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

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By Matthew Ryan Smith, PhD

A VISUAL ARTIST FROM STEPHENVILLE CROSSING, KTAQAMKUK (Newfoundland), Jordan Bennett examines historical and popular culture, new media, customary expressions, politics, and Mi'kmaq cultural practices through his artwork. Bennett recently completed a master of fine arts degree from the University of British Columbia, Okanagan, with special attention to Mi'kmaq and Beothuk art, visual culture, and histories. During the process of earning this degree, Bennett made concerted attempts to revisit sites of Beothuk and Mi'kmaq settlement across the Canadian province of Ktaqamkuk by both physical and aesthetic means. What he found was that most of the historical documentation pertaining to the Beothuk and Mi'kmaq peoples he encountered was mired with conventional colonial-settler narratives, which tended to obscure the objective truth surrounding his ancestry and cultural heritage. In response, Bennett's work in recent years has dually scrutinized these and other colonial narratives while contributing to the unfolding histories of Beothuk and Mi'kmaq peoples in Ktaqamkuk.

Bennett's 2016 thesis exhibition, *Mniku*, which translates to *island* in Mi'kmaw, featured several hand-carved items in addition to paintings, drawings, and interactive sound installations. Here, each work fundamentally represented the island of Ktaqamkuk and appropriated known Mi'kmaq and Beothuk iconography and design to deconstruct entrenched European notions of "time and space."¹ In effect, *Mniku* sought to shift conventional narratives surrounding Mi'kmaq and Beothuk peoples by translating various historical-visual materials into present-day artistic discourse, thus reanimating them with new life.

The history of the Beothuk people of Ktaqamkuk remains an underdeveloped area of study and is often misrepresented in the historical record, particularly because of its encounters with colonial-settler source material. That being said, some believe that Beothuk communities may have violently clashed with European settlers as a result of encroachment on traditional territory, or died from exposure to new diseases and illnesses brought from Europe. Bennett's research bluntly states that the Beothuk were looked upon with despondency, even pity, by European settlers who recognized the myriad ways that led to the suffering of their communities. He is also quick to note how, as often occurs, other Indigenous communities were blamed, in this case the



Jordan Bennett. Photo: Candace Kennedy. All images courtesy of the artist.

Mi'kmaq, who were said to have hunted down the Beothuk, yet no credible evidence for this exists today.² Nevertheless, today, Indigenous peoples of Newfoundland are wholly involved in reclaiming colonial narratives to make better sense of the historical record of their people.

Bennett's work has been shown extensively across Canada and internationally, in venues such as the Museum of Art and Design, New York; the IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, Santa Fe; the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, Toronto; Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal; l'Institut du monde arabe, Paris; and the Vancouver Art Gallery. In 2015, Bennett was one of two artists to represent Newfoundland and Labrador at the prestigious Galleria Ca' Rezzonico during the Venice Biennale in Italy. He has also been long-listed twice for Canada's Sobey Art Award, in 2015 and 2016. Moreover, the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council presented Bennett with its Artist of the Year award.

I had the pleasure of corresponding with Bennett this past fall.

MRS: Thank you for being open to this interview, Jordan. I'd like to begin with the first time I ever saw your work in the flesh, so to speak. I was writing an exhibition review of *Beat Nation: Art, Hip Hop, and Aboriginal Culture at the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery in Toronto for *Blouin Artinfo Canada*. It was certainly one of the*



Turning Tables, 2010, sound installation, walnut, oak, spruce, electronics, 8 x 36 x 16 in. Photo: Mark Bennett

strongest shows I've ever seen. During my walkabout, I stumbled upon *Turning Tables*, a 2010 work comprised of turntables made from different woods with a needle that plays tree rings through speakers, in addition to a recording of you attempting to speak Mi'kmaq words and phrases. It was a clear standout among exceptional works. I was struck by how you translated the material of another being—in this case, a tree—into soundwaves using a contemporary instrument.

What is your aesthetic philosophy—what guides your work?

JB: Thank you for taking the time to interview me, Matthew. My work is guided by multiple influences depending on the work, its purpose, audience, and location it is being shown. A starting point for much of my work is to find a common thread between my own visual aesthetics and the message I want to visualize through my work. Most often it is rooted in home, Ktaqamkuk, and our strong visual culture as Mi'kmaq people. My art forms span multiple materials, but they always stem from home.

From these early works to today, how has your work changed and evolved? I ask because it appears that you've begun to incorporate current design elements with

established, more conventional sculptural techniques. These appear less influenced by pop culture and more informed by Mi'kmaq and Beothuk cultural knowledge. For example, in the exhibition *Mniku* at the Vernon Public Art Gallery, you carved and painted works in yellow cedar that represent the island of Newfoundland. As I understand it, these works take Mi'kmaq and Beothuk visual material and accelerate them into the present day.

I would say that it has grown and evolved to include a wider arrangement of visual forms and aesthetics. The work you mention in the exhibition *Mniku*—although it does look quite different than my earlier sculptural work, it's still strongly rooted in my research and my overall practice that aims to find new ways to understand my familial and ancestral history as a Mi'kmaw person. Pop culture is still a strong influence for me. I draw inspiration from it daily and try to blur the lines between my pop culture influences and influences that date back hundreds, if not thousands of years through our visual culture. I have new works that I have just completed and others that I am working on that blur the lines even more between my past work and my more current painting-based works.

Clearly your work is heavily engaged in the Mi'kmaq and Beothuk historical record. I'd like to know how

1. Jordan Bennett, "Ktaqamkuk: Remembering and Re-Imagining our Relations," (master's thesis, Sir Wilfred Grenfell College, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2008).
2. Ibid.



Mawpile'n (Tie it Together), 2016, acrylic on aluminum panel.

you are engaging with Mi'kmaq and Beothuk histories. Particularly, how are you conducting research and translating it into the stuff of aesthetics?

My work is deeply rooted in research, but also, I spend a great deal of time and energy engaging in hands-on practices, learning art forms, analyzing color theory, and studying mark-making techniques in historical objects. I've been very honored to have had opportunities to visit cultural objects from Ktaqamkuk in various museums across Canada, and to spend valuable time with them. Getting the time to visit these objects from home gave me a chance to study the similarities and differences between Mi'kmaq and Beothuk visual culture, research that I am building on with each and every piece that I create.

Playing with shapes, designs, and motifs from each respective nation is allowing me to see the untold and sometimes forgotten shared histories of the Mi'kmaq and our relations with the Beothuk.

It's interesting to hear artists speak about their relationship with the specific localities and regions where they grew up. I assume this is an important element in anyone's identity, something that they carry with them regardless of how near or far they exist to that seminal place. Do you ever consider the ways in which growing up in Stephenville Crossing [a coastal town of 1,950] plays into your work? Newfoundland is clearly an influence, but what is it specifically that calls you?

Where I grew up influences much of my work. I loved growing up there. It was a rough town and is still known that way today. I had a great childhood, and in turn I feel that the experiences I had there are what fuel a lot of my current work. Growing up in a community where going out ice fishing, moose hunting, and being on the land is just a normal thing leads you to take it for granted as a universal experience. As an artist, I like to explore those relationships with where I grew up, by creating, transforming, and bringing those experiences into an art gallery for others to engage.



Ice Fishing, 2014, multicomponent installation: multichannel video, parabolic speakers with audio, sculptural installation, 3D animation. Produced with the National Film Board of Canada, imagineNATIVE Film, and Media Arts Festival. Contributors: Jennifer Moss, Dana Dansearu, Dru Kennedy, Mark Neary; Amy Malbeuf, Vincent McCurley, and G. Bennett. Photo: Dru Kennedy.

In sticking with this theme of identity, of community, and of place, I'd like to ask you, who is your audience? Perhaps, who is your ideal audience?

I think my audience is anyone that wants to take the time to visit with the work. When I create a new work, I always have in mind our youth, the future generations of Mi'kmaq, our future artists. I hope that the work I am creating and the research that I am doing will make it just a little bit easier for them to create work without needing to justify that the visual culture that they are using is ours. I really enjoy working with youth and giving them the opportunity to explore new possibilities, new ways of seeing the world, and in turn helping them in some small way see more open doors for their future.

As a curator and educator, the question of community (and particularly youth engagement) is always at the forefront of my work. As an artist who engages with various forms and tropes of popular culture—hip hop, social media, DJ-ing, and so on, what are the ways in which art and visual culture can inspire youth and get them interested in the world?

Art can have such an amazing impact on youth, and through tools like hip hop, popular culture, and social media, it can be an outlet, an entry point to really grab their attention. Being able to engage in artistic dialogue by relating to something you are seeing, to see yourself in the artwork, can be the first step to truly feeling like you belong or that you can share your own voice through these tools. Art has always been a means of asserting our identities in the world as Indigenous people; it allows us to reach back into time and communicate with our ancestors.

What's the best advice you ever received?

Wow, that's a big one. I would have to say that it's to treat everyone the way that you wish to be treated. To walk lightly on the earth in order to move forward in a good way.

As someone who is currently curating exhibitions of contemporary art produced by Indigenous artists from Canada, it would be wonderful to have you say a few words on where you think Indigenous art in Canada is heading. Where do you perceive its trajectory into the next 100 or 500 years?



Artifact Bags (Giant Tiger), 2013, pyrography on moose hide, sinew, 10 × 12 × 6 in. Photo: Tony Mamer. Giant Tiger is a Canadian chain discount store.

You're throwing down some good ones here, Matthew! Indigenous art will continue to grow and allow us to grow. Our people will keep making work that positions us as living, growing, and ever-changing cultures, not something to be viewed as stagnant. We will keep breaking down the stereotypes that have been placed upon our people for the past centuries, and we will play our part in changing the world through creating, learning, and knowing that art, language, and [cultural practices] are inseparable from one another. Our art will continue to lead the way, our people's names will be common household names, and our messages through art will resonate far past 500 years. I have huge hopes for the future of Indigenous art in Canada and its impact.

Artists, like other professions, don't exist in a vacuum. The impact of that which comes from outside cannot be ignored. It's a question that's not asked enough: Who are your key influences? What music or books or artists are informing your life and work right now?

My key influence can vary from day to day. I am constantly drawing inspiration from other artists like Lori Blondeau, Rebecca Belmore, Adrian Stimson, Amy Malbeuf, Dean Hunt, Jerry Evans, Amanda Strong, and so many more. I recently finished my MFA at University of British Columbia, Okanagan, where I was introduced to countless inspirational

texts and amazing Indigenous writers. Over the past year or so, I have tried my hardest to just visit with others and not get stuck into text too much. Music is a constant influence. I listen to music that spans from hip hop to powwow, from contemporary Indigenous artists like Tanya Tagaq and A Tribe Called Red to Louis Armstrong or Parliament. I'm really all over the board and open to anything that catches my ear. I always have music on when I'm creating.

I often ask artists this because it's often one of the most revealing questions pertaining to their practice, and sometimes even to their life more generally: What do you struggle with most in your practice?

Staying in one place and slowing down. I've been working nonstop, and it's difficult to take time away from art and art-related things. I'm learning to do this more and more.

Now, somewhat of a different approach: What do you feel is the most successful work you've created? Is there or can there be such a thing? Is failure part of the success?

Dang, I don't know what that would be... I don't know if there is one, but I feel that each time I make a new work, I learn more about myself. I know that I always feel most proud of works that I make that involves my family. Failure is definitely part of the success. Some artworks break me down



Nisqunamu'k Kmtn (Purple Mountain), 2016, acrylic on carved wood panel, 36 × 36.

physically and emotionally, because I put so much of myself into them, but it always seems that the next time I create a work, it's just a little easier.

Lastly, I'm curious to know of your current projects. What are you currently working on, and where is it being shown?

I just opened a couple of shows and did some new performances. I did a performance recently called *Samqwan/Nipty* in collaboration with Lori Blondeau in Mi'kma'ki [historical Mi'kmaq territory], Prince Edward Island. We held a feast on the last day of the Artist-Run Centres and Collectives Conference, Flotilla. We collected water from the ocean to cook lobster for everyone. It was a beautiful experience.

Another piece that I just completed was a new mural in the city of Winnipeg as part of the exhibition *Insurgence/*

Resurgence at the Winnipeg Art Gallery and the Wall-to-Wall Festival. At the same exhibition, I performed as part of the Earthline Tattoo Collective alongside Amy Malbeuf and Dion Kaszas. We did Indigenous tattooing in the gallery. That show is open until mid-2018.

I just finished another commissioned piece titled *Aosamia'jij (Too Much Too Little)* that is en route to the National Museum of the American Indian [George Gustav Heye Center] in New York City. It's a new sculptural, sound, and photo installation that will be part of an upcoming exhibition, *Transformer: Native Art in Light and Sound*. I will also have my artwork *Herd: Heard* as part of the exhibition at MAC VAL [Musée d'art contemporain du Val-de-Marne] in Paris, France. It's been a busy couple of months!