

## ***An interview with Rebecca Belmore***

### **Wanda Nanibush**

**Wanda Nanibush: When did you first think about art and becoming an artist?**

Rebecca Belmore: It was in the early 80's. At the time I was living in Thunder Bay and began meeting artists and visiting their studios. These experiences of seeing artists go to their studio everyday made me understand that art is a profession, something that I thought I could do too. I eventually ended up at the Ontario College of Art in Toronto, where I lasted two years.

**Why did you leave art school?**

For many reasons, personal and professional. I had a comment in my second year-end critique that I think was racist, or maybe I should say misguided. The instructor, in looking at my work, asked me if I thought my "Indian-ness" would get in the way of making art. It made me speechless - and then angry. I went home and spent the summer working at a sawmill in Upsala, the town of my birthplace. Physical labour has a way of clearing the mind and turning trees into lumber was very much a part of my

immediate families livelihood back then. Shortly after returning in the fall to Toronto, I decided I should go home and make art. Become one, an artist.

**I think sometimes it is the culture of art and its class that can exclude too. Your inclusion was unique then?**

The late 80's and early 90's, contemporary art was wrestling with issues of appropriation and the authentic voice. The generation of artists before me was the one who actively busted open the gallery door. I happened on the scene at an interesting time, I walked in. That was twenty years ago. I am not sure where we are at now, but we do have Tribe in Saskatoon and Urban Shaman in Winnipeg and a lot of young artists making strong work. Who knows, maybe one day soon we will have our own national museum of art.

**When did you come to performance art as a specific art form?**

I began in my first year at art school, before I knew what performance art was. After

leaving school to return home I began participating within the social/cultural space at the Thunder Bay Friendship Centre, in talent shows to be precise. I wanted to see if my own people got anything out of it. They accepted my work and I was scheduled in with everyone else, mostly musicians and some writers.

In retrospect, this community context where my way of working was accepted was the affirmation I needed. They did not know that it was called performance art and it really did not matter.

**Is there one event that stands out?**

I think one of my early works from 1987, *Rising to the Occasion*, was key to building a foundation for my performance art practice. That summer the royal newlyweds, Prince Andrew and Sarah Ferguson, paid a royal visit to a reconstructed fur-trading fort, Old Fort William. They were driven to and dropped off somewhere upstream, on the Kaministiquia River, where they boarded a birch bark canoe and were paddled downriver to the thousands of curious onlookers and royal fans who were waiting to see them. Simultaneously, in the quiet and empty streets of downtown Port Arthur, a group of women marched in silent protest, wearing garments created specifically for this historic event. This performance art parade, titled *Twelve Angry Crinolines*, was the work of Lynne Sharman. My contribution to the procession was *Rising to the Occasion*, a dress that was part “Victorian” ball gown and part beaver dam. The royals came to our city for a handful of hours as performers,

replaying colonial history complete with birchbark canoes and a fake fort. This was incredibly absurd to me. What to wear for such an absurd occasion? The dress now resides in the collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario.

**What was it like travelling around with your exhibit, *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomamowan: Speaking to Their Mother (1991)*? What did you learn from the process?**

Michael Beynon and Florene Belmore were project assistants for the touring of this artwork in 1992, which was two years after the Oka Crisis and 500 years since the landing of Columbus. We purchased a used cargo van to transport the object of art, commonly referred to as “the megaphone,” directly to the people. Working outside the gallery system and directly within First Nation communities located on reserve land, towns, cities, and an active logging blockade strengthened my understanding of the role of the artist. The “artist”, the maker, the visionary has always been a part of who we are. People readily embraced the idea of speaking directly to the earth through this strange object that had come to them. Ironically, or perhaps humorously, many admired the physical beauty of this instrument and remarked that it should be displayed in a museum.

**You have called this exhibit a politics as poetic action? Why did you choose that strategy?**

Poetic because we were speaking directly to the land. Political because of the long history

of others working to silence the sound of our voice echoing off of this land. The megaphone was created as a response to the “Oka Crisis.” My strategy was simple, bring a conceptual artwork in the form of a functional tool to the people and ask them to speak directly to the issue, to the land itself, as we have always done.

**Your photograph, *White Thread*, was addressing the Iraq war and seems to be about a commitment to struggling and the capacity for that in a people against a stronger force, in this case the USA. Is that a fair assessment of the work? It also seems to relate to Indigenous issues, with the red and white - a single white thread. What is the symbolism of that for you? Is there a relation between Iraq and Indigenous nations?**

Yes, that is a fair assessment. Women and children bear the trauma of war. I was thinking about the will and strength that they would have to possess in order to survive such violence. Regarding the symbolic use of red cloth sewn with white thread, we too have survived invasion in our history and now live within Canada, under a flag of red and white.

**A few of your works - *artist*; *Mixed Blessing*; *I AM WORTH MORE THAN A MILLION DOLLARS TO MY PEOPLE*; and, *Creation or Death, We will Win* – seem to deal with the struggle of being an artist and how you identify as one, as well as the relationship between being both Anishinaabe and artist. What are your**

**thoughts on this? Do you see a thread through these works?**

I am both Anishinaabe and artist at once. There is no struggle within; that takes place on the outside. *Mixed Blessing* wears the words “FUCKEN INDIAN” and “FUCKEN ARTIST” in the form of a cross. *artist* wears an “X” and stands on a plinth-like box. *I AM WORTH MORE THAN ONE MILLION DOLLARS TO MY PEOPLE* was a sign of protest. *Creation or Death, We will Win* was the body gagged and bound, but never silenced. The thread that runs through those works is me – Anishinaabe (kwe) Artist.

**What do you think of the idea of art for art sake?**

Oh for Christ sake!

**You seem to like to work with space, especially public space, as a material that you interact with and feed off of and transform - is that accurate?**

Long ago, James Luna once said, “The Land we are standing on; It's all Indian land.” I read it in one of his catalogues, I liked seeing it as a line, written. Public space as a material is a good way of seeing my approach to making work, especially performance works. I take off my shoes, stand, and momentarily imagine how it must have been before Europeans made it theirs. My physical being becomes conceptually grounded, my female Indian-ness unquestionable. From this place I can address what is immediate and know that I am one in a long line of Indigenous artists.

This knowledge makes me happy, that is what feeds me.

**In the photographic installation *sister* you were located on the Downtown East Side, Vancouver (DTES) and the work interacts with that site. You have made other works, like the performance, *Vigil*, in the same area. Are these works related in terms of how Indigenous women live and are seen in that hood? One seems to deal with criminalization of the body and the other seems to deal with lack of being seen or cared about by the police and society - do we deal with this contradiction as 'Indian' women?**

Yes, those works are specific to the DTES but they could easily have been created in any city in this country. The DTES is hyper charged with the contradictions of people struggling with addiction and visibly surviving on the street against a backdrop of aggressive gentrification. Many of our sisters were murdered and have gone missing from this place. The work *sister* was site-specific and strategically placed to be present during the February 14<sup>th</sup> Annual Memorial March which passed right in front of the gallery window on Hastings Street. The stance of *sister* - is she being apprehended, is she being crucified, is she taking flight? My intention with this work was to use the site to acknowledge our sisters who were last seen in this place, to picture them with grace and beauty. *Vigil* – I am going to let that one rest.

**Is art-making a form of decolonization? Decolonization can mean moving towards independence from the colonial state;**

**changing attitudes and actions from ones that further colonial rule to ones that work towards independence; changing our sense of our inferiority; thinking and acting as if our philosophies, cultures, and practices matter; acting as if being Indigenous is important to who we are; ending violence, etc., etc.**

Maybe it could be considered a form of decolonization, but that is not for me to say. My job is to make art. That's what I have trained myself to do. To cast myself in the role of decolonizing agent would be a thankless job, tiresome and endless. I prefer to think of what we do today, as artists, is simple: to be ourselves. We are the ones who articulate where we come from, where we are now and where we want to be going. What is exciting is there are many of us, and our numbers are growing.

**Do you think your work is political? Is that your primary concern or is the primary concern something to do with art making? Is this a false dichotomy? Does it matter to you what is primary in how your work is read by others?**

I care about what goes on in the world, is that political? I don't believe I have a primary concern in how my work is read. One thing that does puzzle me though is this idea that my work is only concerned with identity politics. I do a lot of "visiting artist" work for university programs and people cannot see beyond the "Indian-ness". I was recently asked during a visit if I ever got tired of always having to represent my people? I joked that I have never run for the position of

“chief”. Seriously, how do non-aboriginal people view themselves? That is my question.

**Our people do not seem to like ‘in-your-face’ politics, but prefer a well-articulated subtlety - do you agree? Why or Why not?**

Are we speaking specifically about us, the Anishinaabe? I spent eleven years in Vancouver, on Coast Salish land, before moving to Winnipeg in 2012. We are culturally different people and have our own way of doing things, as First Nations we understand this. I think our people prefer a well-articulated subtlety, who doesn't? But, when push comes to shove, in your face politics can be a necessary strategy. I think we are accustomed to both but prefer a gentler way of communicating. I was talking with a friend not long ago, saying that the rhythm of our language makes me think of waves of water on the shoreline of a lake. It is very comforting to be in the midst of our language, to hear it spoken on the streets of Winnipeg.

*Rebecca Belmore is a Winnipeg-based multi-disciplinary artist from Upsala, Ontario. In 2013 she won the Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts. She gained international acclaim at the 2005 Venice Biennale's Canadian Pavilion, where she was the first Indigenous woman to represent Canada. Belmore has exhibited and performed internationally and nationally since 1987. She won the Jack and Doris Shadbolt Foundation's prestigious VIVA Award 2004 and the 2009 Hnatyshyn Visual Arts Award. Her work is in the collections of the National Gallery of Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Canada Council Art Bank, the Canadian Museum of Civilization and many others.*

*Wanda Nanibush is an Anishinaabe-kwe image and word warrior, curator, community animator, arts consultant and Idle No More organizer from Beausoleil First Nation. Currently she is curator in residence at the Justina M. Barnicke gallery and Dame Nita Barrow Distinguished Visitor at University of Toronto. She has her Masters in Visual Studies from the University of Toronto.*

**Is there a politics today that speaks to you?**

I want more Idle No More.

**What is the relationship to politics in your work: Is it that you are a First Nations woman and that in itself is political? Is it because you use your body? Is it because you are influenced by political events?**

Faye Heavyshield once wrote, as an artist statement back in the late 80's, for a catalogue in which we were both included:

NATIVE WOMAN ARTIST  
or was it  
WOMAN NATIVE ARTIST  
for sure it was not  
ARTIST WOMAN NATIVE.

She may have added, “What else is there to say?”

It still stands to this day, for me anyway.