

Concealed Geographies

**KC Adams, Jason Baerg, Merritt Johnson,
Cheryl L'Hirondelle, Justine McGrath, Nigit'stil Norbert**

Curated by Julie Nagam and Suzanne Morrisette



Presented by A Space Gallery and imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival

Reception: 5:30 - 7:30 Friday October 19, 2012

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BIOGRAPHIES

KC Adams is a Winnipeg-based artist with a BFA from Concordia University. The focus of her practice has been the investigation of the relationship between nature (the living) and technology (progress). She has had several solo exhibitions, group exhibitions and was included in the PHOTOQUAI: Biennale des images du monde in Paris, France. Her work is in many permanent collections both nationally and internationally. Twenty pieces from the *Cyborg Hybrid* series are in the permanent collection of the National Art Gallery in Ottawa. Adams' installation *Birch Bark Ltd* is in the collection of the Canadian Consulate of Australia, New South Wales.

<http://www.kcadams.net/>

Jason Baerg is a Métis Visual Artist. He has presented at such international art events as the Luminato Festival, the Toronto International Art Fair, and Art Basel Miami. Baerg has given formal artist talks at the University of British Columbia Okanagan, New York City's Parsons School of Design, and the University of Toronto. He has received awards from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council and The Toronto Arts Council. Dedicated to community development, Baerg is a board member for the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective, the National Indigenous Media Arts Coalition and the Independent Media Arts Alliance.

<http://www.jasonbaerg.com/>

Merritt Johnson is a multidisciplinary artist, working across performance, object and image. Her work explores subjection to division, material and physical limitation, clumsiness of being, and the meanness of survival. She earned her BFA from Carnegie Mellon University, and her MFA from Massachusetts College of Art. Johnson is of mixed Indigenous (Mohawk, Blackfoot) and non-Indigenous heritage. She lives and works in Brooklyn, exhibiting and performing in traditional and nontraditional venues throughout North America. Her work was recently included in the anthology *Salish Seas*, published by Talon Books, and *Antennae: the Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*.

<http://www.merrittjohnson.com/>

Cheryl L'Hirondelle (aka Waynohtew, Cheryl Koprek) is an award winning nomadic mixed-blood multi/interdisciplinary artist, singer/songwriter and curator/programmer. Her creative practice is an investigation of the junction of a Cree worldview (nehiyawin) in contemporary time and space. L'Hirondelle was one of the first Aboriginal artists from this land now known as Canada to be invited to present her work at DAK'ART Lab during the 2004 Dakar Biennale for Contemporary African Art in Senegal. L'Hirondelle is a two time recipient of the imagineNATIVE New Media Art Award for her online net.art projects: *treatycard* and *17:TELL and wepinasowina*.

www.cheryllhirondelle.com

Justine McGrath is a Toronto-based artist who recently received a BFA from OCAD University. Her art practices include using found objects and scavenged materials to make wearable sculptures. From these materials she constructs strange beings that combine human, plant, and animal characteristics. Many of her installations deal with representations of her mixed heritage and concepts of hybridity. The result is a series of work that is dark, soft, natural and fantastical. She was recently awarded the Anne Adler Kagan Award.

<http://www.justinemcgrath.com/>

Nigit'stil Norbert is a photo-based artist from Yellowknife and recently received a BFA from OCAD University. Her art practices are rooted in her interest in the convergence of old and new ideas, as a place for considering the formation of new traditions. Her most recent explorations have involved stop-motion photography, unique beaded photographs and focuses on the historical and contemporary representation of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Norbert's work has been exhibited in Canada and the United States. Her piece *Representation* was included the recent exhibition *Decolonize Me*, at the Ottawa Art Gallery.

<http://www.nigitstil.com/>

Suzanne Morrisette is Curatorial Resident at the Thunder Bay Art Gallery with support from the Canada Council for the Arts. She received a BFA from Emily Carr Institute of Art + Design University in Vancouver. In 2011 Morrisette received an MFA from OCAD University in Toronto with a focus in Criticism and Curatorial Practice. Morrisette has contributed to co-curated projects in Canada including: *You Are Here* at the Art Gallery of Ontario and past now at the Graduate Gallery in Toronto which later travelled to the MaLaren Art Centre in Barrie, Ontario.

Julie Nagam PhD. is an Assistant Professor at OCAD University in the Aboriginal Visual Culture program. She has conducted research on site-specific locations on the Indigenous history of Toronto for the Visible Cities Project + Archive in Toronto and Inuit artists in Pangnirtung, Nunavut. Her creative practices include working in mixed media, such as drawing, photography, painting, sound, projections, new and digital media. She has recently published the article, "(Re)Mapping the Colonized Body: The Creative Interventions of Rebecca Belmore in the Cityscape" with UCLA, *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*.

CONCEALED GEOGRAPHIES

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The political ordering of space privileges certain forms of knowledge and, by virtue of this process, suppresses others. This has serious consequences for Indigenous relationships and connections that are formed with the land. These relations have been theorized by scholar Mishuana Goeman, who describes "land as place" where "Indigenous peoples make place by relating both personal and communal experiences and histories to certain locations and landscapes – maintaining these spatial relationships is one of the most important components of identity."¹ For many Indigenous artists, the gesture of "making place" through visual means can open up space for narratives which draw from these personal and communal experiences to show other forms of knowledge: the unearthing of concealed geographies.² Media-based works by Indigenous artists **KC Adams, Jason Baerg, Merritt Johnson, Cheryl L'Hirondelle, Justine McGrath, and Nigit'stil Norbert**, illustrate the ways in which their stories of place are both concealed and are a part of their identity, trauma, desire and worldviews.



Jason Baerg, *Nomadic Bounce*, 2012

Jason Baerg's work *Nomadic Bounce* (2012) relates to this idea through the visual re-ashing of six short videos taken from the artist's travels. Short single-channel videos framed within animated circles spring between the edges of the screen, capturing fleeting moments in time and place that shift and change – mirroring Baerg's own journey. In one clip, a pomegranate sways in the wind in front of the burning Oaxaca sun, another documents a Round Dance in Fort Albany. These snapshots stand in for his memories like documents of his experiences, moving both towards and away from his own fluid definition of home. These places become affixed to, and have a role in shaping, the artist's own identity which we view like an index of his journey through moments that have been impressed upon his sense of self.

Understanding the types of inscriptions apparent in bordered lands can provide telling insight into the events and histories that have transpired at different places in time. **KC Adams's** *Circuit City Toronto* (2012) series depicts aerial views of a sectioned-off Toronto landscape. Adams photographed the series while descending into the metropolitan centre in an airplane in the winter, digitally manipulating the images later.



Cheryl L'Hirondelle, *Medicine Trails*, 2012

Here, the Toronto landscape is reduced to its bare parts: rendered in black and white, the city's make-up of gridded streets and property lines are highlighted. The prints simultaneously resemble the circuitry of a computer motherboard and hearken back to the ancient pathways from which many contemporary routes and major thoroughfares were derived.³

To retrace these pathways, then, is also to reveal the nexus of stories that are located within the land and across vast cross-sections of geographies and time. **Cheryl L'Hirondelle's** *Medicine Trails* (2012) uses QTVR software to translate a particular place along the Humber River in Toronto called Lambton Woods. Here L'Hirondelle found herself amongst a grouping of plants – oak, pine, birch, and other medicines – and animals, including the páhpástêw (woodpecker).⁴ Her work engages these elements and animals through her own singing. Her relationship with this particular place developed over time, revealed through her growing knowledge of the life which co-inhabits that space and the acoustics of the area.

Geographies are as much shaped by the people living within them now as they are by past events. In her installation *Pick Up Sticks* (2012), **Nigit'stil Norbert** reflects on issues of colonization in Canada through an investigation of the ongoing effects of residential schools. Using an assemblage of photography, video and sculptural elements, Norbert recalls her father's experience with residential school through the trauma that she has inherited by way of this history. This work begins to tell a story of a father-daughter relationship that cannot escape the colonial ties between them. Through the juxtaposition of objects, Norbert creates a dialogue around the legacy of a widely-felt event that stems from histories specific to people and places of her home town in Yellowknife.

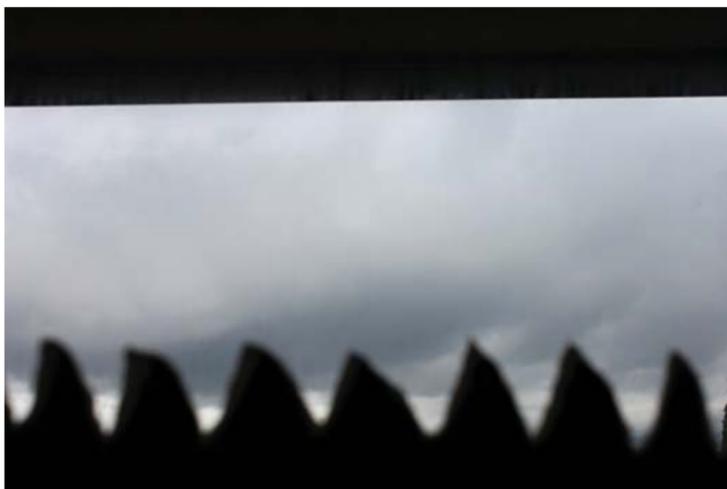
As a Métis artist, **Justine McGrath's** artwork contends with the complexity of identity and of belonging. Her two wearable sculptures – *The Bride* (2010) and *The Protector* (2010) – paired



KC Adams, *Circuit City Toronto III*, 2012

with two corresponding video works of the same title, combine elements of nature and fashion, which obliquely allude to a cultural connection between identity and fashion, mythology, and regalia. Here, her sculptures are animated by bodies such that the setting – a forest conservation area near her home in Waterdown, Ontario – becomes unhomely, fantastical, or even exotic. Her subjects crawl over the landscape, simultaneously protected and costumed, navigating these sites under the influence of that character.

Also traversing a series of landscape images, **Merritt Johnson's** installation, *With all teeth showing* (2012), considers the incongruous relationship between ecological systems and national structures set in place by humans. In the video, Johnson moves across various landscapes shrouded



Merritt Johnson, *With all teeth showing*, 2012

conspicuously by a tarpaulin. By their physical presence, observers are immediately implicated within the artwork's narrative. In relation to the video, visitors stand behind rows of moving teeth that appear to devour the landscape which is visible just beyond. From this perspective, visitors then find themselves inside of the mouth and in the company of (other) partially-eaten objects – the same tarpaulin and swaths of fabric seen in the video. The movements of the jaw and the events that take place on either side of the teeth reflects metaphorically on the biological imperative to consume such that, "the fear of being devoured is a tool for self preservation, and continued survival."⁵

Together, the works in this exhibition call attention to deeply personalized stories of place that have been forged in close connection to the land; they hinge on the interrelationship between subjecthood, and geography. To borrow from the words of the artist and intellectual Robert Houle, this connection contributes to a "new visual language" and it is "a lexicon not just rich in historical forms and images, but one laced with the authentic vocabulary of a shamanic past, of a moment when humanity's indestructible dignity was in harmony with the symmetry of time and place."⁶ As seen and heard in this exhibition, Indigenous identities, desires and worldviews are bound to the current and historical conditions of land and place.

- Suzanne Morrissette & Julie Nagam, Co-Curators



Justine McGrath, *The Protector*, 2010

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Mishuana Goeman, "From Place to Territories and Back Again: Centering Storied Land in the discussion of Indigenous Nation-building," *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies*. Volume 1 Number 1, 2008. pg 24.
- ² Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*. Minneapolis: University Minnesota Press, 2006. McKittrick has coined the term 'concealed geographies' as "non-white, non-European mappings."
- ³ Cheryl L'Hirondelle, "Codetalkers recounting signals of survival," unpublished material with permission of the author.
- ⁴ Cheryl L'Hirondelle, email correspondence, 21 June 2012.
In Cree, the woodpecker is linguistically tied to the place where L'Hirondelle's family reserve, Pahpahstayo.
- ⁵ Merritt Johnson, email correspondence, 28 May 2012.
- ⁶ Robert Houle, "The Spiritual Legacy of the Ancient Ones," *Land, Spirit, Power* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1992), pg.48-49.

front: Nigit'stil Norbert, *Pick Up Sticks*, 2012

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