



Amy Malbeuf tattoo by Dion Kaszas, 2015
(photograph provided by Amy Malbeuf)

Beading is political, whether it's simply the personal contribution to an age-old continuum or consciously reworking loaded imagery. I really do see beading as an act of silent resistance.

—Nadia Myre, Algonquin artist

The letters tattooed across Amy Malbeuf's knuckles spell the phrase "TUFT LIFE," an expression of her commitment to boldly take the northern practice of caribou hair tufting into new forms and places. Nadia Myre engaged over two hundred

people in beading over the words of Canada's Indian Act. Shan Goshorn's baskets are visual calls to action, as she deftly weaves images and text to expose and commemorate critical histories. Ruth Cuthand beads pathogens and black mold to bring attention to grim historical and contemporary health conditions in First Nations communities. Stepping far beyond the conventional debates of traditional arts as craft or fine art, these artists are among a growing movement of artists reclaiming the materials of their grandmothers, reinvigorating traditional practices, and moving them from the past into the future.

The majority of these artists are women, but is there an aesthetic relationship with the larger body of work by feminist artists who have also reclaimed women's practices in contemporary work? The Canadian artist Joyce Wieland, who did quilt collaborations with her sister Joan, starting in 1968 with *Reason over Passion*, and Judy Chicago (*The Dinner Party*, 1979) were doing politically charged work much earlier. I would argue, due to different historical trajectories and the traumatic experience of colonialism, that Indigenous women's reclamation has been a parallel development, rather than a branch or offshoot. These are sovereign practices rooted in distinct histories, but they became mothballed in museums, associated only with the past—signifying a kind of cultural death. Indigenous artists have had to assert artistic agency in the face of harsh and controlling government policies and acute economic pressure.

Return to Mastery

Across North America, artists working in traditional media have been part of both continuous and broken "lines of descent" as the knowledge for gathering and processing materials, techniques, and patterns has survived and transformed over generations.¹ The simple act of retaining and protecting knowledge was political—the materials themselves often believed to be living and potent, and the gestures of weaving and stitching deeply personal and meditative. Porcupine quills, hide, and clay are ancient materials, while beads and wool, now considered traditional, were introduced through early trade.² Replacing ancient forms, old beliefs were transferred onto new objects.

While traditional materials are similar across the continent, the historical trajectories of arts practices in Canada and the United States differ. The sharpest differences were the early development of an American market that encouraged collecting and connoisseurship, and different federal policies, particularly the "culture ban" instituted in Canada through the Indian Act, the overarching federal legislation that controls and defines those who live under its jurisdiction. Declaring ceremonial practices illegal resulted in the seizure and confiscation of

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Tuft Life: Stitching Sovereignty in Contemporary Indigenous Art

The epigraph quotes Nadia Myre from James Martin, "Nadia Myre's Art Project Is Already at the McCord," *Concordia's Thursday Report*, June 6, 2002, at http://ctr.concordia.ca/2001-02/June_6/08-Myre/index.shtml, as of August 25, 2016.

1. The phrase is borrowed from Gerald McMaster's seminal article "Tenuous Lines of Descent: Indian Arts and Crafts of the Reservation Period," *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 9, no. 2 (1989): 205–36.
2. Beads, needles, and scissors were available on the coast of Hudson Bay by the late seventeenth century, arriving on the northern plains by the 1830s. See George Irving Quimby, *Indian Culture and European Trade Goods: The Archaeology of the Historic Period in the Western Great Lakes* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966); William Orchard, *Beads and Beadwork of the American Indians* (New York: Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, 1975); and John Matzo, *Reconstructing Fort Union* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005).

ceremonial objects and regalia. Restrictions also applied to dance, traditional dress, and gatherings. These restrictions were in place until 1951.³

The American tradition of “Indian traders” and the impact of “railroad tourism” in the late nineteenth century, followed by early twentieth-century architectural and interior design trends, resulted in moves to “revive” aesthetic standards and support artistic excellence.⁴ While there was a traditional-arts market in Canada, it increasingly became a low-end tourist market that devalued excellence and innovation, encouraging an assembly-line approach to production. Designs became simplified, and financial remuneration of time invested influenced creative choices. A low-end market certainly existed in the United States, but avid and appreciative consumers supported excellence, although often in ways that were exploitative of artists.⁵

A tangle of initiatives to promote quality and support artists began to emerge in the early twentieth century. The Santa Fe Indian Art Market originated as the Southwest Indian Fair and Industrial Arts and Crafts Exhibition, establishing an ongoing tradition of prizes, categories, and performances. The US Indian Arts and Crafts Act and the Indian Arts and Crafts Board originated in 1934, as a two-part economic strategy initiated by the Department of the Interior, one that remains as a protective measure against fraud and appropriation. While not free of critique, these early initiatives continue in renewed form today.⁶

Canadian federal policy and programs in support of the arts did not appear until culturally oppressive policies were either in decline or terminated.⁷ Beyond shifts in policy, however, continuity in traditional arts in both the United States and Canada has relied on individuals and families who carried on traditional arts practices, often under the most difficult of circumstances. Emerging from that base of continuity, a growing number of contemporary traditional artists returned to mastery, resisting economic pressures that privileged volume and stability over innovation and risk.

Taking It Further: Pushing the Limits

By the late 1980s Indigenous artists who worked primarily with traditional media began to adopt the social critique of contemporary art, while their counterparts working primarily in “contemporary” media rediscovered the potency of plant fibers, quills, and beads. In the United States, the Santa Fe Indian Market, the Pendleton Round Up, and a network of similar venues provided a sustained, competitive climate. Young artists began to push the limits of traditional form.⁸ Beadwork artists, in particular, began to use smaller and smaller beads to execute increasingly ambitious projects. Dolls became one sphere of innovation. The quill and beadwork artists Rhonda and Charlene Holy Bear (Lakota), Joyce and Juanita Growing Thunder Fogarty (Assiniboine Sioux), and Jamie Okuma (Luiseno/Shoshone Bannock) shifted the traditional doll form into sculpture, and in 2000 Okuma became the youngest artist to win “Best in Show” at the Santa Fe Indian Market.⁹ Okuma’s dolls are fastidiously detailed and expressive. Her *Indian Cowboy Doll* slouches against a fence lighting a tiny cigarette. From his black hat to his vest and accessories, stitched with impossibly tiny beads, he is a turn-of-the-century photograph in three-dimensional form. Okuma has since turned to fashion, and museums and private collectors avidly collect and exhibit her beaded designer footwear.¹⁰

3. For a discussion of cultural repression instituted through the Indian Act, see Katherine Pettipas, *Severing the Ties that Bind: Government Repression of Indigenous Religious Ceremonies on the Prairies* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1994).

4. See Jackson Rushing III’s introduction to Part I, in *Native American Art in the Twentieth Century: Makers, Meanings, Histories*, ed. Rushing (New York/London: Routledge, 1999), 3–6; Erica Cottam, *Hubbell Trading Post: Trade, Tourism, and the Navajo Southwest* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015); and Beverly Gordon and Melanie Herzog, *American Indian Art: The Collecting Experience* (Madison: Elvehjem Museum of Art and University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1988).

5. For a discussion of artist exploitation and unfair practices, see Carrie Ortiz, “The Native American Artist,” *Oshkaabewis Native Journal* 1, no. 3 (1991): 63–72.

6. See David W. Penny and Lisa A. Roberts, “America’s Pueblo Artists: Encounters on the Borderlands,” in *Native American Art in the Twentieth Century*, 21–38; and Susan L. Meyn, *More than Curiosities: A Grassroots History of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board and Its Precursors, 1920–1942* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001).

7. A new edition of the Indian Act, with the most oppressive sections omitted, was quietly issued in 1951. It took some time before the changes to the legislation affected the policies and practice of government officials.

8. The categories and evaluation criteria sometimes confined and controlled artists, but the competitive environment also moved them toward experimentation.

9. Okuma won “Best in Show” for the third time at the 2012 Santa Fe Indian Market, with Charlene Holy Bear and Joyce and Juanita Growing Thunder Fogarty consistently placing and winning in divisional categories.

10. Okuma’s spectacular beaded boots and shoes are in the Peabody Essex Museum, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, and the Minneapolis Institute of Art. Her work is currently touring in *Native Fashion Now* (2015–17), organized by Peabody Essex Museum. “Indian Market 2012 Winners” supplement, *Santa Fe New Mexican*, August 18, 2012.



Jamie Okuma, *Horseshoes*, 2014, Giuseppe Zanotti platform boots, antique 16/0, 13/0 cut glass seed beads, twenty-four-carat-gold-plated beads, 12 x 8 x 3 in. (30.5 x 20.3 x 7.6 cm) (artwork © Jamie Okuma; photograph by Cameron Linton provided by the artist)

11. These pieces became the foundation of *Cont[r]acts*, Myre's MFA thesis exhibition at Oboro Gallery in Montreal (2002) and are among her most widely exhibited and influential works.

In 2002 Nadia Myre paddled through the early morning mist in an unusual canoe. Under the guidance of the traditional birch-bark artist Daniel Pinock Smith, Myre constructed a half-birch-bark, half-aluminum canoe, a powerful statement on merging knowledge systems and negotiating difference. Although she was newly introduced to beads and birch bark, traditional media formed the basis of Myre's thesis work at Montreal's Concordia University. The canoe, *History in Two Parts* (2002) and the documentary video *Portrait in Motion* (2002) were created at the same time Myre organized volunteers across the country in the collective act of covering the text of the Indian Act with rows of beads (1999–2002).¹¹ Of the fifty-six pages of the act, some are completely covered; others are partially beaded and still carry traces of the process. Myre's practice includes sculpture, installation, and film, but beaded works continue to be central to it. For *Journey of the Seventh Fire* (2008–9), she beaded large-scale logos of corporations threatening

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Nadia Myre, *Indian Act* (page 13), 2000–3, seed beads, stroud cloth, thread, *Indian Act* (R.S. chapters 1–5, 1985 paper), one of 56 elements, ea. 15¾ x 15 x 1¼ in. (40 x 38 x 3 cm) (artwork © Nadia Myre; photograph provided by Art Mur Gallery)

Ursula Johnson, *L'nuweli'tk*, 2015, wood splint portraits, installation view, *Fifth World*, organized by Wanda Nanibush, Mendel Art Gallery, 2015 (artwork © Ursula Johnson; photograph by Troy Mamer provided by Tribe Inc. and Mendel Art Gallery)

Amy Malbeuf, *kayas-ago* (one of 18 panels), 2014, sculptured and tufted caribou hair on light panels, diam. 12 in., depth ½ in. (30.5 x 1.3 cm) (artwork © Amy Malbeuf; photograph by Kelly Henson provided by the artist)

land, water, and Indigenous territorial rights. *Meditations on Red* (2012) and *Meditations on Black* (2013) are large meditative circular forms. She is currently working on another community-engaged beading project. Myre has established creative collaboration as a viable and important methodology. She and others have taken traditional beading circles from the kitchen table to art galleries and community centers, engaging dozens and occasionally hundreds of people in the thoughtful, rhythmic experience of sewing together.¹²

Basketry requires artists to tether and restrain the energy of resistant plant fibers. Responding to that energy, Ursula Johnson (Mi'kmaq) often merges her basketry with elements of performance. Her ongoing portrait series, *L'nuweli'tk* (*We Are Indian*), is a play on the notion of volume, weaving around the bodies or heads of sitters. Portraits of volunteer subjects are crafted as performance, with the resulting woven forms displayed afterward. Between 2003 and 2015, in various iterations of *Basket Weaving* (*Cultural Cocoon*), Johnson wove a basket around herself as an endurance performance. While the techniques she uses in her performance basketry tend to be fairly basic, it is obvious from Johnson's other work and her investigations into museum collections that she is deeply committed to ensuring the survival of Mi'kmaq basketry in all its complexities. Her 2015 exhibition, *Mi'kwite'tmn* (*Do You Remember*), which is currently on a national tour, focuses on the empty spaces of plexiglass display boxes, etched with drawings of her great-grandmother's baskets. The installation documents Johnson's cultural research/recovery process in museum collections, but also her growing alarm at the enormity of what could be lost. Accompanied by Mi'kmaq words, concepts, and processes related to basketry, the installation starkly brings home the urgency of endangered knowledge.¹³

Similarly, Amy Malbeuf is one of the few contemporary practitioners of sculpted and appliquéd caribou hair tufting. She seeks to preserve the art form, and to actively resist the manner in which motifs and forms became standardized

12. Lorna Thomas-Hill and Samuel Thomas (Cayuga), Christi Belcourt (Métis), and Marie Watt (Seneca) have also established community sewing and beading circles as engaged practice. It is difficult to ascertain where the practice first emerged.

13. See Daniel Joyce, "Ursula Johnson: Traditions and Transformations," *Canadian Art* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 192.



Ruth Cuthand, *Don't Breathe, Don't Drink*, 2016, installation view and detail, glass beads, resin, glasses, and baby bottles (artwork © Ruth Cuthand; photographs provided by the artist)

and commercialized by the late twentieth century.¹⁴ Although appreciative of her teachers and artists who preserved techniques, Malbeuf is reintroducing innovation to caribou tufting, and her ambitious projects are executed at an unprecedented scale, with content designed “to expand the visual vocabulary.” The installation *kayás-ago* (2014), which Malbeuf describes as an act of “self-portraiture,” is comprised of eighteen round light panels with multilingual text executed in large-scale caribou tufting.¹⁵ The words and phrases were chosen from community slang, comments by family members, and favorite quotations from cultural heroes and Indigenous authors. Often with a note of humor, phrases such as “We may be oppressed but at least we aren’t depressed!” glow against the soft light.

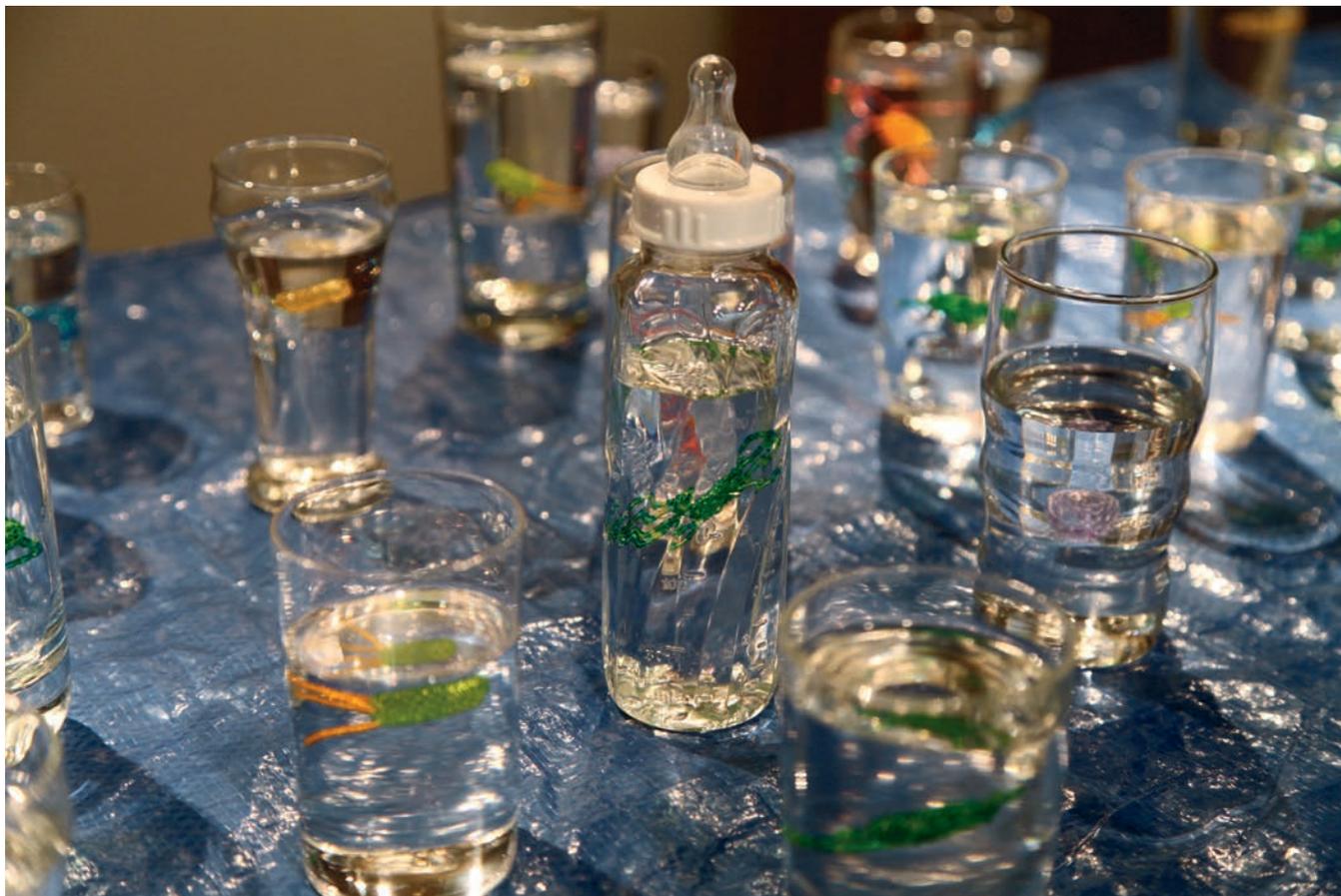
Truth Telling and Visual Activism

The sharp, witty social critiques and engaged creative processes employed by many artists using traditional media become a form of visual activism when they reveal unknown histories and move viewers and participants to action. The work of the Cree artist Ruth Cuthand is simultaneously beautiful and unrelentingly tough. In 2009 Cuthand began beading detailed representations of various pathogens that historically had a devastating impact on Indigenous populations: diphtheria, cholera, tuberculosis, and smallpox. The works, beaded in haunting accuracy, were presented in two series, *Trading* (2009) and *Dis-ease* (2010).¹⁶ In

14. Amy Malbeuf, “apihkēw (s/he braids, s/he weaves, s/he knits)” (MFA thesis, University of British Columbia (Okanagan), 2016), 12.

15. The text is in Cree, Michif, and English. *Ibid.*, 12–13.

16. *Trading* was featured in Cuthand’s mid-career retrospective organized by the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon. See Jen Budney, ed., *Ruth Cuthand: Back Talk, Works 1983–2009/Kihkahtowin-Naskewasimowin: Astoskewina 1983–2009*, exh. cat. (Saskatoon: Mendel Art Gallery, 2012).



2015 she began creating small, three-dimensional works representing listeria, salmonella, and other contemporary bacteria. These works culminated in the large installation *Don't Breathe, Don't Drink* (2016), a roughly constructed room representing the housing and clean-water crisis on First Nations reservations.¹⁷ Beaded bacteria are suspended in resin-filled glasses and baby bottles, representing the quality of drinking water. A blue tarpaulin covers a table. Its surface is beaded with small dull black circles representing black mold, an artistic response to the state of emergency declared in Attawapiskat, a small northern community in Ontario. In this work, Cuthand has plucked political activism and controversial reports from newspaper headlines and the evening news, and made them visible in the gallery.

Shan Goshorn (Cherokee) worked in photography and painting before turning to the unique double-woven Cherokee baskets as vessels to carry her complex retellings of history.¹⁸ Goshorn slices documents and photographs into thin strips that she weaves into compelling sculptural forms that can be read from multiple directions: top, bottom, four sides, inside, and outside. *Educational Genocide: The Legacy of the Carlisle Indian Boarding School* (2011) combines the names and faces of thousands of students from photographs taken in 1912. It is those faces, woven into a deep border around the lid of the basket, and the names lining the inside that deliver the emotional punch. Viewers alternate between marveling at the technical virtuosity that enables the artist to deconstruct the photographs

17. Ruth Cuthand, *Don't Breathe, Don't Drink*, dc³ art projects, Edmonton, Alberta, March 18–April 16, 2016; see www.dc3artprojects.com/ruth-cuthand-dont-breathe-dont-drink, as of July 10, 2017.

18. See Lee Allen, "An Activist's Baskets: The Unique Art of Shan Goshorn," *Indian Country Today*, December 3, 2013, at <http://indian-countrytodaymedianetwork.com/2013/12/03/activists-baskets-unique-art-shan-goshorn-16-photos-152549>, as of August 23, 2016.



Shan Goshorn, *Educational Genocide: The Legacy of the Carlisle Indian Boarding School, and detail*, 2011, archival watercolor paper splints, printed with archival inks and acrylic paint, 12 x 20 x 12 in. (30.5 x 50.8 x 30.5 cm) (artwork © Shan Goshorn; photographs provided by the artist)

and reintegrate them seamlessly into a three-dimensional form, and the impact of the restructured imagery.

Recently Goshorn has been invited into archival collections to create baskets responding to specific collections and historic sites. In spring 2016, she reached out through social media, requesting assistance for an upcoming visit to the Carlisle Indian Boarding School.¹⁹ It was her intent to place offerings at the children's graves to honor them, and as an expression of her support for the repatriation movement to return the children's remains to their home communities. She posted photographs of the laborious process of laying tobacco ties beside each headstone. Because she shares her forays into archival collections through social media, posting photographs, invites participation, and mobilizes actions on behalf of communities of interest, Goshorn's weaving begins before the research, focusing on intent. For both Cuthand and Goshorn, the meaning of their stunningly beautiful and technically proficient works is amplified by their creative processes and the power of the acts of creation (weaving, stitching, gathering), which inspire, provoke, and support actions to change the world beyond the gallery or museum walls.

Old Knowledge in New Places

The importance of this return to traditional media is reflected in the recent recognitions and awards these artists have received within the larger sphere

19. See Shan Goshorn, Facebook posts, April 13, 2016, at <https://m.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10154191635903117&id=600373116&set=a.297358543116.147369.600373116&source=48>, and May 4, 2016, at https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10154240703328117&id=600373116, and Goshorn, "Swept Away," artist statement, at <http://www.shangoshorn.net/swept-away/>, all as of July 27, 2017.

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