

The landscape of Turtle Island and the landscape of Canada are two very distinct places. A history of stone and water and cultures that permeate place from time immemorial to present day, and a history of colonization, emigration and diasporic adoption of place by people from every corner of the world. Such a history creates a dichotomous and deep-rooted cacophony of claim to a place and by people that have become intrinsically bound together. The First People, tell the first and most foundational stories of place and culture, reciprocity and responsibility, after which come stories of “discovery” and cruelty and unspeakable violence, resilience, healing and advocacy, and also the mythology of the melting pot, survival and denial and “progress”, always progress, evolution and change. These stories sit precariously atop the landscape; they hang in the air, and dig deep into the earth. These stories are embedded in social constructs, time and space, and exist within people themselves, and their children, and their children’s children.

‘As Immense as the Sky’ is a body of work by artist Meryl McMaster that explores a series of landscapes through the ethos or persona of wildly allegorical and sculpturally striking characters or “temperaments”, that both haunt and echo the places where they pose. There is a deep communion between the artist and the landscape, a sense of playfulness and mischief but also an honouring, and fierce guarding against environmental ill-will. There is a magical realism element to these tableaux, and they feel powerful, like spiritual, steam-punk portals to another time. McMaster explores the stories, mythologies and complexity of place through her own lived experience and deep connection to the land, through the lens of her lineage of

nêhiyaw (Plains Cree), British and Dutch ancestry and these perspectives play an essential role; a “Crossfire of Identity” (Gerald McMaster, 1993) of profound significance for many people living today. She accomplishes this complexity of visual language through conceptual, site specific photography and a combination of performance art, body art, and an abundance of symbolic iconography (birds, water, etc.). The work delves into the concept and reality of time, a profound advocacy for the environment, and the peculiarities and polarity of perspectives and self, set against places of historical importance, as well as the celebration of quietly integral places that are essential but uncelebrated.

**“That open country is so huge you can feel lost and abandoned in it or you can work to feel a part of it, like ya belong to it and it belongs to you. Like a part of you is rock and stone and stream and all the open sky. Ya get past lonesome then...them creatures is all my family and i'm family to them as well.”**

**— Richard Wagamese, *Starlight***

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Landscape as a subject has always conferred meaning, from bucolic vistas to reverential realism but also importantly as part of Manifest Destiny messaging and Western expansionist propaganda “Go West, young man” being just one example. Such movements are colonialist and expansionist in nature, and contribute in a concrete way to the settlement and infrastructure of a country. The result is the displacement and destruction of existing claims to place, ecosystems, sacred sites and the people who call such places home. The re-framing

of how we see landscape and place is an important part of McMaster's work, creating images that illustrate the symbolic relationship between archetypal and imaginative selves and the environment in which they exist. These images are not simply a backdrop or stage for mortal foils, but an essential element of/for lives lived large and mindfully in communion with nature.

Portraiture, similarly, carries equally complex connotations, on both sides of the lens, from documentary to staged, and the sepia-toned idealized "noble savage" images created by photographers such as Edward S. Curtis. Such images stand as the record of history, and one that needs to be corrected and answered in an authentic way. This is very much why the work of McMaster and others is so essential, as it challenges and adds authenticity and purposeful ownership to the cultural conversation, which only artists can fully address.

McMaster, of course, is not the only artist contributing to this cultural and artistic advocacy, and in the realm of photography specifically there are many Indigenous artists taking up the call of cultural re-appropriation through artistic means. The nowhere/everywhere photos of Dayna Danger, for example, which are purposefully shot in an interior void and the anywhere-ness of setting which are distinctly different from the land-based setting of people and place that McMaster presents but are similar in the subversion of stereotypes that people like Curtis have previously perpetuated. Terrence Houle, Adrian Stimson and Will Wilson are also examples of Indigenous artists subverting the veracity of photographic realism as a means to challenge and/or question the record of what an "Indian" looks like and why and where. Photography is a powerful tool of questioning, representation

and a means of meta conversation that McMaster accomplishes with a quiet and powerful dignity and strength.

***“Curtis created the most comprehensive archive of indigenous North Americans,” he said, “and now contemporary artists want to take that authority back and create archives of who they believe themselves to be.”***

***“Our culture is still here”***

- Will Wilson, *Seattle Times*. Brendan Kiley; re: *Seattle Art Museum’s ‘Double Exposure’*.

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The work of Meryl McMaster is a privilege to be able to see. It makes the viewer think deeply about people and place and the importance of communion and complexity within a landscape that we all share.

Arin Fay, Curator

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