

Meryl McMaster: *Wanderings*

Meryl McMaster's work is part of a long tradition of Indigenous artists working at the intersection of photo and performance-based practices who have confronted issues concerning the representation of Indigenous identity. Artists such as James Luna, Shelley Niro, Jeff Thomas, and Rosalie Favell, among others, have all made significant contributions to both the medium and discourse regarding Indigenous identity politics. Rather than attempting to present a unified or monolithic portrayal of Indigenous identity, each of these artists has put forward an individual, highly personalized account of what it means to be Indigenous for them. These artists opened doors for themselves and others in the emerging discourse of Indigenous identity politics in North America in the late twentieth century. McMaster's practice benefits from this early work, as it both exists within and contributes to this same tradition, presenting a highly personalized account of her own experiences as an Indigenous person of bi-cultural heritage. However, rather than make a case for the sheer existence of such identities, McMaster's work functions as an evolving exploration of the artist's own relationship to cultural identity within the larger framework of historical and contemporary identity politics. As a person with both Indigenous and European familial lineages, her father is Plains Cree, her mother is British and Dutch, McMaster treats identity subjectively, as something that is never complete, always in process, but invariably shaped by both internal and external factors and actions.

Wanderings, a new body of work by the Ottawa-based artist, represents an aesthetic and conceptual progression in McMaster's practice, which draws in equal parts from sculpture, performance, and photography. While prior work by the artist has established her occupation of two contrasting, but interrelated worlds, the images in *Wanderings* consider the personal journey McMaster has undertaken between and within these worlds. *Wanderings* is the culmination of several narratives McMaster has explored previously, and is very much an aesthetic and conceptual continuation of *In-Between Worlds*, a series of images the artist produced between 2010 and 2015. The collection represents a mixing and transforming of the artist's bi-cultural identities. McMaster recognizes the clear link between the two bodies of work, stating that, "*In-Between Worlds* and *Wanderings* say more about me as a person than any other work I've produced. They are a window into me as an individual and speak for my own stories and my own history."¹ For McMaster, the dualities of different identities, which are steeped in the colonial history of interactions between First Nations and European settlers, are at the core of this new work. But, rather than dwell within the negative or confining spaces of liminality, the work in *Wanderings* allow for an oscillation between identities, and put forward an assertion that for Indigenous people, identity has never been static.

Rather than view each image as an individual entity, the photographs in *Wanderings* are part of a fictional world created by McMaster that functions not as an escape, but rather, a parallel world, that is part of a larger, unfolding story. Central to this story is McMaster's own contemplations of the limitations of selfhood. While it would be easy to locate each image within the realm of self-portraiture, McMaster feels that through the creation and embodiment of various characters the work becomes something more complex. "Stripping away all the pre-convictions of my own identity, at least from a visual or aesthetic perspective, allows me to

¹ Meryl McMaster in conversation with the author, June 16, 2015.

step back and look at each image like any other viewer.”² The creation of these characters enables McMaster to exist within a liminal space that the artist’s own self cannot, allowing each character to wander freely between spaces, and in turn, advance the dialogue of Indigenous self-representation. While McMaster’s physical body is located within each photo, the characters shaped by the artist are a dreamlike representation of the artist’s own interpretation of her identity. McMaster imbues each character with signifying objects and markers, in the process creating two corresponding narrative developments within the series of works. The first is a single character clad in a blue tunic with red markings that range from strands of red string to face and body paint. These red markers, which stand in contrast to the starkness of McMaster’s winter backdrops, function as a trail marker for this character. *Equinoctial Line* is perhaps the clearest realization of this figure. Carrying a large spool of red thread, the character - clad in blue tunic with a wash of red streaking her face – is the embodiment of McMaster’s own wanderings. With the red string trailing behind, the artist conjures Thesus’ navigation through the labyrinthine lair of the Minotaur, the strands and scraps of red string and fabric serve as a guide to the past, both figuratively and literally.

The second set of characters is a complex series of shamanistic guides that that perhaps function as a collection of sentinels within McMaster’s journey. Each of these characters is marked by the symbolic elements of Indigenous shapeshifters. Raven and Coyote are traditional symbols of the trickster within a variety of Indigenous traditional and contemporary storytelling traditions. In *Keeper’s Crossing* the subject’s physical body exists in unison to the ephemeral being of the coyote, while in both *Secret Darkness of Birds* and *Sentinel’s Sight* the presence of the Raven acts as an ominous markers on the viewer’s journey. Each of these figures carry subtle red markers, in the process these become physical signs or “cairns” along McMaster’s embodied journey. Each exists and functions in unison with tunic-clad “wanderer”, allowing for a more ambiguous, open-ended dialogue to unfold between the viewer and artist, and within the works themselves. The red markers become a navigational tool to both the past and present, as the two sets of characters work together rather than in opposition to one another, and are part of a single journey undertaken by McMaster.

Within this journey, McMaster treats her own identity as subjective, part of an ongoing process of negotiation with one’s own lineage, culture, and heritage. Family stories, political borders, cultural stereotypes, and national narratives mitigate McMaster’s relationship to and exploration of her own identity. On the topic of Indigenous identities in the face of the legacy and lived experience of colonization, Mi’kmaw scholar Bonita Lawrence remarks:

Identity, for Native people, can never be a neutral issue. With definitions of Indianness deeply embedded within systems of colonial power, Native identity is inevitably highly political, with ramifications for how contemporary and historical collective experience is understood. For Native people, individual identity is always being negotiated in relation to collective identity, and in the face of an external, colonizing society.³

² Meryl McMaster in conversation with the author, June 16, 2015.

³ Bonita Lawrence, *“Real” Indians and Others: Mixed-Blood Urban Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004) 1.

For Indigenous people, their own relationship to identity is read through the long and ongoing history of colonialism in North America, and the repression of Indigenous cultures for generations. Hereditary lineages further juxtapose the often-complicated relationship Indigenous people maintain with their own cultural and individual identities. For individuals of bi-cultural heritage, such as McMaster, the process of reconciling the often-fraught histories of Indigenous and Western cultures is problematic. Louis Owens, a prominent Native American scholar of Choctaw, Cherokee, and Irish-American descent, reflects on the “in-betweenness” experienced by individuals of European and Indigenous heritage in the face of settler colonialism, stating:

Mixedbloods are fixed in a straightjacket of history, a metaphor not chosen lightly, for history attempts to bind the mixedblood into a certain and paradoxical schizophrenia. The mixedblood is not allowed ambiguity but only bifurcation, a breakdown in the signifying chain. The world has, from the point of view of the Indian or mixedblood, a most astonishing and often shocking investment in determining the singular definition of Indianness. One is Indian or one is not Indian. The mixedblood is forced to chose, to check a single box on every form.⁴

Owens goes on to reflect that in the face of colonization, “In-between does not cut it in the mixedblood world.”⁵ However, rather than allow herself to become lost or disempowered within the spaces between contrasting identities, McMaster creates a visual narrative of empowerment. The images in *Wanderings* enact what Anishinaabe author and scholar Gerald Vizenor has termed survivance, “... an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry.”⁶ The work in *Wanderings* is less concerned with negotiating a space in-between two worlds, instead asserting a presence that is both empowered through a distinctly contemporary Indigenous consciousness, and cognisant of the undeniable cultural and social influences of Western society. Rather than allow these contrasting narratives to become burdensome, McMaster treats them as simultaneously empowering and self-affirming of her own lived experiences. With the creation of these characters in *Wanderings* McMaster dons metaphorical masks of cultural survivance as a form of empowering liberation from the lingering constraints of identity politics taken on by her predecessors.

As both Lawrence and Owens have acknowledged, Indigenous identity can never be regarded as neutral, and is further complicated by the cultural and political interactions and interconnections with Western settler colonial society. McMaster’s work in *Wanderings* eschews neutrality, putting forth an affirmation of selfhood in the fraught legacy of exchange between Indigenous and Western cultures.

- Jon Lockyer

⁴ Louis Owens, *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place*, (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998) 198.

⁵ Owens, 198.

⁶ Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives of Postindian Survivance*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999) vii.

About the Artist:

Meryl McMaster (Plains Cree member of the Siksika Nation, British and Dutch) is an Ontario-based artist and a BFA graduate from OCAD University, Toronto. She is the recipient of the Charles Pachter Prize, the Eiteljorg Contemporary Art Fellowship, the Canon Canada Prize and the OCAD Medal. Her work has been included in numerous exhibitions throughout Canada and the United States and has been acquired by various public collections including the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, the Canada Council Art Bank, the Eiteljorg Museum and the Donovan Collection.

About the Author:

Jon Lockyer is a curator, educator, and writer from Toronto, Ontario. Lockyer's interest as a curator focuses on issues of social and political engagement, and that challenges the aesthetic and pedagogical boundaries of contemporary art. More specifically, Lockyer is interested in Indigenous art and curatorial practices that have originated in North America since the early 1960s. Lockyer received his BA from Trent University in Canadian Studies, and completed an MFA at OCAD University in Criticism and Curatorial Practice. He has worked previously as a curatorial intern at the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts (Santa Fe, NM), as well as the Art Gallery of Ontario (Toronto, ON) and *C Magazine*. Lockyer currently lives in Peterborough, Ontario where he is the Director of Artspace.

