

Rebecca Belmore, New Work, Georgia Scherman Projects, Toronto

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Rebecca Belmore

← *witness; madonna*, 2018.

Photo : courtesy of the artist & Jessica Bradley Inc.

↑ *matriarch; omen*, installation view, Georgia Scherman Projects, Toronto, 2018.

Photo : courtesy of the artist & Jessica Bradley Inc.

Rebecca Belmore

New Work

Recently, the Art Gallery of Ontario ran what was arguably its most powerful and important exhibition of a contemporary Canadian artist to date. *Rebecca Belmore: Facing the Monumental* featured a prodigious body of work that spanned over thirty years of an active and diverse practice. An Anishinaabe artist and member of the Lac Seul First Nation, Rebecca Belmore is known for producing confrontational sculpture, installation, and performance-based works that walk the line between politics and art. From very early on in her career, Belmore employed her own body as an instrument for communicating the suffering, invisibility, and innate strength of Canada's Indigenous peoples. As if to extinguish any implied conclusiveness that a retrospective might bring, curator and author Jessica Bradley (who continues to represent Belmore since her gallery closed in 2015) presented, in collaboration with Georgia Scherman Projects, seven new works (all from 2018), including one sculpture and six large-format archival pigment prints. Each of the prints feature Belmore's own body immersed in a series of highly tactile environments. Five of these clearly allude to previous performances, causing the exhibition to appear, at first glance, as documentation of newly staged re-enactments.

In *witness* Belmore stands in frozen tension with her tattered red dress nailed to a wooden pole, her mouth stretched wide in a silent, guttural scream. The scene comes from a larger, multi-phase performance titled *Vigil* that took place on the streets of Vancouver's Downtown East Side in 2002. A re-traumatization of the body and a call for remembrance of missing Indigenous women, *Vigil* engaged with history while forcing the recognition of a dark contemporary story. With similar cues to previous work, *madonna* features Belmore enrobed in a sea of craft paper so that only her face, hands, one foot, and a rough silhouette of her body are visible. Assuming the iconic repose of the Holy Virgin, but lying

rigidly on her back and replacing the body of Jesus with a piece of driftwood, Belmore turns Christianity's twisted view of feminine purity on its head and transforms herself into an empowered vision of Mother Earth. The image cites a 2012 performance on Canada Day in Toronto's Queen's Park titled *Facing the Monumental*, where Belmore used the same materials to wrap an Indigenous woman to an ancient oak tree. By cross-referencing the biblical matriarch with historical and ongoing colonial rule, and juxtaposing it with an Indigenous reverence for nature and the innate power of the feminine, *madonna* becomes a complex distortion that bears witness to suffering and reveals a continued struggle for identity.

Lacking the raw immediacy and rough quality of their source documentation, these new images might almost appear contrived, were it not for the nuanced subtlety with which they continue to confront the issues that inspired them. Acting neither as documentation nor re-enactment, these poetic reconfigurations continue to deepen Belmore's existing conceptual frameworks. As symbolic acts performed for the camera, they manage to embody the full power, pain, and beauty of her original performance works, demanding that viewers confront their own complicity in the historical and contemporary treatment of Canada's Indigenous peoples.

Alex Bowron

Georgia Scherman Projects

Presented by Jessica Bradley Inc.

Toronto, October 20–

November 17, 2018