Reading the Talk (exhibition review)

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Reading the Talk
Museum London

Reading the Talk brings together artists Michael Belmore (Ojibwe), Hannah Claus (Mohawk), Patricia Deegan (Tuscarora-Mohawk), Vanessa Dion Fletcher (Potawatomi-Lenape), Keesic Douglas (Menikaning Ojibwe), and Melissa General (Oneida), whose works engage with the land now known as Canada in different and often divergent ways. Part of their engagement with the land directly relates to how Indigenous peoples approach treaty rights, hunting grounds, trade policy, and tribal sovereignty.

Curators Rachelle Dickenson (Cree) and Lisa Myers (Beausoleil Ojibwe) explain that the project is strongly influenced by conversations with artist Bonnie Devine (Serpent River Ojibwe) and Elder Jan Longboat (Mohawk), who passed down the history of the Dish with One Spoon Treaty and the significance of wampum in the negotiation of treaty rights. These histories and objects reveal new trajectories for exploring what the land means to Indigenous artists today and how their interpretations continue to form ways in which the land is approached as both a physical and conceptual territory.

As Dickenson and Myers make clear, Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe nations negotiated disputes from the 17th to the 19th centuries involving hunting grounds in the area around the Great Lakes using the Dish with One Spoon Treaty. The dish (or bowl) and spoon are instrumental in resolving intertribal conflict over resources because they symbolize the idea that all nations will take from a single bowl and eat from a single spoon, which essentially points to the unification of both nations and an understanding that food, including fish and beaver, will be shared. Moreover, the inclusion of the spoon rather than a knife further indicates a commitment to the equal distribution of resources instead of warring over resources through the spilling of blood.1

A number of works in the exhibition respond to the land using a variety of media and clever visual devices. Hannah Claus’s our mind are one (2014) is one such work. Here she presents a large cylindrical canopy featuring circular photographs of leaves, trees, and stone strung on acetate hung from the ceiling with monofilament thread. Though it first evokes the quality of a wigwam (specifically a shaking tent), it’s much more spiritual than ceremonial. The work envelops viewers invited to stand underneath the canopy and become, quite literally, clouded by the land. All the while, reflections of light from Claus’s discs dance on a nearby wall. Similarly, Patricia Deegan’s Giardino dei Semplici (2013) approaches the concept of land by displaying photographic prints of a forest in a grid on the wall. In a way, these individual images combine in the eye to create a lush textile of color and pattern. While the photographs are somewhat foggy, the overall effect is that of gazing through (and among) the trees into a hidden distance. Keesic Douglas also employs the grid structure and use of photography in his work Trade Language (2013) to demonstrate how trading practices among Indigenous peoples have relied upon gesturing through the lip, chin, and head for communication. For Douglas, “in many First Nations communities, this is still practiced, subconsciously and consciously, when people communicate with each other even while using English as their common language.” This poses a question: Is this learned behavior or is it embedded in [Indigenous peoples’] DNA? Presented here are 28 black-and-white portraits of Indigenous men and women bare from the shoulders up. Their faces gesture at communications such as “acknowledgment” and “directional heading” while, taken as a whole, representing a breadth of Indigenous lexicons. The result is a fascinating conceptualization of Indigenous language beyond the verbal dimension.

Melissa General’s Satakónhsatat (2014) boasts the only video work in the exhibition whereby two women cover a pile of split logs with a tanned hide. The gentle sound of a running brook accompany the work and even trickles into the rest of the gallery space, serving to reinforce the exhibition’s close relationship to the land.

Of course wampum played a critical role in the Dish with One Spoon Treaty. More specifically, these beaded belts allowed for tribal historians and others to read of the treaty talks, accords, and concessions produced between

different nations. Both Fletcher and Belmore appropriate the wampum for their own purposes. Fletcher's *Relationship or Transaction* (2014) takes the Western Great Lakes Covenant Chain Confederacy Wampum Belt, given to 24 First Nations leaders by Sir William Johnson, as its starting point. In effect, settlers began to exchange wampum as financial currency rather than its intended use as a bearer of diplomatic agreements and a strengthen of intertribal relationships. By doing so, they not only transformed its usage but also disregarded the wampum belts' original purpose. Using five-dollar bills as purple beads and replica five-dollar bills as white beads, Fletcher deconstructs traditional wampum to reflect the monetary value settlers attributed to it. Ultimately, it's a powerful statement on cultural hybridity.

Belmore's *Investment* (2011) is a profound example of his signature stone carvings. In these works, he carves out stones so that they sinuously rest with each other. Belmore covers the hollowed-out spaces of the stones with copper, making a kind of connective tissue that appears as if embers from a fire. While *Investment* reads as more of a direct reference to the value of land, Dickenson and Myers have also included the work *Bridge* (2014), a wampum belt featuring colored and copper beading. It's a beautiful and strangely delicate appropriation of traditional wampum.

Though the exhibition has moved through several Southern Ontario art galleries and museums, including the Robert McLaughlin Gallery, the Art Gallery of Peterborough, and the MacLaren Art Centre, its recent iteration is perhaps one of the strongest. *Reading the Talk* provides evidence of Indigenous artists and their sustained—and expanding—relationships to the land. It also represents a deep commitment to understanding the ways in which historical events such as the Dish with One Spoon Treaty remain relevant and topical to contemporary art making, curating, museology, and, more generally, Indigenous ways of life.

—Matthew Ryan Smith, PhD

Norman, Oklahoma

**Enter the Matrix: Indigenous Printmakers**

Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art

**LOCATED ON THE CORNER** of Elm and Boyd, the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art is part of the bustling campus of the University of Oklahoma. Parking, always scarce on a campus, is available in the parking garage on Elm. Bring enough quarters to feed the meter for at least two hours.

Once we entered the *Matrix* exhibit, we were overwhelmed by the space and the large collection of art produced through all possible printmaking techniques. This one-of-a-kind exhibit brings together Indigenous artists from across the North American continent and beyond.

As you approach the west entrance to the museum, you are greeted by a rotund, winged sculpture, Fernando Botero's *Sphinx*. Pass through the doors and see the glowing red eyes of Luis Jiménez's *Mustang*, reared up, beckoning you to the stairs that grants access to the exhibition. Climb the first set of 30 stairs to enter the second-floor gallery of pottery and extraordinary jewelry that leads to the last set of 17 stairs, where bold black-on-white letters announce the exhibit: *Enter the Matrix: Indigenous Printmakers*. While there is an option to take the east-side elevator, it is not as dramatic to begin the show from the present day to the past.

If you begin your journey through the matrix from the stairs, you will encounter early early—20th-century artists Lois Smoky (Kiowa, 1907–1981); Stephen Mopope (Kiowa 1898–1974); Fred Beaver (Muscogee–Seminole, 1911–1980); Archie Blackowl (Southern Cheyenne, 1911–1992); Leonard (Black Moon) Riddles (Comanche, 1918–2003); and Woody Crambo (Potawatomi, 1912–1989). For those familiar with the iconic *artwork* and the history of Native American art, these pieces feel like a welcomed visit with old friends. *This beginning* exposure to early printed images will certainly prepare the viewer for the rich and expansive journey ahead.

The curators left no stone unturned in a comprehensive matrix of 86 prints by 67 artists—on the 1920s to today's contemporary, visual narratives. The exhibit is organized in a matrilineal array of rows and walls of chronological and geographical information about diverse Indigenous cultures. The curators selected themes of Gender Roles, Ceremonial Practice, Sustainability, Politics/Governance, and Landscape and Place, which can be explored in-depth through an online short course and a scheduled lecture series throughout the duration of the exhibit.

The prints selected for display are from the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art's permanent collections, including the James T. Bialas Native American Art Collection, and on loan from Crow's Shadow Institute of the Arts, Pendleton, Oregon; National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; and Melanie Yazzie's private collection, Boulder, Colorado.

The prints are a complete catalogue of printmaking matrices; pochoir, serigraphy, monotype, etching, intaglio, collography, lithography, and others that capture the interest of the viewer and appeal to patrons familiar with the processes and who appreciate the skill required to produce fine art prints. The process of printmaking demands adherence to strict rules of process: clean ink, plates, felt blankets, brushes, barons, brayers, rollers, and properly dampened stones and paper! It is a labor-intensive process, and a print can easily be ruined by carelessness with the materials. Though it is technically demanding, the rich textures, tonal quality, and the clean, defining lines that result from the time invested is a reward for not only the artist but also the viewer.

For those with limited knowledge of printmaking processes, the wall text provides information about each process that will enhance the viewer's overall experience. For instance, the production of multicolored prints can take several hours for each color per print pulled.

Joe Feddersen's *Okanagan-Sinixt Wyoming* (2003) is a six-color lithograph of a subdivision project on the Umatilla Indian Reservation in northeastern Oregon, built over an area where the