

**Duane Linklater** is Omaskêko Cree from Moose Cree First Nation on James Bay. He obtained a Bachelor of Native Studies and a Bachelor of Fine Arts at the University of Alberta, followed by a Master of Fine Arts in Film and Video at the Milton Avery Graduate School of Arts at Bard College. Duane is the 2013 winner of the Sobey Art Award, Canada's pre-eminent award for contemporary art. He has had solo exhibitions at Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto; Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Thunder Bay; Or Gallery, Vancouver; and Family Business, New York. *Modest Livelihood*, a film installation co-created with Brian Jungen, debuted at the Walter Phillips Gallery as part of dOCUMENTA (13) and has since traveled to Chicago, Vancouver and Toronto. His work has been included in group shows at the Esker Foundation, Calgary; Le Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, Montréal; The Power Plant, Toronto; Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver; UBS Gallery, Redhook, New York City; The Banff Centre, Banff, Alberta; and Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton. Duane lives and works in North Bay, Ontario.

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MACLAREN**ART**CENTRE

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# Decommission

by Tanya Lukin Linklater

Three men stand facing an open UHaul. The carcass of our Jeep tucked inside is a thousand pounds. Duane's black boots mark the white ground. At his back, a wind carves deep water.

For four years, Phil has tended to the Jeep. Sometimes it is driven ten minutes down the dirt road to his garage. Other times it is towed, billowing white smoke to wait its turn for repair. Together, we listen to the hum grow more deafening, feel the catch cough and sputter.

Phil and his garage sit squarely on Nipissing First Nation. We live down the road in a small house. Daily we pass his house, drive to town, and for four years the Jeep has carried us across the invisible boundary between Nipissing First Nation and the City of North Bay.

Duane tells Phil his idea, and for a year Phil listens; he doesn't say much. Duane calls in town to find someone to tear the blue down to its frame, but it isn't right. Each man he speaks to makes him think of Phil and wait for his decision. He waits.

Two summers ago, we drove ten hours, thousands of kilometres south, in the refuge of the cool Jeep to the unforgiveable stickiness of upstate New York. Duane told someone in that place of compost and art and heat and dorms that the Jeep was his horse.

I see the Crow Fair, Montana. When we were young, we camped in the tall grass. He braided my hair while Crow boys rode horses through camp, with reins but no blankets. The ten a.m. parade each day called me. Horses in stitched beadwork. Exquisite. Shiny trucks with elders and families in the back; truck beds wore Pendleton blankets, hoods were adorned in beads. A procession.

I see the time I traversed mountain ranges and plains, whisking three children to Oregon. How cheap the gas was how Oregon beaches interrupted how the Columbia River how tulips.

There are other stories.

When Duane tells me his idea, it lives in my imagination for a year or more. I turn a sculpture over in my mind, an object transforms from the utilitarian to the non-useful; quotidian to non-everyday. I picture the sculpture, sandblasted.

As it is torn down in my mind's eye, as it is decommissioned in Duane's imagination, Phil too deconstructs the Jeep, first in his head. I hold my breath. Duane's intention is for Phil to tend to the Jeep, one final time. To tend to the ideas of object, invisible boundaries, and the time it takes to build relationships. We wait for his decision.



2005 Grand Jeep Cherokee, 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

For four days, the Jeep is pulled apart and boiled down. For four days, Phil labors.

It sits, tucked inside the UHaul, as a rusted carcass. I catch a glimpse and no longer remember all that I wanted to say about living with this object for six years.

My ideas about the object are not the same as the object itself. My ideas are only part of the negotiation between Duane, Phil and the thousand pounds left.

**Tanya Lukin Linklater** is a multidisciplinary artist whose practice spans experimental choreography, performance, installation, text, and video. Her works have shown at Images Festival/Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (Toronto), Museum of Contemporary Native Art (Santa Fe), Latitude 53's Visualeyez (Edmonton), grunt gallery (Vancouver), Culver Center of the Arts (California), TRIBE (Saskatoon), Sakewewak (Regina), and in exhibitions in Brazil, Argentina, Alaska, among others. She studied at University of Alberta (M.Ed., 2003) and Stanford University (A.B. Honours, 1998). Tanya was awarded the Chalmers Professional Development Grant in 2010 and the K.M. Hunter Artist Award in Literature in 2013. She has collaborated with Duane Linklater on two projects. [www.tanyalukinlinklater.com](http://www.tanyalukinlinklater.com)



Duane Linklater

# DECOMMISSION

MACLAREN**ART**CENTRE



# Decommission

by cheyanne turions

**D***ecommission* is a solo exhibition by Duane Linklater, composed of a single work: *2005 Grand Jeep Cherokee*, the stripped frame of Linklater’s family vehicle. An object/sculpture in an otherwise empty space, the shape is strange and ghostly for the ways it beckons the viewer to construct the vehicle atop the skeleton.<sup>1</sup> The title of the work reads funny too, with its inversion of terms, though it manages to give specific shape to the filling-in-the-blanks of the thing on display. For myself, it’s a familiar act of imagination because my sister and I, like many teenage girls, had our bout with silly fandom obsession. The handsome young man we pined after, when he reached driving age, acquired a shiny new Jeep Grand Cherokee. Unsurprisingly, this became our dream vehicle. The Jeep Grand Cherokee, a model still in production today, retains this spectacular aura for me. For the American auto market, the appearance of the Jeep Cherokee in 1984 was a harbinger of the sport-utility craze that is only now receding as climate change becomes more and more apparent, and austerity policies—both governmental and personal—more and more common.<sup>2</sup> When Linklater purchased a Jeep Grand Cherokee in 2007, the SUV phenomena and the economy were at fever pitch. Six years later, that jeep has been “driven into the ground” and the economy declined on a scale such as to be commonly referred to as the Great Recession. In the courtyard at the MacLaren Art Centre, there is a bit of what remains, what Linklater calls a *memento mori*, a stark reminder that all things come to pass.

For the Jeep Grand Cherokee, that ending has yet to come. Launched almost a decade after the introduction of the Cherokee, the Grand Cherokee was manufactured and advertised as an upscale version of the tough SUV meant to be “maneuverable enough for urban duty, roomy enough for family duty, stylish enough to take out on the town and capable enough to get to the more remote campsites.”<sup>3</sup> Though this paradigm is recognizable now, there was a market risk in mixing passenger carrying capacity with the machine power associated with off-road activities.<sup>4</sup> Where the rugged Cherokee model emphasized all-terrain capabilities, the Grand Cherokee prioritized on-road performance, which seems to reflects the way Linklater used the vehicle, running the regular errands of life, moving his family across the country, and the substantial back and forth commutes for grad school hundreds of kilometres from his home base.

Though the Grand Cherokee remains in production today, the era of the super-vehicle is waning. Chrysler, the present-day manufacturer of Jeeps, has experimented with ways of keeping the sport utility dream alive, including a rebranding of the base Cherokee line as the Jeep Liberty in 2002. Discontinued ten years later, the line was then re-re-branded back to the original Cherokee moniker. Given that discourse around cultural appropriation is more commonplace today than a decade ago, the decision to revert to the Aboriginal name “Cherokee” is cause for reflection. As a *New York Times* article asked earlier this year, “in a time of heightened sensitivity over stereotypes... Jeep is reviving an American Indian model name. Why?”<sup>5</sup> Allen Adamson, a brand consultant quoted in the article notes that ““If you have a name



2005 Grand Jeep Cherokee, 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

that offends nobody, then you end up with a forgettable brand’ that won’t cling to the memory.”<sup>6</sup> (Some things, perhaps, do not change...) One presumes that the initial decision to name the line “Cherokee” was made for the connotations of a relationship to land and nature that are often stereotypically placed upon Aboriginal cultures. Despite the fact that Cherokee culture is traditionally land-based, and that contemporary Aboriginal life can be as urban and technological as non-Aboriginal experiences, the association serves Jeep’s construction of their brand as one that facilitates a sense of adventure and freedom connected with being active outdoors, as well as being a symbol of masculinity and prowess, both of which harken back to early uses of Jeeps as military vehicles.

This kind of lateral association is a common practice of our capitalist economy where, as Queen’s University professor Ian McKay notes “consumers are enveloped by a system of goods and services that doubles as a system of meaning and transcendence. Yet, all too often, there is seemingly no clear purpose or direction to everyday life: activities seem geared to means and not to ends, to fragmented rather than integrated experiences, to an eternal ‘present’ and not to any history or future. Struggling for something beyond the shopping mall, North Americans grasp at the occult, countless schemes of self-improvement, new diets, ‘nature’—all of which require further trips to the shopping mall.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, advertising manifests desires that can only be fulfilled through the accumulation of goods, where purchases come to reflect an idealized version of ourselves.

In Linklater’s act of ownership, I think it is fair to imagine that there is a negotiation with the clichéd naming and the commodity fetishization represented by the Jeep Grand Cherokee. Yet, the work is distinctly not some translation between an idealized Indigenous life and a modern industrialized one. They just are, complexly and mundanely, knitted together. Encountering the object/sculpture in the sculpture garden, the broken machine portrays an act of dissection, or an attempt to come to know. In that act of undoing, Linklater examines his complicity and his resistance to the hyper-masculinized, outdoorsy connotations of Jeep ownership. The wild and tough, but still sensitive man seen in Jeep commercials is an image his identity became aligned with by virtue of ownership (despite any reservations he may have had). In releasing the frame from its utility, the object/sculpture becomes an idea



2005 Grand Jeep Cherokee, 2013. Photo: André Beneteau.

in formation, not only an aesthetic object nor a represented reality. In stripping the vehicle down to its frame—a kind of irreversible undoing—Linklater pays morbid witness to his implication with systems of buying, selling and identity as they present themselves to North American consumers today. We, viewers of the work, have our biographies, which are informed by the things we collect around us. In the space of the exhibition, encountering the Jeep as a token of one man’s identity, the possibility of dissection (or the necessity of labouring to know) opens for us all.

Though Linklater did not effect the deconstruction himself, he did author it.<sup>8</sup> The vehicle was his family’s, not some random Jeep. The specific lived connection to the piece of metal on display cannot be read as separate from Linklater’s artistic relationship to the material. As a sculpture, *2005 Grand Jeep Cherokee* is whole, complete, betraying the unburdened movement of the machine. In its oscillation as an object, it is fragmentary, its status relative to the exhibition space in which we encounter it. At the same time, at an even larger scale, the dismantling is antagonistic to the same capitalistic systems that encourage constant consumption by recycling the mechanical, metal skeleton as valuable, salvaged materials, instead of a pile of scrap bound for a junk yard. Yet again, the object/sculpture has become another product for consumption. The system of contradictions continues...

In the end, this is the skeleton of a 2005 Jeep Grand Cherokee. The slight inversion between the brand name (Jeep Grand Cherokee) and work’s title (*Grand Jeep Cherokee*), allows the adjective’s modification a larger scope, making the stripping down seem even more extreme in relation to how fantastic the machine is made to appear in the naming of the work. The exhibition title, *Decommission*, then describes the Jeep precisely as it appears in the space, a sort of reverse assemblage that disturbs a regular way of ordering things: it is decomposition as composition, an action that questions the previous choices of its maker.

My sister and I, we laugh now at our celebrity stalking—how childish, how frivolous—but that shared mania remains a bond between us despite our reflective embarrassment. And I, too, am subject to the allure of commodities that compromise the values I seek to embody. I don’t know the ways out of these contradictions, but I know it is important to sit with them. That the reproduction of capitalism requires numb complicity, then active looking becomes a small act of rebellion.<sup>9</sup>

In *Decommission*, Linklater puts these contradictions and grapplings on display and proposes to think about what we otherwise leave unexplained, to consider what we otherwise ignore out of habit. The space of art can be a place to try out different ways of being. Equally, it can be a place to attempt fluency with the ways we already are. Our acts of looking can lead to thinking, can lead to acting, and all things change in the end.

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<sup>1</sup> In referring to Linklater’s work as an object/sculpture, I am making reference to Helen Molesworth’s 2005 exhibition, *Part Object Part Sculpture*, which was presented at the Wexner Center for the Arts. The show explored the “liminality of the objects...their uneasy place between art and something else, between sculpture and painting, between commodity and art object, between objects and *objets d’art*, between language and its failures.” Molesworth, Helen. “Part Object Part Sculpture,” *Part Object Part Sculpture*. China: Wexner Center for the Arts and The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005, page 26.

<sup>2</sup> According to Peter Valdes-Dapena at CNN Money, “the Jeep Cherokee, introduced in 1984, was one of the vehicles that essentially created the modern SUV market segment.” Valdes-Dapena, Peter. “Iconic Jeep Cherokee’s controversial return,” *CNN Money* (27 March 2013). <http://money.cnn.com/2013/03/27/autos/jeep-cherokee/>. Accessed 06 November 2013.

<sup>3</sup> “Jeep Grand Cherokee Review,” *Edmunds*. <http://www.edmunds.com/jeep/grand-cherokee/>. Accessed 06 November 2013.

<sup>4</sup> For a time, the design-gamble proved a smart one. At the height of the sport utility craze, the gargantuan Hummer demarcated a status hyper-masculinized, wealthy and reckless. Yet, in 2010, production ceased of the modified military vehicle after poor sales followed economic downturn, rising gas prices, and environmental and safety concerns.

<sup>5</sup> In the ellipses here, I have removed the claim that “ethnic, racial and gender labeling has been largely erased from sports teams, products and services.” Officials from the Washington Redskins, the Atlanta Braves and the Cleveland Indians, to name just a few examples, remain adamant that no changes are in order for their team names or mascots. Collins, Glenn. “When cars assume ethnic identities,” *The New York Times* (21 June 2013). [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/23/automobiles/when-cars-assume-ethnic-identities.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/23/automobiles/when-cars-assume-ethnic-identities.html?pagewanted=1&_r=2). Accessed 06 November 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> McKay, Ian. *Rebels, Reds and Radicals: Rethinking Canada’s Left History*. Toronto: Between the Lines, 2005, page 3.

<sup>8</sup> The actual dismantling was carried out by Linklater’s personal mechanic, Phil Legault, so that the person who laboured to keep the vehicle up and running over the course of Linklater’s six years of ownership was, in the end, the person who undid the Jeep completely.

<sup>9</sup> It has been said many times, including by Slavoj Žižek and in Mark Fischer’s *Capitalist Realism*, that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. This failure of the imagination is precisely the kind of numb compliance required for the perpetuation of any system, capitalism included.