



Main Space

Xpace Cultural Centre
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Tuesday-Saturday 12-6
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*so consider as you live your days, that we live ours under the gaze
of generations watching us
of generations still in act
of generations still to be
seven forward,
seven back*

-Thomas King, *I'm Not the Indian You Had in Mind*¹

***waabandiwag* curated by Natalie King**

Monique Aura, Aylan Couchie, Kadrah Mensah, Karalyn Reuben, Curtia Wright

October 18 – November 16, 2019

waabandiwag (Anishaabemowin) / ***they see each other*** (english translation²) calls upon tenderness, joy, radical love, pleasure and ancestral knowledge. through our collective consciousness, intersections, and shared lived experiences, *waabandiwag* seeks to create partnerships of intergenerational healing and our projections of the future, as informed by where we find joy and love. *waabandiwag* celebrates our resiliency, confirms our creativity, and re-inscribes QTBIPOC women and femmes as leaders, who have always been at the forefront of our collective cultural histories.

waabandiwag is an attempt in what we hope will be a continuing collection of collaborative stories and an ever-broadening back and forth between female- and femme-identified BIPOC folks, focused on the love, support and connection that

¹ Thomas King, *I'm Not the Indian You Had in Mind*, directed and written by Thomas King (2007; Ontario:

² John Nichols, ed. "Waabandiwag," *The Ojibwe People's Dictionary*, 2015, <https://ojibwe.lib.umn.edu/main-entry/waabandiwag-vai>.

QTBIPOC women and femmes experience with each other within our communities. Through this essay, I believe in the artists' ability to speak to their own works and intentions, and I prioritize their ability for the artists and their works to speak for themselves. *waabandiwag* seeks to provide an entryway into dismantling Western cultural and art historical notions of what our art is and how we speak to these works.

Monique Aura is a Onyota'a:ka (Oneida) artist, currently based in Tkaronto. Through her art practice, Aura uses mixed media, beadwork, mural work, and digital illustration to discuss intergenerational healing, identity, and mothering. She looks to community to collectively explore personal storytelling and truth sharing. In her work *Constellations of Scars*, Aura speaks to self-passion, reflection and ancestral healing through picking. Through her journey Aura has used the act of picking her skin to soothe anxiety and redirect stress. Aura describes that the work is “about healing and unpacking the things I carry, and that my mom and grandmother has carried” through her interest in personal story telling.³

In two canvases hung together in the middle of the gallery, Aura shows us her scars, mapping out the connections of these scars as constellation, with tactile materials such as beads and thread. Connecting one scar to the other, she shares with us and tells us her story through these large illustrative prints of her body. Aura views this work as ancestral healing as well as harm reduction, describing that “the picking has saved my life and has been a coping mechanism. I’m doing the healing work. So, if you think about that in those terms it’s like, this is how I shift my focus from self-hatred to self-love. Because it is more about the light, the stars, the beads.”⁴

Aura reflects on her practice as well, sharing that she began her portraiture series because she “wanted to convey empowerment through the vast history of Indigenous peoples” as “we all come from different histories, we speak different languages,

³ Monique Aura, in discussion with the author Natalie King, October 2019.

⁴ Ibid.

everything is different, it's not all one way.”⁵ Aura gives the portrait participants “the power to decide how they are represented” with the starting point of consulting how one wants to be seen.⁶ The collaborative nature of her works emphasize questions of coming together in ways that are meaningful to our peoples, and in a full circle moment of coming into her own, Aura is also doing this for herself in this work.⁷

Community is demonstrated-ly one of the most integral parts of Aura’s work - she is all about sharing knowledge, reciprocity and learning. “We want all of our people to succeed, that is where community is. Like what do you want to do? What do you need? I love to be a support person in that role. Even though I’m still learning so much I love to be able to create these spaces for people to be able to do what they want. Because they are usually many barriers and how can we shift that and tear the barriers down so we can continue to do that good work and uplift one another.”⁸ This relates to Aura’s own healing journey, because sharing with others is also a part of her healing process. The work is just as much personal storytelling as it is sharing stories from community to community. Aura adds that, “the journey is challenging and difficult and exhausting but it’s really important work that we are all doing and I don’t want to do anything else.”⁹

Aylan Couchie is an Anishinaabe interdisciplinary artist and writer from Nipissing First Nation, her art practice consists of exploring the various intersecting histories of First Nations stories of place and culture, as well as researching and investigating issues of cultural appropriation.

Couchie’s Installation *Noondam na? (do you hear?)*, consists of one hand drum mounted on the wall, approximately 16-18” in size. The drum is wrapped in fabric. Embroidered into the drum is the visual transcription/pattern of sound waves of protests world wide, that have been led by Indigenous women and their songs. These

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

women are all here, singing sounds about the water, the future, the land. Layering the sound waves over each other on the drum in thread with various colours such as red, yellow, orange, Couchie reminds us that Indigenous sovereignty is global. “Across the world, Indigenous Nations fight for their rights, their land and their waters. From New Zealand to Standing Rock, Hawaii to Brazil - *Noondam na?* invites you to take in the layered voices of five Nations gathered in protest and song. Though separated by oceans and thousands of miles, their hearts drum in unison with the earth and each other as they fight for their sovereignty, and, in doing so, our collective futures in a time of climate crisis.”¹⁰ The audio component of the piece focuses on the songs from all of these protest actions, compiled and layered on top of one another. The voices are Sami, Samoan, Maori, and Anishinaabemowin. Couchie plays the audio component for me and I mention that it sounds like one song, rather than its reality of several songs spanned out across the world in different languages. This piece pays homage to Indigenous water and land protectors across the globe.

“I think it’s interesting that each component is done in the language, they are each singing their Indigenous languages, so I think it also responds to the year of Indigenous Language well, International Indigenous language.”¹¹ Couchie adds, “I think there is a real beauty in having a conversation about this urgency we are all feeling right now in terms of climate change and Indigenous sovereignty running so close hand in hand,” in particular, noting the recent destruction of the Amazon forest.¹² “There is an urgency in the audio file, but also beauty in that. With Standing Rock, there was barely any mainstream media coverage even though it was huge. So, it’s these voices are urging to be heard, and the amplification of that.”¹³ Couchie in her work is speaking to the strength of the drum, amplification of voices and urgency. “I think we need to think of our art globally, not only in terms of our own sovereignty but the sovereignty of other nations worldwide” and I tend to agree.¹⁴

¹⁰ Aylan Couchie, in discussion with the author Natalie King, October 2019.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Curtia Wright is a multi-disciplinary artist who primarily works through mural and painting. Wright is interested in the way societies perceptions of black bodies and how their narratives have been made without consent. Curtia Wrights' works delve into the spiritual and mental health of African peoples and the connection to mythology, while also disseminating what 'fantasy' is and whom it belongs to.

In *Retravel* Wright explains her connection to identity and the act of splitting and repair, conveying reconfiguring identity. Wright speaks to her work as metaphor, as a garden, with the emphases of death as an identity shifting, and of re-birth or growth as an identity forming or becoming strengthened. Wright explains that "our bodies are in constant states of undoing and repair" and that this work "shows the splitting of the body while simultaneously being sutured and pulled together."¹⁵ For Wright, "there is a beauty in these acts of splitting and repair; we create our own universes, our own gardens, and ultimately our own realities."¹⁶ The work is a love letter to herself, "a reminder that identity is not static, to be accepting of and embracing love, to connect with my past, to heal and to give myself time."¹⁷

In this installation, a figure floats in the corner space of the gallery, painted on dyed canvas, which is loosely woven. It is woven so large so that Wright can take it apart at the seams as material evidence of the splitting of identity. Wright has also added charms, all of personal significance, including a skeleton key from her grandfather. Wright explains the significance of this piece within her own practice: "With this piece, and other pieces I've worked on. I touch on performing femininity and what it means to me, and how a lot of my identity was formed without my own jurisdiction, like everyone picking apart how I look or dress or how I performed, they kind of informed my identity without me. My work is taking back my position in the world and why I felt like I had to perform how I expected to."¹⁸

¹⁵ Curtia Wright, in discussion with the author Natalie King, October 2019.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

In *Retravel* Wright questions her positionality, reflecting on the fact that who she was perceived as throughout most of her life was never who she really was. Wright is undoing identity and in her own terms. We discuss the importance of place, and the times in these spaces in which we never quite feel ourselves, anyway. Wright shares that “I’ve always questioned where I belong within different spectrums of identity, I’m starting to realize you don’t really belong anywhere. Your identity is non-linear. Nothing is static or placed, that’s why I really like the fabric I’m painting on, because it’s breaking and then coming together.”¹⁹ This piece is emotional for Wright in that it brings together many themes that she has sought to take up in her work but to date, had not had the opportunity to.

Kadrah Mensah is an interdisciplinary artist, with origins from Ghana and Trinidad & Tobago. Mensah is often focused on the integration of art, technology, and culture to expand on representations of queer black identities.

Kiki Kanboulay is Kadrah Mensah’s journey through queer black existence. Mensah explains that this is not a recent manifestation. “We have always been celebrated. In Haitian Vodoun, we are reflected and protected by the Ezili Iwa. In Trinidad, I see us in the *Jamette*, the name given to a socially deviant person condemned for their fearless sexual expression and rebellion against colonial rules. Linking these histories to our present-day existence, I see rebellion in the underground spaces we use as sites of celebration for our continued will to exist.”²⁰

In Mensah’s installation *KiKi Kanboulay*, Mensah uses a vanity to portray a queer black person reflecting on the self, and more specifically, how the self is linked to past and present histories. Above is a video, in which Mensah documents the process taken to transform into Kiki Kanboulay, a drag queen, whom she herself is portraying. KiKi starts bare faced, and begins to add make-up, glitter, and a wig, making herself up while listening to a variety of Caribbean and house music. Her make up style derives from typical carnival make up, with the exaggerated flare of drag. KiKi takes

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Kadrah Mensah, in discussion with the author, October 2019.

selfies and enjoys the act of getting ready. Whether KiKi is preparing for a stage performance or to participate in carnival remains ambiguous. The line between carnival and ball culture are intentionally blurred to show how similar these practices are.

We speak about the significance of underground culture to queer black existence. “I started looking into Vodou and Voudon, it something in both my cultures that was always taboo, and seen as fearful. I found these Ezili figures, referencing things about protecting queer people, and surpassing gender binaries. This one character, Ezili Freda, was subverting femininity and owning her sexuality. And it made me start to think about rebellious women figures, I started reflecting on the term, which is Trinidadian/French term called ‘Jamette’. It’s a derogatory term, almost like slut. It came from slavery in Trinidad and it was around when slavery was being abolished and these women, around carnival time, would go off, being sexual showing their bodies, having fun, dancing.”²¹ These women were seen as debaucherous because they were anti-colonial.

Mensah and I speak about the significant link between carnival and the Jamette and Vodoun characters, and how this spirit has carried ²²on: “Ezili Dantour (one if the Ezili characters) always has a mirror with her. So, I liked the idea, of looking at yourself. There’s shame connected to looking at yourself and admiring yourself. I think as a queer person you need to. That’s the spirit I see in carnival, I am rebellious, I am free. I am free to express myself, and that how I feel when I am in carnival, I am limitless.”

Karalyn Reuben is an urban mixed Oji-Cree German-British artist, based in London Ontario. Reuben is uncovering her Oji-Cree identity through learning and knowledge. In furthering her knowledge based in her current research, and in receiving traditional

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

teachings from her father she has come to understand concepts of Anishinaabe knowledge.

maškawīman (*it is powerful*), is a part of an ongoing series of self-portraits. In *maškawīman*, Karalyn Reuben reflects on her ancestors. Reubens' connections, tied and re-tied, culminate in conveying the small moments in recognizing yourself within your culture and the power of intergenerational knowledge. Reuben discusses the work: "I've captured this ephemeral moment of myself in the act of smudging. Inviting the viewer into this private practice, showing this act of self-care and self-love, with ancestors behind me since time immemorial, guiding me and revealing to me my journey."²³ Reubens' work features the image of the artist smudging with one feather in hand, Reuben has also drawn her ancestors behind her, layers of generations, one by one. The image is mesmerizing. Reuben adds: "It is thrilling and self-affirming when you come to recognize your path under your feet, it instills in me my sense of purpose. In cladding the ancestors with hair of gold, speaks to the power and resiliency of my ancestors and their strength that exists in me, that intergenerational resilience."²⁴

We constantly re-aware of the current power of our love, care and community. Through the works of Monique Aura, Aylan Couchie, Kadrah Mensah, Karalyn Reuben and Curtia Wright, we see this. We also see this in the land, in our ancestors, in our families. We speak to the strength of each other, our communities, our kin. We can express love to our elders, past and present and we can provide guidance to new leaders, artists and collaborators.

-Natalie King

²³ Karalyn Reuben, in discussion with the author Natalie King, October 2019.

²⁴ Ibid.