

Re-enact

Sarah Ciurysek
Michael Farnan
Meryl McMaster
Emma Nishimura
Krista Belle Stewart
Elinor Whidden

BY RENÉE VAN DER AVOIRD

History has been the text of the dead dictated through the living, through a voice which cannot speak for itself.
– Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani

Re-enact explores how six Canadian artists interpret, commemorate and renegotiate moments of the past. Works by Sarah Ciurysek, Michael Farnan, Meryl McMaster, Emma Nishimura, Krista Belle Stewart and Elinor Whidden open up spaces for empowerment through imagination, sharpening our awareness of historical bias. Collectively, the works respond to our contemporary reality by challenging the authority of historical narratives, and pose questions about representation—and reconciliation—in the future.

Canada's sesquicentennial presents an opportunity to reflect on our history through a broad lens. Countering the masculinist and Eurocentric underpinnings of Canadian historiography, the artists in *Re-enact* question the "celebration" of commemoration. Themes of sustainability, loss, identity and place weave through the works, each of which operates under an expanded definition of re-enactment. Through strategies such as mimicry, repetition and appropriation, these artists activate the experiential and performative potential of re-enactment. *Re-enact* thwarts the linear narrative of Canadian history and proposes definitions for the future that are inclusive and multivalent.

Anchoring the exhibition is *Her Story* (2014), a silent three-minute video by Vancouver-based artist Krista Belle Stewart. The black-and-white video comprises excerpts of *Seraphine, Her Own Story*, a 1967 CBC documentary about the artist's mother, Seraphine Stewart, a residential school survivor who became the first Indigenous public health nurse in British Columbia. Fifty years ago, CBC approached Seraphine to re-enact these scenes from her own life as part of a new initiative that asserted film as a medium for social change. Krista Belle Stewart's response to this documentary is *Her Story*, and is meant to shed light on the complexities of interpretation, mediation and storytelling.

As an extension of *Her Story*, Stewart created *Seraphine, Seraphine* (2014) a 39-minute film that juxtaposes the entire CBC documentary about her mother with recent footage of her mother delivering a testimony at the Vancouver Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 2013. As part of *Re-enact*, this two-channel film will be screened at the Uptown Theatre in Barrie on September 29 at 7pm in conjunction with the Barrie Film Festival, followed by a discussion with the artist. A blatant incongruity divides the two facets of *Seraphine, Seraphine*. On the left, the grainy CBC documentary tells the story of Seraphine's relocation from her reserve in Douglas Lake to nursing school in Victoria, a lively jazz soundtrack underscoring the unnatural interactions between Seraphine and her white peers. The TRC footage, on the right, is sterile and bureaucratic, a running close-up of Seraphine set against a still image of a waterfall. Here Seraphine speaks openly of the loss of tradition, family hardships, deprived living conditions and emotional abuse that resulted from her time at the Kamloops Residential School. The disjuncture between the dated re-enactment and the recent candid footage is jarring. The CBC film, contrived and awkward, amplifies the veracity and emotional power of Seraphine's testimony. By contrasting these two modes of storytelling, Krista Belle Stewart calls our attention appalling realities in our recent past, and highlights the profound divergences between history as it is recorded and reality as it is lived.

Similar to Krista Belle Stewart, Emma Nishimura appropriates found narratives to shed light on current attitudes, and to open up complicated truths in both her family's past and Canadian history. In *Constructed Narratives* (2013-14), the Toronto-based artist retraces the experiences of her ancestors through geography and the written word. The series consists

of nine etchings that map the interior landscape of British Columbia. Topographic contours tracing roads and waterways are, upon closer inspection, lines of meticulously hand-etched text. The artist appropriated these words from a variety of books that have shaped her understanding of the region, texts ranging from contemporary to historical, fiction to non-fiction.

Installed so that each map flows into the next, the prints mirror the actual geography of interior British Columbia. The meandering series encompasses several Japanese Canadian internment camps, including the one Nishimura's paternal grandmother lived in from 1942 to 1945, as well as sections of road her grandfather was sent to work on during the war and the city where her father was born shortly afterwards. "Fragmented and veiled, [the maps] whisper of a story, almost unreachable and unknowable, but there nonetheless," the artist notes. "As the geography changes, so do the stories."¹

Constructed Narratives draws our attention to another harrowing period in Canadian history—the internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II. The majority of Japanese Canadians living in British Columbia were detained and dispossessed, their homes and businesses sold to pay for their own detention. This government policy has had an enormous impact on the present, as racism afflicted many Japanese Canadians in the post-war years. Nishimura seeks to spark dialogue about this shadowy past and its effect on current day attitudes towards Japanese communities. Through the accumulation of voices from several points in history, all relating to the internment camps, Nishimura reinserts the experience of the internees onto the physical map of experience.

Also steeped in family history, *Granary (Anticipated Collapse 2009)* by Winnipeg-based artist Sarah Ciurysek is a full-scale reproduction of the floor of a traditional wooden granary: an iconic Prairies structure that is disappearing. Wooden granaries form an integral part of local identity and are vernacular symbols of farming life in the Prairies. Over the past century, the majority of these intricately engineered structures, hand-built by the farmers who used them, have been replaced by much larger steel granaries.

Ciurysek's family worked with this granary for three generations. Located near Peace River in northern Alberta (the artist's home town), the granary serves as a document of past activity, with evidence of use ranging from the marks of oil drums to bits of leftover grain to metal scraps that patch holes in the floor. Ciurysek photographed each section of the floor on large-format film before digitally merging the sections. The artist's mother assisted with the shoot, which was laborious and required a specially designed hanging mechanism installed on the ceiling beams. "As we worked, she told me stories about playing there. [...] I like the full circle of her playing in the granary as a child, and then helping to preserve it through stories and photographically."²

Granary is interactive: visitors are invited to walk on the photograph and stand in the position where the farmers once stood. This element of re-enactment transforms representation into embodiment, a direct involvement that turns the passive visitor into an active participant.³ The granary floor becomes a stage for imagining a specific aspect of Canadian agricultural history that is quickly fading.

Like Ciurysek, Ottawa-based artist Meryl McMaster employs the experiential and performative potential of re-enactment as a tool for artmaking. Through a process that combines performance and photography, McMaster examines how identities are constructed through lineage and history. Where Ciurysek investigates a physical structure as a marker of identity—both personal and collective, McMaster mines intangible legacies—language and written histories—to reflect on similar ideas.

For *Murmur* (2013), a triptych of performance-based self-portraits, McMaster draws inspiration from the natural phenomenon of a murmuration, a mass of starlings that fly collectively as one being. In the photographs the artist dons an elaborate sculptural garment composed of thousands of paper starlings folded from pages cut from North American history books. Inside the towering mass of starlings she performs a graceful spin that echoes the form of the swirling birds. Like the aerial spectacle of a murmuration, the images verge on surreal, reminiscent of a childhood daydream in which birds represent freedom and the sky boundless potential.⁴ By dissecting and reassembling history books, McMaster transforms the fixed meaning of words into open possibilities of subjectivity.

¹ Emma Nishimura, *Artist Statement: Constructed Narratives*. http://www.emmanishimura.com/work_statement7.html. Accessed February 15, 2017.

² Email correspondence with artist, February 20, 2017.

³ Inke Arns, *Strategies of Re-enactment in Contemporary (Media) Art and Performance*. In Arns, Inke and Horn, Gabriele, Eds., *History Will Repeat Itself*, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2007. p 59.

⁴ Meryl McMaster, *In Between Worlds*. Video interview by Station Gallery, Whitby, Ontario. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qxXGxiiO7c>. Accessed February 17, 2017.

Written histories contribute to collective identities, shaping relationships with the past and how we define the past in the present. In *Murmur*, McMaster explores the opposition of individual identity and collective persona, both of which are strongly influenced by history and language. An artist of Plains Cree and Euro-Canadian heritage, McMaster often addresses her own interstitial identity in her work. The artist notes: “In *Murmur* I photograph myself as a method to understand my autonomous existence outside of formations of collective identity; any insight, however, is thwarted by the fact that these collective notions of personhood, at least in part, determine my sense of self.”⁵ Here, McMaster’s documented performance carries an emancipatory quality in that it invites transformation and creates a stage for possible and as-yet-unthinkable performances.⁶ With this poetic gesture she reclaims histories from stereotypes and misrepresentations and moves them into a contemporary space.

Elements of performance and bi-culturalism carry through in the work of Michael Farnan, an artist based in Victoria Harbour, Ontario. His collaborative, multidisciplinary practice queries the enduring effects and lived realities of colonialism in Canada. As a Canadian citizen of British descent Farnan wrestles with the social and historical narratives of institutionalized Canadian racism from a local, non-Indigenous perspective.

Dance for the Narrows (2015) is an eleven-minute video in which the artist hired canoeist William Brims and documentary filmmaker David Hartman to perform and document a paddle dance at the historical Mnjikenning Fishing Weirs near Orillia, Ontario. Brims paddles Canadian-style, kneeling and manoeuvring the boat in small, graceful motions. With expert skill, he paddles to two folk songs performed by accomplished Métis musician and educator Joel Alain, who stands ashore, overlooking. One of Alain’s songs, “Land of the Silver Birch”, is based on a poem by Mohawk-English author Emily Pauline Johnson (1861-1913) called “Song My Paddle Sings”. Written from an Indigenous perspective, Johnson’s lyrics express a profound respect for nature and the land. Here, the song is removed from the romanticized wilderness it describes. The canoe—itself a loaded colonial symbol—seems out of place in this contemporary iteration of the Weirs, populated with motorized boats. The documented performances are at once critical and reverential, honouring Indigenous traditions while calling attention to Canada’s history of cultural appropriation. Farnan, who believes the settlement of Canada is ongoing, employs collaboration as a strategy to acknowledge the influence of Indigenous culture on settler life, and the interconnectedness between these two world views.

Toronto artist Elinor Whidden is another who restages contemporary versions of history to comment on undisclosed narratives. Through a practice that combines sculpture, installation, performance and photography, she critiques contemporary culture by subverting myths of history, specifically with regard to colonialism in Canada, physical mobility, and mobility in time, creating artworks that posit “impossible possibilities for the future”.⁷

Whidden’s *Head-Smashed-In-Engine-Block Buffalo Jump* (2010-2013), is a large-scale installation of rusted mufflers scavenged from scrapyards and reassembled into bison (or buffalo) skulls. The work’s title directly references Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump, a site near Lethbridge, Alberta where for nearly 6,000 years Indigenous peoples of the plains hunted herds of bison by driving them over cliffs.⁸ Now a World Heritage Site, the park exhibits traces of a sophisticated—and sustainable—mode of killing and processing bison. Post-contact, settlers shot bison as a means of starving Indigenous communities into dependence. Bison, once so abundant in the region, nearly reached extinction in the 1880s.

Amassed in staggering pile, Whidden’s skulls conjure the crisis of the buffalo famine. However, amidst the themes of loss, greed, and overconsumption evoked by the installation is an undercurrent of perseverance. As Cree artist Kent Monkman comments in his sesquicentennial project, *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience*, “It was one more way they tried to make us disappear, but the buffalo came back, and we never left.”⁹ Referencing the automotive industry, the mound of rusted parts recalls not only the bone yards of mass bison slaughters, but also piles of scrapped cars in wrecking yards. Characteristic of Whidden’s oeuvre, this work links the past with the present, calling our attention to the ominous political and ecological situations we find ourselves in today.

Often political, artistic re-enactments such as these communicate educational and ideological objectives that reflect current attitudes. They allow viewers access to history through immersion, embodiment and empathy. Taking the notion of re-enactment beyond its standard definition, the works in *Re-enact* substitute a monolithic history with individual lived experience through direct, and sometimes physical, interactions with the past. By collapsing the distance between historical

⁵ Meryl McMaster, *Artist Statement: Murmur*. http://merylmcmaster.com/section/374824_Murmur.html. Accessed February 17, 2017.

⁶ Robert Blackson, *Once More... With Feeling: Reenactment in Contemporary Art and Culture*. In *Art Journal*, Spring 2007, p 29.

⁷ Elinor Whidden, *Car-Carrying Adventures*. Artist talk documented by Forum Vies Mobiles, France. <https://vimeo.com/groups/175798/videos/69068435>. Accessed May 17, 2017.

⁸ UNESCO, *Head-Smashed-In-Buffalo-Jump Information Guide*. <http://history.alberta.ca/headsmashedin/>. Accessed March 1, 2017.

⁹ Kent Monkman, *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience*. Exhibition Brochure. Art Museum, University of Toronto. 2017.

knowledge and subjective experience, these works make space for personal engagement with nuanced, difficult and underrepresented histories.

Artist Biographies

Sarah Ciurysek was raised in northern Alberta and currently lives in Winnipeg, where she teaches at the School of Art, University of Manitoba. She trained at Emily Carr University of Art + Design (BFA 2003), Parsons The New School for Design, and Concordia University (MFA 2007). Her work has been exhibited across Canada, in the UK, and in South Africa. She has participated in national and international residencies and has received grants from the Canada Council and the Alberta Foundation for the Arts.

Dr. Michael Farnan is a multi-disciplinary artist with a Studio-based Ph.D in Art and Visual Culture from Western University. He works in a variety of media including sculpture, painting, drawing, video and performance. Farnan, who is based in Victoria Harbour, Ontario, completed his MFA at the University of Saskatchewan and BFA at Concordia University.

Meryl McMaster is an Ottawa-based artist with a BFA in Photography from OCAD University. Her work has been included in exhibitions across North America. She is the recipient of the REVEAL Indigenous Art Award, Charles Pachter Prize for Emerging Artists, the Canon Canada Prize, the Eiteljorg Contemporary Art Fellowship and the OCAD U Medal. Her work has been acquired by various public collections within Canada and the United States.

Emma Nishimura received her MFA from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 2013 and her BA from the University of Guelph in 2005. Her work is in public and private collections and has been exhibited in both Canada and the United States. Nishimura is currently teaching printmaking courses at the Ontario College of Art and Design University, the University of Guelph and Sheridan College. She lives and works in Toronto.

Krista Belle Stewart holds a BFA from Emily Carr University and a MFA from Bard College in New York. She is a member of the Upper Nicola Band of the Okanagan Nation, and lives and works in Vancouver. Stewart's recent solo exhibitions include *Eye Eye* at Franz Kaka (Toronto); *Seraphine, Seraphine* at Mercer Union (Toronto); and *Motion and Moment Always* at the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, which was the culmination of fall 2014 residencies at the Nisga'a Museum and Western Front.

Elinor Whidden received a BA in Canadian/Environmental Studies from Trent University, a BFA from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and a MFA from SUNY at Buffalo. She has exhibited throughout North America, recently in Newfoundland, British Columbia, Ontario and Detroit. Whidden is the recipient of numerous grants and awards including creation grants from the Ontario Arts Council and the Toronto Arts Council. She lives and works in Toronto.

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