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**From the Selected Works of Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.**

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# Secwepemc Interdisciplinary Artist Tania Willard

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.



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# SECWPEMC INTERDISCIPLINARY ARTIST TANIA WILLARD

**T**ANIA WILLARD is an artist and graphic designer based in Chase, British Columbia, and a member of the Secwepemc Nation in the interior of British Columbia. Her artwork has been featured in numerous solo and group exhibitions throughout North America, and her work resides in the collections of the Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, Thompson Rivers University, and Kamloops Art Gallery. She has participated in artist residencies in Vancouver and the Banff Centre's Visual Arts Creative Residencies with the themes of "fiction" and "Trading Post." Willard is a former Aboriginal curator-in-residence at Kamloops Art Gallery and grunt gallery.

While at grunt gallery in 2008, Willard and Skeena Reece (Cree-Tsimshian-Gitksan) curated an online exhibition, *Beat Nation*, which grew into the major traveling exhibition, *Beat Nation: Art, Hip Hop and Aboriginal Culture*, produced by Vancouver Art Gallery and co-curated with Kathleen Ritter. From 2012 to 2014, the exhibition opened in cities across Canada. In 2016, Willard and Karen Duffek co-curated the solo exhibition, *Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun: Unceded Territories*, at the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology. That same year, Willard received the Hnatyshyn Foundation Award for Curatorial Excellence in Contemporary Art. I spoke with Willard to discuss her work and latest projects.

**MRS: When did your interest in art and visual culture began to flourish? Was it an "aha" moment, as they say, or was it gradual, more organic?**

TW: My work within the arts has been gradual, but one of my early memories around art making and thinking was courtesy of Daphne Odjig. When I still



Tania Willard. All images courtesy of the artist.

lived on my reserve in the late '70s—I do now as well, but during my teen years I lived in nearby small towns—a lot was going on in terms of Indigenous politics and resurgence. My aunty and uncle, who was chief of our reserve at the time, were talking about a recent meeting with Daphne Odjig, and I remember them mentioning that artists think differently. I was pretty young, maybe five years old, but it sticks in my memory. I knew I wanted to pursue creative work since I was an early teen, but growing up in a small town in BC with no role models, I had no idea what that meant. I did go to art school but really found my voice as an artist within anarchist and Indigenous politics. Now I think a lot of those earlier influences have come to a confluence, and I live and work back home on my reserve and take time in my work and life to value Indigenous art, politics, and lands. For me this is enacted as a project I call *BUSH gallery*.

**You've cited a childhood experience**

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**that profoundly changed your view of Indigenous art. You were selling fruit at a powwow when you saw kids breakdancing through the powwow. In your own words, "That was probably my first exposure to those ideas of what crossovers there could be between what we consider traditional and what we consider contemporary." Can you elaborate on these potential crossovers? Has this idea changed or evolved for you?**

Oh wow, yeah, this is a lifetime kind of question. Those dancers came through at Kamloopa Powwow, and I remember they did a blanket dance to collect money as they traveled around dancing. Thing was, at that time, most kids I knew at reservations near small BC towns were listening to alt-rock or metal and only just getting into hip-hop. It was a transitional time in many ways for my generation. Everything I do is linked to ideas of futurity and continuum, and this is in many ways a political decision that speaks to the presumed fate of extinction that many settlers expected, and that most Canadian government policies are based on. So centering our culture as cultures of the present and future is a reaction to that obscurity and extinction. I think "traditional" forms are important, but I question what the distinction between contemporary and traditional really is, both from within Indigenous communities but also thinking through contemporary art.

We can see ways in which Indigenous art was not part of the cultural landscape in Canada other than in museums and education and ways of positioning us in the past. So Indigenous art histories that speak to our artists who work in contemporary art become these places to question these distinctions, dislocations, and dismissals. I just make my way and my life through it. I center



*Ancestral Remains*, part of the *#haunted\_hunted* series, 2016, installation detail, wooden table, glass seed beads, porcelain cups and saucers.

and value my language, land, and family, and try to carry this through in different ways through my work.

**Can you talk about your experience growing up in Armstrong, British Columbia, as well as on the reserve? How do those experiences inform your current work?**

[Laughs] I don't know. Armstrong is a small town and was even smaller when I was growing up. It made me understand the almost complete erasure of Secwepemc presence in especially small towns in BC. We learned about "Indians" as far off in the North and eastern Ontario. It was rarely positioned that these towns were nearby or adjacent to reservations, or that our cultures had anything we could "learn" from in school. Now this seems completely bizarre. A generation before me, instead of erasure, Indigenous people struggled with more derogatory and directly racist experiences. However, that erasure made me want to reassert my presence as a Secwepemc person. Now I think conversations are shifting,

and sometimes people want to discuss more mixed heritage experiences or just make work and not be always qualified as Indigenous first in their artwork. But, for me, the tactic of visibility was and is important as a way of fighting erasure. I am also of mixed heritage. My mom's side of the family is Scottish/Irish and their connection to this land is also important to my experience and me. I do think it is important in some audiences and work to resist being placed in isolated categories as Indigenous and to talk more about intersectionality.

**As an artist, designer, and curator, how does this multidisciplinary approach blend and bleed into the others?**

After a few years of curatorial work, I felt disconnected to home and to Secwepemc experience. I had my first child and struggled to make enough money as a self-employed creative person, so I worked in these different modes. My role as a mother also felt disconnected to my curatorial and artwork. Now I resist moving to a city

to get a job as a curator or artist or designer. Thanks to the Internet, I can work from home, from my reserve. Being home and building a house on the land as well as having my children attend the immersion school in our language is fundamental to everything I do. Though I still work in these modes that are at times disconnected, I experiment with their synergy and possibility through *BUSH gallery*. At *BUSH gallery*, I invite artists and thinkers and audiences to work together to examine these ideas and hopefully create ideas to fill the gaps between these ways of working. I am interested in collapsing barriers and borders around how we work, where we work, and why we work as artists, etc. Though Indigenous artists are in some of the top galleries, these are spaces we are fitting into. What is an Indigenous model of a gallery? Are their points of possibility and overlap between birch bark harvesting and performance art or critical writing and farming? So *BUSH gallery* allows me to move in the liminal spaces and the gaps [where] I find the possibility of transformation.



*Staking Claim(s) #BUSH*, 2014, installation with land, land marking flags, land marking spray paint, cord, and stakes. A performative work for the grasshoppers, bees, hawks and whoever else may have been watching.

### What is the philosophy that drives your artistic practice?

It is just part of my impulse and instinct to appreciate and value and advocate for strong ideas, visions, and methods. I make my living with my work, and some of it is more enjoyable than the rest. I work hard, I try out ideas, and most of all I value the conversation and dialogue and ideas of my peers working in arts. I am trying to be more aligned with joy. I am joyful when I learn language, when I make things, when the ideas are relevant for other artists or community or even to my family or myself. I am also at times disillusioned, and the one thing I have faith in at those times is the power of the creative act—not all, though [laughs], but those moments when something—art, music, dance—speaks to your spirit.

### Do you have an intended audience?

I make things and have conversations, ideas, and actions, and they sort of land where they land in terms of an audience. However, I also was aware working in

the very white world of white-wall galleries that, even when I tried to work closer to home, getting people from Native communities to the gallery was a hard sell. I could spend my whole life doing that, but ultimately that only benefited the institution. Instead, I chose to ground myself in community and not always seek that through my art or curatorial practice. *BUSH gallery* is a bit of an experiment to take the gallery to community instead of always trying to get community to come to the gallery. I am interested in spaces of engagement, whether that is a community dinner, political rally, school, gallery, or the bush.

Earlier series such as *Claiming Space* and *Disparity* examine themes of Indigenous sovereignty and settler colonialism. In *Disparity*, you cast a series of baskets in resin, essentially plasticizing them forever, which conjures up themes of cultural preservation, dislocation, appropriation, and more. One work, *The Combo* (2012), emerges from a mentorship with Neskonlith basketry artist Delores Purdaby. Here you weave

a drink, fries, and burger container and 3D glasses using cedar root and birch bark. It's a dynamic take on consumer capitalism, waste, and exploitation; more so since the documentation of the work is shot against a forest background. How do you view your early works and projects, and how does your early work differ from your newer work?

That basketry work was the beginning of centering Secwepemc aesthetics and knowledge in my production as an artist and then as a curator in my later works in Kamloops Art Gallery. I see a very clear connection to moving back home, and *BUSH gallery* and other current projects are just a continuation of these interests. I am still learning about baskets, and they still form an important metaphor for my work. I speak about the *mimc* or birch bark basket as a container for my work as a mother, curator, artist, farmer, and more. This is also an effort to recenter the possibility of abundance, an effort of strength against a tide of colonial ideas that are always trying to push dystopia, which



*The Combo*, 2012, cedar root, birchbark, colored transparency, plastic tray. The outcome of a mentorship with Delores Purdaby (Neskonlith).

in some ways is a logical conclusion of a settler mindset.

**More recently, you've developed a collaborative series with the New BC Indian Art and Welfare Society Collective. As part of the project, you've created the hashtag #BUSHgallery to forge a kind of art gallery that is exactly that, the bush. Works in this series incorporate neon-orange marker flags, survey tape, stakes, and spray paint—all items that signify "development" of the land. It's powerful. How did this project come about, and what is the value of collaborative projects?**

This is the focus of my work lately; importantly, *BUSH gallery* is also on the reservation. I found myself working in ways in contemporary art that seemed to predicate participation with moving to cities and circulating in spaces where we are always minoritized. Although we have a pretty progressive picture

of Canadian contemporary art that centers on Indigenous art, the whole industry is built on Western art assumptions. I asked myself: What does an Indigenous-led model of a gallery look like? Key components surfaced: land pedagogy, interconnected or relational practices, intergenerational and matriarchal models, as well as ephemeral and collaborative work. Important in this project is to point to the structural exclusion of Indigenous lands as sites of significant cultural infrastructure and resource, which is why we often are moving to cities to find work as artists or in the cultural sector.

**Community-based initiatives are elemental to your work. For example, you've helped to create community murals, printmaking workshops, language-learning tools, and so forth.**

Collaborative and relational art practices are key in bringing a wider appreciation

and engagement with the arts into our communities. I seek to create spaces of intersection and collaboration between artists and nonartists in the same way that other specialized industries can serve publics. The science of art can bring many benefits to communities, and I believe in the power of art to speak to the spirit.

**How can artists and curators engage younger audiences in art and visual culture?**

The young ones are drawn to art. It is a driving force in pop and counterculture, so it is about creating invitation and engagement. Intergenerational approaches are important; this is an Indigenous model of engaging in creative practices and one that the rest of contemporary art can learn a lot about through Indigenous art.

**We often talk about our successes, but not enough emphasis is placed**



*Ghost Sickness*, 2007, woodblock print on paper, 1/1 ed.

on our failures. What, if anything, do you struggle with most when creating artwork?

I struggle with time! As a mom with two younger kids, time and focus really tax me. This is also why *BUSH gallery* is steadfastly on the side of Native feminisms that center the important work we do as Indigenous women in our families and communities. And this is said within a space of honoring all gender roles and nongendered spaces in our communities. I also struggle with the precarity of the work. We need more Indigenous curators and arts professionals in full-time, permanent positions. The flexibility of self-employed work is great but takes its toll. So, you know, a familiar artist's rant, time and money [laughs].

What are your hopes for contemporary Indigenous art in Canada?

First of all, I see it as going and [having] already gone beyond borders. Of course, the important work of Indigenous curators like Paul Chaat Smith, Candice Hopkins, Greg Hill, Daina Warren, Michelle LaVallee, David Garneau, Ryan Rice, and others have worked to internationalize Indigenous arts practices and exhibitions. I think we have already—and we will continue to—destabilize and transform the practice of contemporary art into a more engaged and relevant space for diverse communities. I would like to see an opening up wherein Indigenous art is contemporary art with the context of Indigeneity valued but not anthologized.

As a fellow curator, I'm interested in your methods and attitudes toward curating. What lessons did you take away from your experience curating *Beat Nation*?

Well, *BUSH gallery* is also a reaction to my experience as a curator, though I am thankful for my experiences. I also felt the pushback wherein an institution could have a large Indigenous-focused show, and then they could check the Native exhibition box and not return to it for a few years. This is cynical, but I think when our populations, politics, and land are still marginalized, it is also very real. I am interested in deepening my thinking and conversation about what curatorial practice means and what resonance it might have and not have in

our communities as well as in cities and galleries across the country. I also think understanding the previous generations' work and promoting a pedagogy of Indigenous creative practice is important to all art history.

**Mash-up or remix culture is a crucial aspect of our engagement with culture today. Curator Nicolas Bourriaud calls this idea *postproduction*. Certainly this was a central element of *Beat Nation* and much of contemporary Indigenous art produced in Canada today. What is the appeal?**

*Remix* was apparent in *Beat Nation*, but I don't really think of the show in that way, specifically because I really resist the idea of newness, like the young generation and the idea that we have new ideas, new media, and new ways of working. This is not in the postmodern sense, but more that I see many threads over time with the way our ancestor artists worked and think it is important to value this contribution and history. I see that our ancestors always did this, trading and incorporating other aesthetics, concepts, and practices where they had resonance in local community. I mean, this is really a human quality, and I think now to speak of spaces of intersectionality is potentially more generative. It gives us agency and freedom as opposed to the ways in which "museum quality" connoisseurship silo-ed our artistic production. Though I am really interested in relational and dialogical practices, I also understand them outside the art world context and the "coining" of ideas by Western curators, etc., as rooted in our experience and ways of being within Indigenous community. In some ways, we look to these critics to validate our ways of working, but I also want to be clear that validation within a local and Indigenous context is as valued to me as looking at the international, often Western-centric and predominantly white world of contemporary art.

**What does curating mean to you?**

Previously, I really focused on my responsibility to promote artists, their practices, and to facilitate a dialogue



**#Haunted\_Hunted**, ongoing series in collaboration with the New BC Indian Art and Welfare Society Collective that seeks to represent the pop culture reference of settler guilt via the "It's built on an Indian graveyard" plotline. Photo: Aaron Leon (Splatsin).

with their ways of working and concepts within an audience. Lately, and within the context of *BUSH gallery*, I am interested in disattenuating the borders between artists and curator. My curatorial space becomes an extension of my artistic process. I am careful, though, not to make this an exercise of ego where I am the center of this blurring of borders. I still feel a responsibility within the work but also embrace the space of both dialogue and individual reflection that prioritizes our relationship to land and resources, the basis of our futurity and the focus, or what I think should be the focus of transforming in terms of ideas about what we might be leaving our great-great-grandchildren.

**Who or what are your significant influences? What matters?**

I have a long list of influences: our extraordinary Indigenous ancestors, art aunties, contemporary art elders, and the support of our families to allow us to do the work we do. But what matters is how our work affects the communities and cultures around us. In this time of urgency in environment and politics, what matters is coming together, making art central in transforming the ways we organize ourselves and advocate for the futures we want to make reality.

**What projects are you working on now?**

*LandMarks2017* is a project that is an exciting extension for me to think about the concepts I put into practice at *BUSH gallery*. Though I am in a more formal role as curator, the artists and lands I am working with are deeply inspiring. And the project is associated with Canada 150. I also continue to enact *BUSH gallery*, and I invite *BUSH gallery* conversations and the viral potential of the idea: How do you imagine galleries in your home communities, on and off reservation and rural or city based?

I have several public art projects and am finishing graduate school with a focus on a project called *Anthro(a)pologizing*. Drawing from multiple anthropological sources that framed Secwepemc culture, language, and governance, my thesis work for grad school will explore specific sites of obscuring the ethnographic gaze. I also have a piece in and was invited to do some writing for *Connective Tissue: New Approaches to Fiber in Contemporary Native American Art* at MoCNA [IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Arts] that opens in July 2017.

**TANIAWILLARD.CA**