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The Fifth World, Mendel Art Gallery, April 3–June 7, 2015,
Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, January 22–March 20, 2016,
Curator: Wanda Nanibush

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Citer ce compte rendu
but rather to make it affordable, their identity, their savoir-faire and their creativity.

On the question of the integrity of culture, Vigneault notes that Vincent wasn’t a single figure torn between two worlds and two identities, but rather that he had to integrate the different dimensions of his experience and his relationships in a complex and unified way. Vigneault presents this portrait of an individual and a community who sought to combine the allochthonous aspects of “complex relations, multidirectional and complex experiences” (p. 105). Thus, rather than focusing on the acculturation, Vincent and the Siens would frame “voluntarily and punctually proceed to an integration of the elements of culture of the Other” so as to integrate their identity “to a certain extent” and the alterity (p. 105). This is true of others as well, and malgré having often been named “the real Huron”, Vincent is in reality an affable, and this was possible because of his ability to mediate between the symbolism and the social structures of his nation. And whereas, as the author suggests, Vincent is also the “artwork” of his own story, he has managed to do so without losing his identity, at least according to the quality of the present artwork.

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According to Indigenous scholars Jarrett Martineau and Eric Ritskes, Indigenous art defies colonial erasure and “marks the space of a returned and enduring presence, weaving past and future Indigenous worlds into new currents of present struggle.”¹ Amid today’s political chaos and rising environmental degradation, it is clear that our relationships and responsibilities to each other, the earth, and the future need to be reconsidered. The concept of the Fifth World builds on this sense of urgency by framing our present moment as the decisive threshold between building a positive future and realizing a dystopia. An important part of several Indigenous creation stories, including those of the Aztec, Navajo, and Hopi, the Fifth World is said to follow four other cycles of creation and destruction and is the final possible world. It is thus extremely precious.

In organizing the exhibition The Fifth World, curator and self-proclaimed “Anishinaabe-kwe image-and-word warrior” Wanda Nanibush was inspired by Almanac of the Dead (1991), a novel written by Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko, which describes the powerful liminality of the Fifth World. The exhibition thus presents an Indigenous worldview in which we are naturally connected to each other through the earth, which is considered a shared and finite resource.² Its framework builds on this belief—which recalls the Lakota adage “all our relations”—and positions every assertion of Indigenous sovereignty on the land [as an act of] dreaming³—an opportunity to create...
a different future for our children, and our children’s children.

The work presented in The Fifth World reminds us that Indigenous ways of life have always involved a profound respect for, and deep commitment to, past, present, and future forms of life. Presented at two galleries—first at the Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon, and later at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, Kitchener—the exhibition marked the twentieth anniversary of Tribe Inc., the Saskatoon-based artist-run centre dedicated to the presentation of contemporary Indigenous art and its engagement with social and political issues. While francophone and northern perspectives often go overlooked in mainstream curating, The Fifth World featured the work of eleven Indigenous artists from Alaska, British Columbia, Quebec, Ontario, Nunavut, and Newfoundland and Labrador, as well as on- and off-reserve communities. Here, Nanibush’s thoughtful curatorial selection directly reflects her expertise in the field, which she acquired working as a curator, educator, artist, and organizer for more than twenty years.

Turtles (2012), an installation by Vancouver-based artist Charlene Vickers, uses the ancient reptile referred to in its title—an important creature within many Indigenous creation stories—as a means of engaging with questions of past, present, and future life. It features a clan of stylized, yet still easily recognizable turtles grouped together on the gallery floor as if they were slowly moving. Vickers’ use of the turtle clan evokes Indigenous memory, while the turtles’ implied journey suggests a retracing, reclaiming, and return to pre-contact or non-colonial ways of life. The turtles also evoke a number of other relevant issues: our location on Turtle Island, whose name comes from an Indigenous creation story in which the earth emerges on a turtle’s back; the longstanding evidence of turtle habitation in North America and around the world; the species’ demonstrated communal and intergenerational relationships; as well as the vulnerability of living beings on Mother Earth, where many turtles are now endangered. As such, the turtle’s future, like our own, demands greater consideration and respect in order to ensure the sustainability of future generations.

Another potent symbol of interconnection—the round dance—is visible in the sculptural installation L’nuwelti’k (We Are Indian) (ongoing since 2012), by Halifax-based artist Ursula Johnson. This work reminds us of the unique interrelationships forged between bodies as they gather in public spaces such as galleries, or participate in grassroots movements like Idle No More (of which Nanibush was an active member). Using traditional Mi’kmag techniques learned from her great-grandmother, the late basketry artist Caroline Gould, Johnson fashioned sixteen, hand-made black ash baskets for the installation, positioning each one upright so that it resembled a bust. Each “bust” was made to the dimensions of volunteers, who responded to an open call based on their “Indian status.” As such, they stand in for the sitter’s body, as well as their “status story,” and thus function as both unique portraits and embodied repositories of Indigenous oral histories. The circular installation of baskets featured in The Fifth World presents a diverse image of the Indigenous community, one that includes Nanibush herself, as she modeled for one of Johnson’s baskets. Reflecting on the process, Nanibush makes significant connections to other life forms, and describes thinking repeatedly of birds while she was modelling for Johnson. In her words, “I could hear the birds as [Johnson] covered my face. Later when she was by a body of water finishing my bust she said the sky filled with birds.”

Birds are also significant in Ottawa-based artist Meryl McMaster’s photographic triptych, Murmur (2013), in which we see life-size images of the artist encircled by a constellation of birds in flight. Interested in the starling’s unique pattern of migration, also known as a murmuration, McMaster hand-crafted hundreds of starlings and then fashioned them into a huge spiral shape reminiscent of the birds’ collective flight in which each individual is as important to the other as it is to the whole. McMaster’s origami-like birds, which were made from the pages of vintage North-American history textbooks, evoke the ways in which “our identities are strongly influenced by our stories and language(s).” Other works by McMaster included in the exhibition also feature self-portraits with photographic and theatrical props made from recycled paper and processes of reconstruction. For example, Aphoristic Currents (2013), from the series In-Between Worlds, depicts a scene in which McMaster dons an extravagant, oversized ruff made of newsprint, her head poking out of the centre as if from the middle of a windstorm. In it, the artist gazes outward, her face painted white with black spots—a theatrical strategy meant to call attention to McMaster’s mixed Indigenous-European background, as well as the ways in which “whiteness has been imposed on Indigenous bodies and their cultures,” including her own Algonquian ancestors. Using photography to capture this sense of in-betweenness, McMaster represents “our relationship with the past and how such pasts are defined by the present,” thus leaving room for viewers to negotiate and envision new ways of being in the Fifth World.

Although it was made five years ago, Sitka-based artist Nicholas Galanin’s installation The American Dream is Alive and Well (2012) offers pertinent commentary on the political chaos currently unfolding in America. For this work, Galanin reconfigured a traditional bearskin rug, like those often found in “all-American” cabins and homes, replacing its pelt with a star-spangled American flag and the animal’s teeth and claws with 50 caliber bullets. Here, direct references to
the Confederacy and the right to bear arms underscore American nationalism’s roots in the oppression of others through settler property rights and the displacement and attempted genocide of Indigenous peoples, as well as entrenched systems of white power and militarism. Galanin’s artwork also calls to mind historical colonial massacres, such as Wounded Knee, as well as the ongoing genocidal violence carried out by police, military, and white supremacists (aka “white nationalists”) against Indigenous and other marginalized peoples. By emphasizing what is a stake in the “American dream”—symbolized by the nation’s flag—Galanin’s artwork asks viewers to reconsider the complexities of nation-building in light of past and present atrocities, but also to contemplate how our understandings of history can help us to imagine more just ways of living together on contested territories.

Other Indigenous artists featured in the exhibition include Sonny Assu (Ligwilda’xw territory), Laakkuluk Williamson Bathory (Iqaluit), Scott Benesiinaabandan (Montreal), Jordan Bennett (Stephenville Crossing), Sonya Kelliher-Combs (Anchorage), Skeena Reece (Vancouver Island) and Travis Shilling (Rama First Nation). Together their work reflects the ways in which “Indigenous peoples have been protecting homelands; maintaining and revitalizing languages, traditions, and cultures; and attempting to engage Canadians in a fair and just manner for hundreds of years.” Despite these efforts, our current situation reflects an urgent need to rethink our relationship with the land, its gifts, and each other. We are at an important crossroads akin to the Fifth World, where the very life sources in which we all share—Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike—continue to be degraded, exploited, contaminat ed, and capitalized upon. The works in The Fifth World remind us that Indigenous peoples have always demonstrated thoughtful and sustainable ways of living, and that non-Indigenous peoples need to reconsider their relationship with the earth. Recalling the Hopi prophecy of “an impending choice between destruction and conflict”—or, ostensibly, between life and death—The Fifth World shows us that Indigenous peoples made a choice long ago to respect the earth and we should follow them.

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7. McMaster, artist statement.

**Inuit Art in Canadian and Indigenous Art: From Time Immemorial to 1967**

Permanent exhibition, Ottawa

Christina Williamson

As part of the Canada 150 celebrations taking place across the country, several national museums in Ottawa have overhauled their permanent exhibitions. For its part, the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) has rehung the Canadian Galleries, now known as the Canadian and Indigenous Galleries, as part of a show of support for the reconciliation movement sparked by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). NGC touts the new permanent exhibitions—Canadian and Indigenous Art: From Time Immemorial to 1967, which encompasses art made in Canada from 5,000 years ago to today, and Canadian and Indigenous Art: 1968 to Present—as a significant shift for the institution.

First Nations and Metis art were introduced into the Canadian Galleries in 2003 as part of the permanent exhibition Art of this Land, but Inuit works remained in NGC’s basement in the Prints and Drawings Gallery, where the curator of Inuit art was also assigned. Historically, NGC resisted collecting Indigenous art, because it considered it craft and therefore the purview of the National Museum of Man (now the Canadian Museum of History). In the 1980s, however, NGC began to systematically collect Inuit works of art, thanks to the active lobbying of the Canadian Eskimo Art Council (CEAC).

For Canadians and visitors alike, NGC plays a role in defining the officially embraced national story of Canada. Bringing Inuit art out of the basement thus represents a step towards challenging settler notions of what constitutes art within this narrative. Yet, as Steven Loft notes,