The Unreadable Present

Nadia Myre and Kent Monkman

by Richard William Hill for C Magazine (September 2002)

Not all of the Cree phrases that my mother knew were insults, but my favourite was. I can't recall the complete phrase anymore. I remember one word: mistahi-muskwa, or big bear. For a long time I didn't know what this phrase meant, only that my mom would use it on my brother and I when one of us was in a particularly foul mood. It wasn't until I was a teenager that I got past being offended long enough to ask her, "What does that mean anyway?" She appraised me for a moment, considering, and then shot back, "It means you're as cranky as a grizzly bear with a torn asshole."

We left it at that. For all I know she may even have been telling the truth. The part of me that enjoys speculating about it doesn't want to really know for sure.

I like this muddy and sometimes muddled space on the edge of language. Despite all the bad colonial history (and wishing very much that I did know more Cree) it still feels like home. Yet the hybrid quality of this space means that it is often treated by purists as the crash-landing site after a tragic fall from grace: the fiery descent from noble savage to colonized, acculturated Native-Canadian. Some of us wander around in the aftermath a little embarrassed at our own lack of authenticity, a little worried that we are bereft of exotic knowledge that we can trade in the market of ideas. Our authenticity always seems to be somewhere behind us rather than something we carry around with us here and now. If we need to recover our languages and histories, we also need new means of expression that can articulate and translate our own experiences, even (or especially) when that experience is estrangement or not understanding. A lot of energy has been spent, after all, teaching us how not to understand.

Artists Nadia Myre and Kent Monkman have been speaking in and to the silences of the present. Myre is a young Montreal artist of Algonkin-Québécois heritage and Monkman is a Cree artist based in Toronto. Both have engaged the sensuality and tactile process of art-making to visualize and disrupt the ways in which power has used language to make some things un-sayable or incomprehensible.

The Indian Act, the document codifying Canada's relationship with Aboriginal peoples, is a piece of definitional violence and authority that many Aboriginal artists have spoken back to. As far as I know, Nadia Myre is the first to have represented all fifty-four pages in beads. Seeing page after page lined up in double rows on the wall of Gallery Oboro in Montreal, it was difficult not to simply wonder at the labour: all those little beads, placed one after another. And yet the work, titled simply Indian Act, turns on the fact that the beads are not really small enough at all. The pages themselves are reproduced to scale and each letter of each word is represented by a single white bead set off against a background of red beads. The text becomes an abstract, beautifully incomprehensible series of dots and dashes. The pixilated quality of the beading tends to simultaneously give the impression of low and high tech, and the effect is like trying to read text on an absurdly low-resolution computer monitor.

If a legal text like the Indian Act (where the state acts and the "Indians" are acted upon) is a pure case of language functioning as an arm of the state, then there is a special power in transforming that language into something else, something at once contemporary and "traditional." Of course the failure of beads to be words speaks eloquently of cultural difference and the estrangement of the language of the Indian Act from those it is meant to govern. The development of the Indian Act itself was a sign of the state's increasing unwillingness to engage Aboriginal communities on their own cultural terms. Previously, European states and their settler colonies often went to great lengths to use Aboriginal political documents, such as wampum belts, in their political relations with First Nations. The shift to incomprehensible, one-sided documents like the Indian Act was a deliberate signal, a failure to communicate that was no doubt meant to communicate a great deal.

But if Myre's work takes not understanding as a starting point it quickly moves forward from there. The process of turning the Indian Act into its liberated, beaded form is as important as the end product (and all those beads keep reminding us of the process). Myre sought out help, inviting friends to do a page, holding beading circles and otherwise drawing professional and amateur beadworkers into the process of creating this work of art. Beadwork has traditionally been a women's art form, but Myre invited men, non-Aboriginal artist friends and others, to participate. Beaders worked over top of eight-by-eleven-inch sheets of paper, each printed with a page of the Indian Act. They sewed through the paper to the fabric below until the paper disappeared behind a field of beads. The process exposed them to the document and then engaged them in the act of effacing it through the long labour of beading. Letter by letter English text disappears and bead-by-bead it is replaced with a tactile, visually demanding object as the workers learn (or renew their acquaintance with) the art of beading. It is an Indian act. An act that overwrites old limitations to unapologetically lay claim to the complex reality of the present.

I doubt that when Kent Monkman thinks about the Cree language insults are the first thing that come to his mind. For him, the Cree language carried the word of God. The God, the big, all encompassing, very jealous God of Christianity. The God who seems to have so much to say about whom one ought to have sex with and how. Monkman's father was a minister and his father's Cree congregation read a Bible printed in Cree syllabics and sang Cree hymns from Cree hymn books. (If this surprises you then you have not been paying attention to the past several hundred years of Aboriginal-European relations.) It is widely believed that the Cree syllabary was invented by a missionary as a way putting the Bible into any easy-to-learn form that could handle the polysyllabic tendency of Cree, which, like German, has a fondness for compound nouns. There are Cree who dispute this, claiming that we had independently developed the syllabic system for traditional religious purposes, but whatever the case may be, the syllabary played and continues to play an important role for Cree Christians. Monkman's approach to the Cree language is unsentimental and matter of fact. He can't speak or understand it, so for him Cree has not been the gateway to or preserver of traditional culture. It is the vehicle of Christianity. If this is a strange colonial paradox it is also at some level a mundane lived reality.

In his series of paintings, The Prayer Language, Monkman creates multi-layered juxtapositions of the Cree syllabary and images of eroticized, grappling male bodies. The surfaces are highly complex, built from many layers of paint of varying degrees of transparency. Some markings have clearly been painted on and then wiped away while half dry, leaving only rough, ghostly outlines. The transparent layers and the changes in mat and gloss create an ambiguous field of activity in which syllabics and bodies seem to often occupy the same space, floating in and out of focus as the eye moves across the canvas. Each painting is titled after a hymn, which can be read as a cheeky sexual double entendre, pushing back hard against Christian sexual morality. For example: When He Cometh, Softly and Tenderly and my personal favourite, Oh for a Thousand Tongues. Monkman's lack of fluency in Cree means that the syllabics become strangely objectified, detached from particular meaning to become at once abstract designs and meta-signs of Christianity. Perhaps more importantly, they are signs of his very inability to understand.

It is unclear whether the homoeroticized body and the Cree language are liberated in this collision of syllabics and bodies, or whether that is even entirely the exercise. Monkman wants us to spend some time in this territory to get a feel for its ambiguities. Are these men fighting or fucking? Or perhaps a bit of both? (This is not the first time that sex and power seem impossible to untangle.) Is the Cree language recoverable for him beyond its Christian appropriation? Perhaps this question does not do justice to what is at stake, which is getting down the complexity of a lived experience. If recovering our language and culture doesn't first involve locating our own experiences, probing the social technologies that have created areas of knowledge and ignorance within us, then all we will ever be doing is recovering the past. There is no future in not attending to the present.

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