

PI'TAWKEWAQ | OUR PEOPLE UP RIVER

MEAGAN MUSSEAU



pi'tawkewaq | our people up river  
Meagan Musseau

March 6th – April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020

grunt gallery  
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INTRO

Whess Harman

Through the weeks leading up to Meagan Musseau's exhibition, *pi'tawkewaq | our people up river*, Indigenous peoples have been invoking their rights to be on their own land without interruption from the on-going legacies of removal and violence from colonial powers. Solidarity actions with the Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs have sprung up and new alliances have flourished as Indigenous people have taken up ancestral obligations to assert their right to defend their territories and to make nation-to-nation alliances as they envision them.

It seems especially timely then, that Musseau's exhibition arrives on Coast Salish territories, bearing with it the braided sculpture laid in the shape of a lake body from Elmastukwek. The work carries a dialogue of both the experience of its making and the voice of the land which it was made upon, woven in and held tightly, manifested as a tangible result of land-to-human conversation. With its presence here, it invokes a land-to-land dialogue for guests to consider and witness. The enlarged plexiglass Beothuk bone pendants and invocation of Santu Toney voice a dialogue of history-to-continuance.

The planning for *pi'tawkewaq | our people up river* happened from opposite coasts, and is the last exhibition of this cycle. This is to say that the happenstance of Musseau's exhibition

opening at grunt amidst crucial enactments of Indigenous sovereignty points out the fact that these questions have been in existence well before this flash point. Practices such as Musseau's are attached to the immemorial history of the importance of land to Indigenous peoples. Land is not merely a consideration of physical space, but a directive for the Indigenous governances and identities, which are therein informed by place. The work, and inclusion of Santu Toney, a self-identified member of the allegedly "extinct" Beothuk nation, also notes that the recorded colonial history needs to be interrogated by Indigenous voices.

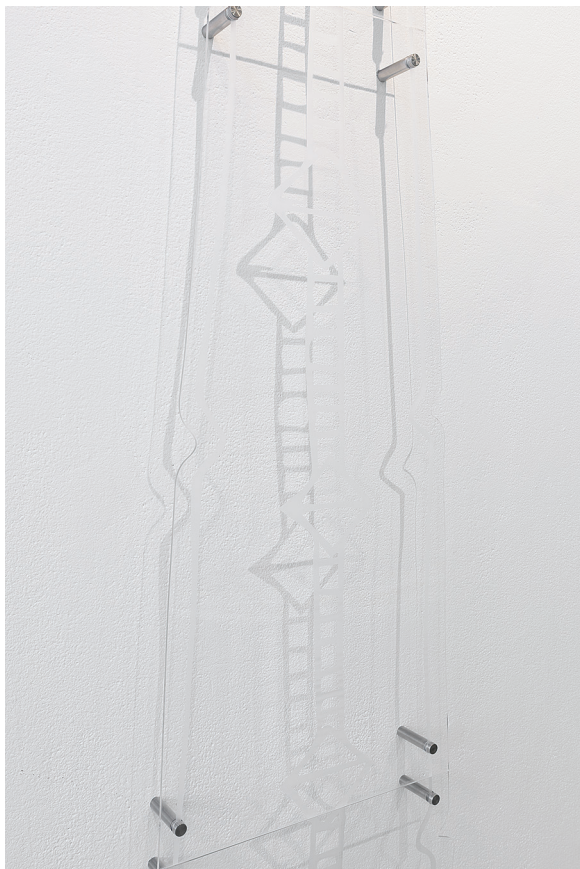
These are conversations which must continue and grunt has been honoured to be entrusted with holding space for the continuing dialogue through Musseau's artistic practice. There are always many hands and voices which are needed to move the production of an exhibition forward, and we'd like to thank the grunt gallery team including Kay, Katrina, Meagan, Vanessa, Hillary and Dan for their support. We also extend thanks to Laurie White for not only taking on the practical labours in facilitating an exhibition but also taking the time and heart to write with consideration towards the work with her curatorial essay. Finally, gratitude also for the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council, Canada Council for the Arts,

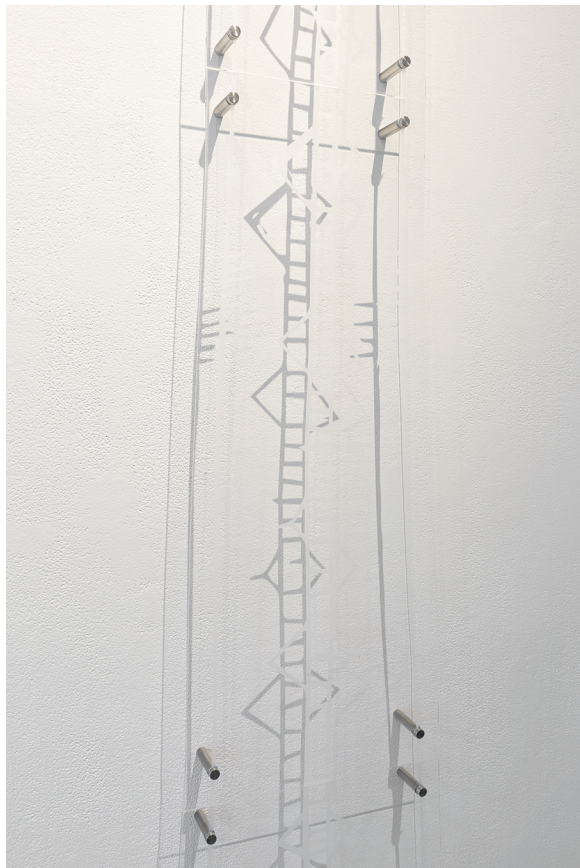
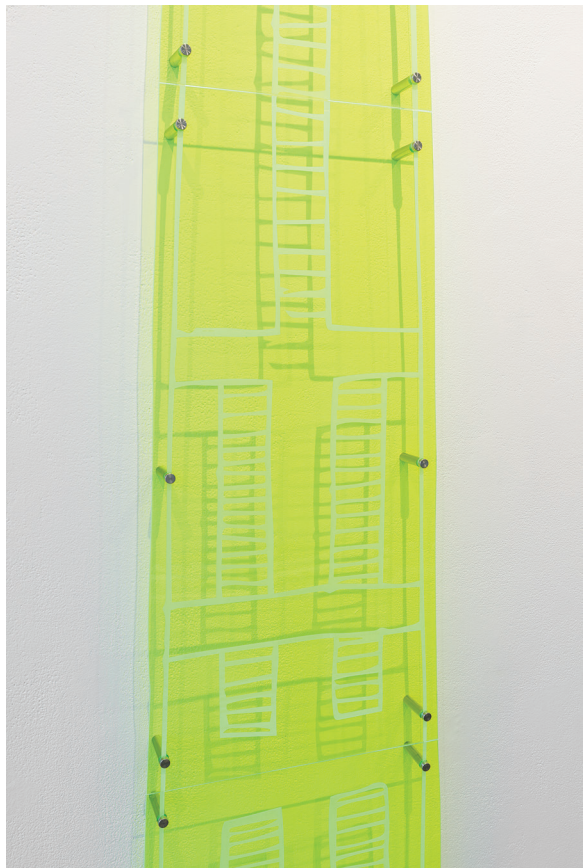
Grenfell Art Gallery and Fine Arts, all of whom assured the resources to support the artist, staff and time to produce this show with care.

Meagan would also like to offer a personal thanks: I'd like to express my deep gratitude for the opportunity to share my artwork on unceded Coast Salish territories. Wela'liog to my family and community for their love, support, and inspiration. This exhibition is dedicated to past, present, and future generations and the lands and waters of Ktaqmkuk territory.

Art has always been politicized, whether it be from an Indigenous artist or not, but it is in these critical moments when being able to give space to works such as Musseau's feels particularly crucial. grunt and our supporters are grateful to be a part of the collaborative effort to carry this through.









PI'TAWKEWAQ  
OUR PEOPLE UP RIVER

Laurie White

*pi'tawkewaq* | *our people up river* is an exhibition of new work by Meagan Musseau, drawn from her ongoing research responding to Mi'kmaq and Beothuk visual cultures on Ktaqmkuk (Newfoundland). By patiently building connections through her practice, Musseau insistently erodes the mechanisms that have cut land into segments, separated neighbouring nations, and isolated people in time. *pi'tawkewaq* is a Mi'kmaw term that describes people being up river, stream or coast and has been used to describe those of Beothuk descent as 'our people up river.'<sup>1</sup> From the perspective of a L'nu woman living on Ktaqmkuk, Musseau creates contemporary cultural belongings to explore the interterritorial relationships between the two nations as a way to enact both Mi'kmaq and Beothuk survivance.

A new series of sculptures is inspired by a collection of Beothuk caribou bone pendants held in the vaults of The Rooms Provincial Museum and Archives in St Johns, NL that Musseau spent time studying in 2017. Hovering a few inches from the gallery wall, their slender triangular shapes and etched surfaces recall the original belongings. Once small enough to hold in the palm of the hand, the pendants are here greatly enlarged. Their scale evokes the proportions of the human body and suggests the presence of both the belongings and their creators.

The acrylic material of these works relates to Musseau's experience of visiting the belongings through display cases. Plexiglass—a ubiquitous material in museum contexts—affords vision but prevents touch. Intended to protect precious items, it is nonetheless a material that divides, distinguishing between who does and does not have access to its contents, all the while obscuring itself by disappearing into the foreground. By etching the pendant designs directly onto the acrylic surface Musseau reclaims the material. The marks invite me to look directly at the plexiglass rather than through it, drawing my attention to the mechanisms by which the museum functions, and transforming it from a barrier into a carrier for the designs.

Of the five sculptures, only two are made of the colourless plexiglass one would encounter in a museum. They are ghostly, the white gallery wall showing through, their etched designs and the shadows they cast only delicately perceptible. By contrast, the other three pieces—two in neon green and another in deep purple—are hyper visible in their luminous colours, as if the energy of the pendants electrified the anaemic clear plastic. An aesthetic signature of Musseau's practice, these bright colours highlight the synthetic quality of her chosen materials, emphasising the substitution of organic for man-made.

This is a key feature of Musseau's methodology in which, time and again, traditional materials are replaced with synthetic products. The substitution points to ecological loss, but simultaneously to perseverance, indicating that traditions can and must continue even when confronted with restricted access to natural resources. By adapting to readily accessible materials, Musseau continues to learn customary art practices, prioritising cultural knowledge alongside cultural products.

Anishnaabe scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson argues that Nishnaabeg theory, "is generated and regenerated continually through embodied practice ... woven within kinetics, spiritual presence, and emotion."<sup>2</sup> This ethos is evident in Musseau's land based action on her home territory of Elmastukwek (Bay of Islands, NL). The video documentation of the action shows Musseau centred within the landscape, patiently making a braid from impossibly long strips of fabric. The colours of the grassy scrub—soft greens and oranges punctuated by a flash of red flowers—is emulated by Musseau's ribbon skirt fashioned from camouflage fabric and geometric details reminiscent of the pendant designs. As she works, the wind catches the fabrics, tossing them about and suggesting a continual flow of movement. The fabrics tangle easily but Musseau

is patient: her arms work tirelessly to tease apart the strands and she uses her whole body to pull back on the braid and create tension. In these moments the braid becomes a cord connecting Musseau's body to the land. The video is set to a song written and sung by fellow Mi'kmaw artist Jenelle Duval. Though I do not understand the words, the song lends the evidently arduous and physically challenging performance a sense of peace, offering insight to the deeper implications of Musseau's practice, in which endurance transcends physicality and, as Simpson suggests, weaves together kinetics with spiritual presence.

The finished braid is displayed within the gallery space at grunt, supported by a plinth cut to resemble the outline of Mekwe'jite'wey (Red Indian Lake, NL). Historically, Mekwe'jite'wey was a focal point for Beothuk communities as, amongst other things, a source of the red ochre that was a significant part of ceremonial life.<sup>3</sup> By evoking the shape of the lake within in the gallery, Musseau locates a traditional home of the Beothuk at the heart of the exhibition, like a pool reflecting the image of Elmastukwek, and emphasises that Ktaqmkuk is the unceded ancestral territory of both the Beothuk and the Mi'kmaq. Mekwe'jite'wey, and the river system it feeds, continues to connect people together as a space of fluid relations.

Further twining together the threads that connect Mi'kmaq and Beothuk cultures is a photograph of Santu Toney, whose story is a guiding force in Musseau's creative process for this exhibition. Interviewed in 1910 by ethnographer Frank Speck, Santu stated that she was descended from a Mi'kmaq mother and a Beothuk father. At the time, and for years after, Santu's testimony was disregarded by academics as Beothuk people were widely believed to have been 'extinct' since the death of Shawnadithit (a Beothuk woman captured and taken to St. Johns) in 1829. In the article "Santu's Song," ethnomusicologist Beverley Diamond revisits the evidence collected by Speck, including a wax recording of Santu singing songs she had learned from her Beothuk father. Diamond questions the role that the pernicious narrative of Beothuk disappearance has played in the colonial imaginary and argues that it has prevented historians from taking seriously the evidence recorded by Speck. Instead, Diamond's renewed exploration "does not aim to find something authentically or uniquely Beothuk, but expects to find plurality, encounter, fluidity, and a quality of "in between."<sup>4</sup> Santu's semi-nomadic life crossed many cultural and linguistic borders. She was in many ways a cultural mediator, a role that indigenous womxn have often negotiated throughout history. Musseau's work seeks to

honour Santu as an ancestor artist by highlighting the transmission of knowledge between past, present, and future generations. The inclusion of her portrait in the exhibition invokes the presence of this culturally hybrid person who could not be categorised by colonial concepts of indigeneity.

I believe the idea of in-between is subtly discernable in Musseau's material choices, in which brightly coloured materials are placed side by side with other, more ambiguous ones. There is a certain similarity between the clear plexiglass of the pendant sculptures, with their connotations of museum cabinets, and the camouflage fabric of Musseau's skirt worn for the braiding performance. Each material is designed to conceal its own presence, by disappearing in the foreground or background, respectively. Both are intended to offer protection, yet in doing so they also conceal a power dynamic: either between hunter and hunted, or between institution and visitor. These materials operate inversely to neon coloured fabrics and materials, which are designed to draw attention to themselves. The tension between invisibility and hyper visibility in Musseau's material choices creates an aesthetic effect that points to a deeper insight: perhaps that which is 'vanished' is in fact still present but camouflaged, hiding in plain sight,

or being overlooked because of false expectations caused by disciplinary boundaries. How much more do we see when we embrace hybridity, cultural exchange, and complex kinship networks? Musseau responds to and interprets cultural belongings and teachings but she does not attempt to make statements of historical fact. Rather, her work aims to connect that which has been isolated and made distinct, both spatially and temporally, so as to allow new meanings to proliferate. This approach affords the flexibility that is needed, to recall Simpson, to “generate and regenerate” cultural histories with sustained energy. Her work brings history out of museum cabinets and into our field of view, a living, breathing realm whipped by the wind, where warm hands tirelessly work to braid the future.

<sup>1</sup> Musseau learned the term *pi'tawkewaq* from Mi'kmaw artist Jerry Evans, who had learned it from Miawpukek First Nation. She has continued to research its use and meaning with community members.

<sup>2</sup> Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 151.

<sup>3</sup> Red ochre is also rubbed into incisions on Beothuk caribou bone pendants.

<sup>4</sup> John Hewson & Beverley Diamond, “Santu’s Song,” in *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies*, 22(1), (2007): retrieved from <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/NFLDS/article/view/10104>

SPECK—BETHUK AND MIGMAC

PL. XXXV

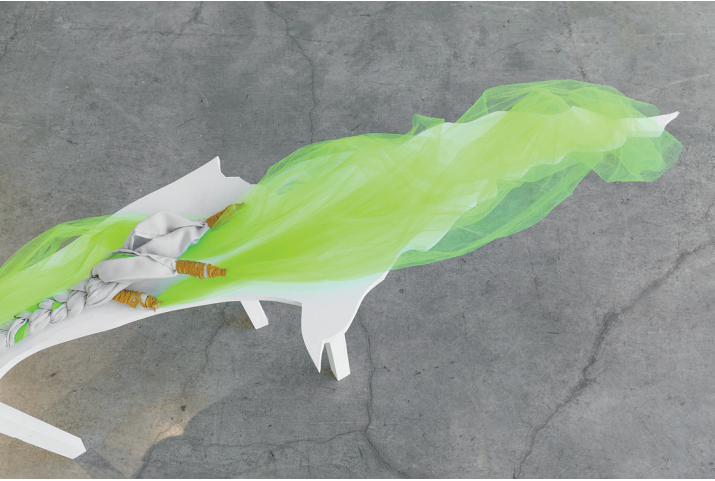


SANTU















BIO

Meagan Musseau is an L'nu artist from the Mi'kmaq Nation. Her practice is rooted in Elmastukwek, Ktaqmkuk territory (Bay of Islands, Western Newfoundland) and extends to other areas of Mi'kma'ki and Wabanaki territory. Meagan nourishes an interdisciplinary practice by working with customary art forms and new media, such as basketry, beadwork, land-based performance, video and installation. She focuses on creating artwork, dancing, learning the Mi'kmaw language, and facilitating workshops as a way to actively participate in survivance. Her work has been exhibited at AKA artist-run centre, Saskatoon; Eastern Edge Gallery, St. John's; VOX centre de l'image contemporaine, Montreal; Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff; and Kelowna Art Gallery, among others. She has been supported by numerous awards, and featured in publications such as *Canadian Art*, *Border Crossings*, and *Visual Arts News*. Meagan is working towards solo exhibitions at TRUCK Contemporary Art Gallery (Calgary 2020) and Ociciwan Contemporary Art Centre (Edmonton, 2020/21).

CURATOR

Laurie White is a curator and writer from Sheffield, England. She holds an MA in Critical and Curatorial Studies from the University of British Columbia. Her research interests consider modes of ecological practice in contemporary art, including salvage and bricolage, materiality, assemblage and futurism. She has curated exhibitions at the Or Gallery (Vancouver), the fifty fifty arts collective (Victoria), AHVA Gallery (UBC), and Western Gallery (Bellingham). In 2019 she co-edited the catalogue *Beau Dick: Devoured by Consumerism* (Figure 1 Publishing) for Fazakas Gallery and her writing appears in the catalogue *Beginning with the Seventies* published by the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery. She is currently the Assistant Curator at the Or Gallery.



