to the general public, this pattern of

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prejudice affected the continuation of aboriginal cultural production, the appreciation and interpretation of cultural objects.

Discrimination also tainted non- aboriginal and aboriginal social relations and research pertaining to aboriginal communities. In addition, aboriginal perception's of self, so closely linked to the production of material culture, waned. This problematic history still colours the essence of contemporary aboriginal art, as artists of aboriginal ancestry incorporate their own lived experience within a legally oppressed culture. Suppressing culture via the Indian Act long curtailed cultural production, although its impact on contemporary aboriginal art is another, more subtle matter. The analysis of the artworks that follows is an attempt to situate their content in the context of the historical effort to eradicate aboriginal culture.

## Racialized Canada

*You whites possess the power of subduing almost every animal to your use. You are surrounded by slaves. Every thing about you is in chains and you are slaves yourselves. I fear if I should exchange my pursuits for yours, I too should become a slave. Big Soldier 6*

Grounded in laws and connotations that constructed Indians as something other and less than white Canadians, racialization continues to breath through the patterns of racial exclusion from equal access through society's portals, and in income, the accumulation of wealth, and associated social privilege.

From the simplest legacies such as Indian dollies for sale at virtually every Canadian airport, to the complexities of high suicide rate and FAS babies, of internalized as well as imposed degradation, haunt the Canadian landscape. First Nations are the racial Other, poorer, scary, and solidly fixed in a position of needing help or demanding too much help.

The United States has a similar history of racial exclusion and *"the centuries of racial dictatorship have had three very large consequences: first, they define " American " identity as white, as the negation of racialized "otherness" – at first largely African and indigenous, later Latin American and Asian as well. This negation took shape in both law and custom, in public institutions and in forms of cultural representation. It became the*

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*archetype for hegemonic rule in the US. It was the successor to the conquest of the "master" racial project."* **7** I quote these writers, because Canada has a similar history of colonization. Although we do not have the slave history that greatly shaped the white American's complex of the master race, we do have social formations that produced negative constructions of aboriginal existence. Consider for example the treatment of the woman in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver who went missing and were murdered: one third of those poor women were Aboriginal. If these had been middle class white women in a "better" neighbourhood, it is unlikely that early reports of missing woman would have been treated with such apparent lack of interest.

Then there is the treatment of aboriginal men by the police. It was aboriginal men who were left to freeze to death in Saskatoon by police and similar conduct by law enforcement agents towards Aboriginal men has been reported in many Canadian towns and cities. It is unlikely that the police would have "dumped" intoxicated, disoriented or otherwise simply compliant and frightened non-aboriginal men on the outskirts of town, certainly not if they were white and middle class. I am not suggesting that the police are directed by those in authority to engage in criminal acts against Aboriginal people, but the disproportionate number of Aboriginals suffering these crimes and indignities must lead one to the consideration that the police often behave in a highly racialized manner.

Through systems of colonialization, especially the general myth that aboriginal communities have lost their land and their culture, they are therefore lesser beings and can be mistreated. Ovi and Howard further point out that, the *Other* – Indians in this case – “see the centrality of race in history and everyday experience, and another in which whites see race as a peripheral, nonessential reality.”<sup>8</sup> Aboriginal people exist outside of the normalized Canadian identity.

In addition to historical race bias in Canada, class is also a major feature in Canadian hegemony. Stuart Hall comments in Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance, following Antonio Gramsci's analysis:

The central concept in his work is that of hegemony. Hegemony is that state of total social authority which, at certain specific conjunctures, a specific class alliance wins, by a combination of coercion and consent, over the whole social formation, and its dominated classes: not only at the economic level, but also at the level of political and ideological leadership, in civil, intellectual, and moral life as well as at the material level: and over the terrain of civil society as well as in and through the condensed relations of the State.<sup>9</sup>

Gramsci's analysis of the superstructure of hegemony and how it is manifested in every area of the dominate class's (white) rule over the dominated (red) leaves sparse room for parity when all levels of *political and ideological leadership, in civil, intellectual and moral life* have shaped negative Canadian attitudes towards Indians.

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For people who have not been marginalized or denied basic human rights based on race, it is difficult to imagine its impact on social and cultural development. If one has not lived in red skin, black skin or with slanted eyes or woolly hair, or those who can pass as "white" but are not white, such as Jewish people, it is difficult to imagine the experience, Aboriginal people in Canada have been historically portrayed as a problem in themselves, rather than just Canadians having problems. In addition to always being placed in the object position, the "Indian problem" formulates other, "real" problems for all Canadians.

The unique position that Indian people have been placed in Canada society is dynamic; Indians serve as the subjugated and pitiful poor, as the feared warriors and also and the idealized eco-shamans. In the latter casting, Indians fulfil the desire of the gentle, noble savage and healthy environmentalist. Aboriginal people fulfill the forbidden desire of the exotic other. Our long black hair is admired and caressed, then shaved off in residential schools. Indian men are admired for their prowess and hated for claiming hunting and fishing rights. Our material culture making is adored and yet we are seen as trouble makers for wanting repatriation of our sacred objects. Native rights advocates are perceived as hostile, rather than being spiritual advocates of a liberation movement seeking social justice. And Indian woman are viewed both as healers and knowledge keepers, and yet treated as worthless sexually debased

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squaws. Indian people have a mythic presence yet they are rendered invisible in practical and real ways, absent from the collective consciousness except as irritating problems.

The failure of aboriginal and non aboriginal communities to contact with one another meaningfully, means they cannot create a shared site of intimacy. But we don't exist without each other. Scholar Cornel West points out in his book Race Matters that enforced racial hierarchy and racial reasoning doom us as a society to collective paranoia, hysteria and misinterpretation. Not knowing each other, we fear each other. Within racial hierarchies there is pressure for Indians to fit into *white* society, even though white society and specifically a market inspired way of life offers little acceptance for Indian people. In a society where the individual is reduced to consumer of objects that give pleasure and remain devoid of non-market values of love, caring and service to others, those that cannot successfully fit into the market definition of life are in danger of a total eclipse of hope. This can be seen in aboriginal communities both rural and urban. There is a danger of cultural and individual collapse of meaning derived from the lived experience of the ontological wounds that have been inflicted by white domination over Aboriginal institutions. Cornel West strongly advises that societies should move away from racial reasoning and move towards moral reasoning and by doing so, live prophetically. **10**

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No longer living in a society defined by just a red/white dynamic, many newcomers to this land continue to judge Indian people on the basis of old and inherited theories grounded in institutional racism. At Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design for the past eight years I have taught a 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year Topics in Contemporary First Nations Art. I am continually taken aback at how little non-aboriginal students know about Canadian history, in addition to their complete lack of knowledge when it comes to First Nations people and topics. Further, most ESL students don't even know that First Nations exist. At least 75% of my students over this eight year period share the "imaginary Indian syndrome" and most think that all contemporary Native art is carvings and prints.



## Aboriginal Art as Tourism and Imaginary

*As I continued to studying the Euro-Canadian interaction with First Nations people, both in the visual arts and in literature, I saw a composite, singular "Imaginary Indian" who functioned as a peripheral but necessary component of European's history in North American-the negative space of the "post" force of colonialist hegemony. Together, the "Indian" and the Euro-Canadian made up a fictive but nevertheless documented historical whole. Each time I looked at an image or a text with the Imaginary Indian component, the same theme recurred with insistence: Western historicizing posits indigenous peoples as illusory; historically, they are inscribed to stand as the West's opposite, imaged and constructed so as to stress their great need to be saved through colonization and civilization". Marcia Crosby 11*

One result of cultural tourism is that someone or something is always being commodified and exploited. For instance, consider the tourist shops at most Canadian airports, where there are several versions of the female Indian dolly in buckskin dress, Dream Catchers, medicine pouches and other trinkets either made in Canada or Asia put up for sale. The buyer can purchase a piece of aboriginal culture and identity. Aboriginal images plague the Vancouver Airport, with Salish artist Susan Point's oversized spindle whorl as a water foundation, oversized wool weavings by Musqueam weavers, and the rather large sculpture by the late Bill Reid, along with the indoor totem park, prints and glass etchings located throughout. The airport becomes profoundly implicated in how aboriginal

art is displayed and positioned as the exotic Other on offer for consumption. Also, the airport as a site for exhibition implies an erasure of cultural grievances. These displays of the material culture with oversized carvings and weavings become wallpaper, decorative, almost confection. They signify the beauty of a culture without the viewer having to be nuisanced by learning about historical complexities or current political concerns. Other similar sites in Vancouver include Totem Park located in Stanley Park and the UBC Museum of Anthropology. These cultural tourist sites are problematic in that they exist with limited appearances of real living aboriginal people. Indians are invisibilized, nowhere in site –just remnants of their culture are on view. The totems at Stanley Park create a falsehood that totems are part of the cultural landscape in Salish territory. The local tribal people never made totems like the ones mounted at Totem Park, and further, prior to contact, other tribal totems never would have been mounted within this territory. The issue of placing a tribal pole on the territory of another tribal group – in this case, Haida and Kwakiutl poles on Salish land, is complex -- it dislocates and ignores whose ancestral land this is, deterritorializing Salish land. In addition, placing totems out of context maximizes the homogenous impulse that all Northwest Coast Nations make totem poles and that all Indians are alike.

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An additional public space that contributes to false identity construction is the international arrivals section at the Vancouver Canada airport. The international traveller is led through a tropical rain forest of flora, fauna and Northwest Coast art. This positioning of aboriginal culture also dislocates the physical landscape. This controlled process by which indigenous culture is displayed subsumes social meanings of what is acceptable in aboriginal art and how to view aboriginal art in a highly artificial context. Again, the presentation of aboriginal culture in this arena is completely devoid of any discussion pertaining to social and political issues. Again, Aboriginal art is used to make Canada look good and exotic cosmetically. Through the reductionist airport and museum use of Aboriginal art and material culture, Canadians both celebrate and diminish aboriginal people.

Although not displayed in airports, there is a generation of Aboriginal artists critiquing the state, history and social relations within the Canadian landscape: within their art practice is an emergence of identity politics. It is to this work that I turn for the balance of my project.

## **The Emergence of Contemporary Aboriginal Art**

Artists have a tendency to make art from a deeply personally place. The tortured soul of the artist – artist's angst as they serve as purveyors of truth and agents of change -- are some of the descriptions bestowed upon artists in general. If one is an artist and comes from a community that has a history grounded in chronic institutionalized racism, how would that artist respond? What is the responsibility of that artist? In the case of this project, all the artists are of aboriginal descent, as am I. They all maintain a lineage and carry the legacy of being an Indian living in their ancient homeland, in the legacy of struggle. How can one contest the stolen and broken landscape without being deemed a radical or polemicist ? Indeed, should one be other than a radical or a polemicist under these conditions?

Contemporary aboriginal art criticism is still emerging. Most notable is the work of Dr. Alan H. Ryan regarding the Trickster Shift a theory that addresses the work of a group of artists called the "Art Tribe": Carl Beam, Bob Boyer, Joane Cardinal Schubert, Robert Houle, Edward Poitras. Mike MacDonald, Ron Noganosh, Domingo Cisnero, Jane Ash Poitras, Pierre Sioui, and the generation after them, Rebecca Belmore, Jim Logan, Yuxweluptun, Shelley Niro and others. These artists all share the Indian

experience and are working in parallel ideologies, most importantly acknowledging the Trickster as a source of inspiration within their practice. The term Trickster Shift that has been applied to their practices is best described as a "doing" that uses ironic humour within its structure of artistic production. The fundamental question that Ryan asks is whether the Trickster Shift is, "a shrewd deployment of a familiar critical strategy or a broader cultural sensibility."<sup>12</sup> Ryan ascertains that indeed there was a [shared] spirit, at work and play in the practice of the artists he talked with. He determined that a shared comic worldview was shared in the artworks and that they collectively embodied the traditional Trickster. Several of the artists he interviewed stated that the Trickster directly influenced their work. In many aboriginal cultures the Trickster being exists; the name varies from nation to nation, but the "doings" of this being are the same. Tomson Highway comments that "Trickster has no gender and straddles the consciousness of man and God. And Trickster translates reality from the Great Spirit to the people and back and forth."<sup>13</sup> The Trickster does not always leave tracks and is half hero and half fool – Her/his role is complex as they know no good nor evil, but are implicated with both. Trickster has no morals and is completely directed by her/his cravings. "Yet through their actions all value come into being," Ryan writes.<sup>14</sup> This comic spirit demands that we look deeper, see outside of our formulae, break patterns, when as the order of things deforms, a new

formation begins. The role of ritual clown encompasses transcendental buffoonery. And through these actions the Trickster is suggesting another way of being human. The Hopi belief is that Trickster is a wise voice of God. These sacred clowns bring teachings and lessons and maintain a dual nature of good/bad and playful/ malevolent. The role of Trickster is to cause us to look at ourselves and by doing so achieve greater self knowledge. Sometimes their plan doesn't work, but because the results are always centreing, a healing of sorts happens through greater self awareness.

## The Artists

I have chosen to write about Thirza Cuthand, Nadia Myre and Rebecca Belmore. All three artists are of aboriginal descent and all are closely engaged with contemporary discourses in art theory and production. Their work, held in Canadian and American public and private collections, is well known in the Canadian art world. In addition, they have influenced Canadian art history through the content of their individual works and the context in which they produce their art. I have chosen specific works produced by each artist comprised of materials made of the colour red and white, colour choices intended to focus critical attention within larger narratives of Red (Indian) and White (Anglo) relations in Canada. I am interested in how race constructs have emerged from historical texts and how these interpretations have led these artists to confront the historical and contemporary dehumanization of Indian people.

## Thirza Cuthand



Photo 1: Thirza Cuthand Video Still

Thirza Cuthand is a media artist who works primarily in single channel video and performance art. She graduated from Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in the spring of 2005. She began making video art as a sixteen year old with her debut work, *Lessons in Baby Dyke Theory* (1995), which addressed issues of youth sexuality. Her ten year arts practice continues to engage concerns of sexuality. In her work *Untouchable* (1998), she comments, "at best, I am a naive, foolish girl with misguided crushes. At my worst, I am the psycho-sexual stalker ready to plunge you into a hellish vortex of warped desires because there's nothing more frightening than a teenage girl with a hard clit."<sup>15</sup> In this work Thirza exposed her genitals while addressing herself as a youth interested in sadomastic sexual practices. Her open discussion regarding her sexuality was an influential first in aboriginal media making. With considerable



cultural taboo restrictions around sexuality, along with the legacy of sexual abuse in residential schools, aboriginal sexual desire has often been displaced.

In her early work, the viewer could not identify Cuthand as an Indian, because her aesthetic was not entrenched in Aboriginal iconography or a race politic while she explored teen sexuality. However, Thirza Cuthand's *Through the Looking Glass* is one of her most aboriginalized and racialized works. Her inquiry into this Lewis Carroll classic children's fable addresses a cultural race politic based on Alice in Wonderland. This short video work which she wrote, directed and produced, features Thirza as a somewhat butch Alice seeking acceptance into both the Red and White worlds, as a mixed race women as well as a lesbian. As "Alice" skips around searching for acceptance as a half Red and half White women she encounters the Queens from Alice in Wonderland. Cuthand has reconfigured the roles of the White Queen and Red Queen as the White Colonialist Queen and the Red Indian Queen. The White Queen is played by Shawna Desmeny, a well know lesbian performance artist based in Winnipeg, and the Red Queen is played by Cosmo Squaw – aka Lori Blondeau, a Cree visual and performance artist.



Plate 1: Through the Looking Glass  
© Thiza Cuthand. 2003, by permission  
Video still courtesy of Video Pool

Cuthand made this work in 1999 as part of an artist residency at Urban Shaman, an aboriginal artist run centre, and Video Pool, an artist video production and distribution centre, both located in Winnipeg. Cuthand borrows and recreates scenes from Through the Looking Glass, bringing the story to physical life, via video production. The script was written both through improvisation with the performance artists and by using her own research, which consisted of recalling childhood memories of actually reading and identifying with Alice.

Thirza stated during our interview that:

"...when I read it when I was a kid, I was always fascinated by the Red Queen and the White Queen because to me it seemed like it was a total fairy tale that explained how I was trying to construct my own race, being bi-racial and I would sort of see Alice as being this sort of half-breed character and trying to find her place, trying to find her identify. In the story she is trying to become a Queen which is kind of interesting too because there is the Red Queen and the White Queen and the whole story is set on sort of this chessboard kind of thing and then there is this third queen. So it sort of brings up this whole idea of sort of a third race beyond Red and White."

**16**

Her version of the story starts with an exterior low angled shot of a pathway, we hear a voiceover of Alice (played by Cuthand) stating," *when I peered into the Looking Glass that day, I was trying to make some sense of my face and if I hadn't, this whole thing wouldn't have happened. I was wanting to be what I would seem to be. But I was white and although that is not the case, the face is what one generally goes by. I was pressing my nose against the glass trying to examine my empathetic eyelids, I think that's how they are described, when the mirror melted away and I fell into a heap at the feet of two of the most outrageous characters I have ever seen.*"**17** Slowly Alice enters the frame, walking along the pathway, and we see her combat boots. Then the scene changes to a wide shot of Alice walking past trees in a park-like setting, which eventually becomes the garden that is described in the original story. Cuthand begins the story with her experience as a mixed race women, who appears to be white, because she is pale, but who is not

white, by way of having a Cree Scottish Mother and a Cree Metis Father. Cuthand herself is ¾ Cree, but is very light skinned and therefore often mistaken for a white person.

Cuthand situates her version of the story in a race politic that goes beyond rudimentary terms of the dominate mono-culture discourse. No longer can we describe race as either Red or White, Black or White. There are liminal race categories that are still undefined with such communities as Afro-Native Canadian, Chindians – half Chinese half Indian and other interrelationships. The opening of this video work indicates race as the central theme of her inquiry when Cuthand announces, *“I was wanting to be what I would seem to be. But I was white and although that is not the case, the face is what one generally goes by.”* **18**

The video then cuts to a studio shot of the Red Queen, completely dressed in red, long cape and with a large red oversized collar, red crown and red cigarette holder, commenting as she stares straight into the camera, *“it is a big responsibility I have as to how to make my subjects understand what it is to be Red.”* **19** Then the video cuts to the White Queen who is dressed all in white and wearing an oversized white pearl necklace as she pronounces with controlled glee, *“I love being Queen.”*

These two simple opening lines of each of the Queens situate them in their respective roles. The Red Queen talks of her responsibility to

educate her subjects about what it means to be Red. She is suggesting that her subjects need to know what it is like to be an Indian, all the complexities of history and contemporary Indian life and social relations. She also could be suggesting that her subjects, who are Red, need to know how to live as Indians, on the Red Road, by the red ways. The Red Road is a spiritual path of living with an open heart and clear mind, grounded in prayer, ceremonial life and traditional teachings of community duty, honouring the natural world, and acts of generosity.

The White Queen's opening line is one of self absorption; "*I love being Queen*" **20**, and her style and tone of pronouncement suggest that her concerns are all about her own needs, where the Red Queen's concern is responsibility to community. The collective versus individualistic has long been of concern for Red and White relations in Canada, as when the government outlawed collective practices such as the Potlatch or the Give-away.

When asked if the Red and the White Queen were friends, Cuthand responds,

They were kind of, they were probably friends in this funny way. Like I think the way I sort of portrayed them in my video is that even though they kind of – I am trying to think how to say it – even though they were kind of antagonistic towards one another they are also sort of close because they're sort of the leaders of their race basically. So I kind of wanted to talk about the collaboration between native and white people and how sometimes – like there is this scene in the video

where the Red Queen is talking about how she has tea with the White Queen and then the White Queen is kind of like – “well you know whatever. Sometimes we have tea and I don't really like the Red Queen that much.” You know it just kind of seemed to me like a perfect example of what happens with native people and white people and you think you're making progress by being friends with this white person and then you find out that maybe they're not that supportive of you or that they don't understand where you're coming from. **21**

Cuthand has chosen a beautifully landscaped garden as a wonderful playland for Alice, with all the flowers, stone work, outdoor columns, pathways and greenery. The gardens structure the story in playland, as well as Alice's walk through the gardens of talking flowers. During one scene in the park the White Queen asks Alice, as part of her examination to become a Queen whether she knows how to make scones.

White Queen  
Do you know how to make scones?

Alice  
First you get flower.

White Queen  
Where do you get the flowers? What kind of flowers?

Alice  
Well...its flour wheat flour

White Queen  
Pansies, Petunia's?

Red Queen  
Daisies, roses?

Alice  
No, no, no.....they are actually this little stick grainy thingy that grows in a field.

White Queen  
That sounds an awful lot like bannock.

Alice  
Well...they are the same recipes actually. **22**

At this point, since Alice has suggested that White bread (scones) and Red bread (bannock) are the same thing, the Queens become very agitated in their body language, rolling their eyes and shaking their heads in disgust and disbelief at the thought that either culture could share basic food like bread. They both mutter, "I don't think so." Cuthand states that she "was showing how they ate the same food, they had the same recipes but yet they were separating it. There was no way that scones and bannock could be made from the same ingredients." The irony of the dispute is that both breads are made from exactly the same ingredients; there is no real difference. This very simple comment on bread is loaded with cultural signifiers that demonstrate key issues impinging aboriginal - non aboriginal relations – contested differences when much is shared.

Red Queen  
They can't be the same because we are different!

The Red Queen points to herself, her skin colour and exclaims "Red!!" and points to the other Queen and exclaims "White!!" and then

she goes back and forth "Red, White, Red, White, Red, White." She then asks Alice to repeat after her, which Alice does.

The Red Queen, leaving no room for negotiation, states simply that's the way it is. Red, White. The video then cuts to the Queens walking arm in arm around the manicured park as we hear Alice's voiceover, "it makes me wonder how they can talk at all." This statement suggests that their race dialogue is so limited by focussing exclusively on cultural difference that they fail to see what commonalities might exist. Alice further states, "if you ask them what colonialism brought to the Natives they would tell you totally different things."

In the next sequence is the performers looking directly into the camera as they comment on what colonialism brought. The rhythm of the editing combined with the humorous element of the juxtaposition of each Queen's opposite interpretation of truth and knowledge, and with their physical gesturing of attitudinal self righteousness makes this a comical scene. The Red Queen's dialogue is based in the destructive aftermath of colonialism, while the White Queen's dialogue consists of standard lines suggesting that the impact of colonialism was not all that bad. Cuthand based this scene on her own real life conversations with non-aboriginal people, primarily white folks. She commented that:

"...it is based on this thing that some white girl had told me once where we were sort of talking about colonization and



you know there is just this classic kind of weird thing where she was kind of like well you know, colonization can bring you some good things like soap and shampoo and television sets. So it was just kind of this inside joke I had with myself. So I decided to have the White Queen do that and just go on and on about all these ridiculous things that the white people had given us." **23**

Red Queen  
Disease, small pox, influenza.

White Queen  
Buses, trains, trucks.

Red Queen  
Took away our culture, our religion

White Queen  
TV of course.

Red Queen  
They killed the Buffalo

White Queen  
Frozen Food

Red Queen  
Pollution

White Queen  
Bottled Water.

Red Queen  
Depression

White Queen  
Gumpy, Pokey, The Flintstones, The Price is Right, ahhhhhhhh Dynasty.

Red Queen  
Pain

White Queen  
Lots of pairs of shoes

Red Queen  
Made Toronto **24**

Clearly the words of the White Queen can be interpreted as denying colonialism and the harm that this power apparatus has bestowed upon aboriginal people. She celebrates in fact all the wonderful "advancements" that the white nation brought. The Red Queen's words indicate the destruction of colonialism.

The two Queens clearly oppose one another. Each believes in her respective truth. But the real issue of this binary conversation, is that colonialism and its aftermath always includes some act of denial. Somehow the White Queen is unable to see the experience of the Red Queen. Within the power structure of colonialism, there is always an unfortunate loser and clearly the Red Queen's dialogue represents that the Red Nations did not fare well.



Plate 2: Through the Looking Glass  
© Thiza Cuthand. 2003, by permission  
Video still courtesy of Video Pool

Alice is now wearing a beige coloured crown. They converse about Alice's potential to be a Queen if she would just decide whether she is Red or White. The White Queen laments, "*I would feel better about her being Queen if she would be clear on the colour issue.*" The Red Queen completely agrees. Getting exasperated, Alice states, "*well what color should I be?*". The White Queen sternly announces, "*White*", as the Red Queen follows sternly with, "*You should be Red*". As the two Queens carry on arguing whether Alice is Red or White, Alice's head moves back and

forth, seemingly wanting to please them both. After all Alice is much younger than both the Queens and somewhat naive. The White Queen insists, "*she looks very white*" which the Red Queen replies, "*I think she looks very Red*". As both Queens continue to banter back and forth about what makes Alice either look White or Red, their examples become more and more desperate. *Her apron is white, her lips are red. She's White, no she's Red.* Alice continues talking and commenting on her conversations with the White Queen and states, "*I was trying to talk to her about colonization in Canada and she goes into such horrendous attitudes when I mentioned the subject.*" The video cuts to a mid shot of the White Queen, who states, "*my ancestors, the family of white did not commit genocide. Its not my fault, well even if they did...its not me.*" Then we hear Alice's voice-over as the White Queen continues to shake her head and then her arms frantically, as her body movements are sped up to fast motion and she looks crazy. This image strongly suggests that the privileged white Queen has been silenced as the voice of the marginalized Indian women takes the subject position. As Alice comments, "*I want to know how she deals with the history of being the oppressor.*" This statement places responsibility for the historical mistreatment of Indian people onto the White Queen, and onto the older generation of the woman portraying her, Shauna Demspy, and further, implicates the viewer and their privilege. The White Queen continues with

the standard arguments of denial, *"its really best left alone, we are in fine place now...I don't know what the big deal is."* Other standard terms are "get over it," "you can't blame the white man for everything", "move on" and "my ancestors didn't have anything to do with it, I am first generation Canadian." These standard excuses, mantras, or alibis are imbued with racist ignorance that devalues any attempts of reconciliation, as they denounce something that has to be reconciled.

Regarding how she is viewed as an aboriginal artist or an artist of red and white heritage herself, Cuthand points out that:

I think that's the main thing, like at the end of the video they are both kind of like – OK now you have to choose. You have to choose one or the other and Alice just didn't want to do that because she didn't want to betray one or the other. And then there was also the whole thing about the fact that Alice was light skinned in the video. Because I am light skinned and I played Alice and so when you have light skin the white people kind of assume that you're just going to naturally go to the white side because they assume that race is just about skin colour. So if you have light skin colour then your decisions are made about who your alliances are with.

**25**

After insisting that she choose one over the other, and they finally agree to allow her to be a pink queen. The artist comments,

" I think – in many ways the whole point of the video is about red and white – like - they can be friends with each other, they can hang out with each other. Maybe there is the tension and all that kind of stuff but they are OK with being the Red and White Queen that hang out and have tea together. But then when Alice comes along who is a half-breed then suddenly that throws the whole dichotomy into

question because suddenly it's not red and white anymore. It's like this biracial person who has sort of skewed everything and it's sort of them desperately trying to figure out how to cope with somebody who is sort of straddling racial boundaries. I think it's mostly about the discomfort that people feel when somebody is mixed race. I think in some ways trying to make people just stick to one race when their ancestry is different races is kind of, well I think the oppression comes from just not – because you cannot see – because I think there is something sort of wonderful about people who are transgressing boundaries and I think if there is going to be more work done in defeating racism and things like that then it has to come from people who are mixed race who are sort of bridging boundaries and making people rethink what race means." **26**

When I asked her what experience she hoped an audience would have by watching, Through the Looking Glass she commented that,

"I would hope that they would question race more and question – I mean basically I made it because I was tired of people wanting me to pick one side so I would hope that people would recognize that race isn't a binary word, construct or something like. I kind of wanted people to realize that race is starting to become more fluid these days. That the boundaries of it are breaking down and sort of to acknowledge that. " **27**

The comment Cuthand makes, "*race is starting to become more fluid these days*", is said with much certainty, determination, and a deep understanding of the race experience in Canada. Constructs, categories and constraints of race specificities have been shifting, and I would argue that the contemporary aboriginal visual arts community has greatly contributed to the demystification of aboriginal people within the gallery space. By the very nature of art, eventually these ideas circulate into

other spheres, not only within the academy but also in the larger public discourse.

Cuthand comments that the most rewarding feedback she received about this work was from her maternal grandmother who said this was exactly how she felt as a child growing up. *"I think that was the best feedback I ever got...I think because she is biracial too so she understood being torn between the two and being told to choose one or the other."***28**

Cuthand suggests that bi-racial people and in her case an artist interpreting her life, can act as conduits, bridging communities, bringing people together. Through dialogue a mutual cultural respect can begin to grow. Cuthand believes that by understanding red, white and pink, we can begin to close cultural divisions, only by first acknowledging rather than diminishing the history of colonization.

## Nadia Myre



Photo 2: The artist, Nadia Myre

*"The purple lines represent the Haudenosaunee travelling in their canoe. Parallel to them, but not touching, is the path of the boat of the Europeans that came here. In our canoe is our way of life, our language, our law and our customs and traditions. And in the boat, likewise, are the European language, customs, traditions, and law. We have said, "Please don't get out of your boat and try to steer our canoe. And we won't get out of our canoe and try to steer your boat." We're going to accept each other as sovereign - we're going to travel down the river of life together, side by side." G. Peter Jemison Faithkeeper, Cattaraugus Reservation, Seneca Nation*

*<http://www.pbs.org/warrior/content/timeline/hero/wampum.html> 29*

*I would describe myself as a visual activist. A lot of the work that I'm making has a political base, and as a conceptual artist, I'm trying to say something." Nadia Myre 30*



Nadia Myre was born in Montreal. Her mother, who was adopted wanted to find her birth parents. When Nadia was eight she remembers that her mother wanted to get her aboriginal status and she wanted a family and people to identify with. When her mother approached the Band Office she was told she would never become an Indian because of the Indian Act. Since then with changes to the Indian act both Nadia and her mother have become status Indians. She has an Associate degree in Fine Art from Camosun College, (Victoria, BC) as well as a Fine Arts diploma from the Emily Carr Institute of Art & Design (Vancouver, BC), and an MFA from Concordia University in Montreal. On May 15th, 1997, she received recognition of her native status from the department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and the Kitigan Zibi Anishnabeg band (Maniwaki, PQ.). "

Since graduating, Myre's work has involved issues of loss and identity, perception and desire. Her graduation works at Emily Carr consisted of a sexualized pair of beaded, pink thigh-high steel-toed muck lucks and the beaded G-string of Pocahontas lover. These works were Nadia's introduction into beading. During her graduate years at Concordia, her academic advisor took her to see an exhibition of beadwork at the McCord Museum. Nadia's grad project was a large work titled "Monument to Two-Row, Revised", which the artist created from historical photographs of the wampum belt. Wampum beaded belts

record events in Iroquois history and document civil matters. The Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy state that their ancestors developed the concept of the two-row wampum as a means to live peacefully while sharing space with the Europeans. The two-row wampum embodies fundamental ways of existing through respectful and reciprocal acceptance and recognition. Further, Myre concluded, *"it is based on a nation-to-nation relationship that acknowledges the autonomy, authority, and jurisdiction of each nation."*

I interviewed Nadia via the telephone, unlike the interview process with Cuthand and Belmore, whom I interviewed in person. The start of our interview was a bit clumsy, I had placed her on speaker phone, so I could record our words. She was in Montreal and I in Vancouver. Added to the geographic distance, the tunnel-like sounds of our voices on the speaker phone made the process become un-intimate. We were not connecting as artists, Indian Woman and as humans. After a few moments of struggle on the speaker phone together, Nadia thankfully stated that the process was not working and could we go off speaker phone and just talk. I agreed and turned off the speaker phone and tape recorder and we began to just converse while I took notes. We then began to connect. I mention this because the artist is very process oriented, concerned with connectivity and interrelatedness.

Nadia's massive work – "Indian Act" , consists of 67 beaded pages of the Indian Act. A contemporary aboriginal artist beading the Indian Act transforms the work of Indian women, situating traditional cultural production, often referred to as craft, within a fine arts discourse. Nadia's work comments on beading as a practice within contemporary art discourse. In addition, she places the function of beading within the role of traditional gender material making but politicizes it as an art form. Myre has stated that beading is political, whether used in a traditional design patterns, or depicting the Hydro- Quebec logo. The artist states, "*I really do see beading as an act of silent resistance.*"<sup>31</sup>

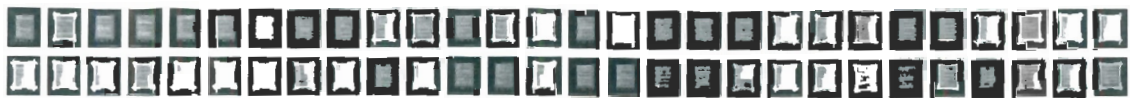


Plate 3: Installation Indian Act 2003  
© Nadia Myre, 2003, by permission

Nadia has taken this imperialistic document, The Indian Act and covered it by way of the ideals of the two row wampum. The very nature of the process of collective beading by Indians and non-Indian's working and beading together, make this work a testament to the principles of both co-existence and rowing together in our separate vessels. Artist and Curator Robert Houle writes that:

Myre transforms a political and socially engineered piece of legislation into a penitential catenation of freedom, made more potent by making it a collective art involving several beadworkers. **32**

Nadia comments about the process:

“ In 1998, a year after I moved back to Montreal, I was driven to bead something monumental. I had just finished beading a piece of text on a pair of steel toed mukluks, and enjoyed the process. I didn't know what I was going to bead but it occurred to me that it had to be something with many parts because if it was just one big thing I would be too discouraged to finish it.” **33**

When asked why she decided to bead the Indian Act, the artist commented that,

I woke up one morning and knew that I wanted to bead something really big. I knew I couldn't really do something as one huge size, it would be too heavy...so one morning I thought. ...I am going to bead the Indian act. Until I finish one page at a time. I did not know how long it was going to take and I had an exhibition deadline.

I never set out to 'work on the Indian Act' as an action against a sordid legislation. The process was much more innocent and organic. I wanted to bead something, I wanted to erase language, I wanted to work in a tactile way, this piece germinated from these desire and manifested as an idea a year and a half later. In 1999 I downloaded the legislation from the internet and in 2000 I started beading it. Alone at first and after a few months it was suggested to me that I should invite people to participate in beading over the act. “ **34**



Plate 4: Indian Act, Beads on Canvas 2003  
© Nadia Myre, 2003, by permission

It was curator of Nadia's proposed exhibition, Rhonda Meir who suggested inviting other beaders and would be beaders to participate, and Meir facilitated and managed the endeavour. The beading sessions in Montreal became a socio-cultural event. Many people made a commitment to the beading circles at OBORO. People would come in and participate, and the more Nadia beaded, the more people would participate. Nadia set up satellite beading bees holding one in

Winnipeg. Nadia was hoping to open up dialogue and have a national beading "doing".

Nadia and I spoke about the structure of art criticism, particularly asking if there is space to discuss ideas of a spiritual practice or a practice induced by ones ancestors without being defined as flaky or non-scholarly. In this spirit, Nadia said the intended process of beading the Indian Act was meant to bring people together in an open place to share in the artwork. The artist's own experience was very physical, moving into realms of the spiritual. The physical rhythm of beading, the space and the sounds of beading, become a shared act of doing. The artist would sometimes pray as she beaded, and she commented on the "the beautiful sound of the needle hitting the beads and the beads falling onto the needles making a pppluff sound each time. " **35**

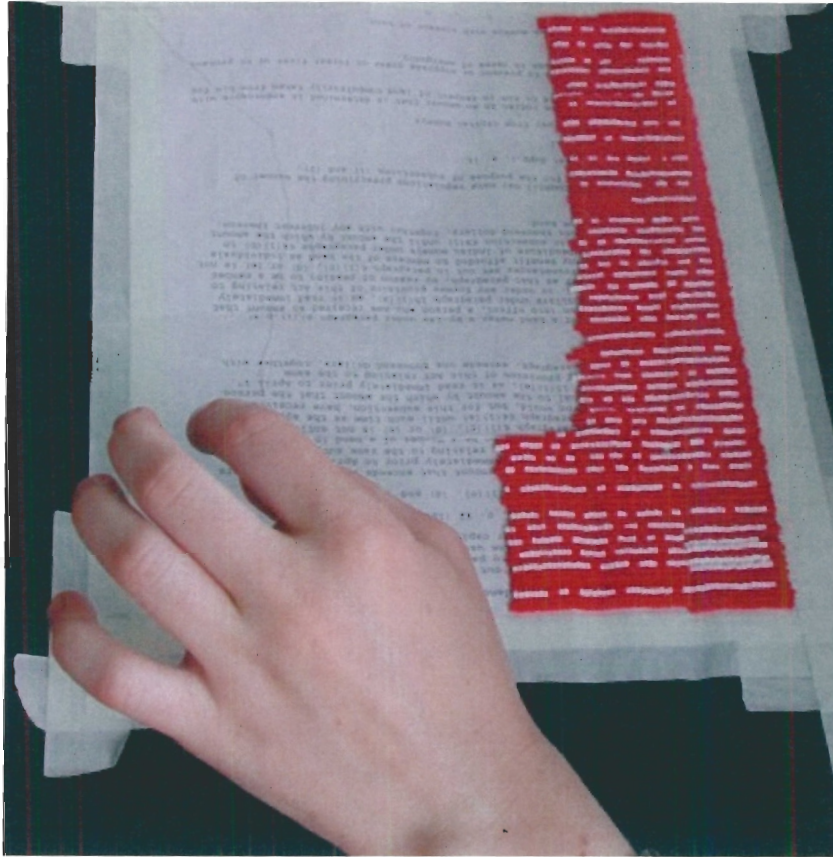


Plate 5: Indian Act, Beads on Canvas 2003  
© Nadia Myre, 2003, by permission

In the catalogue essay Houle points out that;

Myre's refusal to stand still and be voiceless is clearly manifested in her serial work, *Indian Act*, fifty-six pages of beaded fabric. It invites a cathartic experience by eliminating the legalism in the Act through beadwork, *manidoominensikaan* (god-like activity of remembering ones relations.) **36**

Nadia pondered the reality of this project by using several groups of woman and men beadwers simultaneously thus diminishing the distance of the country. This project was the first time beading occurred with people across the country on a massive scale. Two hundred and thirty people

worked on the project across Canada, bringing different people into a shared art making process that lasted hundreds of hours. At the workshops in Montreal people would start the pages and then take them home to finish. Nadia comments that the participants gave a lot to the project by their commitment. She realizes that she was asking people to do a substantial amount of work by both Indians and non-Indians, the workshops being open to anyone who wanted to bead. Throughout the workshops Nadia heard many wonderful beading stories and watched people's identities emerge as a result of the process. Many people acknowledged their own Indian ancestry, and their understanding of the act of beading within the specific context of aboriginal history, while white beaders became more aware of their own relationship (or lack of one) to aboriginal culture.

Nadia comments;

the vastness between people come together in the works. ..its a big thing...that everyone has a point in a connection to the work, for whatever history they have. **37**





Plate 6: Indian Act Beads on Canvas 2003  
© Nadia Myre, 2003, by permission

This participatory event expanded the artist's approach to her own practice, leading her into a more intense place of listening. She described the process as a huge shift. Her earlier works had dealt heavily with conceptual ideas in a highly controlled and planned-out way. In this instance, she worked from an intuitive place and unlearned how she had been taught to work conceptually. This act of commitment of everyone coming together to make this work enabled the artist to let go of her prior ideas of control and perfection and to make room for the translation of space and place involved in the beaders workshops across the country.

The entire project became a ritualized process in itself, taking two and a half years to complete.

The critical intentions of the work extend beyond the cultural dialogue that took place and continues to take place as a result of this process of community building and listening. The text of the Indian Act can no longer be read, as before, as small glass beads have literally erased the meaning of the words. The artist explains:

“The Indian Act is a document that controls Indian lives today....but it was never translated into a Native tongue — yet it describes who and what a Native person is. Native people have a love-hate relationship with it, so to bead over it was to kind of reclaim it, and erase it.” **38**

When considering the work of the Indian Act, Nadia comments that these things are in her history and that she and many aboriginal people carry part of this experience of the Indian Act: trauma and pain from these experiences are passed from generation to generation.

The viewer cannot read the text: the words are gone. The artist has chosen to use red beads for paper, while the original document would have been printed on white paper, and she used white beads for the text. In many ways the artist has Indianized the document. What was once black type on a white background now becomes red “paper” with the

black letters made white. When asked about her use of colours, the artists commented:

For obvious reason the play of red and white relations. Also I was thinking of it as white words (the Indian Act) trying to define Native space / the Native body. This is why the white page is covered in red beads and the black text replaced by white. **39**

The interplay of language and meanings is also apparent in the beading of the Indian Act. The power of language when printed on paper has had a tremendous impact on aboriginal cultures, which nevertheless have maintained oral traditions of knowledge transmission. As well, Indian practices of cultural production have transmitted knowledge via design and material usage.

In many ways, Nadia's act continues this traditional practice while giving new meanings to the act of beading. If aboriginal communities stopped beading, this would be a huge cultural and social loss. Myre's use of this traditional form within a contemporary art milieu both situates the work as commenting on racial power dynamics via the formation of the Indian Act and brings traditional culture making into the contemporary gallery space. Robert Houle points out that,

Myre's Indian Act is a repudiation of a Eurocentric, patriarchal, colonial document designed to assimilate. Her obliteration of the written text is not only an act of defiance, but ironically, a spiritual affirmation. Rather than remembering, Myre is celebrating the present. **40**

As the exhibition continues to travel to different locations, Nadia continues to conduct beading workshops for adults and children. Again, the intention of these workshops is to allow people, both Red and white and other nations, to experience this aboriginal art form, and by doing so, learn to engage with Aboriginal people. The art of “doing” beading, whether the Indian Act or the Two-Row wampum, has provided a valuable site for communities to converge. The concept of the two row wampum, is to facilitate respect, and through the means of a beaded material item works as a marker to confirm that Native philosophy continues to live, Nadia has renewed traditional teachings within the process of her work.

## Rebecca Belmore



Photo 3: Artist Rebecca Belmore

Rebecca Belmore, the most established of these three artists has worked for the past twenty years in installation, performance and visual art. She is of Ojibwa descent, from Sioux Lookout, Ontario. Her work has been exhibited internationally and she was the 2005 Canadian representative at the prestigious Venice Biennial. Her art contextualizes ideas of Indian-ness within the larger Canadian landscape and comments on how "Indian" is interpreted. Her work presents an authentic self, an authentic Indian self living within Canadian structures. She has often used the colours red and white in her performance and visual art and has incorporated the Canadian flag as well. She sees the flag as a visual presentation of Red and White relations in Canada. Her work "White Thread" that I will be discussing was the starting point of this thesis project.

From the first viewing, I was inspired and deeply moved by this magnificent work of art. The narrative of *White Thread* visually combines all of my previous research into aboriginal and non-aboriginal history. It encapsulates the complexities of my relationship with the historical and contemporary meaning of Canada and more generally, to the entire colonialist enterprise. It has also contextualized my experience within the study of Liberal Arts and challenged me to write about that which I breath – Art.



Plate 7: White Thread  
© Rebecca Belmore, 2003

I first viewed of the work "White Thread", as an image via a computer PDF file. A local Vancouver curator, Glenn Alteen, emailed me the image. As I waited for the file to open, it slowly revealed itself vertically, centimetre by centimetre, eventually to disclose its full self. At first, I was struck by how the woman seemed contained, oppressed and completely surrounded by whiteness. The power of white was making her crumple; her body was being crushed, her bones broken. It was a violent image, one that encapsulated the violence that Indian women have been subjected to for the last 500 years: the violence of contact, the historical rape of Indian woman, the government sanctioned laws to sterilize Indian women and the killing of those who live in the streets. Thousands of dead Indian woman were wrapped into this stunning image. She appears restrained, oppressed, of bondage, as if confined and bent over for someone's leisure, or even mummified, preserved for future use. She appears to have completely lost control of her body. Her long black hair hangs down, presenting Indian hair, black Indian hair from this continent, the same black Indian hair that the church and state shaved off thousands of Indian heads. In many aboriginal cultures, hair maintains cultural power and is a source of ones own individual power. Hair ceremonies are common, as is the ceremonial act of cutting your hair during mourning. The black hair that hangs in this work symbolizes



aboriginal power that the colonial enterprise attempted to own, but could never fully acquire.

However, this image has a dual meaning. It was a tremendous experience to engage with the work because on one hand the figure appears in bondage, captive and ready for exploitation, and at the same time she is in a healing place. Upon further reading of the image and considering one's knowledge of aboriginal spiritual practices, she is wrapped in sacred red cloth. The tension in this image is remarkably alive. The narrative of this work offers us the colonial project and its aftermath but the woman also is being wrapped in sacred red cloth, protected and placed, waiting to be healed.

The woman is being honoured and cared for, held in high regard. Sa – the word used for sacred red in the Lakota language, indicates the healing power of colour. In many Indigenous cultures, red cloth is used ceremonially to indicate a connection to the divine. During the Sundance season, offerings are wrapped in red cloth, to give prayers to Wanka Tanka –Great Spirit. When sacred items are stored, or medicine bundles are made, revered items are wrapped in red cloth to protect them, to bring healing spirits to visit the items.

During an interview, Rebecca commented that:

I have always like wrapping. I think wrapping is something perhaps its something like wrapping that I grew up with. Like wrapping up

stuff or being – I think it's something we just do to preserve things and to take care of things. So I think wrapping is kind of something I like because there is comfort or there is care, the caring. So I thought – and then I asked Florene to pose, be the model because she's long, thin, and extremely flexible. So I had her put her into that position. I told her beforehand the position and she agreed and then we just started – I just started wrapping her up. I think at the same time it's weird, like mummification. **41**

When I asked Rebecca more about the wrapping meant she stated:

"I think it means – it can mean a lot of things. You know what's inside and what's outside. There is an inside interior, the body inside and looking at the body that's covered, totally covered except for I think her feet and her hand and her hair. I don't really think about it beyond that I wanted to wrap her up. So I think that now it's with time just starting to think about what was my motivation and what was the thinking behind it. Where does it come from? And if you think of taking care of babies, cradle boards and their babies are bound. Also I remember like hammocks when you take the blanket and you wrap the baby up and it's all neat and tidy and safe you know. So I think it probably comes from those kinds of experiences. **42**

As we talked further, we discussed race relations in Canada and her continued use of the colours red and white to portray this binary dynamic. Rebecca commented that because the aboriginal body is bound in red and presented on a white background, this work provides many entry points to discussions of race, not just colour, but marginalization, white power and red vulnerability.

She commented on the title of the work,

White Thread, also indicates a duality of meanings. The thread of a story line, or history as a lineage to our line. So I think there is that possible kind of meaning for the title and then the whole relationship between aboriginal people and

non-aboriginal people or white people. So whites, Indians, and that whole relationship I think is there. Then I think if you just look over (a building near by where we were sitting outside) there you see the flag, the red and white - so its all that kind of thinking of nation and politics and the body, and the aboriginal body within this whiteness within the frame, within the frame of the white world and that kind of struggle to manage our lives and to I think I guess on another level its red as blood, red as being representing the red people. **43**



Plate 8: White Thread Installation  
© Rebecca Belmore, 2003, by permission

When I further asked Belmore about double meanings in the image of the women being both wrapped for protection and bound by containment, she commented:

It depends on how you are feeling that day about things. But definitely I see my experience with wrapping is a good thing whether you think of burial or babies. Birth to death I think. Wrapping is significant and loving and protective and honouring. So I think it's all. But at the same time I think when you put it into the red and white because of our relationships with this nation, Canada and the history. I have used the flag a lot in my performance pieces or at least red and white to

symbolize the flag or Canada and us within the – the red within the white. **44**

The artist leaves much for viewers to interpret on their own terms.

Some artists work from a place of intuitive creation – they have a general idea and begin to make the work which then becomes something as the process unfolds. I find that Rebecca often works this way, not as a random act, but rather as an uncontaminated reaction to the materials, surroundings, and what happens during the time she is in the process of making the object. Some may call this the spirit of the art, the practice of making art. It happens, as opposed to being fully planned. The artist lets the materials come to life as she approaches them. Her images are ambiguous, complex and haunting.

Rebecca and I talked further about the aboriginal relationship to Canada embodied in our art practices and specifically “White Threads” striking image of a red woman surrounded by white space.

*Somehow, I think it seemed to be a critique of your relationship with Canada and Canadian democracy and the treatment of Indian people. Could you comment on that?*

I would just answer that by saying coming from family and knowing the experience, the many experiences within my own family of having to deal with democracy and living in Canada and living within this framework that we live within and the hardship of the people that I love, the hardship that they face in their lives and how they have to come to terms with their identity and their dreams. That's where it comes from and how – I think as an artist the whole – to use that experience and those stories and those memories and to make them, transform it into something that is still not to beat

people over the head but to somehow maybe trick them into not realizing what's going on or there is a strong kind of under energy underneath. Underneath that blanket ( Blood on the Snow – another work in red and white) there is something going on. I think that's how, so my whole interest in dealing with Canada and being Canadian itself is like – it's not an easy thing. It's really difficult and it's as difficult today as it was 30 years ago. There is just different problems like those men freezing to death in Saskatoon. It's horrific. We have to. As aboriginal artists, as Indian artists we have to – I think we are compelled by our bodies to do something, to say something. And how we say it is personal and how far we are willing to go and how do you want to do it and how do you want to approach this history and make something and say something.

*Its interesting too when thinking of the harsh reality or the harsh history and the continued subjugation of Indian people that you can make such visually beautiful work but at the same time as you said its fully loaded and there are layers upon layers of what the semiotics imply and what the meaning of your work is. I am curious to see how people respond sometimes to it.*

I think like you know that beauty is essential. It's essential for me to be happy, to be happy within my own body. At the same time to celebrate what is beautiful about us, us Indians. You know what is beautiful about my family. That we still have a great sense of humor and a strong will to live as good as possible in spite of the hardship. I see it in my own extended family. People who go to prison and then they get out and they try to put their lives back together. Anything that happens in our Indian world there still is great beauty and I think that's where I want to make objects or works that are beautiful to celebrate that. **45**

Rebecca Belmore feels compelled to go deep into areas of self, and she questions how far she will go to bring that deep emotion to the viewer, but she is not interested in hitting people over the head. Rather, she attempts to engage them with the beauty of her art, hopefully providing an experience for viewers so that they might shift perspective regarding Canada, Indians and our interrelatedness.

## Indians Inside the Exhibition Space

I have addressed issues in Canada's colonial history and discussed three art works that reflect the social relationship between Red and White relations. The process of art making is complex as each artist makes work from their own experiences, while maintaining parallel Indian experiences. Once the art has been made, really, the art needs a viewer other than the artist. The dissemination of art work occur in various ways, generally by the invitation of a curator to exhibit the works, or self curated or submitted events. The works discussed in this paper have been on exhibition in a gallery space, or, in Cuthand's case, screened at media arts festivals.

I am interested in exhibition space and how aboriginal work has been placed within the mainstream public cultural space. The term "White Cube" was founded by artist/writer Brian O'Doherty in 1976, at which time he was writing a series of articles for Artforum magazine which later became the first chapters of his book *Inside the White Cube – The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. This book addressed the complex and sophisticated relationship between economics, social context and aesthetics as represented in the contested space of the art gallery. O'Doherty's argues that the context of the highly controlled modernist

gallery, becomes a thing in itself and that it is this context of space that informs, shapes and even interprets the art and the viewer experience. He theorizes on the impact space has on the art object, what it does to the viewing subject and how the context devours the object, thus becoming it. Meaning, that the object of art, so transformed into its context within a controlled institutional space within structures of the gallery space, the outside world must come in to walls generally painted white. Inside this space, Art is autonomous and has a life of its own outside of the artist's studio. O'Doherty observes that the white cube exists as an unshadowed, white, clean, artificial space that is devoted to the technology of aesthetics, and that the art exists in a kind of eternity of display. **46** His research also maps the various interruptions made in the gallery space initiated by Marcel Duchamp in 1938, when he hung twelve hundred bags from the ceiling of a gallery space, or his Mile of String in 1942, in which Duchamp criss-crossed string that consumed the entire gallery space. He interrupted the picture plane, and Impressionist works that challenged the spectator to question "what is it supposed to be? What does it mean? Where I am supposed to stand?" **47** Duchamp encourages us to think about "when a picture becomes an active partner in perception", and when the picture was no longer a passive object but was indeed issuing instructions.

Although O'Doherty did not consider race in his analysis of the white cube, per se, he did present it as a colonial space with a hard attachment to the vernacular macho obsession with surface and space, "designed to accommodate the prejudices and enhance the self image of the upper classes". **48**

Gallery spaces can make an enormous impact on society from assisting with shaping national identity to contributing to historical developments of human knowledge. In 1927, one of the first noted exhibitions of aboriginal art in Canada "Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern", at the National Gallery of Canada, consisted of traditional northwest coast aboriginal cultural items such as weavings, totems and house posts, grouped together with works primarily by Emily Carr. The aboriginal works were borrowed from museums, private collections and a few living artists. Many of names of the aboriginal artists did not appear on title cards, perhaps a sign for the future of aboriginal art at the NAG, since the next aboriginal show did not occur until 1985, with a retrospective of Inuit artist Pudlo Pudlat and a few smaller group shows in 1986, followed by "Strengthening the Spirit" in 1991, and the well acknowledged "Land, Spirit and Power" in 1992. In 2006, the National Gallery held the first solo Aboriginal exhibition in its 127 year old history with the work of Norval Morresau. To date, the gallery has housed 6 aboriginal exhibitions.



The discussion of where to place traditional and contemporary aboriginal art within Canadian art history as well as Canadian exhibition space is still being defined. The role of aboriginal art in Canada has been one of a pedagogical nature, coupled with powerful critiques on democracy. The viewer relationship to the works hopefully enhances the non-aboriginal understanding of the issues and concerns of real live aboriginal people. Aboriginal artists have engaged with government mistreatment that has filtered down into the mainstream notions and stereotypes that are projected onto aboriginal communities and individuals. If indeed history is always written by the victor, the loser at some point would have to respond. This shift in how history has been presented has been revisited by many aboriginal artists. Belmore, Cuthand and Myre revisit red and white relations through the use of visual and media art. The role of artist as interpreter and historian is plainly visible in the work of these three artists. Collectively they have attempted to bring light to circumstances that are uniquely aboriginal Canadian and in doing so, have informed their public of these concerns via the public exhibition space. The site of the gallery is by no means neutral. Cultural brokers, whether curators, art historians, critics, and art history professors are all implicated in how aboriginal art is presented, collected and interpreted.

When Thirza Cuthand and I discussed exhibition space I asked her the following questions:

*When you think of the gallery space because your work sometimes shows in galleries too and so when you think of the gallery space and all its whiteness because not only is it a white cube but it's been generally a white people's place. How do you think that space functions. How do you think your art functions within that white space?*

I don't know. I definitely have problems when video work gets screened in the gallery space because often you end up with a little monitor in the corner with a little VCR and maybe a chair and some headphones and someone goes and sits there and watches TV and your video is on there and that's kind of it. I don't know. I think its kind of a way that video gets subjugated in a certain way because I think the best way to watch a video is when its big and hopefully there are people around you. I think there is something about a screening as compared to a gallery space where screening dialogue happens after your video is shown. Whereas in a gallery you know people kind of wander in, they watch it, they kind of wander out and its really hard to get them talking about it. Yeah so I don't know. I have issues with video work being shown in gallery spaces. I think quite often it gets...its not shown properly quite often.

*Well as you said it does get subjugated. I think that's the difference when the artists are making it for installation and it's a different experience the viewer has than when we make single channel work. But maybe we can talk about these a bit and see what happens. What interests you most about the gallery space? Because you are known as a media artist, not a visual artist. Do you have an interest in gallery space as a media artist?*

I don't think I really do have too much of an interest in gallery space. I think I am more interested in terms of sort of immersive installation space. I think those are really interesting but for myself I am more interested in making work that gets screened.

*OK. And now the theory that the gallery space is not a neutral site has been written about. Whenever you put an object in there it*

*changes the space and the space changes it. So it's not a neutral space. So I am just wondering what do you think the gallery space is to you? As an artist and as a viewer I guess?*

It's an institution. That's basically how I feel about it. There is something kind of cold about it that I have a hard time with. Whereas you know when you go to a screening that's more – I don't know I guess that is more entertainment kind of like sort of feeling because you're going onto a movie theatre or a pretend movie theatre or whatever but yeah the gallery space just seems to be more institutional and more – you know that whole “don't touch” kind of thing where you're really – there is all these restrictions on how you can interact with the art. **49**

Cuthand's view of exhibition space is one of a privileged, institutionalized site where media art gets presented out of physical context and placed within a “don't touch” environment that, for her, takes away from viewers interaction with her work. We talked further about the impact art has on society and the pedagogical implications of aboriginal art.

*If we think about whatever the role of art is, there are so many roles of art, but if we think in terms of Indian art and how its, even though it hasn't even been the intent of the maker all the time, but Indian art has become pedagogical. It has become educational, it has transformed people's thinking, making people think outside of their experience in the cube. I am just wondering what you think. If you can comment on Indian art as education.*

Yeah I would say that “Through the Looking Glass” definitely has a pedagogical slant to it because it is trying to educate and inform people about different race issues that they wouldn't have thought about normally you know. At the same time I don't want to make out that it is solely about trying to educate people all the time because I think it sort of becomes a bit self-defeating. I think its too

much to expect that people are going to be making art as always informing people and sometimes you have just got to go have some fun and just assume that people are going to come along with you on the ride and just assume that sometimes yeah you just have to make assumptions that people will understand those sorts of complex race, gender, class, sexuality issues that you're going to talk about in your work without having to explain it the whole way.

*I think even though "Through the Looking Glass" is that – obviously you have made art but then it has these qualities to it. I think it gets put on a lot of our art even though we have never stated outright that I am going to make this to educate the viewer. It's just because of the nature of what narrative we're working with opens the viewer up to a new experience, an Indian experience. When the public comes into the gallery space they are presented with an experience out of their world or experience. My further question is: do you think art can transform consciousness through the experience of the viewer. Can you comment on that?*

Yeah I mean I think growing up the most sort of illuminating experiences that I have had that have educated me have been art. I think there is something about art where you get to have sort of a private moment between yourself and the artist through this piece of work where hopefully if the connection is there something gets sort of opened up and it's kind of like a chakra opening or something. You know you feel that when you see a really good piece of art. Just like this thing in your head goes – ummm. Like oh wow, that's really amazing. That makes me think about all these different things and then you wander off and your mind is still thinking about all these different things. It's like opening a door for people I guess.

*So, getting back to the gallery. Whether large or small, it is an institutional space that becomes an artist's space because it all depends on what's on exhibition and how the work effects the viewer. If a viewer is open to the experience they can go in, see art and have, some people can have, a spiritual experience. To stand before art I had only seen in books for years and then to experience them "live" has been overwhelming, I was moved by the sheer beauty, form and colour. Once at a gallery in New York, I walked through the space and saw a small painting across the room and as I approached the painting, I realize it was a work of Salvador Dali that I assumed was 10ft by 10ft, as I had seen the image in books.*

*As I stood looking at this small detailed painting I began to weep at its beauty and power over me. What he managed to do, to paint such a vast landscape in a 12 by 5 inch painting. So this institutionalized space can also provide us with an enormous experience that transcends the physical.*

Yes. I remember one time I was at the Louvre and I saw this painting by David. (David, Jacques-Louis 1748-1825). I forget what it was called but it was about the Sabine, I think it was called "The Sabine Women" (*The Intervention of the Sabine Women, 1799*) and it was about these women who had been kidnapped by this one tribe and then they had children with this tribe and then the fathers from their tribe that they were stolen from came to get them and then it was sort of this clash between these two tribes and there were these women with these babies in the middle and they were trying to stop these two tribes from fighting and I was just like – oh I started to cry...the feeling of being biracial.

*That sounds like a great painting Thirza. OK so there is also the whole idea that art can transform social power. As an Indian woman how do you think your art has disrupted whiteness in art history?*

Boy that's a big question. I don't know if it has.

*Of course it has.*

I guess it has.

*I mean Canadian art history.*

I don't know. Let me think about that. Well I think disrupting whiteness. I think its very strange because I started out my video career being sort of like a lesbian video artist and then I started talking about race a bit more. So by then I had already been showing in a lot of sort of whitey gay and lesbian programs kind of thing and then I started talking about race. So in a lot of ways I guess it disrupted all these ideas of what a lesbian is because I think a lot of people assume that lesbians and gays, that's sort of a white thing. So in a way that was a disruption and then I think just being light skinned gives you privilege for sure but it also gives you this weird thing where you can walk into a white milieu and you hear

white people talking about native people and they don't realize that you're native and god you just hear some really weird things. So in a way sometimes I feel like – even though I have privilege and I don't get followed around in stores because they don't think I am going to steal anything but at the same time I get sort of this spy kind of understanding of what white people are doing in their communities. **50**

It's interesting to note here, that when Thriza talked about her early work and her investigation into sexuality, curators and programmers placed her work primarily within a white lesbian discourse. Once she started to make works that addressed race there was a shift of perception and reception of her work and now her work gets curated in a larger cultural context.

Brain O'Doherty analyses the gallery as gesture and talks of the trinity of changes that brought forth a new god in the exhibition space. He demonstrates that the pedestal melted away, the frame dropped off, space slid across the floor, turbulence was in the corners of the gallery, college flopped out of the picture and settled on the floor. He suggests that this new God in the gallery space removed all impediments except ART and that the new space pushed against its confining box and was infiltrated with consciousness – the gallery was full of mind. I think this is where aboriginal art enters into the construction of the white cube. The works that have been discussed in this project hope to bring a certain consciousness to the viewer/spectator, consciousness of knowing a

culture, a people, a history, an experience, perhaps even knowing the wound.

When Nadia and I talked about the exhibition space she commented that she was an artist for selfish reasons and that she did not go to therapy, but worked out her trauma through art trying to figure out who she was. The process of identity locating has been an on-going endeavour for her. She stated that she *"is not sure of where my practice would be if I didn't have the recognition from NAAF (National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation) ...my mother was adopted and never knew who she was.. I went on that journey with her"*. We further discussed exhibition space for her work Indian Act, and she commented that:

The work requires a large space. Practically to have it housed in one space..the works have been exhibited together all together. This work can now exist in different spaces..people have asked...how could you seprate it....they were made like that....with the work being seprated—everyone can talk about the works, they can experience it at different times in different spaces or at the same time. **51**

We talked about the impact exhibition space has on the viewer and their relationship to the object and agreed that it depends on the viewers context. She spoke of context and interpretation, suggesting that *"the understanding or relations to the works comes from the viewers*

context of that person. Different people can come into it in different ways. And experiences. I got a lot of people in general, asking this question of what language the work was beaded in. The beads themselves become a language...some thought they were beaded in the Morse code or a First Nations language." For Nadia, the fact the pages can be on exhibition simultaneously at several locations is part of the entire process of making the work; can exist in different places at the same time, through various means of experience. The work is now held in several public collections, including the Woodland Cultural Centre, the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation and the Museum of Civilization.

Nadia believes that the work has its own power aside from being in the exhibition space. It now exists in the minds and hearts of those who made and touched the work.

The gallery space has enormous potential to convey experiences. Rebecca and I discussed the potential of space and the power the white cube maintains.

*In terms of the power of art to shift consciousness and make people think in different ways. That's what your art does, it makes people think in many different ways. I think too about your relationship to Indian people and Indian women. So that's very powerful – that space provides us with a very powerful site to converse with people.*

I used to think when I was a teenager in high school that I wanted to go into political science and to work because I wanted to make change and I wanted to do something and I think now with hindsight and 20-20 vision I think well I made the right choice because I think I probably have been more successful as an artist



than I would have been as a political body. Because I think you can reach a lot of people in the art side and you can say – you have freedom to say things which is the beauty of it.

*And thinking about the political...because I have heard that before including myself, at first I thought I was going to become a social worker then a lawyer and then just gave it all up and thought I want to make art. It took me a while to get there. So it's interesting how Indian people feel that obligation. I need to do something that is going to either better my own people or work with non-Indian people to say – you need to understand us. I am wondering about your own art, where does that come from do you think?*

I think it comes from early childhood. It comes from like the first time stepping into or going to public school and at the front of the room there is the big clock and above that is the queen and you're like six years old and trying to figure out what does this mean and where am I supposed to be, what's happening. So I think very early on I just thought about what are these symbols. Why is this set up this way? So I think through thinking about those things and how space is constructed and how we're educated, it's all very profound. **52**

Rebecca explained that, knowing from a very early age that the imbalance of power between aboriginal and non-aboriginal was harmful, she sought ways to close the power gap, realizing that as an artist her voice could be heard within different spaces of interpretation.

*So about the gallery space... is it a neutral space and what does that mean to you?*

Well I think it wants to be a neutral space. I think that's how the white cube, the box supposedly being neutral or being empty and needing to be filled. I think that's – or that it's an equal space. Every object or every art work has its own space or its – I am not sure what I am trying to say. But I am just trying to say how if I was to put something in a space or another artist one month later would put another piece into the space. Is it the gallery space the white cube is trying to bring equality or equity to everyone? I think if we think

about how the art world has struggled with all kinds of issues dealing with race and gender, economics and who gets to be in the space and who doesn't and who decides. The white cube is full, but outside of its emptiness and its cleanliness there are all kinds of messiness and ugliness. So its interesting this whole notion of being neutral is – it's not neutral.

*The politics of space and who has the control of that space is a whole other area of research which I have been very interested in lately.*

You think about say a safe place like an artist run centre and what kind of space ( it is). They try to have the white cube and then as an artist, you move from the smaller cube ( small gallery) to the bigger cube. (larger institutional space). That's how your success is measured if you want to look at it that way. You get more space and the luxury and the meaning but you attain the right to have this much space. It's really interesting. And how and when you get that space and people who don't have it want to know – well how did you get this space.

*Interesting.*

Then when you have a bunch of artists like in a big museum it's the fight over who gets the better space. So there is always a ranking and a hierarchy in that system. So space is like totally so political and complex. **53**

What has been revealed during our interview by Rebecca is that exhibition space is a site of "art/career" power sanctioned by the institution. Clearly when an artist is invited to be in a larger space based on their body of work, this is an indication that the artist has earned the right for a larger and sometimes a more prestigious space. In addition, Rebecca's points out that artist's themselves are aware of the economy of space; during group shows, artists often want privileged wall space.

As artists we continued our discussion about space:

*I have never worked outside of the gallery space. I am so institutionalized... I love the gallery space. I can't wait to get back into it. Every time I'm in the space I just love installing and lighting an exhibition.*

I think its exciting to try to make something that you think is beautiful.  
It's really what's lovely about being in the gallery.

*That's beautiful. This is a big question, one of the broad questions  
..what do you think the function of your art is in that gallery space?*

Oh god I don't know. I thought I knew but I don't know. I don't know why its there. Maybe it shouldn't be there. That could be a question, should it be there. Well I don't know its kind of crazy because it's like as an artist you have a career so you need the space, you need to be there. Then at the same time, the question is why you are there. Why should you be there? What's the point? That's where it gets complicated because then well what is the point and you ask yourself why should anyone care about what I made here and why should they be interested. But then you have to come to some kind of resolve so that you can go to sleep at night. I think it's to give someone something to think about hopefully. I mean that's essentially what I think I try to do. Just try to ask questions or provoke some kind of questioning and then also to at the same time hopefully I am interested also in making something that looks beautiful. At least what I think looks beautiful. At least what I think looks beautiful and people have to agree with me. So it's kind of an offering of something. That's all you can do is offer and then its up to people whether they want to, how they want to deal with that. Whether they want to reject it or to think about it. Some people if they really love it then that's a good thing. If they are really into it and really think about it or look at it and spend time. When I go into look at someone else's work and look at something that I think is amazing and moving and I just love it and I might go back a few times to see it. So I think that's what. It's giving someone this experience. Like a visual experience or something beyond the visual into something else. **54**

Rebecca explains that she views the gallery space as a place to offer something beautiful to the viewer that encourages the viewer to have an experience that goes beyond the white cube. And as she has stated, "beyond the visual into something else" is a complex idea that demonstrates the artist's intention of taking the viewer to a new place of being.

O'Doherty argues that when we as spectators become truly conscious about looking at a work of art, we begin to look at ourselves. I believe Rebecca Belmore is making this gesture with her words.. "beyond the visual into something else", as her work gets placed in many prestigious institutions that both cater to the bourgeois desire for possession and provide public programs to educate the masses. Her work is exposed to both the janitor's child via school tours and the white collar trustee. Her work is being seen by non-aboriginal people within the white cube, and for the length of time they engage with it they experience something other than their own selves. And as Nadia has pointed out, the spirit of art work can live on outside the gallery space, through touch, making and viewing and experiencing the work.

When asked about the aboriginal female experience in exhibition space, Rebecca replied,

I want to assert that experience in that kind of space because we have a right to be there because we are part of

this whole red and white construction that we live within in this country. We are essential. That's how I see it. But we all know that hasn't been true and it's been the whole struggle of getting there. **55**

Rebecca is indicating that red women have a right to be in the exhibition space on the walls of galleries, as they are essential to Canadian culture. Art has the potentiality to enlighten and transform the spectator's mind, perhaps even take them to a place of deep self knowledge. In this way the gallery space becomes a legitimate place for discourse and the dissemination of ideas. Gallery and museum spaces shape national identity, ideological and political conflict regarding art, share new values, and exhibit alternative perspectives. These sites offer a social function for art, and are in the case of this paper, a social space for aboriginal art that offers an aboriginal experience.

In a book review of White Cube Michael Betnacourt states:

it is the special power of this exhibition space to strip away the original context of the art show and replace it with a neutralizing one, a context where the meanings produced by the arts role and engagement in culture and society can be held at a distance from the viewers' encounters with the world. The White Cube is a space of aesthetic neutralization, a space that converts everything into commodities....

When political art is placed in the white cube it will lose its political aspects and gradually become a collection of objects with a specific aesthetic and commercial value. **56**

I would argue that the power of the white cube to strip meaning from artworks and renders them strictly as commodity in the case of the works by Belmore, Cuthand and Myre, is possible, yet at the same time, the cultural context can never be completely diminished. Although, certainly, all art can become commodity through the mere sale of the artwork, I would argue that the viewer reception and understanding of the work does not get completely informed by way of an economic exchange between commodity and consumer.

Since galleries like the National Gallery of Canada assist with shaping power in terms of cultural capital and what is defined or valued as fine art excluded aboriginal artists for many years, the recent exhibition of Norval Morriseau demonstrates the gallery can be a site for changing conventions of social understanding. Aboriginal art is now valued more fully and the gallery has brokered this opening with the assistance of an aboriginal art historian and curator. However problematic its history is of reducing Indian subjects to essentialist stereotypes in past exhibitions, or by not showing aboriginal work, the NAG is attempting to become culturally relevant to the shifting discourse of Canadian contemporary art. Public galleries can become sites of civic purpose, contributing honestly to the economy of truth, as opposed to the history of forgetting. These public white cubes continue to shift meaning, depending upon what is in the space.

## Conclusion

*Contemporary Native art presents aesthetic and political strategies that do not conform to the categories usually assigned to it. When the Native artist speaks as the author rather than the bearer of (an other's) meaning, she or he precipitates an epistemological crisis, which exposes the fundamental instability of those knowledges that circumscribe the social and political place of colonized peoples.*

*The widely held view that aesthetic and scholarship are distinct categories with no responsibility to socio-political life means that institutions controlling such discourses are not obliged to interrogate the ideological assumptions of their own practices.*

Jean Fisher **57**

In this project I have considered the meaning of works that specifically analyze race relations in Canada pertaining to "Red" Indians and "White" (settlers) through the creative assertion of an aboriginal voice. These works have been both welcomed and feared within the

Canadian art world, because of prior systems of interpretation that have defined aboriginal culture as inferior, troublesome and mythic. This stereotype of inferiority became firmly established as a fixed norm: aboriginal identity and cultural production become commodified and placed on display in museums all over the world for consumption in a demeaning fashion. Aboriginal identity and existence was conventionally framed as a dying culture. These stereotypes were transferred to popular culture, becoming part of a negative "knowledge system" which has made it very challenging for aboriginal art to be accepted as contemporary art.

Beginning with Thirza Cuthand's Through the Looking Glass, locates her aboriginal mixed race identity in all its complexities both historically and in contemporary times. Through her use of fable and by placing herself within the narrative as the character of Alice, she situates herself both as a colonial subject and an aboriginal woman in a place of power. By analyzing and decoding the meanings of red and white relations, Thirza has desubjugated herself as an aboriginal woman, as a mixed race woman, and further as a lesbian half-breed.



The discussion of race is a key element in Cuthand's work: she brings forth her experience as a half-breed woman via her artist production. This type of racial analysis through visual and media art is still being documented and charted by both emerging and established artists of aboriginal descent, not only as a means to discover self within western discourses, but further, to develop an aboriginal space and a critical analysis within the discourse. Work like Cuthand's makes a contribution to how we shape meaning and knowledge through processes of art creation by mixed race aboriginal artists.

When discussing race in her work, Cuthand engages the audience with real issues faced by people of mixed racial descent. Through her work she is asking the viewer to consider race constructs and notions of superiority based on race. Cuthand's art challenges the viewer's perception of aboriginal people, consciously intruding into the viewers own reality, creating a new space for further discussion.

Nadia Myre's Indian Act also considers race relations and histories in Canada by examining through text the ways in which legislated race hierarchies were codified. Her use of craft making within a fine arts discourse broadens the discussion pertaining to aboriginal art. The highly

debated question – is it art or is it craft—to which traditional aboriginal art has been subjected is also queried in this beaded work. Practitioners of traditional modes of art making have tussled with non aboriginal art professionals regarding the inclusion and acknowledgement of traditional practices in art historical terms and contemporary exhibition spaces, and Nadia tackles this issue head on.

Nadia's collaborative project brought aboriginal and the non-aboriginal people together, and by doing so, developed a real connection. They worked together, learned from each other and got acquainted through art making. In the process, the participants become aware of the Indian Act and the reality of this text that dominated aboriginal people, in part by legalizing restrictions that distanced red and white relations. Nadia has continued to work with non-aboriginal people on other projects in the spirit of hope to create dialogue that enhances mutual and productive co-existence.

Rebecca Belmore's White Thread, the starting point of my research, serves as the ultimate image encapsulating the aboriginal female experience within the Canadian landscape: Red vulnerability when surrounded by white power, or the reverse, white vulnerability when surrounded by red power. This duality of meaning speaks to the aboriginal Canadian relations with non-aboriginals. How does this image comment on our co-existence? Rebecca's twenty year practice has always

reflected her reality as a red woman living within white frames of reference. She engages the harsh and the pleasant experiences that aboriginal people have experienced both as colonial subjects and decolonized individuals. This work brings forth red realities, meanings and codes: viewers are often able to connect with her work beyond the aesthetic and engage in deeper implications of the image. As a Red Woman, Belmore also interrupts white space, not only in terms of white exhibition space, but in setting new contexts for white consciousness and its relation to red existence.

Combined, these works all have questioned and unpacked meanings within the framework of troubling knowledge and placed the aboriginal experience within the public gallery space for further interpretation. Furthermore, these artists are making a significant contribution to Canadian art history as it continues to evolve and become more inclusive of aboriginal iconography and cultural production outside of ethnographic or anthropological tropes. This is where the real shift has happened over the last fifteen years. These artists have transformed the analysis of contemporary aboriginal art by way of making work that reflects their experiences on their own terms. Further, once the work is in the gallery space, it becomes public, and the meanings of the works enter public discourses that concern aboriginal culture, production and social relations. Art history is shifted by becoming inclusive of art by

contemporary aboriginal artists that previously had been relegated to ethnology or anthropology analysis. Now the public is invited to encounter authentic first person narratives from aboriginal contemporary voices. Contemporary aboriginal art has served to re-interpret art historical references and to contribute to new discourses in contemporary art, collapsing long held stereotypes as to what is aboriginal art while providing windows into the contemporary aboriginal experience.

We expect a great deal from Art, and Art gives us so much. Many contemporary aboriginal artists offer their Art to acknowledge and honour the ancestors and the way of life. In addition, the works have assisted with defining selfhood and locating the desubjugated decolonized self – the self liberated aboriginal self.

The entire experience of being a Red Woman surrounded by white space creates a place to bring the aboriginal experience into life as art from which others can learn in new ways. And through the dissemination of such works, there is hope that our inter-relatedness via the gallery space will allow for greater freedom of thought and a refusal of inequality. The works portray the aboriginal experience and imperative in all its complexities, and questions issues of social justice. To locate justice through the application of art making is an enormous undertaking. These artworks have the considerable potential to shift contemporary

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consciousness toward support of aboriginal justice and equality through  
making objects of compelling beauty.

Wopila Pila Maya. Mitakuye Oyasin.

You have honoured me. I give thanks.

All my Relations. Everything is Related.

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## **Interviews**

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Rebecca Belmore in person interviewed Vancouver Summer 2005.

Nadia Myre interviewed over the phone. She was in Montreal and I was in  
Summer Vancouver 2005.