



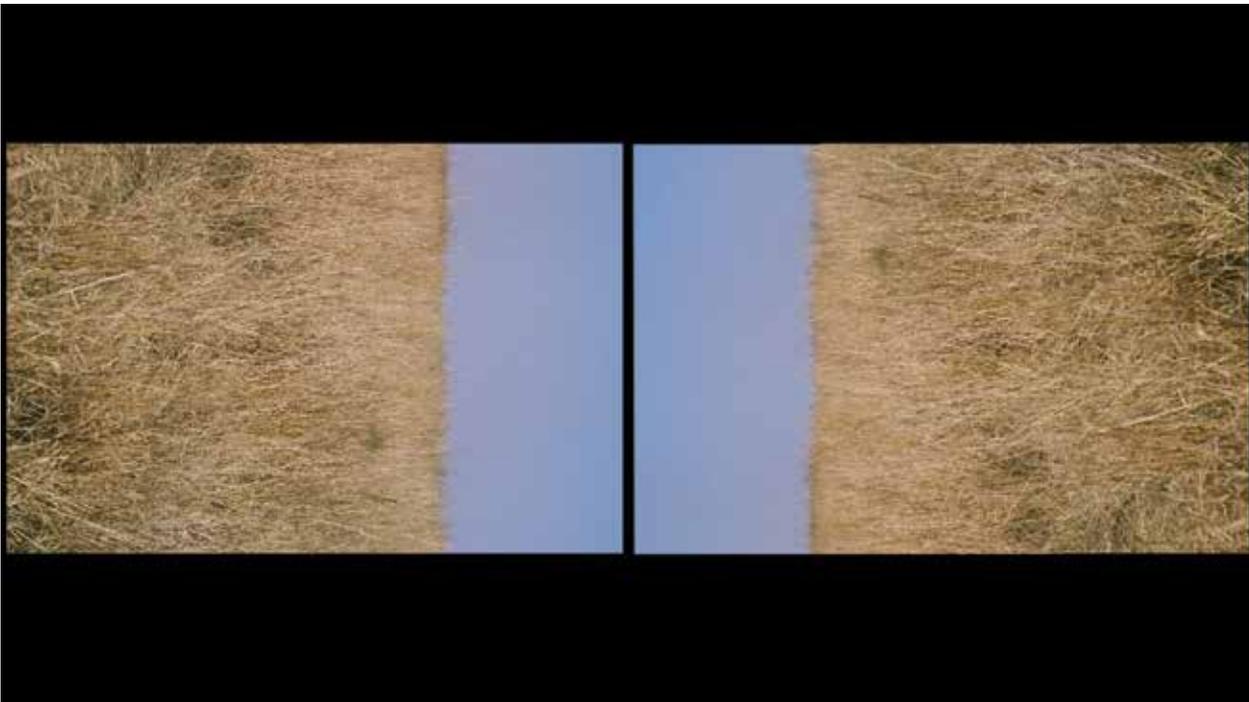
TRANSFORMER

NATIVE ART IN LIGHT & SOUND



Smithsonian
National Museum of the American Indian
George Gustav Heye Center

November 10, 2017–January 6, 2019



MARCELLA ERNEST (OJIBWE) AND KELI MASHBURN (OSAGE)
*GA.NI.THA, 2013 (VIDEO STILL). TWO-CHANNEL VIDEO
WITH AUDIO (4:55 MIN.). COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS.*

that Moves

Art that Moves

KATHLEEN ASH-MILBY

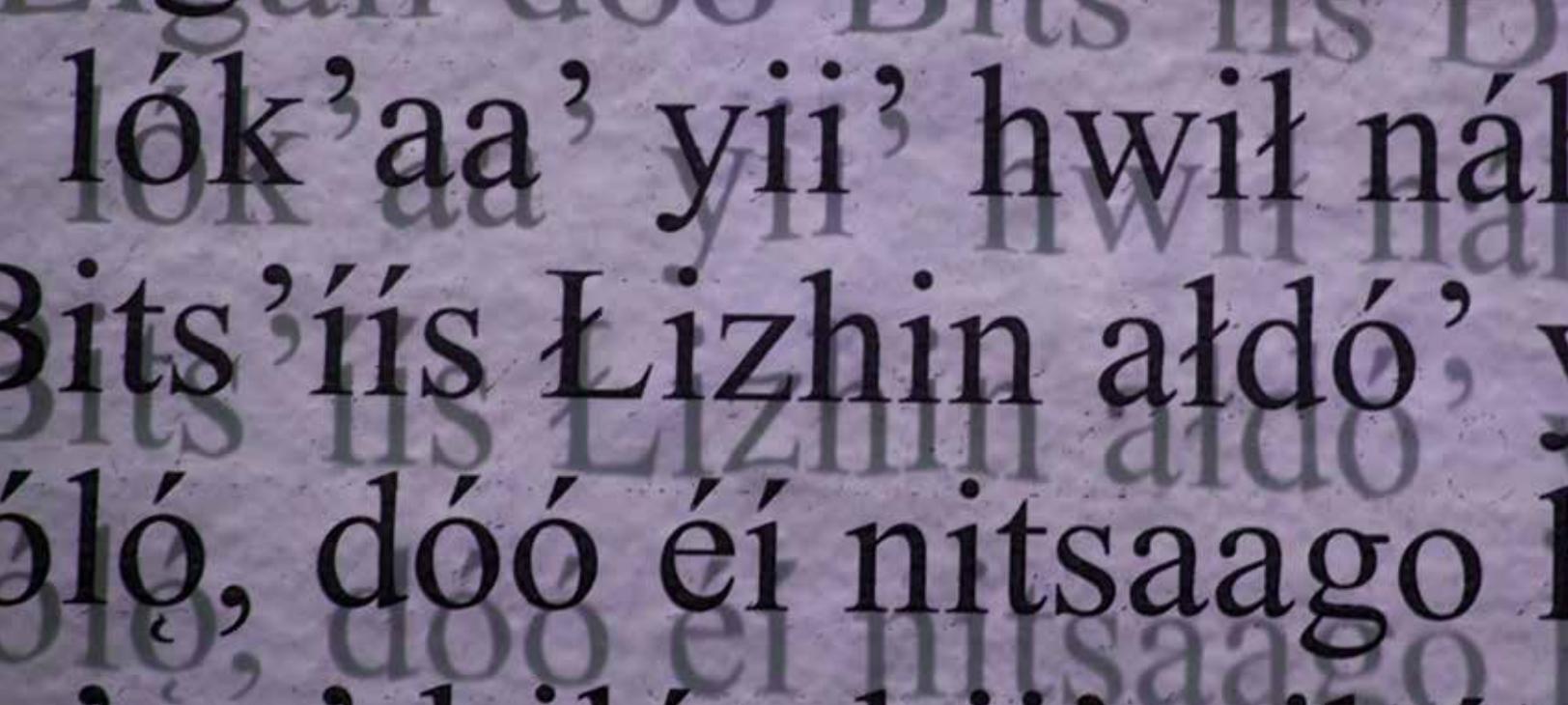
ART TRANSFORMS, TRANSLATES, TRANSGRESSES,

transfixes, and transcends. Most importantly, art moves. It moves our ideas and our ways of seeing as it moves from one way of being to another. Tradition likewise moves as it transmits beliefs and customs across time. The term “traditional art” has often been applied to Native art that is strongly and recognizably related to material cultural practices established in the nineteenth century or earlier. This limiting interpretation does not recognize that tradition, by its very definition, is not static but is in a constant state of motion. Art in motion is not settled, static, or safe. Too much change or motion can also be considered threatening or destabilizing. Is this why contemporary Native art that does not predictably hew to historical constructs is often rejected as inauthentic or viewed as a threat? Without the dynamic force of change and transformation, there is no growth in nature or culture.

Native people view the concepts of tradition and transformation as being inextricably intertwined, as manifested in the work of the artists featured in *Transformer: Native Art in Light and Sound*. Native cultures have always been in motion, not frozen in amber as romantic depictions in popular culture would have you believe. Therefore, a twenty-first-century

exhibition featuring Native American artists whose work is activated by technology should not be jarring or unexpected. On the contrary, these artists boldly demonstrate the continuity of Indigenous cultures and creativity in the digital age.

In nature, motion is inextricable from life. Complete stasis often leads to decline; from a biological perspective, you are either growing or you are dying. In *Ga.ni.tha* (2013), a two-channel video work by filmmaker Marcella Ernest and photographer Keli Mashburn, the artists explore the idea of chaos and disorder as a source of power and purpose. As Mashburn states, “Osages recognize fire as a precious life-giving tool/ gift, and at the same time appreciate it as one of the most destructive forces in nature.”¹ This duality became the inspiration for this work: closely cropped images of clouds and the grasslands of Oklahoma flash and appear in configurations and orientations that transform them from conventional landscapes to beautiful, disorienting patterns, while the soundscape alternates between ethereal chimes and the voice of an elder expressing thanks and gratitude. Forced to abandon notions of traditional Western landscape, the viewer experiences the title’s meaning (the Osage term for chaos and disorder). But *Ga.ni.tha* is not just about nature; it explores a holistic understanding of the universe that also encompasses culture. As the images cycle through a process of renewal from wildfire-scorched grassland



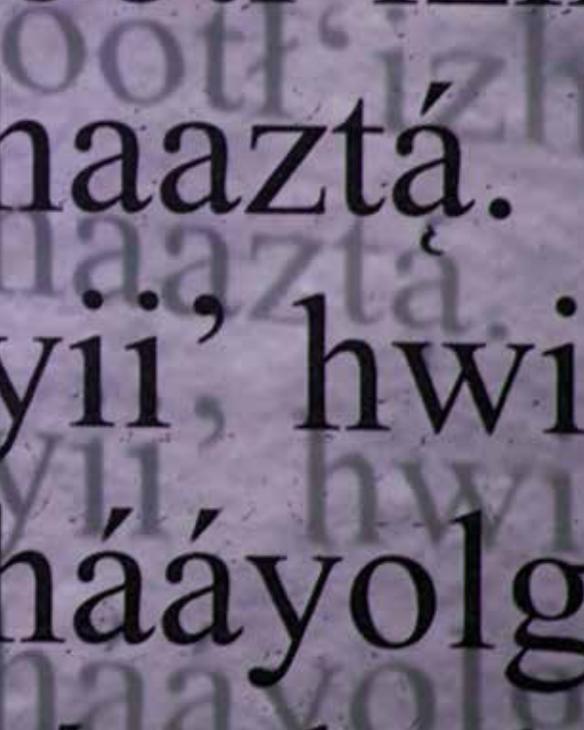
to fresh green waves of springtime growth, there are periodic clips of dancers and an Osage bride working on a finger-woven sash to gift to her new husband's family. It is about the metaphysical, “the microcosm of the universe created through ritual motions and the transfer of knowledge.”² Understanding the nuances of Osage cosmology is not a prerequisite for a physical and emotional response.

Motion is a key component to many of the works in the exhibition. Marianne Nicolson's sculptural installation, *The Harbinger of Catastrophe* (2017), creates an immersive and hypnotic experience through the use of light, which ebbs and flows up and down the gallery walls, projected from her glass sculptural work. Jon Corbett's video work, *Four Generations* (2015), is in constant motion as it builds “beaded” images with computer-generated pixels. The work was created through a computer program that translates photographs of his family and community members into portraits built one “bead” or pixel at a time in a slow spiral.

The movement in Raven Chacon's *Still Life, #3* (2015) is more subtle. A multi-sensory exploration of belief and the understanding of the Diné creation story, this installation is rooted in our inception within a misty, undefined place followed by a journey through four distinct worlds, each defined by light and color. Retold

for generations through the spoken word (although numerous anthropologists have tried to capture it in writing), the story is, at its core, one of continual movement by our Diné ancestors from one world to another. The concept of movement and story possessing a physical presence is embodied in Chacon's use of sound. Using a row of analog speakers, he projects a female voice that recites excerpts of the Diné creation story in the Diné language. The voice moves palpably, traveling up and over the line of suspended speakers. Excerpts of the story, which alternate between Diné and English, are printed on translucent text panels positioned so the words appear to float through time and over the gallery walls. This visual effect is enhanced by the glowing light in the gallery, which slowly shifts through the four sacred colors—from white (dawn) to blue (midday) to yellow (dusk) to black/red (night)—casting shadows of the text onto the wall.

Storytelling is an essential component of tradition. It not only moves but changes with the teller and over time, though the essence of the story remains. This idea, that “stories are continually changing, yet they remain the same”—both a truism and paradox, as stated by curator Candice Hopkins—can be extended to the expression of storytelling within all types of technologically based art forms.³ In *Raven Brings the Light* (2011) by Stephen Foster, the story of the trickster figure Raven, prominent in the origin stories of the



< **RAVEN CHACON (DINÉ)**

STILL LIFE, #3, 2015 (DETAIL). SOUND AND LIGHT INSTALLATION WITH TEXT, VOICE AND TRANSLATION BY MELVATHA CHEE. COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST.

∨ **STEPHEN FOSTER (HAIDA/EUROPEAN)**

RAVEN BRINGS THE LIGHT, 2011 (INSTALLATION DETAIL). MULTIMEDIA INSTALLATION WITH VIDEO AND SOUND (3:30 MIN.). COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST.



Haida and other nations in the Pacific Northwest, is told not with words but through shadow puppets cast on the walls of a two-person tent. In the story, the sun was hidden within a bentwood box until stolen by Raven and flung into the sky, bringing daylight to the people who had been living in darkness. As a witness to this narrative, you see the flashlight representing the sun and hear the subtle cawing of birds and sounds of nature; you are transported to another place and time. No words are written or spoken in this telling of the tale. Instead, you experience a child's viewpoint of camping in the woods: the sounds of nature surround you while a parent or trusted elder tells you a story using the technology at hand. As co-curator David Garneau

explains, "Though the tent and flashlight were bought in a store they are indigenized by the light play as a site of cultural transmission."

Foster is not the only artist who engages nature through technology to tell a story. Julie Nagam has created an immersive 360-degree installation, *Our future is in the land: if we listen to it* (2017), which combines a sophisticated audio track of ambient forest sounds and voices of Indigenous storytellers with reductive line drawings of an arboreal landscape. This is not a static environment but is inhabited by animated forest creatures that appear periodically within the room. Aiming to draw attention to the destructive and complex relationship we have to the environment, she connects viewers to stories of the land through this experience. As she states, "Our survival and our continuation as a people are tied to Indigenous knowledge of the land and a return or an extension of these land-based practices is what will bring us into the future."⁴

Home and community figure prominently in any work that explores tradition. In his installation *Aosamia'jjj—Too Much Too Little* (2017), Jordan Bennett honors his homeland in Newfoundland through the act of recovering stories and narratives. Inspired by photographs of Joe "Amite" Jeddore, a member of the Mi'kmaq community living on Samiajij Miawpukek Reserve (Conne River) in the 1930s, Bennett's

KEVIN MCKENZIE (CREE/MÉTIS)

FATHER, SON, HOLY GHOST, 2015.
CAST POLYURETHANE, ACRYLIC, NEON.
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST.



work combines stories and voices of Jeddore family descendants with atmospheric recordings collected at the rural locations captured in the photographs. A series of speakers enrobed in subtly carved wood housing with grills woven with split black ash echoes Mi'kmaq basketry traditions. The photographs themselves are transformed into living culture, overriding their original purpose as anthropological documentation. Although you can see the original photographs in the installation, Bennett's speakers, transformed into large sculptural forms, supersede the images; suspended against a brilliant pink wall, they are a commanding presence. While basketry is not often associated with such an artificial hue, the choice is not incongruous. Mi'kmaq quillwork was once dyed bright synthetic colors

that have faded and all but disappeared on historic examples.

Kevin McKenzie's choice of materials might also seem anomalous for an artist looking at belief and tradition; his work is inherently contradictory. In the Native world, beliefs are not limited to Indigenous world views. The imposition and adoption of Christianity among Native people is longstanding and raises thorny questions about the co-existence of such different belief systems. *Father, Son, Holy Ghost* (2015) reveals some of these tensions. These three buffalo skulls, cast in acrylic and polyurethane, are illuminated by orange neon lights that create the appearance of a meditative chapel. The reverential treatment of the buffalo, long venerated by



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tribes on the Great Plains whose existence for centuries depended on the hunting of these herd animals, contrasts with McKenzie’s choice of materials. The fabricated, artificial skulls and the secular associations of neon, identified primarily with advertising and the unsavory elements of urban nightlife, complicate the interpretation of this work as creating a sanctified space. As he states, “this is where the past confronts the present, [through] the enigmatic crystalline buffalo skull.” Let us also not forget how the commercial image of the buffalo skull, often with feathers, has evolved into a cheesy representation of Indian spirituality on innumerable black T-shirts and in Western decor.

The power of Native art that uses technological and experimental media is the power to move and excite our thinking about what Native art can be. The inspiration for this exhibition was my first encounter with Nicholas Galanin’s *Tsu Heidei Shugaxtutaan 1 and 2* (2006) at a gallery in New York City in 2008. Galanin has always pushed the boundaries of expression and tradition through many types of media, but perhaps never as profoundly as with this memorable and powerful work. The grainy videos of two dancers improvising to music surprises and challenges us to rethink our ideas about our cultural responsibility to maintain or adapt

tradition. The work was unexpected and jarring, yet also energizing. That rush of excitement stayed with me. Over the intervening years, *Tsu Heidei Shugaxtutaan* has been exhibited and published throughout the United States and internationally. Despite its relative simplicity in concept and execution, it has been foundational in the field of Native art and the possibilities of new electronic technologies.

Although *Tsu Heidei Shugaxtutaan* is a recording, every time that it plays in a gallery it is performed anew. The lights go up, the music begins, and the dancer responds. As a time-based media work it is also ephemeral. It doesn’t exist as a physical object but lives as a collection of data on a drive, waiting to be awoken and performed for an audience. Without electricity or an observer, it ceases to exist. In this sense, it shares an affinity with storytelling, ceremony, and performance, which existed in Native communities long before art galleries or museums attempted to preserve the material culture of North America. Each work in *Transformer* is both participatory and performative, requiring us as visitors in the physical space to truly understand and encounter the work. By the transformation of electricity into art, each of these artists propels us forward in our thinking about what Native art is and what it can be.



ENDNOTES

1. Keli Mashburn, personal communication to author, April 3, 2017.

2. Ibid.

3. Candice Hopkins, “Interventions in Digital Territories: Narrative in Native New Media,” in *Transference, Tradition, Technology: Native New Media Exploring Visual and Digital Culture*, ed. Dana Claxton, Steven Loft, Melanie Townsend (Banff, AB: Walter Phillips Gallery Editions in association with Art Gallery of Hamilton & Indigenous Media Arts Group, 2005): 128.

4. Julie Nagam (unpublished artist statement, December 1, 2016).

Contemporary Native Art: Contemporary Native Art: Plugged In, Turned On

DAVID GARNEAU

SCENE ONE: IN AN URBAN LOFT, DAVID “ELSEWHERE”

Bernal (b. 1979), a Peruvian American dancer, pops, his spine and limbs loop and coil in the fluid hip-hop style he pioneered. Unexpectedly, the soundtrack is a customary Tlingit song. Scene two: against an Eagle-and-Raven-carved wall screen in the community house in Sitka, Alaska, traditional dancer Dan Littlefield performs a Raven dance in full Tlingit regalia. Perhaps even more incongruous than Elsewhere’s musical accompaniment, Littlefield’s crouching slow turns and hops are fueled by electronic music. Shot with a fixed camera in low-resolution black and white, the scenes are intimate, mesmerizing, and perplexing. While the soundtracks seem switched in post-production, each young man is in fact dancing live to the music we hear. Created by Tlingit artist Nicholas Galanin, *Tsu Heidei Shugaxtutaan 1 and 2* (2006), translated as “we will again open this container of wisdom that has been left in our care,” is the title of both the two-part video and the Tlingit song that shapes Elsewhere’s moves. What is the wisdom contained and opened by this strange juxtaposition?

Indigenous people have suffered generations of genocidal oppression—and endure.¹ The embers of culture did not die but often had to be banked. When in survival mode, societies become conservative, insular, and less confident about innovations and outsiders that might disturb the integrity of the community. But times are changing for Native peoples; the creative fires have

reignited and all are welcome to share the warmth of good company. Galanin’s video suggests that we should no longer simply *keep* knowledge to preserve culture, but “*open* this container of wisdom” and share “our language, our culture, our dance, our sovereign creative voices in the artwork that we create.”² Native wisdom is needed, now, by everyone, not just knowledge keepers and their societies. The challenge is how to present it when traditional means have been rendered “exotic” by non-Natives and seem antique to many Indigenous youth. The role of the Indigenous contemporary artist is to tap ancient springs and serve sustenance in new skins.³

Galanin’s work goes further: he shows how human bodies, rhythm, and our restless search for beauty and innovative forms twine together people and their arts across nations and centuries. The work implies that wisdom is not simply kept and shared but is produced. Art is the name we give to those objects and practices that seek to advance culture by challenging and adapting its cherished forms and ideas. Traditional cultures maintain their integrity through repetition and ritual, but they wither into irrelevance if customary ways of knowing, being, and doing do not also tackle present lived realities. Further, healthy societies learn from each other. *Tsu Heidei Shugaxtutaan 1 and 2* show intercultural expressions from three artists confident enough in their own knowledge and skills that they can afford to enjoy and be influenced by art beyond their custom. Indigenous contemporary art is kindling gathered from many sources, ignited by cultural embers, whose light illuminates our ways.

Plugged In, Turned On



NICHOLAS GALANIN (TLINGIT/UNANGÅX [ALEUT])

TSU HEIDEI SHUGAXTUTAAN (WE WILL AGAIN OPEN THIS CONTAINER OF WISDOM THAT HAS BEEN LEFT IN OUR CARE), 1 AND 2, 2006 (VIDEO STILL). DIGITAL VIDEO PROJECTION WITH SOUND. COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN.
27/0086

The artists in *Transformer: Native Art in Light and Sound* are not shamans, tricksters, shape-shifters, or warriors. They do not live off the land, pick medicinal plants, live in tipis, or speak their language. Well, maybe sometimes, but they are included in this exhibition for a different reason: they are Native contemporary artists who have found creative means to express their ways of knowing and being as Native people *and* as citizens of the contemporary art world. While all their content comes from their communities—their peoples, stories, and lands—the forms are non-traditional. Their audio (Raven Chacon, Jordan Bennett) and video installations (Nicholas Galanin, Julie Nagam, Marcella Ernest, and Keli Mashburn); neon bison skulls (Kevin McKenzie); tent shadow plays (Stephen Foster); illuminated-glass, bentwood-box projector (Marianne Nicolson); and digital portrait beading (Jon Corbett) are at once innovative contributions to the art world and also help advance ideas about contemporary Native identities.

Transformer challenges old-fashioned notions about what counts as Native, Native art, and Native

tradition. For example, it seems a truism to say that because electricity is not traditional to Native cultures, electronic art cannot be traditional Native art. But such a claim assumes that the locus of traditional Nateness will always be fixed in the past and that tradition is related to objects rather than ways. It glosses over the fact that perpetual change and adaptation are central tenets of Native lifeways. “Constant flux,” explains Blackfoot elder Leroy Little Bear, is a foundational paradigm of Native understanding.⁴ Imagine a description of Native identity two centuries from now: will we continue to define ourselves primarily in relation to a nineteenth-century or pre-Contact heyday, or will we find ways to narrate continuity *and* adaptation as Indigenous qualities?

Indigenous contemporary art and curation is where new, non-binary solutions for being contemporary and Indigenous are being (per)formed. The *Transformer* artists are contemporary in that they use new, electric technologies and engage the present world. At the same



JON CORBETT (MÉTIS)

FOUR GENERATIONS, 2015 (VIDEO STILL).
SINGLE-CHANNEL VIDEO (1:30 MIN.). COLLECTION
OF THE ARTIST.

and narrative scholar Neal McLeod uses *mâmahtawisi-âpacihcikan*, which translates as “the machine that taps into the mystery of life.”⁷ How beautiful is that?!

Getting a university degree is not traditional. So how do we understand the indigeneity of those who, like Dr. Marianne Nicolson, insist on getting them? What looks like assimilation is often a complex set of negotiations and retooling. Jon Corbett is currently pursuing his doctorate. He is looking for ways to indigenize computer code based on Cree language, worldview, and methodologies. An early result of his research is *Four Generations* (2015). The installation consists of a vertical video monitor suspended in a very narrow gallery. An illuminated dot appears in the middle of the screen. It is quickly followed by another and another—one about every quarter second—in an implied line that becomes a spiral. Soon an eye, then a face emerges from the thousands of dots. The work generates four portraits: the artist, his grandmother, his father, and his son. Each image, comprised of 3,600 to four thousand pixels, takes about twelve to fifteen minutes to complete. To anyone familiar with Métis and First Nations material culture, the work is an electronic version of beading.

Like the other artists in the exhibition, Corbett indigenizes an adopted medium by using it to display Aboriginal content. Yet he goes further: he re-engineers the digital environment to better contain and express his content. The colonial imaginary is ruled by analytic perspective. The mathematical device that blossomed during the Italian Renaissance and allowed the illusionistic representation of three-dimensional realities on two-dimensional surfaces also led to urban and rural planning that reshaped the world. The square grid leapt the page, allowing not only for the natural world to be surveyed but also tamed. Before the grid, European cities were circular, expansive, and grew organically. After the

time, they have a different relationship with these territories and with colonization than do settlers⁵ and those who identify with European Enlightenment and capitalist ideologies over traditional ways of knowing and being.

No object is inherently Native. Native is an action, a way of doing, a set of relations. What makes an object Native is its relation to Native ways of doing. The Western concept of art, the one with art galleries, museums, critics, etc., does not have an equivalent in traditional Native cultures, so it stands to reason that traditional Native languages do not have an equivalent word. However, just as our cultures change and adapt, our languages also admit new words to represent new ideas and practices.⁶ Native language speakers just need to come up with a new word and build culturally-specific associations around it. Language is dynamic—it must be if it and its users are to survive and thrive. For example, just because there is no traditional word for computers doesn't mean that Native people should avoid them. They just need to invent a new word, one that suits them, that in a way indigenizes the object. Cree poet

development and implementation of perspective, cities were designed in advance, and on a grid. By the nineteenth century, surveyors advanced invasion and settlement. The Métis Resistances of 1869 (Red River) and Batoche (1885) were all about fighting the colonizing grid.⁸ Applied math is not neutral.

Digital space retains this colonial heritage; the screens are grids and their illuminating pixels occur in horizontal rows. As a Métis artist conscious of the colonial history of the grid and how it shapes consciousness and behavior, Corbett felt the need to re-tool his environment, making it more Native-friendly. His answer was not only to fill the old container with Métis content, but to disrupt the tool's inherent structure. An advanced programmer, he designed the software that instructs his dots/beads to flow in a spiral. The spiral is more in tune with a Native sense of time. Upon reflection, looking at these beads and then touring the older works of beading in the National Museum of the American Indian—the “traditional” beaded images—you cannot help but see continuity in these pixelated practices.

While traditional culture is infused throughout, this exhibition is not about cultural survivance through

the revival of customary art. It is about making room in everyone's imaginary for new ways of being and displaying Nativeness, including encouraging viewers to review other displays in the National Museum of the American Indian and, instead of seeing frozen-in-time artifacts, discover innovative adaptations by clever and creative people not so different from us. You can, for example, see in Plains regalia the shift from quill work to Venetian beads, the repurposing of tobacco tins into jingle dress ornaments, and the incorporation of mirrors and other trade objects that arrived with colonization. These makers adapted and innovated, and continue to do so.

Marianne Nicolson's *The Harbinger of Catastrophe* (2017) consists of a blue-green glass box that lies in the center of an empty room. A light is slowly and rhythmically raised and lowered into the top of the container. Its four sides are carved with pictographs that are projected onto the floor then slowly climb the walls, remaking the room into the interior of the box. The work is beautiful and novel; its familiar and symmetrical designs project authority and the continuity of culture. The novelty of a glass bentwood-style box and the use of artificial light suggest a contemporaneity that is attractive and approachable. The installation's design envelops and implicates the viewer, making us a participant.

The work resonates with that of the two other West Coast artists in the exhibition: the story told in Foster's *Raven Brings the Light* (2011) and the idea of the cultural container evoked in Galanin's title, *Tsu Heidei Shugaxtutaan 1 and 2*. What does her “container of wisdom” hold? Nicolson explains,

The glass box is based on the traditional bentwood storage chests of the Pacific Northwest Coast. It exists as a metaphor for the house (as container for people) and the land (as container for community). The pictograph images reference original writing on the land by Indigenous peoples and their ancient



MARIANNE NICOLSON (KWAKWAKA'WAKW)
THE HARBINGER OF CATASTROPHE, 2017 (DESIGN
 DETAIL). GLASS, WOOD, HALOGEN-BULB MECHANISM.
 COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST.

connections and beliefs. The movement of the shadow images up the walls mimics flooding. At a certain height the shadows reach their apex and turn back, similar to how a flood crests and then recedes. This shadow flooding reflects on the pending and experienced “natural” disasters that humanity stands to face with the accelerating effects of global warming.⁹

The installation that might at first look simply like an electrified update of a traditional art form turns out to be gently apocalyptic. It is not a break from customary practice but its extension. Likewise, it is not only the form that is brought into the present but also its contents. Stories of a great flood are found in many cultures, including those on the West Coast of Turtle Island; these floods are usually seen as punishments from the deities. Nicolson’s words and tone are even and a matter of fact. She does not assign blame or



recommend remedies. She offers a sense of inevitability, of “we have seen this before.” The painful twist is that our shared looming future is due to the violation of sacred relations between people and environment.

Elders I have spoken with over the years, mostly on the northern Plains, have mixed feelings about being recorded. They are concerned that written, audio, and video recordings might capture the knowledge partially and imprecisely, and that these technologies might displace them: Why go to the living keepers when you can go to a book? Ideally, Indigenous knowledge is passed from generation to generation, slowly, through listening and watching, then doing, through example and repetition, in the right setting, season, and right way. But, many elders complain that few young people are interested in such scholarship and methodology. Modernity demands acceleration. So, they concede to have their knowledge preserved through artificial means, seeds posted to the future—to Indigenous people less devastated by colonization.

Jordan Bennett’s audio installation, *Aosamia’jij—Too Much Too Little* (2017) features five speakers housed in large wooden cabinets. Also in the room are photographs taken in 1931 by anthropologist Frederick Johnson (1904–1994) depicting everyday life and the territories of the Mi’kmaq people. From the speakers come sounds of wind, ocean, and birds recorded in Bennett’s home community of Newfoundland. Also heard are the sounds of people weaving; split black ash basketry is a rich, continuing tradition among the Mi’kmaq. The audio draws you to the speakers, where you notice that their unique grills are woven with the same split ash we hear the weavers working on in the audio.

JORDAN BENNETT (MI’KMAQ)

AOSAMIA’JIJ—TOO MUCH TOO LITTLE (DETAIL), 2017.
INSTALLATION WITH COMMERCIAL SPEAKERS, BLACK
ASH, SWEETGRASS, MEDIUM-DENSITY FIBERBOARD.
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST.



INDIGENOUS IS AN OLD WORD GAINING NEW MEANINGS.

Art, in the sense of beautiful, skillful, and often conceptually rich things made by people to communicate ideas and feelings to other people, is universal. The sense of art that removes belongings from their living contexts and places them in a neutral space, an art gallery, no longer available for touch and use—is a recent and primarily Western concept. Bennett’s audio installation mends this tear through handmade speakers that speak of their making.

Indigenous is an old word gaining new meanings. A tribe, clan, or community provides local identity. Such peoples have their meanings in a particular territory. Venture beyond that space and you become an Indian, a Native, or a First Nations person who is a member of an extended political community—either designated by the state (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada or Bureau of Indian Affairs in the United States, for example), or as an expression of collective sovereignty (e.g., the North American Indian Brotherhood), a collaborative, intertribal identity that has arisen in response to contact. The word Indigenous has been retooled in the past few decades to refer to new, contemporary identities, Native people who not only align themselves with others nearby, but also with Native peoples from other parts of the globe. As well as participating in their local nations, Indigenous people are inter-National: they follow other Native people and communicate with them through social media, they read beyond their nation, and travel to Indigenous gatherings in other countries.¹⁰ An Indigenous artist is cosmopolitan and belongs to the Indigenous art world. Indigenous contemporary artists participate in both local culture and international art worlds. They are scouts discovering new pathways of being Native, following ways that are embedded in territory and tradition while also participating with their global relations. What characterizes an era is not just the physical happenings, but also how we perceive and conceive these changes. Contemporary in our

context evokes a felt sense of historical difference and is expressed in new cultural forms and content, including art that gives shape to how we are changing and what it might mean.

The artists represented in *Transformer: Native Art in Light and Sound* are Indigenous contemporary artists. As art historian Ian McLean explains, to call yourself a contemporary Indigenous artist is to say that you are a living person making art today.¹¹ To name yourself an Indigenous contemporary artist, however, is an altogether different claim. It means that you are neither a modernist nor are you making customary tribal art. It means that your work engages contemporary debates, styles, technology, and institutions—and you do so while being mindful of and participating in the Indigenous. It’s this second part that gets sticky. What is the Indigenous if not local customary art? How can you be both Indigenous and contemporary? One answer is that while you are part of the customary world of your local culture and participate in the global art world, you also engage the Indigenous art world—a current that flows among and through these other spaces but maintains its autonomy. This, of course, has a dramatic effect on what we make. If you are strictly tribal, you make art that has meaning in and for your community. Others may consume but not interfere with its making and meanings. Contemporary artists find visual languages that hover between the local and the international, forms that are legible to and influenced by both communities. There are now Indigenous curators and exhibitions; conferences, symposia, and other gatherings; Indigenous books and magazines; critics and art historians; and the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective—a complex and growing inter-National web of Indigenous ideas, doings, and relations. This is not simply a group that promotes their various Nations to each other; it is a space where the Indigenous—as a new category of being and making—is formed.

Each of the works in this exhibition embodies the complexity of being contemporary and Indigenous and an aspect of its solution. That these artists work in new media shows that they have adapted, grown along with, even helped to shape the new world. But that each also uses these new forms to contain and broadcast ancient content is a testament to cultural continuity. What distinguishes this work from mainstream art is the legibility of their Indigenous content. There are Native artists who become enthralled with the formal qualities of new media, or are overwhelmed by the tech culture and cannot find room to express their Native identity, who are assimilated into the dominant tech culture. While they remain a Native person, they no longer make Native art. Throughout the exhibition you will notice that while the artists are comfortable in the new media of electronic sound, video projections, florescent light, and computer-generated imagery, each remains tethered to the earth and to their communities and narratives.

While unquestionably Indigenous and contemporary, the *Transformer* artists also, unquestionably, participate in Native culture and identity. The knowledge shared by all Indigenous peoples includes the recognition of the interrelatedness of all beings, that animation is a property of all things, that care of the land as a relation is the center of Indigenous being. All of this requires understanding and methodologies that exceed materialist comprehension. Artists of most places and times have puzzled over how to evoke the metaphysical with material means. Material things tend to keep the mind earthbound. Iconoclasts see this problem as irresolvable: graven images should never be made; they are earthly counterfeits that threaten to be worshipped rather than be a vehicle to that which is beyond representation. And yet artists try. They value objects that they can harness as a vehicle to the divine. Some make literal representations, sculptures and paintings of their gods.

Others use more abstract means. Light and sound are especially honored for this application because while both are material, they barely seem so. Recall rapturous melodies issuing from a homey choir. Remember staring at dancing flames as a child. Both issue from physical sources but seem immaterial. Electric light and sound appeal to the *Transformer* artists for similar reasons. Electricity allows them to conjure in these galleries sights and voices from other places and times. Artificial light and sound make presences of absences.

Raven is “hero, trickster, creator, and perhaps most importantly for Galanin, transformer.”¹² Co-curator Kathleen Ash-Milby and I chose “transformer” as the guiding metaphor for the exhibition not only because all the artworks use electricity (and we like the possibilities for puns) but in recognition of each artist as a cultural transformer who amplifies but also alters the possible expressions of their cultures. Electrical transformers increase or decrease power; human transformers embody and inspire change. Both modulate energy to suit the needs of receivers. In electrical transformers, power passes unseen through a magnetic field between coils. In art spaces, meaning and affect invisibly traverse space through sound and light waves, between performers and audiences, artworks and viewers. The work of transformers is not effortless; resistances generate a rise in temperature. In electrical transformers, imperfections in coil surfaces create eddy currents and therefore friction and heat. Working bodies also warm. And warmth is generated in the reception of artwork: warmed hearts, hot faces, and heated discussions. Physical, mental, and affective turbulences occur in our numerous systems as we struggle to absorb forms and meanings that do not always flow smoothly with our experience, custom, and taste. But that is why we engage art: to be stirred, moved, troubled, and transformed by degrees.





JULIE NAGAM
(ANISHNAWBE/MÉTIS/
GERMAN/SYRIAN)

OUR FUTURE IS IN THE LAND: IF WE LISTEN TO IT, 2017 (DESIGN DETAIL). INSTALLATION WITH DIGITAL VIDEO PROJECTION, SOUND, PAINT. COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST.

ENDNOTES

1. In this essay, I use “Indigenous” in the United Nations sense to refer to Native peoples generally, but also when referring to “Indigenous contemporary artists” I mean those Natives, Maori, Sami, and others who are consciously and actively linked to each other and constitute themselves as a collective identity. I use “Native” to refer to First Peoples of Turtle Island (North America).

2. “Artist Nicholas Galanin on ‘Tsu Heidei Shugaxutaaan’” The Contemporary Jewish Museum, accessed March 23, 2017, <https://vimeo.com/194085564>.

3. I use the phrase “Indigenous contemporary artist” to refer to Indigenous artists who have embraced current, cutting edge contemporary artistic practices, which differs from being contemporary—someone who exists in today’s world.

4. Leroy Little Bear, “Naturalizing Indigenous Knowledge, Synthesis Paper” (University of Saskatchewan, Aboriginal Education Research Centre, Saskatoon, SK, and First Nations and Adult Higher Education Consortium, Calgary, AB), 2009, 8, https://www.afn.ca/uploads/files/education/21_2009_july_ccl-alkc_leroy_littlebear_naturalizing_indigenous_knowledge-report.pdf.

5. Many Canadian academics, Indigenous and not, increasingly refer to non-Indigenous people as settlers as a means to include not just descendants of European migrants but also more recent migrants from all over the world.

6. Nancy Marie Mithlo, “No Word for Art in Our Language?: Old Questions, New Paradigms,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 111–26.

7. Neal McLeod, *Cree Narrative Memory: From Treaties to Contemporary Times* (Vancouver: Purich, 2007), 42.

8. Soon after the Canadian nation was formed in 1867, surveyors set out to reorganize settlements following the grid system. This disrupted the Métis system of long “river lots.” The imposition of the grid lots led directly to the 1869 Red River Métis Resistance and the 1885 Batoche Resistance. “Manitoba Land Survey Systems,” Turtle Mountain–Souris Plains Heritage Association, accessed May 4, 2017, <http://vantagepoints.ca/stories/manitoba-land-survey-systems/>.

9. Marianne Nicolson (unpublished artist statement, March 23, 2017).

10. I use the term inter-National to refer to both the intertribal (as between sovereign Native nations within one colonial nation, such as Canada) and inter-National in the Indigenous sense of nation-to-nation relationships between Native nations in various colonial countries.

11. Ian McLean, “Names,” in *Double Desire: Transculturation and Indigenous Contemporary Art*, ed. Ian McLean (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2014), 15.

12. “e.g. Nicholas Galanin: We Will Again Open This Container of Wisdom That Has Been Left in Our Care,” Brigham Young University Museum of Art, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://moa.byu.edu/project/e-g-nicholas-galanin-we-will-again-open-this-container-of-wisdom-that-has-been-left-in-our-care/>.



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ABOVE: **JON CORBETT (MÉTIS)**
FOUR GENERATIONS, 2015 (VIDEO STILL). SINGLE-
CHANNEL VIDEO (1:30 MIN.). COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST.

COVER, TOP: **STEPHEN FOSTER (HAIDA/EUROPEAN)**
RAVEN BRINGS THE LIGHT, 2011 (INSTALLATION DETAIL).
MULTIMEDIA INSTALLATION WITH VIDEO AND SOUND
(3:30 MIN.). COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST.

COVER, BOTTOM: **NICHOLAS GALANIN
(TLINGIT/UNANGAĀ [ALEUT])**
*TSU HEIDEI SHUGAXTUTAAN (WE WILL AGAIN OPEN THIS
CONTAINER OF WISDOM THAT HAS BEEN LEFT IN OUR CARE),
1 AND 2*, 2006 (VIDEO STILL). DIGITAL VIDEO PROJECTION
WITH SOUND. COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF
THE AMERICAN INDIAN. 27/0086



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