

MOSS

Skeena Reece

September 16 – October 21, 2017

Embellished Indigeneity: The Art Making of Skeena Reece

"I refuse to be tragic" – Lee Maracle¹

For the last decade and a half Skeena Reece has created a substantial delectus of work that often features her own body. Whether through performance, photography and video installation, her body maps discourses of self-representation, spirit, trauma and the politic of each. In *Sacred Clown* (2008)², her nude/naked/unclothed/natural body was painted with horizontal black and white stripes in the spirit of the Hopi trickster. A nude/naked/natural voluptuous NDN womyn is a complex site of negotiation. With historical and contemporary colonial and lateral violence circulating rampantly, this body needs to be nourished and cherished. She walked through the mostly seated audience onto the stage where she delivered a humorous and humble trickster shift/comedic stand-up performance act/ion that was both restorative and unsettling. Reece has the uncanny ability to commend of her viewers to go beyond the glance or the gaze and to actually embrace her NDN womyn body/identity/existence/being, and by doing so, they have to acknowledge their own existence within that territory and how that relation might be. The viewer has to make some kind of choice when witnessing Skeena Reece's distinction.

For the performance work *Raven: On the Colonial Fleet* (2010)³, she was literally a boss as her crew ushered her into the performance space with blasting NDN hip-hop. She was like a famed prize boxer with her button blanket enshrined with a blinged out hand grenade sewed on the back and vintage army medals on the front. As she flung the blanket one of her entourage caught it as the projected video footage of various indigenous fishing right conflicts were seen behind her. And then she began to speak.

The photographic works from this assembly are of her wearing a men's dance roach, war paint and a corset, in which she is gender/bending/mixing traditional Plains NDN male dance regalia with a Northwest Coast button blanket and dance skirt, and sexy/at one time slutty/now mainstream thigh high boots. It's the Northwest Coast imagery on these items that make them, warrior/gangsta, and complicate the narrative she has created. The dance apron with images drawn by Gord Hill feature the mythic and powerful Thunderbird flying overhead dropping AK 47's to the people. She don's a carved mask⁴ of Marlon Brando from the *Godfather*. This mix of the political, cultural and sexual creates a dynamism that exposes the complexities of NDN womynhood in urban realities and how femyle leadership and hauntings of matriarchal ways of being have transformed and are steadfast within the very creation of contemporary art.

In the work *Touch Me* (2013)⁵ she baths a "white elder" as they both shed tears of...mercy...relief...grief...joy...This single channel video installation, speaks to love for indigenous people, as the women being bathed is Sandra Semchuk, artist and partner of the late Cree Scholar and poet, James Nicholas. It wasn't reconciliation that was happening, but a knowing. As Skeena gently baths her subject/friend/colleague/, the trickling of the water, deep moments of connection and spirit arise. As this performative and transformative work builds both womyn share beautiful tears. There is an essence and release of trauma and a knowing for them, and the many witnesses who viewed the work. A knowing can become an action and then a movement.

Her new works continue to incorporate herself, her body and the politics of returning to or being in a sound state. She has created an adult sized moss bag and cradleboard, titled *There is time for love* (2016). Both of these are generally made for newborn babies and vary from tribe to tribe. Some using weaved materials, beading, cloth or hide. Babies are wrapped into the moss back and attached to the cradle board, sometimes hanging from a tree, or propped up right, however placed, the babies are protected, cared for and adored, and adorned. By making one for an adult, she has created a site/space/narrative/cultural belonging that will hold and heal all those children

who were not cared for as a result of colonial/settler/state/institutional abuse and violence. And further, suggest that adults can still be nourished and healed from the continued legacies of structural dehumanization that NDN people endure.

Another work features are black and white photos of her parts of her body's contours and valleys and with superimposed Gord Hill renderings of the "OKA crisis", conquistadors and a mother with child. This mapping of politics and love suggest her body as a site of battle, historical trauma and the future. She also commissioned Collin Elder to paint a realist portrait of her with totems, bears, and eagles surrounding her. Reminisced of kitschy paintings of Indian maidens, the Mona Lisa, and nature paintings. The works collapses genres of painting and manifesting what Reece is so good at—intense deep meaning while being playful at the same time. The trickster's shift has risen again. Her ability to combine humour, politics and spirit and bring forth the aestheticization⁶ of NDN histories and current realities, inter-generational trauma and cultural iconic imagery all folded, braided, twisted and laid bare. While at the same time implicating her own self into the art, the discourse, and the analysis of imperial/colonial/settler/Canadian/new comer⁷ colonialism and celebratory NDN survivance/thrivance.⁸

Identity is embellished in these works and the NDN experience in all its generational complexities are revealed—beauty and tragedy become clear and that clarity is Skeena's way in the world.

Skeena haz made art again, for all to see and as we look
what will we find? To go her path Skeena's way
and as we look, all I can say....I am awe again of you
have made...deep deep beauty for all to see
and as we see, and as we look, may we....what...what do we took?
Maybe we should not take, as generous as the offerings are
shall we give to IT, our deepest love
and by doing so, carry its flow, carry its glow
outside of the gallery wallz
down the hallz
to justice!

Skeena's way in the world—take us there.

Dana Claxton

1. Maracle, Lee. "Blind Justice" in *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* Vol. 2, No. 1, 2013, pp. 134-136.
2. A collaborative performance between Skeena Reece and Jesse Scott is based on the Sacred Clown of the Hopi Indians, (2009). <http://www.themedicineproject.com/skeena-reece.html>. Another work that collapses notions of healing is *Nurse Shaman* (2008) where viewers could book appointments to address their white guilt.
3. *Raven: On the Colonial Fleet* (2010), performance at SuperDeluxe@Artspace for the 17th Biennale of Sydney.
4. She commission Corey Bulpit to crave a human like mask of Marlon Brando, and Joseph Paul to make the button blanket.
5. Commissioned by the Belkin Gallery UBC for the exhibition *Witnesses: Art and Canada's Indian Residential Schools*, 2013, I was part of the curatorial team.
6. See my essay, "Wisdom for All through Identity Politics: A Hopeful Idea", in *In the Wake of the Komagata Maru*. 2015. Editors Lisa Marshall with Jordon Strom. https://www.surrey.ca/files/In_the_Wake_of_the_Komagata_Maru_web.pdf.
7. I am using this word and my understanding of how Walter Benjamin theorizes life and living as artistic and political. See *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.
8. My position is some people are still in survival mode, and some are in thrivance mode and that survivance is still operational. See Vizenor, Gerald. *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* (2008). The term thrivance has been circulating for some time, and I am not completely sure where/who/how it gets credited and cannot find proper citation. Jaminie Issac is noted as using this term for the first time in relation to NDN life.

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