

The Truly Made Things of Nadia Myre

BY COLETTE TOUGAS

I believe very deeply that works of art, or let's say things in the world, not just works of art, can be truly made. If they are truly made, in the sense of possessing themselves, then they are beautiful... The idea of the truly made does not only have to do with truth. It has to do with the meeting of material and non-material... [A] thing exists in the world because it has mythological, psychological and philosophical coherence. That is when a thing is truly made... —Homi K. Bhabha¹

I remember hearing, several years ago, the American writer Spalding Gray in a radio interview during a literary festival somewhere in the United States. Gray mentioned having met Susan Sontag on that occasion and retold a conversation they had. She said that she always wrote from the same feeling and she was convinced that this was true of all writers. In her case it was from a feeling of loss and in Gray’s, if my memory serves me right, it was from anger.

I believe it is possible to apply this conception of a writer’s motivation to artists of all disciplines. However elusive it is, this basis in one’s own genesis gives a work its truly made feel or its soundness, if you will.

Nadia Myre has written that it is through the experience of claiming her mother’s and her own Native Status in 1997 that the exploration of her identity as a native woman took precedence in her work. She also noted that, as colonized peoples, the First Nations share a common experience of suffering and shame that she, as an artist, manifests and deconstructs in participatory works where she uses and explores her ancestors’ traditions.² One could argue that this is the backdrop against which Myre designs and builds very contemporary manifestations of her primary concerns.

Before “Cont[r]act”

Nadia Myre was born in Montreal in 1974 and is an Algonquin member of the Kitigan Zibi Anishnabeg. She is a graduate of Camosun College (Victoria, 1995) and the Emily Carr School of Art (Vancouver, 1997) and holds an M.F.A. from Concordia University (Montreal, 2002). The first public presentation of her work was in Wild Women Revue, a group show of native women artists that travelled across British Columbia in 1996-97. The work from this early period shows her determination to speak out as a young artist and woman, but in an intimate register, expressed in writing on various supports, such as *Why Won’t You Make Love to Me Asshole*, *We’ve Been There* and *I Love You*, all three made in 1997. These works manifest a need to make public something secret but in coded, almost evanescent form: the letters written on paper of *Why Don’t You* are not presented in a standard reading sequence; *We’ve Been There*, made out of wood, looks like a hardcover but without pages and thus without history; as a light projection on a Vancouver building, the declaration *I Love You* disappears as soon as day breaks.

In 1998, *Pocahontas Loverboy: Indian Giver* made clothing a symbol of identity, with its red panties bearing the words “Indian Giver” and decorated with feathers, beads and horsehair. This work along with *Urbanation Size 9: Been Around the Block* (1998-99) and *Head-Dress for the Protection of Love* form *Totems from the Tunnel of Love* (1999), a triptych featured in the exhibition “Artistes

autochtones—1999—Native Artists” presented at the Université de Montréal. The three “totems” refer directly to prostitution (more specifically in Vancouver where Myre lived and studied) and indirectly to native women (as indicated by the subtitle of one of the elements, *Indian Giver*). *Urbanation Size 9* is a pair of red leather, steel-toed boots (mukluks), beaded and decorated with black goose down; the title denounces the fate of native women when they move to the city, while the subtitle *Been Around the Block* evokes a hooker’s circuit. Made of white feathers, steel and blue condoms, the sculpture *Head-Dress for the Protection of Love* is a ceremonial headdress, except that the head is made of condoms and the protection referred to is against street love. Also created in 1999 is *Hover Baby*. *Hover* is a narrow steel box containing a long strip of blood-soaked gauze that looks like a fresh wound held inside a case, a wound so fresh that it is not possible to articulate or put into words.³ It can be seen to herald works to come such as *The Scar Project*.

Started by Myre and a fellow Vancouver student in 1996, the *Want Ads* began as spray-painted graffiti on the walls of the city.⁴ To produce these small ads, she met with several people and translated into words each of their “wants,” which resulted in sentences that are at times funny and/or erotic (*Sleeping Beauty Looking for Voyeur*), sometimes caustic (*Amer Indien / Bitter Indian*). In their current form, the quotations have become stencilled variations of beautifully washed-out colours on paper. This piece has something in common with American conceptual artist Barbara Kruger, who applied herself to speaking out against abuses of power, combining images drawn from the media and shock declarations, and with Jenny Holzer’s *Truisms*, another American artist of the same generation. But Myre’s sentences are more emotionally charged, closer to a megaphone than a banner due to the oral quality of her approach as an artist. Myre continued the *Want Ads* until she undertook the *Scar Paintings* in 2006, a series discussed below.

During this early period, Myre used language as a malleable, multifaceted material that enabled her to fling out paradoxical feelings and to camouflage and divert them in double-entendres. Such conceptual strategies would increase in future language pieces, in which she has moved on from words to marks, from page to skin, from wound to scar.

“Cont[r]act”

... her mute mouth can yield no token of the facts. Great trouble is inventive, and ingenuity arises in difficult times. Cleverly, she fastens her thread to a barbarian’s loom, and weaves purple designs on a white background, revealing the crime. —Ovid⁵

For the “Cont[r]act” exhibition, mounted in collaboration with curator Rhonda L. Meier and presented at Oboro gallery (Montreal) in 2002, Nadia Myre brought together nine pieces created between 1997 and 2002, a number of which would feature in several other solo and group shows. This monographic exhibition was decisive because it revealed not only the breadth and depth of Myre’s approach but also its strength. To achieve some of the works, she had to become acquainted with her own Algonquin culture from which she had been estranged, learn traditional techniques and secure the participation of volunteers. Beyond (and through) native claims, the exhibition addressed subjects of universal import, such as identity, stereotypes, spirituality, suffering and justice. The title “Cont[r]act,” without its [r], recalls the first contacts with Europeans and as such an ancestral way of life, and with its [r] the bitterly disappointing contracts that followed. This collapsing or fusion of two terms and periods underpinned all the works presented in the show and served to organize them along a “before” and “after” line.

The work *Contact* (2001-02) is a target with a red centre and alternating white and



Contact: When Odd Gets Even, 2001-2002, beads on canvas, 37.5 x 37.5 cm. Courtesy of Art Mûr. Photo: Guy L'Heureux.

red circles; made of seed beads, the untouched target prefigures the encounter between Red and White peoples, as does the installation *Two-Row*. The *Two-Row* Wampum Belt, on which the installation is based, “records one of the earliest treaties made between the North American and European nations”;⁶ in fact, it represents the European and the Iroquois travelling down the same river but in different boats—a symbol of mutual respect. Myre’s installation revisits the subject in two parts: *Monument to Two-Row, Revised* is twinned with *Portrait as a River, Divided*. Each equal-sized work represents the actual facts, when initial good intentions gave way to a lack of understanding, revision and division. *Monument* materially evokes the ancient belt and treaty, with its two rows of pink wampums illustrating a form of hybridity within a stream of white wampums; in parallel, the two sinuous lines of *Portrait*, an acrylic work on canvas with imitation sinew, stand out against a dried out, dark riverbed.

Indian Act is an imposing work composed of chapters one to five of the government document.⁷ Myre reproduced the fifty-six pages of these chapters and used beading or *manidoominensikaan*, “traditionally a female artform.”⁸ to erase the text “of a Eurocentric, patriarchal, colonial document designed to assimilate.”⁹ To achieve her goal, she launched a beading call to which 250 people answered. This is how the white beads came to replace the (white man’s) text on a red beaded background. From 2000 to 2003, the community work was at once the bringing up to date of a spiritual practice, a political act of erasure and re-appropriation, and the beginning of a healing process. With its fifty-six black frames now presenting abstract variations in red and white, this monumental work proceeded to deconstruct a social wrong and draw from it an artistically coherent conceptual proposition where past and present, ancient technique and contemporary content were fused together.

A similar kind of fusion is successfully achieved in *History in Two Parts* (2000). The work is a life-size canoe with the rear half traditionally built in birch bark (Myre sought advice from her great grandfather in Maniwaki to find someone to help her build it¹⁰), while the front half is a common aluminum canoe—a “found object”. Again, as indicated by the title, two moments, two technologies and two cultures are united in a sculpture that is also a mode of transportation that allows one to *move forward*. In the video *Portrait in Motion* (2002) we actually see the canoe in its natural element—a lake. As a rear projection on a glass surface framed and embedded in a wall,¹¹ this portrait—a sequence shot—shows a paddler advancing in an amber mist. The canoe comes very close to the camera before turning back, giving the viewer barely enough time to make out that the paddler is in fact a woman, Nadia Myre herself. Beyond its obvious visual poetry—evocative of Edward S. Curtis’ sepia coloured, bucolic (and often criticized) portraits—this “elusive, metaphorical union of past, present, nature, culture and soul”¹² appropriates the stereotype of the Indian living in harmony with nature and lets a woman emerge from the mist, in total control of her boat, of her life.

With its spare circle of three wooden poles held together by wooden supports, *Grandmothers’ Circle* (2002) addresses the importance of matrilineality in native communities and, by the placement of two other groups of poles with no support—one lying on the ground and the other resting against the wall—it also evokes the isolation and precariousness of those excluded from their community, as were Myre and her mother as well as any number of other native women.¹³ The looped video *Wish* (2002) shows a slender abstract form created by a figure (Myre in fact) jumping in front of a camera. It is possible to see in this work a split or tear, but at times the distorted and slender image at the centre of the screen also strangely recalls the static poles of *Grandmothers’ Circle*, as if the wish in question was Myre’s own to join the circle of her grandmothers.

Finally, *Distance between Us*, an earlier work from 1997, is made of a table cut in two with the sentence “distance between us” written on two laser-cut stencils. Dim lighting makes it possible to read it, not on the (negotiating) table itself, but as a projection on the ground, where it loses its materiality, its concreteness. This kind of combination of writing and projection was used often by Myre in her early practice.

Written on the Skin

In its structure and functions, the skin is more than an organ—it is an ensemble of various organs. Its anatomical, psychological and cultural complexity anticipates at the level of the organism the complexity of the Ego at the level of the psyche. Of all the sense organs, it is the most vital: one can live blind, deaf, without taste or smell. But if most of the skin is not whole, one does not survive. —Didier Anzieu¹⁴

In several of Nadia Myre’s 2004 works, skin and words combine in actions with a political or intimate content. The video *Inkanatation* records the inscription of a tattoo on the artist’s arm, in fact a new version of the Canadian flag created by Mohawk artist and curator Greg A. Hill for his *Kanata 2000* project. To mark the new millennium, Hill wanted not only to give the country back its original name of *Kanata* (“village” in Iroquoian), but also to update its flag by replacing the central maple leaf by three feathers (symbolizing the First Nations, the Metis and the Inuit) tied together at their base. During this short video, we see the tattooing in fast motion, during which blood and red ink flow together. The word *Inkanatation*, a cross between a portmanteau word and Russian dolls (a Russian portmanteau if you will), is a loaded term. As a critic explained,¹⁵ “ink” refers to the

tattooing process, “Kanata” or village to the country’s name, and the whole word on an incantation; it also contains the camouflaged acronym TAT, for Thematic Apperception Test. Used by psychologists for diagnostic purposes, the TAT consists in showing images illustrating ambiguous situations to patients who are then asked to interpret them. By introducing this reference, the artist questioned our perceptions and representations of “Indians,” and by having the flag engraved on her skin through the tattoo artist’s repetitive, incantatory gesture, she expressed her desire to be in touch with her ancestors and in solidarity with them.

Although not written on skin per se, *Your True Love* and *Everything I Know About Love* refer to it indirectly. In the first case, a video shows a couple dancing together in the middle of a street in a small maritime town. Placed on pebbles, the handwritten words “your,” “true” and “love” are written singly on three pieces of paper, later chewed and swallowed by a young woman (Myre). The dance begins anew and the following words appear as surtitles: “You are salt / I a wound you rub into / We confess our desire / To hurt / To be hurt / And slide into our old skin.” The female character then does the same thing with three other handwritten words—“is,” “a” and “lie”—all six forming “Your true love is a lie.” This piece could be seen as the inspiration for a painting entitled *Everything I Know About Love* consisting of a virgin canvas (spread on two panels possibly representing different periods in the artist’s life) that has apparently been torn before being sewn together again and covered with (oil) paint and ashes: in the end, this is how the devastating effects of love and desire have scarred.

The following year, Nadia Myre began *The Scar Project* (2005-13), her second major initiative (after Indian Act) in which the public was invited to participate, but this time on a more personal level. The aim of the workshops, held in galleries, exhibition centres and other more unusual venues¹⁶ in North America, was “about recognizing, naming and sharing” the wounds that have shaped each person’s identity and “in so doing bringing compassion and love to each other and ourselves.”¹⁷ Participants were given pieces of square blank canvas on which they were invited to represent in stitches a physical, psychological or spiritual wound and to supply an explanatory note. Participants were offered the possibility of remaining anonymous. The act of bringing together people and having them share personal wounds that they want to hide and expose simultaneously (a contradictory impulse found in Myre’s early language pieces) in a friendly public setting is connected with a healing process evocative of shamanic interventions. Also, by asking her fellow human beings to transform their lived experience into material for an artwork (around 1,400 in all), Myre makes clear that any creative or fictional work that is passed on to us, however refined or abstract it may be, is not only based on something real but is a witness to it. She offers participants the opportunity to create because, as Joseph Beuys told us, “every human being is an artist.”

In 2006, Myre began the *Scar Paintings* series, as a complement to the *Scar Project*. This series features scars of various shapes and formats, traces of ancient or fresh wounds, big or small, that the process has allowed her to bring out and acknowledge. These monochrome oil paintings vary from pink to copper to burnt orange (skin tones), giving them an extremely warm and appealing aspect. Each is strangely reminiscent of a fossil, harkening back to the “dig” that brought it to life, or of an organism being studied under a microscope. Furthermore, as Stacey Abramson remarked, “the tissues that accumulate to shape the scar are never identical to what was once there. Myre explores this loss, commemorates and attempts to heal these scars through her paintings.”¹⁸

Finally, *Coda Construction* (2004) evokes the skin of a “viewer” who is capable of finger-reading the poetic text embossed on white paper, the aluminum etched

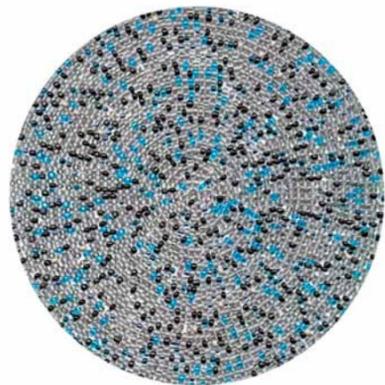
Morse code or the ground-to-air signals stitched on canvas. These languages—one poetic, the other two of survival—create a discourse through juxtaposition (“you loved as a child lost in the thick of wood haunted by a slew of ghostly creatures”) and two meta-discourses: one in Morse code (“help,” “unable to move,” “help,” “help,” “help,” “help”) and the other in ground-to-air code (“do not understand,” “unable to move,” “need assistance,” “need compass and map”). In the over-coded poetic text, the imminence of danger becomes illegible—a reference to the difficulty we have of understanding distress messages or calls that are sent to us in real life. Too much communication, compounded with turmoil, can lead to its opposite—incommunicability.

Nationality, Environment and Sex

This open and non-occult wisdom [ecosophy]... is less the vector of a stable cultural identity than the mark of a more respectful and also exhilarating way of being in the world. —Matthieu Dumont¹⁹

Created five years apart, two artworks were directly concerned with North American national identities: *Stars and Stripes* (2003) and *Rethinking Anthem* (2008). With the former, Nadia Myre proposed a new reading of the U.S. flag. She separated the original stars and stripes and presented them in a new flag-like grid composed of eighteen small tableaux with a star, eighteen others with a triple band, seven covered simply with the cloth used as support and seven blank spaces. In Myre’s version, the cloth used is quite significant since it is blue stroud—a historically popular trade item. Its dark colour and the red of the stripes are the same as those of the American flag, but the white has been completely eliminated: the stars are now golden yellow and the six white stripes (symbolizing with the seven red ones the thirteen founding states) no longer exist. The group of seven elements without symbols and the seven blank spaces could each be interpreted as seven Native generations, one series representing the history that needs to be written and the other stories lost or forgotten. Seven is an important number in native philosophy, as it states that any important decision should take into consideration the next seven generations. Myre also explored this theme in a more recent project entitled “Journey of the Seventh Fire,” which we will examine further on. For the video *Rethinking Anthem* (2008),²⁰ the artist used her favourite material—words. Eliminating the three first words of the English version of Canada’s national anthem, “O Canada, Our,” she questions the four that follow: “Home and Native Land.”²¹ The image has been recomposed in the editing room, so that we see the artist, or rather her forearms, in the process of erasing HOME AND at the top of the frame while undoing the erasure of NATIVE LAND at the bottom. This message about historical occlusion and wilful resurgence could hardly be clearer in its desire to reclaim land usurped by colonizing forces.

It is difficult to address land today without thinking of environment and ecology. Nadia Myre’s approach is topical in this sense, as our environmental problems stem from colonialism, capitalism, industrialization and the excessive exploitation of natural resources to satisfy the wants of a minority. The “Journey of the Seventh Fire” project, begun in 2008, takes as its starting point the Seven Fires Prophecy Wampum Belt, at one time kept at Kitigan Zibi (Maniwaki). In short, it tells how Prophets visited the Anishinabe when they were living in the North-East region of the American continent. At the end of the meeting, the Prophets left seven prophecies, the Seven Fires, which lead up to our days, the Eighth Fire. This fire will occur only if the human race abandons materialism and unites in brotherhood and sisterhood to save the Earth from impending destruction. In the “Journey of the Seventh Fire” series, Myre explores the Seventh Fire, as represented by major mining and hydroelectric companies, such as Alcan, Cameco and Hydro-Québec.



Philosophical from the series *Meditations on Black*, 2012, digital print, 112 x 112 cm. Courtesy of Art Mûr.

She uses beading on a (rather large) canvas (144 x 144 cm) to reproduce the logos of these giants that continue to find it “difficult” to negotiate with the First Nations. Myre explains that she’s pursuing the exploration she began with “Cont[r]act.” According to the seventh prophecy, we are now at a crossroads—the time has come to find out how this new relationship could materialize.

For the “Desire Schematics” series (2009), digital prints made from red and pink beading on white, Myre drew from a piping and instrumentation diagram. The titles of the abstract-looking works, although they too are borrowed from the field of engineering, seem to refer to human processes, such as *Pet Cock*, *Try Cock* and *Lubricator*. This playful effect recalls Duchamp’s approach: by evoking sex, the titles excite our imagination. Moreover, in a solo exhibition at Art Mûr,²² their presentation in the same room as *The Dreamers* (2007)—delicate sculptures made of wooden poles girded with red string placed on an organic-looking platform—brought out the similar lines and colours of both series. This parallelism underscores the co-existence of technical and traditional worlds, torn between yearning and dreaming.

Forgive and Respect

The wounds we are ashamed of never heal. —Dany Laferrière²³

In 2010 Nadia Myre launched a new collaborative project in preparation for a solo exhibition in 2011 at La Maison des artistes visuels francophones in Saint-Boniface, Manitoba. In the same spirit as *The Scar Project*, *The Forgiveness Project* was an open-ended participatory initiative. Based on testimonies sent by people and with her own input, Myre created a list of thoughts and gestures, expressed in words, that seek forgiveness.

In her early years of practice, Myre used words and their various levels of meaning to evacuate bitter feelings and assert her very own identity, in an ironic or provocative tone, but always tinged with poetry. Her personal life was the source material from which she constructed a conceptually based body of work. Triggered by the experience of her mother claiming their Native Status, a return to her origins marked the beginning of a second period. If the backdrop for her earlier participatory projects was collective humiliation and pain, they evolved to a notion and an act of healing, and then to the idea of forgiveness.

In recent years, what rises up clearly from Myre’s work is a call for respect—of oneself, others, the community and the environment. It is possible to see in it a formal and thematic refinement process that over a thirteen-year period has seen the content of her work go from fundamental pain to a dearly asserted pride—a pride that was there from the beginning, buried yet active at a basic and subterranean level.

The words of a poem by Mohawk writer Janet Marie Rogers, *As I Am*, help us understand the impact and resonance of this feeling: “Respect is a powerful thing—like a commodity we can trade.” This rule goes not only for First Nations but for all of us living on a planet where we are increasingly dependent on one another. It is in this direction that Nadia Myre leads us with her art, with her truly made things so deeply rooted in humanity and all its riches.

Colette Tougas works as a translator, writer, editor and production coordinator in the visual arts and in publishing. She has published both fiction and critical essays on the visual arts (*Parachute*, *Ciel Variable*, etc.), curated exhibitions and served on various boards and advisory committees. For many years she was managing editor of the contemporary art magazine *Parachute*. She holds a degree in communications from Concordia University.

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Scarscapes series, 2010. Courtesy of Art Mûr. Photo: André Beneteau.

Nadia Myre is a visual artist from Quebec and an Algonquin member of the Kitigan Zibi Anishnabeg. She received a degree in Fine Arts from the Emily Carr School of Art in 1997 and a Master of Fine Arts from Concordia University in Montreal in 2002. Her work has been widely exhibited, with solo shows in New York, Ottawa, Winnipeg, Montreal, Kingston and Vancouver. Nadia participated in the prestigious Sydney Biennial in 2012 and was given a prominent commission for *Sakahàn: International Indigenous Art* at the National Gallery of Canada in 2013. Her work appears in numerous public collections including the Canada Council Art Bank, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Musée des beaux-arts de Montreal, National Gallery of Canada, Smithsonian Institute and the National Museum of the American Indian. Myre is represented by Art Mûr. She lives and works in Montreal.

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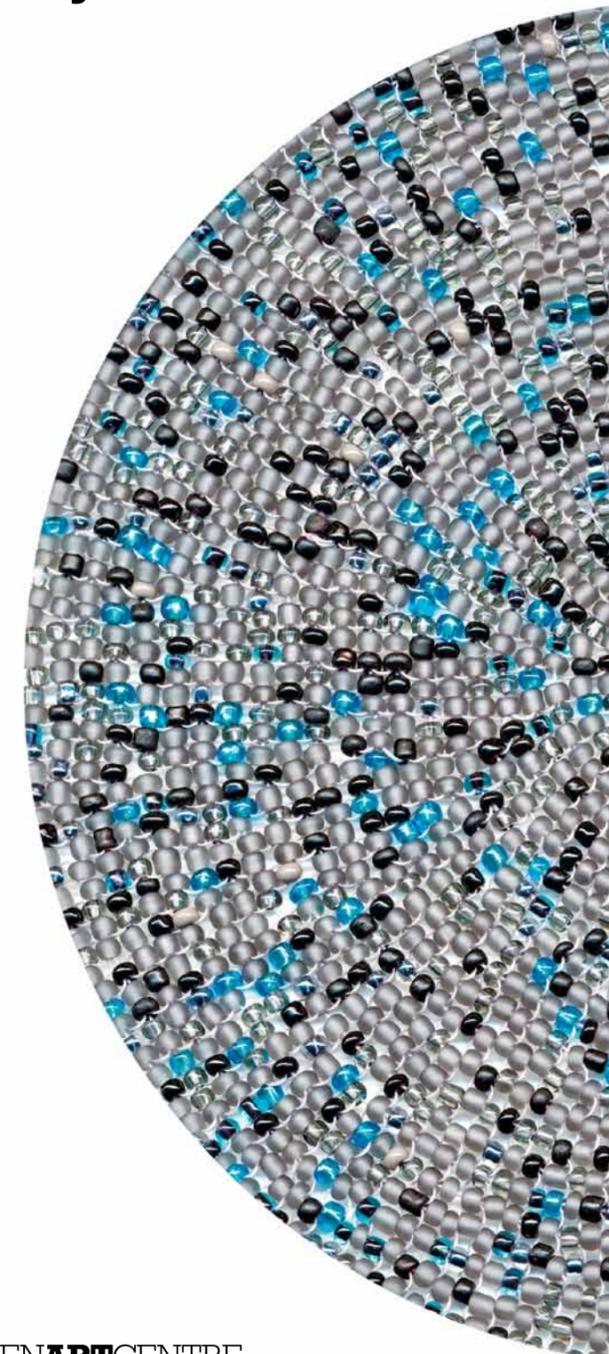


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¹ Homi K. Bhabha, “Anish Kapoor: Making Emptiness,” *Anish Kapoor* (London, UK and Berkeley: Hayward Gallery and University of California Press, 1998). Text reprinted in part on Anish Kapoor’s website (www.anishkapoor.com).

² *Nadia Myre: Artist Statement*, 12 February 2009, Art Mûr file.

³ See Stacey Abramson, “Wounds and Words: Nadia Myre’s Want Ads and Other Scars,” *Conundrum on Line #4* (Winnipeg: Urban Shaman, 2007).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, Bk 6: 571-619, trans. A.S. Kline, Tikaboo.com/library/Ovid-Metamorphosis.pdf, 308. © Copyright 2000 A.S. Kline, all rights reserved.

⁶ Anne Collett, “Remembrance, Restitution, Renewal,” *Nadia Myre: Cont[r]act* (Montreal: Rhonda L. Meier/Dark Horse Productions, 2004), 33.

⁷ *The Indian Act* goes back to 1876 and was amended in 1985 with regards to the status of an “Indian woman” married to a non-Indian, among other things.

⁸ Robert Houle, “Translation/Transportation,” *ibid.*, 23.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁰ Rhonda L. Meier, “Bearing it,” *Nadia Myre: Cont[r]act*, *ibid.*, 13.

¹¹ Nadia Myre, *Portrait in Motion*. Accessed December 2, 2013 from http://nadiamyre.com/Nadia_Myre/video/Pages/Portrait_In_Motion.html

¹² Ken Johnson, “Beyond Stereotypes: 21st-Century Indian Artists,” *The New York Times*, 20 June 2008, B29.

¹³ In two pieces that followed, Myre used the pole to symbolize human beings: *Wood of Desire* (2004) and *The Dreamers* (2007). The latter refers more specifically to male ancestral legacy: the fisherman and the hunter.

¹⁴ Didier Anzieu, *Le Moi-peau* (Paris: Dunod, 1995 [1985]), 35-36.

¹⁵ See Linda Brady Tesner, “Nadia Myre,” *Encounters: Contemporary Native American Art* (Portland, Oregon: Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery of Contemporary Art/Lewis & Clark College, 2004), 10. Excerpts of the text appear on Nadia Myre’s website at www.nadiamyre.com.

¹⁶ Among the venues are Art Mûr (Montreal), John Abbott College (Montreal), Native Friendship Centre (Montreal), Smithsonian Institute’s Gustav Heye Center (New York City), Third Space Gallery (St. John, New Brunswick) Textile Museum (Toronto), Urban Shaman (Winnipeg), Woodland Cultural Centre (Brantford).

¹⁷ Presentation text by Nadia Myre for *The Scar Project*, Art Mûr file.

¹⁸ Stacey Abramson, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Matthieu Dumont, “Introduction,” in Vittorio Hösle, *Philosophie de la crise écologique*, French trans. Mario Dumont (Marseille: Wildproject, 2009), 20.

²⁰ *Rethinking Anthem* was created specifically for the “Hochelaga Revisited” exhibition curated by Ryan Rice and held in 2009 at MAI, in Montreal.

²¹ Interestingly, the original was created in French and sung for the first time on June 24, 1880, on Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day, the French-Canadian national holiday.

²² The exhibition “Landscape of Sorrow and Other New Work” was presented at Art Mûr from April 11 to May 16, 2009.

²³ Dany Laferrière, *L’Énigme du retour* (Montreal: Boréal, 2009), 16.