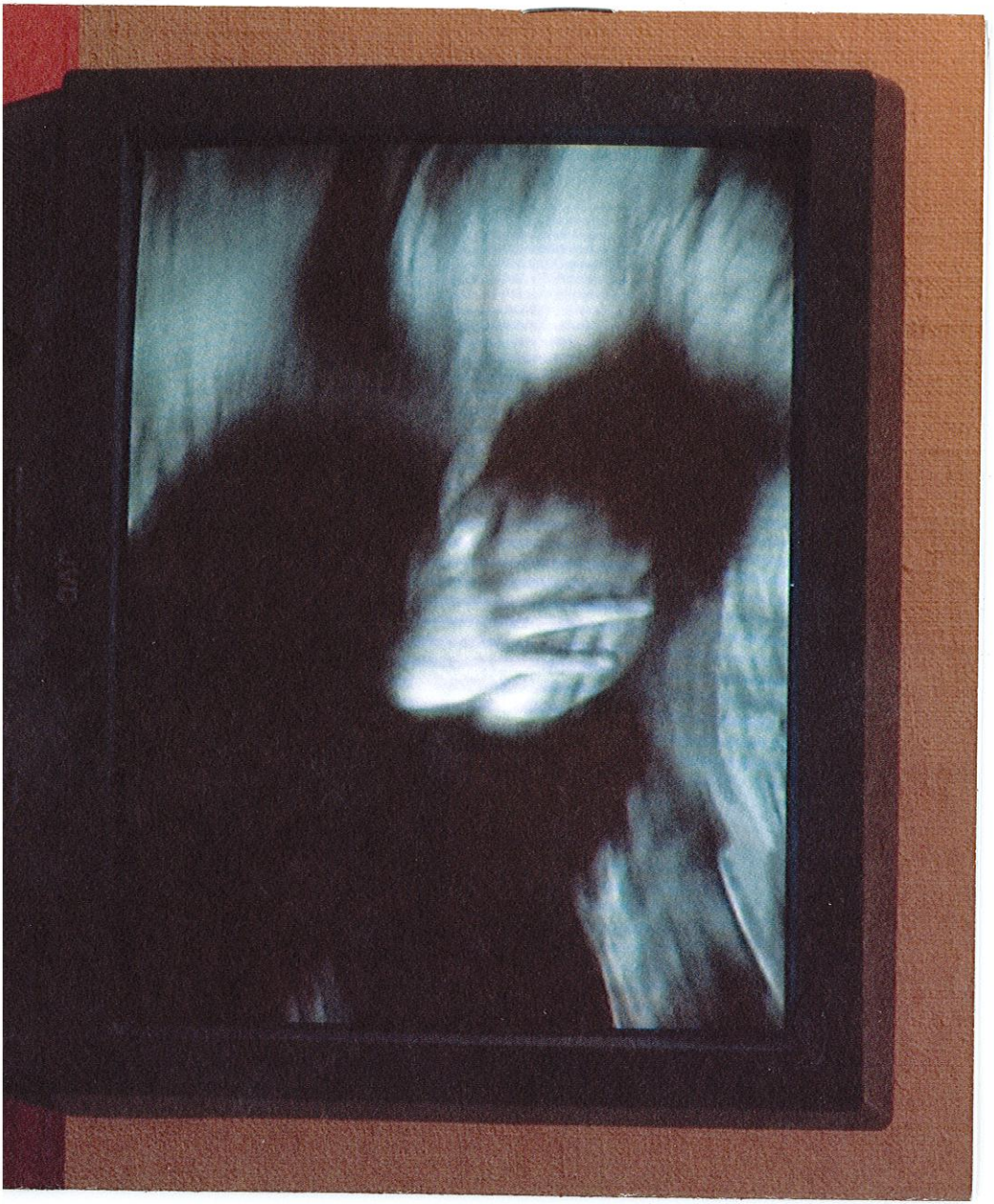


"To be an Aboriginal person, to identify with an indigenous heritage in these late colonial times, requires a life of reflection, critique, persistence and struggle."

– Gerald McMaster and Lee-Ann Martin, *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives* – (Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1992)

Contested Histories

Michel Boutin

Ruth Cuthand

John Henry Fine Day

Valerie Kinistino

Neal McLeod

Sharon Lee Pelletier

Sheila Orr

Gabriel Yahyahkeekoot

Curated by David Garneau

Art Gallery of Regina
June 29 to August 26, 2005

Cover: Gabriel Yahyahkeekoot, *'MAYASITIW'* 2004-2005

Neal McLeod, *The Queen City makes bones of old memories*, 2005

Sharon Lee Pelletier, *Trickery of the Trade*, 2005

John Henry Fine Day, *Colt*, 2005

INTRODUCTION

Contested Histories is a collaboration between Sâkêwêwak Artists' Collective and the Art Gallery of Regina in honor of Saskatchewan's 100th Anniversary. A Centennial Celebration is a time of homecoming, community building and reflection. Naturally, most of the reflections are celebratory as we commemorate our collective achievements and the province's rich history. These events and activities help articulate who we are, to others and ourselves. It is also important in this season of storytelling and celebration to remember some of our more complex and unresolved stories as well. While we honor those who arrived since 1905, we should not forget about the impact of those arrivals, or about those who were here long before.

This exhibition, curated by David Garneau with the assistance of Janell Ranae Rempel, features work by First Nations and Métis artists that expresses some of the Aboriginal histories of this region. The paintings, sculpture, and video in this show reflect on the colonial period and its effects thorough a contemporary lens. The works are individual efforts of commemoration, rebuttal, healing, and interpretation. All try to make sense of our colonial histories and our attempts to adapt to new, inherited realities.

We would like to thank the curator for bringing this insightful work to the public's attention. We would also like to thank the artists for their cooperation and participation in this project.

This show was made possible through the generous support of **SaskTel**, **Saskatchewan Culture**, **Youth & Recreation and the Community Initiatives Fund**, and the **Department of Canadian Heritage through the Alberta-Saskatchewan Centennial Initiative**, for which we are tremendously grateful.

Karen Schoonover,
Director/Curator,
Art Gallery of Regina

Orenda Yuzicapi,
Program Manager,
Sâkêwêwak Artists' Collective

Contested Histories

"To be an Aboriginal person, to identify with an indigenous heritage in these late colonial times, requires a life of reflection, critique, persistence and struggle."

These are the first words from the essay that accompanies Gerald McMaster and Lee-Ann Martin's groundbreaking exhibition, *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives*, at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (1992). For these authors, Aboriginality is not a matter of DNA alone but is an evolving, creative awareness embodied in a set of practices. Aboriginality is not only an inheritance but also a continuous, thoughtful and inventive enterprise, a self-making that exceeds the forces of colonization. And artists are at the forefront of this struggle. The paintings, photographs, sculptures and video in *Contested Histories* are reflections on new ways of Being on ancient ground.

There may have been an Edenic, pre-contact age when people were themselves. But in our present moment, for Aboriginal people to be themselves—or perhaps to discover, invent and negotiate their selves—takes the special effort hinted at by McMaster and Martin. And the stakes are high. Failure to succeed at this hard work means living the limited descriptions written by others, and mainstream scripts for indigenous peoples the world over tend not to be positive.

This problem is palpable in **Gabriel Yahyahkeekoot**'s (Regina) video *MAYASITIW*. In much of his artistic production, Gabriel offers unflinching glimpses into sensational and tragic aspects of young urban Indian life. But like the best classical African American rap music (2pac) he combines macho posturing with poetic soliloquies that reveal the depth of thought and feeling that burns beneath a tough exterior.

Yahyahkeekoot's characters have a love/hate relationship with their place in the world. Healthy, young Aboriginal men are feared and villainized by the mainstream. As a coping strategy, some have looked south and adapted the strategies of young African American men, via popular culture, to come up with a thuggish hip-hop posture (or actuality). This pose attempts to convert negative social projections into a form of personal and collective (posse) power. You can see cartoonish versions of this in the locally produced *Moccasin Flats*. It is a strategy that may be intermittently empowering but it doesn't age well. The 'second act' of fame and fortune as rapper (the notorious B.I.G., 50 Cent, etc.) isn't a script available for every bad boy. And when you are a sensitive and intelligent person like Yahyahkeekoot, the pressing problem as you get older is, 'if not this, what?' and this unresolved but earnest struggle is one of the themes of *MAYASITIW*.

Yahyahkeekoot's anti-heroes are disillusioned—or, rather, are awakening to the illusions around them—but don't quite know how to get beyond their destructive behaviour. *Mayasitiw* is Cree for bad or ugly. Does his lead character fully realize that his path has been bad or ugly, or, is he so distorted by societal projection (he is told that he is bad and ugly enough times that he believes it?) that he cannot escape enacting it? Viewers are caught between empathy and anger. While thoughtful and sympathetic, the character is also volatile—the scene of domestic violence is particularly disturbing. And I think this is just what the artist intends. He shows that there are no easy answers to these complex situations, but consciousness is a start. The story does not have a comforting uplift. Rather than conclude the video with evidence that things are going to work out, we are left to wonder what will happen next.

John Henry Fine Day (Regina) is also a young Aboriginal man, but his work takes a decided turn away from popular urban culture and out into the realms of nature and the metaphysical. Physically and temperamentally an unlikely candidate for the violent posse script, John Henry creates animistic beings that hover in an ontological space between his own body, animals and ancestors. I don't know if they are properly works of art. That designation seems too weak a category for beings that do all that these are designed to do.

In a visually noisy gallery full of works stuffed with meaning, John Henry's *Colt* looks fugitive and accidental. It is a solitary, silent presence that absorbs more attention than it demands. It is an uncanny thing both toy-like and almost real. While small and inviting touch, it is not a plush plaything but a miniature of the real thing made of that real thing's parts. The newborn is made of white hide evenly stitched together with sinew. It has a horsehair mane and tail. Half reclining, the front legs are folded one over the other under its slightly lowered head and the back legs angle out to one side. Brass cones gather the mane into small bunches.

Created in the months following transplant surgery to treat cancer, John Henry recognizes *Colt* as a symbol of rebirth and transformation. Dead animal skin, sinew and hair are reformed into a new animal, a new life. "The horse is put back together with careful stitch work like a doctor would use to lovingly stitch up a patient" (artist statement). The colt is so new, so young, that its legs are too weak to support its body. It must rest to gather strength to stand, walk and run. "When the horse is used in Indian art it is often representative of a journey. In my case, it's a personal journey, a healing journey" (from personal correspondence with the artist, June 2005). After completing the sculpture, John Henry visited his grandmother on the reserve. She had a vision of a herd of running horses led by a white one. She felt that this horse was a helper. Perhaps in making this sculpture John Henry is shaping the help he needs to transform death and dying into life and healing.

Sharon Lee Pelletier's (Regina) recent performances also deal with healing; they combine the best of the traditional culture with the settler world to seek a space between these two cultures. *Trickery of the Trade* is a small installation that looks like child's play. Spread out on a Hudson Bay blanket draped over a coffee table are numerous plastic toys and other objects. The viewer is invited to look for narratives in the arrangements that evoke colonial histories and relationships.

The toys and other things are divided into three sections: a farm scene; a medicine wheel made of stones and a battle between toy soldiers and Indians; and a collection of trade items/commodities. Attached to the sides of the blanket are additional clues to the artist's game: Saskatchewan and Canadian flag pins; a map; toy handcuffs, with a Regina logo card fitted into one of the cuffs; a ledger drawing; a $5 bill; a braid of hair; a small drum. Bags of flour, sugar, containers of baking powder and evaporated milk, teabags, and a Bible sit on the floor alongside the table.

The conceit is that a child has arranged these things into a complex narrative web that reflects her inherited history. She must be Aboriginal and very smart. The trove is a mnemonic device. Each item is meant to elicit part of Saskatchewan's history from an Aboriginal point of view. We have the treaties and their legacy evoked by the $5 bill. The disproportionate number of incarcerated First Nation and Aboriginal people are suggested by the handcuffs—and perhaps Neil Stonechild's nose broken by handcuffs(?). The farm, fence and domesticated animals signify the arrival of settlers. Trade brought mixed blessings, conveniences, new food and

tools, but also disease, residential schools and reserves. Rather than preaching, Pelletier lays out the evidence so we make sense with what we can. We might miss some connections but cannot miss the big picture. Her approach is gentle but firm.

Valerie Kinistino and Sheila Orr have similar strategies for telling stories through homey means and gently coaxed found objects. **Sheila Orr** (Regina) has a wicked sense of humour tempered by a love of craft and people. She often combines fine traditional craft with conceptual art. For the politically minded, her *Modern Day Indian Warrior Club,* a golf club decorated with beadwork, might conjure references to the Oka crisis of 1990—the Quebec village attempted to expand a golf course onto traditional Kanesatake Mohawk land resulting in a violent conflict. Or, the club might refer to the slow increase in middle-class Aboriginals. In either case, the beading transforms a mainstream object into a cultural one.

As with most traditional cultures, family is at the center of Aboriginal society. And an important challenge for evolving contemporary Aboriginal identities is the puzzle of how to develop as an individual without abandoning family. *Indian & Inuit Kichis in the Cupboard* is Orr's touchstone, a memory cabinet to ground her experience. "The kichis piece has tear drop shaped beadwork on caribou hide which is a keepsake I made for my (late) mother. It contains my children's baby hair. I sent it to her to keep by her bed, as I was way out here and she was in Chisasibi, at the time she had cancer. The beads are smaller than the regular size beads, and are called charlottes cut beads. The floral pattern is hers and are [sic] designed for smaller finer work" (artist statement). The function of *Cupboard,* like Fine Day's *Colt,* exceeds conventional art. It is a memory device that is also meant to heal. It is a heart-breaking personal object that, when shared with the public, allows a deeper sense of these lives as they are lived.

When we [David and Janell] visited **Valerie Kinistino**'s (Regina) studio, we noticed a shell with burnt sweet grass sitting in front of her three-panel collage *From There to Here and Back Again.* We were privileged to see the work at its home and worried that it might not resonate in quite the same way in the gallery. Like Orr's *Cupboard* and Fine Day's *Colt* it is a personal object shared in order that a more complete and personal picture of one woman's life and its historical context may develop in the viewer's mind.

The title, *From There to Here and Back Again* indicates a journey that has come full circle. Kinistino, a grandmother, is in a reflective mood and takes on nothing so modest as her life, family and the larger history that surrounds them. The triptych is made of three salvaged wood panels, painted blue, with a red, a yellow, a green and a black line running parallel to each other like a business graph. The red, yellow and green lines end on the right in arrowheads that direct the eye back to the start, while the black line continues back along the top of the panels to the beginning. Also attached to the panels are: bundles of red willow sticks and cedar boughs; porcupine quills; moose antlers; a computer memory card; megas shells; a small pile of nails, beads and Treaty Four Soil; and images of the artist's grandparents.

Kinistino explains that the panels correspond to three historic time periods: Pre-Contact, Contact and Post-Contact. The first section conveys a time of harmony between people, animals and the earth, all in their place "in the stream of life." The three lines represent timelines, lifelines, a heartbeat (as imaged by a heart monitor machine), and the coloured stripes on a Hudson's Bay blanket. The peak in the lines, in the second section, marks the point when Aboriginal culture, the buffalo

population and the fur trade were at their height. The following low point corresponds with the coming of the railroad, small pox, the near extinction of the buffalo, forced assimilation and the resulting cultural and social catastrophe. In the third panel, the lines pass a computer memory board. This pun links the past and present. Kinistino indicates that the memory board suggests the hope that history and memory are not lost but, the artist explains, are embedded in the genes of everyone. Finally, there is a steel mirror that is meant to implicate the viewer into the story. It indicates that the piece is a reflection and that these histories continue to live on in the viewer.

Over the past thirty years, Aboriginal artists have engaged in various missions. Many have shared their traditional arts and stories, in part, in an effort to make a living in the market economy while maintaining and extending their culture. Embedded in this practice is the additional hope that by sharing and having these signs of cultural meaning recognized by the mainstream their makers might also secure recognition as human beings. Some more politically minded artists have tried to educate the dominant culture. But many are tiring of being history teachers and professional "Indians."

There is a growing *avant-garde* of First Nations and Métis artists who are developing a third path. Their works include traditional methods, meanings, ways of knowing and/or histories but they are updated to address, for example, contemporary urban realities. And, while they may include teachings, they are not as didactic or ironic as the political art of the recent past. They tend to be more evocative, nuanced, complex and open-ended so that viewers are implicated (as with Kinistino's mirror). These works and practices are designed not to restore the past but engage history and tradition in the service of present needs.

There is a somewhat related cultural evolutionary example in the history of slave narratives. African Americans addressed the early slave narratives to their white masters in hopes of stirring their consciences and leading to the abolition of slavery, and, later to voting and other human rights. Even apart from their horrific histories, the fact of a literate and intelligent author, who happened to be Black and a former slave, ought, it was hoped, to be evidence enough of a humanity that deserved equality. As one version of oppression waned, slave narratives and later, novels, were increasingly addressed to Black Americans as well as Whites. These texts, reaching their height in the Harlem Renaissance, are complex and self-conscious guidebooks to post-colonial identities. It is said that we are in the midst of an Aboriginal Renaissance.

Poet, professor and painter, among so many other things, **Neal McLeod** (Regina) is one of Saskatchewan's young cultural leaders. A Cree speaker and oral historian, Neal verses himself in the past in order to bring this valuable knowledge forward to the next generations. He engages history without losing himself in it. The titles of his paintings are short poems that allude to this connection between past and present: *Grandfathers wake sleeping stories hidden in city bones*, and *The Queen City makes bones of old memories*. McLeod awakens the timeless mystery and knowledge hidden beneath the veneer of asphalt and settler society.

McLeod uses an expressionistic painting style because it allows him to work intuitively to uncover visual stories that, because they are fluid, are open to interpretation but remain within suggestive narratives. Grandfathers hover in the background like sentinels, not only observing but also making their demands felt. McLeod tells me that the fallen figure in the center of *Grandfathers wake* is a self-

portrait. A helper sent by the grandfathers comes to his aid. Is this a possible 'second act' for Yahyahkeekoot's young men, salvation by return to the culture? A river gushes from the mouth of a huge head to the left. The water with its curling eddies reminds me of da Vinci's river and wind drawings, especially his late deluge drawings where whole towns are washed away while Leonardo sketches from a promontory—he observes the chaos but is not fully apart from it. McLeod explains that there is for him a metaphoric relationship between water and stories. It seems that his oral story mining has resulted in an overwhelming gush that brings with it great responsibility. But if these paintings are open to interpretation, I am reminded of the visions/wishes of some elders that some day the buffalo will return and the settlers will leave. Is this a cleansing flood?

Most characteristically, these new, third path practices, while confident and powerful, tend to be unsettled and unsettling. They are not illustrations but experiments. They present or record a (self) consciousness that is not just reiterating oppressive and repressed facts but exposing the process of coming to terms with and becoming oneself. This is certainly true of McLeod's turbulent images.

Perhaps it is in performance art that Aboriginal artists are making the most astonishing breakthroughs and producing works of art that are recognized not only as great 'Indian' art, but great art generally. I am especially thinking of the recent gut-wrenching performance art works of Rebecca Bellmore and Reona Brass that can be read as personal statements, as having "aboriginal' content, but, increasingly, as resonant with collective human experience. In these works we are not just witness to personal identity in formation and expression, or only the concerns of a specific culture, but an active empathy with all of humanity.

Ruth Cuthand's (Saskatoon) photographs perform this new path. They are plays on truth-telling in photographs. They can be read as responses to those photographs of Aboriginal people of a century or so ago, studio confections that 'dressed' aboriginal people from one tribe in the dress/costumes of others for the delight of non-native eyes.

At the turn of the millennium Ruth Cuthand did a series of portraits where she asked people to imagine what life would be like a century from now. In each case, the participant gets to ham it up with a shiny dollar store 'Indian' headdress. What I like best about these pieces, aside from people having fun, is the range of responses. There are the hopeful and predictable nods to self-government. But there is also the photograph of an older man accompanied by the words: "By the end of the 21st century Indians, like all people, will be subjects of China, the dominant world power." When I first saw this picture I thought, "paranoia knows no racial divide." But, later, I wondered if this were a premonition. After all, things change and that is a possible future. If not a premonition, it is a thought that puts things in an unsettled perspective.

It is a very exciting time for Métis artists. We are starting to emerge with more confident voices. Our unique place between and among First Nations and settler cultural identities makes this negotiation complex. **Michel Boutin** (Prince Albert) has recently embraced his Métis heritage and is searching for visual forms to negotiate this inbetweeness. "For most of my life I have considered myself a Fransaskois (a Francophone born in Saskatchewan). French was my first language but was suppressed at an early age due to assimilation and ignorance. To this day I feel self conscious speaking French....All of my life I have felt myself to be outside the dominant culture and unaccepted by my own but I have always felt comfortable

and accepted by Aboriginal peoples, especially those of mixed ancestry" (from Boutin's artist statement).

In his previous works, Boutin has not been known for timidity, but for boldness even to the point of visual aggression. In both form and content, he is uncompromising. His medium is enamel paint. It is an unforgiving and difficult material that dries very quickly, making blending and nuance difficult. Boutin has forced this modern industrial material to work for him like oil paint.

Uni en le Sang (United in Blood) is densely packed: echoing the red power salute, a clenched fist rises in the center of the painting. The forearm sports black tattoos: a *fleur de lis*, feathers, cross, and Métis infinity symbol. In the background, an orange sun casts wavy white rays to the four directions and bright yellow letters on the border spell out: "Vive les Métis," "Vive les Canadiens," "Uni en le sang," and "pour tout temps." Boutin explains: Le Canadiens [Acadians] and the Métis are bonded by blood. Many if not most of the French Canadien fur traders who arrived in the west and began the Métis nation were already of mixed ancestry....My great, great grandfather was up rooted from his land in Quebec by the introduction of the Reserve system and settled in Saskatchewan in what was then known as the Assiniboia region, traditional Métis land."

Boutin's paintings combine French, First Nation and Métis historical symbolism as a means of identifying his mixed lineage. It is a means of locating himself and publicly declaring that location. For many, contemporary Métisness is particularly fluid, it means different things in different places—and nothing in some places. It is up to this generation of artists to develop contemporary Métis identities rooted in history, but not confined there.

The sentence I began this essay with came from Gerald McMaster and Lee-Ann Martin's exhibition *Indigena* which coincided with the 500th anniversary of colonization. *Contested Histories* coincides with the centenary celebrations of Saskatchewan. Just as McMaster and Martin conclude with the sentiment—"This is the year to celebrate, but let us be clear about what we are celebrating for the right reasons"—so too should we. This is a time of homecoming, community building and reflection. Most of our reflections will be celebratory. We rightfully commemorate our collective achievements. These events and storytelling help articulate who we are, to others and ourselves. But, it is important that some of our more complex and unresolved stories are not pushed into the background. There were people here before 1905. While we honour those who arrived since then, we ought not forget about the costs of those arrivals, or forget about those who were here long before.

Commemorations appear to be about the past, but they are really about grounding the future. The stories we tell form the selves we want to be. We learn from our trials as well as from our victories. While the artists in this exhibition reflect on the past they do so from a sense of hope and future. I hope you can see in these works not only the laments but also people struggling to build themselves and the future.

David Garneau, Guest Curator
with Janell Ranae Rempel

June 2005

Contested Histories

List of Works:

Michel Boutin

Le Père, le Fis et le Saint-Esprit, 2004-2005, enamel on canvas, 125.7 x 30.5 cm (whole triptych); 39.4 x 26.7 cm (each ptg. individually)

Uni en le Sang (United in Blood), 2004, enamel on wood, 24.1 x 43.2 cm

Flag for the Signifiers, 2005, enamel and objects on canvas on wood, 91.4 x 121.9 cm

Ruth Cuthand

Three images from the series (one reproduced in catalogue):

Indian Portraits: Early 21st Century, 2000-2002, digital prints, 78.7 x 106.7 cm

John Henry Fine Day

Colt, 2005, rawhide, horse hair, sinew, brass, 30.5 x 66.0 x 35.6 cm

Valerie Kinistino

From there to here and back again, 2005, mixed media collage (wood, acrylic paint, cedar, nails, megas shells, beads, copper, Treaty Four soil, steel mirror panel, computer memory board, photographs), 231.1 x 100.3 cm (total of all 3 panels)

Neal McLeod

Grandfathers wake sleeping stories hidden in city bones, 2005, oil on canvas, 153.5 x 270.0 cm

The Queen City makes bones of old memories, 2005, oil and acrylic on plywood, 121.8 x 183.2 cm

Sheila Orr

Indian & Inuit Kichis in the Cupboard, 1994, multi-media mini-installation relief, 30.5 x 33.0 x 7.6 cm,

Framed, 2005, porcupine quills, canvas, fabric, beads, bullet casing, wooden frame, 32.8 x 43.0 cm

Modern Day Indian Warrior Club , 2005, golf club, beads, 111.0 x 9.0 x 6.7 cm

Sharon Lee Pelletier

Trickery of the Trade, 2005, multi-media sculpture (table, Hudson Bay blanket, various toys, household consumables, glass, soil, jewelry, stones, etc.), variable dimensions

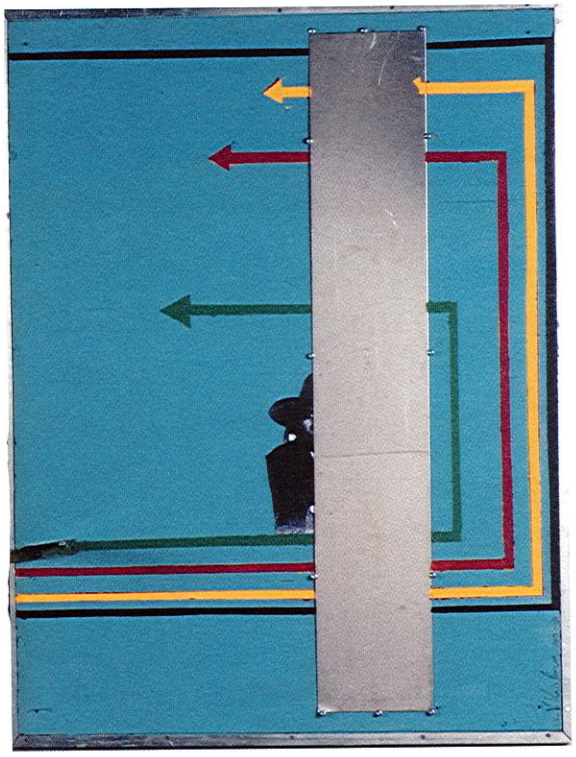
Gabriel Yahyahkeekoot

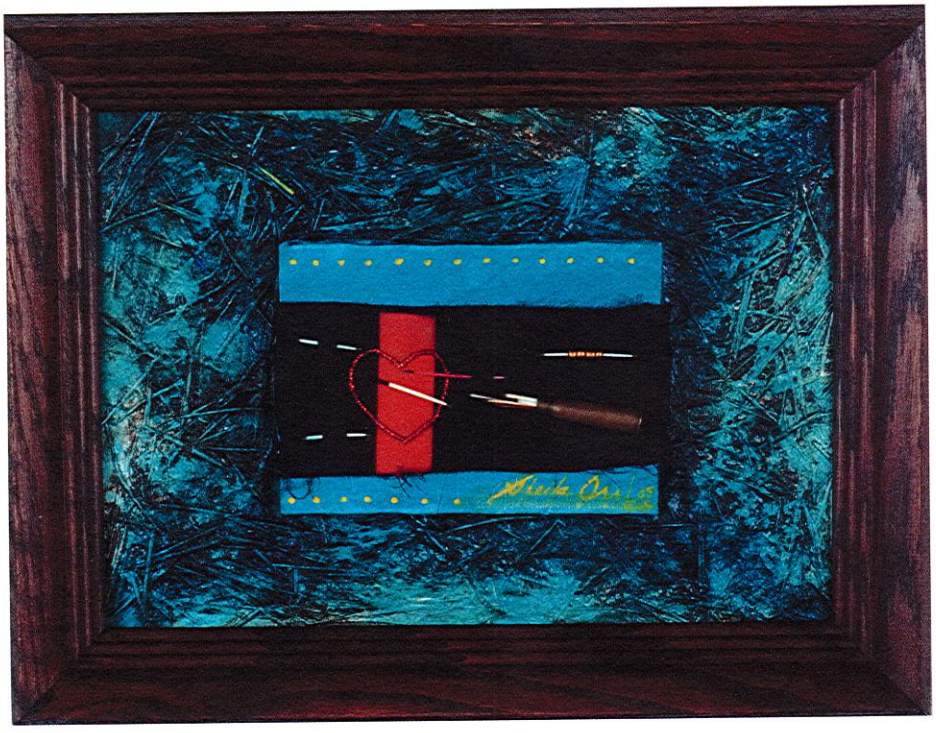
MAYASITIW, 2004-2005, DVD, 8 mins., 54 secs

Tiltles in grey are reproduced in catalogue

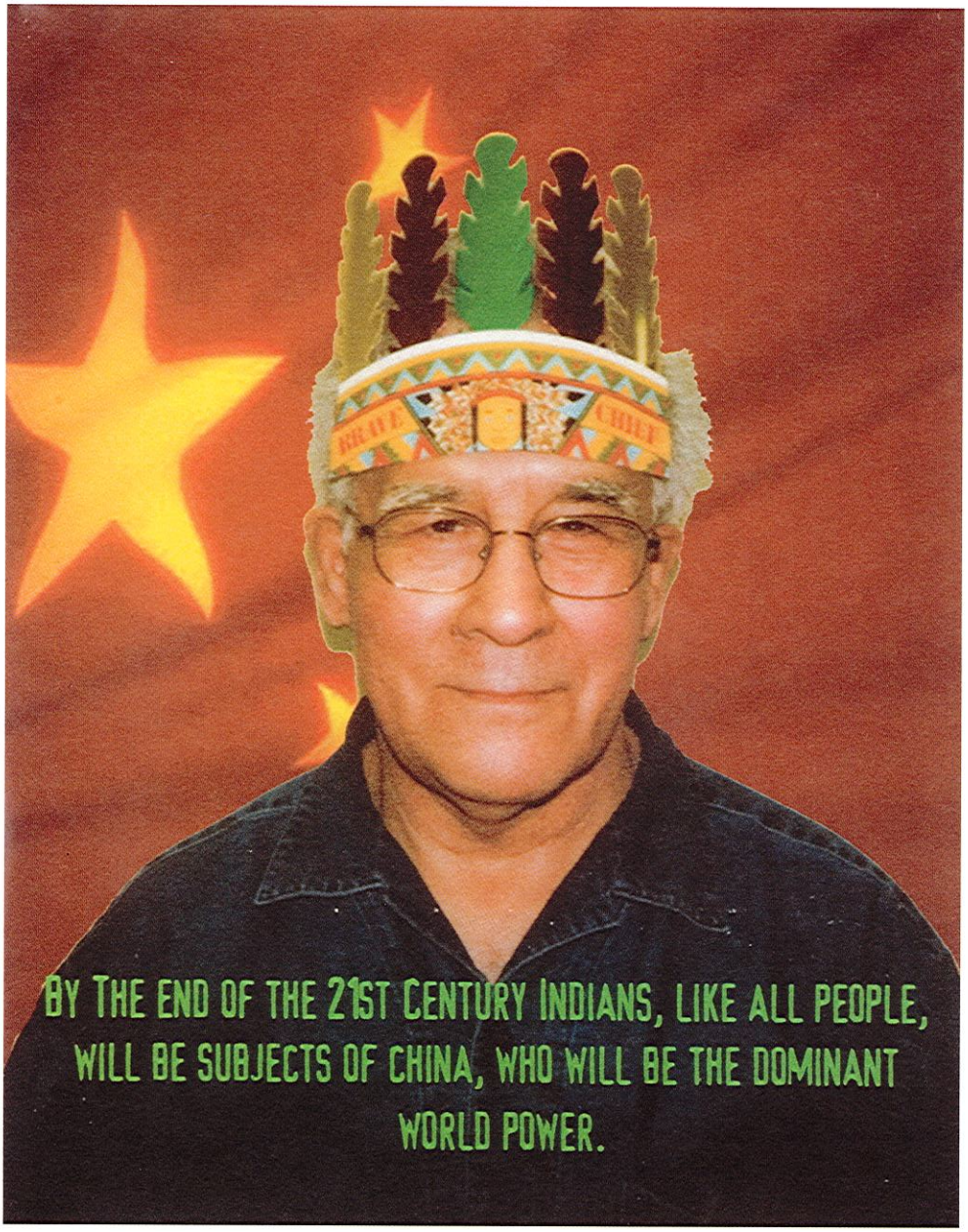
Valerie Kinistino, *From there to here and back again*, 2005

Michel Boutin, *Flag for the Signifiers* 2005





Sheila Orr, *Framed*, 2005



Ruth Cuthand, from the series: *Indian Portraits: Early 21st Century*, 2000-2002

ART GALLERY OF REGINA

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