

Mourning and Mayhem: The work of Adrian Stimson

**Toronto's first solo exhibition
of multidisciplinary artist Adrian Stimson**

Curated by Wanda Nanibush



Buffalo Boy on the Playa, 2004, Black and White Photography, Photo Credit: Happy Grove

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Performance and Reception Friday October 20th from 6 - 7 PM

Mourning and Mayhem: The work of Adrian Stimson is a solo exhibition combining two streams of his multi-disciplinary practice: his experience in residential school and his commitment to the spirit of the buffalo. Buffalo Boy is the persona developed and lived by artist Adrian Stimson. In an interview with Noam Gonick, Stimson explains how “through the character Buffalo Boy, I play back and forth between male and female and sometimes you really just don't know.”¹ Sporting fishnet stockings, a buffalo g-string, corsets, and pearls, Buffalo Boy's transformations and campy shenanigans challenge colonial history as a story of Indigenous disappearance and inferiority. As Stimson points out “one aspect of my art practice is to re-sign history and, in doing so, exorcise the negative energies that exist. I am in the process of coming to terms with my history. It is a process of personal transcendence, telling stories that expose the desperate nature of these experiences, yet demonstrate our common resilience.” Buffalo Boy's alter ego is Shaman Exterminator who inhabits the spirit of the Buffalo here and now as a form of healing and transcendence.

Stimson's installation, photography and performances often enact a reversal of the value system that supports colonialism and the value system that marginalized Indigenous people as uncivilized. The binary hierarchies of clean and dirty, savage and civilized, wealth and poverty, power and working class, control and excess, male and female, heterosexual and



The Original Miss Chief, 2005, Black and White Photography Photo
Credit: Happy Grove

homosexual are sent spinning, calling attention to the way in which these binaries structure our current world. Through processes of mourning and mayhem, Stimson's work destabilizes these value systems with wit, irony, and campy humour while at the same time creating symbols of mourning that mark the trauma of colonial history that we wear in our bodies and communities. The colonial philosophies that divide Indigenous from Settler have led to death and destruction.

The British government through its colonial arm, Canada, put our children into cold, grey institutions (prisons) in order to change them into good little Christians. Many died in these places and the now childless communities they were ripped from were irrevocably disrupted. They were left to deal with intergenerational trauma from hundreds of years of abuse, loss and institutionalization. Just as our lands were stolen and swindled away, so too our peoples had their culture literally beaten out of them and replaced with Christianity and Euro-Canadianism. The land went from something given to Indigenous Nations to be cared for and lived with in harmony to property to be mined by others.

The arrival of the NWMP (later called the RCMP) in southern Alberta in 1873, and the arrival of the military for the Batoche Resistance in 1885, both partially transported by rail, weakened resistance to the reservation system, to bad treaties, and to land theft. Being spiritually bound to the buffalo, Buffalo Boy and his alter ego Shaman Exterminator show audiences how the extermination of the Iniksii (buffalo) was done as an attempt to destroy his people. Coal-fuelled trains travelling across the Great Plains were filled with men who shot at the buffalo from their comfortable seats and left millions of carcasses to rot. They didn't even use the meat. This most sacred and important animal, like their Indigenous relatives, stood in the way of colonial progress and so had to be destroyed. Indigenous people in Canada still struggle to maintain title to their territories and their rights to practice their own culture and run their own affairs according to their own laws and policies. The resource extraction economy continues to threaten the life of the land and the peoples who care for it.

Stimson descends from a family of performers. His Irish great grandfather, Tom E. Deane, was a vaudeville performer. His great grandmother was the opera singer Louie Neville. He was also influenced by the Siksika performance traditions on his father's side. Stimson's Buffalo Boy parodies Buffalo Bill, who made his name killing "Indians" in the American Indian Wars and then took the show on the road with his popular Wild-West shows from 1883 to 1913. Part of the thrill for audiences was the use of real famous Indians like Sitting Bull and Black Elk as well as real horses, buffalo and sharpshooters like Buffalo Bill and Annie Oakley. The re-enactments of recent historical events by those who actually participated in them must have been both thrilling and comforting. The once fearsome Indians are now tamed, transformed from warriors to actors. These displays allowed white audiences to relive and re-invigorate their romantic notions of what Indians were. The performances propagated the idea that the West was officially won.

The Wild-West shows came right after the slaughter of the Buffalo, which was almost complete by 1880. Stimson's Buffalo Boy connects the slaughter and eventual near-extinction of the buffalo to the colonization of Indigenous peoples, both in terms of loss and renewal. "The destruction of the bison as a food source is analogous to the destruction of the people, and the process of reconciling this history while re-constructing both the personal and cultural memes is to infuse contemporary meaning and create a space for Indigenous knowledge and recounting."ⁱⁱ The demise of the buffalo changed the Blackfoot people's cultural balance. It was the time of the reservation system, residential schools, the banning of ceremony and dance, and the assault on Indigenous languages. In 1883-4, the Siksika were starving. They also suffered through small pox and flu epidemics in 1869 and 1870. The lack of a food base and a decimated population did not make for a strong negotiating position when the treaty was signed in 1867.ⁱⁱⁱ

Stimson understands this history intimately. He attended Indian Residential Day School. He was allowed to sleep at home, whereas his father was confined to the school night and day. Betty Bastien writes about how the schools and the death of the bison interrupted the inheritance of language and stories in Blackfoot culture, a history present in Stimson's Buffalo Boy's many incarnations/incantations. The buffalo and Indigenous peoples survived by doing what they have always done: adapt and transform, change and continue. As Stimson writes in his Master's thesis: "Knowing that I am a construction and [a] combination of the colonial project and Indigenous being, I also know that I can play between these conditions and create a reality that is my own."^{iv} The transformative play and overt sexuality of Buffalo Boy's performances queers history and opens up space for a new dialogue on what a 'real Indian' might be. Stimson's camp aesthetic suggests that the colonial past does not completely define the future, and that Indigenous peoples can fashion themselves anew through open negotiation and play with stereotypes and history. The parodying of a colonial stereotype (i.e. the traditional shaman) can destabilize the meaning of shaman within colonial discourse, thus making room for reclaiming its Indigenous contexts and meanings. It is this Indigenizing impulse that saves the work from being a mere reversal of stereotypes which maintains the status quo in the distribution of power. When Buffalo Boy appears as Shaman Exterminator it suggests a more spiritual direction in Stimson's work, where balance, transformation and freedom of expression counter the obsession with authenticity in colonial thought.



Buffalo Boy, 2004, Black and White Photography
Photo Credit: Bradley Laroque



Aggressive Assimilation, 2013, Black and white photography collage

The authority of the chroniclers of the colonial imaginary—such as Edward S. Curtis (photography), George Catlin (painting), Buffalo Bill (entertainment)—is undone in the deployment of camp aesthetics. Camp works through incongruity and contradiction. “Camp functions within a relationship between a performance and a viewer; it is produced through a coded, ironic ‘wink,’ a knowing glance shared between a cognizant perceiver—who can read and appreciate this wink—and a performative agent.”ⁱ By connecting a camp aesthetic to the history of colonial representation, Stimson shows the absurdity of any idea of ‘Indian’ that has been employed in stereotypic discourse. The audience will sometimes become complicit with colonial desires and at other times they are encouraged to be critical of stereotypes. But, above all we are invited to enjoy the experience of being unhinged and learn to laugh at ourselves. Stimson’s agency as the performer is in deciding to play an identity or mix and match stereotypes and histories. The strategies of mimicry, parody and masquerade in camp aesthetics allow for a humorous but unsettling window into the relationship of sex and conquest, desire and colonial representation.

In Stimson’s work he often will use real materials like buffalo hide or the remnants of the actual residential school that he attended in order to ground his camp aesthetic in an actual experience or material reality. This is what marks his difference from other post modern aesthetics and why his work has to oscillate between mourning and mayhem. He constantly reminds us that we are talking about living beings, communities and spiritual realms. We cannot just make up a future without attending to the past in an honest unwavering examination. It is in the performance of play and the creation of spaces of mourning, in the creation of fictions and the maintenance of alternative histories, in the letting go and holding on to colonial trauma, and the engagement with the sacred and sacrilegious that separates Stimson’s from the rest as a radical agent of change and not simply a performer of postmodern puns.

Wanda Nanibush, Curator

ⁱ “Contempo Abo: Two spirit in aboriginal culture”. Noam Gonick interviews Kent Monkman and Adrian Stimson *Queer. Canadian Dimensions*, Volume 43, Issue 4: July/August 2009. <https://canadiandimension.com/articles/view/contempo-abo>

ⁱⁱ Stimson, Adrian. “Suffer Little Children.” *West Coast Line*. 46.2 (Summer 2012): 68-78. P. 74.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bastien, Betty. *Blackfoot: Ways of Knowing: The Worldview of the Siksikaitisipi*. Jürgen W. Kremer, ed. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2004. P. 19-22.

^{iv} Stimson, Adrian. *Buffalo Boy’s Heart On: Buffalo Boy’s 100 Years of Wearing His Heart On His Sleeve*. MFA thesis. Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan, 2005:54. <<http://library2.usask.ca/theses/available/etd-12202005-115924/unrestricted/BBfinaldocopy.pdf>>

^v Piggford, George. “‘Who’s That Girl?’ Annie Lennox, Woolf’s Orlando, and Female Camp Androgyny.” *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*. Fabio Cleto, ed. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999. P. 298.

The essay is adapted from an earlier publication in “The life and times of Buffalo Boy” Published by Truck Contemporary Art in Calgary, 2014.

BIOGRAPHIES

Adrian Stimson is a member of the Siksika (Blackfoot) Nation. He has a BFA with distinction from the Alberta College of Art and Design and MFA from the University of Saskatchewan. Stimson is a multidisciplinary artist who has exhibited nationally and internationally.

His paintings are primarily monochromatic and often depict bison in imagined landscapes; they are melancholic, memorializing, and sometimes whimsical and they evoke ideas of cultural fragility, resilience and nostalgia. The British Museum recently acquired two of his paintings for their North American Indigenous collection.

Stimson's performance art looks at identity construction, specifically the hybridization of the Indian, the cowboy, the shaman and Two Spirit being. *Buffalo Boy* and *The Shaman Exterminator* are two reoccurring personas. He is known for putting his body under stress: in *White Shame Re-worked*, he pierced his chest 7 times, recreating a performance originally done by Ahasiw-Muskegon Iskew. He crawled across the desert in 110 degree heat for *What about the Red Man?* during Burning Man's *The Green Man* and recently dug a *TRENCH* in a five-day durational performance that lasted from sunrise to sunset.

His installation work primarily examines the residential school experience. Stimson attended three residential schools in his life. He has used the material culture from Old Sun residential school on his nation to create works that speak to genocide, loss and resilience.

Stimson's photography includes collodion wet plate portraits, performance dioramas and war depictions.

His sculpture work has been primarily collaborative; he has worked with relatives of murdered and missing women to create *Bison Sentinels* and with the Whitecap Dakota Nation to create *Spirit of Alliance* a monument to the war of 1812. He was a participant in the Canadian Forces Artist Program, which sent him to Afghanistan.

He was awarded the *Blackfoot Visual Arts Award* in 2009, the *Queen Elizabeth II Golden Jubilee Medal* in 2003, the *Alberta Centennial Medal* in 2005 and the *REVEAL Indigenous Arts Award* from the Hnatyshyn Foundation.

Wanda Nanibush is an Anishinaabe-kwe curator, image and word warrior, and community organizer from Beausoliel First Nation. Currently she is assistant curator of Canadian and Indigenous Art at the AGO. She has a masters in visual studies from the University of Toronto where she has taught graduate courses on Indigenous art, history and politics. Her curatorial credits include the exhibitions *Toronto: Tributes + Tributaries*, 1971-1989 (Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Sept. 2016 - May 2017), *Sovereign Acts II* (Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Ottawa, Jan. - April 2017), *The Fifth World* (Mendel Art Gallery, April 3 to June 7, 2015 touring) and the award-winning *KWE: The work of Rebecca Belmore* (Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Toronto, May - August 2014).

Nanibush has worked with many other arts institutions and initiatives over the past two decades, serving in a wide range of capacities from programmer and festival coordinator to Aboriginal arts officer and executive director. Arts organizations she has worked with include imagineNATIVE, LIFT, Optic Nerve Film Festival, Reframe Film Festival, the Ontario Arts Council, Aboriginal Curatorial Collective, and the Association for Native Development in the Performing & Visual Arts (ANDPVA). She was the 2013/14 Dame Nita Barrow Distinguished Visitor at the University of Toronto.

Nanibush's publications include contributions to the books: *Time, Temporality and Violence in International Relations: (De)fatalizing the Present, Forging Radical Alternatives*, Routledge; *Women in a Globalizing World: Equality, Development, Diversity and Peace* and *This is an Honour Song: Twenty Years since the Blockades*. She co-edited *Women and Water*. Canadian Women's Studies Journal; *The Winter We Danced: #Idle No More Anthology*, Arp Press; York University's *InTensions* journal on *The Resurgence of Indigenous Women's Knowledge and Resistance in Relation to Land and Territoriality*, as well as over 15 catalogue essays on artists. She is currently completing two films and her first book, titled *Violence No More: The Rise of Indigenous Women*.



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