

GALLERY 101
Ottawa, ON

Process: A Gathering

by Catherine Mattes

Preface: The following essay reports on Process: A Gathering, Saturday, June 26, 2004 from 12:00-4:00PM at Gallery 101, Ottawa. Produced by Aboriginal Curator-In-Residence Frank Shebageget. Facilitator & Rapporteur: Catherine Mattes (Manitoba). Guest Speakers: Kent Monkman (Toronto), Michael Couchie (North Bay) and Sheila Pokiak (Ottawa)

Process: A Gathering, was structured as a panel presentation, with questions and answers directed to the artists throughout the event. The uniqueness and difference of each presentation affirmed positively the diversity of aboriginal art practices. The Aboriginal Curator-In-Residence encouraged each artist to consider the following questions and worked with speakers to tailor their presentation to address them in relation to their own artistic approaches:

- What are the diverse influences affecting your practice?
- How do you define yourself in relation to traditional aboriginal art practices?
- How do you define your practice in relation to western art history and contemporary approaches, how is this communicated in your work?

Processing Process - by Cathy Mattes

By examining the negotiations Aboriginal artists make as they live in contemporary societies, we gain insight into their artistic practice and process. Process is what leads artists to a finished work; however, many artists would suggest that working process is just as important as final product. Process can have an impact on how one relates to community, family, culture and society at large. It is through process that we can locate ourselves artistically, and that art can locate us.

For those invited to speak at Gallery 101's forum Process: A Gathering, held June 26, 2004, their working process is highly influenced by family, notions of community, and transient and/or urban existences. Kent Monkman works in a variety of media including painting, film and video. His family is originally from Fischer River First Nation in Manitoba though presently he lives in Toronto, Ontario. Sheila Pokiak is an actress, writer, director and independent producer in film and television. Pokiak is the Executive Director at Independent Filmmakers Cooperative of Ottawa. She is a member of the Inuvialuit Nation and currently lives in Ottawa, Ontario.

Michael Couchie focuses on the technical and aesthetic aspects of new media work, often abstract or collage based. He lives outside North Bay, Ontario, where he was born, but has lived and worked in different places in Ontario such as Fort Frances, London, and Atawapiskat.

Kent Monkman's work reflects an intersection of cultures, such as being of mixed ancestry, having lived an urban existence and having had a strong Christian upbringing. Monkman questions what, exactly, is community. He acknowledges that there is no absolute definition of community, that interpretation can depend on individual experience. Monkman's notion of community transcends regionalism, and he strives to make work that is relevant to the masses. His goal is to have as many people exposed to his work as possible.

This can be challenging when visual arts institutions have a long history of being exclusive. Aboriginal contemporary artists have made many great strides over the last thirty-years-plus in having their work shown in mainstream galleries, creating Aboriginal artist-run centres and collectives, and infiltrating Western academia. However, a lot of institutions still operate in ways that confine and exclude many contemporary artists.

In his painting series *The Prayer Language*, Monkman acknowledges the strong hold Christianity has in many small communities, as well as the role it played in his own family. While painting layers of translated bible stories in Cree syllabics, Monkman often loses his place, a metaphor for the loss of language and the attempted cultural obliteration by the Church. Monkman also examines how the residential school system and Christianity impact on perceptions of sexuality within Aboriginal communities: within the layered Cree syllabics are organic human forms that are wrestling or engaging in sexual contact.

In Monkman's recent work, *The Moral Landscape*, he looks to historical landscape painting and how it relates to art history, romanticism, and colonization. Religious belief played a huge role for North American landscape painters such as those of the Hudson River School. Through a process of fabricated ideas, heroic representations of settlers within bountiful landscapes and heavenly skies became the norm. In Monkman's interventions, he responds to romanticism by making spoofs of historic paintings that include his drag queen alter ego Share Eagle Testickle. Share is always the dominant participant; and the colonizers, whether they are Mounties, voyageurs, or soldiers, are her submissive bitches. By placing homoerotic narratives within familiar painted landscapes – with the persona of Share in control – Monkman shifts existing power dynamics.

Michael Couchie is interested in exploring the limits of digital media, and his artistic process is propelled by his transitory existence. When he began creating art in the seventies, his work was about pushing the limits of design through abstraction; it had no specific cultural content. Over time, Couchie's art more closely reflected personal experience and interests, while the technical aspects of artistic production continuously stimulated him in new ways.

Couchie moved to Atawapiskat near James Bay, Quebec, where he began photographing community members and inserting their portraits into his layered work. He spoke about being in the position of an outsider while living in Atawapiskat. For Couchie, regret for not showing the work in James Bay raised questions about artists' responsibility to their subjects. When Couchie

moved to London, Ontario, he began exploring collage, creating work inspired by imagery he found in books. He found commercial success with this series, but started to lose interest in design at this point in his life. Couchie later encountered elders in Fort Frances, Ontario who had a positive influence on him and guided him towards examining his cultural reality. In his presentation he acknowledged the loss of his language through government and Church-regulated residential schools. His recent work is impacted by his family, and is about finding his roots.

One way Couchie now connects with his culture is by incorporating archival photographs of Aboriginal people into his work. These photographs inspire him; and his goal is to reclaim these images from the anthropologists who originally took them. He does so by isolating the image of an ancestor and changing the backdrop with Adobe generated beads to reflect contemporary emblems such as the four colors.

Although Couchie's work at one point may have been primarily about design, he was able to discover through his travels his own set of cultural beliefs and practices. Essentially, by removing himself from his community, Couchie found just how relevant it is to him. He now lives and works in his birthplace on the Nipissing reserve outside North Bay, Ontario.

Sheila Pokiak's work exposes how personal process is – and that it is about far more than artistic production. Her work references her mother and son and her past experiences. She is earnest about the negative impact that residential school had on her family and community. Family members were divided, based on whether they went to Protestant or Catholic school, and the government issued dog tags to community members until the early 1970's. Pokiak acknowledges the legacy of residential schools, which have caused, to quote Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, “bad colonial days” for so many of us, whether we were forced to go to them or not. Her film *Stone Butterfly* was influenced by her own experiences with the residential school legacy.

Pokiak acknowledges how living an urban existence in Ottawa causes her to feel somewhat removed from her people. Despite this, she immerses herself in her urban existence, working with organizations and focusing on film. The birth of Pokiak's son impacted her priorities and raised concerns about how to transfer culture to him. Nurturing has come about through various art forms including the Pow Wow dancing she has been doing since 1999. Pokiak affirms that difference exists within Aboriginal cultures. By dancing women's traditional dance, she is connecting with other Aboriginal people outside of her own culture.

According to Stuart Hall, “... our way of seeing things is literally our way of living, [and] the process of communication is in fact the process of community...”*. Communities and cultures continuously shift and morph, never remaining stagnant. Although the panelists all had similar concerns – such as the loss of language, the effect of Christianity and residential school, urban living, and the challenges of getting their work recognized – the way they tell their stories is varied. It is the exposure of diversity, and not the search for similarity, within Aboriginal cultures and urban experiences that creates a sense of commonality. Importantly, the panelists prove that, through artistic process, our “bad colonial days” can become more bearable, and our notions of community grow.

Catherine Mattes obtained an MA in art history from Concordia University (1998). Through her curatorial practice, Mattes focuses on Aboriginal issues and contemporary approaches by aboriginal artists. Past curatorial programming include: Collections First Nations Photography (1999, Winnipeg Art Gallery), Rielisms (2000, Winnipeg Art Gallery), and Blanket[ed], and exhibition and collaborative exchange between Urban Shaman Gallery and Boomalli Aboriginal Artists' Co-operative, Sydney Australia (2001). Mattes has contributed writings to Urban Shaman Gallery, Mentoring Artists for Women's Art (MAWA), the Indian Art Centre, Aboriginal Voices, and Border Crossings. She presently works as Curator at The Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba and teaches sessionally at Brandon University in the Aboriginal Fine Arts Program.

*Stuart Hall, "Culture, Community, Nation" in *Cultural Studies* 7.3, (1993), 352.