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

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Algonquin Interdisciplinary Artist Nadia Myre

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.

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**ALGONQUIN MEMBER** of the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg First Nation, Nadia Myre has fast become one of Canada’s most important contemporary artists. Since 2011, Myre has been long-listed for the Sobey Art Award, Canada’s premier contemporary art prize. In 2018, she made the short list of candidates. 1 On November 19, Myre was awarded the $50,000 prize at the Winnipeg Art Gallery.

Myre is a graduate of Camosun College (1995), Emily Carr University of Art and Design (1997), and Concordia University (MFA, 2002). Her work is in numerous private and public collections, including the National Gallery of Canada, Musée de la Civilization, and the National Museum of the American Indian. Admires for her work have reached the New York Times, the Washington Post, and Canadian Art magazine. Her aesthetic and intellectual interests are eclectic, but her most popular work engages her Indigenous identity, the communicative potential of language, and themes of loss and redemption. I had the opportunity to discuss past works and upcoming projects with Myre by phone in late fall.

I’d like to begin by discussing when you and your mother claimed Native status in 1997, which is certainly a transformative event. How did it affect both your work and your life?

One thing that happened was I had completed my master’s degree in 1997. When you’re in a master’s program, you spend a lot of time thinking about what art is, what art is for, and art in relation to what. So I started thinking about what it meant for me to be Native, how do I identify to that community, or identify as having that identity, although I wasn’t growing up in that community necessarily. Over the years, one of the things that I’ve realized is that it was a common experience for Aboriginal people like myself, either because of residential school or a number of other factors. To be alien to one’s own identity is common.

**Is it fair to say it was creatively liberating?**

It definitely created a rich focus. At that time, I was already focused on work related to language and sexualization and the power of language. The latter had been my previous focus in a way. When I finally came to Concordia University to do my master’s, I had also been accepted into a sculpture program, but I hadn’t ever made sculpture; that was another challenge. So, it was kind of like I want to make sculpture because I’m in this program, and I want to engage with my Native identity, but for me the answer was to learn how to create, how to make things that are about Native identity: learning how to sew, how to bead, how to make a birch bark canoe, how to make other artifacts or tools—drums, rattles, snowshoes—and learn how to do it in a traditional way, with a crooked knife and with limited tools.

Collaboration is also an important component of your practice, and some of your work is as much a social process as it is an aesthetic one. Evidence of this idea can be found in The Scar Project (2005–2013) and some of your site-specific works, even Indian Act (2000–2002), a beadwork covering 56 pages of the annotated Indian Act, where letters of the law are replaced with red and white glass seed beads. Is that a fair assessment, and what is it about collaboration, the sharing, and exchange between people, that interests you?

Early on in my practice, I wasn’t a strong collaborator. People reference me having involved 250 people beading in the Indian Act as a collaborative process, but for me it wasn’t a collaboration, because a collaboration involves more going on—actual decisions happening together, or relationships to each other. Beading the Indian Act was more about having people participate.

My collaborator for the Indian Act was curator Rhonda Meter. She was the collaborator in that she said, “Why don’t you make it a public project?” In the beginning I didn’t have a desire to do that, and she said, “I want to be a leader, and I want to ensure that other people are leading as well, and I’ll help you do that,” and so we collaborated in that way, by making it public. Later we went to Concordia and other places in order to talk about the project and workshop it with the people there—but perhaps workshop isn’t the right word either. As I continue in my practice, it is becoming more and more collaborative. I’m looking to work with people in different ways, and there are more opportunities with people. There are participating opportunities. So my practice may be involved in collaboration, but I think a lot of it is more about participatory environments. And I should mention that The Scar Project isn’t collaborative either. The collaboration only happens when I have five or six students in my studio helping me to archive it.

In The Scar Project, you invited participants to sew a representation in fiber and thread of a physical, emotional, psychological, or spiritual scar they may have experienced during some moment in their lives, and write out an accompanying narrative. The results are intimate, poignant, and quite beautiful. What stands out for me is the restorative power of sharing trauma with others, regardless of its anonymity. Would you agree?

Absolutely. I think every time we tell our story, whatever that story is, there is a restorative power embodied in the tone of it. Part of the interest for me was that, as I grew up, thinking that if people could just share their things, you know, it wouldn’t be so bad. [Laughs]
in The Forgiveness Project, the voices represent sort of culprits in a way, inflectors of suffering. No? Would you say that's accurate?

Yes, I think I would say that. But there’s also the idea that we have the ability to recognize, on our own, the way that we hurt others.

Which seems to be another aspect of this restorative idea. To this end, loss and suffering mark several of these projects. What is it exactly that makes loss and suffering so conducive to art and representation?

Well, I don’t speak for everybody. Other people’s stories are other people’s story. I think that it’s kind of fundamental. It’s all about growing as humans. From the moment we are born, we are in a state of loss. And then, the question becomes: How do you accept that, and how do you integrate that into your life? There’s always these challenges that happen throughout life, which are the highs and lows of life, which are all about learning how to grow.

Catharsis appears to play such a fundamental role here, no?

Yes, I think so, and also contemplation.

That’s a great addition as well. Can you talk a little about For Those Who Cannot Speak … (2013)? Specifically, how it was manifested at the National Gallery of Canada, and how it factored into the beginnings of the Idle No More movement?

That piece has many starting points, and I had been working on it before Idle No More. The work at the National Gallery of Canada is a photograph of an existing belt, which is 34 feet long and about four or five inches wide. I had been working on that belt, and I had created a loom (or reconfigured a loom) that I was working with, adapting it in such a way that there were infinite spools of thread, or, they weren’t literally [laughs], but they were much longer than you would usually have on a loom. So, the only reason the piece is off the loom is because I needed a piece for an exhibition. I didn’t even want to take it off the loom … I wanted to make it larger. But then I was asked to create a new work for the Sakahàn exhibition [at the National Gallery of Canada]. I felt it would be a good work to show.

At the same time, I had been interviewed for somebody’s film, and I had said something in the film, and people came up to talk to me after they had seen the film. I was introduced to these Grandmothers who lived close to my community, in Maniwaki. Some of them were living in the bush there, living in their traditional hunting grounds, and being threatened by bulldozers that were clear-cutting the forest for the paper industry in Québec. And I became active in the group as much as I could by creating a large banner for them, helping them stage a protest, and creating a soundtrack that sounded like people cutting down trees.

In meeting them, I was able to reconnect with people in one way, because that’s the other thing—I don’t feel that I have family on the reserve at all. Sure, I have a few uncles, but they’re not close. It’s as if you were adopted, and then you had children, then those children went back to the source. So, I heard about these women, I helped stage this protest, and I had heard that they had these things going from one reserve to another to talk about Stephen Harper’s omnibus bill2 to say why it was a bad idea. They also staged walk-ins, where they walked from community to community, and one of the things they did in January of 2013, I believe, was that they walked to Ottawa and made a public declaration, and in that declaration was the phrase, "We are saying this for those who cannot speak."

2. In Canada, the Idle No More movement was a reaction to Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s omnibus bill, specifically Bills C-38 and C-45, which proposed substantial changes to environmental laws. In effect, the bills restructure the protection of waterways belonging to Indigenous peoples, particularly the Navigable Waters Protection Act, which revoked lakes and streams from governmental protection. Much of the criticism arose from the fact that Indigenous groups were not consulted.
I asked them if I could use that phrasing for the work, because the work was, in a way, monumental in my mind, and I wanted to give and do things that created a space where their declaration wasn’t forgotten, but could at least exist in another way, or be talked about in another way, not just by the actions of staging a protest.

Long story short, that was how the title came to that work. And they agreed, and then they invited me to their language camp that they did, with children too. It was really nice. What’s even more interesting is that I asked for the statement to be next to the work, so that there was a strong relationship between the statement and the work.

The [National] Gallery [of Canada] put up a statement, their own statement, saying that the views of the artist do not reflect upon the gallery in any way. Even though I was trying to marry those two, the gallery tried to unpoliticize my actions.

My next question is closely related to your last point: What other challenges or limitations have you encountered throughout your practice? How has this helped you change or develop your approach, your thought practice, and your methodology?

Truthfully, one of the things that I’ve noticed in my short 15 years as an artist is communicating is important. I remember that I created an exhibition called Cont(r)act at Oboro Gallery in Montreal. That’s where the Indian Act work comes from and the History in Two Parts (1999)—half birch bark, half aluminum canoe—and Portrait in Motion (2002), with me padding that same canoe, a sculpture called Grandmother’s Circle (2002), and another video called Wish (2002). So there’s quite a lot of works there, but they became pivotal in a way and affective.

When I created that exhibition, communicating was important for me, and I thought I had delivered a clear message. Yet, what I noticed was that when people came from elsewhere to see it, they said, “Oh, she speaks a Native language,” “What language is the Indian Act translated in?” even though it was just a redaction of language. I felt like I had failed.

The challenge of trying to communicate things is clearly one that is set up for failure, in a way, when you’re working with an individual, fiber-based practice as I am. My answer was to try and be more general, in a way, or to make the messages less specific. Although, the Indian Act works on different levels for different people. Non-Native uses may be different than Native uses, so there’s that, too, being open enough to interpretations from different communities’ optics.

I’d like to shift directions here for a moment. Can you talk about your influences, your inspirations?

My mother was a big influence and continues to be so. And finally, do you have any future projects planned?

Sure, it’s a pretty busy time for me. I have a new exhibition at Oboro Gallery, the Sobey Art Award show at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, and, if all goes well, I hope to go to Africa for an exhibition there.