

Rebecca Belmore: Facing the Monumental

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Rebecca Belmore: Facing the Monumental

Julia Skelly

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Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore is best known for her performances such as *Vigil* (2002), which unfolded on a corner in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver and called attention to the missing and murdered Indigenous women of Turtle Island (now known as Canada). Belmore's most recent exhibition, *Facing the Monumental*, which was organized by the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) and curated by Wanda Nanibush, was on display at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (MAC) from June 20th until October 10th, 2019. It is the largest show of Belmore's career so far, encompassing works from the past thirty years. The exhibition included large-scale photographs, installations, and videos, but her startling, beautiful and poignant sculptures were



Rebecca Belmore. *Tower*, 2018. Shopping carts and clay, 460 x 122 x 181 cm. Installation view at Art Gallery of Ontario. © Rebecca Belmore. Photo: Dean Tomlinson/Art Gallery of Ontario.

the strongest works in the show. These sculptures are at times ambiguous in their significations; they are not clearly didactic, but rather allow for multiple readings. Objects such as nails evoke both labour and stigmata; a tall mound of clay can be perceived as both phallic and geographic. This artistic strategy encourages the viewer to read the sculptures in relation to various, intersecting themes, including material violence against Indigenous peoples and the occupation of Indigenous territories.

Turning the corner into the exhibition's first large room, the viewer is confronted by Belmore's photograph *Fringe* (2008), which depicts a woman (likely Belmore herself) lying on her left side, her back turned to the viewer, and her buttocks covered with a white cloth. There is a long diagonal suture running from the woman's right shoulder to her lower back. The suture has strings of red beads hanging from it from top to bottom, and the beads viscerally create the illusion of blood trickling from the suture. The suture looks alarmingly real, but the wall label does not tell us how the artist attained this effect. This image is not simply an allusion to a material that Indigenous women use in their art post-contact. Rather, here Belmore references a specific incident: in 1980, a St. Boniface surgeon inserted two glass beads into the ends of a suture after completing a lung biopsy on a fifty-one-year-old Cree woman from Shamattawa in northern Manitoba. The violence of this act, which the surgeon claimed was a "joke," is implicitly linked in Belmore's photograph with the centuries of material violence enacted upon Indigenous women's bodies, including, but not limited to, the epidemic of domestic violence and murder that Indigenous women continue to experience in the 21st century in Canada.

An important inclusion in the exhibition, Belmore's *Fountain* (2005) was the artist's contribution to Canada's pavilion at the 51st Venice Biennale. The installation is comprised of a single-channel video with sound projected onto falling water. In the video, Belmore is shown struggling to extricate herself from a body of water; she eventually wades out of the lake, carrying a bucket full of water, and then throws the water—which now has the appearance of thick blood—at the camera. The symbolism here—water is blood, water is life—is simply communicated in an installation that fills the room with a fine mist, creating a phenomenological experience for the spectator. We feel water on our skin, and we are implicated as the beneficiaries of Canada's natural resources.

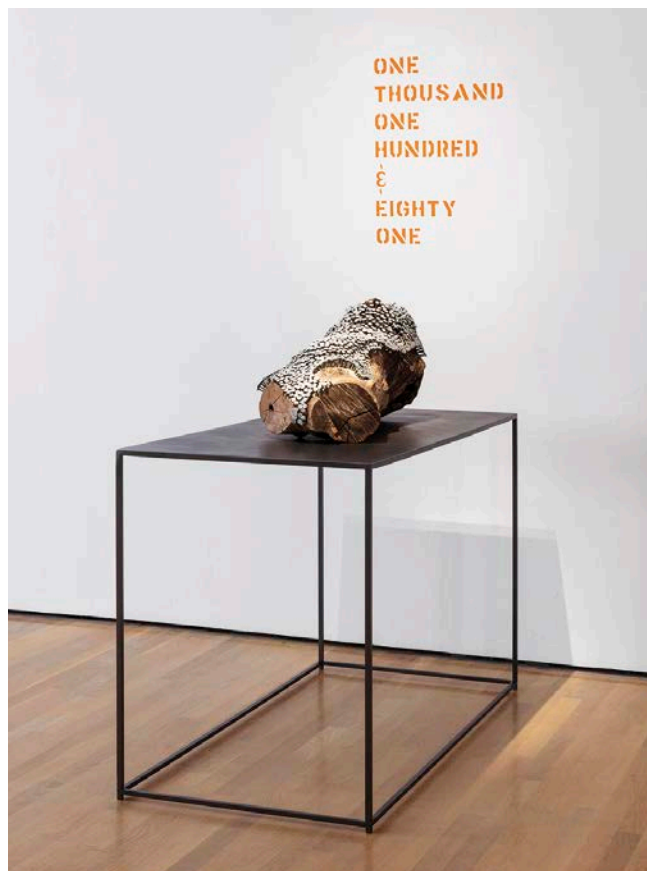
The most striking sculpture in the exhibition is also the most recent. *Tower* (2018) is a tall (almost ceiling height) structure made out of stacked shopping carts (I counted sixteen). Through the centre of the carts rises a phallic-looking column of reddish clay. According to the exhibition catalogue for *Facing the Monumental*, Belmore has identified the shopping cart as a symbol of homelessness. However, looking at the work in the gallery, its colour and its hard, even cruel, appearance made me think of nothing more than sexual violence and colonial rape of the land. This may not have been Belmore's intention, and the wall label provided no description at all, but the work is all the more powerful for leaving space for a range of interpretations.

The sculpture entitled *1181* (2014) is sublime and disturbing in its simplicity, and it elegantly evokes violence to the body with a nuanced artistic gesture. This physical gesture, or more accurately action, is not gentle,

but rather a violent one. For this work, which was part of a performance at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at the University of Toronto, Belmore hammered exactly 1,181 nails into a log, creating a jagged metal surface on one side of the piece of wood. The curves of the log suggest a handless arm that has been removed from a body, evoking, perhaps, the dismemberment of victims of fatal violence. The work is a violent one, but the nails also create an image of broken body armour, resulting in a push-and-pull between the imagined figures of victim and fallen warrior. The number of nails alludes to the total number of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada, as documented in a 2014 RCMP report.

The nailing action indexed by *1181* also recalls one of Belmore's most famous and poignant works, the 2002 performance *Vigil*. In that performance, Belmore wrote names of missing and murdered Indigenous women on her skin, and then yelled their names out, pulling a rose through her teeth after each name. Belmore subsequently donned a long red dress, and proceeded to nail the dress to a telephone pole, violently ripping the dress away from the pole until the entire dress had been torn to shreds. The video of *Vigil*, re-titled *The Named and Unnamed* (2007), was the first work presented in Belmore's show at the MAC, and it set the tone for the rest of the exhibition. Sitting in a dark room, watching Belmore tear the dress away from the pole, it becomes crystal clear that the dress is a symbol for the torn flesh of murdered Indigenous women.

To write about Belmore's work is to acknowledge the ongoing violence against Indigenous women and girls in Canada, as well as the ongoing colonial violence against both Indigenous peoples and their land. Her critical engagement with materials such as clay, metal and beads in this exhibition help make her sculptures some of her most powerful works, because their materiality takes up space in the gallery, interfering with our movements and demanding that we attend to material, as well as discursive, violence. Belmore's recent sculptures, especially *Tower* (2018) and *1181* (2014), harness the power of materiality, demonstrating the artist's understanding of how objects can get under our skin and demand our attention and respect.



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Les histoires nécessaires/ Instrumental Stories : virage vers la périphérie

Elise Anne LaPlante

**GALERIE D'ART LOUISE-ET-REUBEN-COHEN ET
MUSÉE ACADIEN DE L'UNIVERSITÉ DE MONCTON
9 AOÛT –
13 OCTOBRE 2019**

Présentée dans le cadre du Congrès mondial acadien et dans différentes régions acadiennes tous les cinq ans, l'exposition *Les histoires nécessaires/Instrumental Stories* s'inscrit dans un contexte de rassemblement, de célébration, mais aussi de réflexion sur l'Acadie. La commissaire indépendante Véronique Leblanc y propose une perception actualisée de l'Acadie, soit celle d'une culture accueillante ne se réduisant pas à la seule revendication d'un héritage commun. Les onze artistes rassemblé.e.s dans cette exposition s'identifient d'ailleurs à divers horizons culturels : l'Acadie, l'anglophonie des Maritimes et l'autochtonie. Tout.e.s proposent une réflexion sur la notion d'appartenance, déstabilisant une vision unie et rassembleuse de celle-ci. Le dialogue tissé entre les œuvres mène ainsi à interroger la construction de l'histoire, à reconsidérer les mythes fondateurs et à explorer la fabrication des imaginaires tant personnels que collectifs.